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**Distance between the State and the People:  
a Case of Lao Primary Education**

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## **Distance between the State and the People:**

### **Case of Lao Primary Education**

#### **国家と国民の距離：ラオスの初等教育の事例を踏まえて**

#### Abstract

#### 要約

本研究は、国民の生活の向上のために尽力したが失敗した、ラオス政府が抱える課題を明らかにし、解決に向けた方策について考察するものである。

本研究は未だに国家として未熟なラオスを対象に行われたものである。フランスが侵攻する以前のラオスは 3 つの異なる王国に分かれ、近隣国の一部となりかかっていた。1893 年にラオスを占領したフランスは、三つの王国を統一するのではなく、全体で 200 家族に当たるラオスの上層部の者たちのみとの交流を通して植民地経営を進めた。結果として、90%以上の住民は、植民地支配とはいえ独自の工夫と自力で生活することを強いられた。第二次世界大戦直後、統一の動きが見られたが、フランスの植民地支配を抜け出し、三王国の統一への動きは1954年まで待たねばならなかった。しかし、その後でも冷戦が深刻化する中でラオスの統一は困難を極めた。米ソ間の競合の余波だけでなく隣接する中国、そして北ベトナムから影響がラオス国内に様々な党派を生み出していたからである。

安定した「中央政府」を持たないまま独立から独立以後の混乱の時代を生き残ったラオスは1975年によりやく社会主義の許で中央集権国家を樹立する。しかし、「中央政府」の動きに左右されることなく生活を維持してきたのが住民の大半であった。新国家が地方統治の州あるいは地区を設定したものの、これまで通り村を中心とした生活基盤を大きく変えることにはならなかった。現在でも人民大会で税の徴収が滞りがちであるといった報告がされるほどである。

逆に、住民側では自らの福祉の保全と向上を図る目的で“社会的税”と呼ばれる相互補助税を、村の行政機構が中心となり確保している。これを財源として村

単位で進められる生活運営は幅広い。冠婚葬祭などを維持から始まり、災害対策に必要な物資の確保から情報の流通にいたるまで地域生活の保全に欠かせない領域の全てに村中心の活動が浸透しているのである。結果として、村のリーダーの政治的な存在感も大きく、住民は人民大会代表選挙以上にこのリーダーの選出には注意を払っているほどである。

本稿が取り上げる教育改革は、以上のような背景から明らかになった中央政府の限界一国家的政策と住民の距離一を検討するためである。特に初等教育をめぐる国際的な動きに対応するために、中央政府は教育改革を構想した。例えば、1990年のユニバーサルプライマリー教育への動きとか、2000年の国連総会があげたミレニアム開発目標（MDGs）などがそれである。その中でも、急務として取り上げようとしたのが、長期にわたって高い率で推移していた10%以上に上る小学校中退問題への対策であった。

本研究は、中退の原因が登校意欲の低下に起因するものでないことを検討し、その上で、住民にとって改革を主導する中央政府の存在が意識されていないことを明らかにしている。意識の問題として（1）農業主体のラオス経済では労働力の確保が住民には最大の課題であることと、それが（2）小学校教育の実施が委ねられる村レベルでの教育担当者の間でも共有されていることが挙げられる。また、実施体制の問題として（1）卒業を容易にする手順に対策が集中しており、（2）復学者対策が考案されていないため、一時、学校を離れた児童の復学意欲を刺激する対策が軽視されている。そしてこの双方に共通する課題として、教育改革担当者（中央政府）が地域事情一一農業主体の生活＋農閑期の単純労働契約一一を把握する体制が未成熟であることが挙げられる。

キーワード： ラオス、村落の自主性、国家と国民の距離、初等教育、ドロップアウト

## **Distance between the State and the People: a Case of Lao Primary Education**

### **Abstract**

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

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## Acronyms

AC	Agricultural Collectivization
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
ASEAN	Association of South East Asia Nations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIED	Community Initiatives for Education Development
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
DEB	District Education Bureau
DP	Development Partners
EFA	Education for All
EFA-FTI	Education for All-Fast Track Initiative
ESDF	Education Sector Development Framework
ESDP	Education Sector Development Program
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information Communication and Technology
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRRI.	International Rice Research Institute
JETRO	Japan External Trade Organization
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
Lao PDR	Lao People Democratic Republic
LFAP	Land and Forest land Allocation
LPRP	Lao People Revolutionary Party
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOES	Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos
MOPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MRC	Mekong Regional Commission
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières

NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NUOL	National University of Laos
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODOP	One District One Product
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEB	Provincial Education Bureau
PHC	Population Household Census
PM	Prime Minister
PPP	Progressive Promotion Policy
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
US	United States
TPFA	Tropical Forests Action Plan
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nation Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPE	Universal Primary Education
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee
WB	World Bank
WCEFA	UN World Conference on Education for All

## Chapter 1: Laos in transition

Laos is an economically rapidly growing nation-state in Southeast Asia nations sharing borders with Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, and Myanmar. By comparison with its neighbors, Laos is relatively 'young' geographically (the current border) and historically (nation-building) speaking. That Laos is young is the background of this study. The greatest majority of the Laotians have had a minimal time when its central government may have made any significant difference in their lives. The policies that the government in Vientiane designs and sanctions, have had only limited impact upon the life of the majority Laotians, who have sustained a degree of autonomy, even during the civil war between 1962 and 1975.

One major policy allocated by the state to the people was the Agriculture Cooperative in the late 1970s, but it was encountered by the people resistance. In the early 1990s, the state sanctioned the Land Reform policy to the people, to encourage them to invest in the land and stop doing slash and burn farming. However, it was not resulted as positive, the majority of the farmers failed to do modern agriculture; and still doing slash and burn farming though it rendered as illegal. The outcome of the state's orders illustrates certain DISTANCE between the state and the people. The distance here means when the state policies and services allocated to the village level, but the villagers' reaction were indifferent or discard.

Another example is the case of primary education reform and its failure, which is the main topic of this thesis. The state's failure to achieve Universal Primary Education illuminates the problematic relationship between the government and the majority of Laotians spread all across rural Laos. The mentioned intended results of many state policies failed to reach people, exemplified the distance between the state and the people. The research puzzle is the reason leading to the intended result, is it the cause or the result of the distance between the Lao state and its people?

## I. Prologue to modern Laos

Lao history was originally known as Lan Xang kingdom which existed since 14<sup>th</sup> century, yet the current border of Laos was set only in 1946, and the nation had just received its independence and freed from political turmoil in 1975. The Lan Xang Kingdom had long formed the center of gravity for Lao political power in the Mekong region. Due to the internal political turmoil in the early 18th century, the kingdom was not able to maintain itself as a single entity and was slit into separate kingdoms with their centers in Luangprabang, Vientiane, and Champasack. This division enabled outside force to come in. Siam or what is known today as Thailand gradually expanded its suzerainty over these kingdoms. In the early 19th century, Vientiane was destroyed by Siamese. By the turn of the 20th century, Champasack had become a province of Siam, Luangprabang, while formally retaining the status of a tributary kingdom of Siam, was close to becoming the same. By this time, the French was also expanding its influence in lower banks of the Mekong in hopes of restoring equilibrium to Britain's influence in Southeast Asia. The French thus involved Laos - Thailand's affairs and had stopped Siam from acquiring the Lao Kingdoms. It could be perceived as a fortunate event, from the perspective of many scholars, that the French arrival had secured the existence of Laos and prevented its being absorbed by its neighbors. Grant Evans wrote in 'A Short History of Laos' that only French colonial expansion averted, perhaps, the absorption of Laos by Thailand and Vietnam (Evans, 2012, pp.1). The French did secure Laos, however, the point to question here is HOW the French had built Laos as an entity. The first point to note is that the French failed to include Korat Plateau (now belong to Thailand), where the majority of people considered as 'Lao' was living. Furthermore, the French instead of uniting the three kingdoms together, administered them separately. The people's sense of belonging was discussed by different studies about French colonialism in Laos. Soren Ivarsson's 'Creating Laos,' questioned the establishment of a fixed boundary of Laos by the French. He paid attention to the transition, the process when the unbounded states that had dominated the geopolitical layout of the pre-modern period were replaced by geographically bounded states (Soren Ivarsson, 2008, pp.2) (Map 1). He further criticized the French for not including the majority of Lao people into the 'Laos boundary' that "*French created a 'demi-pays' by dividing the Lao population in Laos from the Lao living on the Korat Plateau. The largest group of Lao, living in Korat Plateau, has been turned into 'Thais,' while a smaller Lao population lives across the Mekong in Laos, the nation-state whose name is associated with the Lao*" (Soren Ivarsson, 2008, pp.217). Grant

Evans had done many pieces of research on Laos pointed out that it was more difficult for the French to create the sense of belonging to the national border. The Lao people had never been aware of the central government "when the French took over Laos, there was no sense of a Lao nation among the population that fell within the boundaries that they mapped (Map 2). Even for the French, Laos was, at that time, more of a cartographic reality than a social or historical one. But it was the French who brought the idea of the modern nation to Laos, and this idea would grow slowly among the population over the following 50 years" (Evans, 2012, pp.81). Therefore, the sense of belonging to a specific national border for the people and is, therefore, questionable.



Map 1: Mainland Southeast Asia before Modern Boundaries

Source: Thongchai Winichakul, 1994, pp.2





Map 2: 1906 Laos in Indochina

Source: Atlas, Ernest Leroux, 1906

The geo-bodies gave birth to the future nation-states, mentioned by Thongchai Winichakul in his 'A History of the Geo-body of a Nation' (Thongchai Winichakul, 1994). Sorren argued although Laos's map was completed, yet since "*the geo-body of Laos never materialized,*" thus, a sense of belonging of the people on the map is not as completed. For the case of Laos, it could have been more challenging to install the feeling of a nation, since there were three separate kingdoms under the different royal monarchy and the French. According to Benedict Anderson's study, who perceives the nation as a modern cultural construct or artifact. Anderson associates the emergence of the nationalist imagining with the decline of

classical communities linked by sacred languages and dynastic realms, with changing apprehensions of time and with the role of print-capitalism. Therefore it has a lot to do with the colonial rule, e.g., there was no pavement of administration channeling from central to local Lao. Not only the map but also the census, museum, and education to deliver the idea of nationalism through classrooms, which Anderson called it 'educational and administrative pilgrimages'<sup>1</sup>. When examining the French's education expansion in Laos, it did not start until the 1940s. Surprisingly, almost 50% of senior administration staff in Laos were Vietnamese.

### **1. French colonial rule over three separated kingdoms**

Under the French colonial period, the state's presence had an impact only within the top ruling class people or the Lao elite. In the late 1940s, there were approximately 200 families, assisted by Vietnamese senior staff who were brought in by the French due to the lack of qualified worker in Laos (Evans, 2012, pp.55-56). The influence of the state was centralized in the city's areas, at most few square miles away. A small proportion of the population knew about the ruling class, according to a survey conducted in the late 1950s. Only 34% of the people interviewed even in the capital city knew the name of the late king in Luangprabang who ruled for 56 years (Information and Attitudes in Laos, 1959, pp.35). People in further areas had their own way of living, under a local leader's guidance, usually those who were large land owner. The system Evans called it a 'patrol-client system,' not a rule-governed bureaucracy that in theory, applied itself evenly and impersonally everywhere (Evans, 2012, pp.55-60). For example, in 1930s the colonial state tried to establish the Corvée labor system or unpaid labor as contribution from the villagers (every male between the ages of 18 and 60) had to construct administrative posts, barracks, roads, and the infrastructure of colonial control, but a line of laborers paving the road was inefficient in Laos, and the system finally began to give way to paid labor. While the same order in Vietnam cost several cases of horrendous abuse and loss of life due to the reproduction of labors, there were no similar cases in Laos (Evans, 2012, pp.61). Another point to note about the differences between Laos and Vietnam was that Vietnam's local authority was seriously influenced by the French administration. The district level was supervised directly by French administrative officers, reaching the villages constantly

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<sup>1</sup> See Sorren, (2008), 'Creating Laos', pp.2-3

from 1921-1941 until the village work started to be systematic and had a qualified operation. This positive outcome resulted from placing 'by way of co-option' the 'new notable' (formed in the new education system, people who held positions in the colonial army or bureaucracy) seated next to the 'traditional notable' (Benedict J., 2004, pp.68-72). This same process did not take place in Laos. It was noted by many scholars like Grant Evans and Stuart Fox<sup>2</sup> that to France, Laos was the least important of its possessions because it was perceived only as an extension from Vietnam.

The French's influences and services mainly concentrated in an urban area of Vientiane and Luangprabang. According to Evans' observation "*there was an enormous cultural gap between urban society (considered themselves as Parisian) and the countryside. For many, Paris was France, as sophisticated urban milieu that gave the nation the appearance of being more developed and 'civilized'. Members of this urban elite were often shocked to encounter peasants in rural areas who refused to speak French, who did not see themselves as Frenchmen, and who clung to local customs and 'superstitions'*" (Evans, 2012, pp.50).

At the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expansion of roads, markets, schools, military service and other things that should break down the central administration with local communities, had not begun at all in Laos, while this process had already started in the neighbors including Siam (Evans, 2012, pp.51). As a consequence, many Lao in the kingdom saw little difference between life under the French and their old days.

The interview with Grandma N, who was born in 1925 in Thakong village, a suburban area of Savanhnakhet Province (southern part) aims to provide the life story of the people in a rural area during the French colonial time, to show how famous the state at that time was. Her father used to live in Korat Plateau (Thailand) and moved to Savanhnakhet to marry her mother in Thakong. Her family often went to Korat to visit relatives, and since Korat's economic activities were much livelier the family often bought stuff there to resell in Savanhnakhet. The family was not interactive only with the Thai people, but also Vietnamese and Chinese people at the village, they were surrounded by Vietnamese people (helpers at her restaurant) and

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<sup>2</sup> See, Stuart Fox, (1997), 'History of Laos' and Grant Evans (1990), 'Lao Peasants under Socialist'

Chinese relatives. *"We just stayed together, did not question who from where."* When asking about the presence of the authority, she said that they only interacted with the village officials not a higher level, for example the district officials never visited the village. What could be confusing was that there were two village heads, Lao and the Vietnamese village head. Since many Vietnamese people were living there, they had elected one. In fact, the two village heads were working together quite peacefully taking care of the issues asked by their villagers including Lao, Vietnam and whoever lived around the village. When asking if she heard about the central government, she said that *"we had a king, but we did not pay much attention, we know nothing about them. My family paid no attention to the central government as long as she was able to continue selling food to the French army who were at the camp near the hometown"*.

## **2. The arrival of the Japanese and a precedence of Laos' independence**

The arrival of the Japanese force to Laos in March 1945, although they had stayed in Laos for a short time (March - Aug 1945), it had set a precedent leading Laos to be independent in its own right. Under the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japan dissolved French control over its Indochinese colonies including the three kingdoms of Laos. Due to the Japanese surrender, in Aug 1945, the King of Luangprabang had indented to have Laos resume its former status as a French colony. However, Prince Phetsarath the most influential royal member went against the king's desire and declared the independence of the Lao Kingdom, referring to the unification of three Kingdoms as one entity on September 15th, 1945. It marked the reconstitution of the modern Lao state and the re-uniting of the kingdoms since 1707 having northern and southern Laos formed part of a unified state. Therefore, the people's awareness of the newly unification is doubtful. To Grandma N, her family was not affected at all when the French left, although they have been ruling Laos for almost half a century. The only exception was the restaurant that they were operating, there was no more French clients, but because of the Japanese troop who occupied the camp, they have become the new clients. Later, when the Japanese armies left, she lost her clients, so she went to Korat to look for jobs and other economic opportunities and came back in a year later. When asking about the unification of the different kingdoms, Grandma N did not know anything.

### a. Problem of unification

Previously, during the French colonial rule, the idea of unification was proposed by the king of Luangprabang to the French in 1941. As noted by Pietrantonio, in 'Le problem politique du Laos' to promote a sense of unified Lao space and the notion of a common Lao identity among the population. However, the attempt was denied by the French, as it would cause problems between the French and the Kingdom of Champasack in southern Laos<sup>3</sup>. The French reports on the political situation in Laos during the first half 1940s mentioned that the southern people preferred to be under Siamese rather than to be under the rule of the King of Luangprabang.<sup>4</sup> Hugh Toye criticized the French in his 'Laos. Bufferstate or Battleground' that "*the union of the whole country was something the French could not yet concede*"<sup>5</sup>.

Likewise, the lack of roads isolated these regional divergences (Soren, 2008, pp.157). The construction of roads running east to west had been given priority only in the 1920-30s to integrate Laos with the overall colonial space of Indochina and de-link it from Siam. The king could only visit the urban centers (Thakaek, Savanhnakhet and Pakse) in the south for the first time in 1941.<sup>6</sup> In 1943, 'Route Coloniale No.13' was finished, finally linking Vientiane with Luangprabang and Xiengkhuang. The road no.13 formed the longitudinal artery linking the most important urban centers in Laos for the first time ever by road.<sup>7</sup>

While the unification of Lao had to overcome the problem of pre-existing regional divergences, the French were closely involved, and actively supporting the Lao elite with French education and life style through celebrating French important ceremonies, to make them feel that only with the support of France Laos could become a modern country. Some other attempts to create a sense of Lao nationalism was done provocatively such as campaign to change the Lao people, however from the elite perspective that the Lao people were lazy, ignorant, and uneducated. Such keywords were also the part of the campaign for a national renovation, and, in the same vein Thao Phoui alluded to the changing states of mind when he

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<sup>3</sup> See Pietrantonio, (1947), 'Le problem politique du Laos', pp.96-97

<sup>4</sup> Note sur le Laos par Rochet, September 1945, c.157, EA, AMAE

<sup>5</sup> See Hugh Toye, (1968), 'Laos. Bufferstate or Battleground?', pp.58

<sup>6</sup> The government visits Laos, Lao Ngay, 4 (April 1941), pp.11-12

<sup>7</sup> 'La Route Coloniale No.13' Indochina, 140 (a9430, pp.7)

sets out to discover 'Who are We?' in an article in the Pathet Lao New Paper, referring the Lao as 'lazy' and 'carefree' in 1941.<sup>8</sup> A similar piece wrote by Bouasy in 'The Errors of Our Ancestor' of the existence of a kind of solidarity among the Lao, which did not equate to a sense of belonging to a country. "*It did not include the whole of the country. It was only limited to the village or neighboring villages. Clannishness took the place of love of the nation or patriotism, as the Lao of one Mueang (district) seemed to be unaware that the Lao of another Mueang were their brothers. The horizon of our ancestors was very narrow-minded. In general, the outlook was confined by the mountain forming the limits of the rice fields. This was their universe*". At the same time, Bouasy characterizes the Lao of past generations as being much too caught up with amusing themselves while neglecting work and education. In doing so, these Lao neglected the duty of preparing the future for their descendants. Alluding to an old saying 'a father who takes his food too salty also makes his children thirsty.'<sup>9</sup> By highlight the differences between the urban and rural, it ended up creating more distance between them.

Alternative literature for the campaign used of Roman letters instead of the Lao written language, which was controversial since it turned it back on an important national characteristic. However, a similar approach was introduced in Cambodia, with a decree institutionalizing the use of Roman letters in the administration, which passed in 1943. In Laos, this action was delayed until the September of 1944, when it was made public that Roman letters should be used to write Lao in the administration in Laos. Later, the system was mandated to be taught in schools throughout Laos. However, the use of Roman letters to write Lao, was never carried out, thanks to the Japanese troops occupying Laos at the beginning of March 1945 (Sorren, 2008, pp 198). With the Japanese occupation, the French colonial administration was overthrown and a new period in the formation of Lao nationalism opened up. It is a period when a Lao cultural nationalism orchestrated by French colonialism was transformed into a Lao political and anticolonial nationalism.

Prince Phetsarath had advised the Japanese to sanction the unification of Laos, but the Japanese turned this suggestion down as the French had administered the provinces separately (Soren, 2008, pp.209). Only after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Lao Issara

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<sup>8</sup> See Phoui, (1941), 'Qui sommes nous?', Pathet Lao, pp.3-6

<sup>9</sup> See Bouasy, (1941) 'Les fautes de nos pères', Pathet Lao, pp.7-10

Government (a Revolutionary Force) led by Prince Phetsarath carried the new tricolor flag superseding the three-headed elephant flag of the past, proclaiming the unification. Given the long history of five hundred years of being separated, it is interesting to pay attention to how the populations would perceive this integration.

The interview with Mr. SP, a former Final Court Judge during the 1960s, the case represents how the officials in an urban area of Vientiane worked two decades after the unification. To his memory, there was no contact between the government officials from different parts. The central government only stayed in Vientiane and rarely went to other parts of Laos, not even to cities of LuangPrabang and Champasack. "*There was no regular official visit of the central government of Vientiane to other provinces. Only when there were important tradition ceremonies in Vientiane e.g., Lao New Year when the King from Luangprabang will attend the ceremonies*". Therefore, according to him the population was living as normally like old time.

#### **b. Short-lived independence**

Whether one argues that the French failed to turn Laos into a modern country or not, the newly independence Laos was a case to evaluate. After the proclamation of the independence of Laos under the Lao Issara over the three kingdoms, the government lasted only for less than seven months. This is because there was a serious lacking manpower and resources to run the administration. As seen in Stuart Fox's work, Laos always needed to be subsidized from the revenues of Vietnam, even in the early 1940s. (Staurt Fox, 1995, pp.136). The short-lived state shows the condition of Laos in several aspects. First, the country was not ready to be freed from the foreign assistant, for both qualified workers and financial resources. Second, it had proven that, for half a century, the French colonial administration did not prepare Laos to be independent on its own.

In April 1946, the French colonial administration was reinstalled. In November 1946, the first Royal Lao government was established, consisting of only 'elite members' (Staurt Fox, 1997, pp.67).

### 3. The return of the French and The Royal Lao Government

The French returned with the idea to set a new modern Lao and to continue 'La mission civilisatrice' or a campaign for national renovation. The agenda was to promote the benefits of cooperating with the French. According to Soren, the campaign for a national renovation in Indochina can be linked with attempts to wipe out the stain of defeat and to alleviate French insecurity in this part of their colonial empire (Soren, 2008, pp.145-146). More resources were taken in the economic sphere to enhance Laos' economy. More roads were built to link different parts of Laos with each other, and to connect Laos with other parts of Indochina. Also, improvements were made to the agricultural sector, e.g., coffee plantation at Boloven Plateau and the educational system was finally focused on with the opening more village schools; still, many were at the temples. A French scholar recorded that there were more schools in Laos between 1940-1954 than in the previous half-century of the French presence in Laos (Paul Lévy, *Histoire du Laos*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974, pp.90). The government evinced much concern on the majority Lao Loum, Government services were concentrated overwhelmingly in the large towns, as shown in detail in the *History of Laos* of Stuart Fox (1997, pp.67). Therefore, the campaign, failed to create a sense of belonging to the country, but it created more distance between people in the city and the rural area, or what Alfred MacCoy an American Professor of History who specializes in Southeast Asia, called this strategy an 'immature defensive culturalism' or 'bourgeois' (Alfred McCoy, 1970, pp.92)

Mrs. N's eye-witness account is record of the life of an elite in Vientiane in the 1950s. Her father was the highest ranking official in the Laos National Aviation service, while her mother's family was running a Taxi company. The family lived right in the center of the town in Vientiane, 1 Km from the palace. To the best of her memory, the city was limited within an area of less than 4 Km diameter. State's services and investments were available only to the town, e.g., hospitals, schools, roads. If going further, for 5Km, there was nothing, but only rice fields and farms. Mrs. N also explained the people's interaction that the social-class difference was quite well defined, "*elite stayed with the elite; farmers stayed with the farmers.*" This pattern could be seen until her teenage years, French culture was perceived as being classy, and it indicated a difference between the elite and the rest at that time. It seems that whatever the state did, had an influenced to the elite people who stayed in the central city in Vientiane.



When looking at the non-city resident's case who manage to receive some benefit from the state's service at this time, Mr. SP's account could give us a glimpse of what kind of exceptional aspect he had. He was born in 1943 in a village of Vientiane Province; he became a judge of the final court by the end of the 1960s. Since he was a child, he had always seen Vientiane as somewhere that was very far away, although he lived only 60 Km away. Inadequate roads were one of the many factors for this as, *"it took a day to go to Vientiane. When it was raining, we couldn't go because the road was flooded"*. Inadequate roads also stimulated the gap between urban and rural areas, especially for the people who lived in the mountains far away from not only the state's services but also the economic facilities to acquire some necessity products such as medicines, clothes, and other daily consumption goods. Therefore, there were mobile merchants moving around like his father. *"My father was a merchant; he bought stuff from the city and sold them to the mountain people; each round took him for a few months."* This was the household primary source of income, which supported him and his siblings to go to school, still there was no school beyond the elementary level in the village. *"Commuting to Vientiane where the only secondary school was, which he never thought it was possible."* After graduating from primary school, he decided to give it a try and applied to take the exam for Vientiane Secondary School or Lycée de Vientiane. But he needed to have a certain level of French since all the courses were in French, thanks to his father he could afford to pay for a private French lesson. Thus, he was able to overcome this language barrier and passed the exam. *"I was one among 200 people who passed from 2000 candidates, each year around 1800 students couldn't enter the school. After passing, more than being good, we needed lots of money for school-related things, but luckily our father could afford them. Also, I was lucky to be able to stay at the father's friend's house in Vientiane"*. Given the information, there were many requirements to get access to the French formal education. Unsurprisingly, for the whole village, Mr. SP was the only one who made it to the Lycée de Vientiane. The French's 'La mission civilisatrice' in Laos after 1945, in actuality, happened only in a tiny area of the Vientiane capital.

#### **4. The Ruling class under the influence of East-West and the Cold War**

Finally, in 1954, Laos was granted its independence under the 'Geneva Agreement,' an international platform to decide the fate of the three Indochina countries, Vietnam, Cambodia,

and Laos. According to the conference, Vietnam was categorized as a divided nation (North and South Vietnam), while Cambodia and Laos both were proclaimed as a sovereign state. The Royal Lao Government has been asked formally under the French rule, was asked by the agreement to be merged with the Guerrilla Group (Lao Issara Revolutionary Part<sup>10</sup>). The coalition, however, failed to happen regardless of many attempts, due to the foreign intervention of both sides.

Based on the 'Domino Theory,' the US was worried about Laos becoming a communist country and spreading communism to other countries in Southeast Asia, kept influencing the Royal Lao Government. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao<sup>11</sup> Revolutionist force was supported by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. This eventually led to a civil war in the 1960s. However, it is important to note that the tension was high only among the leaders of the two sides; it was not as evident in the daily life of the people, even in the city. For example, among the government staff, as told by Mr. SP, "*before 1975, the division between the left and the right was not as clear in the mind of the people, including the urban people*".

The civil war lasted for almost two decades and cost severe damage to the country, Laos became the most heavily bombed per capita in the warfare history, more than 200 million tons of unexploded ordinances which remain until today. Yet, it is noteworthy that the damage happened only in specific areas where the conflicts took places, at the city of Vientiane, at the Pathet Lao's base in the north and along the Ho Chi Minh trail where the North Vietnamese armies encountered with the US armies while commuting from North to South Vietnam. The rest of the people were living under their subsistence farming.

Nevertheless, the internal political conflict caused an abandonment of socio-economic development by the state. Although there was a flow of USAID to the country, more than 90% went to military purposes. According to Stevenson<sup>12</sup>, only USD1.3 million was spent on

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the Lao Issara members have kept their nationalist activities going even after the French returned in 1946

<sup>11</sup> The Lao Issara later received more influences from Vietnam and Soviet Union, was later named Pathet Laos

<sup>12</sup> See The end of nowhere: American policy towards Lao since 1954

agriculture from 1953 to 1959, accounting for only 7% even though the majority of the Lao population were peasant farmers. Whereas, up to USD184 million was spent on military support. Based on a different source provided by Viliam Phraxayavong, of the USD480.7 million provided to Laos from 1955 to 1963, only USD9.1 (2%) million was spent on development grants and technical cooperation. The lack of attention from the state and limited financial investment led the related sectors to implement the program without a complete system. For example, in the education sector, although there was an increasing in the number of school buildings, the schools were inadequate in resources and qualified teachers. Even so, the country was still following the French school curriculum; therefore, only schools in Vientiane were able to perform the French way of teaching.

The case of Ms. SD will show the overall picture of the school in Vientiane at that time. Ms. SD was a student at a Teacher Training College; she said that school was more about France, not about Laos. French's history was taught in the history class, the school's rules were a French standard very different from her primary school in her hometown, and everything was taught in French. *"I felt like we were in France, everything was written in certain ways, the rules were so strict, and we were not allowed to go out from the dorm that much"*. The French language was still the most dominant one at school. *"Students who could not speak French like me were put in a preparation class first until we picked some of the language, then we were mixed with the rest."*

The contrast between urban Vientiane and rural areas could be seen in other sectors as well. In 15 years, goods imported to Vientiane rose by 16 times, including vehicles for local government officers. Stuart Fox also recorded that Lao civil servants became among of the most highly paid in Asia (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997). Hence, the Lao officials, the elite, and the urban population became the main beneficiary of the USAID. Because of this, it enlarged differences between Vientiane people and those from other parts of Laos.

Beyond Vientiane where the post-war flurry of activity took place, in other towns approximately 1.5 million people in the early 1950s lived as peasants. Grant Evans mentioned that Lao unlike the Thai peasantry of the Chao Phraya valley, the lowland Lao had not become drawn into significant commercial production of rice, or indeed any other crop. Commercial rice growing had made the acquisition of rice-growing land attractive to commercial farmers

and landlords in Thailand, but nothing like this happened in Laos. Trading was mostly confined to occasional markets that rotated through the village surrounding the market towns usually associated with Tasseng and Maung administrative centers. Some industrial products found their way into these networks, primarily through itinerant Chinese traders. Leaving aside natural conditions, the major obstacle to greater commercial development was the serious lack of communications infrastructure in the country. In the mid-1950s Laos had around 5,600 kilometers of roads, of which only 800 were surface and therefore useable in the rainy season. In 1945 there were only nineteen registered vehicles in the country, a figure which had risen to around one hundred by the early 1950s. The Mekong River and its tributaries constituted the main travel arteries, but only in some instances were boats driven by motor power. Air transport was minimal, and telecommunication was confined to the main centers. Telephone calls to provincial centers would not become possible until 1967. Communication throughout the country, there before that time, was slow and intermittent. Without improvement, there could be no serious commercial development of agriculture or exploitation of natural resources, and thus no revenue to initiate serious economic development. The RLG made few financial demands on the rural population and mostly left the peasant untaxed for the whole of its existence. (Evans, 2012, pp. 107-108). Since the state's activities were concentrated only in Vientiane, thus Laos at that time was in fact only Vientiane.

By not being near to the state, the people at the village level relied on a group of villagers composed of kin and neighbors under similar rituals and ways of production. A study of Lao 'traditional' political relations between villages and towns by Martin Barber observed explained more about the political ideology of the outlying villages that remained basically independent of the ritual and ideological involvement with the concept of kinship, although "*control over the villages had to be maintained at the level of political bargaining, through the perceived mutual advantage of military protection, economic support and the settlement of disputes*". Barber affirms, however, that what was shared between the Lao state and people was only through religion (Martin J. P. Barber, 1979, pp.243).

## **II. Laos after 1975: The socialist regime**

Until 1975, when the civil war came to an end, and that the government began following a 'new regime,' a socialist rule under the Pathet Lao government. It is important to point out that the Lao economy in the previous era was 100% under the control of foreign Aid; thus, after 1975, the national economy collapsed. The new state needed to build the nation from SCRATCH with a series of 'Profound Revolutionary Changes' that required involvement from the people of various sectors, including health, education, economics, and especially the agriculture sector (Evans, 1988, pp.27).

Basic education was set as a priority by the state, all the pupils should be trained to become part of a skilled labor forces to participate in the nation-building. Given the fact that there was only one teacher training school available, the goal was quite far from reality. Primary schools increased from 72 in 1975 to 495 schools in 1985. By this time, the primary school enrolment rate increase to 45% from less than 30% in the previous regime. Still, a number of challenges were seen. There were more than 50% of teachers with a few years of primary schooling and more than 50% of the incomplete schools. As a result, there was no possibility to provide a six-year primary school, so the system was adapted to be only five years. Education's quality problem remained with high repetition and high dropout rate (Noonan, 2012).

### **1. State's initiation to reach the people: The Agriculture Cooperative**

Under the supervision of the socialist bloc, through the Soviet Union and Vietnam advisers, the Lao state adopted a Planned Economy, introducing Agricultural Collectivization (AC) to the people for national economic development. Without a trial of AC beforehand, unlike Vietnam, who adopted AC since 1954, when looking at Laos's case, the transition was quite rushed. Besides this, the shortage of cadres and limited resources (technical and financial assistance) provided by the central authority were inadequate to support the people to strictly implement AC. The state also rushed to apply a taxing system giving 30% of farmer's rice production to the country (Ronald Bruce St John, 2006, pp.33). It is noteworthy that before the Lao people had never been taxed since the previous government relied on donations from

outside. As a consequence, the new policy encountered farmers' opposition in various forms. The people even chose to destroy their crops and to slaughter of cattle to prevent them from becoming communal property (Stuart, 1999, pp.180). Based on the fieldwork in PakNgun District, the majority of the village left AC right after one year of being engaged in the program due to the decrease of production they experienced from being in the group. It demonstrates the state's lack of attention given to the internal condition but being responsive to the need to follow the socialist orbit. Meanwhile, the closure of the border between Thailand and Laos due to political conflicts created more problems and food shortages in the country. The discontinued flow of imported goods to the city created a shock to the elite and people in the city. Ms. N admitted that her family was very affected, "*my mother needed to sell her gold to buy food in the dark market. Many of my relatives could not stand the poor economic situation and left for France*" (Ms. N). Attempt to reach the people through AC ended up creating pressure on both the state and the people. However, not until 1986 that the state admitted the failure of the program.

### **III. Laos after 1986: A transitional phase towards a Market Economy**

In 1986, the state adopted the New Economic Mechanism (NEM), the market economy to replace the failure of planned economy. Internally, the state started the decentralization of administrative controls on pricing, production targets, wages, and introduction of a market exchange rate to support the development of an export-oriented cash economy. Externally, a 'Foreign Code' was set to open up the country to attract foreign aids, technical assistance, and investment. In 1990, 16 multilaterals, 15 bilateral and 25 NGO donors from the convertible currency area (Western countries and their international agencies) assisted, amounting to USD153.3 million. The largest loans were given by the ADB, the WB, grants by Sweden, Japan and United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which data was shown by Viliam Phraxayyavong in his 'Aids to Laos' (Phraxayyavong, 2009, pp.169). He further commented that the aid and the flows of investment were due to the fact that Laos is abundant in forestry, mineral, and hydro resources. With the flow of investment and grants, as a result, Laos' GDP has been rising sharply. When looking at the 2018's GDP, it had increased from 621 million in 1988 to 16.8 billion in 2018 (WB, 2018).

## **1. Trials and Errors**

The transition towards a market economy is still in process and there have been some downsides and remaining issues. For example, the Land Reform devised by the state to the people resulted in the reallocation of a huge number of the local people. Another example is the 'Universal Primary Education' which was in committee since 1990, but at the time of writing, has not been achieved.

### **a. Land Reform and its contradictory outcomes**

Land reform was one among many international commitment, Laos had from getting itself more integrated into the world community. In 1992, Laos joined the largest ever world summit on Human Environment, Rio summit (Earth summit) and alternative to Slash and Burn Consortium was created. The Land Reform Policy<sup>13</sup> and the ban of slash and burn farming was adopted<sup>14</sup> with two goals: increasing land tenure security in order to encourage farmer involvement in intensive farming and protecting the forest.

What to note is that, in order to practice this new farming method, farmers needed capital to purchase the required resources, including seeds, chemicals, and machinery. For the majority of upland farmers, who produced just enough for self-consumption, that was far from reality. What is more, since the program led to the allocation of people, especially highland people (50- 80% of the total population in some provinces), their livelihood was totally disrupted, yet, still today slash and burn remains in around 25,000-30,000 hectares per year because of the lack of knowhow to practice the lowland farming and the constraint of available land at the low land area (Mya Than&Joseph L.H. Tan, Eds, 1997).

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<sup>13</sup> In October 1989, (No.117/CM) on the Management and Use of Forest and Forest Land was promulgated. 1990-1996, Land Reform was sanctioned by the state to the people

<sup>14</sup> Early 1989, deforestation and forest degradation were acknowledged to have reached the critical stage at the first National Forestry Conference. This conference marked a shift from exploitation-based forestry to the preservation, planting and development of forests. Slash and burn farming were categorized as the key cause of deforestation.

## **b. Universal Primary Education and its remaining issues**

Another international commitment was to achieve Universal Primary Education. It started in March 1990, when the state joined the UN World Conference on 'Education For All' (EFA) at Jomtien to address the basic learning needs of all. With the commitment, the country received investment and assistance from the international agencies to improve the education sector tremendously, yet its influence was still limited to certain areas. For example, it took more than ten years for the service to reach somewhere beyond the capital such as Phonhong District in Vientiane Province (60 Km away). It should take longer for further remote areas.

Ms. D's children and niece's schooling are examples to see some outcomes of the reform. *"When my son was 3-5 years old (1985-89), there was no formal kindergarten even in the capital city of Vientiane. He had to be with at a lady's house, the lady looked after 10-15 children, there the kids were asked to sit down and be quiet all the time"*. She was so sorry for her son and felt appreciation for the foreign assistance coming in from 1990. *"My younger daughter was born by the time there were several formal kindergartens (1991-94). UNESCO and Unicef's staff trained teachers, which made the teaching approaches became more fun, full of learning materials, and lots of activities"*. While outside the Vientiane capital, it took longer to change, *"my nieces who lived in Phonhong District, Vientiane Province, the kindergarten did not exist until the 2000s and was only available in big villages"*.

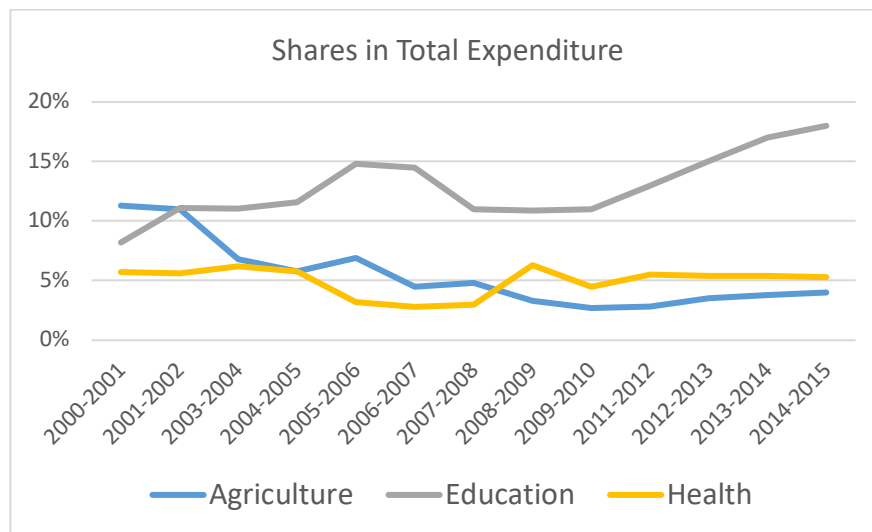
From 1990 of the state's signing of EFA to 2000 when the state later pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG2) on UPE by 2015. Laos emphasized more on the role of primary education, such as in 2000, the Lao government issued the first law on education, in June 2000 mandating free and compulsory education. In 2005, the National Action Plan to meet the goal of EFA and MDG2 was endorsed by the Prime Minister's Decree no.68 to achieve the goal of 95% enrolment rate and 0% dropout rate by 2015. Although Laos has achieved the target of enrollment rate of 95% since the early 2010s, the target to reduce the dropout rate to 0% remained problematic, which was an obstacle to achieving the UPE in 2015. On average, every year, approximately 35,000 (out of roughly 290,000) children are dropping out in the middle of their primary school. As a result, Laos failed to meet with the goal to achieve MDG2 in 2015. Thus, as an extension of the MDG2, Laos vowed to achieve the UN's



Sustainable Development Goal 4: Universal Primary Education (SDG4) by 2030. Given the role of primary education in creating a base for higher schooling levels and providing job security in the future, UPE has not been fulfilled in Laos and in fact in many countries regardless of consistent efforts from the individual states and the international community, including Cambodia and Myanmar. Hence, achieving SDG4 on time is a great challenge to Laos.

The state expenditure on the education sector has been increasing and has already been at the top of the other development sectors, e.g., health and agriculture, as shown in Figure 1. The source of financial investment came in from foreign grants and loans after the country gave the promise to do the education reform accordingly to international commitments and standards.

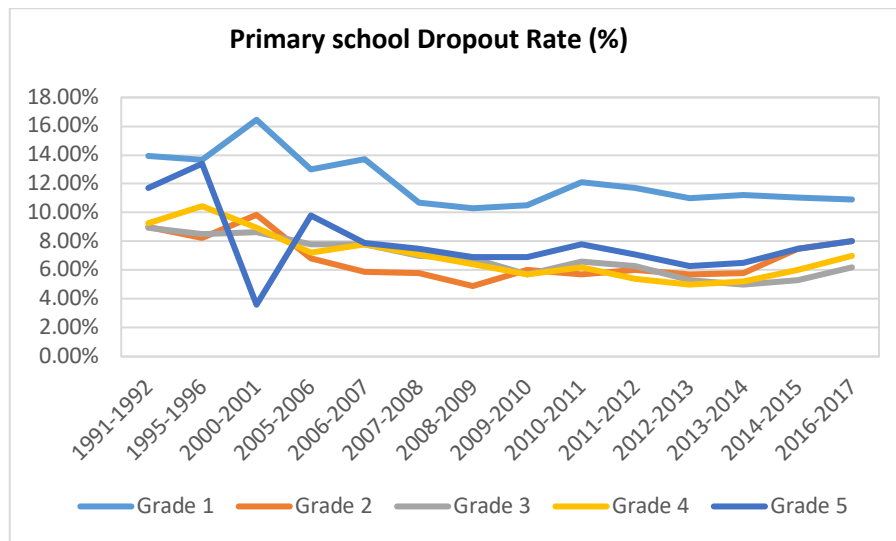
**Figure 1: State expenditure in different development sectors 2000-2015**



**Source: Statistic Center, MOES 2015**

Figure 2 shows the performance of the key education development indicator, dropout rate throughout times.

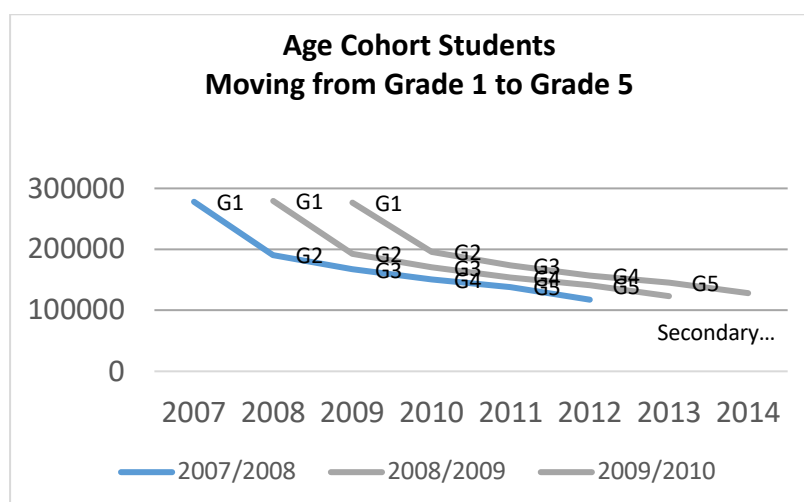
**Figure 2: Primary Dropout Rate from 1991 to 2014**



**Source: Statistic Center, MOES 2015**

Overall the trend of the dropout rate improved after 2005 but stayed around the same rate from 2010-2015. It is noteworthy that after 2008-2009, the dropout rate slightly went up from 6.9% (2009-2010) to 7.8% (2010-2011) and remained around 8% on average in the years later. The last record (2017) shows that the rate strangely has increased to 10.5%. The persistent dropout rate has had a direct effect on the student survival rate to Grade 5 of primary school. Around less than 70% of students enrolled in grade 1 reached grade 5. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Primary School Student Age Cohort of 2007-2008, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010**

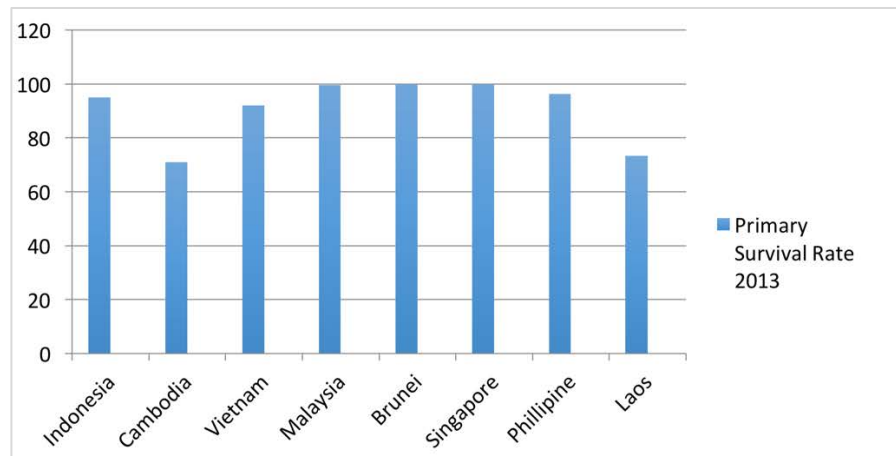


G: Grade; M: Secondary School Level

**Source: Statics Center MOES, 2014**

When compared with countries in ASEAN (Figure 4), in 2013, Laos had almost the lowest rate of survival at 73%, slightly higher than Cambodia, who had 71%. While other countries achieved over 90% of survival rate, Laos and Cambodia were the two countries struggling.

**Figure 4: Primary Survival Rate to Grade 5 in southeast Asia region**



**Sources: various sources gathered by the author**

Since Laos is moving toward economic integration, e.g., ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the people need to be prepared to compete with the foreign labor forces, and education is a primary tool for that, and allows for things such as a skilled labor forces, involvement of people in the national agenda and participation in the national economy. Thus, education development is a challenge for the Lao state. It is essential to achieve UPE, to have enough pupils to move up to higher grades and complete higher education and become workers to participate in national development. This is the concern of this research to find out the causes of the dropout and therefore pointing out what could be done to mitigate the problem. The study selects the case of primary education reform to see the problematic relationship between the state and the people.

Since, primary school dropouts have been the major issue achieving UPE, as shown in the low survival rate at the primary school level. It stayed above 50% from 2000 to 2007 and reached 67% in 2008. To address the problem, in 2009, the Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos (MOES) introduced the ‘Progressive Promotion Policy’ (PPP). The policy is to allow the students to proceed to higher grades automatically regardless of their class performance. Other

policies were also designed by the state to improve the situation such as the School Block Grant in 2012 to provide an extra budget for USD6 per student per year for school operation. Another strategy is the School Feeding Program in the 56 poorest districts in 2015 to convince students to come and stay at school for the whole day.

The survival rate, however, at the primary school level did not improve from 85% in 2009; it fell to 75% in 2012 and remained trending in this way in until 2018. In other words, the drop in the survival rate is a puzzle. One reason found during this research is that students have difficulty at the higher grades and consequently are not motivated to stay on at school. It is worse for a group of returnees who were temporarily out of school due to their household's needs, e.g., farming and migration to work elsewhere, and returned to school. In fact this group has never been mentioned in any official report before. In PakNgum, approximately 80% of the drop out students return to school (returnees) and are upgraded to higher classes, thanks to the PPP. But the problem is that without support from the school; these returning students fail to catch up with the lessons; therefore, they quit again. When they quit for the second time, most likely they do not come back to school again.

#### ➤ **Defining the problem of dropouts**

This research aims at uncovering neglected issues regarding the dropout rate, including that of returnees to provide new insights to the policymaking process in solving the dropout issue in Lao PDR. This study found 'the group of the returnees', which implies that they do want to go to school either to invest in their futures or to have fun at school. Thus, it is important to focus on 'the daily life of the key actors' which when examining carefully, we find that education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (e.g., food and jobs).

**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.**

#### **IV. Thesis outline**

This chapter provides an introduction to Laos, a transitional country. While the country now is in 'a making process', the people's reactions towards the state's policies were indifference. As evidenced by the un-intended result of the state's development programs, including Universal Primary Education, the case study of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Note to the research. An exploration of the atmosphere of the field trip at a rural community outside the capital city Vientiane, through a lengthy interview of the people focusing on the narratives of the informants to capture the view of the concerned parties (central government, local administration, villagers, school staff, and school-age children) and their attitudes toward primary education within the context of their lives.

Chapter 3: Full History, is to examine the chronological history to reveal how the Lao nation-state has been shaped from the French Colonial Administration in Laos (1893-1945), to the period when Laos was under East-West Confrontation (1962-1975). Since the Lao state only began reaching its population at all levels in 1975, the country has already embarked on the open door policy in economic activities in 1986. Thus achieving the development programs is challenging for the government, which several examples will be discussed in the chapter.

Chapter 4: Life in Lao village. The chapter will go over the villagers' life and the local administration throughout the time. The research site, PakNgum District, is the case to discover the state's centralization process in different sectors of social services at the village level, including the education reform.

Chapter 5: Education in Laos. The chapter is an examination of the origin of Lao education during the pre-1980s and education under the socialist after 1975. Persistence primary school dropouts and the education reform at the village level is the example to understand the implementation of the state's policies and the local situation. Finally, providing an evaluation of the government's policies and its outcomes from the research findings.

Chapter 6: Laos: the struggle for the centralization process. An overall examination of the distance between the state and the people of Laos, thereby offering some recommendation.

## **Chapter 2: Note to the research**

Laos is a case of a 'young' nation-state, geographically, and historically. Some scholars of Laos describe the country as backward such as Taillard (1989) who called Laos 'a dead angle,' 'a forgotten country', and there are similar depictions of Laos by Neher (1991) and Chi Do Pham (1994). Yet, some see Laos as a land full of opportunities, for example, Dommen said that Laos is 'a key-stone,' 'crossroads,' or 'lynchpin' in the region. Given the background, the research aims to study the state's policies to reach the people whose majority have been living on their own with limited interference from the central government. Nowadays, Laos is trying to meet its national development goals adopted from the international community such as the SDGs. Having pointed out its condition inherited from the past, it is clear that achieving such goals is a challenge to the central government. This chapter aims to draw the research site's environment where the majority of the people is farmers and engage in highly mobility seeking for working opportunities. The villagers' daily routine will be demonstrated to show how the Lao villages have change.

### **I. The Making of Lao state**

Not since 1707 had northern and southern Laos formed part of a unified state, the separation was untouched until 1946. Even after the French arrival, the French colonial administration kept their influence to each kingdom separately. In 1946, the Lao nationalist force was able to unite the three kingdoms together, however, due to a backward economic infrastructure prepared by the French, the new government lasted only for less than a year. It was not much time to reach out to the people to build a sense of a united Laos. The French returned and emphasized the need to promote 'French culture' and 'the idea of civilization,' however since its influence was concentrated only within the city area, it did not help to involve the people from rural areas who were the majority. After the French left Laos in 1954, Laos was still not free from foreign-influenced. The central government has cooperated closely with the foreign experts under the USAID program. On the other hand, there was also the involvement of the Soviet and Vietnam in the revolutionary force, the Pathet Lao. These foreign partners fully absorbed the attention of the ruling class. The situation was worse when the involvement of the foreign parties unavoidably led Laos into the civil war, which lasted for

almost two decades. Not until 1975 did Laos received its full independence as a socialist country, the Lao People Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), when the state's initiative to build relationships with the people and to involve them in the nation-building.

## **II. The 'untouched' Lao people**

Most of the people in Laos lived as peasants relying on rice farming. There are two kinds of rice cultivation in Laos, first is the rice paddy in the flat areas and another is shifting agriculture on the mountain, which is the most practiced type due to the mountainous geography of the country. Rice farming was undertaken along with raising life stock, fishing, and collecting forest products; these were the people's everyday activities. As seen in Grant Evan's 'A Short History of Laos,' Lao peasants lived in basically subsistence economy, in which families produced most of what they needed and bartered and traded for the few products they did not have, often with forest products. "*Trading was mostly confined to occasional markets that rotated through the village surrounding the market towns*" (Evans, 2012, pp.107). It was not common for the rural people to commute to the cities, partly was because of the poor infrastructure. Even until the mid-1950s Laos had around 5,600 kilometers of roads, of which only around 800 were surfaced and therefore useable in the rainy season (Evans, 2012, pp. 108).

