When the First-World-North Goes Local:
Education and gender in post-revolution Laos

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Only what is seen sideways sinks deep
E. M. Forster

Abstract

This thesis is a study of three global issues – development cooperation, education and gender - and their transformation to local circumstances in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), a landlocked country in Southeast Asia. Combining post-colonial and post-structural perspectives, it sets out to understand how discourses of education and gender in Laos intersect with discourses of education and gender within development cooperation represented by organisations such as the World Bank and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Through field observations, analysis of national and donor policies on education and gender, and interviews with Lao educationalists, this thesis offers an analysis that shows the complexities arising at the intersection where the first-world-north meets the local in the context of development cooperation. Foucault's notion of the production and reproduction of discourses through different power-knowledge relations is used to show that the meanings accorded to education and gender within development cooperation, indeed are historically, culturally and contextually constructed. Within development cooperation policy, first-world-north discourses appear to have a hegemonic status in defining education and gender. Thus 'Education for All' and 'Gender Mainstreaming' become privileged discourses that also take root in Lao national policy-making. Development cooperation further brings with it discourses defining the cooperation itself. Partnership is one such privileged donor discourse. These policy discourses are however interpreted by Lao educationalists that are not influenced by policy alone; rather, contextual discourses also affect how policies are understood and negotiated. It is when these discourses intersect that structures of power and preferential rights of interpretation become visible. The analysis points to how the perspectives of international development cooperation organisations representing the first-world-north are in positions to set the agenda for development cooperation within policy. This position of power can, from a post-colonial perspective, be traced back to how former colonial structures created a privileged position for first-world-north knowledge that still prevails. This is to some extent acknowledged by development cooperation organisations through the emphasis on partnership. However, in the local context, partnership is not experienced as a discourse which has the effects of redistributing power. Partnership is rather transformed into a discourse of superiority and subordination where development cooperation organisations monitor and evaluate and local actors adjust and implement. Lao education officials however express alternative interpretations of partnership that are based on face-to-face collaboration and collective effort. These strategies have closer links to local practices and also reflect contextual discourse-power-knowledge relations which the education officials are well aware of. These strategies of negotiation also extend to the issues of education and gender. Discourses of 'Education for All' and 'Gender Mainstreaming' are acknowledged among the education officials as policy goals which to some extent also extend into practice. These discourses are however renegotiated to accommodate local circumstances. 'Education for All' is thus replaced by the '5-pointed star' which serves as an operationalisation of the concept of 'learner-centred education'. 'Gender Mainstreaming' has to co-exist with local discourses that on the one hand build on patriarchal organisations of society and on the other hand build on local strategies for access which weaken patriarchal structures. The analysis ultimately stresses the importance of incorporating local, contextual knowledge in educational development cooperation processes, both among international and national stakeholders. This process can be supported by a willingness to deconstruct taken-for-granted understandings and value systems; and in doing so, recognising the normative aspects operating both in the areas of education and gender.

Keywords: education, gender, development cooperation, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, discourse analysis, Laos, ethnography

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LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

CHINA

CHINA

MYANMAR

VIET NAM

THAILAND

CAMBODIA

Gulf of Tonkin

Simao
Jinghong
Muang Ou Tai
Phôngsali
PHÔNGSALI
La Chau
Dien Bien
Muang Khoa
LOUANG NAMTHA
Louang Namtha
Muang Xai
Pakmong
BOKÈO
Houayxay
OUDÔMXAI
Muang Houn
Pakbeng
LOUANGPHRABANG
Louangphrabang
Xiangkho
Viangxai
Xamnua
HOUAPHAN
XIANGKHOANG
Phoukhon
Phônsavan
Ky Son
Kasi
Pua
Nan
Vangviang
VIENTIANE
Ban Nalè
Nam Ngum Reservoir
BOLIKAMXAI
Pakxan
Phontan
Phônhông
VIENTIANE PREFECTURE
Phrae
Sirikit Reservoir
Paklay
Vientiane
Xanakham
Nong Khai
Phontiou
KHAMMOUAN
Ban Na Phan
Uttaradit
Loei
Udon Thani
Nakhon Phanom
Thakhek
Dong Hoi
Sakon Nahon
Khengkabao
Xeno
Xepôn
Khon Kaen
Savannakhet
Muang Phin
SAVANNAKHET
Hue
Da Nang
SALAVAN
Salavan
Khôngxédôn
XÉKONG
Xékong
Ubon Ratchathani
Pakxe
Pakxong
ATTAPU
Attapu
Champasak
CHAMPASAK
Dac To
Cheom Ksan
Siem Pang
Play Ku
CAMBODIA
Stung Treng

Muang Xai
XAIGNABOULI
Xaignabouli

Lao Cai
Cao Bang
Bac Kan
Pingxiang
Tuyen Quang
Lang Son
Thai Nguyen
Yen Bai
Bac Ninh
Cam Pha
Hanoi
Haiphong
Nam Dinh
Qua Hoa
Thanh Hoa
Vinh
Ha Tinh

LAO P.D.R.

Legend

- ⊛ National capital
- ⊚ Provincial capital
- ○ City, town
- National boundary
- Provincial boundary
- Main road
- Secondary road
- Railroad
- ✈ Major airport

0   50   100   150   200 km
0   25   50   75   100 mi

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

List of acronyms

DoE	Department of Education, Umeå University
EFA	Education for All
FoE	Faculty of Education, National University of Laos
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
GRID	Gender Resource Information and Development Centre
HDI	Human Development Index
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LDC	Least Developed Country
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MoE	Ministry of Education, Laos
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NUOL	National University of Laos
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RLG	Royal Lao Government
SFS	School of Foundation Studies
Sida/SAREC	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency/Department for Research Cooperation
TEADC	Teacher and Education Administration Development Centre
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN	United Nations

CONTENT

PART ONE

PART TWO

PART ONE

I. (DEVELOPING) EDUCATION IN LAOS

This thesis deals with educational development supported by the international donor community in a Southeast Asian country; Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). It presents perspectives which in various ways address development cooperation[1] focused on educational development[2] and the inclusion of gender perspectives into educational practice. Further, it also incorporates the perspectives and experiences of Lao nationals whom in different ways were involved in the task of developing education in Laos in the early 2000's.

The main driving force for writing this thesis was an interest in how development cooperation between first-world-north and third-world-south countries[3] moved from policy to practice within projects supported by first-world-north organisations such as the World Bank and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). These organisations officially support third-world-south countries with funding and technical support in order to make a contribution towards evening out global gaps between the rich and the poor. Over the past 15 years, education and gender have increasingly been topics of interest within development cooperation. Education has been regarded as a key issue in the fight against poverty which is emphasised in Sida's Education for All (EFA) policy:

> *Education is a basic human right and is necessary for sustainable*
> *social and economic development. The education of girls is one of*

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[1] When I refer to development cooperation I refer to aid funded projects of various kinds; i.e. the type of economic and technical support which the first-world-north provides to the third-world-south through for example, bi- and multi-lateral development cooperation organisations such as Sida and the World Bank.

[2] Development is a concept that in itself would merit, and have merited, extensive research. Within development cooperation, 'development' often refers to a process that will lead to something that is qualitatively better, i.e. developing education is to make education better. This view is not one that I necessarily subscribe to, i.e. that development always leads to a qualitaively better state. However, this meaning frequently appears in the discourse of development cooperation.

[3] I have chosen to use Zillah Eisenstein's (1998) terminology first-world-north and third-world-south when I refer to developed and developing countries.

> *the most important determinants of development. Investment in basic education is indispensable for human development and pro-poor growht* (Sida, 2001: 11).

The questions, however, that 'bothered' me were; what type of education is it, that is referred to? How are gender and the development of the rights of the girl and the woman thought about? And how does the distribution of power influence the development cooperation process? I got the opportunity to look into these queries through a development cooperation project within education at the National University of Laos (NUOL). More precisely, I was interested in understanding more about which discourses regarding education and gender that were activated at both policy and practice arenas.[4] I also wanted to understand more about how global movements such as EFA affected the local context where it was to be implemented. Laos further struck me as an interesting context since it was a country that only in the early 1990's had opened up to the first-world-north. It marked its difference to the first-world-north through its cultural and political structure, for example by its emphasis on the collective and its will to retain a one-party state in a market economy This indicated that Laos could be a context where conflicting discourses would meet.[5]

In 2002 Sida's Department for Research Cooperation, SAREC[6] initiated a development cooperation project at NUOL. My own university, Umeå University, was selected to function as a counterpart to NUOL in this process, which was mainly directed at assisting NUOL to develop research capacity at some of its different faculties, among them the Faculty of Education (FoE). The Sida/SAREC project provided me with a platform for more closely exploring the issues that interested me. Furthermore, this platform also provided me with contextual understanding regarding the situation in the country, at the university and within education which proved to be important for my own research. Therefore, the remainder of this

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[4] Forthcoming I will make use of 'arenas' in my presentation, namely, the policy arena, the policy-practice arena and the contextual arena. These will be elaborated on in chapter V. I want however to emphasise here that when I refer to 'practice' it should be understood as an arena where issues regarding the effects that policy have on practice are discussed, not the de facto practice where implementation takes place.

[5] I have chosen to call the political structure in Laos communist as it is a one-party state that after 1975 attempted to modell society on Leninist ideals. Other scholars and writers on Laos refer to the political structure as communist and/or socialist which is why both will appear in the text.

[6] From hereon referred to as Sida/SAREC or SAREC.

chapter will serve as a contextualisation of Laos, and educational development cooperation in Laos based in part on research, development cooperation policies and my own experiences of doing fieldwork in Laos. This contextualisation will then lead to the specific research questions that guided me in my own work.

Putting Laos on the Map (of Development Cooperation)

Education is a sector which has received quite a lot of attention in international development discourse since the early 1990's.[7] Within development cooperation discourse, education is regarded to be a strong societal force not only for the advancement of societies at large but also for the potentials of individuals to reach their own personal goals in life. Furthermore, education is seen as a liberating force insomuch that it enables us as individuals to interact with our societies, enabling us to make informed choices relevant to our daily life. When the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, was formed in 1945, it rested upon the belief that education was "an instrument of integration, harmony and tolerance of difference" (Buchert, 2002: 6). The premise and the mandate of UNESCO by the 1990's reflected a "strong belief that education can transmit specifically defined, fundamental values irrespective of racial, gender, language and religious" circumstances (Buchert, 2002: 6). These ideas can be traced back to experiences from the first and second World Wars, and the post-war ambition to create a world without war. Put in the words of UNESCO: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed" (UNESCO, 1995-2007). Education was hence thought of as a powerful tool in implementing values that would promote peaceful developments.

Today, the focus has shifted and education is seen rather as an important arena for achieving poverty reduction in third-world-south countries. It was in the late 1990's that poverty reduction replaced the discourses of economic development that had up until then been

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[7] The development cooperation community is geographically widespread. However, in this thesis it mainly refers to international and national organisations that represent the countries of Europe, North America, Japan and Australia, i.e. the first-world-north, who are big stakeholders within development cooperation via organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sida (Sweden), Jica (Japan), AusAid (Australia), USAID (USA) and so on. These organisations are presently influential in Laos even though there are other organisations and countries that have increasing significance in Laos, one such example being China.

privileged by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Adams, Kee, & Lin, 2001a: 64). As Tikly (2004: 179) notes, the 1970's was an era where neo-liberalism established itself within the discourse of multilateral and donor agencies "in their dealings with Africa and other parts of the so called 'developing' world." The consequences of this discourse were that third-world-south countries, through structural adjustment programmes, should focus their efforts on opening up their markets, cutting government expenditure and creating environments to attract foreign direct investment to boost their economies. The expected outcomes from these reforms did not take place, instead there was an increase in poverty in many of the countries making these structural adjustments which prompted a change of reasoning among donor agencies (Tikly, 2004: 179f). The rhetoric thus shifted from focusing on economic development to poverty reduction. This focus is for instance clear in Sida's EFA policy which already in the foreword emphasises poverty reduction as an overriding goal for all Sida's activities. Furthermore, the relevance of education for numerous other areas is also clearly expressed: "the goals of human rights and democracy, gender equality and sustainable development, depends on and promotes education, training and competence" (Sida, 2001: 5). This strong emphasis on the potential of education needs to be understood in the context of a wider discussion within the development cooperation community. The result of this discussion was formulated in Jomtien, Thailand where the World Education Forum held its first EFA conference in 1990. There, the UN-community committed itself to "meeting basic learning needs" (UNESCO, 2000: 74). An important distinction from previous discussions on education within development cooperation was the shift from aiming at providing universal primary education, i.e. a set system which provides a specified number of years of compulsory education for school aged children, to providing basic education for all members of all societies worldwide (Buchert, 2002: 7). Ten years after Jomtien, The World Education Forum in Dakar remained committed to the goals and targets set in Thailand. There was some advancement according to the EFA Assessment in 2000 but there was still considerable work to be done. The Dakar Framework stated that: "Education for All is a realistic and achievable goal. But it needs to be frankly acknowledged that progress has been uneven and far too slow" (UNESCO, 2000: 12). The challenges that needed to be met were in no way minor since the assessment in 2000 showed that:

- *Of the more than 800 million children under 6 years of age, fewer than a third benefit from any form of early childhood education.*
- *Some 113 million children, 60 per cent of whom are girls, have no access to primary schooling.*
- *At least 880 million adults are illiterate, of whom the majority are women* (UNESCO, 2000: 12).