While the majority of the Lao people were living far away from the state, the people were so closed to their neighboring countries such as Thailand. Before there was no clear borderline, the people were commuted freely. Through mobility, many ended up getting married and settled down on either side of the Mekong River. Thus, it was normal for these people from a different side to cross the border to visit their family and relatives. Another popular reason for crossing the Mekong River was because of the need for goods, the routine of which has lasted until now. For example, the informants at PakNgum usually go to the fresh market in BeungKarn, Thailand, by a small boat that takes them only 15 minutes. More than getting access to the other side's goods, services are what Lao people like to go to Thailand, to get services, including health and infrastructure. For a long time, Lao people have crossed the Mekong River and made use of the roads in Thailand as well as their public transportation to get to other parts of Laos. For example, the people in Savannakhet (south of Laos) when they needed to come to the capital city of Vientiane, they prefer to cross the border to Mukdahan

(Thailand), for those who have cars they will use the high way there and for those who do not will get on the train there, until they reach Nongkhai (Thailand), they will cross the border to Vientiane. Additionally, because Thais and Lao people share religious belief (Theravada Buddhism), gives a reason for the people to take turns visiting each side's traditional ceremonies at the temples in both countries. Likewise, job opportunities have been luring the Lao people who live near the border to go to Thailand and earn some cash income, which is a popular option for the Lao farmers during the break of rice farming (June to December). One point to note is that the similar language of Laos and Thailand also help to facilitate regular visiting. Everyday Lao people will cross the border, more than 2000 of Vientiane residents go to Nongkhai (Thailand) daily. What that means is that the Lao people were distant from its own state's services and were relying on the other state's services. Similar mobility happens with those who live near the Vietnam borders. Therefore, although Laos' map is geographically VERTICAL, yet the Lao people's circulation is HORIZONTAL.

### **III. Construction of a new 'spatial reality'**

The new government of Lao PDR in 1975, for the first time, earnestly tried to set up a close relationship with the people who the majority were peasants. Agricultural Cooperative was sanctioned, the people working on the land could retain a specified portion of the crop, but the rest or approximately 30% of the productivity, went to the government (Ronald Bruce). The problem was that traditionally, the Lao worked for their family or household economy, they were not willingly going to work hard on the common lands or sometimes on their own land and receive the same share of the crop and money for it as the lazy people in their collective, giving a large portion of their harvest to the government. The farms began to produce less and less so that there was only enough for the people doing the work. As a consequence, the country was facing a serious food shortage, economic progress instead of being progressive, it was stymied. Still, the programs lasted until 1986, which shows that the state was preoccupied to meet the requirement of a socialist orbit, and thus failed to pay attention to the people's fundamental way of living, who majority were living under subsistent farming, producing just enough for their households, as a result, were not prepared to work in the cooperative groups and worse to be accustomed to pay tax.



The New Economic Mechanism launched in 1986, and the government finally opened the door for cooperation and attracting investment from abroad from countries besides its fellow socialist bloc allies such as Vietnam, countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The 'other countries' responded to the action positively, and there was a great number of multilateral cooperation arrangements for several reasons. First, Laos was located in the middle of the five southeast Asian countries, its landlocked characteristic in a way is a strategic point and can be turned to a Land-link, to connect these countries as a route for trading. Second, which is very convincing for many investors, was that Laos was so rich in natural resources as seen in Viliam Phraxayyavong's study in 2009. Therefore, more and more foreign assistance and investment were pouring into Laos. However, many investors found various difficulties. For example, there was no investment law in Laos nor constitution<sup>15</sup>. Given the situation, it showed that not even at the central level was the government ready to open up. Thus it was questionable how ready the people were. Penelope Khounta published her story of marrying to a Lao elite in the 1960s in 'Love Began in Laos' in 2017, where her stories show all the transitions. One part of the book shows her husband's letter in 1988 mentioned about the NEM, the new thinking of the Lao PDR government, "*at present, there are many changes, but there was still neither law nor a constitution. No one can predict the situation in Laos. This opening of the country is the big topic of everyone. Will it last or it just be temporary? Since Laos opened its border, all the little commercial shops opened their doors. Everyone is going into business. Small Thai merchants are coming to Vientiane looking futilely to make some fast money. More highly capitalized companies are not coming to invest in Laos. They are waiting for the protection of Lao laws and rules regularizing business and guaranteeing their interest*" (Penelope Khounta, 2017, pp.244)

Nevertheless, Laos had managed to bring up the national income with the flow from foreign aids. This positive sign must have made the country even more convinced to cooperate with outside. As a result, the state constantly sent the delegation to various world conferences in the 1990s to pledge commitments to the international community such as the World Conference on Poverty Reduction, World Conference on Education and World Environment

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<sup>15</sup> Laos did not have its constitution until 1990. No system to receive aid, nor to write its own agenda when dealing with the big players such as WB, ABD. These international organizations were the ones writing Laos the law.

Protection or the Rio Summit. In 2000, the country signed a pledge to achieve various goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the progress was nowhere near the goals, which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 could be considered as the extension of the state to achieve the committed development goals.

Since the new economic reform in 1986, until recently, based on the Household Survey in 2015, more than 70% of the people were still living in a subsistent way<sup>16</sup>. 50.9% were occupied as 'unpaid family workers and 39% were engaged in their 'own account work.' 67% of the people were living in 'rural areas' (A village where more than 30% have no electricity, piped water, and no regular market) (PHC, 2015). When examining alternatives in the surroundings, job availability is one major constraint for the majority of people. The central government cropped with the issues of the un-livability of the economic environment with the introduction of micro economic development programs, including One District One Product (ODOP), Village Saving borrowed from Thailand and the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), e.g., contract farming. These programs were responded by the people, nonetheless only at the beginning. Based on the interview from the fieldwork at PakNgun District, the major reason was that there was a lack of guidance and resources to perform activities and take steps toward the target goals of each project. Another reason was the people's prioritized in their daily lives such as the traditional ways of production.

There were other examples of the failure of state policies introduced to the people, such as the Land Reform. It was a policy to encourage the upland farmers to produce more and thus can sell the productivity since the early 1990s, to the contrary it had moved people to low-land areas and started to hire their labors to some of the industrial activities. Similar to the health sector, Birth Mortality Rate was targeted to be 45/1000 by 2015 (MDG Progress in Laos)<sup>17</sup>, Still, in 2017 it was 64/1000. Similarly, overdue progress was also seen basic education. Since 1975 the state announced the need to achieve Universal Primary Education. Together with the international cooperation through Education For All in the 1990's, the UN's MDG2 in 2000 and SDG4's from 2015. Still at time of writing (2019), and the Lao state has failed to introduce

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<sup>16</sup> Lao Household Survey 2015

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.la.one.un.org/sdgs/about-the-mdgs/mdg-progress-in-lao-pdr>

'Universal Primary Education.' Due to the persistent DROPOUT RATE of more than 10% annually. These mentioned intended results of the state policies illustrate the distance between the state and the people. The government policies had only limited impact upon the life of the majority of the Laotians who have sustained a degree of autonomy. The transition to open up the country in 1986 had marked some changes in the Lao society. Still, they were not to the point to be able to reduce the distance between the state and the people. Although with more care from the state and its international partners towards many social-economic issues e.g., ODOP, FDI, MGDS, SDGs in particular Universal Primary Education, however, needs at the local level did not seem to be met. The people DO NOT or DO NOT NEED to follow the state's order and are still living by themselves. Therefore, this research investigates the relationship between the state and the people, including measuring the distance of the relationship.

#### **IV. Research Methodology**

This research relies on 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.

Attention to the local context is important to see 'changes', meaning departures or differences from the past. However, decision or action 'to change' depends very much on its cost whether one perceives what changes promise to bring about, and can afford to do so or not. In-depth interview helps pay attention to the conditions under which the individuals and communities face, what is available in their environment, and what are their main concerns. The survey, in other words, will illuminate the conditions of life in the middle of the transition, in this case toward 'Market Economy' with the promises as presented by the state, e.g., to

pursue higher education and of commercial activities. However, whether there is a need to change or not is where the research's question lies. The research also expects to outline the clues through the research findings from onsite observation and the people's life story withdrawn from the fieldwork and thus implying what may be done to fully support and lure the people to follow the state's development programs and to seek the most effective steps that are needed to be taken at the micro-level.



**Map 3: Location of PakNgum in Vientiane**

**Source: MOES 2013**

PakNgum district is one of the nine districts of the Vientiane Capital, no.9 on the Map 3. The fieldwork was conducted in different villages of the district from March 2011 to August 2018. In total, 14 visits (Table 1) were done to interview the informants of 126 informants (Table 2) and to withdraw onsite observations.

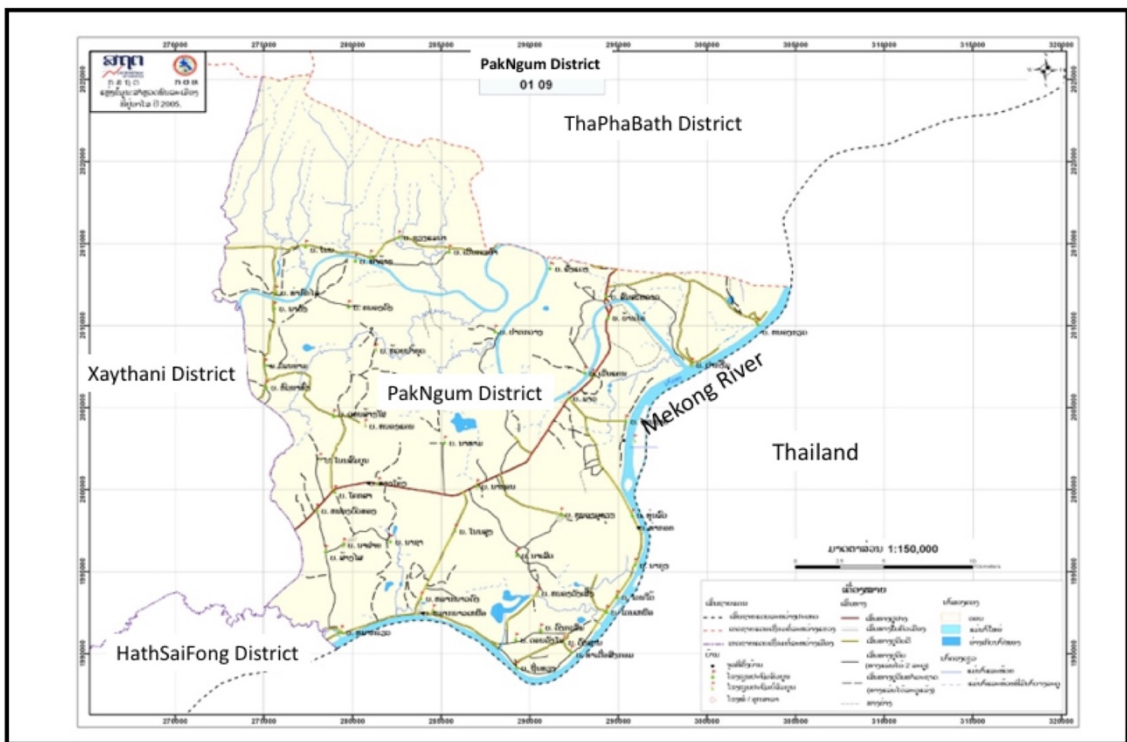
**Table 1: The Fieldwork**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Period: March 2011 – August 2018</b>	<b>Institutions</b>
<b>PakNgum District</b>	<b>14 rounds:</b> Jul 2011, Mar 2012, Aug 2012, Mar 2013, Aug 2013, Mar 2014, Aug 2014, Aug 2015, Feb 2016, July 2016, Mar 2017, Aug 2017, Feb 2018 and Jul 2018	<b>Local administration</b> <b>7 schools:</b> Ban Phao, Nonghai, Natarm, Marknao, Hai, Nason,
<b>Sisattanak District</b>	<b>2 rounds:</b> Mar 2011 and Aug 2015	<b>Local administration</b> <b>2 schools:</b> Sokpaluang, Suamone
<b>Chanthabuly District</b>	<b>6 rounds:</b> Feb 2016, July 2016, Mar 2017, Aug 2017, Feb 2018 and Jul 2018	<b>Central government offices:</b> education, finance and related sectors <b>International Organization:</b> WB and UNICEF

## **1. Research site: PakNgum District**

This research selected the PakNgum District (Map 4) as the research site. The PakNgum district is located in the eastern part of Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, around 67 Km from the city center, with a population of 49,211 people with a total area of 980 Km<sup>2</sup> (PHC 2015). In total, there are 47 villages in PakNgum District, 13,482 people. 27.4% live in areas that are considered urbanized, and 35,598 or 72.3% live in rural areas with roads while 131 people (0.3%) live in rural areas without roads (PHC, 2015, p.100). Most parts of the district share their border with Thailand, making it highly accessible for the people to cross the Mekong River to go to the neighboring country. The district is an ethnically diverse area, with the majority of the populations engaged in farming. PakNgum district is one of the poorest districts in the Vientiane capital. It has an annual income of USD988 (2017) when comparing with the Vientiane capital, the average GDP appears to be USD6000/year (JETRO, 2017). However, when comparing PakNgum's GDP to other areas in Laos such as other provinces PakNgum fits

in the range of USD560 - USD2500. Though recently, the economy in PakNgum has become more lively from the launch of a number of factories, yet all are operating on a small scale, thus available jobs are still minimal and concentrated among some family members. Because of this reason, it is very common for people in the district to migrate to work elsewhere, mainly to Thailand, which is closed when compared to Vientiane and people believe that the wages are higher.



**Map 4: PakNgum**

**Source: Lao Statistic Center, 2013**

PakNgum represents other districts and villages in the country well, in terms of the majority's way of production, subsistent farming. It is an ethnic diversity area and social structure where regular interaction among kin in the neighborhood takes place under the supervision of the village head. Although its location is not so far away from the city center, its conditions are different from the cities in the central Vientiane capital. The economic gap could be even wider in further areas or other provinces in the country. Therefore, PakNgum was chosen as the place to examine the relationship between the state and the people.

## 2. Key informants

**Table 2: In-depth interviews (Total: 130 informants)**

Occupation	Number	Age	Location
Central government officers mainly Educational Officials and related sectors	18	30-65	Central (6), District (3), Village (2) Internal Organization (3: 1 UNICEF, 1 AusAid and 1WB), Ministry of internal affair (2) Ministry of Finance (2)
Local administration	7	35-78	Village Head (3), Village Administration Staff (4)
Villagers	30	27-90	Koksa (6), Natharm (10), Chomphet (2), MarkNao (4) City area: Sisattank District (2), Chanthabury District (2)
School staff	25	23-55	Donhai (7), Natharm (3), Ban Pao (1), Thakokhai (1), Nongbo (1), Sokpaluang (1), MarkNao (4), Phonsavanh (1), Haisok (2), Chomphet (1), Nongvaeng (3)
Children	30	8-14	Donhai (5), Natharm (12), MarkNao (4), NoneSong (3), BanPhao (3), Nasone (3)

### a. Central Government

During the interview, attention also went to the changing nature of the government such as the response of to the different international commitments, e.g., the Land Reform, the United Nations' MDGs, SDGs, and microeconomic development. Closely observation was on the establishment of the state's national development targets, the government officials' decision-making, and their expectation from the people.

When looking at the stage of economic development at the district, the allocation of state policies such as microeconomic development, e.g., ODOP, FDI; and compulsory Primary Education, can easily create immense pressure on both the local authority and the villagers. Channeling of communication and support from the central government to the local level was, therefore, the focus of the fieldwork.

The first impression from the interview with the central officials was that, while they were responsive to the international goals and closely interacted with the development partners. Similar relationships did not happen at the village level. Although there is a system of communication from the central government to the local authority, through Provincial and District Administration. In reality the district barely talks to the villagers and village administration. Another way of communication between central and local is through the National Assembly, which is in session twice a year. There, national policies are addressed by high-level officials to the People Representative. Meanwhile, the representation should inform the state about the village situation, which information was gathered by the District, Provincial Administration, thus, it may not be as accurate.

#### **b. Local administration**

To explore the implementation of the state policies at the village level and discern what are the other urgent and preoccupied tasks of the Village officials, is what this research aims to discover. Channels of communication between central and local level's effectiveness is also a focus of the fieldwork, e.g., who and how often do the Village Administration reporting or talking to about the state's policy related matters. Likewise, interaction between the village officials and the villagers will also be examined e.g., the role performance of the village head, how he perceived himself and how the villagers perceived him, in order to withdraw the village functional system and to spot what might be the unmet needs of management's work at the village level.

Based on the visits to three Village Administration Offices in PakNgun District, it was found that overall, the village administration is responsible for a huge amount of tasks in various sectors (law, security, tradition-culture, economy, health, mass organization, financial management, and education). Given the content of the mentioned tasks, one problem is the lack of budget allocated from the central government, and another is the lack of qualified officials, most of the officials graduated only from primary education level. Besides it is surprising is that some of the officials only receive salaries of USD20 per month, and many others are doing the jobs on a voluntary base. What may make the tasks more complicated is that there are a



number of unwritten tasks<sup>18</sup> that the village officials have to do, which are very time-consuming, such as the social events that include the traditional festivals at the temples, and the villagers' funeral, birth and wedding ceremonies. Table 3 details is the profiles of the village officials, which shows that they are also engaged in other jobs like farming. Therefore, regarding these activities that the village officials are engaged in, social events and farming, that require both labor-intensive and time-consuming, how can the officials perform their official tasks?

**Table 3: Profiles of the village officials in villages in PakNgum District**

<b>Village Officials</b>	<b>Position and village</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Working period</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Side jobs</b>	<b>Spouse Job</b>
Mr. Lar	Natarm Village head	67	35 years	Nason	Farming, raising pig for sell	Farming
Mr. Pha	Natarm Deputy Village head	56	20 years	Natarm	Farming	Farming
Mr. Som	Narm Village Education Development Community	50	15 years	Natarm	Farming	Farming, Retail shop
Mr. Seng	Natarm Financial Management	45	20 years	Natarm	Farming	Farming
Mr. Ko	Nartarm Security	53	30 years	Natarm	Farming	Farming
Mr. Keo	Koksa Village Head	49	28 years	Koksa	Farming, Barber shop	Farming
Mr. Thong	Marknao Village head	52	29 years	Marknao	Farming	Farming

Mr. Lar, Natarm Village Head since the year 2000, he had been working in the village for more than 30 years as the village's servant before. Mr. Lar came from Nason, a village

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<sup>18</sup> According to Article 53, Law on Local Authority, Duties of Village Administration are “to disseminate the government policies and laws to maintain the peace, security, to promote good national traditions – cultures, health, education.”

nearby. Before 1975, he was working as a teacher in Vientiane under the USAID grant, after 1975 he moved back to Nason to his parents' house, then he got married and moved to Natarm. At Natarm he started working for the village authority. Besides, he was also works a rice field and raising pigs for sale. In 2017 he could turn the pig farm to the industrial level, the first one in the village, thanks to the financial support from his daughter who got married to a Lao man living in Japan. He admitted that there are multiple tasks at the village office, and what made it more difficult is the lack of time of the officials, including himself.

*"The staff complain that there is too much work, they are also busy at home and on the farm. Many times, we have just to do what we can and based on what are available resources at the village, e.g., we respond to the school's demand when we can."*

Mr Keo Phimmason, Koksa Village Head, has a side job as a rice-farmer and a hairdresser. He confessed that the most occupying activities are traditional village ceremonies and social events, which help to create solidarity among the villagers.

*"Traditional ceremonies are what keep the villagers together; they work, they share, they eat-drink, they help each other through ups and downs, which is important. If we do not help each other, who is going to help us?"* It shows that there is no exhibition to other sectors outside the village, such as a higher institution like the district office.

Overloaded tasks are one of the observations, and contradictory the 'unwritten tasks' are what the officials pay more attention to since it helps to unite the people in solidarity. Through the organizing of the ceremonies, the village officials also gain trust and respects from the villagers, which makes their relationship quite strong.

On the contrary, there is no regular communication between the district and the village administration. The reporting of the village situation is through writing a yearly report, in which the state policy related matter are barely mentioned. The report is usually drafted in a very board way and only provides statistic, e.g., births, deaths, and crimes rate. When asking what the village expects from the district or the central government, Mr. Lar, Natarm Village Head, answered that *"they are doing 'ok' by themselves."* The impression is that, even though the village administration is not well equipped with financial and qualified human resources. Still,

the village officials prefer to manage the village's stuff by themselves, by its division of labors and its own way of fund raising and management. With the same token, there was not much signs of state's existence at the village level.

### c. School staff

One objective of the field work was to understand more about the daily lives of the teachers, and their concerns besides teaching, for example, other tasks at the household they have to pay attention to. This understanding was extremely important to review the education reform at the school level. The difficulties that teachers face at school is one of the key points that this research aims to reveal. Additionally, attention was also given to the interaction between teachers and parents (villagers) regarding children's schooling.

**Table 4: Profiles of the Primary School Staff at PakNgum District**

<b>School Staff</b>	<b>Position, School</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education attainment</b>	<b>Another job</b>	<b>Spouse's job</b>
<b>No.1</b> Khambu	Principal (Koksa)	45	Teacher Training College	Running a restaurant, rice farming	Running a restaurant
No.2	Grade 2 Teacher (Koksa)	43	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, tapioca, vegetables, animal husbandry	Tapioca factory worker
No.3	Grade 3 Teacher (Koksa)	38	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, tapioca, vegetables, animal husbandry	Rice farming, tapioca, vegetables, animal husbandry
No.4	Grade 4 Teacher (Koksa)	32	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetables, animal husbandry	Running a shop at the market
No.5	Contract Teacher Grade 1 (Koksa)	23	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetables, animal husbandry	Rice farming, tapioca, vegetables, animal husbandry
<b>No.6</b> Khamso ne	Principal (Natarm)	43	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, raising cows for sell	Police and raising cows for sell

No.7 Teacher S.P	Grade 3 (Natarm)	37	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetables, animal husbandry	Rice farming, menial labor
No.8	Teacher Grade 4 (Natarm)	40	High school and intensive teacher training course	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Teacher, Rice farmer, vegetables, animal husbandry
No.9	Contract Teacher Grade 1 (Natarm)	22	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetables	No spouse
No.10	Contract Teacher Grade 2 (Natarm)	24	Teacher Training College	Weaving, helping family in the rice field	No spouse
No.11	Principal Orn (Ban Phao)	39	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Solider and farmer
No.12	Principal Kham (ThaKokH ai)	38	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing	Farmer and house wife
No.13	Teacher Grade 5 (NongBo)	27	High school and intensive teacher training	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Police and rice farmer, animal husbandry
No.14	Ex- principal (Mark Nao)	65	Teacher Training College	Rice farmer	Rice farmer
No.15	Principal K. (Mark Nao)	50	Teacher Training College	No part-time job, receive remittent from a daughter who live abroad	Head of the village
No.16	Vice- Principal N. (Mark Nao)	45	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry
No.17	Teacher K. Grade 4 (Mark Nao)	48	Intensive teacher training	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry
No.18	Teacher L. Grade 5 (Sokpaluang)	43	Teacher Training College	Growing vegetable	Construction work, farming

No.19	Teacher Grade 5 (Phonsavanh)	27	Teacher Training College	Growing vegetable	Police and farmer
No.20	Teacher Grade 2 (Haisok)	35	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry
No.21	Teacher Grade 3 (Haisok)	29	Teacher Training College	Weaving, farming	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry
No.22	Teacher Grade 3 (Chomphe t)	33	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing, selling vegetable at the market	Farmer, fixing bicycle
No.23	Teacher Grade 4 (Nongvae ng)	28	Intensive teacher training	Rice farming,, raising pigs for sell	Hairdresser, farming
No.24	Teacher Grade 3 (Nongvae ng)	27	Intensive teacher training	Rice farming, vegetable growing	Rice farming, vegetable growing, animal husbandry
No.25	Vice- Principal (Nongvae ng)	30	Teacher Training College	Rice farming, vegetable growing	Working in Thailand

According to the fieldwork, besides teaching, there is a strong need for the teacher to secure their household economy; thus, the teachers need to do part-time jobs as well as farming, which shown in Table 4 that all the teachers have side jobs. Teachers' salary can cover only half of what they usually spend each month. The Natarm ex-principal confessed that "*some teachers even see teaching as a part-time job and farming as the main job*". A great number of teachers take one week's leave to cultivate rice during the rice cultivating seasons around November – December, and March – April of each year.

When examining, education reform at the school, such as 'Child based Learning center,' it was found that he policy placed huge pressure on the teachers. Table 4 shows brief information of the school staff in the PakNgum District indicates that not all the teachers interviewed have been to a teacher training course, many just finished high-school and went to an intensive teacher's training for a short time. This partly explains teachers' limited knowledge to make used of teaching tools to deliver the lesson. It is more difficult when there is no budgets allocated to train the teachers or to buy teaching materials. Because the District Education

Bureau is located far away and without regular visiting, the principals, always relying on the village administration for financial supports and guidance. Thus, most of the schools' support was from the Village Administration, who helped gathering funding, labor forces, and materials from villagers. The same situation can be found with the promotion of schooling, as the teachers also relying on the Village Administration to talk to the villagers, "*they listen to the head of the village more than us,*" noted principal KhamBu.

To sum up, school principals, instead of communicating with the District level, talk and seek assistance from the Village Administration, which is not helping to facilitate the communication between the village and central government level.

#### **d. Villagers**

The main interest of the research is to collect the witness accounts of people's lives. The observation was on the parameters of the changes in their lives, given the changes at the central level e.g., engaging more to the international development goals. By going over their daily lives, the research gives extra important to their environment and their main concern in life. To locate where education fits in, in the daily life of PakNgum District people. Knowing this should help clarify the decision-making process of the villagers, to let the children enroll and to drop out, which is this thesis's concern.

The majority of the people in PakNgum live under rice farming, raising life stock, fishing and picking forest products. People's way of production has always been under the household economy, showing no change. It is explicable, due to the environment where has limited jobs opportunities, and the village authority who still manages the stuff on their own without much guidance from the state and inadequate financial support. The people are living by themselves under the division of labor guided by the head of the village. Regarding things which do not exist within their environment, e.g., consumption goods and job opportunities, the villagers will cross the Mekong River to find these supplies in Thailand, a journey which takes only five minutes by boat.

Based on the fieldwork, the daily routine of the parents impacts greatly their children's school attendance. Education appears to be only one among many other concerns (food, jobs) that they have to consider, and most of the time, it becomes secondary to these other needs. There are mainly three different characteristics of parents at PakNgum.

**Table 5: Profiles of the Parents Interviewed at PakNgum District**

<b>Parents</b>	<b>Working routine</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Children schooling</b>
Group 1	Farming rice fields, vegetables, animal husbandry, teachers, local government officers	30-48	2 million Kip or 250 USD	Never leave
Group 2	Farming rice fields, vegetables, animal husbandry. Not engaging in other non-farm jobs	27-40	1,5 million Kip or 190 USD	Leave 1-2 months
Group 3	Farming rice field, vegetables, animal husbandry, construction workers, street vendors, other small wage labors and migrants workers	28-42	1 million Kip or 120 USD	Leave more than 1 year

The first group of parents have stable jobs, such as District Administration officials and teachers. Their children could perform better at school because since they did not have to quit school in the middle of the year to provide labor forces. Although their families also have rice fields, the parents could afford to hire labor to do the cultivation instead of asking their children to be absent from school.

In comparison, the second group of parents is farmers the majority was farmers; they relied heavily on only rice farming and other farms' work. Therefore, their children had to quit

school to help them on the farm during the busy periods. For example, in the case of Somchai, an 11 years old boy, enrolling in Grade 5 at Natarm Village. His parents are farmers and illiterate. The family relies on the productivities from the rice field and the farm (vegetable and livestock). Somchai was asked to leave school to help during the cultivation period, which time requires labor-intensive. Each cultivation time takes approximately two weeks to one month. When asking about his performance at school, he had never reached an average score of 5 (out of 10), while before he used to get 7. Even though it was a short absence, it affected the students' performance.

The majority of the group 3's parents were wage earners and migrant workers. Because of parents' high mobility jobs, children had to be away from school for a long time. For instance, while some students spent one year, some spent two years outside the school to follow their parents to work in Thailand. When these people returned to the community, surprisingly, the parents put their children back to school, which was agreed by the children to resume. However, the class scenario becomes different, besides the need to catch up with the lesson, and many were accustomed to speak Thai. Therefore, they not only needed to catch up with the class but also the language. This clearly indicates that parents' activities have a profound impact on their children's school attendance, as well as their performances.

#### **e. Children**

Finally, children were the focus of the research. The dropout issue was a key question and children's everyday life is the center of the fieldwork conducting. Other activities the children do besides going to school were questioning during the interviews.

The Fieldwork aimed to provide a better understanding of the primary school dropout issue in a rural Lao. Through all the fieldwork 30 students from 7 different schools were interviewed as illustrated in the table below.



**Table 6: Profiles of the Children Interviewed at PakNgum District**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Schools</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>School Attendance</b>
No.1	None Soung	5	10	Regular student
No.2	None Soung	5	14	Regular student (Late school enroller)
No.3	None Soung	1	6	Regular student
No.4	Ban Phao	3	8	Regular student
No.5	Ban Phao	4	14	Returnee
No.6	Ban Phao	4	13	Returnee
No.7	Nasone	5	13	Returnee
No.8	Nasone	5	14	Returnee
No.9	Nasone	4	10	Returnee
No.10	MarkNao	4	9	Regular student
No.11	MarkNao	4	9	Regular student
No.12	MarkNao	4	14	Returnee
No.13	MarkNao	4	13	Returnee
No.14	Koksa	4	14	Returnee
No.15	Koksa	2	8	Regular student
No.16	Koksa	2	8	Regular student
No.17	Koksa	2	8	Regular student
No.18	Koksa	3	11	Returnee
No.19	Natarm	3	11	Returnee
No.20	Natarm	4	11	Returnee
No.21	Natarm	4	10	Returnee
No.22	Natarm	4	10	Returnee
No.23	Natarm	5	14	Returnee
No.24	Natarm	5	15	Returnee
No.25	Natarm	5	14	Returnee
No.26	Was in Natarm	-	14	Dropout from grade 1, Returned and Dropout from grade 4
No.27	Was in Natarm	-	20	Dropout from grade 1, Returned and Dropout from grade 4
No.28	Was in Natarm	-	23	Dropout from grade 3, Returned and Dropout from grade 5
No.29	Was in Natarm	-	28	Dropout from grade 2, Returned and Dropout from grade 3
No.30	Was in Natarm	-	35	Dropout from grade 2

Regardless of the family's busy activities, surprisingly, going to school is a daily routine for many children in PakNgum District, as shown in the enrolment rate of 98% in 2017-

2018. However, when needed, these children will leave school, such as to respond to the urgent needs of the family, including farming or looking after younger siblings so that the parents can work. It shows a certain level of independence of the children, taking a shift of the household chore. When it comes to family obligations, not even the teachers can keep the students at schools. During the fieldwork, through a series of interviews, students were categorized as **Regular students, Returnees, and Dropouts.**

A **Regular Student** was a student who attended school at the school-age as suggested by the Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos and continues until he or she finishes primary school, the compulsory level. A **Returnee Student** was a student who is currently enrolling in school, after a while of being absent (duration of more than one month). This group of **Returnee Students, have, prior to the present research, neither been mentioned in any study nor recorded in any statistical report before.** Thus, they are also the target of this thesis. Third, a **Dropout Student** was once at school as **regular student** or **returnees**, but at the time of the research, had apparently dropped out of school for good.

➤ **The un-investigated group of students: The returnees**

The academic year in Laos is divided into two semesters, the 1<sup>st</sup> semester (September - December) and 2<sup>nd</sup> semester (January - June). A dropout student is a student who enters school in September then quits school at some point during the academic year and does not come back before June, the end of the academic year. For an example, in the Natarm primary school, there are a significant number of students who quit school for one to two months (the returnees), to help parents working on the farm, mainly in the rice field during their busiest time of the cultivating season around October-November and April-May and then return to school. Given this background, considering the information from MOES, the statistical data, the national dropout rate had increased from 7.8% in 2010-2011 to 10.5% in 2017-2018, 6.6% in PakNgum District and 7.9% in Natarm Village (PakNgum Education Bureau Annual Report, 2018).

What that means is that the dropout rate may have been even higher, since not all the dropout students are counted as dropouts in the statistic. Also, since these returnees are not recognized, there was no specific plan to solve the attendance related matters, and at that same

time, they are left without support from schools e.g., re-entry programs. The example of Natarm Primary School’s student attendance in Table: 7 will help shed more light on the situation. Students are therefore categorized into three groups.

**Table 7: Natarm Primary School’s student attendance in 2016-2017**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Group I: Never Leave</b>	<b>Group II: Leave 1-2 months</b>	<b>Group III: Leave 6 months or more</b>
Grade 1	19	9	7
Grade 2	18	13	3
Grade 3	17	16	3
Grade 4	10	15	5
Grade 5	10	19	2

From the information shown in the table, it is clearly indicated that in Natarm Primary School's students were not always at school. They either quit for a short or a long period of time. However, only those who had quit school for more than one year (Group III) were counted as dropouts.

**Group I:** Never leave: Students who barely absent from school.

**Group II:** Leave 1-2 months: Students who quit and then return within one to two months.

**Group III:** Leave six months or more.

In this case, the returnees can be categorized into two groups. The first are those students who quit and then return within the academic year. The second are those who quit and do not return within but in the next academic year. According to MOES, Group II was not counted as dropouts, only Group III is.

What Natarm and other schools in PakNgum have missed is the transition of dropouts. Dropouts do not merely mean students were quitting school. These students do return to schools later; this is the case of returnees. The differences among the returnees are not only

found in the period of absences but also their performances in school, as shown in the following section.

➤ **Students' performances**

As expected, based on the interviews with the teachers, returnees' performances were relatively lower than other students who had no gap in their attendance at Natarm School. The performances are as indicated in the following table.

**Table 8: Students' performances**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Performance</b>
<b>Group I:</b> Never Leave	Good - Average
<b>Group II:</b> Leave 1-2 months	Average - Poor
<b>Group III:</b> Leave 6 months or more	Poor

Group I students usually have no problem with their learning because they have been attending the classes regularly. Mrs. Khamphone, a Grade 1 teacher at Natarm Primary School, said "*although they do not understand all the lesson in the class, it is easier to teach the students who are always in school because somehow they can concentrate on the lesson longer than the rest. Whenever they do not understand, they can ask and we, teachers, who can then give them further explanations*". This is mainly why Group I students' performances are generally good.

Group II students have problems catching up with the classes because they were not at school for some time. Therefore, without providing remedial classes for them to be able to catch up, their performances are likely to be weaker.

Group III are students who come back to school after quitting for six months or more, even up to a couple of years. When these students return to school, based on the automatic promotion policy (Progressive Promotion Policy), they are placed in higher grades. Basically, the grade placements are based on their age solely, without regard to their knowledge nor their previous academic record. Furthermore, there is no preparation for these students from school before starting new classes. Some school offers tutoring classes in some subjects to them at the end of the school day. As a result, many returnees end up having a tough time catching up and

perform poorly. Therefore, students' regular attendance is very important, yet it tends to be disrupted by the everyday life of the children and their parents. The study on dropouts by MOES confirmed that one reason leading students to drop out is the parents' jobs and their lack of responsibility to encourage their children to go to school. Therefore, the family background of the students has always been considered while doing the fieldwork.

### Chapter 3: Full History of Laos

Laos is a country emerging from its past colonial past. Without the French, Laos would have become part of its neighboring countries. According to a number of scholars, including Grant Evans, "*without the French, upland areas of Laos such as Houaphan in the north would probably have been absorbed by Vietnam. Also today northern Thailand was formerly known as Laos and was only formally integrated politically into the Thai state before the French asserted their control over Laos in 1893*". However, whether the French prepared Laos to become a viable country or not is an issue in need of study. Often times, scholars of Laos tend to question whether Laos existed before 1975. Arthur Dommen, said that Laos was more a conglomeration of 'tribes' than a people (Arthur Dommen, 1971, pp.17). Bernard Fall a writer on the Vietnam war, thought of Laos as "*neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience*" (1969). Laos was referred to as un-real in a famous novel, *The Bronze Drums* by Jean Lateguy, "*Laos is paradise, as I told you in Paris, only, like a paradise, Laos doesn't exist; it's a figment of the imagination of a few French administrators*" said by one character in the novel (Jean Lateguy, 1967, pp.147). Martin Stuart Fox, on the other hand, although he recognized the political disunity of Laos over time, argues in his history of Laos that "*the discontinuity of central political structures was overcome by the continuity of political culture based firmly at the village level, anchored in the socio-religious Lao world-view*" (Stuart-Fox, 1993, pp.113) So he argued continuity is based in culture and society. This chapter will go over a chronological history of Laos, from its colonial beginnings to the nation-state that it has transformed into. This overview of the Lao political in the past, will serve to help the reader understand the Lao state's foundation and its state at the current time. The history, meanwhile, will serve as a way of illuminating the people's lives in the past, especially during the time of the civil war.

Laos did not exist before the French arrived. Although the LanXang Kingdom was found in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was split into three separated Kingdoms. The political turmoil and the civil war between 1962-1975 did not allow the state to do the profound reform. Considering the country's young background and the political disruptions, it could partly explain why there was no possibility of constituting a greater Laos, the ruling class had always been pre-occupied in the conflicts and only had limited influence in even the urban

areas<sup>19</sup>. As a result, throughout the transitions, there has not been a close relationship between the state and the people.

## I. 1893-1954: The French colonial administration

"*The state of Laos was founded by Prince Fa Ngounm in 1353,*" noted by George Coedès (1959), he furthered argued that although Laos had taken various influences and blended them into a harmonious whole, what was crucial was that it had "*inherited Indian culture in its various forms.*" The formation of the Hindu states and the domestication of Theravada Buddhism was a fundamental watershed in the evolution of the Tai, the original tribe who lived around what is known today as Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma. Evans further explained in his work 'Laos Cultural and Society' that the area (Laos) "*is defined first and foremost by a common history as Hinduized states and Theravada Buddhism. This cultural area, therefore, encompasses Thailand, Laos, the Shan, and the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna, also Cambodia, and Burma. Secondly, this cultural area is part of an oikoumene which includes Vietnam and other parts of the peninsular and insular Southeast Asia, and other Sinicized Tai groups*" (Evans, 1998, pp.14-15). Because of this fact, Evans furthered concluded that one cannot write a history of Laos or a history of Thailand, or Cambodia as these entities did not exist until the modern nationalist period (Evans, 1998, pp.15).

The Franco-Siamese Treaty, signed in 1907, established the first map of Laos. It turned the unbounded states that had dominated the geopolitical layout in the past to the geographically bounded states, from then there was a need to categorize different ethnic group. The conflation of an ethnic term with a nation is a problem common to Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and Burma, among others, and minorities within them are always and inevitably reminded of their difference from the ethnic majority. Yet, the conflation of an ethnic designation with a state could be considered as part of the 'natural' logic of nationalism. The multiethnic or multinational country of Laos has attempted to get around this by a tripartite definition of its population, roughly designating all ethnolinguistic Tai groups as '**Lao Loum**' (lowland Lao); Mon-Khmer and Austronesian groups as '**Lao Theung**' (midland Lao); and

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<sup>19</sup> where only slightly over 10% of the total population concentrated in it (worldometre, 2018).

Tibeto Burman and Hmong-Yao groups as ‘**Lao Soung**’ (highland Lao). It is important to note that Buddhism has always played a crucial role in Laos, the Lao Royal Family was also relying on the religion to connect with the people, the problem is that Buddhism was practiced only by the Lao Loum group. Thus for the other ethnic minorities, a people and their sense of belonging was questionable.

The strongest proponent of French colonial expansion into Laos was Auguste Pavie. Pavie claimed the Lao territory, yet objected to using the Mekong River as a ‘natural’ frontier, as a line of separation between Laos and Thailand. This was the cause of the failure to include Korat Plateau, where a majority of Laotians were living there (Soren Ivarsson, 2008, pp.217). Auguste Pavie was the first French governor of Laos, but apart from replacing the ailing King Ounkham with his son (Sakharine) and proclaiming, "*I confirm the princes in their current positions in Laos, now become a French possession*", he did relatively little. In 1899 Laos, now was seen as an administrative unit of Indochina, and was headed by a resident supérieur based at Savannakhet. He moved to Vientiane the following year (Evans, 2012, pp.54). Although the three principalities (Kingdom of Vientiane, Luangprabang, and Champasack) were brought together, each part had a different relationship with the French. Luangprabang held the status of a French protectorate, while Vientiane and Champasak were both administered as French colonies.

Colonialism transformed some societies in the region more profoundly than others. The French were accused of treating Laos as a ‘colonial backwater,’ or ‘colonial playground’ while pouring all their energy into Vietnam (Evans, 1998, pp.21). Economically, there were not many instances where the French tried to reach or integrate the people to engaged in activities contributing to the national economic development. One attempt could be seen through the introduction of potatoes and coffee plantations, however, it ended up as a total failure. Because 99% of the people were living in a state of natural economy<sup>20</sup>. Hence, Laos had always been known as posing a burden on France. The main concern was revenue, raised in a variety of ways. For the Lao, a head tax for males from nineteen to sixty years old was imposed, fixed piasters per year, plus ten to twenty days of corvée. Most notable was the Régie de l’opium, over which a member of the king's council-maintained day to day operations (Evans, 2012,

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<sup>20</sup> See Grant Evans, 1988, *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos*



p.54). The outcome was that the tax collection had never been successfully implemented. People did everything they could, and came up with all possible manner reasons for them to escape paying tax. Therefore, the French needed to rely more on the sale of opium for the Lao national revenue at the time.

During the nineteenth century, many writers made observations distinguishing between urban and rural Lao, mainly Evans: "*there was an enormous cultural gap between urban Parisian society and the countryside*" (Evans, 2012, p.50). In the forest of the Pyrenees peasants took up arms against newcomers to the region, such as police and administrators, who were ignorant of the local situation. As late as 1900, the French state still faced rebellions in these mountain regions. It is noteworthy that even for the people in France, they had come to understand they were French subjects, to identify themselves as 'French' following their integration into the wider national community through the development of roads, markets, schools, military service and other things that slowly broke down their exclusive identification with local communities. This process had begun in Siam, and not at all in Laos

Many Lao in the kingdom saw little difference between life under the French and the old days. Virginia Thompson, who wrote in French Indochina, published in 1937 that the administration of Laos 'was an immense success because it floated gently on top of the old native administration, giving an appearance of modernization to what had already existed and with which it did not interfere. The top people were the French, but the colonial bureaucracy immediately below them was mainly staffed by educated Vietnamese. Except for Lao intelligentsia such as Prince Phetsarath, interpreter and adviser to the resident supérieur in Vientiane, this Vietnamese predominance was unacceptable, but not until 1928 was a school for training Lao administrators established. Still, in 1937, Vietnamese held 46% of the senior indigenous positions in the colonial bureaucracy (Evans, 2012, p.51-55). The delay of Lao officials training program, and reliance on Vietnamese officials to do Lao administrative work, showed that even in an urban area, state administrative effectiveness was also inadequate. Thus, there was a need to heavily rely on Vietnamese officials for Lao administration work. This also is evidence that the French did not prepare Laos to be a mature independent country, and at the same time, illustrates their intention of not working to develop Laos into a country independent from Indochina.

## **1. Independence and unification in 1946**

In 1945, France's position got weaker because of its situation during World War II. This time, the Japanese had carried out a coup in neighboring Vietnam against the French, and the same happened in Laos. The Japanese although they did not stay in Laos for a long time, due to its surrender in late August 1945. It was a chance Prince Phetsarath and his team the Lao Issara to quickly move in to fill the vacuum by proclaiming the independence of the kingdom of Laos, which implied the unification of the Three Kingdoms.

The Lao Issara was a group of educated Lao, who had nationalist sentiment from the global movement against colonialism. Prince Phetsarath in his capacity as prime minister of the kingdom of Luangphrabang, decided to declare on September 15<sup>th</sup> the incorporation of the southern provinces of Laos into a new 'kingdom of Laos', and he appealed to the Allies for recognition of this new state. In the growing crisis, Phetsarath felt that he not only had to act decisively but also that, as prime minister, he had the right and power to act. Although he was not supported by the king, who said such a move now needed to be ratified by the French. (Evans, 2012a, page15).

The key players during this time were among three main families. First was the King of the LuangPrabang family, the King himself Sisavangvong, and his son Prince Sisavangwattana, who were based in LuangPrabang. The second was the Vice-Roi family, including the three princes (Figure 5), Prince Phetsarath and his brother Prince Souvanna Phouma and their half-brother Prince Souphanuvong. The princes were more active in Vientiane and later formed the LAO ISSARA. Although the Princes of the Vice-Roi were the second most important royalty, they were the key figure in changing Laos. The third important was Prince BounOun or the King of Champasack.

**Figure 5: Three princes**



**Prince Phetsarath    Prince Souvanna Phouma    Prince Souphanouvong**  
**(1890-1959)                    (1901-1984)                    (1909-1995)**

Phetsarath or ‘The Iron Man of Laos,’ is rightly considered the most dynamic senior royal figure in the twentieth-century. There is no better record of the Prince and other Royalty of Laos than ‘The Last Century of Lao Royalty’ by Grant Evans (2012). Evans illustrated Prince Phetsarath as follows, *“the prince’s intelligence and foresight reminds one in particular of Prince Damrong, the brother of King Chulalongkorn in Thailand, who was a key figure in the modernizing of the Thai state and monarchy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and an intellectual to boot. No doubt Phetsarath was not only inspired by what he had learned in France and Europe generally, but also by development in Thailand. Not long after returning from his studies at the Ecole Coloniale in 1912, he was recruited to serve the French colonial bureaucracy working in the office of the resident supérieur in Vientiane from 1914 onward. This placed him at the pinnacle of colonial politics in Laos. In 1919, he was named director of indigenous affairs, a position he used to strengthen the role of Lao in the administration, given the French reliance on Vietnamese officials to staff their colonial bureaucracy. In 1923 he became the inspector general of administration and worked with organizing a consultative council of Lao Chao Muang and Chao Khoueng (district and provincial heads) once a year. This bringing together of Lao from across the country began to create a sense of nation. Phetsarath’s position gave him considerable powers of patronage and drew around him a substantial entourage. This much was acknowledged by Katay, who wrote that Phetsarath was the most influential person for the careers of Lao functionaries in authority. Currently, he is called by the people ‘the King of Vientiane’. Chao Phetsarath knew how to constitute among*

*the administrative cadres and notables a variable clientele*<sup>21</sup>. He had the colonial laws translated into Lao, and a school for training Lao administrators was established. He used his growing knowledge of administration to reorganize palace affairs in LuangPhrabang in 1927, and would do so again in 1941. His travels around the whole country, in his role as colonial administrator made him one of the best-known members of Lao royalty". (Evans, 2012a, pp. 18-19)

Not only was Prince Phetsarath educated in France, his brother and other elites related to the royal family members also went to study in France. *"Prince Souvanna Phouma got his diploma in the engineering of the Université de Grenoble; then he returned to Paris in 1930. He was happy to meet up with his half-brother Souphanouvong and his cousin Sisavangwattana, the son of King Sisavangvong. All three princes stayed at the house of Mine Coquelet. They regularly visited the Latin, where they had friends in common. They shared in daily housekeeping tasks - Sisavangwattana went shopping, Souvanna took care of the cooking, and Souphanouvong did the dishes. Born in 1907, Sisavangwattana had left Laos at the age of ten. After finishing High School in Montpellier, he came to the capital to enroll at the School of Political Science. As for Souphanouvong, after having completed his studies at the Lycée Saint-Louis in Paris, he turned to the School of Civil Engineering (Roads and Bridges). Physically well built, he was an extrovert. The three princes made the best use of whatever France had to offer them. While Sisavangwattana and Souphanouvong were pursuing their studies, Souvanna prepared his return to Laos. He only reluctantly left his half-brother Souphanouvong behind. Nevertheless, he saw their reunion as a sign of fate. Their paths crossed only to separate again and then to meet up once more. Thus, was the life of the two brothers who loved each other, and were unwillingly to stay in France. Souvanna had been an architect-assistant while pursuing his studies whereas Souphanouvong had to work hard at Le Havre port during school holidays"*. (Evans, 2012a, pp.272). According to Evans, President Souphanouvong's political choices were profoundly affected by his experiences at Le Havre port during this time, through his reading of the paper L'Humanité. On his return, he was assigned to work in the Annam (Vietnam) public works department, but it seems that after his sojourn in France he bridled at any assertions of colonial superiority by the French and became

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<sup>21</sup> See Thao Katay, Contribution a l'Histoire du Mouvement Indépendance Viationale Lo (Editions Lao Issara, 1948), xviii.

emotionally committed to anti-colonialism. Soon afterward he met a young Vietnamese woman, Nguan Thi Kim Nam. She was the daughter of a hotelier, and he married her in 1938 at the age of twenty-nine, when she was just seventeen years old. Living along with intellectuals all over Indochina, and in Vietnam in particular, they were radicalized together by the experience of World War II and by their contact with the Viet Minh. Under instructions from Phetsarath, he had sought out Ho Chi Minh in September 1945, and this was a watershed meeting for Souphanouvong. Ho's legendary charisma worked its charm on the young Lao and in October he returned to Laos at the head of a platoon of Viet Minh soldiers to join up with the Lao Issara movement. (Evans, 2012a, pp. 287-288)

After the Lao Issara declared the independence of Laos, the new government could survive only for six months. The difficulties for Laos to be on its own were all revealed, and there was no way to run the administration, even in the capital, and the government seriously ran out of resources and skilled staff. The government could not afford to pay the salary of civil servants and could not meet with the cost of its defense and legitimation (Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.63-64). This situation showed the poor infrastructure the French had erected during the past four decades, and how it was inadequate for preparing the Lao for independence. By early 1946 the weakness of the Lao Issara government were manifest. The French forces took back the power and dissolved the Lao Issara.

## **2. The return of the French and the Royal Lao Government**

The Lao Issara, though they had failed to free Laos from the French, had successfully united the three Kingdoms together, which the French had been taking so long to do, (if they had ever intended to so at all, as it may have gone against their desire to show their loyalty to Prince Boun Own, the 'King' of Champasack). Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak had never wanted to be under the Lao Kingdom, especially not under Luangprabang and preferred to remain the king. He was most than welcoming of the French to return, as seen in Evans record that "he had militarily assisted the return of the French and perhaps expected greater recognition from them than he received. But at the end of World War II, the mood for political unification overrode any southern assertions of separate interests. In a 1946 protocol to the modus vivendi that initially remained secret, Boun Oum renounced any claims to a distinct

kingdom in Champassak. The strength of nationalist sentiment against any such claims can be seen in the comments by National Assemblyman Bong Souvannavong in 1948, after the protocol had been made public. There he argued that Champassak had no right Political Problem of Laos focusing to a separate existence (Evans, 2012a, page21).

The symbolic importance of LuangPhrabang in Laos as a unification sign, however, did not happen. It was plain to see by the people. Before 1975 royalty only attended the major rituals that took place in the city, in particular during Lao New Year. Based on the interview with Grandma N, who was selling food near the French Army camp in Savanakhet. She did not know anything about Vientiane in 1946, neither did she know of Laos independence nor of the unity of the Lao state. In addition, she thought that King Boun-oun governed the South of Laos until 1975. What she did know was that the Japanese have replaced the French armies, and that the Japanese did not stay in Laos for a long time. When the Japanese army left, her family could not run their business. Unlike the other Lao people, grandma's families were not subsistence farmers, which required them to move instantly to look for opportunities elsewhere. They moved to Ayuttaya (Thailand) to be with their relatives. They stayed there for one year, helping a Chinese cousin selling Tabaco. When they heard from the people that things were already peaceful, no more conflict between Lao Issara and the French, they decided to return to Savanakhet. On the way back to Laos, she stopped by Mouk (Thailand) and stayed there for one year with a Chinese aunt. Grandma was helping them with housework, and the aunt was running a small retail shop. From Mouk the family left to Savanhnakhet and stayed at a relative's house, grandma was helping them selling things at the retail shop for one year. It was difficult to earn money in Savanhnakhet, and the family moved to settle down in DongHen because there was an army camp there. In a similar business, they started to sell seasoning and ran a restaurant there. The army camp had been at DongHen for a long time ago even before the French-Japanese conflict. After the French moved back (1946-47), the camp got bigger because the French started an army school, so grandma's food selling was going very well. When asked about the change of the Lao state, she said that she did not bother to ask much, only when she talked to her clients, mostly the soliders, who stopped by the restaurant, did she come to learn some major events, but nothing in particular according to her. When asked about the authority before 1975, she said, *besides the French and the US, there were two kings in Laos, King of LuangPrabang and King of the South. But we never heard much about them.*

*Even the Mayor, the head of the district, we also never heard much of them. We were under only the Village Head, who did everything".*

Although, there was pressure on the king to be a symbol and created a link among different parts of the Lao Kingdom, over more than 50 years of ruling, the routine of the king may have already institutionalized in Luangprabang following the same practice, which was hard to adjudge. Historian Martin Stuart-Fox has confirmed that the monarchy missed forming a sense of unity following the formation in 1947, "*The King could have served as the symbol of Lao unity only if he had moved his palace to Viang Chan [Vientiane], the administrative and political capital of the country... But this significant opportunity was lost. By remaining in LuangPhrabang, the King did nothing to overcome the problem of regionalism. The royal family remained identified with their royal capital, not merely above, but entirely removed from political life in Viang Chan*" (Martin Stuart-Fox, 1997, pp.69).

## **II. 1962-1975: Royal Lao Government under East-West influence**

The French later formed a new government, the Royal Lao Government (RLG). Due to the pressure from the civil servants and the public, they needed to include members of the Lao Issara in the new government. Thus, the French warranted the Lao Issara members to return to take part in the RLG. Prince Suvanna accepted the request to work with the French, and he was elected to be the Prime Minister and the head of the RLG. Prince Suvanna claimed that the return was not to support the French, but to control Laos because he thought Laos was not ready to be isolated yet. Therefore, compromising with the French could be the solution for that time. This was not agreed to by his two brothers.

Prince Phetsarath was in self-imposed exile in Thailand, and Prince Souphanouvong went to Vietnam to ask for Viet Minh's support (Figure 6). The Viet Minh was a Vietnamese Revolutionary force in Vietnam standing against the French. There Prince Souphanouvong also joined the Indochina Communist Revolutionary force, a collaborative force drawing members from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Souphanouvong established the 'Pathet Lao', a Lao Revolutionary force with Kayson Phomvihan as a new partner, who had a solid tie with Vietnam, his father was also Vietnamese (Figure 7). Kayson studied in Vietnam from an early

age and had been very active in the Vietnamese Revolutionary Force since he was a student. He was a Lao member trusted by the Viet Minh. He was assigned to be the linkage between the Lao-Vietnamese communist parties.

**Figure 6: Laotian president Souphanouvong and North Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh meet in 1953**



Source: <http://i.imgur.com/N3jwCAt.jpg>

**Figure 7: Kayson (Left) and Ho chi minh (Right), met up in Vietnam and discuss on their country's revolution (1962)**



Source: <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn>



The Viet Minh's interest in Laos was due to their need to secure the hill region in Laos bordering on Vietnam for security purposes (Map 5). Thus, Pathet Lao was closely tied to the Viet Minh. It also led the Pathet Lao to be able to receive supports from the Soviet Union who had been supporting Viet Minh and the Communist Forces. Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh finally won the war against the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The forces had been attacking French bases in the south and north of Laos in order to withdraw the French reinforcements from Dien Bien Phu (Map 5), and were finally able to achieve the victory. With full support from North Vietnam, Pathet Lao defeated the French forces in the battle of 1954. This event led to the Geneva Conference (Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.85), to determine the future of Indochina. In June 1954, the Geneva conference recognized the Pathet Lao; however, as a guerrilla movement whose combatants are required to be assembled as one national entity and demobilized. While Vietnam was divided into two sides: North Vietnam and South Vietnam (Map 5).



**Map 5: The Hochiminh Trail**

**Source: <https://www.pinkbike.com/photo/14953598/>**

The outcome of the Geneva conference constituted a clear political gain for the Pathet Lao to be the government (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, p.86). Since the Pathet Lao was influenced by a socialist idea from the Viet Minh, the United States, therefore, was not satisfied with the result of the conference. *"The US was deeply unhappy over the outcome of the Geneva Conference. US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had insisted that any settlement should meet certain conditions, namely ensuring the viability of stable non-communist regimes and preventing the spread of communism"* (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, p.89). The US thus interfered in the new government through economic development aid. The influence finally led the government to separate into two sides. While, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) under the US patronage; the Pathet Lao, from which the force took the base in the north of Laos backed by the supports from Viet Minh, and the Soviet Union.

Prince Suvanna, although he was the Prime Minister of the RLG, feared the influence of Thailand and the US in Laos and tried to unite the two separated Laos. He went to China and the Soviet Union to ask for support for the coalition between the RLG and Pathet Lao. In mid- 1958, the agreement was to neutralize Laos and merged the RLG and Pathet Lao together, under the smooth negotiations between Suvanna and his half-brother Souphanouvong. However, the coalition did not last for a long time due to the involvement of the US. Since the US never supported the consolidation of the coalition, fearing the communism would end up spreading throughout the region like the case of Czechoslovakia. US opposition leads the coalition to collapse. The US kept pouring in money into Laos through the Economic Assistance Program. Within less than 10 years, the financial assistance through the program reached approximately 500 million USD and could support a new key player in the RLG, the former Foreign Minister Phui Xananikorn, to form a new government, of which, later Phui became the Prime Minister.

As for the usage of the USAID, according to Stevenson<sup>22</sup> Out of the grant, only USD1.3 million was spent on agriculture from 1953 to 1959, in fact, agriculture accounted only 7% of project aid to Laos, even though the majority of the Lao population were peasant farmers. Whereas, up to USD184 million was spent on military support. Based on a different source provided by Viliam Phraxayavong, of the USD480.7 million provided to Laos in the fiscal

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<sup>22</sup> See The end of nowhere: American policy towards Lao since 1954

years 1955-1963, only USD9.1 million (2%) was spent on development grants and technical cooperation as seen from in table 9.

**Table 9: US foreign aid to Laos, FY 1955-1963 (in millions of USD)**

Year	Development grants and technical cooperation	*Budget support	**Military equipment	Total
1955-1960	7.1	225.2	58.0	290.3
1961	1.4	29.1	33.4	63.9
1962	0.6	27.5	37.1	64.0
1963	-	38.5	24.0	62.5
Total	9.1	320.3	152.5	480.7

\*Budget support: principally to pay the salaries of the army and civil administration

\*\*Military equipment: referred to in official publications as the Military Assistance Program

**Source: Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009, p. 85**

Though the two sources provide somewhat different numbers, what stands out is the minimal amount spent on development projects (including projects for agricultural sector), compared to the huge amount spent on the military, which is the telling evidence of the total lack of attention towards the national economy in Laos. What was behind the scenes is that economic aid was a mere cover for the massive flows of military aid from the US to Laos. The civil servants, especially those who were working for military-related activities where the majority of the grant went received the benefit through their salaries and vehicles. As a result, Lao civil servant became one of the most highly paid in ASIA (Martin Staurt Fox, 1997). In 15 years, goods imported to Laos rose by 16 times, including vehicles for local government officers. Hence, only the Lao elite and the urban population were the beneficiaries of the USAID.

At this time, there was a clear division between two opposing parties with four key players. Prince Suvanna's position was to neutralize with the Pathet Lao. Phui Xananikorn was working closely with the US. On the other side, Souphanuvong, who had been claiming that his position was neutral, ended up having strong ties with the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese

communist force working closely with Kayson, who was very loyal to the communist ideology. What is important to note here is that the ruling class kept being influenced from outside.

Under the condition of having strong foreign domination, Laos was unable to maintain neither its independence nor its unity (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.96). As a result, Laos was pulled into a civil war that can also be referred to as a proxy war between the US, North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. *"Both sides of the Lao leadership became the tools, willing or not, of powerful outside forces whose use of Lao territory as an extension of their own conflict, showed little concern for its impact on the Lao people"* (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.135).

The government, under Phui Xananikorn, fully supported the US, led the RLG to become even more compromised, deepening its dependence on the US. A similar situation was taking place on another side, the Pathet Lao. Kayson was fully open to the advice of the Viet Minh and accepted substantial military assistance from the Soviet Union. The two supporters did not bring only assistance to both sides. They also had their own interests. The US saw Laos as a strategic location to win the Vietnam War and to stop the spread of communist influence, according to the Domino Theory. The Viet Minh used the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in Lao's territory, to have a route to enter South Vietnam in order to keep its influence.

In 1964, the US started the bombardment along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. In order to stop Viet Minh's armies from the north from going to the south of Vietnam passing through Laos. The US and RLG's bombardment was extended to the north of Laos where Pathet Lao's base was located. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was providing arms and a budget for Pathet Lao to fight back the attacks. The war lasted for more than ten years. It was not until 1973 when the US started to withdraw its forces due to the public pressure to stop the war. The US withdrew all the forces and military activities from Laos, by the end of 1975, Pathet Lao took over the government and declared the independence of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

There is a witness account of Mr. SP, a former Judge of the Final Court during 1970-1975, about this period. After graduating from law school in 1970, he was assigned to be one of the Judges at the Final Court. By that time there was a tension between the RLG and the Pathet Lao. To him, like other technical officials in the government, he did not take a side; as he, and those like him, were only trying to live their lives with no conflict, keeping their daily

activities going on as if nothing had happened. The leaders were fighting, and that was all that the colleagues talked about. *"We were just working on his duty, not thinking about political ideology, which side we should take was not allowed as technical staff, and this was written in the rules."* When asking about the key feature around the 1970s, he said that *"the most famous Prime Minister at that time was Phui Sananikorn, Prince Souvanna was more famous and known to base in Luangprabang. In Vientiane, the Sananikorn family was the most powerful and rich one. Also, they were known to be on the right side to an extreme level, whenever they ran into the staff of the Pathet Laos, they did not have any open conflict that clearly, they sometimes met at the cinema and acted as if nothing had happened"*.

Regarding, socio-economic development works, Mr. SP admitted that the USAID did initiate the governments to investment more in the public works. However, this did not go to a broader area, but rather was concentrated only in the city areas around the palace, within a distance from 1-3 Km. Many foreigners were coming into Laos to make use of the new lively economic performance in the city, such as Vietnamese and Chinese people. They stayed around 1-2 Km. The lack of roads did not facilitate the circulation of people as well as goods and information. The state's activities were focused only within the cities, while the people in further areas were left to themselves.

## **1. The outcome of the war**

Damages from the civil war left a huge challenge to country development programs. More than two million tons of ordnance were thrown at Laos, making the country the heaviest bombed country per capita in history (MAG, 2018)<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, one-third of the dropped bombs did not explode, leaving Laos contaminated with vast quantities of unexploded ordnances. Also about the enormous amount of Agent Orange sprayed by the US Air Force, along the Ho Chi Minh trail to destroy the forest, in order to spot the North Vietnamese army. To this day, people are still facing the negative impacts, including many babies have been born

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<sup>23</sup> See, <https://www.maginternational.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/laos/> accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> Sep 2015

with birth-defects<sup>24</sup>. It is noteworthy that the conflicts had a significant impact, nonetheless, only in some areas, where the conflicts took place, mainly in Vientiane, where the Royal Lao Government offices were located; around the provinces of Xamnuea and Xiengkhuang in the north where the Pathet Lao bases were; as well as in the area along the hill region (Ho Chi Minh Trail) where the North Vietnam army commuted to South Vietnam.

More severe damage to the country was to the national economy, only a tiny part of the USAID was used to invest in the country's infrastructure, besides the civil war between the RLG and Pathet Lao has also caused the abandonment of all the socio-economic development in the country. With the withdrawal of the USAID after 1975, the Lao national economy was in the state of total collapsing. Since the industrial investment and foreign assistance was concentrated only within the cities' boundaries, the city people's lives were more disrupted than those of the people in areas further off. When the country changed its status from a monarchy country to a socialist state, it did not change the lives of the people in a more distant region. People's response towards state officials was indifference. Until 1975, it is estimated that 90% of the population continued living under subsistence farming (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.91, pp.130). Although there were some attempts to encourage the Lao people to produce more in the past by the RLG and its US partner, it failed to make changes. For instance, the Green Revolution<sup>25</sup> was introduced into Laos, though high yielding, were non-glutinous "*whereas the people of Laos have the highest per capita consumption of glutinous rice in the world. The annual per capita consumption of milled rice in Laos during the 1990s was about 174 kg. Furthermore, the people of Laos proudly regard the consumption of glutinous of 'sticky' rice as part of their cultural identity. The Lao language expression 'to eat' not only means 'to eat rice' as in the language of their Thai neighbors but to eat glutinous rice*" (IRRI, 2007, p.205).

The promotion of cash-crop production, however as Judy Austin, a wife of a USAID officer in Laos in the early 1970s noted that "*road building, so desperately needed in this country, where there were no means of shifting produce, lumber and people from one area to another was designed for military transportation and went to the borders where the heavy fighting took place and in and out of the Long Cheng area, seat of the CIA forces... The USAID*

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<sup>24</sup> See Vu Le Thao Chi, 2012, Farmers in a Developing Country: An Inquiry into Human Insecurity of the many, Journal of Human Security Studies, Vol.1, No.2 pp.94-108

<sup>25</sup> High-yield seeds

*agricultural assistants were experienced teachers and practitioners who devoted the majority of their efforts to a futile attempt to persuade the hill tribes to switch from growing opium, which brought high returns, to growing fruits and vegetables, which spoiled on the way to the markets that needed them because of poor transportation and no refrigerator. It was a losing game"* (Judy Austin Rantala, 2004, p. 45).

Local people knew little about the state's existence. When talking about their origin, they refer to their tribes rather than to their country. "*People spoke of the 'Ban-Muang' (Village-District) as a traditional unit and assumed it was a NATURAL unit of administration"* (Evans, 1990, p.192). People were more influenced by neighboring countries, such as Vietnam and Thailand. They felt comfortable crossing the border to Thailand, for buying necessary goods, enjoying familiar dishes, and celebrating common festivals. Based on the interview with the elderly in PakNgum, they admitted that their sense of national border was not as clear, especially between Laos-Thailand and Laos- Vietnam. "*It was so easy to go, and we go there so often."*

### **III. 1975-1986: Laos under socialism**

On December 2, 1975, the Pathet Lao acquired independence along with a huge challenge to build the economy of the country. The leader of Pathet Lao, Souphanuvong became the President, and Kayson was appointed as the Prime Minister. Former members of the Pathet Lao led different ministries. While some ministers had an aristocratic background and had received higher education in France, a larger number were from modest social backgrounds with lower levels of education. The new government lacked a skilled workforce, specially trained economic planners and administrative personnel, to rehabilitate the war-torn economy (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009, p.133). It must be highlighted that the shortage of skilled administrators in the government was partly because 10% of Lao people fled the country, due to fear of the new regime (Evans 2012, p.195). The majority of those people were working for the past regime, which also implied that they were the educated ones.

Laos heavily relied on foreign aid; when it stopped, the country was affected. Fortunately, Vietnam and the USSR continued supporting the country in various areas from

infrastructure such as roads and hospitals to education and agriculture (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009, p.145). In 1978, Lao PDR and Vietnam signed a twenty-five Year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation which tightened up their already existing strong relationship (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.177). The treaty legitimized the presence of 30.000 Vietnamese troops that had been stationed in Laos since 1976, just one year after the end of the civil war, making the Vietnamese imprint on Lao national policy even more significant. By the end of 1990, there was a record of total of aid of 996 million USD from the Soviet Union to Laos spent on equipment, material, and technical assistance, see table 10. "*Where there has once been a 'Little America' was now a 'Little Moscow'*" (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009, pp.63)

**Table 10: Soviet economic aid to Lao PDR 1976-1990 (in millions of USD)**

	1976-80	1981-85	1986-90	Cumulative total
Exports	93	226	282	600
Imports	-	11	58	69
Loans				
‘Saldo’	93	214	223	530
Other loans	14	104	67	185
Total loans	107	318	290	715
Grants	16	20	12	48
Project assistance				
equipment and	-	99	64	163
materials	-	25	15	40
Technical aid	30	124	79	233
Total project assistance				
Total aid	153	462	381	996

**Source: Chi Do Pham 1994, p.311**

Due to the serious lacking of personnel in Laos, Soviet officials also came to work in Laos' administration. Hundreds of Russian experts replaced the American aid workers. The assistance from the Soviet Union also went to military activities, air force, heavy weapons, and communication equipment. Unsurprisingly, Laos also adopted ideological convictions following the leadership of Vietnam and the Soviet Union.



The Soviet advisers helped Laos to draw up the Interim Plan, a three-year time frame for future coordination with the five-year plans of Vietnam, Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and the CMEA countries (Ronald Bruce John, 2006, P.19). To endorse the country's path by mimicking what foreign countries did without any trial experience put Laos at risk. Laos adopted a similar model of the collective economy. The State-controlled people's consumption patterns "*what to produce, by whom and for what uses, were predominantly the subject of administrative decisions*" (Chanthavong Saignasith, Laos' Dilemmas and Options, pp. 23). The relations of production needed to change from private ownership into cooperative ownership, which aimed was to provide all citizens with the same rights and equal resources, and thus blocked the way to capitalism.

## **1. Planned Economy and the Agriculture Collectivization**

Before 1975, effective state control was largely limited to the urban economy, particularly the small modern industrial sector concentrated in and around Vientiane. Political and military struggles within the country in the past had carried the central government away, but the national economy, as a whole, was kept afloat. A brief description of Lao agriculture before 1975 stated that "*90% of the population lived in rural Laos were either slash and burn cultivators, who produced no identifiable surplus, or a peasantry that was largely subsistence-oriented*"<sup>26</sup> (Stuart-Fox, 1997). This posed the challenge of bringing the rural economy into the national economic system.

As a preparatory step toward for the process of collectivization, in September 1976, an agricultural tax was introduced. It was the first time Lao peasants felt the state's existence. "*One of the first clear signals to the peasants that the new government planned a new role for them in the country's economic development*" (Evans, 1990). The agricultural taxation system took

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<sup>26</sup>They were engaged in rice farming, raising animals, hunting, fishing, and collecting forest products to meet their basic needs. They traded only for essential goods, accumulating no surplus. Traditional cooperative assistance groups for labor-intensive activities were formed when labors were needed

up to 30% of a farmers' rice production (Ronald Bruce St. John, 2006, p.33). This first move was done in a hurry to have the tax to replace the USAID that used to support the national economy, yet the rate was too unrealistic. Therefore, it was not approved by the peasants who had not been seriously taxed by previous regimes before. The peasants destroyed orchards and livestock rather than pay taxes to the government (Kham Vorapheth, 2015, p.121).

In January 1977, an enlarged cabinet meeting called for the correction of 'improper measures' in applying the tax laws. The government planned a gradual, four-stage progress towards agricultural collectivization (Kham Vorapheth, 2015, p.121). The first stage would be to form solidarity groups in villages, based on traditional mutual help. The second would be to organize the group through an exchange of labor regularly exchange of labor, with different groups specializing in specific tasks. In the third stage, peasants would retain ownership of land, tools, or draught animals, but would work collectively and receive the return accordingly. The final stage would involve COMMON ownership of land and tools of production.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1978, the decree on the management of agricultural co-operatives was promulgated. The launching of co-operatives was an essential part of the Interim Three-Year Development Plan (78-80) and the First 5 Year Plan. At the end of 1978, the number of co-operative recorded was at an estimated 1356 and increased to 2452 in 1979 (Grant Evan, 1988, 1995). However, from 1979 to 1980, the total number of cooperatives went down dramatically because of the opposition from the peasants. Lao peasants were not motivated to pool their resources for collective actions, but they were trying to prevent them from becoming communal property (Stuart, 1999, pp.180). Another explanation proposed by Grant Evans borrowing the argument 'Moral Economy' (James Scott) in his Lao peasant under Socialism pointing out that the Lao had been living on subsistence farming, thereby producing enough for subsistence being their top priority. The 1978's constant natural calamities experiences made Lao peasants be in hunger. Therefore, they had rather stay with 'tried and proven ways' to sustain the subsistence ability, than adopt the new way (collective farming introduced from outside) in order to produce surplus (increase productivity). From this point of view, according to Evans, *1978 was not a time for experimentation with cooperatives. Too much was at stake. The government's resolve to continue with the campaign was bound to run into spontaneous resistance* (Evans, 1990, pp.52-53). In reality, peasant opposition took various forms, from passive non-cooperation to destruction of crops and slaughter of cattle to prevent them from

becoming communal property, and even migration to Thailand. By the end of 1978, thousands of peasants had fled southern Laos (Stuart, 1999, pp.180). Besides, unlike the condensed presence of cadres who were constantly talking people into cooperatives, the shortages of cadres and the limited resources (technical and financial assistance) in Laos also contributed to the failure of the collective model right from the very beginning. The failure was admitted by Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane "*in the form of generalized propaganda rather than based on reality*" (Kham Vorapheth, 2015, pp.123) after he toured the country to take 'a first-hand look' at the cooperatives by the end of 1978.

After 1979, the Lao government decided to slow down the collectivization. Vietnam also supported the decision. However, the model was still applied for another decade, even without any assuring an increase in production.

A brief history should help the vulnerable position that Laos was taking after 1975. After 1975, Laos found itself in a very vulnerable position, politically, especially in the relationship with neighboring countries. The relationship between Vientiane and Bangkok was deteriorated when right-wing regime under Thanin Kraivisien was hostile to Laos and blockaded the country in 1977. The neutrality of Laos swayed when the relationship between Vietnam, its closest ally, and China the latter's ally of Democratic Kampuchea turned sour. Being the smallest and landlocked country in the region, Lao had no choice but relied on the Soviet bloc and supports from Vietnam (allowing Vietnam troops to station in Laos). Not surprisingly, adopting collectivization soon after the new government was in place. Laos saw collectivization not only a means of economic security but of political security. Therefore, despite the local resistance, the Lao government showed its enthusiasm to stay firmly with the socialist path and collectivization. This enthusiasm was reflected in the statements of the Prime Minister in the following years. In a report of February 1979, he continued to argue that cooperatives were the only way peasant agriculture could overcome natural calamities and achieve food self-sufficiency. At the party congress in 1982, Prime Minister Kaysone still spoke of the need to "*persuade the peasants to embark on the socialist collective path of production in the form of agricultural cooperatives*" (Evans, 1990, pp.53-58).

In 1983, Saly Vongkhamsao, Vice Prime Minister reconfirmed that collectivization is the sole efficient way to liberate the peasants from outdated agricultural patterns and introduce

new and modern techniques. Also, in April 1984, Council of Ministers' Instruction No.022 came out, which urged local officials to establish plans for switching to collective production without delay. The more insecure the state felt about its domestic situations as well as its vulnerable position in the region, the more Laos felt the need to be ideologically committed to socialist transformation, thus pushing to penetrate the model of collectivization into the rural areas (Evans, 1990, pp.60).

The new system created pressure not only for rural but also urban people. The shortage of goods and agriculture cooperation way of production created a shock to the people in the city, including the elite. *"My mother needed to sell her gold to buy food in the dark market. Many of my relatives could not stand the poor economic situation, so they left to France"* (Mrs. N, who was a high school student in the 1970s and a daughter of a former high-rank official of the past regime said that there was a dark market, which shows the limited control of the state in the 1970s. Mrs N further explains the situation that, eventually, the government could not secure food for the people. Although everything was free for the people, utilities like water and electricity price were reduced, but, it was impossible to collect tax from the people and to collect the productivity from the cooperative. *"The people in the city like us were encouraged to grow our own vegetable and raise their own livestock." The economic situation was very stagnant, the people had no mean to earn money, and were relying on remittent from their relatives from abroad. Because of this, so many people left the country to the third country where they believed to have 'a better, a more secure life'. Her family did not go, because of her father, "he told us that, life abroad was very tiring, we will end up doing menial jobs, besides we have lots of land in Laos, we will be ok."*

Mr. SP, the former Judge, however, decided to flee the country because of the changes in his working situation and especially the poor economic situation that the family members preferred to leave to stay, *"Because of the physical constraint, I could not farm with the cooperative group. My department was dismissed, though I was transferred to the Ministry of Justice, I was not assigned to do much. My wife wanted to leave, first was to move out from the economic situation that did not seem to get better and second was because all her siblings had already left, so we decided to leave"* (Mr. SP).

Other serious problems persisted: inflation reached 115% in 1985, and the budget deficit came to represent about one-half of the estimated GDP. Low procurement prices continued to discourage farmers from producing more rice for the market. The size of the cultivated area started decreasing from 731,000 ha in 1982 to 651,000 ha in 1986. The economic field survived on foreign aid and loans from the socialist- countries which was about to finish, e.g., from 1976 to 1990, the debt to the Soviet Union was as high as USD714 million (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009). By the end of 1978, as many as 4000 people were crossing the Mekong river to Thailand every month. The Hmong contributed the largest. At a certain point, there were more than 120,000 refugees in Thai camps. (MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, 1979). By the end of 1980s number of refugees reached 15% of the total population (Martin Stuart Fox, Jan 1989, pp.97).

It was not until 1986 did Prime Minister Kaysone admit one reality that “in the agricultural field, cooperatives are still in the low form, and the peasants have just embarked on the path to collectivization, but in general, they are still engaged in the natural economy” (fourth congress) (Evans, 1990, pp.63) and that "*Our main shortcomings lie in subjectivism and haste, in our failure to combine transformation with construction, in our inclination to abolish the non-socialist economic sectors promptly*" (Evans, 1990, pp. 61). In 1988, the model of collectivization was abandoned and shifted to the market economy. "*Our previous cooperative policy was in the old style practiced by other socialist countries. After some investigations into the actual situation in Laos, we decided to change direction and start from the family*" (Evans, 1990, pp.64). Similar to Vietnam, Laos recognized for the first-time households as active economic units in 1986.

#### **IV. 1986-Present: The socialist Lao state and New Economic Mechanism**

Collectivization failed to contribute to the development of the national economy. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the ‘New Economic Mechanism’ or NEM was introduced, similar to ‘Doi Moi’ of Vietnam economic reform. NEM was the beginning of the transition of Lao from a centrally planned economy to a market economy characterized by ‘private ownership,’ market incentives, competition and internationalization (Mya Than&Joseph L.H. Tan, Eds,1997, pp.34). A range of measures designed to promote internal and external trade were introduced

in 1987. In April 1987, the Decree No. 16 was issued to reduce controls on private trading. The private sector was allowed to compete on equal terms with state trading enterprises, even in agricultural marketing. The decree also removed the state's monopoly on the import and export of various commodities (Mya Than&Joseph L.H. Tan, Eds,1997, pp.16). At the same time, the Foreign Code<sup>27</sup> was established to open the country and to attract foreign aids, technical assistance, and investment not only from the socialist bloc countries. International financial institutions (IMF, WB, ADB) and Western countries responded to Laos' requests to rescue its economy, especially after Laos adopted Open Door Policy and Market Oriented Economy. The ADB and the UNDP provided technical assistance to the Lao PDR government to codify the appropriate legal system for attracting foreign investment (Viliam Phraxayavong, 2009, pp.165) and the attraction to investors was strong, as mentioned, for its natural resources.

Additionally, around this time, Laos was also trying to get itself more integrated into the world community like the efforts to become members to ASEAN and UN. Also, trying to normalize the relationship with Thailand and the U.S., by joining the green movement in the late 1980s and signed the Convention on Diversity at the world summit on Human Environment, Rio summit (Earth summit) in 1992, which Agenda 21, Deforestation and Agricultural and Development was the center of the world attention, from this, alternative to Slash and Burn Consortium was created. The need to eradicate Slash and Burn was also what Laos had to follow. What to note is that by this time, in 1995, the Lao forest cover was more than 53% (see table 11). Therefore, whether there was a need for Laos to participate or not is debatable.

**Table 11: Forest cover in the Mekong lower country**

Country	Forest cover, 1995, % of land area	Forest/capita, 1995 ha/person
Cambodia	55.7	1.0
Lao PDR	53.9	2.5
Thailand	22.8	0.2
Vietnam	28.0	0.1

**Source: IUCN, 1986, p7**

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<sup>27</sup> Legal framework to attract external investment, to expand economic and technological cooperation to pursue the eradication of poverty

When looking at the forest cover in different neighboring countries, Laos is almost the largest, just second to Cambodia and forest per capita stands out as the highest in the four countries in the Mekong sub-region with up to 2.5 ha per person. Forest area was estimated at more than 70 percent in 1940; 64 percent in the 1960s, and at 47.2 percent in 1988-1989 equivalent to a cumulative 0.80 percent per year loss. According to Olivier Ducourtieux, the low population density and the fact that the tropical forest still covers nearly half of the country mean that access to land should not pose a significant problem.

It was because that the green movement was picking up popularity. It started with the 'Stockholm Plus Ten' conference, considered at the United Nations Conference on Human Environment, held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1982. In 1985, the World Forestry Congress was held in Mexico, where the Tropical Forests Action Plan (TFPA) was adopted. Therefore, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Party congress 1986, the Lao government brought up the issue of stabilizing Swidden agriculture or slash and burn agriculture as the second priority in order to protect the forest. The influence from outside is much more evident after Lao was quick in endorsing Tropical Forest Action Plan (TFAP) in 1991, which pushed Laos to carry out the land reform one year after that. Decree No.169 (No.169/PM) on Land and Forest land Allocation (LFAP) was drafted. This LFAP program was supported by 'newly greened development agencies,' the World Bank and the ADB. Since the first TFAP review meeting in 1994, was held in Vientiane, the annual donor meeting has been held in Vientiane. This meeting was attended by active donors, NGOs, forestry officials from the provinces, and key technicians of the department. In these meetings, progress of the TFAP implementation was reported on and the donors' community presented information on the status and future support to Lao forestry development<sup>28</sup>. It was also reported at the meeting that, the Governments of Denmark, France, and Norway sent missions to Lao PRD and identified some co-operation projects. They informed the meeting that financial support would be provided to implement the identified projects (Viliam Phraxayyavong, 2009). The reform, although was unavoidable steps for an agrarian country towards development like Laos and many neighboring countries (Vietnam

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<sup>28</sup> Major donors include: Bilateral donors: SIDA, GTZ, and JICA; International Monetary Institutions: ADB, WB, EU, FINNIDA; International Institutions: Mekong River Commission, FAO, UNDP, UNCRD; NGOs international/bilateral: WWF, JVC, CSIRO, CUSO, CANADA, IUCN, BMZ Germany, CARE, WCS, CESVI (Italy), DANIDA, and NORAD

and China), but how the reform is implemented is always the center of debate between pros and cons.

According to the 1998-1999 Lao Agricultural Census, the total land used for agriculture was 10,000 out of 236,800 Km<sup>2</sup> or some 4.2% of the national territory, this already included land under slash and burn farming. The practice is the way the upland areas growing rice, and they are accounted for 25% of the whole population (150,000 households) (FAO, 2010). The return of slash and burn farming is considered much lower from lowland rice farming (rice paddy), 5 Kg to 13 Kg per labor day (W.Roder, 1997). Meanwhile, slash and burn may use up to 80% of the soils used in agriculture (MRC, 2013). This is one of the reasons Laos has been having the problem of food shortage. Back in the French colonialism, Laos was a net rice-importing country. From 1988-1993, the country spent 7 to 31.4 million USD to import rice and other food products (Mya Than and Joseph LH Than 1997, pp.39). Therefore, national food self-sufficiency was always a priority in the national agenda. As a result, the movement of eradicating slash and burn cultivation gained momentum in Laos.

The reform, in contrast, resulted in a source of insecurities for the majority of the upland farmers who were not prepared for the transition from their own way of practicing slash and burn to implement modern farming practices suggested by the state. It is noteworthy that Laos consists of different groups of ethnicities, mainly three groups namely Lao Lum (56% of the total population as of 1990), Lao Theung (34%) and Lao Sung (9%) and the three groups also have different ways of production. Lao Lum had practiced lowland rice cultivation where many had cut down the forest to do the rice paddy. Because the production is always on the same plot of land, more problem from this system has shown throughout the time, because of the lack of maintenance, "*low soil fertility and limited application of improved management techniques, rice production in the lowlands has declined*" (Kenji Domoto, 1997, pp.312). Lao Theung has practiced the traditional shifting cultivation or slash and burn using crop rotations involving fallow fields for five to fifteen years depending on soil condition and land availability. In general, their practices are not a serious threat to forest resources and land (Kenji Domoto, 1997, p.312). Lao Sung occupies the uplands of high altitude, where soils are swallowed and have low fertility. Their main practice is also slash and burn, where the common crops are maize and poppy. Overall, the major cause of forest destruction in the country is the Lao Lum way of farming neither the Lao Theung nor the Lao Sung 's slash and burn. Also, at that



moment, slash and burn in Laos accounted for less than 4% of the national territory in 1992, which do not post any major threat to deforestation. Also, without extra support from the technical officials to these people, to do modern farming and to invest, the people were left with no mean of production. As a result, although entering the forest is illegal, many went back to the forest to do slash and burn and relying on forest products.

In this case, farmers are expected by the state to change their traditional farming method to engage in modern farming, including the green revolution. However, in order to adopt this new farming method, farmers have to have the capital to purchase required inputs, which include seeds, chemicals, and machinery. For the majority of upland farmers who produce just enough for self-consumption, that is far from reality. In fact, at the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress Party, a resettlement program (Pheng Souvanthong, 1994, pp.19) was planned to arrange fixed occupation for 277.000 families of shifting cultivators. In order to cope with the new situation, these farmers have to manage themselves to make their ends meet. Some may opt to leave the area and migrate to big cities like Vientiane, looking for new jobs. In some areas, the displacement reaches 50% to 80% of the total villagers (Peter Vandergeest, UNESCO 2003). The land reform ended up deepened the poverty, by creating the wider gap between the poor farmers who now have to do illegal farming, some have become landless farmers, and the rich farmers who have the investment to survive and become richer. What is contradictory is that the population density in Laos at that time was 12 people/Km<sup>2</sup> <sup>29</sup>, access to land should not pose a major problem to the environment, and Dufumier's work suggested that if the land is left fallow for more than six years, the yield will decrease and soil will erode, slash and burn can be therefore sustainable. To briefly sum up, the policy just created disruption to the upland farmers' lives, due to the need to respond to the international commitment, while paying less attention to the people inside the country. As a consequence, the Land Reform policy sanctioned by the state failed to improve the lives of the slash and burn cultivators.

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<sup>29</sup> 2015 Population density is 30 per Km<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Universal Primary Education among the national development goals

Since 1986, the government has emphasized the importance of cooperating with international agencies to reduce poverty in the country and to develop the country's human resource potential (GOL, 2004). It also applied in the education area. One of the initiatives was the joining of Laos in the UN World Conference on Education For All (WCEFA) in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, which adopted goals calling for a '*decade of the initiative*' to assist developing countries to pursue Universal Primary Education. A decade after the Jomtien Conference, when the time-bound target in areas such as enrolment, completion, and achievement had not been met. A second Education For All Conference was held in Dakar, Senegal. The Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000). A further international initiative occurred in 2000 when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration and its eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to "*provide concrete, numerical benchmarks for tackling extreme poverty in its many dimensions*" (UNDP, 2011a). The goal number two or MDG2 was specifically on Universal Primary Education, which Laos was one of the signatories to the Declaration: "*To ensure that, by (2015), children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education*" (UNDP, 2011b).

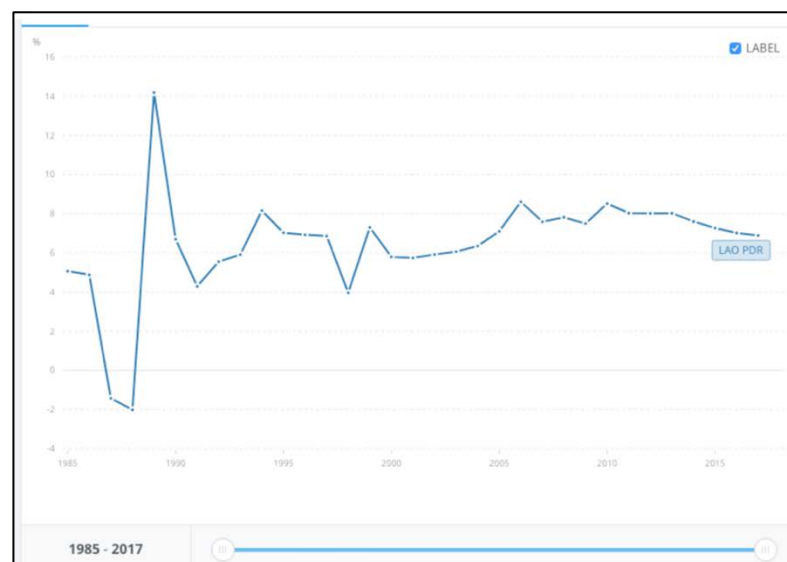
To keep tracking the goals, the donor agencies established the Education For All-Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) (WB Independent Evaluation Group, 2006) as a global partnership between donors and developing countries to help accelerate progress towards the MDG of universal primary education by 2015. While this initiative represents a concerted effort at coordination of effort by donor agencies, some argue that the EFA-FTI fosters planned dependence, involving an increased reliance on technical assistance to fulfill the administrative requirements for receiving funds (Torres, 2003; Samoff, 2007; Hartwell, 2008). Another program to ensure the implementation of the educational improvement was the 'Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness,' Laos did sign the declaration and localized it to the 'Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness' in 2006, to facilitate the work with the Donor Community. It was a joint effort by both the government and the international partners. Therefore, foreign experts exert considerable influence on the education agenda of the country through projects and funding allocation. More details on the cooperation are discussed in Chapter 5.

Despite the assistance from the foreign agencies both technical and financial, in 2015, Laos failed to achieve the goal of Universal Primary Education on time, due to the persistent issue of the dropout rate of 9-10% for the past ten years. This led the government to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals 4 Universal Primary Education (SDG4). The aim is to continue trying to make sure every child in Laos go and graduate from the primary education, which will contribute to achieving the development goals set by the Party's political directive, to quit the status of least developed country by 2020. Universal Primary Education is, therefore, a challenge to the Lao state to convince the people to follow.

## 2. Current Development Indicators

Currently, after 30 years have passed since the economic reforms were implemented in Laos. Ever since Laos has integrated itself to the region and the world showing considerable results like the current GDP growth of 7%. The size of the Lao economy has increased by 100 times (1988:621 million and 2017:16.8 billion), see Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Economic Growth in Laos 1986-2017**



**Source: WB Development Indicator, 2018**

Figure 8 shows that the Laos economic growth has been illustrating a steady increase from the beginning of the 1990s, thanks to the interest of foreign investors, most likely the abundant natural resources the country poses. With railway projects, the state aims to connect Laos with other countries of the region, to turn the country to the cargo port or merchandise hub of the region, the potential of Laos helps to keep foreign investor attention in Laos. These goals and visions have become one of the factors stimulating the continuously growing Laos economy. When comparing with the GDP growth in ASEAN, Laos together with its neighbors, Cambodia and Myanmar are having the highest economic growth among other ASEAN countries. See Table 12.

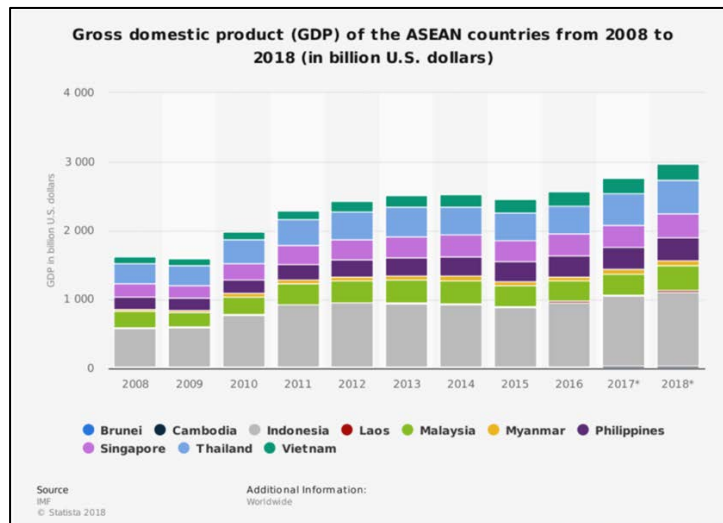
**Table 12: Laos leading the ASEAN countries in real GDP growth**

	2016	2017	2018-22 (average)	2011-15 (average)
<b>ASEAN-5 countries</b>				
Indonesia	5.0	5.0	5.4	5.5
Malaysia	4.2	5.5	4.9	5.3
Philippines	6.9	6.6	6.4	5.9
Thailand	3.2	3.8	3.6	2.9
Viet Nam	6.2	6.3	6.2	5.9
<b>Brunei Darussalam and Singapore</b>				
Brunei Darussalam	-2.5	0.0	0.5	-0.1
Singapore	2.0	3.2	2.3	4.1
<b>CLM countries</b>				
Cambodia	6.9	7.1	7.2	7.2
Lao PDR	7.0	6.9	7.1	7.9
Myanmar	5.9	7.2	7.4	7.3
<b>China and India</b>				
China	6.7	6.8	6.2	7.9
India	7.1	6.6	7.3	6.8
Average of ASEAN-10	4.8	5.1	5.2	5.1
Average of Emerging Asia	6.4	6.4	6.3	7.1

**Source: OECD Development Centre, MPF 2018**

Notwithstanding, Lao GDP growth does not tell much the country's situation in the region, when looking at the GDP in ASEAN, Laos is still having the least, much less than Cambodia and Myanmar. In 2017, Laos' GDP was USD16.8 billion, while Cambodia has USD22 billion and Myanmar has USD69 billion. See Figure 9.

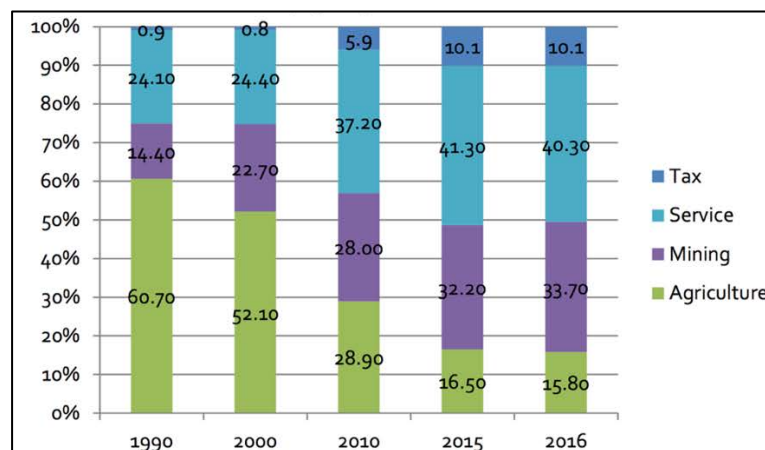
**Figure 9: GDP of ASEAN countries**



**Source: IMF Statistic 2018**

When looking at the share of GDP, as depicted in Figure 10, the main source of income in 2016 was from the service sector representing 40.3% of the GDP, followed by the industrial sector that contributes 33.7% and agriculture with 15.8% and 10.1% for tax (Lao Statistic Bureau, 2017). Despite having more than 75% of the people engaging in the agricultural sector (Boike Rehbein, 2005, pp.32), what it contributes to the national economy is considerably low. Likewise, tax revenues contribute little to GDP due to the failure of the central government to collect tax from the people (Minister of Finance speech at the National Assembly in May 2019).

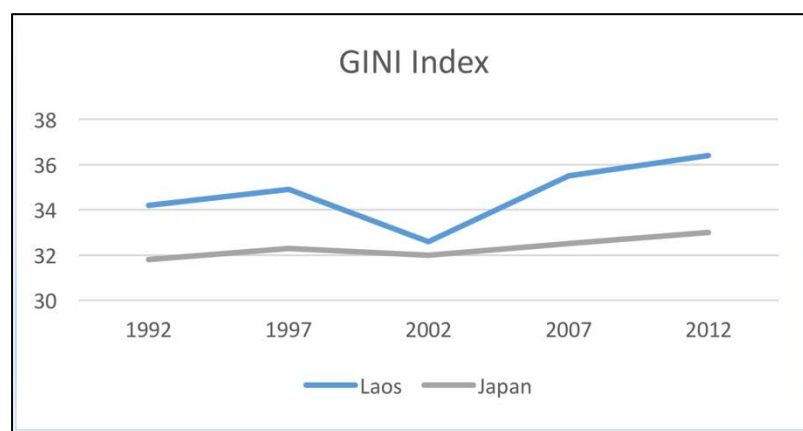
**Figure 10: Share of the source of income in Laos**



**Source: Lao Statistic Bureau, MPI 2017**

One important point to note is that the majority of the people engages in the agricultural sector, the share of GDP to the national figure has been declining from 60,7% in 1990 to 15.8% in 2017. This poses a question regarding the wealth distribution of the increase in GDP growth in the country that does not go to the majority Lao. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the gap of income in the GINI Index. Laos' Gini Index appeared to be around 34-35% from the past decade. Although before, the gap has reduced to 32.5% in 2002. But from 2002, the gap has become wider and reached 36.5% in 2012. See Figure 11.

**Figure 11: Laos' Gini Index 1992-2012**



**Source: WB Development Indicator 2013**

### 3. The remained challenges

Regardless of the rise of the GDP growth, development challenges remained. For example, in Laos' urban area, in 2011 there is 31.4% considered living in the slums area. When looking at the number of people living under the headcount ratio of USD2 a day, it accounted for almost half of the total population (46.8%) (Trading Economics 2018). There is a big gap between GDP in different areas in the country. USD4,463 per capita for the people in Vientiane Capital, which is doubled of the GDP in the provinces, e.g., Saravanh of USD1,814 and Phongsary of USD1,444, see Table 13.

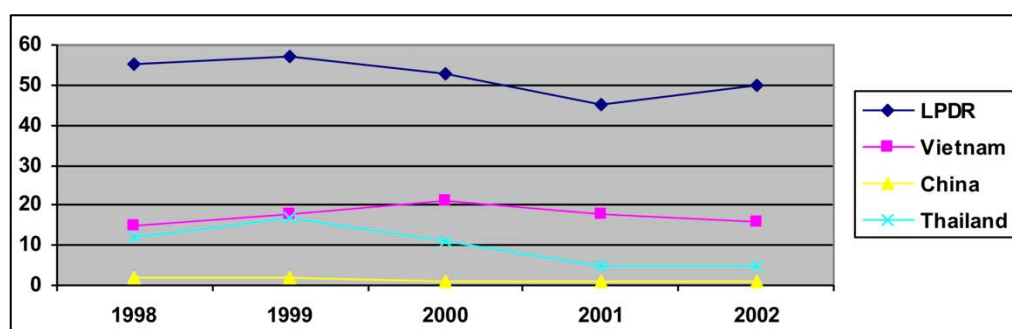
**Table 13: GDP per capita per year in 2018 by province**

	Province	GDP per capita
1	<b>Vientiane Capital</b>	<b>44,630</b>
2	<b>Phongsaly</b>	<b>1,444</b>
3	Luangnamtha	2,792
4	Oudomxay	3,975
5	Bokeo	2,984
6	Luangprebang	7,076.0
7	Huaphanh	3,213
8	Xayabury	9,079.0
9	Xiengkhuang	3,444
10	Vientiane	7,088
11	Borikhamxay	5,569
12	Khammoun	7,588
13	Savanakhet	17,470
14	<b>Saravanh</b>	<b>1,814</b>
15	Xekong	1,606
16	Champasack	16,554
17	Attapeu	2,661
18	Xaysomboun	1,111

**Source: Lao Statistic Center 2018**

Although Laos' GDP growth can be considered as having a similar trend with the neighboring countries, it is noteworthy that Laos is the most Aid dependent when comparing to Vietnam, China, and Thailand (Figure 12).

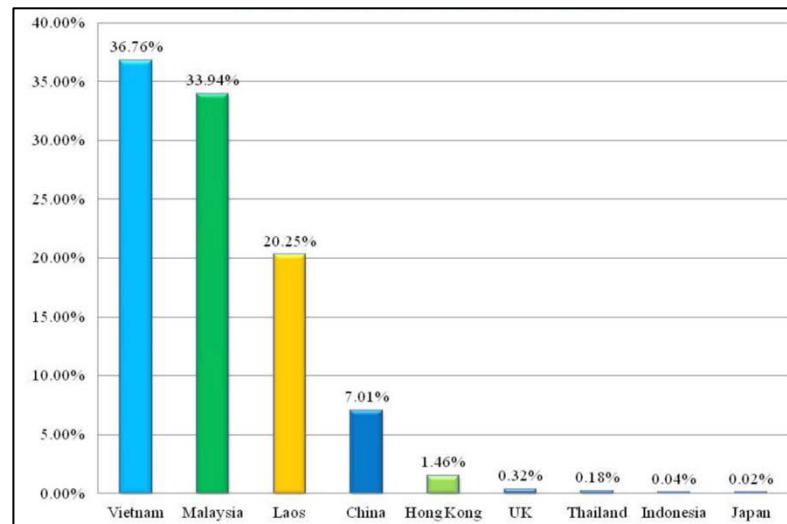
**Figure 12: Aid in Laos per capita 1998-2002 (USD)**



**Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators CD-ROM)**

When examining the investment in Laos, it shows that foreign investment is the leading investors in its economy, almost 80% of the total investment was from foreign investment. Only 20.25% was from the local. This illustrates the significant role of foreign capital flow in Laos and how dependent Laos' economy is on investments from outside.

**Figure 13: Foreign Direct Investment to Laos by Country in 2015**



**Source: MoPI, 2015**

China, Thailand, and Vietnam were investing in Laos the highest. They played a significant role in the Lao economy since the country got opened up until recently. From 1989 to 2012, China's investment value was recorded to be USD5.4 Billion, Thailand was USD4.5 Billion and USD3.4 Billion for Vietnam, as shown in the table below.

**Table 14: Foreign Direct Investment to Laos 1989 – 2012**

#	Country	Projects	Value(USD)
1	China	830	5.4 Billion
2	Thailand	746	4.5 Billion
3	Vietnam	421	3.4 Billion
4	R. Korea	291	751 Million
5	France	223	490 Million
6	Japan	102	438 Million

**Source: MoPI, 2013.**



The indicators briefly show that Laos is dependent on international aid; foreign investment is the main contribution to the country's GDP. Much of the revenue contributing to the growth of the national economy has been from mining, electricity exports and foreign direct investment from countries such as China, Thailand, Vietnam and Australia (MoPI, 2013). Unfortunately, foreign investment did not focus on labor-intensive industries but concentrated more on the country's natural resources. Although the country offers cheap labor force, Lao labor could not compete with labors in surrounding countries in terms of quality. Table 15 shows Laos' adult literacy rate (79.9%) in 2018, which is the second-lowest among ASEAN countries. Additionally, poor road infrastructure, the logistic cost is another constraint to establish an industry in the country. For these reasons, most of the time, countries like Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar are chosen over Laos.

**Table 15: Adult Literacy Rate in ASEAN countries in 2017**

Countries	Adult Literacy Rate
Brunei Darussalam	96%
Singapore	97%
Thailand	93.5%
Vietnam	94.5%
Cambodia	77.2%
Laos	79.9%

**Source: Different sources gathered by the author**

The brief background of Laos reveals overall state - people relationships, and the example of the failure of the state's policies. During the French colonization, there was not much investment in the country's basic foundation.

Regarding the education sector, it had never been the national priority since the colonial period until the 1970s. As a result, until now, the problem of the lack of skilled staff and labor force remain among the top issue to Laos' socio-economic development. Such as the infrastructure, there was a limited number of roads and bridges, to facilitate the commute from urban to rural areas, until now there are some areas where have no road. 10% of the total population lives have no access to road (LSIS, 2017, p.44).

During the French colonization, there was no economic system; the main source of income was from exporting opium. Later, during the 1950s-1970, the country was relying on 100% on the USAID. Therefore, after 1975, there was no economic system for the new government to inherit. The rest of the people were left untouched, relying on their traditional way or subsistent way of living and were not aware of what was going on at the central government level. Since the state did not have any presence in people's lives before, they have to establish the control or the relationship from scratch, which will take some time. It is the real challenge for the Lao state.