Within development cooperation discourse, Laos is described as one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, heavily dependent on foreign aid. It is further listed as a 'least developed country' (LDC)[8] by the UN system. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Sweden estimated that during the period of 2002-2003, the foreign aid inflow to Laos accounted for 64 per cent of Lao government investment, and that 40 per cent of the total government expenditure in Laos was financed by foreign aid (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2004: 8).

Part of the development cooperation support for Laos is directed towards EFA. Providing comprehensive education for Lao citizens has been a difficult task for the national government for a number of reasons. Despite the relatively small population of around six million people, large parts of the population live in remote areas which are hard to reach. The size of the school-age cohort is also large given the fact that nearly 50 per cent of the Lao population are under the age of 15, making education a costly affair for the Lao government. There is also a large number of ethnic minorities that do not speak the official language, Lao, which is the language of instruction in Lao schools. This gives rise to high numbers of students both dropping out and repeating primary level studies (Ministry of Education, 2000: 2).

It is within this context that the Lao government is attempting to achieve developments within the national educational system, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The goal is to:

> *graduate from the ranks of the LDC by the year 2020 through sustainable economic growth and equitable social development while at the same time safeguarding the country's social, cultural,*

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[8] LCD assessment is based on three criteria; a low-income criterion, a human resource weakness criterion and an economic vulnerability criterion. For more information see http://www.un.org/special-rep/ohrlls/ldc/ldc%20criteria.htm, downloaded 061002. This assesment system does not escape critique and it is claimed that the assessment of needs of planners, politicians and economists seldom correspond with the needs of the poor; see for example Rahnema, Majid (1992) Poverty, in Sachs, Wolfgang (ed) (1999) *The Development Dictionary – A Guide to Knowledge and Power* (pp. 158-176). London: Zed Books.

> *economic and political identity* (Ministry of Education, 2005: 11).

A general trend in Lao education has been that educational development cooperation efforts have been directed towards the lower levels of the education system. When different higher education institutions in 1996 merged into what is now the National University of Laos, international funding was made more available (Chapman, 2002: 97). From then on, an increasing number of development cooperation projects were initiated at university. The Sida/SAREC project was an example of such a project. The aim was to advance research practices at faculties at NUOL and the FoE was one of the involved faculties. The faculty wished to strengthen its capacity in the areas of research and teaching/learning in order to live up to goals of increased research activities set by NUOL and to meet demands from the Lao Ministry of Education (MoE) regarding the quality of teaching and learning. The MoE had already in 1994 issued a Concept Paper on teacher education which required teaching institutions at all levels in the country to work with learner-centred methods (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994). The FoE felt it could not live up to the expectations of the MoE due to lack of experience and qualified staff. Therefore, the Sida/SAREC funding provided the FoE with the opportunity to initiate a project addressing these issues; the 'Curriculum Development through Action Research Project'. According to the proposal, two main areas would be focused; developing a new pedagogical practice and including a gender perspective into this practice. The work would further be linked to research since the FoE wished to use an action research approach; i.e. changes to educational practice would be researched in order to generate new knowledge (Faculty of Education, n.d.). From the very beginning, my own research interest revolved around questions regarding how development cooperation such as this operated, what the potentials were for educational change and which challenges that occurred along the way. The Sida/SAREC supported project at NUOL enabled me to look into these issues more closely since my own department at Umeå University, Sweden was chosen to work with the university in Laos. That was the starting point for this thesis and during one year and a half I lived in Laos and had my base at the FoE, trying to get an insight into development cooperation linked to issues of education and gender. This provided me with the opportunity to closely follow development cooperation work and more importantly; it provided me

with connections to educationalist in Laos who extended their experiences and views of education, gender and development to me.

My extended period of fieldwork in Laos was motivated by a conviction that context matters. In order to understand processes within development cooperation, I also needed to understand more about the context where the cooperation took place.

Laos – Past and Present

Laos is in many ways the land in between. It is landlocked and surrounded by five different countries, Burma and China to the north, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east. The people of Laos have a history of being caught in different power struggles; historically between different kingdoms and more recently between different political systems. The main struggle in modern history has been between communism and Western notions of democracy which not in the least had concrete effects during the Vietnam War.[9] While the war raged in Vietnam, Laos was equally affected although this was not nearly as well known to the general public (Robbins, 2000).

During the 1800's the French had incorporated Laos into colonial Indochina. The effects of colonialism were not considered to be too harsh however. Laos was not especially rich in resources but was rather regarded as an expansion of Vietnam, and therefore geopolitically important to France. This did not mean that colonialism had no impact. The official language of government was French and many educated Lao were trained in the French system. Nevertheless, the colonial administration was limited and in the mid 1940's the rule of the country was left to the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and within ten years, French colonialist rule in the region was over (Evans, 2002).

However, this was not the end of the power struggle within Laos. The RLG, with the support of the USA, fought a loosing battle against the Pathet Lao (that later became the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, LPRP), a communist grouping that had the support of North Vietnamese communists. In 1975, Lao PDR emerged and this was the beginning of a one party communist rule that still exists (Evans, 2002). Despite the different political currents, many Lao have held on to Buddhism, which is the largest religion in the country. After the

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[9] Incidentally, what the first-world-north knows as the Vietnam War is known as the American War in the Southeast Asian region.

revolution in 1975 the new government tried to lessen the influence of religion in the country with little success. Therefore, one of the dominant features of Laos are still the many 'wats' (temples) one sees in towns and villages, institutions which have also played an important role in Lao education, especially concerning boys and men (Chagnon & Rumpf, 1982).

Laos at the beginning of the 2000's is a country where one-party state socialism meets capitalism. The country has liberalised the economy without changing the political system, much in the same manner as China and Vietnam. It is in this era of relative openness that many aid agencies have appeared and the country is once again put in a new state of being in between different political systems and economic structures.

Education in Laos

Education in Laos has not gone un-discussed. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) concluded in the National Human Development Report for Lao PDR that a "situation in which only an estimated half of the students enrolled at the primary level complete their schooling calls for a wide spectrum of corrective actions" (UNDP, 2001: 13). Furthermore the report states that: "Of all the Asian countries, currently only Bangladesh has a lower HDI[10] than the Lao PDR" (UNDP, 2001: 12). Sage (1998: 5) held the view, regarding the Lao situation, that:

> *Unless human resource development and education are given high priority, inadequate supplies of skilled manpower will be a serious constraint to developing the country both in the short and long term.*

Thant and Vokes (1997: 154) painted a picture by describing the situation of education in Laos in the following way:

> *Retention rates of students within the education system are poor, and dropout and repeater rates are high. Provision of educational facilities is also not equitable and favours the lowland ethnic group over minorities who live mainly in upland areas. The government's efforts to improve educational facilities have been*

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[10] HDI stands for Human Development Index which represents a way of measuring the development level of countries by combining dimensions of longevity/survival, knowledge, standard of living/quality of life, equity, sustainability, security, diversity and empowerment. For further information see UNDP, 2001: 10ff.

> *frustrated by the physical features of the country, demography, past neglect and until recently, poor macroeconomic performance that made it difficult to allocate adequate financial and economic resources to the education sector.*

The focus of this thesis is not to cover the broad situation of education in Laos in the 2000's. However, it is still important to have a sense of the situation in order to understand the contextual surroundings since the general situation also applies to the situation at NUOL. The FoE, for instance, not only had to address the educational practices ongoing at the faculty. It also had to scrutinise these in relation to the practices at secondary school level since FoE was the only institution training teachers for this level of the school system.

Historically, education has not been an endeavour open to the large masses of the country. It has rather been afforded to members of certain sections of society; the former royal elite or the current social elites of Laos who have a strong connection to the governing party, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) (Evans, 2002). At the turn of the millennium, the Lao school system is quite well developed, at least on paper. The education system offers some kind of schooling for children from the age of one to 22 (Phannolath, 1998). The compulsory schooling for all Lao citizens consists of five years of primary education, which in itself, according to Tomasievski (2003: 26f), is a reflection of the financial difficulties the country faces. In practice the school system is not functioning to the desired level. 20 per cent of the potential students never even enter the system and out of 8 000 primary schools only 35 per cent offer education through all five grades. Furthermore the rate of repeaters is high, it's estimated that around 30 per cent of the students in grade one have to repeat the first grade and the number of dropout's is also believed to be quite high.[11]

Presentations at the National Seminar for the Launching of EFA for Lao PDR, held in Vientiane, Laos on June 26, 2002, further strengthened this picture. The total Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for the year 2000 was high, 110 per cent, and when comparisons were made between the GER and the Net Enrolment Rate (NER)[12], which was just under 80 per cent, the conclusion drawn was that the grade

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[11] The information is taken from a presentation on 'Education in Laos' by Erik Illes at Sida, November 3, 2002.
[12] The GER presents statistics on the total amount of students enrolled, irrespective of age, while the NER shows how many students of the appropriate age are enrolled.

system was only weakly age-related. Looking at the GER and the NER by sex, the GER was just over 90 per cent for females while it was as high as 135 per cent for males and corresponding figures from the NER were 67 per cent for females and 98 per cent for males, which shows that enrolment is substantially higher among boys, and so is the repeating rate (Ministry of Education, Committee for EFA Planning, 2002). The National Human Development Report for Laos from 2006 indicates that there have been some small changes recently:

> *In 2005, the net enrolment ratio in primary schools reached 86 percent. Yet only 62 percent of students entering grade one completed full primary schooling* (Committee for Planning and Investment, National Statistics Centre, & United Nations Development Programme, 2006: 7).

In order to improve the quality of education at all levels of the school system, and to work towards the global goals of EFA, the MoE, as already mentioned, introduced a Concept Paper for primary and lower-secondary teacher education in the middle of the 1990's (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994). The practical translation (or reduction) of this was the '5-pointed star' which describes the different methods teachers should utilise in order to create a learner-centred environment; activities, group work, questioning, materials and relevance to daily life. One report concludes that:

> *Basic understanding of the nature of modern teaching, particularly in relation to the interactive nature of learning, appear to be missing in much of the discourse and practice of educators. In other words form (for example group work) has taken precedence over process and content (group work as a means for children to actively and in a reflective and focused way deal with content)* (Ministry of Education, 2004a: 1).

The formulations in the report indicate that there are assumptions about what 'modern teaching' is, which also suggests that an antonym exists. What 'modern teaching' and its antonym might be are not deconstructed at any length however.

From the perspective of the Lao constitution there are nonetheless steps that needed too be taken. The constitution clearly states that "Lao citizens irrespective of their sex, social status, education, faith and ethnic groups are all equal before the law" (article 22). Further "[c]itizens of both sexes enjoy equal rights in political, economic,

cultural and social fields and family affairs" (article 24) (Olausson & Uddenberg, 1997: 1). Many children are however denied schooling. Tomasievski, for instance, notes that: "In Laos, schooling is unilingual. School enrolments reflect the linguistic obstacles: non-Lao speaking minorities are in practice excluded from school" (Tomasievski, 2003: 176). Certain groups of Lao citizens can, in other words, not exercise their rights as expressed in the Lao Constitution. The Lao Government therefore has a challenge ahead of it, in meeting the goals and visions of EFA. Not only is there a need for a school system that can provide education to all school-aged children in Laos, but the EFA-commitment also requires that steps are taken to provide basic education for the entire population. EFA has hence brought new demands into the Lao educational arena that stem from international agreements and relationships between development cooperation agencies and the Lao government.

The Lao Government and the Donor Community

The period following the 1975 revolution was marked by a state of isolation against all non-communist nations and not until the late 1980's did Laos open up its borders to Western countries (Evans, 1998, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 1997). This was followed by an inflow of donor agencies and Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's). Along with the presence of these organisations also came a continued influence on the policies of Laos. Lately these policy implications have been visible within the field of education, especially since the EFA conference in Jomtien in 1990. With this cooperation within education follows a 'long line' of considerations, which must be taken into account in order to understand the possible implications on educational and societal practice. One of the effects of globalisation and increasing international cooperation is for instance that: "The formerly 'closed' national state is threatened and cannot isolate its citizens from international economic and political influence"[13] (Bjerg, 2000: 47); i.e. national states risk loosing influence over their own policies and populations. Even though there are changing discourses within development cooperation, which seemingly give more power to developing countries, this new, so called, partnership era might:

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[13] My translation from Swedish to English: Den tidigare "slutna" nationella staten är hotad och kan inte isolera sina invånare från internationellt ekonomiskt och politiskt inflytande. All forthcoming translations from Swedish to English are made by me.

> *merely shift the conditionality from the macro-economic terms associated with the structural adjustment era to a situation where the North chooses partners according to whether they fulfil certain other essential criteria. In what may be termed the 'the development texts' in which the new approaches are embodied, it is already evident that there has emerged a set of preconditions for partnership* (King & Buchert, 1999: 16f).

For a third-world-south country opening up to the surrounding world, the influences of donor countries and development cooperation organisations can become prominent. As Dahlström (2002) noted, a new market place was created for development cooperation agencies in Namibia at the time of its independence. The approaches of these agencies differed but all of them had their own perceived 'preferential right of interpretation' often operationalised through 'mandating sector analysis' (Samoff, 1999). However well-meaning, these agendas do not always have the intended effects. In the case of NUOL, research management and administrative capacity remains low despite increasing support. One of the explanations of this is that the university has had little ownership over the changes made since these to a large degree have been donor driven (Bourdet, 2001). This could be understood as a situation where dual processes are at work. First-world-north countries acknowledge their responsibility to support third-world-south nations. There is however also a more politicised motif which points in the direction of altering that which Dahlström (2002) terms the 'preferential right of interpretation'. Support can in other words be viewed as a political highway where the more powerful vehicles easily can overtake the weaker ones despite of the partnership discourse.

Even though there are always power relations to consider when attempts are made at understanding the dynamics among national governments and donor agencies, the apparent power of the agencies might not automatically stipulate change in the 'desired' direction. In the case of Laos, the agenda of the government must also be considered since many of the overarching goals of development cooperation agencies operating in Laos today starkly oppose the political structure that the Lao government is trying to retain. Jones (1993: 22), for instance reflected on how conflicts in societies are also mirrored in how education is viewed. She wrote:

> *This basic conflict in the area of education is expressed in conflicting theories which on the one hand view education as socially reproductive of the power relations in society and on the*

other, see it as reforming and equalizing social and political opportunities for more disadvantaged members of society.

Education is in other worlds a complex arena where different policies meet. It might not be a clear-cut as Jones suggested, i.e. that it is a question of conflicting theories solely. However, it would be fair to assume that the education objectives of, for instance, Sida will not always correspond with the objectives of the Lao government given the different political standpoints, which could provide the basis of a conflict such as the one Jones pointed to.

As far as Sweden's development cooperation with Laos is concerned, it is guided by two main objectives. Firstly the cooperation aims at poverty reduction, secondly it aims at strengthening the conditions for democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2004: 2). Furthermore the Ministry for Foreign Affairs assesses that:

> *Lao society is still characterised by a lack of transparency and by authoritarian rule […]. Reform of the political system is virtually non-existent. In bilateral dialogue, Sweden strongly emphasises rights issues and structural reform.*

Even though these views represent the Swedish government and are not necessarily shared by its Lao counterpart, they are still an expression of one government's assessments of the other's shortcomings. There are scholars that would agree with the Swedish assessment. Power in Laos, it is argued, is something that belongs to a small elite which is the main beneficiary of the current system (Evans, 1998; Freeman, 2001; Stuart-Fox, 1997). From the perspective of conflicting educational theories discussed earlier, there might then be, open and/or covert conflict between different political strivings that potentially will be played out on the Lao educational arena. Donor organisations with their monetary powers meet the Lao political system that currently might not do anything but lose ground if the educational system moves in the direction of reforming and equalising social and political opportunities for more disadvantaged members of society.

National versus international goals

Laos, as all countries, expresses part of its value system through the school curriculum. In the curriculum for compulsory school it is stated that: "Primary Education creates students to be patriotic, to

love people's democracy,[14] and to acknowledge the national tradition and the revolution" (Ministry of Education, 1998: 2). At the FoE there are development goals for student activities where it is stated that the most important task is to emphasise "the spirit of the love of the nation, grand national tradition and the training to be good citizens" (Faculty of Education, 2003: 5) A prominent feature of both the Primary Curriculum and of the goals of the FoE is to build towards a specific national identity. This is not unusual in de-colonising nations which is why this feature of Lao education policy is not surprising (see for example Pholsena, 2006 for an extended discussion on national identity in Laos after 1975). However, in the cases of third-world-south countries one could argue that national education systems do not solely convey the perspectives of the ruling political party/parties. Other actors such as donor organisations also desire a say in which direction these societies should develop. In the case of Laos, with its high dependency on support from the international community, donor organisations are put in positions of power in relation to the national government. Accordingly, if national, aid-receiving countries such as Laos have different goals than donors, one cannot but wonder about the strategies of resistance and compliance that might arise.

Since the education sector currently receives much attention and support from donors, the relationship between development cooperation organisations and national governments seeking support becomes important to consider in the wider contextual sense. NUOL is certainly one arena where these issues could be emerging considering their attempts to develop research activities with the assistance of various donors. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to contextualising NUOL and the faculty which has the main responsibility for upper-secondary teacher education; the FoE. The situation of NUOL and FoE is used to exemplify the various challenges facing the Lao education system.

Education and Research at National University of Laos

NUOL, as an institution of higher education, is young. It was only in the middle of the 1990's that the previously independent institutions of higher education were merged into one organisational structure in

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[14] Note that the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2004: 29) refers to democracy while the Lao Ministry of Education refers to people's democracy.

the capital city of Vientiane. According to Bourdet (2001) the driving force behind this merger was that, during the late 1980's Laos introduced the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in an attempt to reform the country's economy and open itself to the global market. As a result of Laos' attempt to introduce itself to an international market it became apparent that the level of education among the population was far too low for the country to meet the demands of an extended market. The need for a better educated work force grew. As Bourdet (2001: 5) noted:

> *One historic reason for the very small proportion of the population equipped with higher education is the departure of many educated from Laos following the change of political regime in 1975. Another reason is the low priority given to higher education by the Lao government after 1975.*

Since its inauguration NUOL has grown steadily. The enrolment of students has risen from 8 053 (2 170 females) students in 1996 to 26 673 (9 415 females) students in 2006. The number of teaching staff at NUOL amounted to 1 434 (466 females) in 2006 (National University of Laos, 2006). Apart from the campuses located in Vientiane, there are also two satellite universities in Luang Prabang in the north and Pakse in the south. In 2006 the university consisted of eleven faculties, seven centres and a university hospital. NUOL also has a School of Foundation Studies (SFS) where the students are introduced to subjects both within the social and the natural sciences before moving on to study at the different faculties (National University of Laos, 2003-2005). In addition to the regular courses, all the faculties also offer extra courses for which accepted students have to pay tuition fees and for which the teachers also receive extra salary since these courses are outside their regular teaching duties.

NUOL sets high goals for the future developments of the university, aiming at sustaining its leading position within higher education. It seeks to offer educational programmes that will make graduates of NUOL "the most sought after by the world's best employers" (National University of Laos, 2006: 4). The university also aims to gain recognition from universities worldwide "through the creation and dissemination of knowledge" (National University of Laos, 2006: 4). It is recognised that the road ahead is long before this vision can be realised and it involves upgrading both within teaching and research, the latter being a fairly new activity at NUOL. In an effort to promote research capacity at the university, NUOL has formed a 'Research and Graduate Office' and a 'Research Coordinating

Committee'. Information from this office states that the research strategy at NUOL is guided by the following vision: "Research is a part of NUOL's role becoming as a national brain for Development" (National University of Laos, 2004: 8).

The mission statement is further expressed in the following way:

- *Encourage all teaching staff to have involvement with research*
- *To Develop the deeper knowledge in both Social Sciences and Natural Science*
- *To Respond to the Social requirements*
- *To progress research toward regional and international recognition* (National University of Laos, 2004: 8).

The activities which are targeted in order to reach the mission statement include:

- *Upgrading the educational qualifications of teaching staff*
- *Increasing the budget for research activities*
- *Create broad research collaboration with outside institutions*
- *Create an incentive system*
- *Set up a suitable and capable network or mechanism in mobilizing research activities* (National University of Laos, 2004: 8).

The 'Research and Graduate Office' states that there are challenges related to carrying out research activities due to both economic restraints and lack of experience among staff. Furthermore, the research carried out so far has been done with the support of international agencies and institutions (National University of Laos, 2004: 15). The level of qualification among staff at NUOL is in the process of being upgraded with the aim of building research capacity for the future. Among the staff there was in 2006, three per cent with a Doctoral Degree, just over 20 per cent with a Master Degree and two per cent with some other type of post graduate certification (National University of Laos, 2006: 5). The Sida/SAREC project provided funding and technical assistance to different faculties at NUOL to support this upgrading. As mentioned previously, the FoE used this opportunity to initiate an action-research project aimed at the development of learner-centred and gender sensitive practices. For FoE this was an important project since it was the first large project to include the faculty. Through this it was hoped that the faculty could maintain and strengthen its position within teacher education.

The Faculty of Education

The FoE has a broad responsibility as far as teacher education for upper-secondary level is concerned. It is at the time of writing (2007) the only institution in the country that provides pre-service training for upper-secondary level. This means that the faculty yearly meets students coming from a range of different subject areas (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, Lao language and literature, political science, history, English and French) who all intend to become teachers. FoE is further organised into five different departments (Department of Psychology and Education, Department of Languages, Department of Science, Department of Social Science and Department of Education Management) (National University of Laos, 2006: 18), and within each department there are smaller units that specialise in different fields such as education administration and guidance. There is also a Teacher and Educational Administrators Development Centre (TEADC) connected to the faculty, as well as a demonstration school. At the time of the commencement of the Sida/SAREC project in the beginning of 2000, the total number of staff was 66, 56 of these being teaching staff. Among them there was one person with a PhD degree and 12 members of staff with Master level qualification (Faculty of Education, n.d.).

In the 2004-2008 development plan for the FoE the faculty identifies goals regarding both teaching and research activities. The document states that many challenges must be met to raise the level of education among staff and to improve the quality of education. The FoE sets out to produce teachers of high quality but also to advance research capacity at the faculty. The following priorities are identified; teaching, research, providing services to the surrounding community and conserving and promoting national traditions (Faculty of Education, 2004). Another important aspect of the work of the FoE is to continue cooperating with foreign donor organisations in order to reach the stated goals, since this is considered necessary for successfully reaching the goals of the development plan.

Engaging teachers in development work and research is however a challenge. The conditions of teachers in Laos are troublesome for a number of reasons, and could well be an obstacle to educational change, if not addressed.