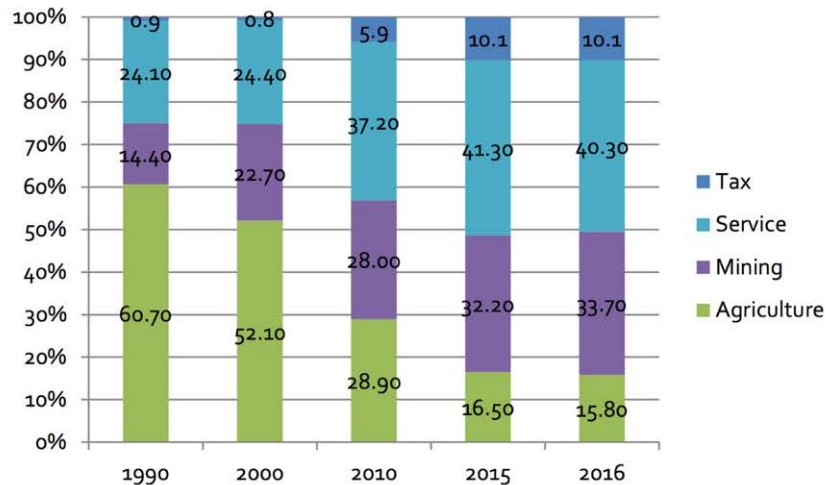
Soon after 1975, the socialist government put efforts to reach the people for nation-building. The newly formed state was lacking both resources and technical staff, relying heavily on guidance from Vietnam and the Soviet Union, adopting to follow a central command economy with two key components: development of heavy industrial and agriculture cooperative. However, the majority of the Lao people produced no identifiable surplus or a peasantry that was largely subsistence-oriented. The attempt to bring the rural population into agriculture cooperative after 1975 was not an easy task for the government. Furthermore, a fast move of the government to tax the people's productivities for 30%, has soured the relationship between the state and the people. After NEM, the people were encouraged to invest, while more than 80% of the population was under subsistence farming, it was quite far from the people's reality.

While the majority of the Lao people are still living under subsistent farming and that the state is under the process of trial and error, the country has already embarked on the open door policy to attract foreign investment. Without a doubt, the state needs to rely on the assistance from outside, however, it is essential that the state finds an equilibrium between being responsive to the international demands and the needs of the local villagers, which observation is at the core of this research attention

## Chapter 4 Life in Lao village

Laos' GDP has been enjoying its annual GDP growth with the average of 7%, it has increased 26 times since the country opened up in 1986 (from USD621 million in 1988 - USD16.3 billion in 2018). While most of the GDP came from mining (33.7%) and service (40.3% in), tax was 10% and agriculture was 15.8%, as shown Figure 10: Share of the source of income in Laos (2016). However, what is interesting to note that 72% of the Lao population engaged in the agriculture sector (PHC, 2015, pp.80), what this means is that while the state's economy seems to be performing well, the majority of the people are not benefiting from this national economic growth.

Figure 10: Share of the source of income in Laos



Source: Statistical Yearbook, Laos Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Planning and Investment

The Population and Housing Census (PHC) reveals that nearly 80% of the total labor force is self-employed and unpaid family labor, as seen in Table 16 (PHC,2015, pp.8).

**Table 16: Population, Aged 10+, (%)**

Labor Force Category	2005	2015
Unemployed	1	2.1
Paid Employee and Employer	12	18.8
<b>Own Account Workers</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Unpaid Family Works</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42.1</b>

Source: PHC, 2015, p. 8

According to the results from the Population and Housing Survey 2015 on the total labor force, although the rate of unemployment has increased from 1% in 2005 to 2.1% in 2015, the rate was low compared with neighboring countries of Thailand, which was at 1.15% (Trade Economic Thailand, 2019), and Vietnam at 2.17% (Trade Economic Vietnam, 2019). However, the majority of the Lao labor force was categorized as ‘**family workers**’ or workers who do not receive any fixed compensation for work done, which accounted for 37%, and 42.1% as ‘**own account worker**’ which are cases where an individual operates an economic activity without being a regularly paid employee (PHC, 2015, pp.78). Given the unstable income, how do these people handle the necessities in their everyday life will be focused in this chapter.

## **I. State's centralization: The local administration**

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) started ruling Laos in 1975. The President is the head of the party, and there were ten Politburo members drawn from sixty-nine members of the party's Central Committee elected at the Party Congress, which is held every five years. The LPRP maintains memberships of 191,700 members<sup>30</sup>. Branches of the Party are organized in a hierarchical fashion starting from the villages, rising through the districts and the provinces, and culminating at the uppermost central level. Administratively, Laos is comprised of 17 provinces and the municipality of Vientiane (see table 17). Each province and the municipality of Vientiane have the same three-tiered levels of organization – the provincial,

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<sup>30</sup> See Lao National Assembly 2017

the district, and the village. In total, there are 148 districts with an average population in each district of 43,866 people, or 6,492,228 people (PHC, 2015, p.100). Under Article 2: Local administration, is the state administration at the local level, its role is to manage the territory, natural resources and population in order to preserve and develop into a modern, civil and prosperous society. Stated in Article 4: Authority and Duties, defines that each local administration is to supervise the organizations under its responsibility and that the village level<sup>31</sup> is the implementing sector for the allocating of policies from the central level (Law on Local Administration no.60/Po, November 2003).

Table 17: Number of Districts and Average Population of Districts by Province 2015

Province	Number of Districts	Total Population	Average Population of Districts
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>6,492,228</b>	<b>43,866</b>
Vientiane Capital	9	820,940	91,216
Phongsaly	7	177,989	25,427
Luangnamtha	5	175,753	35,151
Oudomxay	7	307,622	43,946
Bokeo	5	179,243	35,849
Luangprabang	12	431,889	35,991
Huaphanh	10	289,393	28,939
Xayabury	11	381,376	34,671
Xienkhuang	7	244,684	34,955
Vientiane Province	11	419,090	38,099
Borikhamxay	7	273,691	39,099
Khammuane	10	392,052	39,205
Savannakhet	15	969,697	64,646
Saravane	8	396,942	49,618
Sekong	4	113,048	28,262
Champasack	10	694,023	69,402
Attapeu	5	139,628	27,926
Xaysomboun	5	85,168	17,034

Source: PHC 2015, p.100

Whether the local authority is a competent institution or not, there is a need to explore its historical background, especially during the French colonial administration, who initiated the administration system in Laos. Also, it is important to spot available infrastructure at the village level in order to evaluate the claims of Laos being a ‘modern state’, aiming to uncover

<sup>31</sup> In the whole country and 8,507 villages (PHC, 2015, p.24)

the state's existence at the village level.

## **II. Historical background of the local administration**

Before the arrival of the French (1893), Laos was composed of three separate kingdoms (Luangprabang, Vientiane, and Champasack). A king's influence on their people was limited only within a kingdom's boundary (Stuart Fox, 1997). At the end of the 19th century, the three kingdoms were retaining the status of tributary kingdoms of Siam. When the French came in, the royal structure was maintained to aide with the French in ruling each kingdom. The central government was narrowly concentrated in the cities of Vientiane, Luangprabang and Champasack. The state's presence at the time was limited to the top people who were the French, the Vietnamese staff who were brought in by the French, and the Lao elites who were made up of approximately 200 families (Stuart Fox, 1997). The Lao elites, who mostly from the aristocrats and first received their education in French schools in Hanoi, Saigon or France, where taught little about Laos, but rather, were steeped in a celebratory view of French nationalism (Evans, 2012, p.83).

Attempts to reach the majority of Laotians in rural Laos did not happen. There was no substantial reform to reach the villagers from the French colonial rule besides setting down the village administration structure on paper. Previously, this level of administration, although not registered, did exist. The village head had been supervising the villagers actively before and after the French arrival.

The French were not interested in making a profound revolution on the village level in Laos, unlike in Vietnam, where lots of intervention was done. Although the French divided Vietnam into three parts (Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina) to incorporate in Indochina, the three parts were ruled under one core power of the colonial administration rule, while the three kingdoms of Laos received orders and influence from the French separately. This partly explains why it was more challenging to turn Laos, which was under a system called 'two-three lord' by Grant Evans, into a systematic administration like Vietnam, which had only 'one lord.'

The French did not try to involve the Lao people into nation-building until the 1940s, when they saw the need to build a sense of belonging of the Lao people. Under the 'civilization programme' or civilization program, the Lao people needed to be made to feel that they belonged to Laos and to were Frenchmen, not to be made to feel as if they belonged to Thailand. However, this effort could be seen only in the city, not in suburban or rural areas. Therefore, it ended up creating a cultural gap between the urban areas and the countryside. In the city, the people looked up to the French and Paris as a sophisticated urban milieu that gave the nation the appearance of being more developed and 'civilized,' while the rest of the people were living by themselves under subsistence farming, isolated from the state's activities in the urban areas, due to the limited investment in the country's infrastructure, including roads and bridges.

The French administration in Laos did not expand even to the district level. Unlike in Vietnam, where the French officers were deployed to run the district administration and to apply consistent reforms for more than 20 years in the villages.

In Vietnam, the reform kept being implemented and adjusted until it was able to take root uniformly in village administrations throughout the country. It started with the introduction of the electoral principle with the hope to recruit the 'new intellectuals.' It did not go as expected, since there were villagers who wanted to be elected who were already in better off positions financially, and they even went so far as to literally buy votes. In 1927, a new attempt was introduced, the 'new intellectual' or young educated officials were added to the village council, and the traditional notable or traditional ruling class was assigned to be the consultant. Still, it did not go as planned; the new intellectual failed to balance the power with the traditional. Again, in 1941, the French decided to stop the election system, in what can be called 'a return to the tradition,' in which leaders are not elected, but rather are placed in power by placing the 'new notables' (those who received education from the new educational system, and held positions in the colonial army or bureaucracy) seated next to the 'traditional notables.' This finally led to a positive outcome, leading to the setting up of a 'qualified village' (Benedict J, 2004, p.68-71). Considering the many attempts to control the villages in Vietnam, not much happened in Laos.

The Lao villagers have always relied on a traditional administrative system. Although a more systematic 'village administration' was introduced by the French, in reality the villagers

had long had their own way of cooperating with each other under a native leader, usually those who were large land owners, or what Grant Evans called a form of 'Patrol-Client', not a rule-governed bureaucracy, that in theory applied itself evenly and impersonally everywhere (Evans, 2012, p.55-60). The people knew little about the state, even in the later 1950s, the Crown Prince and King were virtually unknown to villagers a few score miles from the royal capital (Information and Attitudes in Laos, 1959, P.35). On the other hand, the state also knew little about its people. One of the first Lao students who went to study in France had an observation in one region in the south, sounding surprised, he pointed out that "*these people have different customs..., their local speech consists of many languages which are not French, and people use their local languages to talk to one another*" (S.P.Nginn, 1971, Vientiane, p.20).

Although the state was trying to set a tax system in Laos to secure the colonial budget by setting a head tax system, they were not able to collect tax effectively, at most they received it in a lump sum, but most of the time it was delayed and unreliable. Finally, the colonial budget had to rely on the sale of opium instead. One reason that the French failed to tax the Lao people was that they were relying on the village head to do the tax collection, however, without close guidance and training for the officials on tax collection, the village failed to do the job. In fact, the French had not done any reform at the village administration level to become more systematic, or to be functional. Unlike the case of Vietnam, where the village administration received consistent reforms from the French officials. As recorded by Benedict that after the reform at the village level, the Vietnamese villagers could be taxed individually, it had eventually changed to a head tax, then to income tax (head tax and land tax), and tax collection could give a positive outcome (Benedict J., 2004, p.68-72). Similar to the Corvée system (a line of laborers pounding road) in Vietnam, while it could be reproduced again and again. In Laos, the French could not get it going. Besides, the inefficiency of the system finally began to give way to pay labor in the 1930s (Evans, 2012, p.60-63).

More than failing to set a tax system for national financial security, economic development during the French barely existed. For more than 40 years under the French colonial rule, there was still no industry, except for two relatively small French-owned mines near Thakhek (in southern Laos), where there were employed around 3,000 Vietnamese workers, and commercial plantations (coffee and tobacco) on 300ha of land operated by some French planters. (Evans, 2012, p.58).



Moreover, delayed state sponsored education by the French has also been criticized by different scholars, including Noonan, Grant Evans and others, as the cause of distance between the state and the people. The state failed to educate the people to create in them a sense of nationalism and a feeling that the state existed in their lives. The majority of people relied on the pagoda schools up until the 1930s. The temple education was directly related to morality and the teachings of the Buddha, and such education created more of a sense of a shared identity as Buddhists than of a shared identity of being Laotian. Also, this system had the effect of largely excluding non-Buddhist minorities from education (Noonan, 2011, pp.2). The recognition of the importance of education for nation-building was shown only after 1940, by the fact that between 1940 and 1945, more schools were built in Laos than had been made in the preceding 40 years (Evans, 2012, pp.89). Regardless of investment by the French, not many Lao people felt the need for sending their children to school. From 1939 to 1944, the number of primary schools increased from 92 to 163 schools, yet the school enrolment rate remained low, 4.6% in 1944 (Lahmyer, 2002). Euthrope, a French official gave the reason for the low school enrolment, saying in 1937 that it was because of a lack of understanding of the role of education by the parents, "*one of the main obstacles to the diffusion of education was the failure of Lao parents to understand the absolute necessity in modern conditions of giving their children a solid education, at least to primary level. It is up to Lao families to use all their influence to send their children to our schools to follow the instruction there assiduously*". However, since only in the 1940s did funds become freely available for education, the Lao could legitimately complain that it was too little late, as argued by Evans (Evans, 2012, pp.57). The schools were where young Lao were introduced to national symbols, such as maps of Laos, and the national flag, but only a few Laos could get access. Therefore, for the rest of the people, there was no clear sense of boundaries among the Lao population, the people in the rural area e.g., those living along the Mekong River, had a close interaction with the Thai people (Frank M., 1960, p.39, Joel M. and Marilyn, 1966, pp.500). Laos and Thailand share similarities e.g., as wet-rice farmers, speakers of similar language, and practices of the same religion - 'Theravada Buddhism.' Since there were no official documents required to commute between the two countries, the people often attended temple festivals and visited relatives freely across borders. "*Besides, Buddhist education related to a religious space, a space traced by pilgrimages that overlapped into Siam (Thailand) in particular, and did not conform to the new boundaries space of Laos.*" (Evans, 2012, p.81). Therefore, creating a sense of belonging

to Laos for the Lao people was another challenging task for the French. Thus, a Lao language newspaper began publication in January 1941, the Lao Nyai, or 'Great Laos', which had issues twice a week and was intended to build a sense of national identity in the Lao people. Still, it was concentrated among already literate people, who were mainly living in the urban areas (Evans, 2012, p.89).

In the 1950s, the French' influence over the Lao state or the Royal Lao Government was replaced by the US through the US economic cooperation program and other various aid programs. The government heavily relied on the USAID to maintain the existing infrastructure, economy, and administrative bodies. The problem was that the one-way flow of the US development aid had freed rural communities from any obligation towards the central government and any expectation in return. Elimination of the responsibilities of rural communities to contribute to the state only weakened state authority (Stuart, 1997, p.130).

It is noteworthy that while people on the top were fighting, the majority of the people were living far away by themselves. A survey in the late 1950s demonstrated that the name of the late king of LuangPrabang, who had ruled for 56 years, was known by a relatively small proportion of the population. Only 34% of the population interviewed in the capital city knew the name of the king, 32% in the provincial capitals and 19% in the village sampled (Washington, D.C, Bureau of Social Science Research, 1959, pp.35) At the same time, the Crown Prince and present King were virtually unknown to villagers a few miles from the royal capital (Joel M. Halpern and Marilyn Clark Tinsman, pp.506). For the whole country, "a public opinion poll conducted in the mid-1950s suggested that at that time less than half the population knew the name of their country" (Clement Johnson, 1095, pp.11). Damage from the civil war happened only where the war took place, in Vientiane, Luangprabang, Xiengkhuang where the base of the Pathet Lao was, and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail where the conflict between the North Vietnamese and US armies was. The rest of the people survived the war under their traditional way of living, supervised by their local authority, free from state intervention and obligation, including taxation.

Peter and Sanda Simms who lived in Southeast Asia and some time in Laos during 1955-1973, wrote about the way of living of the 'Tai' including Lao and Thai people in 'The kingdom of Laos' published in 1999. "*The year was divided into two natural periods: the*

*months of hard work, planting and harvesting, and the rest of the year that could be given up to more pleasant things. In the relatively free months, visits could be made to distant relatives if some members of a family felt like a change, they would pack up a few presents and be away from their village for days, even weeks, at a time. In this way, even though relatives lived in Muongs (districts) that were quite far apart, they could still keep in touch. Out of these relatively frequent contacts, a cohesion pervaded the system of Muongs (Districts) and of the Tai people as a whole. This was to be an inheritance that was preserved until recent times".* Their observation resembles the case of one of the research informants, Grandma N (shown in Chapters 1 and 3). During the civil war, Grandma N was running her restaurant and retail shop, often traveling to visit relatives or to buy goods in Thailand and Vietnam. Before and after the war, her family was not influenced by what the top people were doing. The authors further explained how accessible the neighboring countries and Laos was, *"in those days, there were no hard and fast frontier lines. One state merged into another, often with a neutral area between, where sometimes the villages, or even quite large towns, paid tribute to two rulers. There was, therefore, no difficulty in crossing from one kingdom to another. All rulers encouraged trade, and with it, the free movement of people"* (Peter and Sanda Simms, 1999, pp.3). Even during the civil war, the time to design the fate of the country, there was no room for the state's existence in the mind of the majority Lao, the boundaries of Laos were drawn only within the Vientiane capital, not the rest of the country.

Since 1975, there had been attempts to replace the lone village leader with commitments and specialized functional positions. The local administration or the local authority worked on behalf of the state administration at the local level, to manage the territory, natural resources and population in order to preserve and develop into a modern, civil and prosperous society. Together with the reform, cooperative agriculture and taxing of crops were introduced as tools to involve the villagers in the national economic development. For many people, this was the first time that they had received direct interaction with the state. The state's program was responded to by the people; however, only in the beginning.

### III. Local administration in practice: Case of PakNgum

In order to understand the picture of the villages in Laos and the local administration, the real situation of village administration operating at the villages in PakNgum will be explored. The Village Administration consisted of one village head and two deputies (With a salary of roughly USD20 per month). Usually, ten more staff were recruited as volunteers by the village heads. The majority of the staff had the educational background of the secondary school level. Their duties at the village were considerably large, cover all development sectors. As mentioned in article 53 of the local authority law, the head of the village is "to disseminate the government policies and laws to maintain the peace, security, to promote good national traditions and cultures, health and education." Since the allocated tasks' details are not specified, the village heads are left with a high level of freedom to interpret and implement the state policies. Moreover, there is not much interaction between the village and the district level, less with the provincial level and the central government. Roughly speaking, the village administration was implementing the state's orders and policies on a highly personal level. Villages administration in PakNgum District (Table 18) will be examined and serve as an example to see the link of communication between the village and the central government. The actual situation of the village life will also be explored to spot the unmet needs of the villagers following the state's policies.

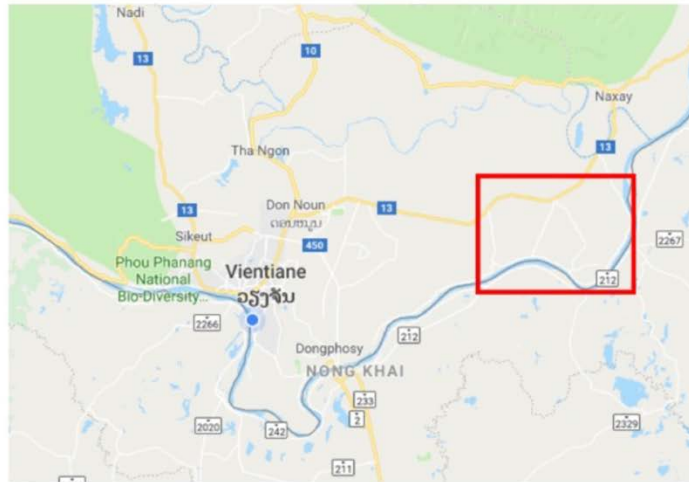
**Table 18: Total population and proportion of the population living in urban and rural areas by Province and District**

Province/District	Population				Percent			
	Total	Urban	Rural with road	Rural without road	Total	Urban	Rural with road	Rural without road
Lao PDR	6,492,228	2,137,831	3,841,565	512,832	100.0	32.9	59.2	7.9
Vientiane Capital	820,940	639,601	180,726	613	100.0	77.9	22.0	0.1
Chanthabuly	69,187	69,187	-	-	100.0	100.0	-	-
Sikhottabong	120,999	114,704	6,295	-	100.0	94.8	5.2	-
Xaysetha	116,920	116,920	-	-	100.0	100.0	-	-
Sisattanak	65,712	65,712	-	-	100.0	100.0	-	-
Naxaithong	75,228	36,184	39,044	-	100.0	48.1	51.9	-
Xaythany	196,565	131,317	65,248	-	100.0	66.8	33.2	-
Hadxaifong	97,609	86,133	11,476	-	100.0	88.2	11.8	-
Sangthong	29,509	5,962	23,065	482	100.0	20.2	78.2	1.6
pakngum	49,211	13,482	35,598	131	100.0	27.4	72.3	0.3

Source: PHC 2015, p.100

PakNgum district is located in the eastern part of the Vientiane capital city of Laos, approximately 67 Km far from the city center (Map 6)

**Map 6: Location of PakNgum (Marked within the red box area)**



Source: Google maps, accessed in June 2018

Although PakNgum is not far from the center, its GDP per capita (USD988) is very different from the four central districts who have an average GDP per capita of roughly USD6000 per year (Jetro, 2016). The district has a population of 49,211 people or 9660 households in 47 villages in an area of 980 Km<sup>2</sup> (PakNgum District Bureau Report, 2015). The district is an ethnically diverse area with the majority of the population engaged in rice farming. Most parts of the district share their borders with Thailand, making for the PakNgum people a high level of accessibility to engage in activities in Thailand. Given this introduction, there are three main characteristics to point out to form an overall picture of the district.

First, the district has a ‘behind’ stage of economic development. The majority of the people are subsistent farmers, relying on rice growing, which they can do only one season per year; raising livestock, but not many can raise cows, which is the most profitable, since there is not enough grass and it requires too much capital to do so (one cow costs around 1000,000 kip or USD120); picking forest products such as bamboo and mushrooms is always the people’s primary source of food security; growing vegetable and some surplus of rice that can be sold to meet with cash needs; other things people can do for more income are doing menial jobs. Nevertheless, jobs are very limited in the district. In total, there are 794 jobs (for 49,211

PakNgum people in total), one-third of the jobs are taken by foreign workers (Vietnamese and Chinese) working in factories (glasses, crayons, tapioca, and wood processing factories). Therefore, migrating to Thailand is usually the people's option to gain some cash income. Furthermore, there is no local product in the district, it used to be rice that could bring some revenue to the town but since the majority of people produce just enough, and due to the smaller land each household has now<sup>32</sup>, the amount of rice is therefore decreasing, so others products (including pork, fish and other consumer goods like soap and detergent) at the market are all imported from Thailand.<sup>33</sup>

The second observation is that people's economic activities stay within the household level, 90% of rice production is for household consumption, money flowing through farming and daily life activities goes at farthest to the district level and usually stays within the boundaries of the village level.

Third, the villagers rely on a group of individuals, and the village administration to help with things such as labor-exchange, land sharing to raise big animals and lending resources for each other. The local authority or village head is responsible for giving people advice, hosting social events, religious practices, solving a family's internal conflicts and implementing development work from the central government that includes the management work and hardware work like building infrastructure, i.e., bridges and roads. It illustrates a closed relationship between the people and the village administration.

## **1. A multi-tasking village administration**

According to the fieldwork at three village administrations (Natarm, Koksa, and MarkNao) at PakNgum District, the administrations are made up of one head of the village and two deputies and some local volunteers which consist, on average, of ten people in each village. Their tasks are divided into eight main categories:

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<sup>32</sup> Inherited land is divided among siblings equally, the farmland is becoming smaller

<sup>33</sup> Information from PakNgum District Bureau Report 2015 and interviews with the district staff and heads of villages from three villages in PakNgum

**Constitution, law:** The head of the village serves as the judge of local conflict and the announcer of laws, decrees, and rules assigned by the district bureau.

**Economic Development:** The village administration should guide the villagers to follow the socio-economic development plans designed by the central government level, such as the Saving group and One District One Product (ODOP).

**Health:** There is one hospital in PakNgum District, no local clinics at the village level, the village office only provides people necessary hygienic information, and warnings when needed, e.g., the spread of disease and disease prevention announcements.

**Security:** Each village has its own voluntary security force, patrolling day and night and sometimes providing security at important events, e.g., temple festivals and social ceremonies of the villagers.

**National traditions and cultural activities:** The head of the village is the key person organizing and overseeing social events (e.g., births, deaths and festivals at the temple) from planning, to gathering resources and labor forces from the villagers.

**Finance:** The village needs to secure its budget for its operation, usually through fundraising from the villagers, mainly from large landowners and business owners.

**Mass Organization (youth, women):** An organization works to recruit more members. These members are educated with the socialist ideology and are encouraged to work and be members of the workforce (laborers) for community services, contributing not only to village activities' events but also to infrastructure building, maintaining and fixing the roads, school buildings, village offices, etc.

**Education:** Village administration has the responsibility for supporting the schools, for example, gathering contributions from villagers (cash, materials, or labor). The sector is quite useful and can respond to the principals' needs on time. Its role became more recognized in 2008 when the government set up the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) to link it with the District Education Bureau.

The mentioned tasks required specific and intense commitment from the village officials, which is interesting to note, as the officials are doing the work only as their part-time jobs. Besides working for the village administration, the officials' full-time jobs include rice farming, raising livestock, and running a small business such as selling vegetables, weaving,

running a barbershop, etc. Unsurprisingly, the officials never stay at the office unless there is a meeting. Thus, when needed, the villagers will find them at their houses, their farms or their shops.

In order to grasp a clearer picture of these villages, the situation of Koksa village administration will be examined. The majority of the people in Koksa village have an average land ownership of 2-3ha. Although having a big enough size of land, the farmers here can grow rice only once a year. If they want to do more rice farming in order to have a surplus, these people have to rent land in other villages. Other jobs of the people in Koksa are weaving, gardening, and raising livestock. However, due to the lack of water in the village, it is complicated to raise big animals like cows, although it is very profitable, only 3 out of 404 households raise cows. Jobs for immediate income are quite limited since there is only one small factory in the village, producing alcohol (employing 9-10 labors). Below is the profile of the head of Koksa village and some of his thoughts:

Mr. Keo Phimmason, the head of the village, graduated from lower secondary school. After finishing lower secondary school, he started working for Koksa village for more than 20 years, until 2014 when he became the village head. As mentioned earlier, the village administration takes care of many development tasks, including culture, defense, health, financial management, and education. Among these, the biggest concern for Mr.Keo is the weak economy of the village. Farmers can only grow rice once a year, rice production is decreasing, and there has never been a fixed price for rice, the middleman is the one who sets the price, and sometimes villagers can only sell at a meager price, which discourages them from producing a surplus for sale. His other concern is that the limited jobs in the village, with only one the small alcohol factory that hires 9-10 laborers. According to Mr. Keo, the most time-intensive activities of the village administration are to be the co-host of social events such as weddings, funerals, births, and other traditional ceremonies. They need to gather contributions from the villagers, both labor and resources. Mr. Keo and the staff confirmed that they are always willing to participate in economic development works, and they wish the life of the villagers would get better, such as through the creation of jobs and new ways to earn money. However, since none of the staff has experience in business management, and are even worse



on technical aspects, they can only do their best delivering the message and aims of policies such as One District One Product (ODOP), Saving group and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the villagers to encourage them to participate. Besides the village work, since the village head and other officers receive a low salary (USD20 per month) nowhere near the minimal requirement for the family consumption, they, therefore, do other jobs. For example, Mr. Keo works as a hairdresser while doing rice farming during the farming season.

Another example is the situation of Natarm village, which is located in the middle of the PakNgum District, situated 1 Km away from the main road. The center of the village has a school, temple, and villagers' houses, and the outskirts consist of the villagers' gardens, common ponds, and rice fields. Alternatives besides farming is raising livestock, such as pigs and cows. At Natarm, luckily there is a big pond for fishing and getting access to water, and the village head assigned the villagers to have their own pond. Because of this, it is possible for many households to raise cows for sale. Another option is to do menial jobs. Menial work in Natarm is mostly in the form of working as construction workers, boiling rubber trees and in a crayon factory. These factories recruit from five to seven labors, with a wage ranging from 35000 to 80000 kip or 5 to USD11 per day. Working elsewhere is also the option such as in the Vientiane capital and in Thailand, where they have more job opportunities and higher wages. Crossing the river to Thailand for a higher wage has been among the most popular options for the people in PakNgum District, (see Table 19).

Table 19: Comparison of wage in PakNgum, Vientiane Capital and Thailand

Location	PakNgum	Vientiane Capital	Thailand
Job – Wage - Experiences & Conditions	<b>Construction Worker</b> \$7/day Not often	<b>Construction Worker</b> \$10/day Away from home for a long time and high cost of living	<b>Construction Worker</b> \$15/day Physically strong
	<b>Boil rubber tree</b> \$3/day temporary work	<b>Garment Factory</b> \$6/day Temporary work	<b>Garment Factory</b> \$9/day Long hour working standing
	<b>Crayon Factory</b> \$6/day Might be bad for health	<b>Tabaco factory</b> \$6/day Difficult to get in Need to have experience	<b>Food Process Factory</b> \$4/Kg Usually go as a group to meet the goal the factory wants
	<b>Other Menial works</b> \$6/day Difficult to find Not regular	<b>Other Menial works</b> \$7/day Difficult to find Not regular High cost of living	<b>Sugar Can Farm</b> \$9/day Far away from the city, spend more on transportation to come to stamp a passport
<b>Wage range</b>	<b>\$3-7/day</b>	<b>\$6-\$10/day</b>	<b>\$8-15/day</b>

Source: Fieldwork interview in 2016

Industrialized agriculture is still new to the village. CP pig farm from Thailand did try to encourage Natarm villagers to invest. With the same amount of land, the villagers can make more profit. The only requirement is that the farmer needs to have a capital to build a specific cage for the pigs. After four months, the company would come to collect the pigs and pay USD0.10 per Kg. For 600 pigs, villagers can earn up to USD4000. In Natarm Village, only Mr. Lar, the head of the village could afford to do this type of farming. He does so with his savings and some money sent by his daughter from abroad. He said that *"he never thought of doing business before, but the idea of CP was convincing because they have a solid system, and the deal is appealing..."*. From August 2016, he had already sold pigs for two rounds.

Table 20: Comparing between village pigs and CP pigs farm

Investing	Village pigs	CP pigs
Size of land	0.5 Hectares	0.5 Hectares
Amount of pig	2-5 pigs	600 pigs
Labor force	1-2 person	2 persons
Investment (Cage)	0	\$35,000
Pigs Food and piglets	Nature	CP
Length of producing	2 years	4 months
Purpose	Household Consumption	Sale
Price	\$1.5/Kg	\$0.1/Kg
Market	Local meat brokers	CP - Thailand
Profit	-	4000\$ / 4 months

Source: Fieldwork interview in 2016

The CP farm system may bring more benefits to the people, as shown in Mr. Lar's case. However, not everyone can invest in the farm but, rather count on their rice fields and some other opportunities, from which there are three key policies to boost up economic performance at the village level. First, the Saving Group, which was introduced in 2002, was a project that had proven to be successful in Thailand before, as it had given capital for the local people to invest in their pre-production, it allows farmers to produce more for more money. In Laos, the program is under the women's union. Each member needs to put in money monthly. In the first two years, it was very active. Each member deposited 100,000 kip or USD15 per month, later the deposit amount got decreased to USD1 – USD2 per month. Members are eligible to borrow the money to invest up to a maximum 10,000,000 kip or USD1200 for the case of Koksa Village. It is acceptable to ask for a loan without a strong business plan, nor there is any technical official to consult on it. As a result, the people do not borrow money to invest, but to spend on food, utility, and some time for festival-related matters. The usage did not match with the initial intention. The problem was that they had no means to pay back the debt. When this

happened, it created a disruption to the whole system, and therefore, led the project to close down. It is important to note that, although the local authority adopted the policy from the central government, it was adjusted to fit with the local's needs and their ability to manage. A similar case happened in Natarm, where there was no fixed amount of loan and deposit, the head of the village decided who could borrow what amount, admitted by Mr. Lar Natarm head of the village. He further mentioned that it was difficult to get the money back so they had to stop the program.

The other policy is ODOP that started around 2008. The policy has proved to be quite successful in Thailand and Japan. The main sponsor of the project is JICA. The Japanese staff and some Thai staff came to introduce the steps to make products. However, they stayed only at the district level and only in some places. At the village level, for example in Koksa and Natarm village, the village heads received guidance and instruction from district officials. In the beginning, the villagers expressed interest in establishing a local product, after some trial and facing difficulties such as preservation techniques packaging, marketing and capital to invest; the people started to lose interest. Mr. Keo and Mr. Lar commented about the policy that there were no personnel from the district to guide the activity and it was impossible to do it, "*without idea, techniques on how to preserve food, material for packaging and leaders to guide the villagers, we could not do it and this is the reason nothing came out of the project*". Mr. Lar further reported that he does not think his village has anything to sell unlike his neighbor, Takkohai Village where they have always been famous for weaving, Takkohai village just turned their products into ODOP's products. However, he said, unenthusiastically, basically the villagers received the same amount of money that they used to earn since they do not have any knowledge on how to scale their business.

Finally, the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), was introduced in 2005, and its appearance came to PakNgum in 2011. FDI is known through the Contract Farming form of investment. Contract farming is claimed to be one way for small-scale farmers to fully participate in the market economy in the era of market liberalization. Models to facilitate FDI in agriculture were introduced by the central government. One is 2+3 (2: land<sup>34</sup>, labor + 3: cash, technique, market) and another is 1+4 (1: land + 4: labor, cash, technic, market). At the national level, it brought a positive outcome, FDI in agriculture has been increased sharply, 2006-2014:

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<sup>34</sup>Land can be rented for 30 years (Land Law, article 65).

approx. USD2.7 billion as opposed to 1988-2005: approx. USD330 million. At PakNgum, there have been some activities, e.g., selling forestry products, especially mushrooms and rice, cassava factory and land renting for mass production of bananas.<sup>35</sup> The Tapioca Factory, for example, opened up in 2011 but shortly, unfortunately, closed down in 2013 leaving a massive debt to the people.

The Tapioca Factory encouraged the villagers to grow cassava with the promise to buy all the products. There was no problem in the first two years, but later, although the factory accepted the product, they were not able to pay the people. The total debt that the factory owed the people accumulated to more than USD3 million when the factory declared bankruptcy. Since 2014, the people have sued the factory, but at the time of writing there has still not been any judgment. To cope with the debt issue, the villagers chose to migrate to work in Thailand, "*one way to pay back the debt is to go to work in Thailand*," noted the Natarm Village Head. The experience of the cassava plantations led people to rent out their land instead of investing in it to avoid the risk of losing money. Currently, the foreign investors are renting some of the lands for banana farming for 1,400,000 kip or USD200 per ha per year. This has not been providing many job opportunities to the local villagers. One farm can hire only five to six people for a week in each season. What is more, the chemical used in the farms is known for being toxic. For example, in Ban Hai during the chemical spraying time, cows and fish have died. Due to the incident, the head of the village has to watch out and warn the people not to let their cows go near the farm and for people not to fish. When asking where do they think the chemicals go, and if they think it will evaporate or disappear, they said they do not know, but they think it can go with the water flow, and that's why they need to wait for it to be rinsed away before they return to fishing. In 2016, the central government finally banned the activity, but it was too late, and as a consequence, the areas where they used to plant banana trees are now no longer arable, and the villagers cannot grow anything. It was roughly estimated that at least 200 households were affected. Moreover, it was even worse to find out that some areas such as Ban Natarm still keep growing bananas, ignoring the state ban<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>The investors are mostly Chinese.

<sup>36</sup> A recent visit to Natarm Village in November 2018

Because microeconomic development has been failing, people are still continuing in their old ways of production. The concerns of household income are based on doing menial jobs that very unstable due to limited chances in the district. Thus, securing the means for household consumption (farming, menial work) is still the people's priority. During the busy times, such as the rice harvesting period, farmers will need labor forces, including their neighbors and children. Unlike children in the cities, children in the rural area have to provide the labor force in farming, looking after younger siblings, giving parents company and can even be financially independent by doing some menial jobs. Some descriptions of Poupey's family will show how the household economy in Koksa village operates.

Poupey is 12 years old, and left primary school when she was ten years old (grade 3). Her daily life centers around her younger sister, who is three years old, her parents and her grandmother. Poupey is acting in an adult role in the family; she always gives company to her parents and grandmother, picks vegetables and goods in the forest, takes care of all her younger siblings, does housework not only for her own house but also for a relative's house and takes care of their errands, e.g., going to the market, buying gas, in return she receives some tip. Poupey does not want to resume school since she wants to help her parents taking care of work in daily life, and she can also earn money for herself.

Poupey's mother also left her school when she was in grade 5 (13 years old), and went to Thailand with her mother. There she worked on a fruit farm for three months, then she returned to the village for one year and then went back to Thailand again to work at a restaurant for a year. Then she returned to get married, gave birth to Poupey, and went again to Thailand with her husband for a year and then returned to build a house. Nowadays, going to Thailand has become more complicated due to stricter legal processes. Thus, she focuses more on growing rice, but since her mother sold their rice field, she is now renting land to farm, and 30% of what she produces must be paid for rent. For side jobs, she does some fabric weaving to sell. Her husband does some menial jobs as well, mainly as a worker on other people's farms, e.g., rice fields where he could procure work only during the busy times, which can be from 10 days to one month. The family also raises livestock to use in an emergency.

Daeng, Poupey's grandmother, sold the rice field to city people. The

reason was that she was in debt. She borrowed money for 500,000 kip or USD70 and accepted to pay interest of 10% per month. She could not earn money to return the debt on time. Thus, she decided to sell her rice field. What to note here is that 10% of interest per month is illegal, but she never questioned it. The villagers are used to working things out by themselves, or relying on their neighbors. Such as in the cultivating time in November, she will ask the neighbors to help out, and in return, she gives them a portion of the production. Every day, Daeng will go out to look for food in the forest with either her granddaughter Poupey, or with the other villagers.

The example of Poupey's family illustrates a certain level of autonomy that people have. When examining the villagers' daily life, it shows that they have strong ties to their neighbors. The villagers are following similar daily activities and making use of resources that are available to them.

The sense of community in PakNgum is not only found in the sharing of farm work, but also in the shared beliefs, the 'similar language' through face to face interaction, and the mutual-help in traditional ceremonies, e.g., weddings, births, and funerals. Here in the village, we help each other, was something mentioned many times by Mr. Keo (Koksa Village Head). For example, to organize a funeral, the village office will give money to the house first so that they can purchase necessary things for the ceremony, and later the village officials will collect money from the other villagers.

The village administration assigns different jobs to the villagers to assure the 'stability' of the village. The villagers are very cooperative with the village's work. Every day, information from the office is spread to the people through the speaker. Meetings are organized twice a month to go over topics like security, cleaning, public building maintenance; and organizing festivals: religious ceremonies and funerals. At the meetings, the officials will always seek villager participation and more importantly, their agreement.

The mutual aid function in rural communities plays complementary roles for social security. In the healthcare sector, people in PakNgum barely have national health insurance, and none of the villagers in Koksa and Natarm have health insurance. When the villagers need to spend on health-related matters, they either sell their livestock or ask for help from their relatives and neighbors. For health-related information, besides the hospital, they also ask the

village head for information, and many prefer to buy themselves medicine, for example, anti-biotic and Paracetamol (for infection and painkilling). Although the village head has encouraged the villagers to register for the national health insurance, the village head at Natarm said that *"we did tell the villagers, but it cost too much for them, even us, we do not have it."* Some even prefer to utilize superstitious folk healing remedies over modern medical practices.

Health insurance is not the only thing that the village administration and villagers manage on their own. There are other sectors e.g., finance, economy, defense, agriculture, welfare, and education, although on a voluntary basis and highly impersonal level, but they are quite efficient, and the response is matched with what is available at the village level and the staff's ability. These social securities, in theory, should be provided by the state, the provider of policies and services to individual citizens, and in return, the individual citizens need to pay taxes and follow the state orders as a duty. In reality, the local authority and the people nourish each other, without the existence of the state. Unlike with services from the state, villagers have seen how they have benefited in the past as a member of the village, therefore they feel a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the village and respond to the village's requests, as shown in Table 21.

**Table 21: the existence of the state at the local level: Services and Policies**

State - Individuals	Services and Policies	Village Admin.- Individuals
△	Development work: health, agriculture (farming), economy, infrastructure and education	O
×	Social welfare: deaths, births and weddings	O
×	Contingency: danger, natural disasters	O
△	Duties and Contributions e.g. Taxes and voting	O
× Non-Existent    △ Limited Availability    O Available		

Source: composed by the author

Table 21 shows that there are no services from the state at the village level, thus there is no connection between them, e.g., development work, social welfare, and contingency



matters. As a result, there is no sense of obligation from the villagers towards the state, including paying taxes and voting during elections. On the other hand, similar services and obligations are exchanged between the village administration and the villagers quite actively.

Through regular face to face interactions with people with similar daily routines, the village administration officials and the villagers enable a close relationship with each other, and can respond to each side's demand accordingly. The state or even district authority is considered to be too far off, and seen as barely supporting the villagers' needs. For development works including health, agriculture, economy, infrastructure, and education, the village authority is the main unit to implement the orders of the state, which is always in the form of official documents, not in terms of regular hands-on guidance, and most of the time the support is inadequate. Clearly, in important aspects of life, such as important ceremonies (deaths and births), the village officials are always there to help the villagers out. The central and district level did not have any social welfare arrangements for such matters, and besides, the villagers rarely have health insurance. At the same time, people are also not expecting authorities at a higher level to do anything. Without regular interaction with the state, in time of contingency, the village does not expect assistance from the central level, and they are accustomed to managing things by themselves under the guidance of the village head.

As a result, the villagers follow their duties to the village, and contribute to the village demands. When it comes to following the state or give contributions at other levels, such as through paying taxes, without receiving any services from the state, the villagers are debating and trying to avoid it. "*We prefer to pay 'social tax'*" generally mentioned by many of the interviewees, referring to the contribution they give to the wedding, birth, funeral ceremonies, and traditional festivals which they will also benefit from when their turn comes. When examining more about the taxing system at the village level, although tax is supposed to be collected individually, until now each village pays a certain amount, which was assessed internally. There were types of land tax on different kinds of land, e.g., farms, rice fields, empty lands, and houses. For example, in Natarm village, PakNgum district land tax could be collected from around 200 out of 315 landowners, and none of the villagers have to pay for the income tax. However, businesses do need to pay business tax (e.g., small shops, restaurants, tractor owners).

When asking another obligation of the people, especially voting for representation to in parliament, the Natarm village head, Mr. Lar, said that "*they were not that excited about the election, only if we, the village officials, encouraged them to go to vote, would some follow. Still, there are only around 20 to 30 out of more than 200 eligible people who vote*". The way the statement was made, it did not seem as if felt guilty or embarrassed that the village could not gather more villagers to vote, which was the requirement of the state authority above. When asking about the election of the head of the village, Mr. Lar proudly answered that "*almost no one was absent, probably only about 30 people*". This illustrates the lack of participation in national institutions and the lack of accountability of the village head to do the job of enforcing or encourage participation.

The village officials do not function as a successful link between the state and the people, are do even appear to be aware that that is an expect part of their role, instead, there is a feeling of pride in themselves for operating the administration peacefully.

The following description of Mr. Lar, the head of Natarm Village, serves as an example to give a clearer picture of the prominent role of the village head in PakNgum. *Mr. Lar strongly stated that the role of the head of the village is very critical, he said: "I am like the father of everyone."* Mr. Lar is very proud of himself, guiding the people to build the village and everyone is self-sufficient with a high level of solidarity. "*we the village literally creates everything for ourselves, each year we build a new road, people have enough to eat, also they care for each other, they work together, working on similar activities.*" The village is the kind of society that people share similar daily life, and as a result, they interact very often, which might explain why they also tend to think alike. People often meet in the public spaces: temples and house that host ceremonies (usually talking and helping each other).

When asking about difficulties regarding the authority, Mr. Lar said that it is not to unite or to guide the people but the budget to run the office and to implement the policies from the central authority, e.g., even security work, we have to encourage the people to participate on a voluntary basis, there is no stipend nor social welfare for them.

*"An extra task of the village head is to hear the people's problems and help them during their bad days."* Villagers usually visit the Village Head's house for advice, such as at times when their children encounter some social problems (hanging around too much, not studying, drinking, gambling, not helping with housework, spending too much money, etc.) and issues of their farming production.

The villagers also think of the head of the village when they have important traditional ceremonies such as new house celebrations and newborn ceremonies. Mr. Lar will be at their events as an important guest to make the ceremony more meaningful and to guide them on how to run the ceremony correctly. Also, in the case of death, Mr. Lar is supposed to be the main person who supports both the labor force and money to run the ceremony. This money will be gathered from other villagers, 5,000 kip, or USD5 per household.

Furthermore, Mr. Lar is also counted as a person to solve internal conflicts such as land conflicts within the neighborhood. He also serves as a legal consultant for the people, when they need to create contracts, for things such as land investments with other people, and the buying and selling of land.

*"People have never asked about the central government, they do not care about what the government can do to help or what the government is doing out there," Mr. Lar said.* He admitted that he has a similar opinion as the villagers. Although he represents the local government in the village, he prefers not to rely on asking advice or help from the central government level. *"I represent the government officials, but our village is still very traditional, and we can take care of each other. We do not need help from the central government or not even our representative in the parliament, as it took too long and may not be suitable to the village. The most we may ask is for advice from the district level if we need advice that is not within our ability. I am more like the villagers' father, not their civil servant"*. Interaction with the government people is also very rare, *"we have never gone to meet them (the central government), only they come to meet us."* To convince people to follow what the village wants to do (development plans, defense, health, education), Mr. Lar relies on his team to go to talk with the people directly.

The villager's similar ideas and interests are formed through regular interaction, their close proximity, and re-enforcement by the village head, which has separated them even more from the outside world including the state; no one exhibits an interest in the state. This illustrates the distance between the state and the people, a situation in which the state barely exists in the daily life of people.

Education is one of the development programs allocated by the government, which is the focus of this research. Therefore, education reform at the village level will be carefully examined, in order to spot the problematic relationship between the government in Vientiane and the majority of Laotians spread all across rural Laos.

#### **IV. Village educational development**

In 2009, the Ministry of Education and Sport introduced the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) to the Village Administration as a new sector to support schools both in terms of technical support and school operations, and to be a link between schools and the villagers. According to Mr. Keo, Koksa Village Head, there is not much that changed with the coming of the VEDC, "*we have always been taking care of school and supporting education work at the village.*" What is different is that there are more tasks such as writing reports and more meetings with the school principal, he complains about it a bit, stating that "*more tasks though no budget that comes along with it.*" Schools are supposed to receive operation budgets from the District Education Bureau (DEB). However, the village still has to use its own funds, which they gather themselves from the villagers. Although the DEB is assigned to support school operations, their job, in reality, is more to inspect the performance of the schools. Teachers claimed that the district does not understand the real situation at the school level "*besides not helping, they will allocate us a very difficult task that puts us under a lot of pressure*" (Teacher Kayson, Koksa village). If the district is perceived to be far off, and failing to support the village school, the central government is seen as even farther away and more ineffectual.

At Natarm, Mr. Lar explained the main task of the VEDC is to encourage all the kids in the village to go to school, support volunteer teachers by paying them a salary, and try to provide what schools need, such as school building repairs, and teaching materials. Each year

the head of village-level educational office has to draft what needs to be done and how much budget he needs to gather, and announces it to the parents to gather from them contributions, and sometimes fix the amount of contribution that everyone is required to provide (around USD5 – USD10 per year per household, but can be waived if some households are experiencing hardship "*if some families have difficulty paying, we skip them*" Mr. Lar said.

## **1. Teacher positions at the village schools**

Teachers have an essential role in teaching and nurturing the children at the village school, and at the same time, they have other roles that they must play, such as being a representative of the central government, to be the link between the state and the people in education reform. Talking to teachers at PakNgum District will reveal their performance in their roles at the village level.

Based on the fieldwork, it was discovered that teachers are facing many difficulties at schools, mainly in terms of low budgets to run the schools, and limited guidance from above (the district and the central government), which puts a great pressure on the teachers, in spite of the lack of support they provide to them. The district staff only does inspecting work, and does not provide useful resources or guidance. "*We are on our own, both in terms of technical assistance and financially, assistance from the District Office is all words, more for giving hope, and no real action*" reported by Khambu, Koksa's primary school principal. Therefore, teachers are not only focusing on educating the students, but they are also expected by the principals to do management work such as managing the resources for the school's operation, through raising contributions from the parents as well as cooperating with the village administration for fundraising, and sometimes even trying to involve the temple to convince the parents to support their children's education.

Furthermore, low and delayed salary (USD200 per month), requires the teachers to supplement their incomes to support their families through a variety of means, e.g., farming, weaving, raising livestock, etc. "*they could focus on teaching only after the rice cultivation seasons end,*" reported by Mr. Khamstone, 40 year old, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade teacher and principal at the Natarm Primary School. Because teachers are engaging in other activities, they sometimes are

absent or leave school early, and indeed have less time to prepare lessons for each class. As a result, they usually re-use the same teaching materials again and again. This widely limits the effectiveness and growth of the teaching of teachers, and prevent them from training to meet with new learning approaches sanctioned by the central government, such as Child-centered learning and progressive promotion programs.

Natarm Primary school is an example of how a village school is operated by the teachers. The school is located in the center of the village, near the temple and all the houses. Mr. Khamson (40 years old) is the current principal of the school and also a Grade 5 teacher. He started teaching in 2002 and became a school principal in 2015. His main tasks at the school are to evaluate teachers' teaching and to manage the school operation. He needs to make sure that the school is operating according to its agenda by organizing teachers' meeting (once per week) to listen to problems and to inform the teachers about the school schedule and goals set by the district e.g., Green School Project (clean and beautiful environment), usage of teaching materials in classes, improvement of the school's performance indicators, etc., though without any budget allocation from the central government. This lack of funding leads to the third task, which is to manage the school's budget. He has to find a way to gather enough money to cover all the expenses (teaching materials, volunteer teachers' salaries, school maintenance work, furniture, school festivals, utilities, etc.), this is the toughest part of the job, according to him. Besides the school work, Khamson is also a father of 2 and the owner of a 5ha rice farm and a cow farm. These tasks compete with his school tasks, and taking into account all of these difficulties, there is limited time to work to improve the schools' performance, e.g., for the teachers to be effective at delivering lessons to students, especially when it comes to applying the new curriculum suggested by the district, which is something Khamson himself admitted,

*“We get very stressed when we receive an order to reform the curriculum, there is no specific guideline, and most of the time there is no teacher training provided by the district, so eventually we learned that we cannot always think about it, so we do what we can, and in the end, we often return to the same old ways of teaching, as it causes less stress”* (Principal Khamson).

Teacher SengPhien is another case of someone who shares similar experiences with Khamson, her boss. SengPhien is a vice-principal of Natarm school who became a teacher

because of the influence of her father, who was ex-principal at Natarm. Now Sengphien's husband works on the land he purchased with his savings working in Thailand for 20 years. When Sengphien is free, along with her children, she helps with the farming work. Sengphien does not know why she became a teacher, but she said that she likes it. First, because it provides a stable income:

*"One good thing about being a teacher is the regular salary and the school break that allows us to improve our household economy."* Many people in the village rely heavily on subsistent farming. Thus, they have a meager cash income. To have a regular income does help the people to secure some basic and urgent needs, especially on a rainy day. Additionally, during the school break, the teachers can keep up with their routine of production, e.g., farming or weaving for extra cash, at the same time gaining a particular role in the village. Sengphien further stated, *"I enjoy teaching because I feel the respect I get from the villagers as I am taking care of their children."* However, Sengphien did express the exhaustion of being a teacher as well. *"Being a teacher is not always easy, sometimes students do not listen, and a lot of them are not good at studying. I tried to provide remedial classes for poor performers, once to twice a week for Math and Lao, and give them more homework to practice on."* The teachers joined the training session provided by the district once a year; it is mostly about lesson planning, and takes 2-3 days to finish the course. Sengphien mentioned, *"The training is very useful for me to upgrade my knowledge. However, I still find it difficult to put it into practice, given the situation, and the lack of resources we are facing at the school"*. When questioned about dropout students, Sengphien's expression got darker, and she expressed, *"I am frustrated, I do not know what to do. When children want to quit school, we teachers have no option but to follow their decision"*. Although some dropouts return to school, the returnees, they always quit for the second time. This is because they perform poorly and cannot follow the class. Sengphien stated, *"If the returnees are patient enough to stay around for 2 to 3 months, they might be able to catch up, but they tend to quit first."* This suggests how crucial it is to keep the children in school, in order for them to be able to catch up and stay on until they finish the primary education level.