Being a teacher (in Laos)

Finding information about the situation of Lao teachers in general and Lao teachers in higher education specifically has proven difficult since there is little research done on the matter. The research that has been done, has usually targeted teachers and students at primary level since the development of access to primary education has been, and still is, the focus of the majority of the existing projects (Ministry of Education, 2005: 39). Despite this there are some indications in various reports that begin to paint a picture of the situation in primary and lower and upper-secondary school. In the year 2000 assessment on EFA in Laos, one can for example read that:

> *The improvement of education quality depends very much on the quality of the training of teachers. Due to a shortage of trained teachers a large number of untrained teachers and contract teachers are employed. Therefore the quality of education is quite low* (Ministry of Education & National EFA 2000 Assessment Group, 2000: 95).

Another study targeting teaching performance in Lao primary education concludes that the kind of training teachers have received does not make a difference in their teaching performance; the reason being that teaching at the teacher training institutions are entirely reproductive and textbook-centred (Ministry of Education, 2004a: x, executive summary). On a more general note, Sida stated in 2000, that:

> *Growing national and international commitments to universalising primary education and improving its quality during the 1990's have, paradoxically, coincided with a global deterioration of teaching and teachers* (Sida, 2000: 12).

The changes made have often resulted in 'innovations' that have neglected the situation of the teachers with regards to their professional and private circumstances. The report also notes that many teachers who have received in-service training choose to leave their profession due to low salaries and unsatisfying working conditions (Sida, 2000: 14ff).

These issues have also been discussed in the Lao national media where the country's only English language newspaper regularly had articles dealing with the situation of teachers with headlines such as "Teachers wanted: but so are salaries" (Soudalath & Phonepasong, 2004), "Budgets fall short for textbook printing" (Vongmany, 2004), "Overcrowding slices into school success rate" (Noradeth, 2003),

"Poor pay cited as reason behind corruption" (Souksavanh, 2004) and "Poverty prevents education in Sekong" (Phimmasone, 2002).

Many of the issues that are addressed in the above sections also apply to higher education where the teachers are considered ill-qualified to meet the new demands that are placed upon them. As Sida acknowledged, a 'holistic' approach in assessing the situation at large is necessary:

> *In order to achieve a truly learner- and/or child-centred education system, teachers and their professional development must be the backbone and the centre of educational reforms. Education sector development programmes, co-financed by national governments and their external financial funding partners, must be analysed in a holistic manner. In this context, external support should not fail to address the salary, career and professional development aspects of teaching and non-teaching/support staff* (Sida, 2000: 32).

UNESCO (2002) also emphasised that the importance of the teachers cannot be underestimated. By the same token this could however become a catch-22 situation in countries where qualified teachers are badly needed since:

> *the number of teachers that is possible to employ depends in part on cost, which is mediated by salary levels. If salaries are too high this may constrain capacity and if they are too low the quality of learning will suffer* (UNESCO, 2002: 11).

These constraints are examples of how policy and practice can be difficult to unite in the local context. There was, for example, a will and a wish at FoE to upgrade the qualifications of its staff in order to ensure good teaching practices for the student teachers. The students could then put their training into practice at lower levels of the system once they graduated from teacher training. There was however, an inherent conflict always present. There was not enough money within the government to raise the salaries among the teachers who then needed to have other jobs to supplement their incomes. This impacted on the time available for lesson planning and led teachers to resort to textbook oriented strategies. In the case of NUOL and FoE, there was nevertheless hope that the Sida/SAREC project could contribute to changing situations such as these. For the FoE specifically, the ambition was, in the short-term perspective to improve research and teaching/learning practices at the faculty, but in

the long-term perspective a trickle down effect was hoped for that would reach other parts of the school system.

Conflicting Contexts

The contextual situation where the Sida/SAREC project was being initiated was one where many different challenges presented themselves at different levels. At government level, there were many issues which could have different implications for development cooperation. The Lao government was regarded by donors as authoritarian and the donors made the assessment that corruption was widespread (see for example Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2004: 6) which would set a certain tone for cooperation from the very start. However, the Lao government was in great need of outside support since the capacity for local financing was limited. Therefore, an inherent imbalance in the cooperation process was to be expected since the development cooperation agencies providing financial support to some extent had the upper hand in setting agendas for cooperation through a moral imperative. Put differently, the providers of money made assessments which positioned the Lao government as not trustworthy and therefore closer monitoring was justified. At the university level, there was an outspoken need for upgrading and development, both regarding teaching capacity and research activities, but due to a number of different factors the work ahead was considered enormous. These circumstances also affected the faculty level where respondents identified a weak economic situation and a low level of qualifications as challenges to partaking in different projects, handle its teaching duties and live up to the expectations from higher levels in the government. Still, the staff expressed a discourse relating to the duty to help the government and the country to develop. Therefore, demands from higher levels in the hierarchy were seldom rebuffed.[15]

The local circumstances in the Lao context thus became increasingly interesting to understand. On the one hand, development cooperation brought with it possibilities that might not have been available otherwise. On the other hand, there were problems that arose along the way that at least partly could be contributed to weak contextual understanding on behalf of the donors. These issues will be explored throughout the remainder of this thesis, taking their

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[15] This is elaborated in the interviews in part II

points of departure in the aim of this thesis which is elaborated on below.

Aim and Purpose of the Thesis

This thesis deals with issues of how contextualised experiences and understandings shape perceptions of education and gender within development cooperation. The study was conducted in Laos during 2003-2005 and the following aspects are reported:

- How education and gender are discursively constructed in national and international policy documents on education
- How local education decision makers understand and experience nationally and internationally driven interventions on their education sector
- How life experiences shape understandings of education and gender in Laos in the early years of the second millennium
- How international development cooperation brings possibilities and challenges at a local level

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter provides an outlook by referring to available research on Laos that is relevant for this thesis. It also covers some of the more general contributions that have been made on the topics of development cooperation, education and gender.

Research on Laos is quite limited and one can and should reflect on the reasons for this; questions which have also engaged others:

> *The short supply of research activities can be traced to the exodus of highly educated Laotians at the time of the revolution, the currently underdeveloped education system (which has virtually no output of education researchers), and the initial Lao government priorities that focused on nation building, national defence, and development of national language and symbols. Within the context of these priorities there has been little demand for or resources to build research capabilities or a tradition of research* (Adams, Kee, & Lin, 2001b).

After the revolution in 1975 other priorities meant that research capacity was neglected. This coincided with Laos choosing to limit its relationships with countries outside the Eastern Block; therefore getting access to Laos has been difficult for external researchers. Cooperation between Laos and the former Soviet Union for example seems to have been limited to teacher exchange and other types of technical support. It has not supported the development of research capacities.[16] From the 1990's some efforts have been made to set up research activities in Laos, for instance by the establishments of an institute for cultural research. However, little of this research has been reported outside Laos or in other languages (Stephens, 2007): "In education the same situation prevails, with even less research undertaken, either by Lao scholars, or by foreign researchers" (Stephens, 2007: 196). There has of course been some research reported in English on the Lao context. However, this research is located within fields that have had different focal points and different research interests, e.g. research done in the fields of human geography, (Jerndal, 1998); archaeology, (Källén, 2004); history, (Stuart-Fox, 1998); and political science, (Boupha, 2003). This

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[16] Personal communication with Lao education officials, 0703

research has not directly provided frames of references for the study of educational development cooperation and gender. I have however been inspired by and oriented in my own understanding by available research.

Once Laos opened up to countries outside the Eastern Block, development cooperation organisations entered the country. These organisations conduct studies of their own and it is primarily these reports which are presently available. Samoff (1999: 51) has characterised these as 'externally initiated reports':

> *With few exceptions, these studies have a common framework, a common approach, and a common methodology. Given their shared starting points, their common findings are not surprising.*

From this standpoint, I have included few of these reports, since they provide little but 'one size fits all' analyses and cannot be regarded as independent research efforts. Rather, as Samoff points out, these reports function as recipes for action. Samoff also discusses the similarities between these reports:

> *The recommendations too are similar: Reduce the central government role in providing education, Decentralize. Increase school fees. Expand private schooling. Reduce direct support to students, especially at the tertiary level. Introduce double shifts and multigrade classrooms. Assign high priority to instructional materials. Favor in-service over preservice teacher education. The shared approach of these studies reflects a medical metaphor. Expatriate-led study teams as visiting clinicians diagnose and then prescribe. The patient (i.e., the country) must be encouraged, perhaps pressured, to swallow the bitter medicine* (Samoff, 1999: 51).

With the above in mind, the aim of this chapter is therefore to try to add perspectives which can contribute to understanding the wider context of and around development cooperation. This is done by drawing on sources that offer both historicised and contemporary views on issues of education and gender and which also apply a critical eye on development cooperation.

Glancing at Development Cooperation

How development cooperation should be understood is a debatable issue. Is the new global order a form of neo-colonisation wearing the guise of partnership or, are its motives nobler? There has been an important shift in rhetoric within the development cooperation

community. As King (1999: 15) notes there has been a growing trend among bilateral agencies (e.g. Sida) to focus on partnership between the first-world-north and the third-world-south. He also points out that this has especially been true for the Nordic countries with Sweden as a primary proponent of partnership. This trend however also extends to multilateral organisations such as the World Bank. In 1995, the president of the World Bank set out a new direction for the Bank's work. He stated that:

> *To be a good partner, we must be ready to listen to criticism and respond to constructive comment. There is no place for arrogance in the development business. I want to have a Bank that is open and ready to learn from others and that holds itself accountable […]. Of all our partnerships, we must remember that the most important are those with the governments to which we lend – and the people they serve. It is a point worth repeating. We must get closer to our clients […] we must be mindful that the projects we finance are not World Bank projects – they are Chinese, Haitian, or Malawian projects. It is for the Bank to support them and advise on them. But it is for the countries to own them and be responsible for them […]. Partnership is the key* (Wolfensohn, 1995: 20).

Partnership was thus identified as a key strategy for the World Bank resting ideas of handing over responsibility and ownership over development cooperation funded projects and programmes to third-world-south nations. As King (1999) claimed, the general idea of this partnership discourse was to reduce the financial dominance of the donor countries. However, as King also points out, policy and practice are still two separate things. Hjertholm and White (2000: 85) further claim that despite the discourse of partnership there still seems to be reluctance for donors "to allow recipients more than a limited role."

They further state that:

> *The motives of donors should not be thought to be grounded solely, or maybe even partially in the development needs of the recipient countries, but are rather dependent on the donor countries assessments of both political and economic gains on their part* (Hjertholm & White, 2000: 85).

Hjertholm and White also point out that the "donor community has done little to support the search for alternative models of development and even less to promote them" (Hjertholm & White,

2000: 85). Rather, many policies were directly translated to market-oriented goals, such as trade openness and fiscal and economic strategies, which the fund-receiving nations had to accept (Hout, 2004). Even if economically rational decisions should be at the core of the World Bank's work, reality is not always that simple:

> *the Bank's charter requires its decisions to lend money to be dictated by economic consideration, although it is commonly recognised that politics and especially the desires of the largest shareholders of the Bank shape Bank decision making* (Kurian, 2000: 92).

However, trying to find a single, dominating motif for development cooperation is not a fruitful exercise. Motives are always mixed and they also depend on the donors: "The useful question, then, is: what motives predominate?" (Sogge, 2002: 41). Three main motives can, according to Sogge, be distinguished; strategic socio-political motives, mercantile motives and humanitarian, ethical motives. Political considerations related to securing allies in the third-world-south, is an important factor for some first-world-north countries. Other first-world-north countries might have more interest in establishing trade relations through development cooperation. Others still, justify their involvement in development cooperation with arguments of solidarity. It is seldom as clear cut as this, however. Sweden is, according to Sogge, known for its humanitarian concerns in its involvement in development cooperation. Nevertheless data suggest that Sweden acted "rather more as a Merchant than an Activist" in its "corruption-tainted sales of weapons to South Africa" (Sogge, 2002: 41ff).

Development cooperation is in other words an arena that is not easily definable. It is an arena of contestation; between different value systems, political agendas and economic interests which will be explored further below.

Western Educational Perspectives Go Global

After much debating, education was included into the UN charter as a basic human right in 1948. From then on, education has been on the agenda of development cooperation. From the perspectives of various donor agencies, with the UN at the forefront, the objectives of support for education have changed over the decades; from viewing education as an important factor in the promotion of peace and security, to viewing education as a powerful force for economic

advancement (Jones & Coleman, 2005; Tabulawa, 2003). In the 1970's and 1980's feminist discourses also began to feature on development agendas. Poverty reduction was complemented with gender equity. One rationale for this was that women made up half of the population globally and were a resource that should be tapped into. Tikly (2004: 185) argues that the World Bank for instance holds the view that "women's productive capabilities are to be developed as a means to integrate them more effectively into national and international markets." A consequence of including women into the productive spheres of society, thereby reaching goals of poverty reduction and societal development, was to ensure that education was made available.

Visions of the UN and other multi- and bilateral organisations, regarding how societies ought to develop, were influenced by different theories of modernisation, (liberal) democracy and competitive capitalism. In order to be part of the competitive 'global society', highly skilled human resources were considered to be a key factor (Lindberg, 2005). Thus, ideas of development and education were intertwined. However, these perspectives on development, viewed it as synonymous to Western development (Samoff, 1999; Tabulawa, 2003), which further prompted scholars to investigate issues of, for instance, compulsory education. Samoff (1999: 55) interpreted the demand for compulsory education as a "consequence of a distinctly Western set of values and cultural practices." Muschinsky (2000: 60, footnote 3) agreed with this assertion claiming that:

> "pedagogy" as we know it is very much an expression of Western civilization and reality. The practice that we refer to – upbringing and teaching - is of course taking place everywhere in the world as well as being the subject of reflection and planning. But the whole thought process that lies behind that which we call "pedagogy" is, through its special focus on performance and ability, very much a Western phenomenon – and it has primarily been brought to the developing world through the forced import of the educational systems of the colonial powers.[17]

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[17] ämnet "pedagogik" såsom vi är bekanta med det, i hög grad är uttryck för en västerländsk civilisation och verklighet. Den praktik som vi hänvisar till - nämligen uppfostran och undervisning – äger självfallet rum överallt i världen, liksom den är föremål för reflexion och planering. Men hela den tankegång som ligger i det vi kallar "pedagogik" är, med sin speciella inriktning på prestationer och förmåga, i utpräglad grad "västerländsk" – och den har primärt också kommit till tredje världen via tvångsimport av kolonialmakternas utbildningssystem.

The practices of upbringing and teaching that Muschinsky refer to can indeed be described as an expression of Western civilization and reality, that can be traced back to the days of Immanuel Kant who in the early 1800's wrote his classic work 'On Education'. Kant was influenced by the Enlightenment and its focus on reason, rationality and scientific scrutiny (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2001: 16, 64). He brought these perspectives into education, arguing that "[m]an can only become man by education" (Kant, 1899/2003: 6). Kant also had distinct ideas about what separated civilised nations from so called 'savage' nations which according to Kant:

> though they may discharge functions for some time like Europeans, yet can never become accustomed to European manners. With them, however, it is not the noble love of freedom which Rousseau and others imagine, but a kind of barbarism - the animal, so to speak, not having yet developed its human nature (Kant, 1899/2003: 4).

Hall (1992/1997: 278) further noted that:

> The emergence of and idea of 'the West' was central to the Enlightenment [...]. The Enlightenment was a very European affair. European society, it assumed, was the most advanced type of society on earth. European man (sic) the pinnacle of human achievement. It treated the West as the result of forces largely internal to Europe's history and formation.

The development of Western education was therefore imbued with distinct sets of values. These related to the fostering of the individual to become a certain kind of member, in a European society, which Kant understood as distinctly different from societies in other parts of the world. Kant therefore asserted that the major challenge for education was "how to unite submission to the necessary *restraint* with the child's capability of exercising his *freewill* - for restraint is necessary (Kant, 1899/2003: 27).

Viewing development and education as neutral endeavours, where perspectives of development, modernisation and pedagogical approaches are presented as applicable in all contexts therefore becomes problematic. This approach fails to recognise that Western educational thought has distinct roots which need to be acknowledged. The lack of acknowledging this is for instance pointed to in discussions of learner-centred education; a pedagogical approach that has become prominent within educational development cooperation. Learner-centred education is presented as a 'universal

pedagogy', one that works, as Tabulawa (2003: 9) comments with "equal effectiveness irrespective of the context." This 'technicist view' of education masks its ideological and political nature. As van Harmelen (1998: 4) points out, educational practices have their starting points in theory. Therefore, concepts such as child-centred and learner-centred cannot be used interchangeably, as these, rest on different theoretical underpinnings. The idea of a 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogy is criticised elsewhere, even within the Western spheres. Bjerg (2000: 45), for instance, argues that behind thoughts of universalism and the associated criteria of educational efficiency, lies strong political and economical forces. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 41) described this as cultural imperialism which:

> rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such […]. Today numerous topics directly issuing from the intellectual confrontations relating to the social particularity of American society and of its universities have been imposed, in apparently de-historicized form, upon the whole planet.

Despite this there is apparently an attempt to universalise educational practices which do not take account of local educational circumstances. In doing so, different forms of upbringing are disregarded. For instance, Western Enlightenment philosophy had much influence on the formation of a discourse of individualism, or the 'child' as Kant put it. However, in a more collectivist society educational ideas focusing on 'the child' might not be the reasonable or most logic approach. Rather, one conclusion that can be drawn is that if a society builds on the collective more than the individuals making up the collective; collective upbringing might be the appropriate approach which could also result in putting the teacher at the centre rather than the individual student.

Concerns regarding the importation of Western educational systems were voiced at an early stage in post-revolution Laos. The then director of secondary education in Laos, Khamphao Phonekeo, wrote an article about the challenges facing Lao educationalists at that time. He argued for the need to create an education system that was 'non-polluted' by the importation of educational ideas and systems from the West which, according to Phonekeo (1975: 87), had done more harm than good:

> The Western-type school, unwisely transplanted in Africa and Asia, has frequently spread the ideal of consuming more effectively than that of producing; it has led people to forsake their living

> *local and national cultures and to turn instead to a 'canned',*
> *petit-bourgeois, urban and cosmopolitan culture, thereby*
> *encouraging the exodus to the towns, which hold out the*
> *attractions of the consumer society and cosmopolitan culture. The*
> *examination system has given rise to careerism, a scramble for*
> *government jobs and a contempt for manual work; as curricula*
> *have laid the emphasis upon academic and intellectual*
> *attainment, they have generally neglected to prepare children to*
> *fulfil their personal, family and civic responsibilities.*

Phonekeo's call for a 'non-polluted' system should be understood in the wider political context at that time. The newly formed Lao PDR was in a phase of nation-formation which not only meant breaking free from colonialism and former Lao governments. It also entailed creating a homogenous society within an ethnically diverse nation; the ultimate goal being the creation of "a new socialist man" (Pholsena, 2006: 55ff). Despite the apparent wishes of the new Lao government to make a clean break with Western influence, Phonekeo's ideas should not be thrown to the side as political rhetoric. The point that he made was that third-world-south nations have different needs and resources which cannot be accommodated by educational systems that are not appropriate to the situation. Instead he advanced the claims of an education system formed by Lao for Lao. Further, he was opposed to accepting any form of aid from the outside:

> *Almost invariably, the aid properly so-called, the aid that is*
> *potentially useful, is inextricably tied in with an educational*
> *model which hardly ever corresponds to the receiving country's*
> *needs and situation* (Phonekeo, 1975: 93).

The situation in Laos became such that Phonekeo's ideas of Lao education by and for Lao people, was not realised in the way that he had envisioned. Instead the country became heavily dependent on foreign assistance, the education sector being no exception. The following section focuses on the Lao context and changes within the country which ultimately lead to increased development cooperation.

At the Crossroads of Education in the New Laos

As a formerly colonised country Laos aimed, after 1975, at building a national identity that marked a clear separation from the colonial past. Regarding education, a revised curriculum incorporating subjects that were considered necessary for educating the population

in line with the revolutionary philosophy was one consequence. Some of those who did not agree with this philosophy and remained in the country were sent to so-called re-education camps.[18] Teachers were an especially vulnerable group at the time of the revolution. Evans (1998: 158) made the following reflection:

> One of the reasons why teachers fled, of course, was because they had been one of the main instruments for imparting the values and views of the RLG to the younger generation. Part of the "hidden curriculum" of schools everywhere is the inculcation of the dominant values and views of the society. Therefore, teachers feared that they would be singled out by the new regime for "reeducation."

Since a large part of the educated population left Laos after the revolution[19] the situation was difficult, especially as there was a commitment from the new government to educate the entire population. Consequently, the quantitative growth of schools was considerable in the years after 1975. Their quality was however questioned since many new schools were so called 'skeleton schools', i.e. temporary structures that were not really fit for serving as facilities for teaching and learning.[20] More importantly, the teachers themselves were often young girls with only a few years of primary school education (Evans, 1998: 157ff).

The colonial administration had left the post-1975 government with a sparse schooling system. Within the high ranks of the new government the educational level was also low since the merits for gaining positions in the new government did not emanate from being educated; it came from being part of the revolutionary movement. Bouphanouvong (2003) describes how, during the late 1940's, he worked for the *Lao Issara*, the revolutionary 'Free Laos' movement. He received a position as a propagandist, one he feared he did not have sufficient educational background to fulfil. His superiors gave him the following (Maoist) response:

> In this revolution there are none who have graduated from school. The most important thing is that the revolutionaries have solid

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[18] For an extended discussion of re-education, see, Bouphanouvong (2003).
[19] Ng (1991), states that 90 per cent of the already minscule educated population of Laos left the country around the time of the revolution.
[20] Dahlström (2002: 90) refers to this as the ritualised coulisse school which "looks real at a distance but becomes a façade without the official educational content it is supposed to foster at a closer look. The rituals behind this façade can as well be replaced with a tape recorder."

> *dedication, high ideals, do not tremble at obstacles and difficulties, have absolute courage in performing their duties, learn from their mistakes and failures, and try to learn from the masses because the masses are the greatest university, the masses create history, no matter what day or age* (Bouphanouvong, 2003: 31).

This can be understood as one important political starting point when it came to the views that shaped educational thinking within the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), and thus in Laos. The above quotation should be understood in its own historical context but as Evans (1998) notes; political education was the main focus in the early years after the revolution. One assumption that can be made is that education in a broader sense, i.e. outside the realm of political education, was not the main ambition of the government since society and its members was to function as the 'people's university'. Another important dimension regarding the way education was practiced can most likely be traced to the country's educational inheritance. According to Cooper (2001: 38), the French Indochinese education policy had as its aim to make sure that there were representatives in the indigenous population that could function as propagandists. Their role was to "facilitate the dissemination and inculcation of French ideals amongst the Indochinese populations." Creating an educated indigenous population was not the goal, since this could pose a threat to France as a colonial power. Rather, as exemplified with the case of Vietnam, it was about "rerooting the Vietnamese in their villages" (Lebovics, 1992: 98ff), i.e. to keep them where they were considered to belong.

The LPRP thus made it its task to set up an educational system that would meet its requirements. This was to be done in a context where several educational discourses were active which had consequences for the work ahead.

Tracing Educational Discourses

In the pre-colonial time the Buddhist pagodas served as the main teaching institutions, open only to boys and men who were taught basic reading and writing skills (Chagnon & Rumpf, 1982; Evans, 1998; Ngaosyvathn, 1995). In a predominately oral society, illiteracy was not a big issue since folktales and traditional arts such as dancing and puppet theatres provided alternative arenas for teaching and

learning. As Evans (1998: 154) noted: "This was a perfectly workable and acceptable arrangement within traditional Lao society."

This changed to some extent with French colonial rule. The French used education in a systematic manner in order to limit the number of indigenous administrators who received sufficient education. As a result, the bulk of the colonial administration comprised Vietnamese staff brought in to serve as administrators, which lessened the need for educating Lao nationals:

> *During most of its fifty years as a French protectorate, Laos' educational needs were benignly neglected by its colonial administrators. As long as Vietnamese filled administrative positions and the Lao elite did not complain, there was no pressure to improve educational opportunities* (Chagnon & Rumpf, 1982: 164).