Teacher Khambu is a principal in another village (Koksa) and head of a family of four. He shared his experiences and the difficulty of being a teacher below:

*"with a family of four, it is almost impossible to live with just relying on the salary,"* in his case he has to rely on rice farming. In his 3 ha rice field, his family and some hired laborers need to grow rice for the family every year. He makes an extra 7 to 8 million kip per year off selling the rice, which is almost as much as what he makes as a principle. When his teachers at Koksa complain about their low salary, he understands them and because of this reason he felt like he should not push them too much, if not they will feel discouraged to stay on, and that will create more trouble. As a result, he tends not to check on their performance and admits that it is tough to follow what the Ministry of Education and Sport wants them to do, e.g., a new way of teaching mathematics, or teaching through playing, child-centered learning, these things stress them out.

It is important to note that, the teachers, similar to the other villagers, rely heavily on the Village Official, for security, health, traditional ceremonies either at home or at schools. Even to teachers, as government officials, besides receiving a salary, there is no link between them and the central level. When it comes to seeking support related to school matters, they do not count on the District Education Bureau, but rather on the Village Education Development Community.

When the school needs financial support, the principal usually contacts the village head, because the village head responds fast and can convince people to participate. *"When we need the villagers to do some maintenance work for the school building, we go through the Village Education Development Committee, because this makes it easier to get people to participate"* (Principal Khamson), *"The Education District could only provide guidance, not financial support because they also don't have budget"* and *"Even when the issue is money, the village's response is within a month. Unlike the district, which never responded"* (Principal Khambu). I cautiously questioned the principles on how has he worked with the district officers; he quickly responded, *"we have written the reports, usually every month describing our difficulties with budget shortage to manage the school. The officers from the district office came to our school but to check on how we are doing, none of our requests have been responded to, and they never bring us any grants. They said they also lack of budget and do not receive any from the province"*



*administration because the budget needs to go to the national defense affair. Thus, we have to be on our own", Principal Khamson reconfirmed*

Therefore, the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) has been the main supporter of schools. This formal task from MOES started in 2008. Khamson said it is the same task as the previous village work. The person who takes the responsibility of this task is a voluntary official under the Village Head (Although, he often complains about the overload of work he has to do). The commitment from school to the VEDC is to write them reports about the school, including their demands regarding school work needed. The school needs the village to sign before they send the same report to the district level. The principle further stated emphatically that besides the VEDC's help, the temple is another place that they also rely on a lot. The monk can talk to the parents to convince them to let their children go to school rather than working in the fields and also make them understand that our school needs contributions. He said, *"I have to admit that parents, most of the time, listen more to the monks."*

Education reform at the village level is highly managed by the village administration and the principals; the district office usually does only the inspecting work. Many times, the orders from the central level put pressure on this implementation level. Worse, when the key persons are occupied with difficulties in their lives, e.g., securing household economy and other social welfare, including health and maintaining public infrastructure, there is not enough support for the teachers. It makes it more difficult for the state policies to work at the village level where the conditions are inadequate, both in terms of qualified staff and finances, it is worse when the teachers and the villagers see little need to follow the central government orders.

Since 1986, the government has emphasized the importance of working with international development partners to reduce poverty and to develop the country's human resource potential (NGPES, GOL, 2004). In 2000, the government signed the adoption of the pledge to achieve the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). To facilitate the work with the Donor Community, in 2006, it signed the 'Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness,' a joint effort by both the government and the international partners. Also, in 2015, the government adopted to achieve the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) to achieve the development goals, and to quit the status of being one of the least developed countries by 2020. Education was set as one of the tools to achieve the national goal, and becoming a means of sustainable

and equitably distributed growth across the country. The central government prioritized education development, among other development sectors. Primary Education was made as a compulsory level under the Lao PDR Education Law and was assigned to be administered by the Ministry of Education and Sport. Long-term goals and direction for the sector are given through the National Socio-Economic Development Plans drawn up by the government every five years along with other planning documents such as the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy and the National Plan of Action for Education For All. This was arranged to include a close working relationship with the international agencies re-enforced by the 2006 Vientiane Declaration, therefore the foreign experts exert considerable influence on the education agenda of the country through projects and funding allocation. However, the goal of Universal Primary Education has not been achieved yet.

Universal Primary Education is one of the reforms introduced by the state to widen people's working opportunities besides farming. As evidenced by the high enrollment rate, people did respond to the state's efforts promoting children's schooling. However, as shown by the persistent high dropout rate, people seemed to follow the state's guidance only in the beginning. Majority of the Lao people are engaged in farming activities, which form their daily routine and their main source of living. When they (parents and children) need to respond to the urgent needs (busy time of farming and jobs), they have to foregone the choice of schooling.

## **Chapter 5: Case of Primary Education**

While social security is in the process of development, mutual-aid is functioning in rural communities, playing complementary roles, as seen in Chapter 4. For example, none of the villagers has national health insurance due to the lack of information and the high cost. These villagers choose to count on the sale of their livestock and their neighborhood's help. The same in emergency time such as natural disasters, a warning will be spread by the head of the villages, each village has their own Plan for mitigating the issue. Important events e.g., birth, death, and wedding, required the whole village to contribute to complete the ceremonies. This own way of management reveals a certain level of autonomy of the villagers and at the same time shows limited interest towards the state as evidenced, by the lack of attention of the people to fulfill their civic obligation, including paying tax and voting. Taxing has been a chronic issue of the Lao state. The villagers prefer to pay 'social tax,' meaning contribution to the neighborhood's ceremonies, where they perceive themselves as the beneficiary as a member. Likewise, the villagers only show excitement at the village head election, not one of the central government level's, proved by a different rate of attendance. Education reform is the case study of the research. Therefore, this chapter will explore the state's educational reform implementing at the village in the past, especially during the pre-1975, when the service was available only for the elite, until the current time. The end of the chapter will present findings of the education situation at the village level.

### **I. Education development progress and challenges**

For more than four decades, has Universal Primary Education (UPE) been introduced by the Lao state to its people. Efforts on promoting the critical role of education do not only come from internal but international participation. Laos has joined the World Education Conference and cooperated with the international agencies under different agreements, e.g., Education For All in 1990, Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Until now (2019), Laos has not achieved the goal with persistence DROP OUT rate of more than 10% for the past ten years. which considers high when compared with the neighbor Thailand (0.78% in 2015) and Vietnam (1.16% in 2015).

Similar to many developing countries, education is also the Lao state's priority development program. Given the vital role of education as a tool to boost up economic development in the country. As mentioned by number of scholars that, education is universally associated not only with substantial economic returns but also with many social returns including lower fertility and lower infant mortality, better child health and better education, and reductions in gender and ethnic inequality (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004; and Struass and Thomas, 1995). Education serves as a tool to tighten the state and the people's relationship and therefore, to reduce the distance between them. As evidenced by the study of James that administrative capacity is manifestly dependent upon modern education. "*A certain level of formal mass education is indispensable for the development of a modern communication system, which is critically important in revolving the two most general and most fundamental problems in political modernization, namely, the changing of attitudes and reducing the gap between the ruling elites and the less modernized masses*" (James S. Coleman, 1965, pp.16). This could also be seen in the study of Max Webber in 1946 that, education is a tool to move the stage of modernization. Without education, it seems impossible to move a state to modernization. Besides, for the state to have its policies work effectively, education is necessary. Not only must mass literacy, which makes a modern communication system possible, but also the rational-secular component in attitudes that are essential for individual participation in the modernization process must be established. Literacy, as well as attitudes congruent with modernization, is crucial for effective political 'penetration' by the government as well as for meaningful citizenship. Formal education has a cardinal role in producing the bureaucratic, managerial, technical, and professional cadres required for modernization (Max Webber, 1946, pp. 298-299).

Given the country's young historical background, the state had to start from scratch. Besides, investing in the infrastructure e.g., school building, teacher training, education promotion to raise awareness, difference policies borrowed from different counties were also allocated in an attempt to attain the goal of universal primary education. Starting from setting the primary school level as a compulsory and as a fundamental right for all children. The first education law of Laos that was issued in 2000 stated clearly about compulsory primary education as a tool to build good citizens with revolutionary competence, knowledge, and abilities. Following by numbers of other policies, which could also be seen in other developing

countries such as, Vietnam (Morikazu Ushigi and Takashi Hamano, 2005, Duc Son Nguyen Trung Le, 2011, pp.139-143), Thailand (W. Kongnoo, J. Loysongkroa, S. Chotivichien, N. Viriyautsahakul, N. Saiwongse, 2014, p. 2889-2892; UNESCO 2016) and Cambodia<sup>37</sup> (Ministry of Education and Youth Cambodia, 2016). These policies were borrowed from one another at different times and were most likely influenced by the international agencies such as through the conference on education development of the UNESCO.<sup>38</sup>

The first policy to be discussed is the increase of state expenditure on school infrastructure, in the case of Laos, the expenditure was increased from 8.2% in 2000 to 14.5% in 2008 and recently in 2017 increased to 17%. The number of school buildings has expanded rapidly. There were 8,887 primary schools in 2015 (95 students per school).

The second policy was the Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP) in 2009. The policy was introduced to solve higher repetition and dropout rate by allowing the students to pass to the next grade automatically without passing the final examination. An outcome of this policy is a temporary reduction in the school dropouts and its failure with the returns shortly to the old habit of leaving the school as other needs require the children to do.

The third is the rise in teachers' salaries, to encourage the teachers to compensate with the side jobs and thus to commit to the teaching tasks. Laos was probably the last country to make this happens after the nine years of attempts by the officials at the Teacher Training Department, MOES. Finally, in 2012, the demand to raise teachers' salaries was approved from approximately USD100 to USD200.

The fourth policy is to provide recurring expenses per child to exempt the informal fee, and therefore make schooling completely free. For Laos, this was done under the Blockage Program started in 2015 to provide a school operation budget of USD6 per student per year.

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<sup>37</sup> Feeding Dream Cambodia, retrieved from <http://feedingdreamscambodia.org/free-school-meals-program.php> accessed on 28 Oct 2018

<sup>38</sup> Interview of MOES staff, on the 20 Dec 2017

The fifth policy is the mid-day meals or Free Meal Program that was introduced in 2013, to allure the students to come to school and stay until the end of the day and also to promote nutrition to the children. Therefore, the program is done with the cooperation of the Food and Agriculture Organization or FAO.

Because of the legal framework of Compulsory Education, the increased in the investment in primary schools' infrastructure that allowed more and more schools throughout the country and the policies mentioned above help to facilitate children's schooling, the enrollment rates of these countries have shown a positive outcome. However, an educational development indicator such as dropout remained the problem to achieve UPE, especially in Cambodia and Laos.

**Table 22: Educational development indicators in Southeast Asia in 2015 - 2017**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Net enrolment in the developing world</b>	<b>Primary School Dropout Rate</b>	<b>Pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary</b>	<b>Literacy rate among youth aged 15 – 24</b>
Brunei	96.6	-	99	99
Singapore	99.9	-	100	100
Thailand	95	0.78 in 2015	100	97
Vietnam	98	1.16 in 2015	99	97
Cambodia	93	6.2 in 2016	64	87
Laos	94.7	12.5 in 2017	73	84

**Source: Various sources**

Although both Cambodia and Laos did not meet the UPE goal by 15%, Cambodia's dropout rate<sup>39</sup> is improving. It was 9% in 2011 (Creative Associates International, Inc., August 2011) and decreased to 6.2% in 2016 (SEM, HEM, 2016). Meanwhile, Laos, the primary school dropout rate has increased from 10% in 2011 to 10.3% in 2016. It is still considered a problematic issue and has shown no sign of improvement, as evidenced by the 10.5% dropout rate in 2017.

Since the historical background is a reflection of the country's performances at the current time, education performance also reflects the past efforts of the central government during the pre-1980s, including the French colonial rule period. Besides the past investment in education development, other related development sectors will be shown in this chapter by going over the key players daily life. For example, the social-economic situation, to grasp how ready the infrastructure had been installed. Also, others related sectors that are driving the education's performances to move forward e.g., healthcare, how well the children are preventing from all short of sickness; way of production like rice farming, since majority of the parents is engaging in it, thus difficulties in farming can create struggle and disruption to the family as well as affecting the children's schooling. These are the state's responsibility; therefore, the central government priority and agendas matter a lot, but it is noteworthy that the socio-economic development to reach the people including education across the country have not been prioritized until 1975. Since the past regime and their activities determined the country's foundation, the process of Lao's development program and the Lao society as a whole, it is worth it to go over each historical background and the transition focusing on the education expansion.

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<sup>39</sup> In Cambodia shows that during the period 2000- 2012 the dropout rate at each grade decreased, in grades 4 - 6. The dropout rate at grade 6, decreased by 5.20 percentage points. This decreased dropout rate resulted mainly from the following interventions such as implementation of a scholarship program which offered both cash and provision of food, provision of school meals, establishment of new primary schools, increased numbers of primary schools offering all six grades and increased participation from the community to help children facing all kinds of difficulties, especially girls, to return to school. Some schools had the additional benefit of student councils; peer to peer support groups and girls' counselors. These all helped to reduce drop out.

## **II. The origin of Lao education**

Traditionally, literacy in Laos was reserved for the aristocracy, their administrators, some merchants, taught by the Theravada Buddhist monks. Only until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal education was introduced in Laos of the French Colonization (1883-1954). To train the elite group of the people to become the administration officers, because Laos at that time was though labeled Franco-Lao they were mainly patronized by the expatriate Vietnamese community. As a consequence, the primary school was offering instruction in French and was established only in a few provincial capitals. In the 1920s, the first school was established in Laos with limited accessibility to the people to join. The primary beneficiary of education at that time were children of the Lao elite related to the royal family, French and Vietnamese children whose parents were working in Laos. The French never supported education in Laos as much as in Vietnam (Noonan, 2011, pp.1).

It was not until 1945 when the French expanded education services to a wider area as it was seen as a way to create nationalism in Laos, and to prevent the resistant forces in the country. Still, it was concentrated only in the cities and offered limited seats to enroll, besides the curriculum that had French as the language of instruction, did not match with the local area in Laos where no one spoke French or saw the need to use the language.

After the independence in 1954, UNESCO and USAID supported the 1962 reform to create a Lao education system. The establishment of a university was in the early 1970s (Noonan, 2011, pp.1). Likewise, at the Liberal Zone, another education system was established there under the guidance of the Pathet Lao supported by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Therefore, in the 1970s until the mid-1980s, there were two educational systems in Laos. More expansion of education was seen in this period, but still, the development indicator was not high. For example, in 1968, the national adult literacy rate was about 50-60% for men and 25% for women (MOES, 1996, History of Lao education. pp.15). The education's agenda at this time was to balance the influences of each side and concentrated only where the influences of the two sides took place, the cities in Vientiane, Luangprabang, and northern provinces in the case of the Pathet Lao education.



After 1975, under the Pathet Lao or the socialist government, education became for everyone to build the nation. For the first time, the idea of Universal Primary Education (UPE) was announced. Education services were expanding more to rural areas, but it was considered as having poor quality and was damaged because of the lack of budget and workforce.

The recovery was delayed until 1986 when NEM was adopted to open the country and receive assistance from international agencies. Education at this time became a valuable tool to boost up economic development such as to increase the national GDP. Laos joined the World Education Conference, signing to achieve the Education For All (EFA) goal in 1990 and led the Fifth Party Congress in 1991 to pursue a policy of compulsory education for all. The goal was further reinforced by the signing of the Lao state to commit with the Millennium Development Goal 2 in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Universal Primary Education. Regardless of the efforts and advice from the various international organizations, the issues remain, including limited accessibility, lack of budget for operations at the school level, children graduating with poor quality education, some children outside the school and who have never been in school, and the dropout issue. Among these issues, the dropout issue at the primary education level will be an example to study, as it has always been a problem in Lao education development and shows no sign of improvement. Currently, education improvement has been set as a national priority to serve as a tool for the national goal of leaving the 'least developed country' status by 2030. Dropout is, thus, a challenge for Lao educational development and Lao human resources development in general. Overall, after 1986, the Lao state did bring positive changes to the education sector, but not to the point that the country will achieve the goal at any time soon.

When looking at the historical background of Laos, if the political situation has just been settled, it is the same as education. Before Laos had neither time nor the budget to carry out its education and other socio-economic improvements across the rural areas, each transition of Lao political and educational will be presented in the following part.

## **1. Education for the ruling class**

Until 1907, learning in Laos was based on 'Buddhist Monarchy'<sup>40</sup>; Monks were respected sources of higher learning. The highest-ranking monk became the king's teacher (Somlit, 1996, p.15-17). Literacy was higher among the aristocracy, the crops of administrators, and urban merchants, many of whom were Chinese or Vietnamese. In the villages, a rich oral tradition was the bearer of morals and culture (GE, 1998, p. 154). Monk education was divided into three primary levels (Somlit, 1999, p.226). The first level was novices learning reading, writing, arithmetic, and basic morals. In the second level, monks continued to learn and copied manuscripts. Lastly, in the third level, higher ranking monks continued to study the holy texts, to copy manuscripts and to learn the grammar of the Pali language in which the earliest Theravada Buddhist texts wrote. Temple education for the general people had monks as the instructors providing lessons to both male and female students at temples in every village. They provided general information, including vocational subjects such as mathematics, Lao language, art, medical science, and fortune-telling (Somlit, 1996, pp.17). Though female students were allowed, it was generally agreed among the people that only men could go to the temple school<sup>41</sup>. Basically, at this time, most Lao people were peasant farmers, and literacy was not needed (Noonan, 2011).

## **2. Beginning of formal school in Laos**

The French colonial government introduced the first 'modern education' in 1907 to Laos but only for the elite. After having colonized the country for 14 years, schools were built in several provinces, and while all the lessons were given in French, there were only 4 French teachers in the whole country. Thus the schools were managed mostly by Vietnamese teachers. A full six-year primary school was established for the first time in 1917. In 1921, the first grade of junior high school was established in Vientiane, namely College Pavie (Martin Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.43). This marked the first time 'formal education' came to Laos. In 1925, 227 out of

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<sup>40</sup> took place at the temple, monks were the instructors, there they learned how to read, to write literature, mathematic, some basic medical science and basic moral.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with elderly whose childhood was at that period

317 students could pass the primary school final exam held in Hanoi, Vietnam. In 1930, 52 students graduated from high school. In 1939, only seven students could pursue tertiary education in Vietnam. These students were mainly children of the elite people, the crops administer, and urban merchants (KP, 1996, pp.22).

Over 30 years of Lao education by the French could show only very little progress, and it had failed to accomplish a high level of quality. Not only until 1941, when the French saw the need to invest in education for more pupils. Under the ‘civilization program’ to create a sense of Lao citizens to make the Lao people noticing the national boundary, especially the one between Laos and Thailand. Therefore, from 1942, the number of schools and students had increased sharply (see table: 23). By 1944, the number of schools had increased to 163 primary schools, and the number of students increased to 11,401 students, however this covered only 4.6% of the school children age (KP, 1996, pp.22), the majority of the people, especially in rural areas, still had very little or no chance of accessing formal education.

**Table 23: Secular Primary Schools and Students in Laos 1915-1944**

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students
1915	10	260 (0.2%)
1920	28	931 (0.7%)
1925	39	1,585
1932	70	7,035
1935	84	6,537 (3.4%)
1939	92	7,026 (3.2%)
1942	121	7,901
1944	163	11,401 (4.6%)

**Source: Manynooch, 2007, p.174; GER, Noonan, 2011, pp.4**

For over 50 years, most of France's aid on education was used to finance the education in France of the children of the elite families. This illustrates the small scoop of education investment of the past colonial rule and thereby barely prepared infrastructure for formal education in a wider area of the country. Until the late 1950s, quality of the education was

another critical issue; only a few students attended secondary school because only one-fifth of the students enrolled in primary school could graduate (MSF, 1997, pp.100).

### **3. Two-folds education system (1960s-1975)**

In 1954, Laos successfully achieved independence from France. The government was attempting to meet many national development goals including health, telecommunication, economy, and education. All these areas needed qualified human resources to get involved in national development. Thus, the education sector in the country was set as the priority to produce skillful workers. Given the weak education system inherited from the French colonization, the improvement of the education sector was not an easy task for the new government. Willingness to receive support from outside was, therefore, a convincing idea for the ruling class. For this reason, the French were allowed to maintain their presence through a Socio-Cultural Relationship and kept supporting the Lao education development. Since the budget from the French was never enough, the RLG was tempted to accept assistance from other foreign nations, particularly the United States (US).

The US economic operation was signed between the US and the RLG in 1955. Supports were set to go to all the development areas in Laos. US pushed Laos to joined UNESCO and reviewed the recommendation of proving education in the country. There were more schools and more students with USAID. However, the quality of education was considered to be very low. In 1962, only 11% of primary school students could graduate from primary schooling (KP, 1996, pp.82).

#### **a. Education under the Royal Lao Government**

One major reform of education at this time was the involvement of foreign experts. The review team of UNESCO suggested three main aims to the RLG in 1957. First, education should be expanded to both urban and rural areas. Second, there should be further education and training for youth to enable them to have occupations based on their preferences and

potentials. Third, adult literacy should be focused to improve their health and to reduce poverty (KP, 1996, pp.75-76).

UNESCO supported the 1962 education reform to convert the French schooling system to a Lao system. USAID supported the development of the education system at all levels, covering primary, secondary, and tertiary education, and introducing vocational subjects. Moreover, the aid was also spent on printing new school textbooks in Lao language. (KP, 1996, pp.85-88). In 1966, USAID focused on establishing high schools in the country. The development of a system of Fa Ngum Comprehensive High Schools was established in the major urban centers around the country. The language of instruction was Lao. By 1969, the number of schools in all levels increased to more than 3000 (199,000 students) from 944 schools in 1955 (KP, 1996, pp.84-87). Something to note is that still around 25% of the schools were registered as temple schools. The French and The US advisors never cut ties between the royalty and the community of Buddhists (Tarling, 2000, pp.223). By 1971, there were 20 public secondary schools. All the graduates were offered scholarships for advanced study in France (Whitaker, 1972, pp.79).

Additionally, higher education was upgrading, and the teacher training center was promoted to become the National Institute of Pedagogy (Ogawa, 2009, pp.288). Local technical colleges were established in Luangprabang, Pakse, and Savannakhet. The Institute of Law and Administration, the School of Medicine, and the Pedagogical Institutes were merged to become Sisavangvong University in the early 1970s. It is noteworthy that this higher education level was taught in French language; thus, it was available only for a tiny group of people in an urban area.

Education's progress in that period was made, yet it was widely agreed that the quality was low. In 1963, from 5,759 students who completed their primary school, only 3,130 of them were entitled to take the secondary school entry exams, and only 645 passed. In short, 11% of those who completed primary school could move on to the secondary school level (KP, 1996, pp.82).

A domestic problem covered the situation of Laos, the conflict between the RLG and the Pathet Lao in the 1960s, shortly turned into a civil war. At the liberal zone or the Pathet

Lao base was, there was another education system that was taught by instructors from North Vietnamese.

**b. Education at the liberal zone**

France continued its influence in education under the RLG. Furthermore, the US cooperation in the section was also on the rise. At the liberal zone under the authority of the Pathet Lao, Vietnamese education philosophy and instructors were heavily influenced in expanding education for the Lao people. Other school textbooks were published with the support of Northern Vietnam and the Soviet Union (OC, 1996, pp.105).

In July 1967, the Pathet Lao government issued a three-year education plan, which included the expansion of primary schooling and adult literacy. Every two villages were to have one complete primary school and every province was to have a lower secondary school. All higher education for students from the Liberated Zones took place in Vietnamese institutions and in Vietnamese language (GE, 1998, p.157). By 1970 there were 45 non-formal learning centers for providing primary schooling to some 2,160 adults (OC, 1996, pp.102-103).

The Second Three-Year Plan for education covered the period between 1971 and 1973 and focused on the expansion of primary education, mainly grades 3 and 4, lower secondary school, and teacher training. Community support was mobilized for schools, teachers, and instruction materials. Half of the teachers were volunteers (OC, 1996, pp. 105-106).

**Table 24: Education development at the Liberated Zone**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Number of Teacher Training Schools</b>	<b>Number of Primary Schools</b>	<b>Number of Primary School students</b>	<b>Number of Lower Secondary Students</b>	<b>Number of Higher Secondary Students</b>
1962-63	1,200	1	-	32,000	500	47
1963-64	-	1	-	-	-	-
1964-65	-	1	-	-	-	-
1965-66	-	4	-	-	-	-
1966-67	1,700	8	-	36,000	400	264
1973-74	-	-	-	89,899	3,762	668
1974-75	6000	-	430	104,786	4,179	868

**Source: OC, 1996, p.99, p.112**

By 1974, the educational indicators of both schools and students at the liberal zone had increased sharply. There were 430 schools, 104,786 students and 6,000 teachers (OC, 1996, p.99, pp.112). Still, children from other areas (non-liberal zone) could not benefit. Their options were the same; they could either rely on learning from the community or at the temple.

Roughly speaking, the idea of going to school before 1975 was still limited only to the elite group, namely children of the administration class and the children of the revolutionary leaders and their officials.

### **III. Education under the socialist rule after 1975**

Due to the past incomplete infrastructure, the Pathet Lao had to build the nation from scratch, adopting a profound revolutionary change from the local level. Education was one of the tools to meet the requirement of production, starting with primary education. The state emphasized the expansion of education, as announced by the government that education is "*the mean to raise the level of knowledge, patriotism, love of the people's democracy, the spirit of solidarity between ethnic groups and the spirits of independence*". Although there was no

specific policy drafted especially for the ethnic minority group, this marked the first time that ethnic minorities were given a chance to access formal education.<sup>42</sup>

Education was recognized as a basic right endowed to all citizens of the 'democratic state', so much that everywhere it was regarded as one of the critical indices of 'development and progress.' Pre-modern and colonial states (which are undemocratic by nature) were measured against this index and always found wanting. Post-colonial states and revolutionary states, therefore, need to make a great deal of effort into expanding education, stated President Kaysone Phomvihane (Evans, 1998, pp.153). He made this idea clear in the First Party Conference after getting full independence from the civil war in 1975. The government placed great importance on education and introduced the idea of universal education. Since then, education became free for everyone.

Although education was for everyone, it was not easy to do so. At that time, there was an enormous number of challenges to achieve the goal. Many teachers fled the country, so schools had to rely on monks to be the instructors. With a small number of teachers left, many were asked to work for the government. There were almost no teachers.

Moreover, few books were available for students, and foreign books were destroyed. In addition to that, necessary instructional materials and school buildings were not available to follow the degree of 'Universal Primary Education' to extend primary education to all ethnic groups, the government was determined to place a school in every village. Regardless of the challenges, the outcomes show the definite number of school and students. Both have increased from the year 1975 to 1985; the number of schools increased by 77%, students' and teachers'

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<sup>42</sup> Clarification of the Ethnic Groups in Lao PDR: Ethnic groups in Laos is classified into three main groups. First, "Lao Loum" (Lowland Lao); "Lao Theung" (Upland Lao); and "Lao Soung" (Highland Lao). This classification spread rapidly within the public sector of Laos, but it proved insufficient for grasping the diversity of the ethnic groups across the Lao PDR (Chazee, 1995:10-11). According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2000:5), the 1995 census categorized the population in four broader ethnic classifications: "Lao Loum" was renamed as the "Tai-Kadai" group (accounted for 66.2%); "Lao Theung" was renamed as "Austro-Asiatic" (23.0%); and "Lao Soung" (Highland Lao) was classified into the "Hmong-Yao" (7.4%) and "Sino-Tibetan" groups (2.7%).



ratio rose to 69% and 83% respectively. Furthermore, the primary education enrollment ratio also went up to 85%, and the adult literacy rate was vastly improved to 83% in 1985 (Mya Than and Joseph L. H Than, 1997, pp.156).

Despite these improvements, the education system encountered the problem of low efficiency, and the availability of schools was insufficient in the rural areas (Mya Than and Joseph L. H Than, 1997, pp.162), due to a minimal budget to improve the situation. Schools were more like a 'skeleton school' to only formally fulfill the command from above. More than 50% of teachers had only a few years of primary schooling, and more than 50% of the schools were incomplete (Staurt Fox, 1997). Some temples served as schools and monks were the instructors. For the whole country, there was only one teacher training school.

Furthermore, there were also issues of high dropout and repetition, especially in primary school. Because of the lack of resources and teachers, schools covered only five years instead of 6 years of primary school. Until 1986, the net enrollment rate was 58%, the repetition rate was 35%, and the primary school dropout rate was 11.5% (Richard Noonan, 2011, pp.14-17).

## **1. International agencies in Lao education reform**

In 1986, with the introduction of NEM, the educational situation in Laos changed, with more financial support from outside. Fortunately, the increased contribution to the educational sector was made possible by the dramatic increase in the GDP growth in 1986. Primary education was emphasized more than any other educational level, aiming at increasing the skilled labor force. Although by 1990 there were 6,500 primary schools with 560,000 students, sadly this did not mean the actual situation had fully improved. The enrollment rate included a very high percentage of repeaters. More than a third of students in primary schools were over-aged. Meanwhile, lower and higher secondary schools were still limited to only some areas. For the whole country, there were only 699 lower secondary schools and 119 higher secondary schools with a total number of students of 84,447 and 31,826, respectively (Richard Noonan, 2011, pp.14).

Moreover, because of the new foreign policy of NEM to open up the country to attract more foreign investment and assistance, Laos was willing to join the international community like becoming ASEAN members, joining the Rio Summit for environment protection. In terms of education, the state joined the second UN Conference on the 'Least Development Countries' in Paris, held between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1990. With the message that the 'Least Developed countries' have the responsibility for the formulation of appropriate policies for their growth and development. The GDP growth goal was set to 7% by 1995 (from 4% in 1991). During this time, Laos was in the process of drafting the new national social-economic Plan. Therefore, the idea and target that the country should meet the GDP Growth of 7% by 1995 was included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plan for the period between 1991 and 1996 at the 5<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

Followed by the joining of the World Conference on Education For All (WCEFA) in Jomtien from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9 Mar 1990, education was set as the priority tool to increase the GDP growth and to eradicate poverty. WCEFA is an expansion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). UDHR was proclaimed since 1948 a global drive by international agencies<sup>43</sup> to encourage and support developing countries to provide basic education for their citizens, to improve the people's living standards and alleviate poverty. Thus, improving educational opportunity contributes to the promotion of human rights, democracy, and world peace (Verspoor, 2004; Jones, 2007a). For over the three decades following the proclamation of the UDHR, there were significant educational advances in many developing countries with an increased quantitative provision, particularly by building schools, training teachers, and providing textbooks. However, in the 1980s, decreasing enrolments, high attrition rates, and low academic achievement became significantly more apparent (Verspoor & Leno, 1986; Verspoor, 1989). In response, UN agencies<sup>44</sup> Convened the WCEFA in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, which adopted goals calling for a 'decade of initiatives' to assist developing countries to pursue UPE. As a signee, Laos had to shape its education strategy. By setting primary education as a compulsory level in article 19 of the Lao Constitution. The commitment brought various foreign grants to the Lao government, which had strings attached, such as advice from

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<sup>43</sup> UNESCO and UNICEF, and the World Bank, have been foremost amongst these international organizations

<sup>44</sup> UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, and the World Bank were the conveners of both the 1990 World Conference on Education

the source organizations. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Educational Development Plan was also shaped by the international commitment, with the goal to achieve 96.8% primary enrollment rate by 2010, through four main strategies: to expand education to reach remote and mountainous area, to construct the ethnic boarding schools, to promote the private initiative in primary education and to improve the quality of education to meet international standards. Foreign language schools started operating in Laos after their ban in 1975 with the reason that people can access to alternative sources of knowledge and information in foreign languages.

Like other developing countries, a decade after the Jomtien Conference, the time-bound targets in areas such as enrolment, completion, and achievement had not been met. Although the primary enrolment rate increased from 58% (1992) to 75% in 2000, slightly less than 50% of the schools were incomplete. Thus, students had to move to a complete school in order to finish the primary level. Few ethnic minorities can continue their studies beyond the primary level. (MOES, 2000). Therefore, the four strategies set could not be fully implemented. This consequently led to the second Education For All.<sup>45</sup> The conference that was held in Dakar, Senegal. The Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000) that resulted from the conference was

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<sup>45</sup> Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, announced six goals:

Goal 1: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children

Goal 2: Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality

Goal 3: Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs.

Goal 4: Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access basic and continuing education for all adults.

Goal 5: Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality

Goal 6: Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring the excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills. From expanding the accessibility to make sure the quality and that the children entering grade 1 has to stay on until grade 5 and graduate from the primary education level

produced in response to the increasing evidence that 'quality' and to ensure the completion rate of the children not only the enrollment.

A further international initiative occurred in 2000 when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration and its eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to provide concrete, numerical benchmarks for tackling extreme poverty in its many dimensions (UNDP, 2011a). With respect to the education MDG2, the 189 signatories to the declaration committed to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education (UNDP, 2011b)<sup>46</sup>. The MDG2 placed some particular indicators. First, the enrolment rate of the primary school needed to reach 95%. Second, the rate of survival needed to meet 95% as well. Lastly, the transfer rate to the secondary level needed to be 75%.

This marked another turning point of the education system in Laos, as evidenced by the promulgation of the first Education Law in June 2000 mandating free and compulsory education. Laos, as one of the signatories of MDG, committed to achieving the goal of universal primary education by increasing the enrolment rate to 98% and reducing the dropout rate to 0% by 2015 (United Nation 2008; MOES 2012 p.5); Statistical and Information Technology Centre MOES 2011, p.14). Since then, Laos increased the number of schools, teachers, and continued the provision of free primary education. As a result, Laos had already succeeded in accomplishing half of the goal ahead of time by raising the enrolment rate at the

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<sup>46</sup> The Millennium Development Goals composed of,

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environment sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Goal 9: Reduction of UXO

primary level from 78% (2000-2001) to 96% (2012-2013) (World Bank, 2013). However, Laos still faced an increase in the dropout rate. It had increased from 6.8% in 2009-2010 (World bank 2013) to 10.5% in 2016-2017 (MOES, 2017). This meant the country already failed to achieve the MDG2 target to have a dropout rate of 0% by 2015. Now that Laos is aiming at achieving UPE of the SDG4 by 2030. Evaluation of the problem preventing Laos from meeting the MDG2 is a lesson learned to meet the goal of SGD4: UPE by 2030.

## 2. Expansion of education for ethnic minorities

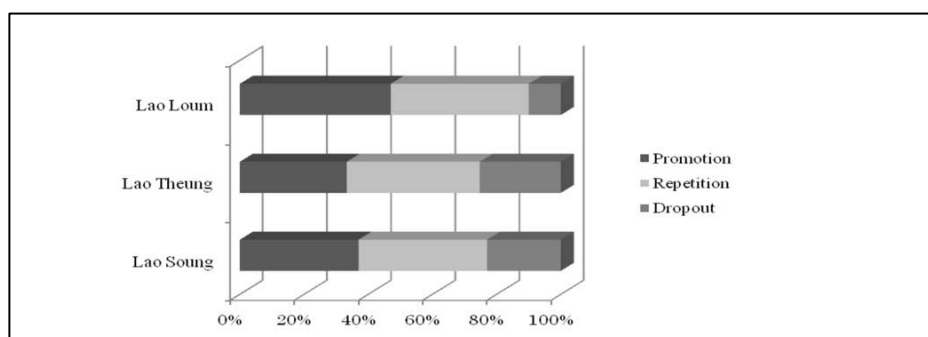
Since 1975 education was aimed to reach everyone regardless of ethnicity. Still, the gaps between different places remained rather large. Provision of educational facilities was still not adequate and relatively not accessible for ethnic minorities who live mainly in the rural areas, as shown in the statistic of promotion, repetition, and dropout in Table 25.

**Table 25: Education Development Indicator in 1991-1992 among ethnic origin**

	Promotion	Repetition	Dropout
Lao Loum	47	43	10
Lao Theung	34	41	25
Lao Song (includes Hmong)	37	40	23

Source: Miki Inui, 2015

**Figure 14: Promotion, Repetition, and Dropout by Ethnicity 1991-1992**



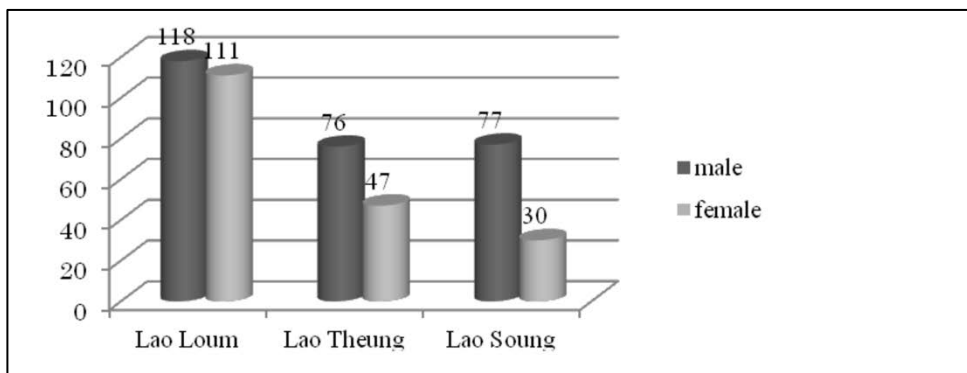
Source: Miki Inui, 2015, P.7

The data showed that the Lao Loum group performance is better than the other ethnic groups, and they are promoted to the next grade more often. The dropout rates of those assigned to the other ethnic classifications (25% and 23%, respectively) are twice as high as the majority group (Lao Loum: 10%).

The Lao Loum or the Tai-Kadai group is the ethnic majority, who speak the national language, Lao and also has traditionally dominated the political, economic arenas in the lowlands. The majority of the Tai-Kadai are Buddhists, where education was rooted since the past. Thus, the idea of schooling is more familiar in this group than in the others. As for the ethnic minorities, the very first document about them was in 1996, when the government advocated in policy documents, the expansion of educational opportunities among ethnic minorities as well as efforts to promote their cultural heritage. Thus, the government has just gradually implemented policies that have the stated goal of making additional educational resources available to ethnic minorities.

Through these improvements, ethnic groups eventually have access to equal educational opportunities in Laos. Although they are still behind the Lao Loum group as shown in 1995. The average GER was 114% for Lao Loum, 61.5% for Lao Theung, and 53% for Lao Soung.

**Figure 15: Gross enrollment rate in primary education by gender and ethnicity in 1995**

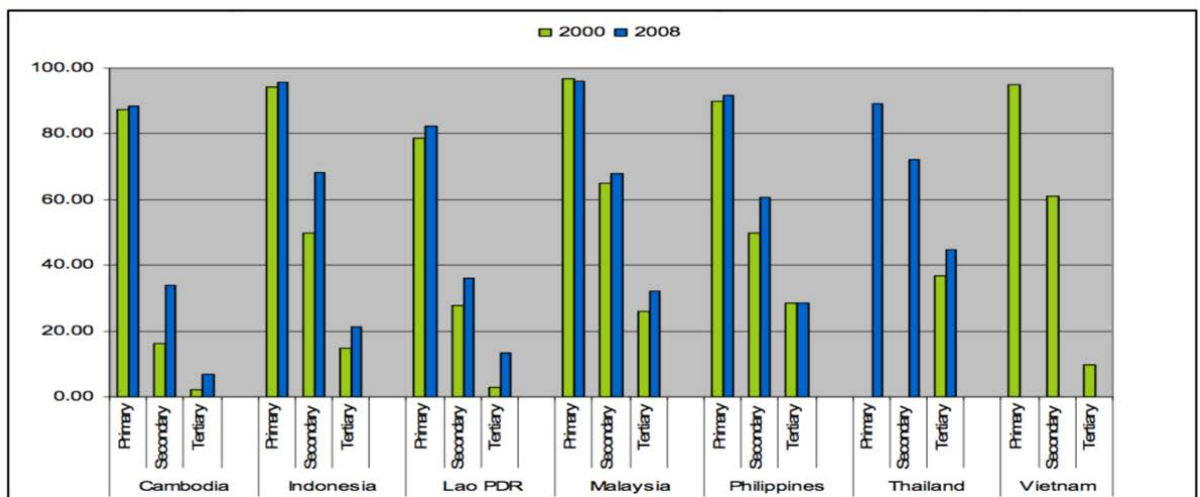


Source: Miki Inui, 2015, P.6

Moreover, the data showed that gender disparity exists among all ethnic groups: Lao Loum show slight disparities in the GER (7%), but the Lao Theung and Lao Soung groups show a gap between males and females of 29% and 47%, respectively.

When comparing the seven ASEAN countries, Laos' primary education enrollment rate appeared to be the lowest in both 2000 and 2008. It was 78% in 2000 and 82% in 2008, while other countries had a higher rate by around 8% to 10%, as shown in Figure 16.

**Figure 16: Net Enrollment Rate by education in 2000 and 2008 in six ASEAN countries**



**Source: L21 Building**

Concerning the primary school graduation rate in Laos, it increased from 69.3% in 2000 to 74.7% in 2008. Among the ten ASEAN countries, Laos' performance was also not so impressive. In 2000, Laos was at 69.3%, the second-lowest rank ahead of Cambodia with a rate of 47.2%. Conversely, in 2008, Cambodia surpassed Laos, and Laos than was ranked the lowest, with a rate of primary education graduation of 74.7% (ADB, 2010).

### 3. Development projects and Lao education reform

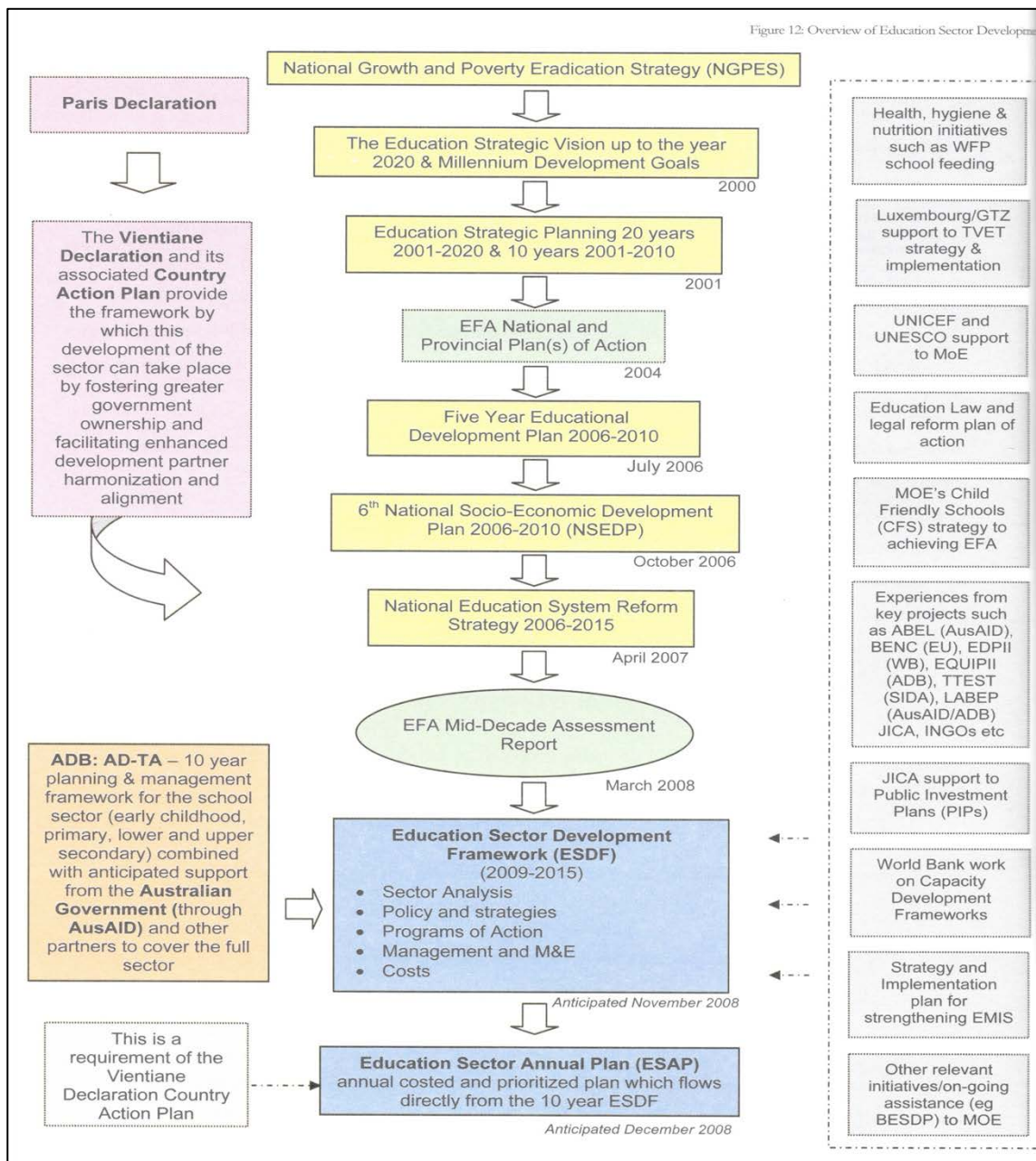
International agencies have been playing more role in the Lao education reform. The donors became even more involved in Laos state planning when Laos signed the ‘Vientiane Declaration on Aid effectiveness’ in 2006. As a result, the implementation of policies and plans requires the joints effort of both government and international partners. When questioning the Lao state position, it seemed avoidable since the country was always lacking financial stability. In other words, Laos has always been an aid-recipient country. Since after the independence (1975), reconstruction and financial assistance was provided by the Soviet Union and Vietnam. In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union aid programs were demised. It affected the financial crisis in the country, which led Laos to adopt the New Economic Mechanism. The economic reform changed from state command to rely on the market and an open-door policy. As a result, Laos turned to rely on international agencies such as WB, ADB, UN; and donors' countries such as Sweden, Japan, Germany, and Australia and the ODA. Therefore, these international aid agencies can exert considerable influence on Laos, as well as its educational agenda, through projects and funding allocation. As seen in the research on education development in Laos by Don, Geok, Lin that *"influence of international donors on the priorities and projects of national plans can be substantial... appears in the establishment of broad priorities (e.g., basic education), which donors tend to favor"* (Don, Geok, Lin, 2002, p.229).

The Lao education national goal of UPE is an outcome of the National Goals approved at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress Party, where the highest political circle was attending and shaped itself through the MDG2 and Education for All (signed at the World Education Conference in 2000).

Joint efforts by the government and Development Partners (DPs) signed at the Vientiane Declaration facilitates the implementation of the Education Sector Development Framework (ESDF) in 2008, where the DPs fostered sector analysis, policy and strategies, and programs of actions and management. This condition is one requirement for Laos to apply for the Fast Track Initiative, a donor group established since 2002 designed to help developing countries to achieve Universal Primary Education. It is thus, noteworthy that planning tends to focus on projects that respond to donor-driven initiatives and resources.



**Figure 17: Summary of MOES and DPs towards Lao Primary Education Reform**



**Source: MOES EFA, Report 2008**

The ESDF has three main areas to reform Lao education performance:

**To expand equitable access**, first, a school block grant is introduced to offset the informal fee that schools used to rely on the parents for. Second, scholarships were also a strategy to support children from poorer families. Third, is to form multi-grade classes in incomplete schools. Fourth is to ensure access to both genders.

**To improve the education quality**, by increasing instructional hours, recruiting teachers from rural areas, ensuring the adequate supply of teachers in rural areas, and strengthening school management and delivery of teacher education.

**To reduce repetition rate and dropout rate** to meet the MDG2 and EFA, by implementing School Feeding Programs to six-year-old students and the Progressive Promotion Policy.

These policies were starting to take place in the Lao education together with the other policies borrowed from different countries as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia in a different time.

There were several policies toward the accessibility of primary education, such as 'Child-Based Learning Center' in 1992, a program to design the learning method based on students' demands. 'Multi-Grades Classrooms' in 2000, provided multiple grades within one classroom, therefore full primary school grades (5 Grades) can be provided, despite the limited number of classrooms and teachers. The 'Equitable Teachers Recruitment, Deployment, and Distribution' policy recruited teachers from rural areas and trained them with the expectation for them to return to their hometown and teach there.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education (hereafter MOE) conducted an overview of the government policy toward education and as a long-term objective established and promoted vocational training for women and girls, minority groups, and disadvantaged adults (Peters, 1998, pp.5).

Bilingual education (Lao and ethnic minority language) in the first grade of primary school was introduced in the 'Education for All National Plan of Action 2003-2015'. The latest educational policy document titled 'National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education 2011-2015' aims to eliminate disparities in educational access for disadvantaged groups (especially women and girls), ethnic groups, and people with socio-economic difficulties (Miki Inui, 2009, pp.4).

The ongoing concern by donor agencies to extend access to basic education and improve 'quality', resulted in the 2002 establishment of the Education For All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI), (World Bank Independent Evaluation Group, 2006), as a global partnership between donors and developing countries to help accelerate progress towards the MDG of universal primary education by 2015. While this initiative represents a concerted effort to coordinate the support of donor agencies, some argue that the EFA-FTI fosters planned dependence, involving an increased reliance on technical assistance to fulfill the administrative requirements for receiving funds (Torres, 2003; Samoff, 2007; Hartwell, 2008). Nevertheless, the World Bank and UN agencies anticipate that the EFA-FTI would provide resources that should enable developing countries to extend access, improve quality, and implement reform plans.

Besides, educational planning was emphasized by MOES officials and by many educational experts, both domestic and foreign, who were invited to contribute. The policy framework of the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) to improve the educational situation in Laos was formed for the 2010-2015 plan (MOES, 2010). This includes increasing decentralization of educational services, improving policy planning, budgeting and monitoring sector performance, efficient management of human resources, an adequate flow of information to ensure transparency and accountability, and aid effectiveness through harmonization and government ownership. Also, there are support from international organizations, such as 'child-friendly schools' from UNICEF. It focuses on the learning environment, equity, and gender and community participation, aiming at improving the quality of the development.

Moreover, there are also development programs from the Community Initiatives for Education Development (CIED-II) programs, that support 'self- developing schools of quality' through a bottom-up approach to school development planning. Also, there is a very supportive program from the Education For All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) to train the principals in School-Based Management (Daravone Kittiphanh, 2011, pp.5). It is seen that there were efforts to develop education in Laos, not only at the domestic level, but Laos was also receiving considerable assistance from international organizations.

Moreover, in 2011, MOES set new instructional guidance to create an incentive for teachers, known as '3-builds', which spells out the details on the authority, roles, and functions of the central government and schools. The 3-builds consisted of: 'build- great teaching-learning', 'build- a safeguard to avoid the challenging' and 'build- a good environment to study.' This is to form the standard of teachers and the schools, to make the evaluation possible and accurate.

An additional strategy was the teacher salary-raise implementation. After the proposal was placed and went through all the respective processes for nine years, this incentive was finally approved by the central government in 2012. With this new salary, it was expected that teachers would not have to worry about looking for other part-time jobs but would concentrate only on teaching. With this, the quality of teaching would be improved. Besides these efforts, new schools, additional classrooms in the primary schools were also built. In addition, more and more teacher training centers have been consistently established.

#### **4. The remaining educational issues**

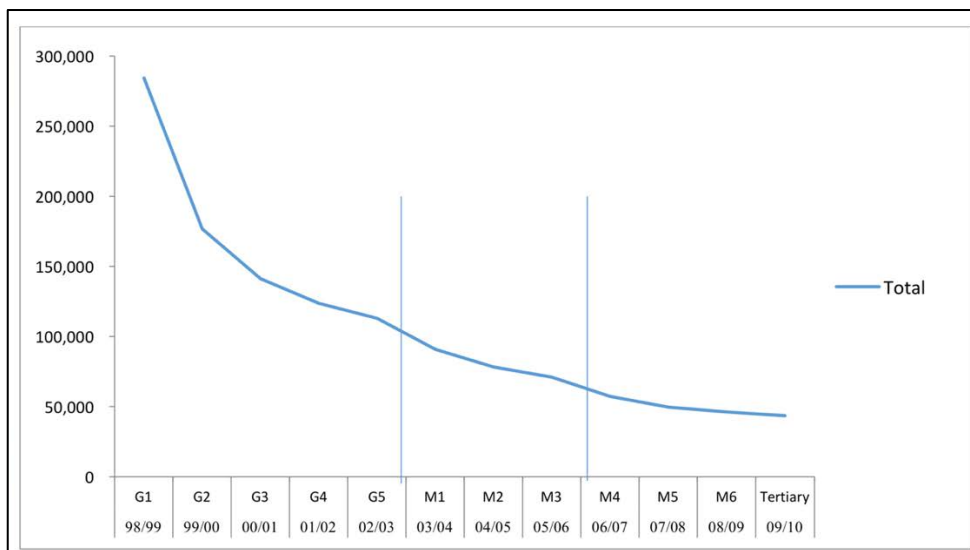
Despite the budget and efforts from the government on educational improvement, unfortunately, problems remained. Firstly, the allocated budget was often delayed. Additionally, it covered only some components of each policy. Thus many policies have shown little success. Principals still lack the capacity for instructional leadership. The distribution of teachers by the government is considered weak. Teachers are oversupplied in urban areas, while there is a severe shortage of teachers in rural and remote areas. In 2009 there were more than 1,034 primary schools with one or two teachers in rural areas (MOES's Mid-term Review, 2013). Insufficient classrooms, textbooks, and teacher guidelines have always remained as problems. The teaching approach by the teachers is not based on the ability of the students. Adaptations of the curriculum to meet the demand of different groups of students are too tricky for a significant number of teachers, which is found to be more severe in rural areas.