From a more ideological point of view, education also served to create a French Indochinese identity among its colonial subjects which the French hoped would strengthen the position of France in that region. However, the potential risk of educating the colonial subjects did not go unattended, as it was:

> *considered dangerous to permit the peoples of Indochina even technical education beyond the most basic level, lest they become 'ambitious'. The educational needs of the colonised Indochinese populations were thus perceived to be rudimentary, and largely of practical rather than intellectual nature. Education in Indochina thus resembled a form of modest vocational training rather than an education in its traditional and accepted sense* (Cooper, 2001: 39).

This was not unique to French colonial rule, but a feature of colonial rule in general. Furthermore, such systems provided a "setting for a particular sort of international influence on education: the implantation of metropolitan education institutions in the colonized world" (Samoff, 1999: 53). According to Samoff, this influence has persisted into modern times in the sense that the trails of influence continue to extend from the European core to the southern periphery (Samoff, 1999: 53).

One concrete educational feature that has continued in Laos regardless of political rule is rote learning. During the French colonial era, expenditure on education was low. One way to keep it down was a continued emphasis on the Buddhist pagodas as the main teaching institutions where literacy was the supposed aim but where "little

more than rote instruction in Buddhist doctrine and morality" (Stuart-Fox, 1997: 43) was provided.

As in the rest of Indochina, education in Laos was mainly directed towards the aristocratic groups of Lao society who mediated French rule. The education system was modelled on French examples and used French as its medium of instruction. Even though educational expansion was accelerated by the time of independence from France in the late 1940's and early 1950's, it was still difficult to break free from the French influence since there were few Lao teachers and little instructional material in the Lao language (Evans, 1998: 155ff).

The construction of new schools after 1975 can be regarded as an effect of the social agenda that the LPRP introduced as a means of mobilising popular support (Ng, 1991: 159). However, many of the schools were indeed skeleton institutions. There were many reasons for this; lack of funding, material and lack of qualified teachers due to the 'brain-drain' (Evans, 1998: 155ff). The educational endeavours that were made built once again on the principles of rote learning[21] where the "latest party directives or resolutions of the party" (Evans, 1998: 158) were taught:

> The main message communicated in such sessions was, of course, obedience and conformity to the wishes and views of the state. The content of such session included attacks on the old "neo-colonial" regime, on American imperialism, celebrations of the patriotic struggle for independence, the need to defend the country against "traitors" and the need to build socialism (Evans, 1998: 158).

The political strategies of building a new socialist state and a new socialist man had at least two consequences. Firstly, it meant building an even closer relationship primarily with the former Soviet Union and Vietnam, where many Lao went to pursue higher education. Secondly, it also meant including ethnic minorities and women into the related educational discourse of a collectivist national identity (Ngaosyvathn, 1995; Pholsena, 2006). Despite the inclusive rhetoric and the discourse of developing the nation, reality fell short of the aspirations. To get access to further education applicants had to have the right political connections. Furthermore, the policy of utilising friendly Eastern Block countries as providers of higher education had

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[21] Rote learning should in this context not only be regarded as a legacy of the past; it could also be regardes as a a functional approach in that historical context where political education was the primary mission.

the effects of creating a linguistic situation analogous to "the Tower of Babel" (Evans, 1998: 161). Returning from their studies abroad, Lao graduates spoke a multitude of different languages and the results were chaotic:

> *With the departure of the French, Americans and others from the institutes of higher learning in Laos, professors from the socialist bloc were imported to deliver their lectures in whatever language they spoke and these would then be translated (often imperfectly) into Lao. In secret some people began to think wistfully of RLG times when Lao had to wrestle with only French or English, both of which at least gave access to a wider world* (Evans, 1998: 161).

The changes made after 1975 did mark a difference in Lao education, especially regarding issues of access. However, the ambitions of establishing a contextually sound educational system were still difficult to realise some ten years into the new government rule. It was in the middle of the 1980's that the Lao government realised the need to make economic reforms which also resulted in more cooperation with first-world-north countries. This opened up for the development that Phonekeo feared, namely the import of first-world-north education systems. This, notwithstanding, was not the only challenge facing the Lao government. One pivotal part of the education system that the LPRP wanted to introduce, was the inclusion of all members of society into education in order to create a shared Lao identity. This meant that both women and ethnic minorities, groups who had previously been disadvantaged, received special attention in the new nation building project.

Women and the Socialist Project

In many ways, communist societies have addressed women's subordination and lack of power, taking steps to bring women from the reproductive to the productive spheres of society. Ireson (1996: 17) makes the following observation regarding women's situation under socialism:

> *Examples from Third World socialist countries […] illustrate […] common patterns. Declaration of or legal enactment of gender equality often occurs during the initial enthusiasm of establishing a socialist regime, as part of the transformation of past oppressive social relations and mobilizations of the population to build a new society. Socialist societies also tend to*

> *draw women into economic production outside the home. Socialist governments are less effective in recruiting women to economic or political leadership positions, however. Such governments usually acknowledge the importance of women's dual roles in production and reproduction. Some have collectivized some aspects of women's domestic work in order to free women for greater public participation, and most at least promise to do so at some future time. In the meantime, they exhort husbands to "help" their wives with domestic work.*

One area where women usually were 'winners', was within education since part of the official goals in socialist countries was to extend education to both boys and girls. This was a greater advantage for girls since illiteracy was usually more common among them than among boys (Ireson, 1996: 18).

Another common feature of socialist societies has also been the establishment of mass women's organisations, usually part of the dominating party's apparatus:

> *This organisation is almost always founded by the party or government to serve its purposes, which usually include mobilizing women's labour and support for the postrevolution (or postwar) reconstruction and development under Party or government direction. Secondarily, and often less effectively, the women's organisation is to "advocate" for female emancipation* (Ireson, 1996: 19).

In the case of Laos, a women's mass organisation, the Lao Women's Union (LWU) was formed within the party structure. The benefits of the LWU were however questioned. According to Ireson, there were voices raised among Lao women claiming that "[w]omen have been liberated to work harder" (Ireson, 1996: 48). So despite efforts to bring women into the production and reconstruction of the country, the situation for both women and ethnic minorities remained problematic.

The leaders of the post 1975 government "proclaimed their support for female mobilization and emancipation" (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004: 13). Education was seen as an important tool for building the new nation, and women and ethnic minorities were included in this endeavour. However, "[t]he implementation of this policy was due to 'revolutionary will' rather than financial or material means" (Ngaosyvathn, 1995: 137). There was also a more fundamental threshold to get past, i.e. that of the status of both

women and ethnic minorities in Laos. Boys' education has historically been promoted since girls and women have been responsible for the reproductive spheres of society, having the main responsibilities for providing food for the families. Poverty and perceptions of the little use of educating girls constituted other obstacle for girls' education which continued to produce gendered patterns in Laos. Fewer girls started attending school and the drop-out rate was higher for girls than for boys, patterns of inequality that were even greater among ethnic minorities (Ngaosyvathn, 1995: 16f). This pattern persists according to the first comprehensive gender profile made in the Lao PDR, which states that the goals of reaching equitable enrolment by 2015 will not be met at the current pace. Furthermore, the gender profile points to the large existing discrepancies between urban and rural areas, which also lead to inequality between ethnic minorities and ethnic Lao, since minority groups often live in rural, inaccessible areas (GRID, November 2005: 54).

Contradictions around the status and role of women can also be illustrated from the official rhetoric on the role of women in the 'new Laos', as it was envisioned by party officials after the revolution in 1975. When the first president, Kaisôn, gave his address at the first national congress of the LWU he did talk about the importance of women's emancipation. Nevertheless, he stated that a woman's duty was "to be a good wife, good mother, and good citizen" (Stuart-Fox, 1997: 197), thereby indicating that a woman's place was primarily in the home. The socialist call for equality among Lao citizens did in other words not fully extend to women and members of ethnic minorities who continued to be excluded from areas of societal life. However, claiming that Lao women in general have been denied power would not be reasonable since Lao women have enjoyed "some autonomy, access to resources and decision-making power" (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004: 14). This would be especially true for women belonging to ethnic groups that practices matrilocal residence principles. Lao Lum is one such group where matrilocal principles usually mean that once a couple marries, they live with the parents of the wife. Thus, the wife is generally protected by her own kin which grants her more freedom (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004: 62ff). The privileges accorded to women, have however been based on a view of gender complementarity, i.e. women and men possess different traits which all can contribute to the society at large. According to this rationale, women's skills have been placed within the sphere of the home (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004: 15). This situation changed slightly with the socialist

government's incorporation of women into production outside of domestic life (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004: 17f). Furthermore, the LWU also managed to establish itself in Lao society and political life, thereby gaining input at the highest political levels. However, claims are made that the women who did establish themselves at high political positions could do so because of their social status:

> *Nevertheless, and predictably, such visible signs of equality do not add up either numerically or metaphorically. Again and again, there is evidence that women in power have ascribed power through their family's position in the social hierarchy, in spite of the government's socialist stance* (Fox, 2003: 410).

Despite the political visions and discourses of inclusion that existed in post-revolution Laos, women and ethnic minorities still had difficulty exercising their constitutional rights; one of which was the right to an education. However, the Lao situation can also serve to exemplify how different systems of power intersect with each other and how different discourses engage and sometimes conflict with each other. There was an outspoken ideal of creating a communist, national identity which would erase the boundaries between rich and poor, man and woman, majority and minority ethnic groups. Notwithstanding, some discourses remained powerful enough to prevent this ideal from being realised. Women were, for instance, to be included into the productive areas of society, nevertheless, the communist discourse placed them in the homes. Likewise, the women who did gain positions did so, not necessarily on account of their gender or competence, but because of their family name, which signals the importance of social position within Lao society. It is however realisations such as these that point to the complexity of any endeavour of change. Bringing women into the socialist project proved to be more difficult than expected. Would the same be true for bringing gender into development and education?

Developing Education – A Nation or Donor Driven Process?

When the MoE introduced the new curriculum in the Concept Paper for primary and lower-secondary school, it was according to one minister a necessary step: "because the situation in the world has changed, for instance, in terms of technology and science which have

developed rapidly."[22] Not only was the content new in terms of textbooks but the curriculum also discouraged rote learning (Evans, 1998: 166). Some of the important points within the new curriculum were to develop certain qualities among the students:

> *good citizenship, feelings of patriotism, spirit of unity, spirit of internationalism, good discipline, industrious and hardworking qualities and a sense of responsibility to preserve the strong values of former generations* (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994: 2).

In this quest, the importance of able teachers was identified as a key aspect in reaching the set goals and therefore, improving teacher education became a priority. The Concept Paper envisioned a completely new role for teachers, "shifting from knowledge bankers, knowledge paymasters and knowledge examinors to facilitators, consultants, lifelong learners, innovators and leaders" (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994: 6). Not fully ten years later, some studies where carried out to evaluate the new education system. One of the studies, *Teaching performance in Lao primary education and its relation to teacher training background* (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004a: 1), set out to investigate "why primary teaching remains teacher-centred, divorced from the learning needs of student, despite major efforts on the part of the Ministry to introduce 'new' teaching." The report describes the educational situation in Laos in the following way:

> *Much time over the years has been spent of promoting the 'new teaching methods'. In the 1990's, the EQIP I[23] Project introduced, quite successfully in terms of coverage, the concept of the '5-pointed star' (Activities, Groupwork, Questioning, Material, Relevance to daily life) as a framework for conveying the new approach. From the fieldwork done within the framework of the present study, it seems clear however, that at a conceptual level, the understanding of the 5 'points', or the principles behind them, remains superficial among much of the education establishment as well as among teachers* (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004a: 1).

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[22] Vientiane Times 30/8/96, in Evans 1998: 166
[23] EQUIP stands for Education Quality Improvement Project

Despite the widespread knowledge among teachers about the '5-pointed star', which was the policy turned into practice in the pursuit to move away from teacher-centred approaches, it was still apparent that there was a big gap between policy and classroom practice. The teaching remained "teacher- and textbook-centred and characterized by passive and reproductive learning" (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004a: 22). An additional cause of worry, according to the report, was that few teachers acknowledged that they did not feel comfortable with their understanding of the 'new teaching':

> *The majority of the teachers apparently believed that the extremely teacher–centred methods they themselves used actually qualified for the designation 'new' teaching* (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004a: 23).

Somehow, Lao education, at the beginning of the new millennium, faced the same problem it has faced during modern history, regardless of which educational goals and principles that have guided educational policy:

> *too few students are being educated and the quality of the education offered is too poor. There are not enough schools in rural areas, particularly those inhabited by ethnic minorities […]. Teachers continue to be underpaid, poorly trained, and underqualified* (Lockhart, 2001: 30).

There is apparently a continued problem in developing an educational policy that is applicable in the Lao context, despite the national commitment to international goals of 'Education for All' (see for example Ministry of Education, 2005). In part financial matters might offer one explanation; providing education for all is a costly affair, especially for a poor nation. Furthermore: "[t]here is little evidence of the massive increase in global aid estimated to be necessary to achieve education for all" (Samoff, 1999: 61). Another question regarding the Lao National Teacher Training Plan is posed in a Review Mission Report regarding the Sida supported 'Teacher Training Enhancement and Status of Teachers Project' (TTEST). The report states that the plan puts forward a number of interesting and attractive proposals regarding teacher training. Nevertheless, it asks "is this plan really what the Government wants?" (Sida Advisory Team (SAT), 2003: 6). Samoff (1999) asserted that lack of national funding abilities also leaves national governments more or less in the

hands of donors and the agendas they support. This might lead to a situation where third-world-south educators:

> *may tailor their requests, more or less explicitly, to fit within the funding agency's agenda. In their planning discussion, for example, they may begin by exploring the funding agency's current high priority goals and then consider how to develop a request for assistance congruent with that priority* (Samoff, 1999: 66).

Tailoring requests has not been unheard of in, for example, the African context where countries such as Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have implemented so-called learner-centred pedagogies. In these cases, "analysis shows that the pedagogy has partly come as a 'prescription' from aid agencies through educational projects and consultancies funded by the aid agencies" (Tabulawa, 2003: 9).

Discussions of developing education in Laos has to a large extent been talked about as a matter of developing new methods; in the Lao case the new teaching has been conceptualised through the implementation of the 5-pointed star. This seems to be symptomatic of educational development issues where education, like development, is "viewed as a technical undertaking" (Tabulawa, 2003: 14), where changes in teaching methods are believed to be the same as changes in the quality of teaching (Tabulawa, 2003: 10). Missing from this discussion is a fundamental issue of philosophical nature; i.e. what are the underlying ideas of human development that different educational thinking entails? Furthermore, can educational change occur if it is merely viewed as a technical endeavour (Samoff, 1999; Tabulawa, 2003; Tikly, 2004)?

Mainstreaming Gender in Development Cooperation

There are claims that, even in the new millennium, development has failed the third-world-south. A "misplaced emphasis on modernization strategies for the past half century is central to understanding why development has not led to a greater decrease in inequalities between Third and First Worlds" (Bhavnani, Foran, & Kurian, 2003: 1f). There are even claims that the integration of "the economies of post-colonial Third World states with the global economy, often called 'development,' frequently exacerbates women's subordinate position" (Ireson, 1996: 16).

The years between 1976 and 1985 was declared as the 'Decade for Women' by the UN, which, according to Jahan (1995: 3), created great expectations among women in the third-world-south:

> *It was hoped that the international development agencies and national governments would provide leadership in giving guidance and undertaking proactive measures to address the root causes of gender inequalities.*

One way of addressing these issues has been to bring gender mainstreaming into the debate. "Gender mainstreaming as a concept obviously reflects a desire for women to be at centre-stage, part of the mainstream" (Jahan, 1995: 13). Research reveals, however, that gender mainstreaming has been a contested term (Baden & Goetz, 1998; Walby, 2005). It is both a theory and a practice (Walby, 2005), but increasingly it has taken on a technical guise with the consequences that "agencies adopt some of the components of gender mainstreaming, especially tools or techniques often in the absence of an overall framework" (Daly, 2005: 436).

What seems to be the largest discrepancy between how gender mainstreaming is viewed within the theoretical versus the practical realms is, that in practice, it seems to have lost much of its feminist political content in its translation to policy applications (Baden & Goetz, 1998). One of the effects of the gender mainstreaming discourse is thus that existing power relations are made invisible. However, it is a term that has travelled well and made its way into the policies of large international organisations such as the European Union and the UN (Daly, 2005).

Theoretically, gender mainstreaming is viewed as a political strategy that rests on a feminist analysis of gender inequalities as structural. One of the central aims behind advocacy of gender mainstreaming was the development of "key feminist concepts and approaches" (Daly, 2005: 439) which would challenge norms and values deeply embedded in societal structures. Gender mainstreaming was thus viewed as a "strategy of change, seeking to address gender inequality by focusing effort on organizational culture, processes, and structures, especially those associated with policy-making" (Daly, 2005: 440). In its transference from academia to the policy-making arena, gender mainstreaming has however evolved more into the shape of an econometric toolkit including "gender disaggregated statistics, the use of gender impact assessment methods, and gender budgeting" (Daly, 2005: 436). Furthermore, since an overall framework has been

absent, it has led to a process which can be understood as the "technocratization of gender mainstreaming" (Daly, 2005: 436). Within development cooperation, mainstreaming has also rooted itself firmly within the policy frameworks, which has led to claims that gender mainstreaming is a donor driven agenda. Within these contexts:

> It has also been argued that the mainstreaming agenda focuses on process and means rather than ends, leading to a preoccupation with the minutiae of procedures at all levels rather than clarity of direction about goals[24] (Baden & Goetz, 1998: 20).

One can question how it has come to be that gender mainstreaming has lost much of its human rights' underpinnings in the translation from theory to practice. One way to understand this process is from the perspective of style and fashion; gender mainstreaming has won the "style battle" (Daly, 2005: 440), making it not only fashionable within policy circles, but also a "symbol of modernity" (Daly, 2005: 441). Therefore, it is a field that has become increasingly fundable, attracting new interested parties. Many of these, "bear no allegiance to feminist research and may not even have any familiarity with its basic texts, concepts and methodologies" (Baden & Goetz, 1998: 21f). Among these new interested parties, one often finds economists, statisticians and econometricians focusing on altogether different issues, which to a large extent are informed by neo-classical economic paradigms. The consequences many times are that these perspectives reduce the discussion and definitions of gender to a discussion of binaries; i.e. gender equals the woman/man binary. In doing so one is "stripping away consideration of the relational aspects of gender, of power and ideology and of how patterns of subordination are reproduced" (Baden & Goetz, 1998: 22).

Another issue regarding how gender mainstreaming has evolved over time is that it currently lacks intersectional perspectives, i.e. perspectives which point to other structures of subordination and repression, which intersect with gendered patterns. Within feminist theorising there is currently a growing body of research that not only directs its attention to gender issues but which increasingly also incorporates issues of race, class, nationality, sexuality and ethnicity, into the analysis. As such gender mainstreaming:

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[24] Referring to Razavi & Miller (1995) *Gender Mainstreaming: A study of Efforts by the UNDP, The World Bank and the ILO to Institutionalise Gender Issues* (UNRISD Occasional Paper for the Foruth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995) OP 1, Geneva: UNRISD/UNDP, August.

> *is inherently limited and limiting because it always prioritizes*
> *gender as the axis of discrimination and moreover, the*
> *conceptualizations of gender that GM* [gender mainstreaming]
> *rests upon is clearly outdated* (Hankivsky, 2005: 978).

There seems, in other words, to be tensions and contestations around the concept of gender mainstreaming. These stem from how the concept has evolved from its feminist starting points to becoming a tool for economic and statistical analysis that lost touch with feminism. One of the arguments for this is the aforementioned technocratisation which more and more has come to define gender mainstreaming. Not only has the concept lost its feminist roots, it has also been transformed into a toolkit that irrespective of context is thought to be applicable. In the case of development cooperation, arguments are made that however much feminist advocates struggle to maintain both a technical and a political perspective, "the development business only tolerates the technical role" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004: 96). Furthermore, claims are made that there is a tendency within development cooperation to discourage special attention to women:

> *While a mainstreaming strategy does not preclude initiatives*
> *specifically directed towards women, in the development business,*
> *it has come to mean exactly the opposite. Initiatives specifically*
> *directed towards women are seen as a failure of mainstreaming*
> (Mukhopadhyay, 2004: 97).

As a technical effort, gender mainstreaming has many times amounted to a strategy that has been translated into balancing numbers of men and women. Increasing the number of women in any given organisation and thereby achieving a male/female balance has been thought to bring about gender equality, a line that many times has been "pushed by well-meaning donors" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004: 99). This in itself should not be regarded as an altogether failing strategy, but: "if such measures are introduced in an a-historical and de-contextualised manner, they can have serious consequences for gender politics within organisations" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004: 99). In other words, viewing gender mainstreaming as a tool ready for application, with measurable outcomes would be a mistake since there is no country that is not "predated by and grounded in an existing history and set of gender equality measures. Context matters" (Daly, 2005: 437). Within the context of the Sida/SAREC project, a question presents itself: How is the concept of gender, which is so readily written and spoken about

within the framework of the cooperation, understood? As something that needs to be accommodated within policy (for the sake of meeting donor requirements) or as something that has a potentially transformative effect?

Gaining Perspectives through Previous Research

Development cooperation entered Laos at a historical point in time when local, contesting discourses of previous regimes and previous traditions were challenged by the LPRP. There were clear ambitions in Laos after 1975 as to how issues of gender and education should be addressed. However, these ambitions were difficult to realise due to political and economical circumstances which eventually lead Laos to engage in development cooperation with first-world-north organisations. As a result, Laos had to adapt to a different political and economical order that was introduced by development cooperation organisation. This brought with it new sets of discourses that had to be incorporated into local policy and practice. As the research presented here puts forth, these discourses represents perspectives that to a limited extent incorporate post-colonial critique. Education and gender are made into technical solutions, or remedies curing any and all illnesses. These strategies have, as this chapter has pointed out, not escaped criticism from either first-world-north or third-world-south scholars. Instead they point to the need of questioning discourses within development cooperation such as EFA, learner-centred education and gender mainstreaming.

As a final note regarding research in and on Laos, this chapter should also be viewed as the result of the lack of previous research in Laos regarding the combined fields of development cooperation, education and gender. A complete search of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies catalogue revealed that of the approximately 550 listings on Laos,[25] the overwhelming majority are development cooperation documentation such as technical assistance reports and country reports. Among the remaining posts, there were only four listings that had 'gender', 'women', 'women's rights', and 'women in development' as key words. These studies centred on gender and women's issues in relation to reproduction among ethnic groups, historical accounts of women, women and land rights and women and irrigation. Furthermore, only one publication had education

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[25] These are results from a search done 070131

listed as a key word, which calls for the need for more research on education in the Lao context.

III. THEORETICAL OUTLOOKS

There is not one single way in which all of us can understand the world around us. In everyday life this manifests itself as differences of thought, opinions, experiences and understandings; manifestations that also extend into the world of research. As researchers we understand our arenas of study through the lenses of different theoretical perspective that we apply to our research. This chapter will therefore elaborate on the perspectives which have provided analytical perspectives by which the empirical material has been understood.

Constructing the World and Constructing Knowledge

In the processes of doing research one important step is to articulate our positions about how we view existence itself, and the ways in which we believe that knowledge can and should be created:

> *The view we hold of the human and the life here on earth - the ontological question of "what we believe in" – influences the way in which we believe that the human and life can (should) be explored and vice versa*[26] (Widerberg, 2002: 27).

My own ontological and epistemological understanding has over the years developed into a constructivist understanding which is important for my analysis. I understand the world as socially constructed by humans. Putting it more concretely; materiality in itself does not carry meaning but is only understood through the meaning we ascribe to it. This viewpoint has definite consequences for the way that I understand the studied context since I will not subscribe to an understanding and analysis that makes essentialist claims. I do, for example, not understand gender relations as something that can be explained by the biological make-up of women and men. Rather I understand gender relations as constructed by

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[26] Synen på människan och livet här på jorden – den ontologiska frågan om "vad man tror på" – påverkar också hur man menar att människan och livet kan (bör) utforskas och vice versa.

socialisation and power relations within societies. These ontological and epistemological starting points have consequently directed me towards theoretical perspectives that lend themselves to developing understandings about how ideas of education and gender are constructed and contested both globally and locally.