The Mid-Term Review of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in 2008 indicated that the enrolment rate was 'on track' (95% in 2008) to meet the goal of 97% by 2015. However, the dropout rate was 'off track' with a rate of 10% in 2008, which was considered

too slow to achieve 0% by 2015. As a result, MOES and the DPs agreed to jointly undertake a sector analysis to develop an Education Sector Development Framework (ESDF) in 2009. This was a policy framework designed to achieve the agreed targets.

The education situation in Laos has been improving, but only the enrollment rate. It has almost achieved one of the targets of the MGD2 of 96% in 2013-2014 (from 68% in 1994-1995). Even though the enrollment rate increased, the dropout rate remained high. For example, there were 280,000 students enrolled in Grade 1 in 1998, but only 27,000 students stayed in school until the tertiary level in 2010 (Statistic ITC MOES, 2013), as indicated in Figure 19. Due to the annual dropout rate of 9-10%.

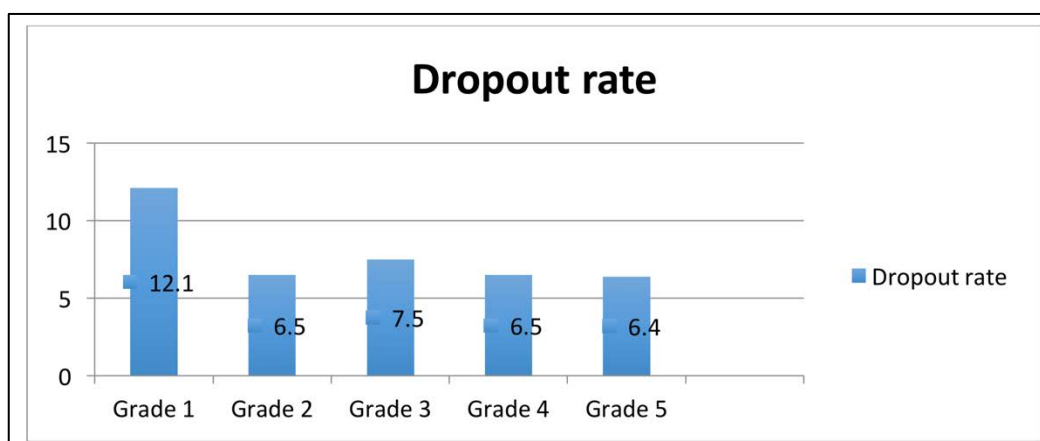
**Figure 18: Enrolled students in primary Grade 1 to tertiary level, 1998-1999 to 2009-2010**



**Source: MOES, 2011**

Therefore, above all, the most serious problem is the high rate of dropout in primary school, where no improvement has been seen in the past. And what is puzzling is that the highest rate of dropout concentrates in Grade 1, 12.1% (2016-2017) see Figure 18, while in the same period other grades had a dropout rate of 6% to 7% (Educational strategy research and analysis center MOES, 2017). This goes against the common understanding that students tend to quit more at higher grades. Consequently, the literacy rate remained low in many disadvantaged and ethnic group communities, and among children in rural areas.

**Figure 19: Primary dropout rate in 2016-2017**



**Source: MOES, ICT, 2018**

#### **IV. Persistent primary school dropouts**

The problem of dropout exists, and there is no clear explanation from MOES about the reasons leading students to drop out, except indicating poverty as the reason. Dr. M., an educational policy planner at MOES, stated that *"We are aware of the issue of the high rate of dropout, but because of the limited budget, examining the real causes of each area has to be delayed. So far, there are no concrete answers to the question of why do students quit school, except the main reason like poverty, the reasons beyond that have not been explored yet"*.

#### **Dropout poses an issue to both national and personal level**

##### **➤ National level**

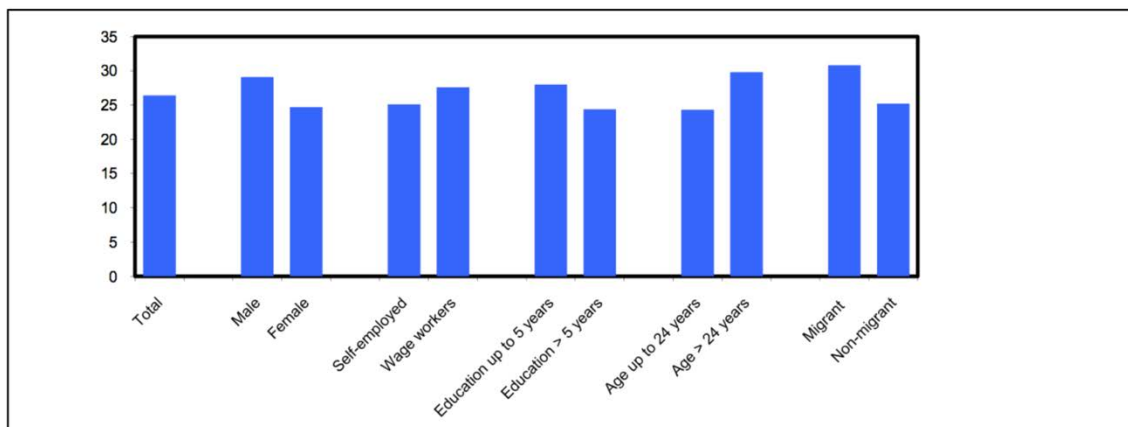
In order to have scientists, economists, bureaucrats, or medical doctors, it is necessary to have good universities. It is necessary to have many young students. However, if many students drop out of school, there will be fewer students going to junior high school, to high school, and college. Therefore, as primary education is the basis of all further education, it is crucial for the schools to keep students from dropping out.

Moreover, dropouts could lead the country to have a high rate of illiteracy. This could hurt the Lao national economy, as literacy plays a significant role in determining the labor

market and the labor market, in turn, is the major source of the economy in the country. As seen in Colclough, 1982, "*higher schooling is expected to increase cognitive development and also contribute to economic modernization.*"

Dropouts are less likely to find and hold jobs that pay enough to keep them off public assistance. Even if they find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates. Higher rates of unemployment and lower earnings cost the nation lost production and reduced tax income (Rumberger, 2001). As seen in 2007-2008, on the 4th National Human Development report, more than a quarter (26.4%) (MPI- UNDP, 2009) of the employed workforce in Lao PDR consider themselves underemployed, as seen in Figure 20.

**Figure 20: Underemployment Rate by different categories in Laos**



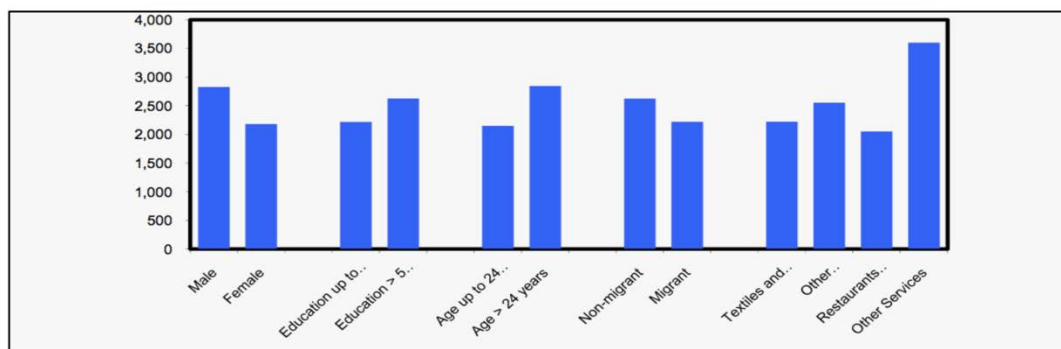
**Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment and UNDP, 2009, Employment and Livelihoods: The 4<sup>th</sup> National Human Development Report**

➤ *Personal level*

At the individual level, a student who does not complete school education severely restricts his adult earning potential. Dropouts could be categorized as low skilled workers working in the informal sector, such as migrant workers, textile workers, and working in restaurants, places where they receive very little payment. According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Laos and the UNDP survey about the livelihood of wage earners in Laos, the income of wage earners' work per day is around 2 USD to 4 USD. For example,

migrant workers, textiles workers, and restaurant workers work one hour for 2,250 kip or USD2.5 (MPI- UNDP, 2009), as presented below in Figure 21.

**Figure 21: Hourly earnings of wage workers in 2007 and 2008**



**Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment and UNDP, 2009, Employment and Livelihoods: The 4<sup>th</sup> National Human Development Report**

Another example comes from the case of timber processing workers in Vientiane, where they can receive up to four times more as skilled machine operators, and two to three times more as skilled workers, than as unskilled laborers (MPI- UNDP, 2009), as listed in the table in Figure 22.

**Figure 22: Average Monthly Wage Rate for Wood Processing workers in Vientiane**

<b>Table 3.4. Average Monthly Wage Rate for Wood Processing Workers in Vientiane</b>	
Unskilled Labor	\$25-\$35
Semi-skilled	\$35-\$40
Skilled	\$50-\$70
Skilled machine operators	US\$100

**Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment and UNDP, 2009, Employment and Livelihoods: The 4<sup>th</sup> National Human Development Report**



The low-skilled workers do not face only the issue of low wage-earning, but also the instability of the jobs, which sometimes is pushed into the informal sector, including becoming migrant workers. This is the same with school dropouts; they are categorized as low-skilled workers. According to the labor force survey of the government in 2010, child labor is remarkably high. Out of the total population of Lao children (5 to 17 years old), 1,767,109 children, around 15% (265,509) are currently employed in some economic activity instead of studying at school. Among the children engaged in economic activities, 67% (178,014) are considered as child labor, and 49% of the working children are considered to be engaged in hazardous child labor (ILO, 2010). Furthermore, these children are not protected by any labor law, which puts them in a riskier situation e.g. not receiving the wage, over-working, and being poorly treated by the employers.

## **1. Review dropouts' determinants in Laos**

Many studies of drop out related issues in Laos are reviewed. First, an official study of MOES in 2012 "The challenges to achieving the millennium development goal 2 & 3: the rapid assessment of school dropouts, the distribution of textbooks and teachers' guidelines primary education". Another study is the "History of Lao education" by Khamy Bouasengthong in 1996. The study of Mr. Phanhpakit and Terukazu in 2006' "Education and Earnings in Lao PDR: Regional and Gender Differences" is revised. Following with the study of Richard Noonan in 2011 "EDUCATION IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC: CONFLUENCE OF HISTORY AND VISION," which provided data of Lao education situation in the past as well as hinted reasons of drop out issue. Finally, a study of Lao ethnicity and their schooling of Inui Miki in 2009 has shown the situation of different groups of ethnicity in Laos, "Minority education and development in contemporary Laos."

Variables used in the studies made up of both schools (internal factors) and students' household (external factors) of dropouts:

*School availability incomplete facilities:* children in rural areas usually walk to school. Therefore, if the school is too far, it can discourage them from going to school. In addition, it is also found that schools with incomplete facilities such as adverse classroom conditions, not

enough classrooms, no toilet, no tap water, no playground, not enough textbooks, writing supplies, as well as shortage of teachers with poor skills can lead students to drop out from school (MOES, 2012). What to note is that more than 50% of primary schools in Laos have less than three teachers (Stuart Fox, 1996). Besides, most of the teachers still rely on side jobs, mainly farming in order to support their livelihood and their family. Hence, teachers tend to have limited time to compose the teaching plans and are occasionally absent from school during the cultivating season. As a result, the parents, at some point, lose trust in the school. Regarding students' dropout, principals and teachers never come up with a solution to the issue (MOES, 2012).

*Parents' background:* influences the children to drop out. First maternal schooling is dominated paternal schooling, and its effect is particularly high for ethnic subgroups (Phanhpakit Onphanhdala and Terukazu Suruga, 2006) Second, it is widely known that household poverty has a big impact on children's education. Poverty issues including lack of food, uniforms, shelters, and the inability to pay for some necessary fees have been the reasons for the high primary school dropout rate. Therefore, poorer households are prone to income shocks and unable to insure themselves (MOES, 2012). They are less likely to send their children to school, but more likely to pull them out of school in the event of an adverse shock. Family income has a substantial impact on both girls and ethnic subgroups to dropout (Phanhpakit Onphanhdala and Terukazu Suruga, 2006).

*Gender disparity:* Even, in recent years, gender difference has declined, girls likely to be pulled out of school in order to help with household chores, although they are less likely to repeat a grade than boys, girls are most likely to drop out than boys (Noonan, 2011). The gender bias can be traced to the perception that returns to educating the male child are higher as compared to the girl child. Nevertheless, another study of the gender issue in Laos mentioned that inequality is almost disappeared, only a small percentage shown the girls drop out more. What remains, however, is a sign of divergence among different ethnic groups, particularly in rural areas (Phanhpakit Onphanhdala and Terukazu Suruga, 2006).

*Ethnic minority:* ethnic groups in Laos is classified into three main group. The Lao Loum or the Tai-Kadai group became the ethnic majority, while the others two (Lao Theung or Austro-Kadai and Lao Soung or Sino-Tibetan group) were the ethnic minorities. The Lao

Loum speaks the national language 'Lao', this group has traditionally dominated the political and economic arenas in the lowlands and have had relatively easy access to formal education compared to other ethnic groups (Miki Inui, *Hmong Studies Journal* Volume 16, 24 pages). Therefore, if the Lao Loum people had limited access to education, the Ethnic minority children were in a worse position considering the location where they were in the mountainous rural areas. Therefore, the difficulty that the ethnic minority groups are more about the accessibility of the schools. What may be more problematic to them is the language. The policy of using only Lao as the language of instruction contributes to the educational disadvantage of ethnic minorities (KB, 1996, pp. 121-122). More than 80% of the teachers were from the majority group<sup>47</sup>. The study of MOES in 2012 confirmed that teachers' lessons are difficult to follow by ethnic students and may have led them to drop out (MOES, 2012). Phanhpakit Onphanhdala and Terukazu Suruga's study supported this point "the major obstacle is the first grade, where repetition rates are very high at 35% in 2003-2004 and 32% in 2007-2008, due to mainly children from ethnic minorities face difficulty in understanding the Lao language. Repeating the first grade often leads to more repetition and eventually drops out".

The more specific answer to the causes of dropouts is the most needed in order to solve this chronic problem. However, the issue is very complex, and there are many reasons involved making way for the students to arrive at the final stage of dropout. What was shared as common characteristics from different works of literature are: remote rural area tends to be where problems are concentrated the most because of the schools' inaccessibility, inadequate facility, and unqualified teachers, not the lively economic environment, household poverty and the language barriers for the case of ethnicity.

As for the research contribution, first, the research found the group of 'RETURNEES' or returning students who return to school after quitting for some time. The interval of dropouts is what the research gives important to. This group has not mentioned in any study. It is essential to pay attention to the 'returnees' because understanding how the children decide to return to school is just as important as understanding how they decide to drop out in the first place. The returnees reveal one remarkable fact that they do want to go to school either to study

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<sup>47</sup> According to the Asian Development Bank (2000:52), based on the data from the MOE, the majority of teachers came from the Tai-Kadai group in 1997-98, especially at the primary level

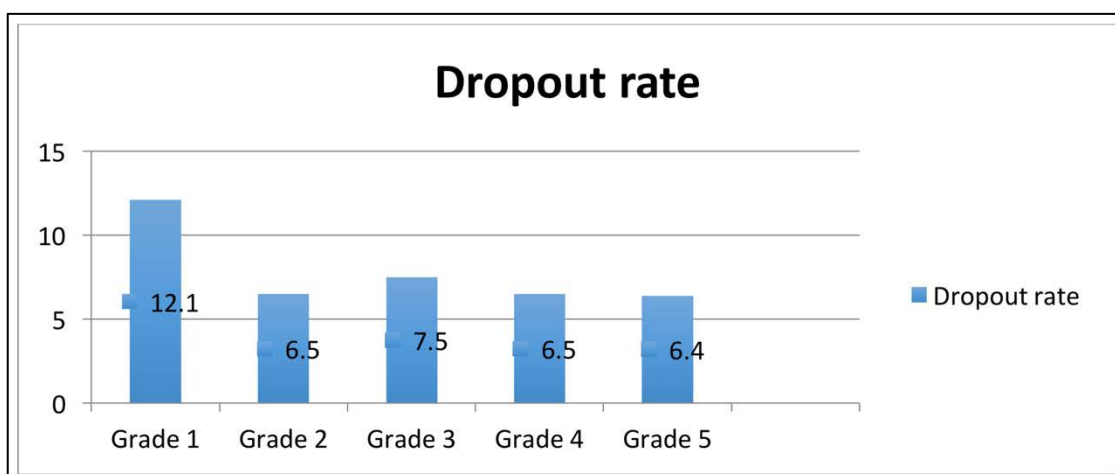
or to have fun. Therefore, similar importance will be given to this group of returnees, and other groups: enrolled students and the dropouts.

## 2. Defining dropout students

According to the information from MOES, a dropout student is an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year and was not enrolled in the current school year, has not graduated from school or completed the educational program, and does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions (e.g. passing the primary educational exam standard), however they might transfer to another public school district or private school (Statistic ITC MOES, 2011).

The current dropout rate in 2016-2017 at the national level is 10.5% (Grade 1: 12.1%, Grade 2: 6.5%, Grade 3: 7.5%, Grade 4: 6.5%, Grade 5: 6.4%) (Statistic ITC MOES, 2013), as presented in the Figure 19.

**Figure 19: Primary dropout rate in 2016-2017**



**Source: MOES, ICT, 2018**

The dropout issue has always been a persistence issue. Instead of having a sign of improvement, it has become worse in the past few years. When looking at the completion rate of ASEAN, Laos has shown some of the lowest educational indicators in the region.

**Figure 23: Primary education completion rate in ASEAN countries**

	Both Sexes		Female		Male	
	2000	2008	2000	2008	2000	2008
<b>Southeast Asia</b>						
Brunei						
Darussalam	121.7	105.7	121.3	106.9	122.0	104.6
Cambodia	47.2	79.5	41.2	79.0	53.1	79.9
Indonesia	98.2	108.1	98.7	106.9	97.8	109.3
Lao PDR	69.3	74.7	63.3	71.0	75.1	78.3
Malaysia	94.0	96.4	93.4	96.2	94.6	96.5
Myanmar	79.9	96.9	77.8	99.7	82.0	94.1
Philippines	101.5	92.3	106.3	95.1	96.8	89.6
Singapore						
Thailand	87.0	87.5	86.7	88.5	87.3	86.6
Viet Nam	96.4		94.2		98.5	

**Source: ADB, Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2010**

In terms of the school life expectancy from primary education to tertiary education in the ASEAN countries, in 2006 Laos appeared to be the second-lowest with 9.2 years, slightly higher than Myanmar with 8.3 years. Laos was lower than countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore by about 1 to 4 years. Considering the national literacy rate, in 2007, Laos was the lowest among all with a rate of 73.2% (Labor and Social Trends in ASEAN, 2008), as listed in Figure 24.

**Figure 24: Competitiveness ranking school expectancy and adult literacy in ASEAN**

	Global competitiveness ranking	Output per worker, constant 1990 US\$	School life expectancy, primary to tertiary education (years)	National literacy rate for adults, ages 15+ (%)
	2007-2008	2007p	2006*	2007**
Singapore	7	46,494	--	94.4
Brunei Darussalam	--	--	14.0	94.9
Malaysia	21	25,045	12.7	91.9
Thailand	28	14,999	13.5	94.1
Indonesia	54	10,309	11.5	91.4
Philippines	71	8,075	11.7	93.4
Vietnam	68	5,453	10.3	--
Myanmar	--	5,082	8.3	89.9
Cambodia	110	3,772	9.8	76.3
<b>Lao PDR</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>73.2</b>

*Notes: "p" demotes projections; "--" denotes data not available or ranking not given; "\*" data for school life expectancy are from 2006, except Malaysia (2005), Myanmar (2002), and Vietnam (2000); "\*\*" data for adult literacy rates are from 2007, except Myanmar (2000).*

*Sources: School-life expectancy and adult literacy rates: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, accessed July 2008; Global competitiveness ranking: World Economic Forum, Global Competitiveness Report 2007-2008; Output per worker: The Conference Board and Groningen Growth and Development Centre, Total Economy Database, January 2008.*

**Source: UNESCO 2007, Institute for Statistics**

According to all the data indicated above, it clearly shows that, from the primary school level until the tertiary school level, Lao has been facing a low rate of school survival. Many students are dropping out of school along the way to higher education. Moreover, although the primary school enrollment of Laos appears to be high, the country is still considered as the one with the lowest enrollment rate in ASEAN. Besides, Laos's completion rate is also the lowest, and it has been stagnant for years, while Cambodia, whose completion rate used to be lower than Laos, has now a higher rate. Moreover, the school life expectancy of Laos is sadly also the lowest among the countries in ASEAN.

### **3. State's policies to cope with dropouts**

Like many countries, Lao PDR has set education as a priority among the national development goals. In 2000 Laos vowed to commit to achieving the goal of universal primary education (UPE) by increasing the enrolment rate to 98% and reducing the dropout rate to 0% by 2015 (UN-MDG 2008). However, to accomplish this goal requires both time and effort.

According to the 2009 report by MOES<sup>48</sup>, Laos had already succeeded in accomplishing half of the goal ahead of time by bringing up the enrolment rate at primary level from 78% in 2000-2011 to 96% in 2016-2017<sup>49</sup>. However, Laos faced an increase in the dropout rate, which rose over the years from 6.8% in 2009-2010 to 10.5% in 2016-2017.

According to the Rapid Assessment of the dropout issue in 2011 by MOES, one-factor leading students is that parents cannot afford to pay the informal fee. The informal fee is the fee that parents need to pay to the school for school maintenance in every academic year, which amounts to 25.000 kip (3 USD) per year, although each school sets a different rate. Given that the informal fee appeared to be the problem, in 2012, the government implemented 'the blockage' policy. The policy aims to remove the informal fee, which amounted to 50.000 kip (6 USD) per student per year. The outcome of the policy is reflected in an increase in the enrollment rate, to 96% in 2010-2011 and 98% in 2016-2017.<sup>50</sup>

The government launched the School Meal Program to bring children to school and to encourage them to stay until the end of the day. The National School Meals Program "*recognizes that good health and proper nutrition are important for improving mental performance, increasing enrollment and reducing absenteeism*" (Omporn Regel, an education specialist from the World Bank office in Vientiane)<sup>51</sup>. Supported by the World Bank, it was introduced in February 2012. In reality, the program is not easy to implement. First, teachers claim they do not have enough time to prepare the meals. Second, in some school, the type of rice that the children are used to consume is different (not-glutinous rice); thus they do not find it so convincing. Third, the lack and delayed budget led many schools to stop doing it.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See MOES. (2009). Aide of Memoire, Educational Sector Development Plan.

<sup>49</sup> See World bank. (2018). *World Bank Database*. Retrieved from:  
<http://data.worldbank.org/topic/education>

<sup>50</sup> MOES. (2018). Educational Indicator

<sup>51</sup> See World bank. (2013). Retrieved from  
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/04/05/Lao-PDR-A-Feeding-Program-is-Bringing-More-Children-to-School>

<sup>52</sup> Fieldwork note summer 2015, 2016, interview in PakNgum district and Phin District in Savanakhet

Lastly, the main policy is the ‘Progressive Promotion Policy’ or PPP<sup>53</sup>, which was implemented in 2009 as the main policy aiming at keeping children progressing with their age-cohort to reduce the repetition rate and the dropout rate. However, the rate of dropout appeared to improve only in the first year of the implementation. The dropout rate decreased from 7.5% (2008-2009) to 6.8% (2009-2010), then increased over the years from 6.8% (2009-2010) to 7.8% (2010-2011) <sup>54</sup>and to 10.5% (2016-2017).

#### **4. Progressive Promotion Policy to solve dropouts**

PPP<sup>55</sup> came from the consultant team of MOES of Laos in 2009 to develop the strategy to achieve the MDG2 (Millennium Development Goal 2: Universal Primary Education), mainly to reduce grade repetition and most importantly the dropout rate<sup>56</sup>.

Based on the memory of three officials of MOES who were in charge of PPP, the policy was brought up by a UNESCO expert in 2004 at the meeting on strategies to accelerate the progress of achieving the goal of UPE. The PPP was suggested by the UNESCO expert team to handle the repetition and the dropout issue, using the case of Cambodia as an example. The study tour for PPP was organized however in Bhutan and not in Cambodia<sup>57</sup>. To the officials, PPP sounds very convincing because it will encourage the parents to send their children to school. Also, it will help to reduce the expense of the parents on children schooling since grade repetition is no longer allowed. However, they did admit that the teachers needed to work harder since they have to provide the remedial classes and make sure that all the children are moving up with good quality.

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<sup>53</sup> see, MOES. (2009). Minister’s Instruction on Progressive Promotion, Vientiane, Laos

<sup>54</sup> see World bank, (2013). *World Bank Database*, from <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/education>

<sup>55</sup> see MOES, (2009). Minister's Instruction on Progressive Promotion, Vientiane, Laos

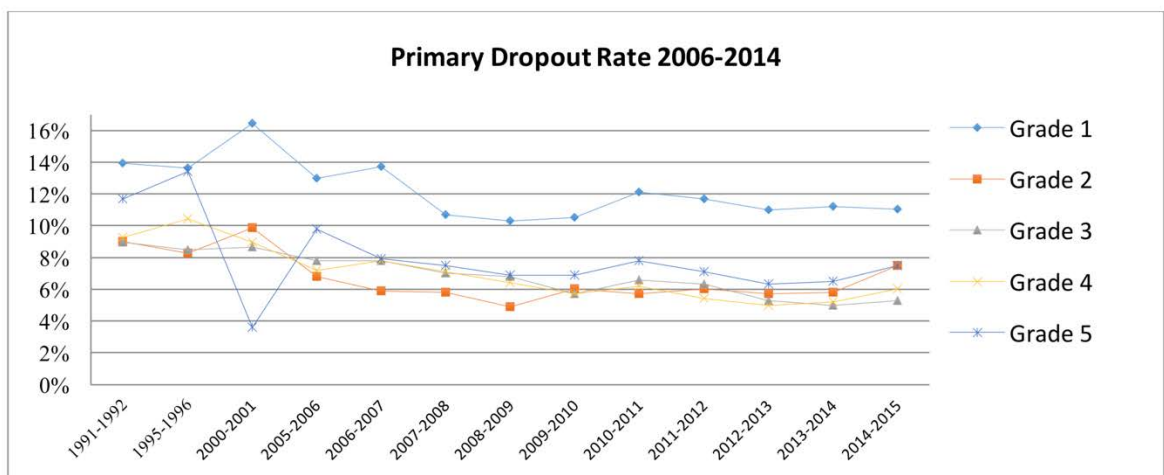
<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with MOES officials, department of planning and investment.



The PPP was finally put into a degree NO. 1203 on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2009, under the Education Sector Development Framework endorsement. The content of the policy is to encourage children to stay in schools. This is supposed to make sure that everyone finishes the primary education within five years, as there used to be a large number of children spending as many as nine years. Thus, the policy aimed to reduce the crowded classrooms, mainly Grade 1 (where usually one-third of children were repeaters) and to keep children progressing with their age-cohort. It was hoped that this would prevent children from being over-aged before graduating so that there are more chances for students to stay at school, as over-aged students tend to drop out more than regular-aged students. However, the outcome was uneven. The dropout rate remains problematic, at 8-10% annually, and the improvement has been very unsteady, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Primary Dropout Rate from 1991 to 2014**



**Source: ICT, MOES, 2016**

It noteworthy that the overall primary dropout rates of 5 grades before 2009, the introduction of the PPP, was already decreasing. After the PPP, the dropout rate slightly went up at first from 6.9% (2008-09) to 7.8% (2010-11) and remained at around 8% on average in the years later. Because of the persistent dropout rate, in 2015 the rate was 8.3%, and Laos failed to achieve the goal rate of 0%. What is puzzling is that regardless of the introduction of the PPP, graduation does not seem strong enough to keep the students to remain at school until their primary completion. What is more surprising is that in 2017, the dropout rate increased to 10.5%.

## V. Education reform at the village level

### 1. The administration

Laos' education administration is based on the decentralization of educational services from the central, provincial to the district level as presented below in Figure 27. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES)<sup>58</sup>. The administration is structured in different departments and divisions which extend the bureaucracy through the 17 provinces and 142 districts down to the schools. Each Provincial Education Bureau (PEB)<sup>59</sup> has supervisory (financial, personnel, managing resources) and inspectorial responsibilities (oversights the working at the district level). Each District Education Bureau (DEB)<sup>60</sup> is responsible for schools operations at a standard timetable, provides teaching support, and collects statistics.

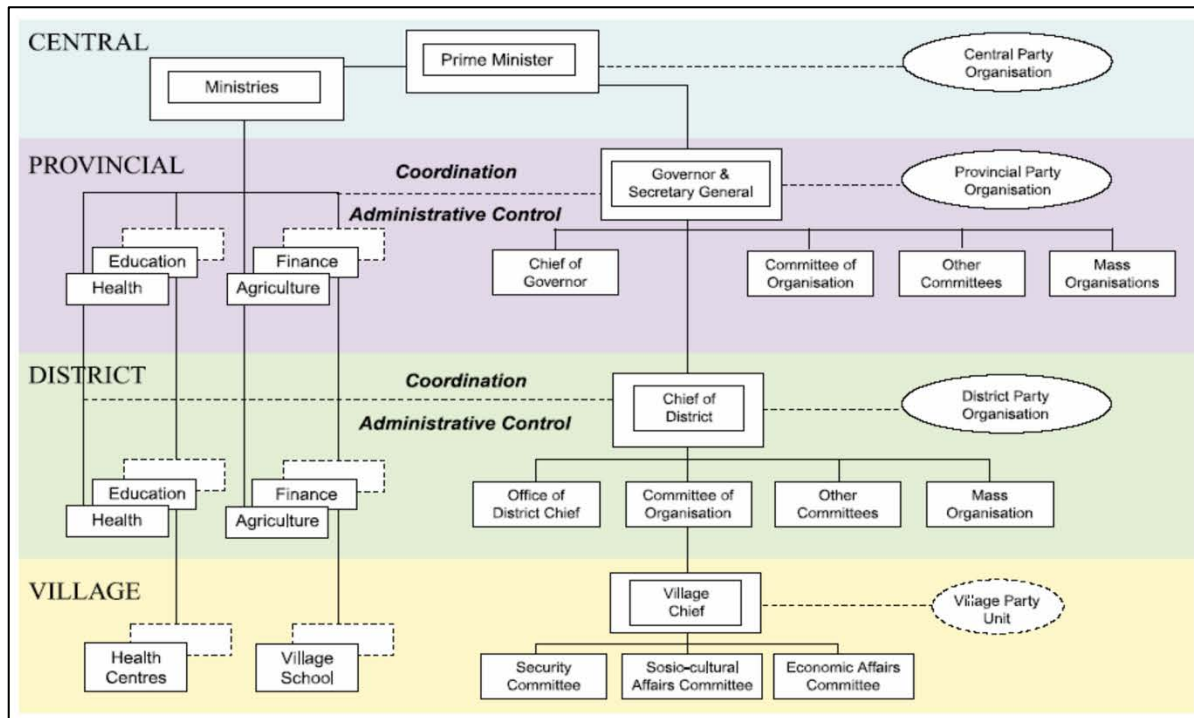
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<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos (MOES) is the organ that creates educational policies and education curriculum from nursery to university level. The ministry is under the supervision of the Minister. The ministry's role is to provide guidance and leadership, to implement, to inspect, and to evaluate the education administration under the government and the Party policy

<sup>59</sup>The provincial level's role, is to provide guidance and leadership, implement, inspect and evaluate education administration, management, and development within its province following the government and the Party policy

<sup>60</sup>The role of the educational district, is to provide guidance and leadership, implement, inspect and evaluate education administration, management, and development within its district under provincial and the ministry of education and sports' policy

**Figure 25: Overview of the overall central-local party-state framework**



**Source: UNDP (Lao PDR) National Human Development Report (2001)**

## 2. Educational budget

In theory, the education sector receives an increasing share from the national budget from the National Assembly, but how much the sector receives, is another thing. Based on the interview with staff from different levels. It was found that each level had not been using the money as planned, what is more, surprising is that there is no plan, especially the district and village level. As a result, at the implementation level like the village, they barely get access to the budget and managing the fund themselves by asking the Village Administration and villagers to contribute to school operation.

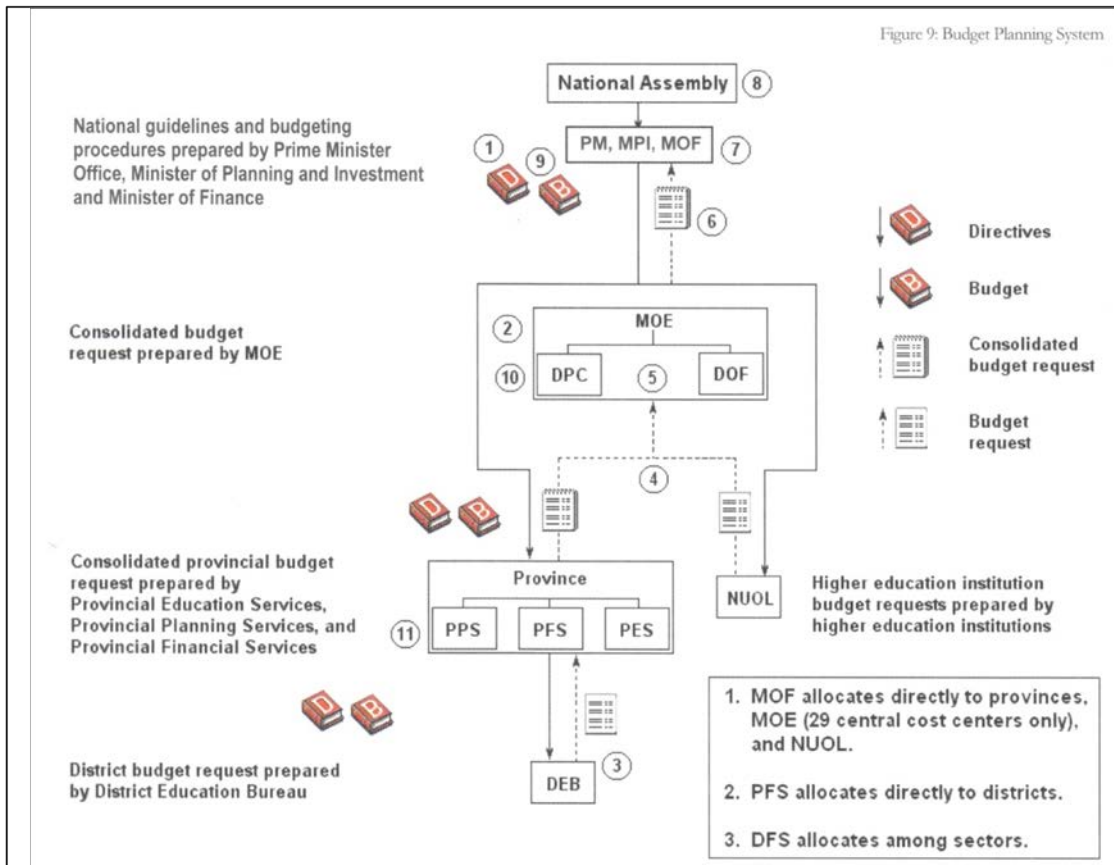
The education budget is defined by the National Assembly based on the demand of the MOES, which has had an increasing trend. The state expenditure on education increased from 8.2% in 2000 to 14.5% in 2008. As a result, from 2000 to 2008, 40,000 more teachers were recruited, and 1,000 more school buildings were established (ICT, MOES Laos, 2016). Recently, in 2017, the ministry received 17% of the national budget, the highest among other sectors such as health and economy. The Ministry of Finance allocated the budget directly to

the province level. Out of the total budget, more than 50% was destined to pay the salaries of education officials and teachers. It meant there might not have been much budget left for managing work. Moreover, when needed, the province administration may use it to support some other sectors if they are perceived as urgent.

Schools and village administration can prepare their budgets and submit their demands to the district. Most of the time, the response is delayed, and the demands end up not being fulfilled. Moreover, many times, the schools failed to submit the requests ahead of time. To cope with the situation, the school's principal relies on Village Education Development Community (VEDC) to gather villagers' participation (money and labor force).

To sum up, there is a lack of financial support at the village level, and many times, they have to manage the budget based on the available resources within their reach. A study of the schools in the southern part of Laos shared a similar story; it said that there was an "*absence of adequate resources to implement plans and programs. Local administrators remain de facto policymakers as they are forced to rely on experiential knowledge, community resources, and innovations to keep schools in operation*" (Willsher.M. 2013).

**Figure 26: Budget Planning Process**



Source: EFA-Mid Decade, 2008

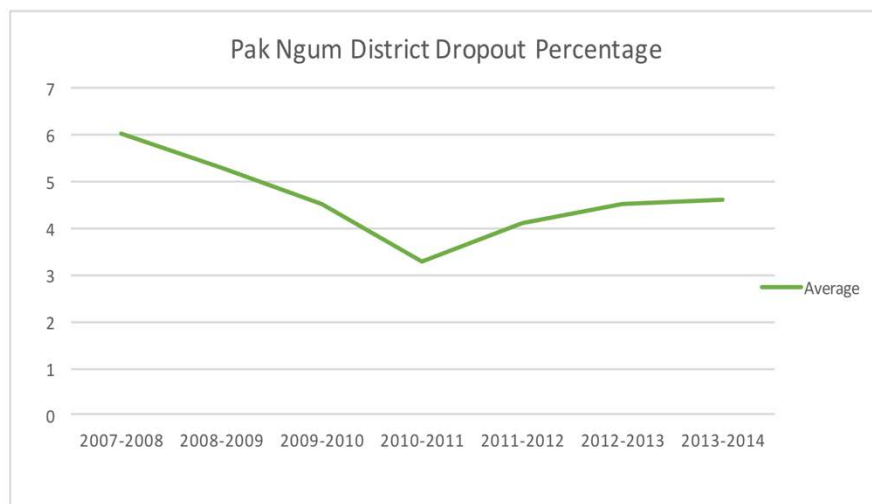
## VI. PakNgum: a case study of an educational reform

The 2012 record from the district educational bureau on the overall primary education performance in PakNgum showed exciting facts and figures. First, there was enough school in ParNgum District, where there were 56 primary schools among 47 villages meaning there was at least one primary school per village. There were approximately 10,172 students, which gives an average of 181 students per school. Besides the positive looking indicators, when examining the accessibility, it takes the students between 10 to 30 minutes for them to reach the nearest school by foot. With this in mind, it is not surprising when looking at the primary school enrollment rate, PakNgum had surpassed the goal ahead of time. Since 2012, the rate was already 95%.<sup>61</sup> Second, in total, there are 507 primary school teachers in PakNgum, meaning

<sup>61</sup> See, MOES. (2012). *Annual Educational report*. Vientiane, Laos: PakNgum District

on average, there is one teacher for 20 students and almost ten teachers per one primary school. Nonetheless, it was reported that there were not enough teachers in three villages and that those schools need to merge some grades up and be instructed by only one teacher. This is called multi-grades classes<sup>62</sup>. It is generally agreed by the district officials that there is a problem of students' learning quality in PakNgum as a whole, worse in this multi-grades type of school. Besides, it was noted that PakNgum had always been facing dropout problem, 6.1% in 2007-2008, although it reduced to 3.2% in 2010-2011, later it rebounded up to 4.8% in 2013-2014 (see Figure 28), meanwhile, the rate in other surrounding districts were less than 3% in the same period.

**Figure 27: Primary Dropout rate in PakNgum**



**Source: Statistic-ITC MOES Center 2015**

In brief, although PakNgum has over 95% of enrollment rate, on average 4.3% of them leave school every year. The dropout issue has been chronic for the district educational sector that has yet to find a solution to, despite the effort in both the software (Policies, promotions) and hardware (buildings, study tools) enhancements by the state.

Historically, education in the district was expanding slowly. Since the French colonial period, state education did not expand to this area. State's schools started to spring up more

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<sup>62</sup> Usually the class is paired up by Grade1 and Grade2; Grade3 and Grade; Grade 5 is usually left solely because it is the most crucial grade which determined whether the students can graduate or not

under the USAID and UNESCO educational development plan in the 1960s. However, due to the civil war in the 1970s, educational promoting was not the focus. As a result, the majority of the elderly or the 1<sup>st</sup> generation in PakNgum are illiterate. The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, who are the parents, did receive a certain level of primary education but still considered as having low education attainment, less than 10% finished full primary schooling.<sup>63</sup> Notwithstanding that there is a low interest in education, not so many people seem to see its significance since these people have been living in a subsistent way, the idea of investing in education is quite new.

When looking at the economic environment in PakNgum District, it has not changed much from the past; jobs availability is by far still not enough for the villagers at the district. The main activity of the people therefore has always been growing rice, which they tend to be very busy during the plantation season in July-August and the cultivation period in October-November. In PakNgum only one-third of the villages have access to the irrigation system. Thus, the majority of the people in more than 30 villages only grow rice one season per year. Parents' activities could have a direct impact on the schedule of their children's schooling, particularly when examining the schedule, **schooling, and farming schedule are overlapped**. School's academic year is September-June. Given the farming schedule mentioned earlier, there are at least two months of the time when the farming time and schooling time get overlapped. Therefore, the students need to leave school to help out with the farm, especially during the labor-intensive period and resume school later after the farming end. However, there is some stay on to do something else. The latter creates a more serious disruption to the schooling routine, as they later tend to drop out of school. This usually happens when something related to rice farming goes wrong such as the unstable price of rice and natural disasters e.g., flood and drought. The farmers could quickly lose their expected profit or their productivities. This, therefore, disrupts their household consumption and children schooling since the popular option for the parents is to go looking for jobs elsewhere. Children were asked to leave school, either for short or long while to fit in the parents' farming schedule and mobility.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with senior members of PakNgum district officials

Besides, the effect of parents' concern (food and jobs) to the children schooling, parents' low educational background is another factor discouraging the commitment of children's regular school enrollment. This is reconfirmed by a study, i.e., 'Inclusive Education Center Baseline study in Factors Inhibiting Students to Go to School 2009', "*The study showed that parents who do not finish primary school do not worry whether their children finish their schooling or not.*"

During the fieldwork, through a series of interviews, students are categorized as **Regular students**, **Returnee**, and **Dropout**. A **Regular Student** is a student who attends school at the normal age as suggested by the Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos and continues until he or she finishes primary school, the compulsory level. A **Returnee Student** is a student who is currently enrolling in school; however, he had once or more time short (At least one month) been out of school and had return to study. This group, **Returnee Student**, has neither been mentioned in any study nor recorded in any statistical report before. Finally, a **Dropout Student** is who once was a **Regular Student** or a **Returnee** but has now dropped out of school for good.

The Fieldwork aims to provide a better understanding of different groups of students and the interval of dropout based on 14 rounds of fieldwork, talking to 30 students from 7 different schools.

## **1. Enrolled students and their reasons to enroll school**

Children's whose parents are also farmers but doing better off in terms of regular income whose jobs are concentrated in local public servants such as soldier, police, teacher and the officer at the district administration office. Another group is the people who have their own account workers such as running small restaurants, having farming machinery and trucks for rent, running retail stores or having a bigger size of the farm to raise livestock such as cows, pigs, and chicken for sale. These people have a certain capacity to have savings to hire labor forces during the busy time of farming and have no need to ask for their children to help with the farming work as well as not need to migrate to work elsewhere.



Some families' profiles of the children's who have always been at school will be presented, in order to grasp a clearer picture of their position and options.

The first case is the case of Mr. Lar's family, he is the Village Head of Nartarm Village. Mr. Lar's two granddaughters are the best students in the town. Everyone in the village knows the family for being powerful as the village head and being wealthy from the big rice field and a big range of livestock both pigs and cows.

Mr. Lar was born in 1950. His parents were farmers and illiterate. He has eight siblings, and he is the youngest. His seven older siblings went to Natarm Primary School but only until grade 4-5 when they quitted helping to work on the farms. Since his brothers and sisters covered all the farm-tasks, Mr. Lar was allowed to continued studying. When Mr. Lar graduated from the high school (1966), one of his older sister was already moved to Vientiane because she got married to a guy who lived there. She offered Mr. Lar to stay with her and she supported him to go to a private language school (English). After two years, he went back to Natarm and was offered to teach at Natarm Primary School in 1968. He also got married in the same year to a large land owner's daughter. While he was teaching, during the vacation, he kept coming to Vientiane for a teacher training and finally received a diploma in teaching. He taught at the school until 1973, when he heard the announcement of the recruitment for new teachers for handicap school in Vientiane supported by the USAID. He was one among 20 candidates who got selected to work there. Thus, at the beginning of 1974, he was a stuff of the USAID program. Due to the political transition in 1975 to a socialist rule, the USAID was withdrawn, he lost the job and returned to Natarm Village, he helped the in-law's at the farms and was active in the village activities, voluntarily helped with the village administration. He got accepted into the village revolutionary party and became the head of the village in 1980. He has been working without a salary until 2000, the state started to pay the salary for 130,000kip per month (USD15).

Mr. Lar expected his four children to go to school and have the highest educational level they can, but they all quitted in the middle, and he could not force them not to do so. When the first child turned six years old and was ready to go to Grade 1, Mr. Lar was excited he said, "*I expected him to study hard and be intelligent and become successful in the future.*" By Grade 5, his son decided to quit school because he wanted to help the family doing rice

farming. Mr. Lar was told about the dropout after the son already stopped going to school for a week. Mr. Lar admitted, *"I did not know how to convince the son to go back to study but only to accept his decision. Besides, we were very poor at that time. After the son quitted school, we could in fact look for food together and work on the land together for the household consumption"*.

When his second son was born, Mr. Lar had accumulated more than 20 cows – buffaloes and the household consumption situation was less stressful. Also, he was already chosen as head of the village, therefore, whenever he needed manpower, the villagers helped him. He expected the second son to do at school, but similar thing happened, the son quitted from grade 5's primary school to look after the cows. Mr. Lar did not react much because he accepted that the son wishes to help the family and that he was also not good at studying. Besides, he did not need to worry about looking for a job, he could always work at the rice field and joined the village patrolling force to receive some respect and resources from the villagers.

His third child was a woman when she was a Grade 5, and she left school to look after Mr. Lar's relatives, who later adopted her as their daughter because their real children fled the country (during the transition from Monarchy to Socialist). Mr. Lar agreed because he felt sorry for the relative. Later, the daughter was arranged to marry the relatives' grandson who had migrated to Japan during the war, after the wedding they all moved to live in Japan, right after she arrived in Japan she got a part-time job at a food processing factory, until now she is still working there and has been sending remittent to Mr. Lar.

The fourth son was born, when the family's situation got better. Mr. Lar sold his buffaloes and cows to buy a truck for his oldest son to do delivery work, carrying stuff from the south to the north for people. Moreover, he also made charcoal to sell. The charcoals were made from wood in the common forest, which he later stopped in 1990-1993 when the government stopped people from accessing to the forest. The fourth son though had the most supports to go to school, but he could only make it to Grade 9 (Middle School) when he stopped to help with family's farm and got married at the age of 14.

In Mr. Lar's case, although he does not need labor for farming but since he was engaging in others' activities such as carrying stuff for the people, making charcoal, as well as

doing village administration works, he sees opportunities for his sons to have the jobs without the need to be at school, although he claimed that education is very important.

Mr. Lar's passion for business did not stop there; he said: *"I have always been looking for opportunities to earn more money to improve the household economy, but I did not have information, and I did not know what the market needs."* Only until 2010, when one guy from the city came to see him from the introduction of people at the district, he told Mr. Lar to grow Napier Grass for him to raise his cows (special breed); unfortunately, one year later, he passed away. However, Mr. Lar already grew the grass, and so he used them to feed his own cows, and they seemed to look more beautiful, so he raised more cows with the special grass.

Around the end of 2011, Tapioca factory was built in PakNgum, the owner of the factory is a Chinese investor. The guy talked to Mr. Lar about the benefit of growing Cassava Plantation, and therefore asked him to encourage the villagers to grow the cassava trees. Mr. Lar himself grew the plants, along with more than 20% of the villagers. The activity went well for the first two years until later when the factory stopped buying Cassava from Mr. Lar and all the villagers, without paying them any compensation. The villagers and Mr. Lar agreed to sue the company. Mr. Lar went to see the district staff, and the district has received the case, but until now Mr. Lar has not received any news about it. *"Eventually, everyone just forgot about it"*, told by Mr. Lar.

Later, in 2015, the CP pigs farm was introduced to Natarm Village by a Thai Private company. They need the people to invest in the cage and raise the pig, while the CP people will provide everything (piggy, food, and advice). Later after five months the company will buy all the pigs for USD0.8 per 1 Kg. Mr. Lar and his oldest son decided to do this pig farm. He borrowed the investing money from the daughter who lives in Japan. *"without the money from my daughter; we will not be able to do it until now we are the only one who can invest in the CP pig farm."* When asked in detail what CP pig farm different from other state's guidance on agriculture before such as the other to turn the farm to business. He said that *"CP people came and told them every detail of how to do the activities, including finding them the strong market where they can always sell with expected price. Unlike the state's orders that usually come on papers and many times too unrealistic. Once we were suggested to create a product*

*to sell under ODOP, without any idea of what to produce, no conservative method provided and no market, we could not follow."*

After earning this cash income, Mr. Lar wants to support his grand-daughters to study in Vientiane because he said that "*they will get a better education service and be with stricter teachers. Also, they will be able to see civilization and study foreign languages*". Therefore, he sent his two granddaughters to stay with relatives and study in a secondary school in Vientiane. He also pointed out that these children need some preparations to enter the university in Vientiane later. What is difficult now is the money to send to them, to spend on the English school. However, he said it is ok as long as his CP project is going right, "*later these children can find a good job in the city, which is worth it.*"

The next case is from Mr. Khamson, principal of Natarm primary school. Khamson's two children have never been absent from school since they enrolled. Khamson's previous experience on education that allowed him to become a teacher receiving a stable income, convinced him that the children would be better off by keeping study to develop some skills; besides, his cow's farm can entirely secure the household economy.

Khamson is a grade 5 and the principal of Natarm Primary School. He is the second youngest child of the family and the only son. Since he was small, he was told by the parents he needs to get a diploma (either police or teacher) because all the older sisters could not do it (all dropped out to work on the farm). Khamson went to a teacher training school, after graduated, he returned to teach at Nason Primary School (a village nearby his hometown). Khamson is undoubtedly a better off guy among his friends who have been receiving financial support from his father throughout his study. His father originally came from Thailand, to settle down in Laos in 1973 and got married to his mother, who is a local Nason villager. The reason he moved to Laos was that it was too difficult to earn money and to own land in Thailand. He has some skills of wood carpentering; therefore, when he first arrived at PakNgum, he relied on that skill to earn money, building, maintaining the people's houses. Later he met with his wife at Nason Village; she was a farmer. After they got married, they received some land from her family (2 Hectares). They kept buying more until he has 16 hectares. He also had cleaned some abandoned land and could reserve four more hectares. After 1975 with the new socialist

rule, the majority of Thai people who came to Laos had returned to Thailand from being scared of the new socialist government. However, his father chose to stay on for several reasons. The first reason is that he has too many children (7 children). The father thinks it will be too difficult to settle down in a new place with this amount of children. Second, he has many lands, and he did not want to abandon them, moreover, when people left, there was more land for him to reserve and buy at a lower price. Third, he knew how to stay on without having any problem with the new authority; he volunteered to teach at the Village Primary School.

Khamsone got married to his wife who is the police; she is a local villager at Natarm Village. Therefore, he moved to live in Natarm. The main household income of the couple came from their salary, growing rice and raising livestock. The following activity has later become their main business. They raise cows for sale, 50 cows per year, which allows him to earn so much. One cow is one million kip or (USD100). Only by selling one cow, the family can use the money to buy rice for the whole year. But they are still growing rice for household consumption. Because they spend most of their time taking care of the cows, they hire labors to do rice farming.

Both of his daughters never have to worried about farming or looking for a way to earn money. They were one of the good students since primary until high school. The first daughter is 19 years old (2017), she is studying Teacher Training at the National University of Laos (NUOL). She is living with one of her aunts who moved to settle down in Vientiane. Her plan after graduation is to return to teach at the secondary school of the village nearby, Nason Secondary School (Khamson's hometown). The second daughter is 17 years old (2017), studying at the last grade at Nason Secondary School. Khamsone thought of sending her to study in the city as well as the sister because Nason Secondary School's teachers are not active and he never heard of any successful cases there e.g., winning the national exam or so. Also, he saw the case of 2 students (Mr. Lar's grand-daughters) who moved to study in Vientiane, according to Khamsone, they both seem to be 'smarter.' However, he did not do so because his wife and he do not want to stay just the two of them. They will let the girl go after finishing high school next year (2018), she will go to NUOL if possible. If not, they will support her for any private colleges in Vientiane (tuition fee of USD200 per year for four years).

Next is the case of Sengphien, a teacher at Natarm primary school. Noy and Boy are her children who study at the Natarm Primary School. Unlike Khamstone, the principal, Sengphien's household economy is not doing that well. However, investing in children's education has rooted in her mind since her father was also a teacher and had supported her to study hard since she was small. She also plans for the children to become teachers in the future.

Sengphien's father was a teacher. In Sengphien's family, her mother is the only person who had not gone to school, but the mother was a local villager since a long time ago and was able to reserve a great amount of land. The parents did lend some to people and got enough amount of rice for her family. Later they sold some of the lands and to open a convenient shop in the Nason Village. All of her siblings went to at least high school. Some help with the family farm, while some do menial works. Sengphien is now married with two children (Noy and Boy) going to the school she is teaching. Her spouse used to be an immigrant worker in Thailand; he went back and forth for more than 20 years before marrying her. He used all the money he saved from Thailand to buy a piece of land in the village, where he is growing rice now. Sengphien's inherited some more land from her parents. Besides teaching, Sengphien, the husband and the children do their farming work; however, she makes sure not to let farming disrupt the children's schooling. When needed, she will hire labor forces to work on the rice field.

When asking why she decided to become a teacher, besides the influence of her father, she responded, "*one good thing about being a teacher is the regular salary.*" Many people in the village rely heavily on subsistent farming. Thus they have a meager cash income. To have to regular income does help the people to secure some basic and urgent needs, especially in the difficult times or busy time in the cultivating time, "*we hire labor to help with the rice field.*" Sengphien further stated, "*I enjoy teaching because I feel the respect from the villagers as I am taking care of their children.*" Her plan for her children is also for them to become a teacher.

Next is the case of Toun, a granddaughter of Mrs. Chai from Marknao Village. The family is known for having a large size of land, and lots of relatives in the city who always give them support, including remittent.

Toun is the best student in MarkNao primary school located in MarkNao Village; she and her one-year older sister have been going to school together since they were little. Their parents are rice-growing farmers for the consumption of the household and relatives in the city. At home, besides the four families' members, they also live with their grandmother named Chai in the most prominent house in the town. The house was inherited by Chai's father who used to work for the USAID back in the 1960s. Chai's seven siblings all moved out, mainly because when they were kids, they went to study in the city in Vientiane capital, so they ended up getting married and working in Vientiane capital. Chai did not go because she was the only girl; her mother preferred to have her around the hometown to give her company. Chai, therefore, was the only one who stayed and inherited the house when her parents passed away together with a big land which was already split among other siblings. Since no one does anything on the land, Chai can have a bigger size of rice field by accessing to the other siblings' lands. Chai has four children. The oldest one is Toun's mother, Ting.

Ting, her two brothers and one sister all went to school until they reached high school. Ting stopped and helped Chai who at that time, got divorced from her husband. The other three went to stay with their uncle in the city in Vientiane to study in college. The three had problems with their studies; they failed to follow school assignments. Eventually, they all quit. Currently, one is running a small retail shop, and two are working for a telephone shop in the city in Vientiane. Ting got married and has the husband to help with the farm work. They have always been growing rice. Toun and her sister have never been asked to work on the farm.

The couple hires labors to do the work whenever they need it. The reason why they can afford this is because Chai has much saving, she got financial help from her siblings who have settled in the city for a long time. In return, she has been sending them rice. These brothers and sisters have promised to support her granddaughters for their study and to find them good jobs in the city. Thus, Chai's strong bond with her siblings, who are doing better off in terms of financial makes her not doubt her granddaughters' future. What Chai and Ting need to do is to make sure Toun and her sister work hard at school. Therefore, the parents have never let them help in the rice farming, *"the uncles will help our daughters to get a good job in Vientiane. We never let our daughters help; one reason is that they need to study and another is they barely know how to farm since we did not teach them when they were younger"* (Ting was joking as a proud mother whose daughters are good at studying).

The last case is the case of Noy, despite needing to help her family with farming, she still keeps her schooling routine very strict, which influenced by her 'wise uncle.' Luckily, the family could reserve a surplus to sell and to save. Therefore, they are quite prepared for urgent needs, which allows the children to study without any interrupting.

Her parents have a rice field for 6ha, making more enough to sell. They make 70 bags each year, which they can sell ten bags for cash income. Moreover, they have six pigs, ten chickens, one cow for security. For daily consumption, they can always look for food in the forest; sometimes, they can find a mushroom that can be sold to the middleman for extra income. Her father studies until grade 5, only her uncles got to study, and these uncles are the people she looks up to, for example when she needs to make a decision, she will rely on them. Noy has six siblings, five of them are all enrolling in school except the oldest sister who is working as a waitress in Thailand. Her daily schedule and the siblings are very similar. They wake up at 5 am, some go to the rice field with the father, and some help the mother preparing breakfast and lunch boxes to go to school. They finish school at around 4 pm, some go directly to the rice field, and some go back home to feed the animals. During the cultivation season, the parents do not let them leave school to help out completely. The children will help in the early morning from 5 to 7 am and go to school at 8 am. For heavy work, the parents would hire a truck and laborforces with the money from the daughter in Thailand and the uncles. Similar to Chai, at MarkNao Village, Noy's parents send some rice to the uncles who have helped.

To sum up, there are different concerns in the daily life of the villagers; some worries could be at the cost of schooling easily if there are no other options. What shares in common among these families who can afford the students to be enrolled in the stable income, the vast land enough to farm and to have a surplus, capital to invest in the land when the time comes, previous experience related to education and relatives supports including advice, settler, and financial assistance.

What is important to note is that to reach today's status, for some families, it took a long time. Such as the case of Mr. Lar and Mrs. Chai, only until their grand-children generation that they are freed from other concerns (money and labor forces) and to invest in education. The research also wants to show the type of Lao society, where family members are helping



each other in the household economy. Economic improvement or other options to ease difficulties in this aspect are barely provided by the central level.

Therefore, families with regular incomes are doing better. For example, teachers, Mr. Khamson and Mrs. Sengphien, who have a regular salary from teaching, have less reason not to invest in the children education. In addition to that, their previous experience on education convinced them more that the children will be better off by keeping study to develop some skills and to have a regular income. What might be equally important is the advice of those educated relatives, that package with their supports, as shown in the case Toun, and Noy. It allows the children to study without any interrupting.

Nevertheless, given the majority of the family relies on subsistent farming, almost everyone goes to school, evidenced by a 95% enrolment rate at PakNgum District in 2018. However, when these children are asked to perform other roles, besides being a student, they are less likely to be able to stay on at school but dropping out of schools.

## **2. Dropout students and their reasons of dropping out**

Two main reasons led the children to drop out. The majority of people in PakNgum do one season of rice farming per year. Therefore, it is one of their main priorities to make sure they have a good harvesting season with a satisfying amount of productivity. When parents start rice farming, some children dropout during the land clearing, planting, and cultivating processes. Each process takes up to 7-10days. For example, at Natarm Primary School, about 25-30% of the class left the school at this time, which is worse in Koksa Primary School that more than 40% of each class left to go with the parents to the rice field. Ms. Ket, a resident in Natarm Village, stated, "*we have to rush to the rice field since early morning to finish the tasks as much as we can before the sun gets too strong, thus we do not have time to check on children's schooling, and they always want to go with us*". Besides helping parents farming, another prominent reason for the kid to skip classes is that they have to take care of their younger siblings while the parents are working on the farm. "*Older siblings need to take care of the younger ones while we were working,*" mentioned by Mrs. Daeng, a farmer at Koksa village.

The second main reason for students to stop going to school or dropout is when parents go to work elsewhere e.g., to the city center of Vientiane or Thailand. Each time takes at least six months. *"Schooling is more for the privileged people"* (Famous quote from the informants). Mrs. Daeng mentioned, *"if my grand-daughter does not quit now, she will have to quit later, we cannot afford to send her to the secondary school, and we need her now."*

Description of Not's daily life, a dropout student, aims to illustrate the children role in a rural community of PakNgum that is not limited to only being a student. Competing tasks the children have to take care of leads them to drop out of school.

Not, a dropout student lives with his mother and his other four siblings. His father left to marry another woman, leaving the mother and the children on their own. Not's older brother quit school when he was in grade 5 when he later migrated to work in Thailand and now working in Malaysia. The 2<sup>nd</sup> child, Not's sister, quitted school when she was in grade 4 to pursue the path paved by her older brother to go to work in Thailand. The 3<sup>rd</sup> sibling Not's another sister also quitted school when she was studying in her second year of secondary school. The 4<sup>th</sup> sister, the only person in the family to finish high school, now staying at home, and besides farming, she does sometimes weaving to get extra earnings. Not, the youngest in the family, quitted when he was in grade 5 of primary school.

The reason was to do farming and to earn more extra money. Not's daily activities, while not in the farming season, would be going into the forest to pick up food and raise cows in his farm. The cows serve as the main financial security; whenever something emergency happens such as health or important traditional ceremonies related matters, they would sell the cow for money. Unfortunately, sometimes they do get stolen, mentioned by Not. Besides all these activities, Not also does menial works occasionally, whenever he gets the information from the villagers. All the money he earned will be used on his daily consumption, and he gave some to his mother as well. Because he is not good at managing his wallet, he will sometimes end up asking for money from his mother. When asking Not what he misses the most at school, he quietly response, *"My friends"*. He still goes to see his friends sometimes after he finishes his work and after they finish their classes. When seriously asked about the reason he decided to quit school, he answered, *"School is not fun. I want to help my family, I want to work to earn"*

*more money. After I quit, now I have the freedom I do what I want, and I can still go to play with my friends when I am done with my work or when they do not have classes".* Not, at one point, wanted to go to Thailand, but he was not allowed to do so because his oldest brother who insisted he must not go, through his experience, the working condition in Thailand is too harsh and very bad. The brother further suggested Not, *"...though being in the village will not earn you much money, you can always find food and have enough to spend, that is good enough".*

When I told Not about the vocational training facility at the village nearby, he was so excited and surprised because he has never heard about it. He looked happy with eyes full of hope, and he kept asking more and questions about the facility. Now that he is not studying, he regrets not being able to require some skills in order to make more money. He found the idea of vocational training much better and suitable than the formal education that he quitted.

Not is just one example of dropout students. After talking to some of the dropouts, many think that by being at school, they create some burden to the parents. To support the children to go to school, apart from the hard work they need to do at farming, parents sometimes have to borrow money and be in debt. Some learned from older generations that education is not a promising tool for them to secure good jobs in the future. Some parents even said that jobs are not easy to find; in some cases, we need to pay money to the employer in order for the children to have the job. The parents further stated, *"Menial jobs are not bad; if the children work hard enough, they can make money, some even can save up and build their own houses too ... "*. Not, despite having an aunt as a teacher, she never tried to convince him to stay on at school, she said that she understands his family's difficulty. Not's case reflects how education failed to compete with other needs of the local people (income and job). Even though primary education is set as a compulsory level, such control cannot be implied or is not followed by the people. Vocational training, in this case, sounds much more convincing to the children who need to have the skill (bike mechanic, carpenter, etc.) in a shorter period and can earn money around the village.

Based on the information gathered, another point to note is that the age range of students in Grade 1 to Grade 5 from all the schools is 8 to 15 years old, which is not corresponding to the primary school age range set by MOES from 6 to 10 years old. It is seen that there is a vast

age gap among students in each grade. For example, in Grade 4, students' ages are ranged from 9 to 14 years old instead of 9. Based on the interview, the answer to over-aged students is that these students are considered once as dropout students, which means, these students have quitted school before for some time, and then they return to school. Surprisingly, this group of students or called in this research '**the Returnee**' has never been mentioned in any educational report of MOES before.

The academic year in Laos is divided into two semesters, the 1<sup>st</sup> semester starts in September and ends in December and the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester starts in January and ends in June. A dropout student is a student who enters school in September then quits school at some point during the academic year and does not come back before June, the end of the academic year<sup>64</sup>. However, for example of Natarm primary school, there are a great number of students who quit school for around 1 to 2 months to help parents working on the farm, mainly in the rice field during their busiest time of the cultivating season around October to November and April to May and then return to school. These students are not counted as dropouts.

In the case of Natarm, the period of students' leaving school is elaborated in the table below where the students are further categorized into three following groups.

**Table 26: Natarm Primary School's student attendance in 2016-2017**

Students	<b>Group I:</b> Never Leave	<b>Group II:</b> Leave 1-2 months	<b>Group III:</b> Leave six months or more
Grade 1	19	9	7
Grade 2	18	13	3
Grade 3	17	16	3
Grade 4	10	15	5
Grade 5	10	19	2

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<sup>64</sup>See, MOES. (2012). The challenges of MDG2, Universal Primary School. Vientiane, Laos,

Returnees account for more than 50% of the current enrolled. However, since this group of Returnees has not been mentioned, thereby, there are no plan policies designed for them. Their reasons for dropping out and returning to school will be presented in the following part.

### 3. The un-investigated: Returnees

Returnees are the students who have dropped out of school at some point in the middle of the year. Some of them need to help parents to do farming for a few months to ensure that the household will have enough productivity to either stock for the household consumption and to sell. This is similar to only some of the finding in the midterm review of MOES, that poverty issue including lack of food, uniforms, shelters and the inability to pay for some basic fees, are the reason for high rate of dropout in the primary education<sup>65</sup>. As some of the returnees dropped out of school to follow parents to work elsewhere and they usually stay with the parents from 1 year to as many as three years. **Whenever these students are not occupied or come back to the community, they do return to school.** Based on the information from the schools, these returnees are not counted as dropouts. The following are some descriptions of the returnee students and thoughts of the teacher towards them.

First is the case of Yoi, once a returnee student. Yoi is a returnee whose parents are migrant workers. After returning to the village, she resumed school again.

Yoi quitted school when she was in grade 1 to follow the parents to work in Thailand for a year. When they came back she was placed in grade 2, and luckily she sits next to a good student. So the friend has been helping her with homework and a quiz. She just returned for three months by the time we were talking, and she was living with her aunt. Her parents already went back again to Thailand to work. Her aunt has one son around the same age with Yoi. Her

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<sup>65</sup> See, Educational strategy research and analysis center, MOES. (2012). The challenges to achieving the millennium development goal 2 & 3: the rapid assessment of school dropouts, the distribution of textbooks, and teachers' guidelines primary education (In Lao). Vientiane, Laos: MOES.

aunt is a rice farmer as well, but the field is not so big, where only she and her husband can take care of it. When in a rush, sometimes the son and Yoi skip school to go with them but never more than three days, as mentioned by the aunt. Since there is no much to do and they better be at school instead of playing around the neighborhood with other kids who have left school, *"we do not want them to have a bad manner, in school, they should behave better."*

The majority of the villagers are a subsistent farmer. Growing sticky rice is the main thing to secure the household needs both food and income. Being able to practice only one farming season per year, the people have a huge gap for more than five months between seasons. During the break, the farmers often cross the border to go to work in Thailand on the menial jobs. One reason is due to the limited jobs within the district. Another is because the villagers do not have a particular skill to look for jobs in the city center of Vientiane nor they can read and write to apply for jobs there, where menial jobs are also limited.

For example, Poupey's mother, a villager at Koksa village, let her daughter drop out of school to follow the family migrating to work in Thailand. Due to the loss of productivities causing by flooding.

Poupey's mother used to be a migrant worker in Thailand, later when the working law became tighter. She returned to do farming in the village, but it is unexpected that they will make a profit from selling the rice, sometimes the price can be too low that they prefer not to sell to keep for household consumption. For extra income, she does clothes weaving for selling and menial works when they are available. Regardless of the many activities, she is engaged in, which are not stable, and the return is wholly inadequate to meet with the household needs. Poupey's mother, her prior goal was for Poupey to finish grade 5, to make sure that she would be able to read and write; however, Poupey quitted before she finishes grade 5 because she needs to look after her three years old sister. The mother does not think that children who graduate beyond Grade 5 are that different from those who are not. Since they are still staying around the village, do farming, weaving and doing construction work for boys. Similar to the grandmother, *"if Poupey does not quit now, she will have to quit later as we cannot afford to send her to the secondary school and we need her now, she gives me a company to the forest every day."* Daeng, Poupey's grandmother, thinks going to school is only to learn how to read and write, *"anyone can teach her that, it can even be better than learning at the school."*

Children's activities depend a lot on the ones' the parents have. Sometimes they follow the parents, to do farming or to look after younger siblings. During the time there are jobs being offered, they would accept to do those menial works. Despite that, one of their concerns is to make friends, to meet them, and to play with them.

Poupey, 12 years old, a student who had been in and out of school, she left grade 1, for 1 year (Follow her parents who went to work in Thailand), she then resumed grade 2 but left again because she performed poorly at school, and she wanted to follow her grandma to other provinces (for 1 month she gave her grandmother company to go to other provinces visiting the relatives). That was the last time she was in school after she returned to the village from the provinces, she never returned to school. Poupey's daily life goes around her three years old sister, her parents, and her grandma. She gives the company to her parents and grandmother to pick food and products in the forest and to the farm. She takes care of her younger sibling all the time, while also helps with farming. She knows all the rice farming process. She also does housework and errands not only for her own house but also for the relative's, in return, she receives some tip. Poupey does not want to go back to school, no matter how the teachers and I convinced her. As capable as she is, she can help her parents and grandmother, and she even earns money from the tip. "*Teachers are scary,*" she mentioned. Outside, she can still play around with 3-4 friends after their school and with two dropouts cousins. Besides, her plan in the future has always been to do farming, mentioned it herself.

Similar stories where children were driven to do something else, besides schooling, could be seen more such as Soubin and Ei in Natarm and MarkNao villages.

Soubin, 18 years old, dropped out when he was 10 from Grade 4 to get a job offered and dropped out for the second time when he was 13 years old from Grade 5 due to the lack of motivation to stay on and to response to the job offered and later stay on to help the family to work on the rice field and burning charcoal to sell.

Soubin's mother passed away when he was very young, and now he lives with his father and his other three siblings. Soubin's oldest sister quitted school when she was in Grade 5 of primary school. Like many other children, she left to help with the family work, and then later

she got married. She now does farming and at the same time work on available menial jobs, the same to her husband. The second sibling, also a sister, finished primary school but later on quitted her second year of lower secondary school. She quitted working on the rice field. The father said that she had to quit because the family could not afford to send her to school, despite her reasonably good performances at school. The family needed labor because they often do two seasons of rice farming (luckily, his rice field has water to grow rice twice a year). Like her older sibling, after quitting school for a while, she got married to a guy from a different village, Nabong Village, where she now lives. The third sibling, Soubin's brother, now works in Malaysia near the border of Thailand as a fisherman. He has been returning to work at the place many times, each time he stays around 4-5 months.

Soubin complained about not having jobs nearby the village, *"when there is an opportunity for working I have to take it immediately. This was the reason I quit school for the first time, to drive the boat that carried rock and sands from Thadeua (Laos) to Donsan (Thailand) and to stay on doing menial works for three years"*. He resumed school again, but the environment became different since he failed to catch up, he lost the fun part of going to school. Moreover, now that his father needs him because his mother passed away. The father does not have anyone to help. The father explained that the brothers are most of the time away from working abroad, the sisters all got married and moved to stay with their husband, Soubin has become the main force helping him with rice farming. When asking if he misses something by not being at school, Soubin answered, *"I love to hang out with my friends, some also left school to help with their parents' farm, we like to play football together. So, even we are not at school, we still meet and hang out with each other, just like the old days"*.

Another case at the nearby village, MarkNao Village, Ei, 14 years old, left Grade 1 because his parents moved to ThanKong then to Nason for farming on the inherited land for two years, for the whole time he did not enroll in any school. The parents sold the land in Nason and returned to MarkNao, where he resumed Grade 1 again until Grade 5 he quitted for good.

For Ei, unlike other interviewed returnees, he resumed the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade, so he had no problem with catching up with the lesson. Thus, his reason to drop out for the second time was not about school but to help the family.



Ei quitted school as the father got him a job to go to help his uncle to cut wood in the forest. His parents are still farmers, but his father also becomes a truck driver (from Vientiane to the south). When asked what he wants to become in the future, Ei's response was without hesitation, for the future job he wants to become a driver. He further mentioned that selling rice is not as profitable, first because of the fluctuated rice's price, and the second is because the fertilizer is getting more expensive every day. Although he lives near his aunt, who is a teacher, she never forced him to resume school. "*Children here quit school two or three times already, it is not their first time, so we cannot do anything about it,*" tiredly claimed by the aunt.

Next is the case of Phin; she dropped out to be at home and taking care of the house shore. Dropping out was not something new to her since three of her siblings also dropped out. What influences her to resume school was that she wants to play with her friends.

Phin also quitted when she was in Grade 3 because she does not want to go to school, want to stay with the parents doing housework and the parents are ok with that. When there was stuff to do, she always helped. However, at home, there were not that many friends. Later, she saw many of her friends go to school (10 girls), her aunt is also a primary school teacher. Therefore, she returned. Then, 7-8 friends of hers quitted school, there were fewer friends, and it was not fun, so she went to another school nearby, it is a boarding school of ethnic people. There, she has many friends, and everyone stays over, they cook, eat, and sleep together.

Most importantly, her friends and the teachers were teaching her and helping her catch up with the classes. The time that she likes the most was when they stay over studying together. Although teachers let them go back home on the weekend, they do not go and prefer to be and to play with friends at the dorm.

To see the environment of the class where the returnees resume, teachers are playing an important part. Whether these students are welcome or not, determines how much they can blend it back to the class. Therefore, talking to teachers will shed some light on this matter.

Mrs. Tia Sibounhueang (39 years old) is the first example to show.

Mrs. Tia is a mother of 2 at Nason village. She graduated from teacher training and until now (2018) has 19 years of teaching. Her husband is also a teacher. Besides teaching, both are also growing vegetable, raising livestock, fishing at the pond in the weekend and do rice farming. Her first comment about the returnees is that *"it is not as easy to deal with them"*. Returnees took some break before returning to school at least 1-2 months for farming and more than six months when moving to somewhere. They usually return having difficulty to catch up with the class, end up being poor performers, and remain to chase behind the other classmates. The performances of the returnees are much weaker than before. Worse when they keep skipping classes. The parents still want them to be in the same or higher class (not to repeat), with PPP, it became possible, but the problem is their performances after that. Tia further stated, *"they, the returnee, need much special care, but it is tough for the teachers to do so, as they have also to take care of the regular students."*

Returnees found it hard also to integrate themselves with other students. The classmates have their friends and usually do not pay attention to the returnees. According to Tia, she thinks in order to support the returnees and poor performers in general, and the school needs a more extended break. *"A longer break will allow both children and teachers to take care of their own needs at home first. The extra classes are not possible to do so unless the vacation becomes longer. The current period is too short, and they always need to run after the time to finish the content of the textbook"*.

Parents' activities, such as being occupied with farming and migrating to work elsewhere, significantly affect their children's school attendance. What to note here is that the overlapping farming and schooling schedule is not helping. What is worse is when these parents fail to increase productivity, due to natural disasters or fail to sell the rice with the expected price due to the unstable price, create impacts on the household economy. Without job opportunities in the town to earn cash income, these parents will have to look for a job somewhere else, disrupting the children schooling when they have to quit to follow the parents elsewhere. What is a positive side in this scenario is that these children do return to schools when they are freed from other families' obligations. However, the problem is there is no special support for this group from the teachers. What is worse is that due to PPP these children were allowed to be in higher classes, but without the support to catch up with the lessons, they feel discouraged to stay on but to drop out to help the families' economy.

In order to understand more about schools' situation, teachers' profiles and state's educational policies at the schools' level will be evaluated.

#### **4. Evaluation of Progressive Promotion Policy to handle dropout issue**

Dropouts have been a chronic problem in Lao educational development and the challenge to achieve Universal Primary Education. In 2009, one of the major changes in primary education in Laos was the adoption of Progressive Promotion Policy (PPP). The policy allows the students to proceed to the next grade progressively without the need to pass the final exam. In principle, the policy is to increase education quality, by encouraging students to work harder and actively as a chance of repeating the class does not exist anymore. This should also raise parents' involvement in education and raising teachers' commitment to supervising the students. The teachers are obligated to provide remedial classes or extra classes during the vacation period to prepare weak performers not to have problems when moving up to higher class. For effective policies' implementation, principals and teachers should discuss it once a month to mitigate the possible problem.

When investigating the policy at its actual situation, since PPP allows children to move up to higher grades without the need to pass the final exam, in reality, there has been less competition among the students knowing they will get to be promoted. The policy also makes parents feel less pressured to take the children temporary out of school or to ask them to be absent. It ended up urging students to drop out more comfortable and then resume the school, no punishment such as repetition is allowed anymore, as evidenced, by the increase in the number of temporary dropouts and rising of the number of returnees. One of the purposes of the policy, to improve the education quality, is by encouraging teachers to work harder. In practice, it creates confusion among the teachers who have to deal with different levels of students in the same class. It is hard for them to deliver the lesson and fail to support the weak performers.

Furthermore, there is no remedial class; the teachers refused to do it without extra payment. The majority of the returnees come to school without remembering the previous

lessons they had learned when they were at school. Furthermore, many of them have lost the habits of studying. This is more serious among the returnees who have stayed for a few years in Thailand, as they all become more accustomed to speaking Thai. However, when they come back to school, school places them in the grade based on their age according to progressive promotion. Although the school has provided remedial classes for the poor performers and the returnees, it does not help them much. Even some schools like Ban Phao, Koksa and Natarm do have remedial classes, and they offer only the main subjects such as Mathematics and Basic Science. For example, as mentioned above, concerning the returnees who left school for more than two years, besides Mathematics and Science, Lao language is also an inevitable obstacle they all have to overcome.

Moreover, hence, without taking this fact into consideration in the curriculum of remedial classes, the system of the progressive promotion itself will never work effectively. As a result, students found it difficult to study because, besides the overwhelming amount they have to learn, they had been away for a long time and already lost the study habits. More importantly, since they got promoted to the new class, to them, all the lessons are new. What is more, the remedial classes are not provided before resuming school but it takes place within the academic year.

Regularly, because teachers also need to do farming, they are always in a rush to finish the textbook. When the students were put under stress, they feel discouraged to stay on and dropout for the second time. Without the regular remedial class, it pushes returnees to dropout again, 50% of returnees drop out again, and this time they never return to school again, which poses a more severe problem. Though graduation is a promise, and it fails to keep the students at school.

Therefore, PPP instead of solving the problem of dropout, it ended up creating more problems. PPP is an incentive for dropping out as it becomes easier for the parents to take their children out of school when needed and put them back when they are not occupied. Moreover, without any preparation from school to catch up with the lesson, the policy also affected the returnees, especially the ones who took a long period of absence. They get to move up to higher classes despite the period they have missed school. As a result, they fail to catch up when they return, got discouraged from staying on at school, and finally drop out for good.

School, in theory, has the right to demand more budget from the District, but they have never received any budget. As a result, there is no extra payment for the teachers to do remedial classes, which is supposed to be the main support for weak performers. Other supports mentioned are the supervision from the province and the district which need to be made to schools, principals and teachers should discuss the policy at least once per month. In reality, besides no remedial class, teachers are always rush to finish the textbook. PPP guidance from upper level was made through a decree and a training course at the district level, evaluation form used to exist, now not in use.

According to the evidences above, the supports by teachers mean a lot for the students, especially the returnees, to perform well in classes and to be motivated to stay on at school. Without the remedial class, the PPP will not work. Therefore, PPP only can solve repetition rate but not drop out, it urges students to dropout out and resume school easier and, indirectly, push returnees to dropout for good.

This shows that there is a distance between the **problem and the solution**, the problem is not well defined. Therefore, the solution is not reached. Dropout took place not because of the lack of motivation to go to school. It is a consequence when Education is just one among many other concerns that people (village officials, teachers, children, and parents) have to consider for their daily life. Education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (food, jobs) and most of the time, it becomes secondary to these other needs. PPP, as a promise for graduation is indifferent to children and their parents. It is worse when they do not receive enough support to be able to catch with the class and enjoy going to school.

## **5. Revealing the mismatched policies at school level**

Since PPP in theory and reality are not as similar. Thus, other state policies should also be examined. Based on the fieldwork, all the policies were customized. Based on what available resources at the local level (resources and capacity of the teachers), which is the only option to keep implementing the policies.

First, the school curriculum, many times, the teachers skipped some chapters of the textbook and claimed that there are too many contents. Especially the last chapters of the textbook and when moving up, students will use the new textbook. From time to time, the principals will order a break for the traditional ceremonies at the village, which has nothing to do with the official calendar.

Second, primary school enrollment is set by the law that once children turn six years old, they should go to school and that each school should have at least 95% of enrolment, and in order to achieve this, schools coordinate with the VEDC and sometimes the temple to gather every child to enroll school. Although some students are often absent from school, they are still considered enrolled students as a way to maintain the 95% rate.

The third is the school fee; though schools in Laos are basically free and students only need to pay for the registration fee of around USD10 per year. However, parents are always asked for some other additional fee e.g., school festival contribution, school building maintenance fee, and contribution to contract teachers' salary and utility bills. The principal decides these expenses.

Fourth, is the decree on the School Lunch Program, which was created by the Ministry of Education and Sport to lure the students into staying at the school until the classes finish. It is because there had been many students going home for lunch and not return to school. However, because of the limited budget, at PakNgum District, not all the schools can do it and the ones who implement it, cannot do it regularly. Currently, there is no free meal program in PakNgum.

Moreover, the change of school teaching's approach introduced by the central level, such as the Child Based Learning Approach to the teachers, is admitted by many teachers that it is difficult to follow. This new method puts considerable pressure on teachers to plan the teaching. It is worse for new teachers. Support from the district and central level to implement the approach is not readily available. As a result, the teachers return to the same way of teaching.

Another is the allocation of teachers; MOES does not have a specific quota for this but will consider based on schools' demand. However, because this process takes some time (more

than a couple of years), so how school handle with this is, schools will find teachers themselves – employ them as contract teachers and wait for the central level to approve them as a full-time teacher later. The villagers pay these teachers in the meantime. While some villagers appeared to contribute to the school willingly, others are reluctant to do so. *"It is time-consuming and tiring"* mentioned by some Parents. The problem then is that this is very difficult for the central level to control the quality of these teachers. So now there are about 14,000 contract teachers in the whole country.

The financial constraint is well-informed at the central level, which the state did try their best assigning a huge investment in the education sector, as shown in the statistic that the education sector has the highest portion of state investment compared to other national development areas. In 2012, Block Grant Policy was introduced by the suggestion of the donors' community. This grant is for the school operating and administrative work, instead of asking for parents' participation. It was mentioned that the state needs to give 48,000Kip or USD6 for each student. However, at the school level, this grant often arrives entirely delay and not enough, as opposed to 48,000Kip, schools get only for 32,000Kip or USD4 for each student.

## **6. Education in the key actors' daily life**

The narratives are collected in Vientiane and the communities in Pak Ngum. A rural Laos away from Vientiane: majority of the people rely heavily on rice farming, menial works, due to its border with Thailand across the Mekong the people have highly mobility seeking work opportunities during the off-harvest season across the river.

This thesis is based upon an extensive narrative of over one hundred informants focusing on their other concerns in their lives. The informants include the village heads on their sense of self-government and their role in school management, the primary school educators, the parents, and the children. Their narratives is the only way to capture the concerned parties' views and attitudes toward primary education within the context of their lives.

➤ *Village Education Development Committee*

According to the educational administration chart, school is the implementing level, based on the fieldwork, many times the principals have to ask for the Village Administration for help, mainly to gather resources and labor forces, instead of asking the District Education Bureau. The responsibility to support schools goes even more to the Village Administration after 2008, when the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) was established. VEDC composed of Village Head and Deputy of Village Head. Therefore, not much has changed, only more role (education development) was added to the sector that already existed Village Education Sector.

Based on nine rounds visits to the Village Administration Offices of three villages in PakNgum District, overall, the village administration is responsible for a huge task in various sectors (law, security, tradition-culture, economy, health, Mass Organization, Financial management, and education). Given the content, the duties are quite heavily loaded. One problem is the lack of budget allocated from the central government. With a low wage of 20 USD per month, the officials need to also work on some other jobs to secure household consumption.

The overloaded task is one of the observations. Moreover, there are also other unwritten tasks<sup>66</sup> That the Village Officials have to take care of and unexpectedly they are the most time-consuming ones e.g., the social events at the temples and the ones of villagers themselves. The impression is that although the village administration is not well equipped with financial and qualified human resources, education promoting and maintenance is handed to the village officials to take care of. However, since education is only one among the many tasks the villagers officials have to take care of, they barely have time to concentrate on the job, besides there is the lack of qualified officials, most of the officials graduated only from primary school. Nevertheless, the village officials have to manage the village's stuff along with education expansion and quality improvement by themselves, by its own division of labors and its own

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<sup>66</sup> According to Article 53, Law on Local Authority, Duties of Village Administration are “to disseminate the government policies and laws to maintain the peace, security, to promote good national traditions – cultures, health, education.”



way of fund management or raising. With the same token, there were not many signs of state's existent at the village level.

➤ *School staff*

Low budget and little guidance from above, put pressure on the teachers. To keep applying the policies, the teachers, therefore, need to customize the content to match with their ability and resources at the school. The District Education Bureau's staff do only the inspecting work. "*We need to be on our own, both technical and financial assistance from the district is more for giving hopes, no real action*" told by Khambu, Koksa primary school principal. For financial support, the school's principal prefers to ask from the village administration to the district level. Because the district always takes a long time and most of the time could not allocate the budget to help the school. Thus, most schools' supporters were the Village Administration who help gathered funding, labor forces, and materials from villagers.

Meanwhile, school principals, instead of communicating with the District level, talk and seek more assistance from the Village Administration. The same with the promotion of schooling, the teachers, are also relying on the Village Administration to talk to the villagers, "*they listen to the head of the village more than us,*" mentioned by principal KhamBu. By relying too much on the Village officials, it neglects the communication between the teachers and the parents.

Low and delayed salary (USD200 per month), Teachers need to secure their household consumption e.g., farming, weaving, raising livestock, etc. The salary can cover only about half of what they usually spend each month. Based on the fieldwork, in Natarm ex-principle confessed that "*some teachers even see teaching as a part-time job and farming as the main job.*" A great number of teachers take two weeks to 1 month leave to cultivate the rice during rice cultivating seasons around November – December, and March – April of each year. Since teachers are also growing rice, they are facing the same difficult the other farmers do such as natural disaster and the unstable price of the rice, that leads to the loss of profit. Due to these activities, the teachers cannot just concentrate on teaching; many other concerns are at the cost of time to plan the teaching. Therefore, teachers' daily life and ability should be taken into consideration when allocating the policies to implement. Training and guidance are needed to

support these teachers to interpret and put the policies into practice rather than creating them pressure.

➤ ***Parents***

The majority of the people or more than 90% of the population live under rice farming, raising life stock, fishing and picking forest products in order to provide for the household consumption. Regarding limited jobs within their environment, the villagers need to go somewhere else, usually in Thailand which there are always jobs offered, high wages and that it takes only five minutes by boat to go there.

Education is just one among many other concerns that the people have to consider for their daily life (food, jobs) and most of the time, it becomes secondary to these other needs. One season of rice farming per year (Feb-May), unavoidably the parents prioritize farming to secure food for the household. There is a need for labor forces either to help out or to look after younger siblings. Since schooling and farming schedule are overlapping, it led the children to drop out of school either for short or a longer time. Similarly, when the parents need to earn cash income, due to limited jobs at PakNgum, they have to migrate to look for jobs elsewhere, which led the children to leave school and go with the parents. The idea of school is perceived as something luxurious. “*Schooling is more for the privileged people*” (Famous quote from the informants).

➤ ***Children***

Unlike children in the cities, children in rural areas can be very independent. They can work as an independent individual, helping parents with farming, looking after younger siblings, giving parents company and can even be financially independent of doing some menial jobs or accepted some jobs in Thailand.

Nevertheless, when they are not busy, they do go to school, as shown in the enrollment rate and ‘the returnee.’ According to the interviews, children admitted that going to school is fun since there are many friends at school to play with. However, whenever schooling is

competing with livelihood, it becomes less important. "*When there is an opportunity, I have to take it immediately. This was the reason I quit school in the first place, to drive the boat that carried rocks and sands from Thadeua (Laos) to Donsan (Thailand)*" (Soubin, 13).

Going back to school is pressure; the schools are not prepared to receive these children, the returnee. As seen in the case of Poupey and Soubin returned to school but were left with no support, they failed to catch up with the classes, less than a month they dropped out for the second time and are not planning to return.

## **VII. Failure of education policies to reach the people and their evaluation**

Previous findings show a misunderstanding between state and the people's perspective regarding dropout; the issue remains although Universal Primary Education was promoted by the state since 1975.

### **➤ *Education is compulsory VS Random***

The state makes education as compulsory as a tool to prepare the citizens for national political and economic stability. In 2000, the role of education becomes even more important, when the state committed to the MDG2, introducing 'Universal Primary Education' and set the Primary school level as 'Compulsory' as mentioned in the first education law. Promoting Education as the mean for the people's social mobility, a good future and therefore eradicate poverty. On the other hand, parents whom majority live under subsistent farming activities, never understand what teachers who borrow state's statement said about the benefit to go to school, the need to stay at school has never been that urgent. As investing in education for a good future does not sit well in their mind yet; besides, it is very costly. School cannot even teach what students need e.g., actual skill to farm and to earn money, which is very close to their daily life. Regardless of what teachers said, parents are not conscious of what they missed because they are doing fine. People cannot understand the state, while the state has no idea about people's life. Although, Lao educational development has also been supported by various international organization including the government (MOES and its sub-sectors), international organizations (such as WB and ADB) and non-government organizations (such as Room to Read and World Vision), the idea about schooling is agreed among them that education is

essential and that it will be the most promising tool to have good jobs and assure the well-being of the people in their future.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, it does not seem that the people can follow it; people are still indifferent. Farming and parents' mobility are not the only cause of the absence or dropouts. The expense for each child to go to school is another concern of the parents. When parents failed to afford the expenses for schooling, they will ask the children to leave school either for a short while or for good. While in principle, the school is supposed to be for free, but in reality, contributions from parents are the main source of income for the school's operation. Whenever schools need to have the budget for example for maintaining the school building, paying the contract teachers, paying utility bills or organizing certain events, parents will be asked for participation depends on each purpose, meaning these contributions that parents need to make are not even fixed nor will they be informed in advance in order for them to be prepared for it. When parents and children think of schools, they associate with resources and labors, which interferes with their daily lives. This clearly shows that there is a miscommunication between the state (the policymaker at the central level) and the people, the majority is self-subsistent farmers.

### ➤ *Schooling VS Farming*

Parents send their children to school once they turn six years old, therefore, Grade 1 enrollment rate is high. Nevertheless, somewhere in the middle of schooling, some children were taken out of school. This usually happens during the rice farming period (November – December, and March – April of each year). School calendar (September-June) is not favored to children's schooling, because it is overlapping with the farming schedule, this fact bothers the majority of the parents, who are farmers, not only in PakNgun but Laos as a whole. These students usually stay outside the school until the parents finish the farming period. Some leave to help the parents' work, but some follow the parents and stay in the field since parents usually leave in the early morning at around 5-6am and do not have time to prepare them to go to school. After the farming period, some students will stay on at the house or follow parents to

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<sup>67</sup> Human Development Sector Reports East Asia and the Pacific Region, The World Bank. (2005). *Schooling and Poverty in Lao PDR*.

go working elsewhere since the routine of going to school already got disrupted; they will get more tempted to follow the parents. If not going to Thailand, some would go to the mountain and do another rice farming there. These motilities of the parents cost a direct effect on children's schooling. Furthermore, these children leave school for a much longer time than when the parents are busy doing rice farming in the village.

➤ ***Education is good for the future, however nothing to do with farming***

Provided the surrounding environment of PakNgum, where the majority of the people are subsistent farmers, and there are no other jobs available. The dropouts' parents admitted that they do not think education is the most needed here in the town. It is contradictory with what the state and the teachers said that "*children's education is an investment for a good future.*" The idea of investing in children's education seems to be more popular for the middle-income families only since the investment is very expensive and time-consuming. Moreover, the return is difficult to foresee, as education itself might not assure that the children will get good jobs, besides there is so limited job availability for the people in PakNgum except civil servants such as teachers and police. For the low- income parents, school tends to be just a place to keep the children away from the bad influences on the street when they are busy working. For example, Mrs. Chai, a 33-year-old meat merchant at Nason market, told me her story: "*in school, teachers can help me look after my children, instead of just letting them play around. The kids might have to work to support the household at some point in the future, but now that they cannot take care of themselves, so they should go to school first*".

Another case is Mr. Sunya, a 38 years old street vendor near Ban Hai Bus Stop who said that "*there is no nobody to look after my children if they do not go to school. When they get a bit older, I might allow them to work in the factory near our house. However, all in all, it is up to them*".

Likewise, Mrs. Duangduane, a 35 years old street vendor in Ban Hai said, "*School is a good place to be, and it is also very safe there*".

Although parents follow the state's advice about schooling in the beginning, schooling is still considered as 'luxurious' to the parents. Because of the increasing need for cash income

led the villagers to mobilize elsewhere for looking for jobs. Meanwhile, supports from the central level are limited (cassava plantation and ODOP is a failure) and not providing enough job opportunities and therefore some have to migrate to look for jobs in Thailand and bring along their children. They are thus giving up on investing in the future of their children through education because they cannot afford them to study until they finish university. For instance, Mrs Bounmy, a 40 years old street vendor near Ban Hai Bus Stop: *"My two children are now in primary school; I am not sure if they should go to secondary school or not because there is no point as I can't afford to send them to the university in the town. And we do not have relatives, whom the kids are going to be with. If they cannot get the degree, they will not be able to get good jobs"*.

Similarly, in the case of Mr. Bounkird, a 30 years old vegetable vendor at Nason Market explained, *"Going to the university in the town is only for the elite people, we need to have money not only for the school fee (informal fee, which is around 20 USD per year) but also the money to rent a room because we don't have any relative there"*.

### ➤ ***Education is to learn VS Unlearning***

It is generally agreed that education is for learning procedures. In contrast, based on the interview from the site, education can be an unlearning process for the children as well. For example, children do not learn anything about farming, which is the parent's source of income and their main concern. Since going to classes in Laos starts from 8am-4pm from Monday-Friday, the children cannot learn how to farm or to help parents with the farm works. Besides, farming, children being influenced by the group of friends is what worried the parents. Some groups of friends in bigger grade, like to hang out, playing around the neighborhood. As a result, their schedule to arrive home has never been punctual. Since the family members are expected to help each other to have enough food such as raising livestock, looking for fish in the pond, planting vegetable and looking for products in the forest, parents do complain about the misbehave of the children from going to school, *"we are worried that if they hang out with the wrong friends they will not listen to our advice"*.

➤ *School Unit VS Family Unit*

The concern of the state and the people, state concerns about education is more limited within the school unit, or within the school boundary, things outside the school are not taken into account. At the same time, the people also concern about their family unit, everything is more about the family, and that is their priority and responsibility. People are doing happily with the way things are, parents and children calculate their life based on their basic household needs.

➤ *State order is not followed*

Education is not the most needed or has not been an urgent option yet. Parents rely their life on the subsistent way of living; the biggest concern is how to secure an adequate supply for their household consumption. Thus, the rice farming season is the most crucial time for them to respond to. Although the state set the primary education as compulsory, it does not seem so important to the parents, to them it is quite random, they do send the child to school, but it has never been something urgent yet. Therefore, the state order is not followed by the people. 'Compulsory education' was made to make this education level more critical, as the country's priority, but because the people do not follow and the obligation and responsibility go back to the state. While the performance is measured by good records: high graduation, high promotion, and low dropout rate, therefore the state has to bring in the kind of policy to help improve the education indicators. For example, the PPP as a means to reduce repetition rate, dropout rate and therefore improve the rate of graduation to have a good record. Still, it was not that convincing for the parents. Making education to a certain level compulsory and PPP to move on to the next class could not lure the students into staying in school. When parents think of schools, they associate with resources and labors, which interferes with their daily lives. The majority own less than 1 ha of land and do 1 season of rice farming, which is very difficult to accumulate a surplus. Among all the rice farming cost, labor cost is the highest cost. As a result, children become a very important factor in reducing such cost. Since the school calendar is overlapping with the farming calendar, children have to leave school to help the parents.

➤ *Obligation and right*

Policy development in Laos is highly controlled, centralized in the LPRP. Although structured to reach from the central to the village level, it avoided the local context. Distance shows when the Lao state could not reach the people, meaning the range of the influence is not as expanded but stays within the central level. The ruling class responds more to the foreign development partners (DPs) than the people, who are the implementing unit of their policies. State tend to follow the DPs' agenda, e.g. Unicef, WB, AusAid, etc., which might not match with the local Lao context. Although sometimes the villagers respond to the state policies, it usually happens only at the beginning. It is because people have their own way of doing things. Their similar idea and interest are formed through regular interaction, then 'we' is perceived and thus labeled the group and separated them from the outside, where no one exhibits their interest towards the government. They go against changes affecting subsistence way of living, paying taxes, joining cooperative farming, prohibit 'modern clothing' etc., and preventing danger through patrolling. The state sets the scope of obligation and right of the people, but this stays more at the central level, the people have their own making world. In other word, the people are quite autonomous, things are being taken care of by the complete set of available sectors and resources at the village level, without the intervention from the state.

Lao state is under the ruling of the Lao People Revolutionary Party or LPRP. The high-ranking party members consisted of the politburo and the central party members; they have the role in deciding the country's structure at the party congress that is held every five years. To decide the National Development Goals, which goals contained approach toward international commitment, mainly the MDGs and SDGs. And these goals are implied in the five years Socio-Economic Development Plan. Each ministry has to follow and expand them into their ministries' development plan.

Laos has always been relying on the Development Partners resulting in the country to fall into the state of not being financially independent. Since independence in 1975, reconstruction and financial assistance were provided by the Soviet Union and Vietnam. In the late 1980s the Soviet Union aid programs was demised resulting in the financial crisis in the country and led Laos to adopt the New Economic Mechanism, the economic reform from state command to rely on the market, and the open door as the new foreign strategy, as a result, Laos turned to rely on international agencies such as WB, ADB, UN; Donor countries e.g. Sweden,



Japan, Germany, and Australia and ODA. International aid agencies also exert considerable influence on the educational agenda through projects and funding allocation, especially in the basic education sector that primary education was set as the country's priority. "*Influence of international donors on the priorities and projects of national plans can be substantial... appears in the establishment of broad priorities (e.g., basic education), which donors tend to favor*" (Don, Geok, Lin, 2002, p.229)<sup>68</sup> The donors become even more involved when Laos signed the 'Vientiane Declaration on Aid effectiveness' in 2006- the implementation of policies and plans requires the joint effort of both government and international partners. Joints effort of government & DPs signed at the Vientiane Declaration felicitates the implementation of Education Sector Development Framework (ESDF), where sector analysis, policies, and strategies, programs of actions and managements were fostered by the DPs, which is one requirement that Laos could apply for the Fast Track Initiative (FTI), a donor group set since 2002 to help developing countries to achieve MDG2 the Universal Primary Education<sup>69</sup>. It is noteworthy that planning tends to focus on projects that respond to donor-driven initiatives and resources. In the same years of ESDF, PPP was endorsed as a tool to accelerate to achieve the goals.

Policy development in Laos is politicized, with highly centralized control in the LPRP, structured to reach from central to the village level. At the village level, the people are doing perfectly happy with the way things are – they were either community-oriented or household-oriented. As mentioned by Grant Evan in his last book about Laos in 2012, "*the 'untouchedness' so beloved by touristic often a consequence of failed development plans and enforced communist isolation for almost two decades*" (Evans, 2012, pp.8)<sup>70</sup>. Even in the old-time observation by Scott, he said "*there is typically a strong preference for settling disputes informally and avoiding litigation which would bring the intervention of outsiders*" (Scott, 1977a, p.289)<sup>71</sup>. However, Scoot did not discuss what peasant communities think of schools.

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<sup>68</sup> See, Don, Geok, Lin, 2002, Linking Research, Policy, and Strategic Planning to Education Development in Lao People's Democratic Republic, University of Chicago Press

<sup>69</sup> See, Richard Noonan, Phommalangsy and Inthasone, 2013, Lao PDR: The Great Transformation, A New Beginning for Education in Laos, Bloomsbury, London

<sup>70</sup> See, Evans, 2012, A Short History of Laos, The Land In Between, Silkworm, Thailand

<sup>71</sup> See, Scott, 1977a, Patron client politics and political change in Southeast Asia, American Political Review

The research finds that when they think of schools, the parents associate it with resources and labors. This can be reluctant to some, as mentioned by a study of a village in the south of Laos. While children and parents consistently calculate their lives based on a small responsibility to the community, and they do not listen to teachers nor talking to them about children's schooling.

In brief, the ideas of schooling for each key holder are conflicting. To say that primary education is important to a child does not lure him or her to the school. Parents should be able to encourage their children to go to school and be able to tell them that they do not need to work at the farm. Teachers have to be able to tell the children why primary education is more important than playing around or working with their parents. The government officials should have the students realized that they will be supported as long as they go to primary school. This same case goes to teachers; government officials should be able to provide teachers a clear picture of their roles and responsibly to perform their tasks well. At the same time, the educational officials should be aware of the teachers' ability, meanwhile, give enough support to implementing the allocated plan. As evidenced by, the Mid-term review of MOES, the internal factor leading students to drop out is because teachers do not practice or follow the policy strictly, which is one of the factors discouraging the students and lead them to drop out.<sup>72</sup> However based on my interview with a local teacher in Natarm district, Mr. Somphone, 55 years old, a teacher at Donhai primary school said that he sometimes finds it hard to teach with the textbook from MOES, as instead of receiving the training he received only the guidelines. As a result, he could not clearly understand the teaching method that the MOES desires. The policymakers are under the pressure of the deadline and the limited budgets. Thus they want to see the improvement of schools and hurry to achieve the goal both national and international they have committed to. Nonetheless, sometimes, they are too focused on how to make the overall performance outstanding. Consequently, they may be more preoccupied with how the school performance appears on paper – the statistical record – as evidenced by the implementation of the progressive promotion, which seems to make students graduate merely on paper. However, PPP resulted in only a temporary reduction in the school dropouts, then

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<sup>72</sup> See, Educational strategy research and analysis center, MOES. (2012). The challenges to achieving the millennium development goal 2 & 3: the rapid assessment of school dropouts, the distribution of textbooks, and teachers' guidelines primary education (In Lao). Vientiane, Laos: MOES, p. 19.

shortly return to its old habit as other needs require the children to do so. The limited ability of the central government to make a difference in local people's lives illustrates the distance between them.

Persistence primary school dropouts, reveals distance between the state and the people. The research found education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (food, jobs) of the majority of the Lao people are engaging in subsistent farming. Likewise, the educators' failure to recognize the demands of people's lives in an economy still at a predominantly agriculture-centered stage, evidenced by the overlapping of farming and schooling schedule. The lack of proper training experiences in educational policies and budget for implementation at the local level e.g., remedial education among the teachers, and education management at the local village administration, led these actors to customize the policies based on what available at the environment.

## **Chapter 6: Laos: the struggle for centralization process**

Laos' today is known as a modern country, its geographical border was not mapped until 1893; it is a result of the colonial past (1893-1954) and the impacts of the cold war (1960s-1975). Therefore, the prolonged war has delayed the Lao state to establish a stable foundation of the government. Before the French arrived in Laos in 1893, Laos was three divided kingdoms that almost became part of its neighboring country (Thailand). However, after the French occupied Laos, instead of unifying the different kingdoms to one entity, the French administered each one separately and interacted only with the top echelon of each (200 families). More than 90% of the Lao population was living on 'their own', and was left untouched by these ruling few. Only until 1946, the kingdoms were unified and ruled by the Lao nationalist group. However, the new government faced many difficulties, including the lack of budget and skillful workers, thus it lasted only for less than a year. Consequently, it was not difficult for the French to return and took the control over Laos again. Although this time, the French put more effort to build closer relationships with the rest of the people, still it was concentrated only within the city areas. After Laos received the independence from France in 1954, in place of France, the U.S., the Soviet Union, and (North) Vietnam exercised varying degrees of influence upon the ruling class in Vientiane. Eventually, Laos was pulled into the cold war in the 1960s. The conflict lasted for almost two decades, which delayed the Lao state in solidifying its basis to build a unified nation. Moreover, the country relied 100% on foreign aid, which freed the state of the need to tax its people.

Only after 1975 Laos became a socialist country with a centralized command. The new rule was structured to reach the local grassroots level, through the Provincial Level, District Level, and the Village Level, for example, through 'Cooperative Agriculture' and 'Taxing system.' Unfortunately, there was resistance from the villagers, who have been by themselves for a long time, freed from the state's interference. Therefore, they were not prepared to respond to the state's commitment. It is noteworthy to keep in mind that the Lao people before 1975 were not severely taxed. The implementation of the cooperative agriculture and the need to pay contributions to the state was a shock to the people, and thus encountered the farmers' resistance. This policy was stopped in 1986, when the state shifted to follow the New Economic Mechanism. This new path allowed the country to open up to foreign aid, technical assistance,

and investment to support the country's public services in its various sectors; including health, economy, agriculture, and education. Until today (2019), Laos is still dependent on foreign aids, which covers more than 80% of Lao's state investment. Similarly, Laos is facing difficulty to tax its people, as mentioned by the Minister of Finance at the National Assembly in June 2019. The Lao state, despite having accomplished some fundamental reforms that have given the country an annual economic growth of 7% and economic stability since 1975, is still facing significant challenges regarding the redistribution of wealth. In 2012, the country's disparities in income appeared to be 36.4% of the Gini Index, and until 2015, 79% of the total labor force was working under their 'own account' and as 'unpaid families workers' (PHC, 2016, pp.8).

Review of various literature sources were done, in order to understand Laos' stage of its nation-building. Bourdet mentioned that Laos was barely existed before 1975, "*Laos had been created artificially*"<sup>73</sup>. In contrary, Stuart Fox has drawn significant of Lao culture and society that existed for a long time. Similar to Coedès who has argued that Laos was established for an extended period, and that its history could be traced back to the 14th century, during the Kingdom of Lan-Xang (Coedès, 1959). However, it was debated by Soren that the Lan-Xang Kingdom was separated into three kingdoms in the 17th century and almost became part of its neighbor Siam (Thailand) at the beginning of the 19th century, and that although the unification was proclaimed in 1945, yet its achievement (nationalist imagination in Laos) is still debatable (Sorren, 2008, p. 217). The existence of Laos as a real national entity was also questioned by Grant Evans, regarding the border between Laos and Thailand that is 'unnatural', since the people recognized as 'Lao' in the precolonial period were split into two groups which were later incorporated into two different national forms (Evans, 1999). This research examines the relationship between the state and the people, thereby shedding light on Laos' nation-building. The research also aims to study the allocation of the state's services and policies at the local level, which has shown unintended results, as exemplified by the primary education dropout issue. This research contribution is to give insights to the state, and its development partners, when planning a policy to mitigate the unsuccessful outcomes.

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<sup>73</sup> The view was presented in L'Observateur Politique, Économique et Littéraire shown in Sorren Iwasson's 'Creating Laos' in 2008, pp.213

## I. State's attempt to narrow down the distance between the state and the people

In February 1945, the Japanese troops occupied Indochina and deposed the French colonial administration who had ruled the area for almost half a century. Since the French had governed the three kingdoms of Laos separately; the Japanese followed the same position. Nevertheless, the Japanese occupation had brought the idea of unification of the three kingdoms to the Lao leaders. As evidenced by the speech of the King of Luangprabang soon after the Japanese occupation, "*From this day forward, our Kingdom of Laos, the former colony of France, is now an independent nation. Henceforth, the Kingdom of Luangprabang will attempt to preserve its own independence like other countries of East Asia and will join with neighboring countries to build prosperity and progress following the principles of the Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Consequently, in order to work with the Japanese Empire as a trusted ally, I hereby declare that our Kingdom has agreed to cooperate in all things with Japan*"<sup>74</sup>. The speech of the king implied that three Kingdoms were unified under the Kingdom of Luangprabang. Following the declaration, the king proposed the Japanese to sanction the unification, but the proposal was refused. It was because the Japanese did not want to change the system the French had administrated before.

The attempt to unify Laos was delayed until August 1945 when the Japanese troops in Indochina surrendered. Under this vacuum of power, Prince Phetsarath, the most influential Lao leader, announced the independence of the Lao Kingdom. By calling 'Lao Kingdom,' the prince referred not only to the Kingdom of Luangprabang but also the Kingdom of Vientiane and Champasack. Finally, the unification was secured, but it is noteworthy that the new state did not have much time to be prepared for it. The first Lao unified government was under the Lao leaders led by Prince Phetsarath, Prince Souvanna, Prince Souphanuvong, and a mix of Lao educated elite. However, due to the lack of budget to run the government, including paying the civil servant's salaries, unfortunately, the operation lasted for less than a year. It illustrates that the French did not prepared a strong foundation of the Lao government, similar to the national economy that was poorly equipped since the French was relying only on the sale of opium. Laos was considered as a poor and backward country, as mentioned by Sorren (2008).

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<sup>74</sup> See The Iron Man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, translated by J.B.Murdoch, No.110, Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, NY, 1978, pp.36, quoted in Soren, 2008, pp.209

In April 1946 French military reoccupied Laos, and the French colonial administration was reinstalled. More efforts of the French were made to build a closer relationship with the people, aiming to strengthen its position in Laos. However, the state's activities and services were concentrated only in the area of 10 Km diameter in Vientiane capital.

In 1954, Laos received independence from France, but the country fell into some other foreign influences (US, Soviet Union, and Vietnam). Because of this, Laos was pulled into the cold war in the 1960s. For more than 20 years, the ruling class, busy interacting with their foreign partners, preoccupying with the political turmoil, and did not attempt to reach the people at the village level. Meanwhile, the majority of Lao people shown little interest in the existence of the state. Lao national economy and agricultural sector, in particular, was kept afloat. *"There was little change in the basic structure of the Lao economy. The relative share of state versus private control of the economy also remained largely unchanged"* (Ronald Bruce John, 2006, p.56).

The Royal Lao Government had effective control only over the urban economy, e.g., small modern industrial sector, therefore, the population in a further area was left by themselves engaging in subsistent farming. The majority of the people did not receive assistance from the state; meanwhile, they were also not paying taxes to the state. The one-way flow of the US development aid has fully supported the state and freed the rural communities of any obligation towards the central government. *"Elimination of the responsibilities of rural communities to contribute to the state only weakened state authority over them"* (Stuart, 1997, p.130). Finally, the civil war came to an end in 1975, which outcome was serious, e.g., heavy bombardment in the northern part of Laos and the spread of dioxide, the Agent Orange in the southern region. However, since the confrontations concentrated only in some areas of XiengKhuang, and along the HoChiMinh Trail, the people in other parts were living normally (following their own daily routine). Therefore, before 1975 while the state was occupied with the conflict, it has delayed the process of trials and errors for the nation-building, more than 90% of the people relied on their natural economy without state interference.

## 1. Attempts to reach the people of the Lao socialist state after 1975

In 1975, the royalist government was overthrown, Laos became a socialist country or the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) under the Pathet Lao government. It marked the beginning of the Lao state's attempt to reach its people. Nonetheless, there was a mountain of challenges for the new government, especially, the serious shortage of budget due to the aid withdrawal from the U.S., which led to the collapse of the Lao national economy. The state, therefore, turned to rely on aid and advice from the Soviet Union and Vietnam to build the nation (Ronald B., 2006, pp.19), such as adopting the Agricultural Collectivization, along with the improvement of Mass Education, Infrastructure, Media, and Health, and to do the profound revolutionary change from the village level to involve the people in the nation building.

Agricultural Collectivization was announced in 1976 right after the declaration of the socialist rule on 2 December of the year before. Along with the agricultural taxation of 30% of a farmer's rice production, as an effort to replace the economic assistance provided by the US before 1975. "*One of the first clear signals to the peasants that the new government planned a new role for them in the country's economic development*" (Evans, 1990). This created tension between the state and the people who had never been severely taxed by previous regimes. "*The introduction of new agricultural taxes, without a concerted effort to explain the need, soured relations with the very Lao peasantry the government claimed to represent*" (Ronald B., 2006, pp.33). Besides, Droughts in 1976 and 1977 led the paddy output to fall by 40% nationwide, decreasing as much as 95% in some provinces (Stuart, 1999, p.178). Also, due to the shortage of cadres and the limited resources (technical and financial assistance) provided by the central authority, the collective farming model was a failure. The farmers, who were participating voluntarily, eventually left the cooperatives. After a few years, cooperative groups were reduced by 50%. By the end of 1978, the number of refugees fleeing from Laos was around 4000 per month; there were more than 120,000 refugees from Laos in camps in Thailand (Brown M. and Joseph J., 1979). It is worth noting that the model of collectivization was still maintained until the end of 1986. The situation shows that the Lao government was occupied with trying to stay on track of the socialist path, which prevented them from responding to the uninterested of the people.



Failure of cooperative led the country to introduce the New Economic Mechanism, which was similar to Doi Moi of Vietnam, a reform that encouraged a market economy opened to the international community. In the 1990s, the Land Reform, including the ban of slash and burn agriculture in the 1990s was an attempt of the Lao state to participate in the international agenda, and foster foreign aid. The reform had two main goals: to increase land tenure security to encourage farmer involvement in intensive farming and to protect the environment (forest) by stopping slash and burn farming. The ideas were expanded from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or Rio Summit in 1992. Domestically, the program led to the displacement of 150,000 households in the north whose livelihood was dependent on slash and burn agriculture. Until today many upland farmers continue to do slash and burn cultivation, 15,000-25,000 hectare annually was seen under the practice, despite being rendered as illegal. Many researchers such as Vandergeest (2003) explains the continuation of the practice was because these farmers lacked the means and knowledge to do modern farming. Slash and burn farmers were people living in the upland areas, the majority from the Lao Soung ethnic group. They represented 25% of the whole population (FAO, 2010). The upland farmers produce just enough for their household, they were not prepared for the transition to modern farming or mass production, which requires capital to purchase inputs including seeds, chemicals, machinery; and the know-how. The Land Reform became a source of all kinds of insecurities. Poor farmers had to sell their land since they could not afford to invest, neither to pay land tax nor to hire out as labor force for the richer families (Ducourtieux O., Laffort J., and Sacklorham S., 2005). According to a study of UNESCO and UNDP about resettled villages in Laos, the land reform created an income gap between the poor farmers (who lost their land engaging in illegal farming), and the richer farmers (who had the investment capacity to become richer). In some areas, the displacement reached 50% to 80% of the total villagers (Vandergeest P., 2003). Given the situation, many farmers still continue slash and burn cultivation, despite being rendered as illegal. It is important to emphasize that the population density in Laos at that time was 12 people per Km<sup>2</sup><sup>75</sup>, whereas the tropical forest covered nearly half of the country. Oliver, a researcher in land reform in Laos, said that access to land should not pose a significant problem to the environment in Laos. Moreover, Dufumier's work suggested that if the land is left fallow for

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<sup>75</sup> 2015 Population density is 30 per Km<sup>2</sup>

more than six years, the yield will decrease, and soil will erode. Thus, in the case of Laos, slash and burn can be sustainable. To briefly sum up, without being necessary, the policy ended up disrupting the people, especially the upland farmers. Again, the situation demonstrates that the Lao state was not responding to people inside the country, but responding to the international agencies.

Education reform was also the state's goal to include the people into national development due to the lack of budget and workforce. The state has been finding support from the development partners. For example, joining the World Education Forum of UNESCO (EFA) in Jomtien in 1990, and in Dakar in 2000. EFA goals also contribute to the global pursuit of the Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) on Universal Primary Education by 2015. With the international commitment, it made Laos emphasize even more on the role of primary education. In 2000, the Lao government issued the first law on education and announced primary education level as a compulsory education level. For the progress, Laos has achieved the target of enrollment rate of 95% ahead of time, in 2013, but the aim to reduce the dropout rate to 0% remained problematic, it was the main obstacle to achieve Universal Primary Education in 2015. Until today (2018), every year approximately 35,000 children are dropping out in the middle of their primary school. Currently, Laos is heading towards the same goal of Universal Primary Education under the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), dropouts is thus the challenge for the Lao government.

Although Laos's GDP growth is currently considered one of the highest among ASEAN with 7% growth, in 2017, Laos had a GDP per capita of 2,300 USD growing at a very high rate (increased from 763 in 1995). It is estimated that, as of today, the GDP per capita in the capital city alone has gone over 6000 USD (JETRO Laos, 2017), higher than the neighbor's big cities: Hochiminh, Hanoi, and very close to the GDP per capita of Thailand. When examining the contribution of the different economic sectors to the GDP in 2017, unsurprisingly 31% came from the industry sector, 42% from services sector<sup>76</sup>, 11% from taxing, and 15.8% was from

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<sup>76</sup> Service sector reached the highest share of GDP it ever had in 2017. The same year was reported to have the highest number of a tourist than before, which explains the rise in GDP of the sector

agriculture (declined from 52.1% in 1995) (Lao Statistic Bureau, 2018). Meaning that in terms of the national income, the Lao state is doing fine; however, it did not involve the agriculture people which the difference number of farmers has slightly declined and stayed around 75% for the past ten years; thus, these people remained indifferent to what the state does. According to the 2015 Population Housing Census (PHC) (PHC, 2015, pp.26) of Laos, 67.1% of the people were living in 'rural areas', which 39% of people in these areas were engaged in their 'own account work,' and 50.9% were occupied as 'unpaid family workers' (PHC, 2015, pp.79). According to the PHC report, one of the reasons for Laos's slow urban growth was that people do not want to move out of their town. *"most rural residents preferring to stay away from urban areas. This could be one of the reasons for the slow urban growth observed during the last decade"*.

## **II. The lack of responsiveness among the people to government intervention**

The people were living on their own, relying on guidance from the village head and mutual help among the neighborhood, to secure the welfare of their own. These mutual contributions to cover communal events such as weddings, funerals, other significant village events, and often extending themselves even to disaster relief, have kept village heads as the primary manager of various social services and affairs. It illustrates a level of autonomy of the villagers, and see no need to follow the changes brought especially when it goes against their daily routine.

### **1. Lao Villages and their 'own making.'**

Historically, Lao villages have never been through any severe reform by the French administration government. When Laos was under the French colonial era (1893-1954), the State presence was among 200 royal families from three different Kingdom interacting separately with the French. State's existence was only felt a few square miles away from the royal capital. *"Members of this urban elite were often shocked to encounter peasants in rural areas who refused to speak French, who did not see themselves as Frenchmen, and who clung to local customs and superstitions"* (Evans, 2012, p.50). During the French colonial rule, only

34% of the population interviewed even in the capital city, knew the name of the late king in Luangprabang (56 years ruling); and less than half knew the name of their country (Clement Johnson, 1957, p. 11). From the 1950s, the central government was carried away by the political and military struggles within the country, under the influence of outsiders (Vietnam, Soviet Union, and the US). While the government was relying on the foreign aid 100%, the people were free from obligation and requirement to participate in the national economy.

After Laos received full independence in 1975, Laos changed in power from Constitutional Monarchy to Communist People's Republic. The main idea of the communist path is to place restrictions on the activities of the 'capitalist' to restrictions on intermittent peasant commerce. And the final aim is communal ownership of land to bypass capitalism. By committing in, Collective Agriculture: The large scale organization of production on agriculture as the country's main industry would replace the capitalist way of manufacturing and achieve even further the application of modern technology. The re-distribution to maintain relative equality among the peasants. To prevent one from becoming significantly better or worse off than others.

On the 5 of May 1978, the decree on the management of agricultural co-operatives was promulgated: to form solidarity groups in villages, to organize the co-operation on a regular basis of exchange of labor, peasants would work collectively and be paid accordingly, to prevent one from becoming significantly better or worse off than others, and to involve common ownership of land and tools of production. The participants did not have many options but to participate; however, some were voluntary participants as they had perceived the benefit of becoming members such as getting the access to the irrigation system, lower price of fertilizer and insecticides, acquiring machinery (tractors and threshing machines), and a pool of labors as a precondition of production. In the case of Ban Mak Nao in Pak Ngum District, cooperative groups at the villages were arranged by the head of the village. Usually one village, 1-2 cooperative groups (20-30 households in each group). Each group was combined among landed and landless farmers. The cooperatives did not get the promised support from the central government. Because there is no machinery to help to increase the productivities, and that landed farmers had to share their land with landless farmers. After the cultivation, Although Landless farmers had more productivities, the landed peasants received less than they use to have. Ban Mak Nao stopped the cooperative soon after doing it only for one year. The point

system superimposed production than what the peasants could make. Landless peasants, who had no rice in stock, got the priority to claim the rice first. Because the account was overestimated, the landed peasants were left with much less amount of rice.

Despite the situation, the government reconfirmed that collectivization is the sole efficient way to introduce new and modern techniques. Lao peasants were not motivated to pool their resources for collective actions. From 1979 to 1980, the total number of cooperatives went down dramatically. They feared that corporatization was but the first step towards the elimination of all private property. Moreover, without a change in the technological basis of production has led to a drop in the landed peasants' standard of living, a drop in work motivation, a drop in productivity. In 1983, because of the low productivities in the country, the government needed to raise production in all areas (inside and outside cooperative); therefore, cooperatives were no longer given priority.

The policy aims to eliminate the inequality by the re-distribution method. However, the farmers (with land) were refused to allow the cooperative to become a means of redistributing income in the village at their expense. The final aim to achieve communal ownership was therefore totally going against the people's desire, as a result, they tried every way preventing their property to become a common ownership. In 1986, President Kaysone admitted one reality that "*in the agricultural field, cooperatives are still in the low form and the peasants have just embarked on the path to collectivization, but in general, they are still engaged in the 'natural economy.'*" A type of economy in which though money is not used, resources are allocated through direct bartering or sharing out according to traditional customs.

The people's way of production in their daily activity cannot be changed suddenly, as shown in the failure of the Agricultural Cooperative. Another attempt to bring farmers to engage in modern farming was the ban of slash and burn in the 1990s, under the Land Reform Program sponsored by different international agencies. The reform, in contrast, resulted as a source of insecurities for the majority of the upland farmers who were not prepared to stop practicing slash and burn and to engage in modern farming, including the green revolution. Also, to adopt this new farming method, farmers have to have the capital to purchase required inputs, which include seeds, chemicals, and machinery. For the majority of upland farmers who produce just enough for self-consumption, that is far from reality. On the top of that, Laos

consists of different groups of ethnicities, mainly three groups namely Lao Lum (56% of the total population as of 1990), Lao Theung (34%) and Lao Sung (9%), the three groups have different ways of production. Although the Lao Lum had practiced lowland rice cultivation or the rice paddy, the Lao Theung has always been practicing shifting cultivation or slash and burn using crop rotations involving fallow fields for five to fifteen years depending on soil condition, and land availability; and the Lao Sung occupies the uplands of high altitude, also practiced slash and burn, where the common crops are maize and poppy. The policy, therefore, created a disruption to the upland farmers' lives, and as a result, the people do not follow the state's policies and returned to do slash and burn when needed.

Another struggle of the state is to tax the people, which is one problem to the national revenue, conversely, it was found that people do pay their contribution, but to the village administration and the social events, so-called 'social tax' as a way to secure their welfare. The term 'social tax' was created by the people and is used informally on a daily basis. It refers to the contribution to the events like wedding, birth ceremony, funeral, and other traditional ceremonies and festivals. Mutual-aid is functioning in rural communities, which play complementary roles of social security in the developing process. For example, none of the villagers has national health insurance. These villagers choose to count on the sale of their livestock and the help of their neighbors. The same is true in the time of emergency, such as natural disasters. Warnings, information, and plans to mitigate the issue will be spread by the villagers. Therefore, people perceive themselves as a beneficiary as a member.

Until today, the image of the village's way of living has not changed much, according to the observations of the life of people, in a rural area in Vientiane Capital during 14 rounds of fieldwork (2011-2018), show that villagers' life is quite 'autonomous' with their own system of division of labor and mutual help under a complete structure of village administration. For example, during the farming season, the villagers often exchange labor force, machinery, and land within a group of villagers when they need to support each other's farm work. Mutual help and contributions among them can also be seen during social events such as weddings, births and funeral ceremonies where neighbors take turns to contribute to the event, under the village head's guidance and presence, making ceremonies meaningful. The village head plays a crucial role in guiding people to take care of the village in various areas including village security, by forming a patrolling force to look after the village, and building their own infrastructure (e.g.,

roads and bridges). In times of contingency, the village head will be the one who spreads news and warnings, gathering labor to give shelter and food to those in need. For serious cases such as health emergencies, the relatives and the village head are the main actors to help out. For example, in PakNgum province, no one has national health insurance. When going to the hospital is needed, people will borrow money from their relatives or will sell their life stock. For information matters, like where to go and when to go, they count on the village head.

The village head is also heavily involved in taking care of the village school. Both construction and maintenance of school buildings are under the responsibility of the village head who distributes tasks among villagers. School operations, including facilities and utilities, are mainly supported by contributions gathered by the village head. The villagers thus perceive them as the village's beneficiaries, instead of the state's. Unsurprisingly, when they are asked for contributions, they do cooperate with the village administration. Regular interaction and exchanging assistance among a group of villagers and the village head allows people to live 'autonomously.' *"We are ok by ourselves; the state does not have to worry about us"* (Mr. Lar, Natarm Village Head). This point was reconfirmed by Koksa's village head, *"more than 90% of our villagers are living under subsistence farming, which secures each household consumption. There is no much support from the state; at the same time, no one has exhibited any concern toward the state neither"*. There is no interaction between the state and the people. The closest interaction can be seen in the state's order, in the form of official documents, spread around by village head during meetings that are held once or twice a year. Accordingly, people do not exhibit interest in the state. Although villagers do pay land tax, the contribution may go unnoticed because it was made into a lump sum decided by the head of the village which gives it to the district level. Many times only the large landowners pay it. The contributions which all villagers are committed to doing are the ones for the village administration. With this in mind, it can be said that there is another 'politic' at the village level. Because of this reason, although the state's policies, including services, failed to provide a positive outcome, the villagers are doing ok in a village politic that is quite strong and autonomous.

These villages, although situated in the capital city, were supposed to receive support, and in fact, should have more possibilities to interact with the central government. If there is still a distance between the central government and the villagers here, the distance in further areas could be even wider.

### **III. A case of education reform**

The research uses the case of Lao education to examine the distance between the state and the people. The goal of Universal Primary Education was adopted from the education conferences at the international level, such as Education For All in 1990, Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. However, after a long time, Laos has not achieved the goal showing a persistent DROP OUT rate of more than 10% for the past ten years.

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, their parents, primary school educators, village heads, and finally, a few in Education Ministry of the central government including the primary education technical officials and their foreign partners. The research found that dropouts took place not because of the lack of motivation to go to school. It is a consequence when education is just one among many other concerns that people (village officials, teachers, children, and parents) have to consider for their daily lives. Education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (food, jobs) and most of the time, and it becomes secondary to these other needs.

When looking at the historical background of education in the country, Laos education is still at an early stage, unlike neighboring countries like Vietnam and Thailand. Before 1975, education was for a few, only elite families and people in the cities. In 1944, by the end of the French colonial, the Primary School Enrolment Rate was only 4.6% (Stuart Fox, 1990). Under the Royal Lao government (1954-1975), although more people got access to education, there was less than 40% Primary School Enrolment Rate. It was only after 1975 when mass education was introduced to provide education services for all ethnic groups. Until now, the dropout issue remains a persistent problem with a recent record of 12% in 2017.

The Lao government has undertaken many efforts to encourage children's schooling. The major policy was launched in 2009: Progressive Promotion Policy to allow students to



pass to a higher grade automatically, without the need to pass the final exam of the prior grade. Remedial classes would support poor performers during the vacation period. As a result, students were expected to finish school on time. Other policies were introduced not so long after. Such as raising teacher's salaries, which got an increase of 100% in 2012, from USD100 to USD200. Informal school fees were removed by introducing the Block Grant in 2014 to replace the informal fee that parents have to pay. The grant provided an extra budget of USD6 per student per year for school operations. In 2015, the Free Meal program was established to provide lunch to students in 'rural areas" where students commute long distances to go back home to have lunch, and sometimes do not return for the afternoon session. With the program, the students do not need to go back home for lunch and can stay at school for the whole day. Among all problems, there has always been awareness about gender parity and ethnicity. As a response to these concerns, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) has emphasized more on recruiting staff from ethnic minority groups in remote areas, so they return to teach at their hometown.

Despite all the efforts and resources invested to achieve UPE, the state has not been able to solve the dropout issue. After an extensive review on the literature including in the study of MOES, Educational strategy research and analysis center in 2012 "The challenges to achieving the millennium development goal 2 & 3: the rapid assessment of school dropouts, the distribution of textbooks and teachers' guidelines primary education"; "Education and Earnings in Lao PDR: Regional and Gender Differences" by Phanpakit and Terukazu in 2006<sup>77</sup>. "Minority education and development in contemporary Laos" by Inui Miki in 2009; "EDUCATION IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC: CONFLUENCE OF HISTORY AND VISION" by Richard Noonan in 2011 and. Difficulties regarding children's schooling have been mentioned as follows. First, school availability is one of the main factors influencing children to drop out: when commuting to school is too far; it can discourage the students from going to school (Moes, 2012). Second, parents' background also determines their children's schooling. Third, poor educational attainment of the parents has an effect on children's education (Phanpakit and Terukazu, 2006). Fourth, household low income or poverty (the lack of food, uniforms, shelter, and the inability to pay for basic fees) have been crucial

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<sup>77</sup> This article provides a comprehensive study on the obstacles to basic education development in rural Lao PDR by using a unique national household survey including 2,492 rural households

reasons for the high primary school dropout rate (Phanpakit and Terukazu, 2006). Fifth, gender disparity: girls are likely to be pulled out of school in order to help with household chores, although they are less likely to repeat a grade than boys (Noonan, 2011). The factor regarding gender was disregarded by Phanpakit and Terukazu, who stated that the gender issue is not relevant for dropping out. Since the percentage of girls dropping out is insignificantly higher than the percentage of boys. The determinant that prevails is ethnicity, particularly in rural areas. One problem for ethnic children pointed out by the authors is the language: "*The policy of using only Lao as the language of instruction contributes to the educational disadvantage of ethnic minorities.*"

The mentioned studies give an overall picture of the causes of dropouts and focus on dropouts' students as the main actor. However, none of the studies has identified crucial differences among dropout students, such as the 'returnees' or returning students. Who returns to school after quitting for some time, which implies that they do want to go to school either to invest in the future or to have fun at school. The research focuses on '**the daily life of the key actors.**' Education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (food, jobs).

First, the village officials, although they are in charge of education promotion. But education is only one among many tasks they are occupied with such laws to maintain the peace, security for village safety and crime, cultures to promote good national traditions, health. Regarding, the officials' salary of less than USD20 per month, they need to secure sufficient household income. For this reason, besides their multiple tasks at the village, village heads have no choice but to do some part-time job and to keep it up with rice farming.

Second, the teachers who are also engaged in many things besides education-related matters. At school, teachers not only need to make sure school performances are kept looking good, but they also have to secure enough resources to run the school. After school, teachers need to do part-time jobs to secure household income, such as weaving Lao skirts and keeping it up with farming activities, since relying on their salary alone is not enough. Since teaching is competing with many other activities, teachers can barely follow the state's orders. Teachers are forced to customize the orders to match with the available resources and with their own ability. None of the policies are strictly implemented as planned by the state. For instance, none of the schools in PakNgum has been capable of implementing the Free Meal program, since

the budget is barely enough for school operations. Regarding the promotion of gender parity and ethnicity, teachers claimed that there is no special guidance to do it. Nevertheless, they talk to the parents whenever they can. It is noteworthy that the school has a meeting with parents once a year, each time only around 10%- 20% of the parents attend. The Blockage Program did help the school's operating budget; however, in practice, schools received less extra budget (USD4 per student per year instead of USD6). As a consequence, teachers still ask for parents' contributions when needed. As for PPP, there is a lack of budget and close guidance to implement remedial classes; none of the schools provide any remedial class. What this means is that teachers were expecting extra payment for giving remedial classes. It is interesting to point out that not even teachers follow the state: although the implementation of remedial classes is an order from the state, teachers still do not do it without extra payment.

Third, the villagers need to make sure to have enough labor force to work the land, either by hiring labor or having the children to help out, to do farming that is their main source of income and food security. Due to the limited jobs in the town, when extra cash income is needed, villagers have to migrate elsewhere to look for a job. Thus, when being worried about all these activities, investing in children's schooling for their future is not an option. Daeng (grandmother of dropouts) commented that "*if Poupey does not quit now, she will have to quit later, we cannot afford to send her to the secondary school, and we need her now.*" Therefore, PPP as a promise for children to graduate on time does not sound convincing for parents who have many concerns besides schooling.

As for children, being a student is not the only role they have, which roles are determined by parents' activities and demands. Overall, based on the findings from the rounds of fieldwork, we can draw a profile of the students based on their parents' activities. For example, enrolled students usually have parents with low mobility who have a regular income from working in the government (police, soldiers, teachers, local civil servants at the district bureau), having their own account work (shop owners), or being permanent factory workers. These parents barely allow their children to be absent; they can afford to pay for school-related things and the labor force for farming when needed. On the other hand, dropout students' parents tend to have high mobility. They are engaged in jobs with unstable income like migrant workers, farmers on the hills, or seasonal menial workers. Children from the latter group, have to work as independent individuals: helping parents with farming, looking after younger

siblings, and accompanying their parents going around. Some of these children can even be financially independent of doing some menial jobs or working in Thailand. From the many things the children do, one of their main concerns is to make friends and to meet with them. Therefore, going to school to play with friends is still an option when their schedule allows them to do so.

What was found at the research site was that approximately 50% of dropouts returned to schools. Due to PPP, children will get to move up based on their age. However, the problem lies here: when these returnees are back to school, schools are not prepared to have them back, because schools cannot provide these children with the support they need. The returnees are placed in a higher class based on their age, without being provided with remedial classes to be able to catch up during the vacation period. When returnees fail to catch up with their class, they end up dropping out for a second time. This second-time dropout is the most problematic issue because these students are not planning to return to school again. PPP is, therefore, a misplaced solution to solve the dropout issue pushing the returnees to dropout for good.

The state was in a rush to adopt the policy because of the need to meet the MGD2 on time. Thus, it failed to notice the different profiles of students that are various, as mentioned above. Only 45% of students in Natarm primary school are regular students; 44% of children have taken a leave for 1-2 months, and 11% have taken leave for at least one year. Another unexpected outcome of PPP is that instead of encouraging the parents and the students to come to school to finish the primary school on time, with expectation they will show more commitment to school now that repetition is not an option, PPP makes it easier for students to drop out since resuming school became easier (there is no punishment, no repetition). *"Parents take their children out of school temporarily to help with farming; the time of absence is longer when parents move to work elsewhere. Although the children returned afterward and got promoted, they failed to catch up and drop out again. This time they did not return"* (Principal Khamson, Natarm School).

Persistent drop out issue is the result of a misplaced solution for a problem that was not well-defined. One of the main findings to be highlighted here is that there is a misunderstanding between the education service provider (the state) and the recipients of the service (the people). Although primary education was promoted as a tool for job-security in the future; and was

made compulsory by law, people seem to perceive primary education neither as compulsory nor as a source of future security. Given the un-lively economic environment of PakNgum, and the limited job availability (794 jobs for 49,000 people); it is difficult for people to imagine and see the need for investing in education for future jobs. Likewise, for farmers, the majority of who rely on one season of rice farming a year, it is not easy to accumulate enough surplus to support household consumption for the whole year. For people engaged in rice-growing makes, schooling is a conflicting choice, since the school calendar overlaps with the rice farming schedule. Therefore, for these people, schooling is not yet a compulsory but a random option.

State's attention was concentrated only within the 'school unit,' while parents' or people's focus is within the 'family unit.' Teachers, who are the link between the state and the people, keep moving their position. Observations from the fieldwork have shown that teachers seem to be aware of their role as teachers only when they are inside the school. Outside the school, they are farmers busying with securing their household income. Even though often teachers run into other villagers around the village, they never talk about children's schooling. *"We meet with them almost every day, but we barely talk about school work"* (Daeng, a dropout's grandmother). When asking teachers about their interaction on education-related matters, they said the only chance they have time to do so is at the annual school meeting, *"We talk to parents at the school meeting, about 10-20% attend, the parents barely pay attention to the talk"* (Teacher Kaison). When asking teachers further about the key person encouraging children to enroll in school, all interviewed teachers answered: the head of the village. *"The parents prefer to listen to the head of the village, they talk more with him than with us, the teachers"* (Principal Khamson), *"when it is difficult to talk to the parents, we let the village administrator deal with them"* (Principal Khambu). In principle, the principals are under the supervision of the District Education Bureau (DEB), who receives direct guidance from the Province Education Bureau that has the closest interaction with the MOES. In reality, the principals barely talk to the DEB, claiming that the DEB only does the inspection job and never really gives the school support, especially financial support. Unlike the village administration who respond faster: *"Assistance from the district and MOES is more for giving hopes, no real action"* (Principal Khamson). *"The district has come to school, but for information, they never brought us any grant"* (Principal Khambou).

The state does recognize the important role of the village administration. Therefore, it established an official education department at the village level in 2008, known as the Village Education Committee (VECD) under the supervision of the DEB. It is noteworthy that the education development work was carried out by the village administration even before the implementation of VECD. Even so, the work before was limited to gather contributions from villagers and to encourage the children to go to school. After VECD, the village administration also needs to collect statistics, conduct research, find appropriate solutions, and report results to the district. All these responsibilities put village heads under great pressure, considering that the education level of the majority is a secondary school. Still, due to the fear of criticism, the real figures tend not to be reported. Therefore, the aggregate data alone might not be projecting the real situation. The introduction of VEDC, as a direct link between schools and central government, seems not to be working as expected since schools have more reasons to rely on the village than on DEB, which means that the communication between schools, the DEB, and the central government as a whole has become less and less efficient.

The policy development in Laos is highly controlled, centralized in the Lao Party Revolutionary Party, to be structured to reach from central to the village level. In practice, however, the range of their influence is not as expanded, staying within the central level and the foreign development partners. The problem is that policies do not match people's needs. Although sometimes villagers do respond to the state's policies, they usually follow in the beginning. When villagers find out that a policy does not fit their local context, it is too difficult to follow or does not benefit them. They stop responding to it. The picture of villagers' lives shows that things at the village level are operated on people's 'own making,' which illustrates a close relationship between villagers and their local authority. If villagers do not see the point in following a policy or do not receive the proper incentives to do so, they are not willing to follow the state's orders; it is worse when orders go against their daily routine.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Laos is still in the process of nation building, and to this end, has already embarked on an open-door policy in economic activities such as trade and investment, and further steps need to be taken to prepare the country for the future, including modernizing farming and human resources development. The country is, however, suffering weakness in institutional preparedness and a severe lack of budget, there is also a shortage of personnel and human resources in general, leading the state's continued reliance on foreign assistance. This thesis listed some of the state's attempts (the Land Reform and MDG2: Universal Primary Education), to create a good environment for foreign investments, and especially to increase its role in ASEAN. However, the attempts have been thus far resulted in failure, which shows the continued distance between the state and the people. Understanding how the state's policies have failed to reach the people at the village level, and the reasons underlying this failure, are what this research aims to uncover.

From 1975, a socialist Laos began attempting to reach its population at all levels, from the capital of Vientiane, through the Provinces, and on to the Districts and Villages. However, the village level reactions proved to be defined by indifference or disregard. First, the attempts to create an Agricultural Cooperative proved fruitless as Lao authority conformed to steadfastly to the communist rule, instead of responding to the needs of the local situation, which may have allowed for the initiation of more suitable and effective change. The farmers in Lao villages had historically produced just enough for their own household consumption and had never been taxed before and they were completely unwilling to conform to the new system that imposed such hardships on them. Additionally, the promise by the state to provide machinery and an effective cadre to supervise the shift was not kept, so the people ended up receiving less agricultural production than what they used to have, the farmers started leaving the cooperative. PakNgum District, for example, quit the cooperative just after one year of joining because it was so unsatisfying to the needs of its residents. Although, the government adopted the cooperative agriculture method with good intentions, as a way of redistribution of capital to maintain equality among the peasants, it was seen as unwanted and externally imposed by the villagers, and it competed with the basic needs and expectations of people's daily life, and therefore was resisted strongly and eventually had to be given up as a failure in 1986.

After 1986, Laos became more open, and it was clear that the country was in need of financial and technical assistances from a wider international community, so Laos joined international conferences, such as the Rio Summit, and committed to the implementation of Land Reform and to the eradication of slash and burn farming, as it was seen to be a more promising way to make changes in the local Lao communities. The high-land farmers were, however, not prepared to shift their farming system, as they lacked both capital and the requisite knowledge to do modern-farming, so many ended up returning to the forest and kept on doing the slash and burn practice. What is a complicating factor of the case of Laos is that, though slash and burn farming may generally be perceived as an unsustainable system in need of change, the evidence does not support this in the particular case of Laos. The population density in Laos at the time was 12 people per Km<sup>2</sup>, and access to land should not have posed a major problem to the environment. Additionally, Dufumier's work has suggested that slash and burn might be sustainable in Laos, as land that is left fallow for more than six years will suffer decreased yield and soil erosion. It illustrates the states tendency to respond to international ideas (such as the notion that slash and burn agriculture is always bad) and commitments (such as to pledge to cease the use of slash and burn agriculture), while paying less attention to the people and situations inside the country. As a consequence, the Land Reform policy sanctioned by the state failed to improve the lives of the slash and burn cultivators.

Similar is the case of education, which left the huge task of reforming the educational system of the country by disseminating the state policies, to the village administrators and school principals. Village administrations play an important role in supporting schools' regular operations, through actions such as gathering budgets and labor forces, however, they do not function well in terms of technical matters that the District Education Bureau was expecting them to do, such as collecting statistics, offering teacher training, and guiding teachers to implement the state-mandated educational policies. Dropouts took place not because of students' lack motivation to go to school, but for some other reason, as the study found that the group of the returnees want to go to school either to invest on the future or to have fun at school. Dropping out is, therefore, a consequence of when education is just one among many other concerns that people (children and parents) have to consider for their daily lives, and the other factors take precedence. Education has to compete with the struggle for other basic needs in life (food, jobs) and most of the time schooling becomes secondary to these other needs. The policies allocated by the state such as PPP, and school blockage are not responding well to the



needs of the people (parents and children) and therefore, have fail to solve the problem of dropouts.

Most of the Lao people live under subsisting farming, which they can always rely on to make a living, and being pushed to change without much support can create stress, and therefore people oftentimes simply do not follow the state's policies. The state completely ignores what the villagers' ability or willingness to follow its dictates, and so need change is not made and people cling to their daily routine and traditional way of production. Mutual-aid functions in rural communities, under the close guidance of the village heads, plays the role of securing needed social services and welfare, e.g., to cover communal events such as weddings, funerals, and other significant village events. These mutual help practices, often extend themselves even to disaster relief, health insurance, and other areas, which has kept village heads as the primary managers of various aspects of social security. This persistent situation demonstrates the strong sense of self-government that people within the village boundaries feel, and also explains why there was little or no preparedness for them to accept any form of external intervention.

Given this background, the Lao government, which was too preoccupied with the utility of development programs, adopted from international conferences, such as the Rio Summit, the MDGs and SDGs as a more promising way to make changes in the local communities. Without paying attention to the clear fact that there is a lack of responsiveness among the people to this, or any other form of government intervention. This is because the state is still a small organization concentrated only in Vientiane, meaning that the Lao politics is Vientiane politics. This also explains why Lao government is quicker to the international agenda setters than to demands of local population. As a result, the state policies are ignored by the villagers who do not see the need for them, or even understand what the state is trying to do.

### ➤ **Proposals**

Distance between the state and the people of Laos persists in spite of the fact that the Lao's state is trying to narrow the divide, and has, in fact, been continually trying to do so through the national development programs cooperating with different international agencies,

(Agricultural Cooperative, Land Reform, Universal Primary Education and others). This study, taking into account the history and character of the Lao people, aims to provide insights for the future of planning development programs in Laos.

This research found that there are three main factors to which the policymakers, including the Lao government officials of the various related sectors and foreign development partners, must keep in mind when designing policies for rural areas across Laos.

- First is that the majority of Lao people exercise a high degree of autonomy in managing their livelihood, including temporary jobs during the off-harvest time. These people's routines have been proven to work for them over a long history, and it is inherently challenging to convince them to change or replace these routines with suggested alternatives.
- Secondly, without proper training and sustained support in the implementation of programs at the local or village level, programs may be destined to failure and eventual abandonment.
- Thirdly, the policies sanctioned need to recognize the demands of people's lives in an economy still at a predominantly agriculture-centered stage. The new policy should be designed to convince the people of the practical advantages that policies and programs bring.

Since the people have sustained their communities by themselves autonomously, the central government must convince the people of the need to follow the state's guidance, that in so doing they can achieve prosperity greater than mere subsistence living, and make them feel that changes are essential to the betterment of their daily lives, e.g. Education should not be promoted only as a tool to get good job in the future, but also so that people can better understand the larger world, and how the state's policies might lead to better things in their daily life. The research also suggests the need for close support from the central government level to the village level, to guide the implementation of the policies and make it easy for the villagers to follow the state's programs. Proper training and constant follow up on the policies should reveal the unmet needs of villagers and thereby help support the village head, and officials of district level. The involvement of the district officials in the policy implementation process is essential. The District Administration should do more than simply inspecting, it should be able to guide the village officials, and strengthening their communication between

different levels and regions. If this can be accomplished, it will make the voice of the local people heard by the central level, so it can recognize and effectively react to the demands of the people and their needs to secure all basic needs at the same time (food, clothes, jobs, and the state's projects) and make sure that the allocation of the state's policies and services are complementing, not competing with, the daily lives of the people.

Moreover, this thesis wants to call attention to the need to clearly define problems before designing and adopting the policies needed to remedy them. As the Lao government officials and the development partners grow in knowledge and understanding of the Lao people, they will come to know precisely what kind of assistance and support the villagers need and what will be the changes they are willing and able to effectively respond to.

Additionally, to make foreign aid more effective, guidance or policies adopted from outside should be unpacked and tailored to fit with the daily life of the Lao people who have been living under subsistence farming, having minimum interference from the outside and are comfortable exercising a high level of autonomy. Targets and time frames to achieve goals in certain development areas should be agreed upon by the four constituent parties (development partners, central government officials, village officials, and the villagers). By the same token, there is an urgent need to have qualified personnel from Laos, the recipient country, to plan and implement the social development programs with the donors, and explore how to meet the country's needs best, and meanwhile, minimizing any social disruption.

#### ➤ **Further consideration**

The majority of the people are facing issue of household economic insecurity; the lack of jobs in their environment is one factor. Economic development is vital for parents to be able to invest in children's education, yet the thesis has not provided an exhaustive explanation of the issue. Given the massive flow of foreign investment into the country, such as in the hydropower projects in more than a hundred sites (both currently operating and those at various stages of development), wealth distribution of the Lao state has not been explored in detail by this study. Therefore, the national economy of Laos is an area in dire need of future study.

This thesis deals with Lao society in the transition to a market economy, yet it has not covered all impacts of the social development on the rapid rise of globalization, e.g., regional integration: ASEAN. Laos' position, including its weaknesses and strengths as a member, has not been scrutinized. While there is a considerable eagerness of the state to be integrated into the ASEAN Economic Community, the majority of people are still engaging in subsistence farming. How Laos' state has prepared the people at the grassroots level, and the country's infrastructure, for making use of the coming 'lively economy' is also an exciting topic for further research. Additionally, influences brought by this engagement with the Lao administrative structure is also in need of observation throughout the time.

Engagement at the local level is closely connect to that at the international level, since the signing of each development goal set the country a specific timeframe with certain requirements. Therefore, the state may be pushed to customize its internal social development work along with different aspects of international-level policy agreements, such as the Free Trade legal framework and the Digital Society. The latter topic is getting the state's attention in the current era, due to the promising potential of effective centralization and transparency. It is noteworthy that information communication technology could boost social change in Laos, like it has in other countries; however, this potential has not been highlighted in the thesis. On the other hand, what is questionable about the Digital Society is the country's background, the lack of qualified personnel, the shortage of budget to create the I.T. infrastructure, and the lack of responsiveness among the people toward state's intervention. This matter is for future research.

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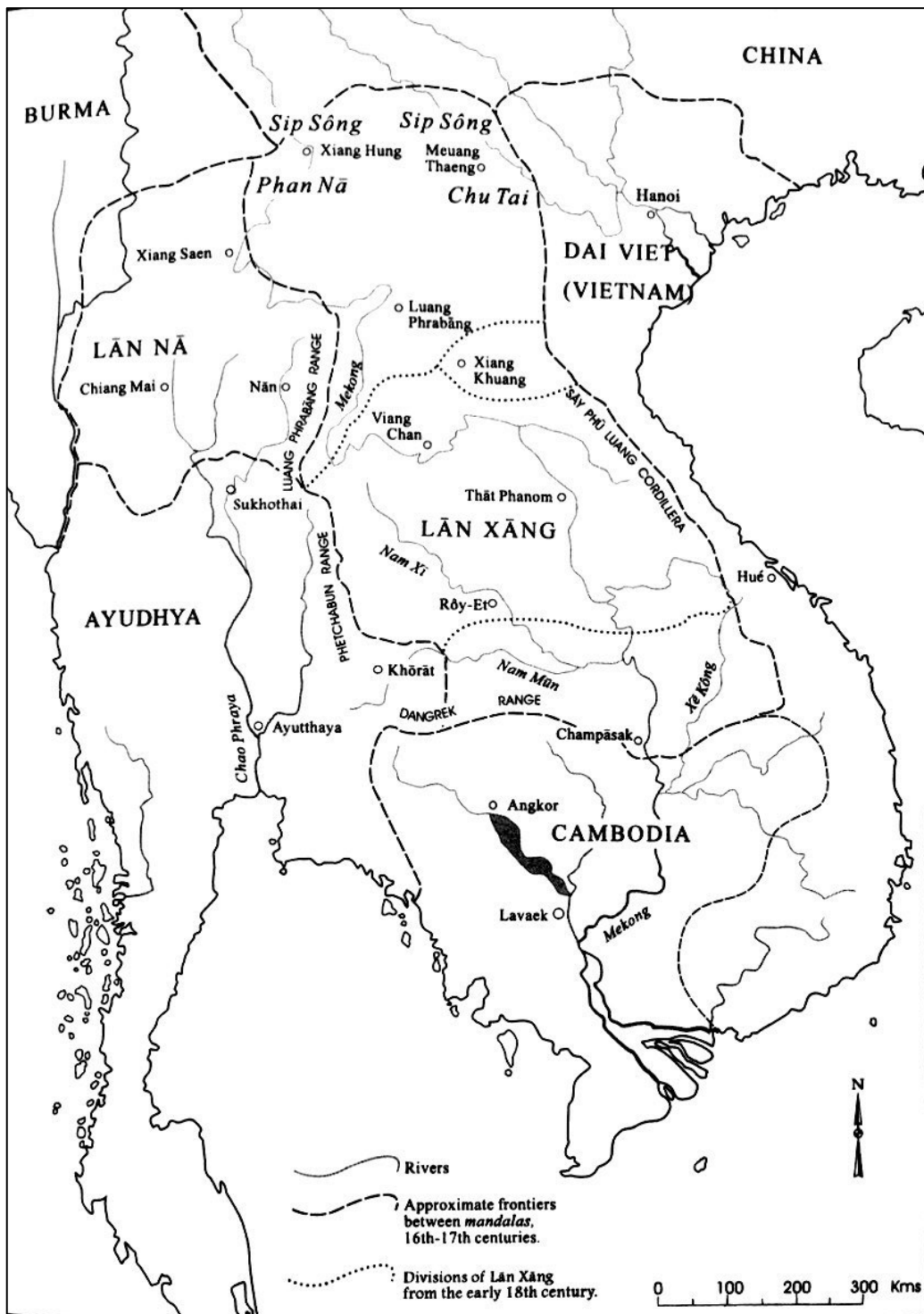
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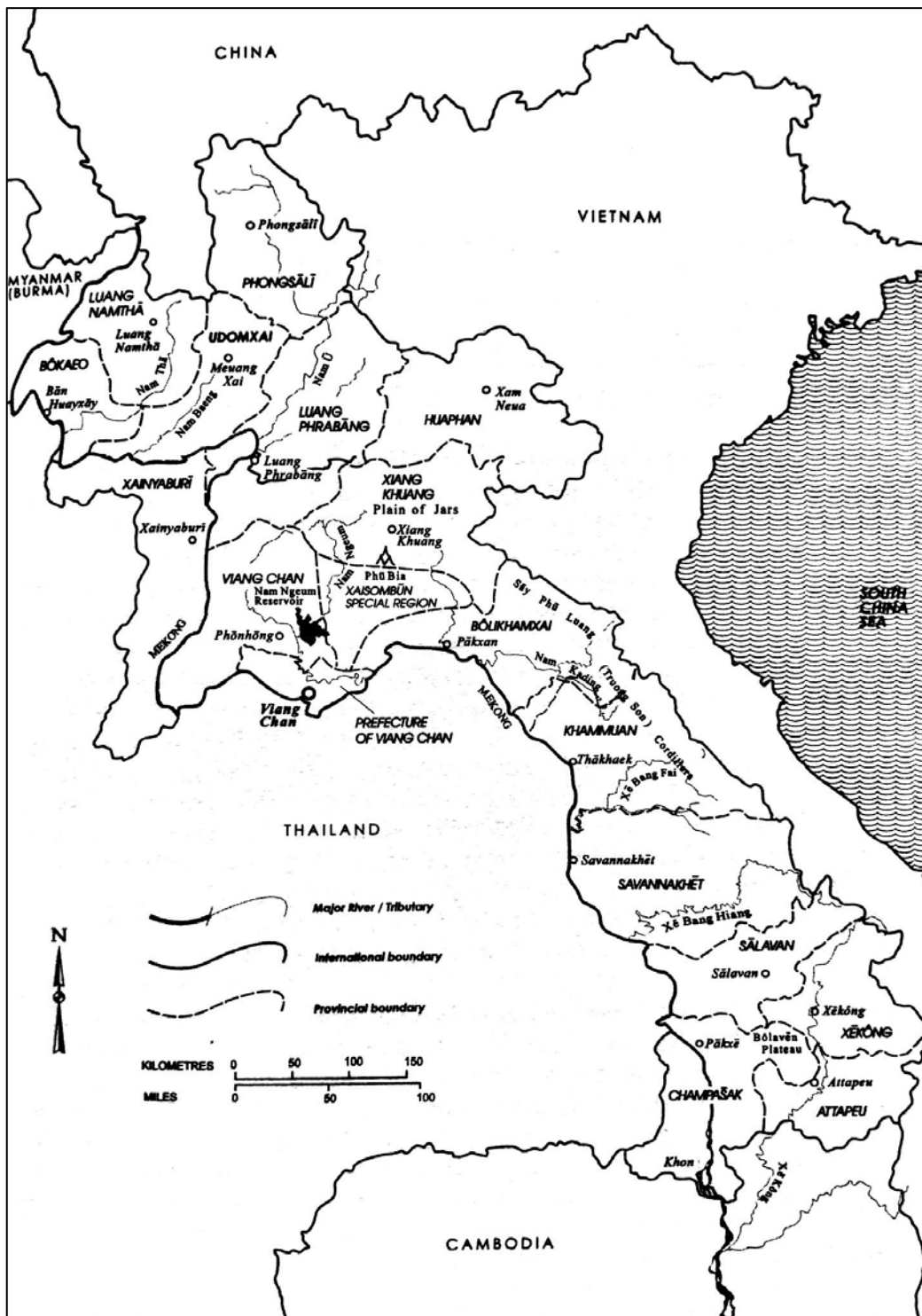
Appendix 1:



Map 7: Southeast Asia in mid-16<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Source: Stuart Fox, 1997, pp.17

Appendix 2:



Map 8: French in Laos in 1930

Source: Stuart Fox, 1997