Points of Departure

A central focus in this thesis has been to understand the discourses on education and gender that have been constructed through development cooperation in Laos. I have thus selected theoretical concepts that, combined, can help explain how discourses and the production of knowledge about education and gender can be understood. The theoretical contributions I have chosen could be characterised in different ways ranging from (neo-) Marxist to post-structuralist and queer theoretical perspectives.[27] Another point of departure has been the works of postcolonial scholars. They have helped to clarify that knowledge production in many societies has its foundations in a colonial order, which today does not take the shape of colonial territorial claims, but rather operates in the form of an economic enterprise of imperialism and capitalism (Spivak, 1999). The contributions from third-world-south feminists have also led to extensive questionings of second wave feminist claims of the importance of a category of 'woman'. Instead they have encouraged many feminists to deconstruct how we understand contextualised experiences, realising that theories are indeed constructed within local or regional contexts and therefore cannot claim to speak for everyone everywhere. From this perspective I have found it necessary to maintain a theoretical perspective that encourages deconstruction of different 'truths' that have been established, both locally and globally. Other important contributions to my theoretical understanding come from theorists such as Michel Foucault (e.g. the triad of discourse–power–knowledge and governmentality), and Judith Butler and her theorising on gender and performativity. Butler challenges how we think and theorise about gender – it is not something we are, it is something we do. I have extended the thoughts about performativity to include all social (identity) categories that are of relevance to my work; i.e. it is not only gender that is performatively constituted. The

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[27] I am aware of the possible critique I might encounter by using theoretical perspectives that are considered as ontologically and epistemologically very different. However, my main concern has been to use and also quite freely adapt the theoretical tools I have used to gain an explanatory depth that I think otherwise might be neglected.

common ground that Foucault and Butler share is that their interests do not lie in finding truth. It is rather about how history creates discourses against which we as humans mirror ourselves in an attempt to understand who we are and our actions in the world (Larsson, 2001). Subjectivity therefore becomes more central than the search for objective knowledge since "the actor (or subject) is structure (or discourse) embodied"[28] (Larsson, 2001: 20). Another way of expressing this is that we in our lives and actions produce and reproduce the discourses available to us.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony has also been included into the analysis since I believe that it has a value for further understanding how power structures are established in societies and how these power structures are linked to dominant groups in society. I therefore include hegemony as a complement to the ideas of discourse and the production of knowledge and power as discussed by Foucault.

Responding to post-colonial critique

Postcolonial theory is a field that in its analysis puts forth the understanding that we are still living in a world that is marked by colonialism. In this respect, one of the key elements of post-colonial theory is that it criticises perspectives that try to understand global processes of the current time by placing them outside the history of colonialism. The argument is that even though we are living in a time that is significantly different compared to the colonial era with regards to politics, economy and culture, we are nevertheless living with the marks of colonialism (Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999: 14ff). Therefore, "the prefix 'post-' also signifies an attempt to *think beyond* the limits and identities that were established during colonialism"[29] (Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999: 16). Poststructuralism and especially the theorising around the production and reproduction of discourses have been important sources of inspiration for many postcolonial theorists. Firstly, it addresses how we are constituted through language. Secondly, it offers a perspective that indeed can serve as a critique and an analysis of dominant systems of ideas and practices; in particular because of its focus on how "dominating theories and empirical practices repress and render

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[28] Aktören (eller subjektet) är strukturen (eller diskursen) förkroppsligad.
[29] Prefixet "post-" betecknar också ett försök att tänka bortom de gränser och identiteter som instiftats under kolonialismen.

invisible the essential aspects of the reality it claims to represent"[30] (Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999: 18f). Pressing questions, among postcolonial scholars who lean on poststructural perspectives, are how these invisibilities are maintained, and what the relationship is between power and knowledge in these processes, questions which point to the centrality of the concept of discourse (Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999: 19).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote the following words in the Author's note to her book *In Other words – Essays in Cultural Politics*: "There would have been no 'other words' for me if something now called deconstruction had not come to disrupt the diasporic space of a post-colonial academic" (Spivak, 1988). Deconstruction of taken-for-granted knowledge does not only carry with it a possibility for those in the diaspora/periphery to have a voice, it also beckons those of us closer to centre stage to question that which we understand to be true. For many in the first-world-north this has been a difficult journey, not in the least because it has forced us to acknowledge that what happens out 'there' is many times a result of what happens 'here' (see for example Schmauch, 2006: 12). It is suggested that this applies especially to Sweden which has marketed a discourse and a polity of neutrality that has constructed and positioned Sweden outside the 'colonial business'. Taking this a step further, it is suggested that being Swedish means to distance oneself from former colonising powers and instead forming bonds of solidarity with the subjects of colonialism (Mc Eachrane & Faye, 2001: 9). This position can, according to Eriksson-Baaz (2001: 164) be traced to Swedish development cooperation organisations that portray themselves as:

> less paternalistic and more respectful in relation to their development cooperation partners. These conceptions reflect a more prevailing rhetoric within foreign policy […]. The former colonisers are defined as the Others, through which "the Swedish" is defined. Through this process, Sweden can place itself outside of the history of colonialism.[31]

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[30] de dominerande teoriernas och empiriska praktikernas undertryckande och osynliggörande av väsentliga aspekter och den verklighet de gör anspråk på att representera.

[31] mindre paternalistiska och mer respektfulla i relation till sina biståndspartners. Dessa föreställningar speglar en mer utbredd retorik som återspeglas i utrikespolitiken […] De före detta kolonisatörerna defineras som den Andre genom vilket "det svenska" definieras. Sverige placeras på detta sätt uranför den koloniala historien.

Deconstruction has however opened up for the possibilities of alternative understandings, which has sparked a debate amongst post colonial scholars. One of the central critiques that have been brought forward is that there indeed remains a position of silenced voices and silenced practices that has its roots in colonisation. This kind of critique was voiced by third-world-south feminists (which in itself is a tell tale notion of how 'we' and the 'others' are constructed) who opposed being represented by North American and European feminists (Mohanty, 1984). The primary message of this critique was that the experiences of white, western, educated, middle-class women were not the experiences of poor women (of colour) in poor countries. Therefore, woman as a category could not be expected to include all women across the globe, under the guise that women shared experiences on the grounds of being women (see for example Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Ferguson, 1998; Spivak, 1988). In this respect one important aspect that was brought into the discussion was the geographical flow of knowledge; knowledge production took place in the first-world-north and was then exported globally (Landström, 2001: 14f; Wallerstein, 1998). As a consequence, first-world-north knowledge can be said to be privileged in a global context.

The process of 'othering' is an issue that is relevant not only for relationships between former colonial powers and formerly colonised countries; it also has an equal bearing on category construction in general. Category construction rests upon opposing categories, i.e. the man does not have significance as a category if he is not mirrored against the woman. Correspondingly there cannot be a first-world-north if there is no third-world-south and along these lines, a whole process of 'othering' takes place. This process not only establishes lines of demarcation. It also hierarchically organises places, collectives, individuals and their knowledge and experiences accordingly, since binaries are not necessarily symmetrical; one part in the opposition is often more powerful (see for example Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999: 8). Furthermore, these processes can be linked to that which Dahlström (2002) calls the 'preferential right of interpretation' a concept which has close links to the distribution of power and hegemony and those discourses which become meaning-making and regarded as 'true'.[32] One ground breaking example of these processes

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[32] A discussion about the preferential right of interpretation is of course also important to have regarding my own position as a resercher in Laos, an issue that I discuss further in chapter IV.

is Edward Said's work on Orientalism. From Said's perspective, Orientalism cannot be understood as the study of the Orient; rather he rests heavily on Foucault's conception of discourse, thereby understanding Orientalism as a discourse:

> *My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period* (Said, 1978: 3).

Said also understands the 'idea of Europe' as a key part in the construction of the Orient which provides an opposition that reflects the 'us' in Europe against 'those' outside Europe. According to Said, it is this construct that places European culture at the top of the hierarchy both within and outside Europe, i.e. "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, 1978: 7). Stuart Hall (1992/1997: 277) makes a similar observation, claiming that 'the West' is a concept or an idea that functions in different ways: "it allows us to characterize and classify societies into different categories – i.e. 'western, non-western." It also serves as an "image or set of images" condensing "different characteristics into one picture." It also "provides a standard for comparison" and it finally "provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies are ranked and around which powerful positive and negative feelings cluster." In doing so, it "produces a certain kind of knowledge about a subject and certain attitudes towards it. In short, it functions as an ideology."

Feminist scholarship is, as already mentioned, no exception to the hegemonically organising principles of first-world-north knowledge. Mohanty for example examined feminist scholarship and colonial discourses, and from her perspective, it was indeed "possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of 'the West' (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis" (Mohanty, 1984: 334). For women of the third-world-south, this has resulted in the production of an image of an 'average third world woman':

> *This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of*

> *Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions* (Mohanty, 1984: 337).

I find it necessary to incorporate the field of post-colonial theory into this framework since I believe that this perspective needs to be acknowledged both as a theoretical point of departure and as a perspective in the analysis. This becomes especially important since many question whether we indeed have the colonial era behind us (see for example Schmauch, 2006, who gives an overview of the current debate on post-colonialism).

Development cooperation is certainly one site where power relations between the 'West' and the 'rest'[33] lend themselves to this kind of scrutiny. Are we truly talking about partnership or are there still remains of old colonial patterns which continue to privilege the history, experiences and knowledge of Western societies?

> *The question Is universalism[34] ethnocentric? betrays an anxiety that has haunted the West since the conquest of the Americas. It grows from beliefs that Western ways of life and systems of value are radically different from those of other civilizations. This widespread anxiety rests on false generalizations about the West itself, about the homogeneity of its identity, the uniformity of its developmental processes, and the cohesion of its value systems. The suggestion that universalism is ethnocentric often also presupposes a homogenizing view of the other cultures and civilization, neglecting elements in them that may be perfectly compatible with, and may even lie at the root of, the West's own discovery of universalism* (Benhabib, 2002: 24).

In order therefore to respond to post-colonial critique, the analytical scope must be widened. Different categories such as class, race, ethnicity, sex, gender and so on always co-construct each other, and therefore cannot be separated analytically as if they were separate entities (de los Reyes & Martinsson, 2005). As such, 'women' cannot be viewed as a homogenous group. Subsequently, as Butler (1990/1999: 6) argues, gender always has to be understood from a historical context since:

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[33] In the words of Stuart Hall (1992/1997).
[34] Benhabib (2002: 26ff) discusses different definitions of universalism; as a philosophical belief about a human essence, as a justification strategy, as morality, and as legislation. I have chosen to include the quote not on the grounds of opening up for a discussion on issues of universalism, but rather as a voice that points to the ethnocentrism of Western reasoning.

> *gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.*

From a post colonial perspective, these constructs and categories are deeply embedded in a colonial world order, privileging first-world-north knowledge constructs, which I argued in the previous chapter, has its roots in Enlightenment philosophy. "The foundation of postcolonial scholarly critique is that the production of knowledge, mirrors political and economic structures in the global world order"[35] (Landström, 2001:11). Therefore, they need to be questioned and deconstructed.

Foucault and (the power of) discourse

The French theorist Michel Foucault is intimately connected with the notion of 'discourse'. At times, the idea of discourse has focused solely on language. Foucault, however, shifted the focus from issues of language to issues of systems of representation (Hall, 1992/1997: 291ff) that were intimately linked to issues of power and knowledge. Indeed, Foucault (1978: 100) suggested: "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together."

Foucault further argued that each society has its general politics which establish regimes of truth which turn into taken-for-granted truths within specific historical contexts (Foucault, 1980: 131). These truths are created by "science, firm systems of control and broad political tendencies, [and] created the eyes that in turn created the student, the patient, the criminal, the soldier, the worker, the woman […]"[36] (Börjesson, 2003: 37). Discourse analysis, however is not about truth, rather it seeks to understand how we arrive at believing something to be true:

> *Discourse has little to do with truth. Take for example the colonial discourse about the human race and the white man's supremacy. This discourse was faulty at the core, but became very influential on colonial oppression and for the use of excessive violence. This is an illustration of a more general fact that*

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[35] Grundvalen i postkolonial vetenskapskritik är att kunskapande speglar politiska och ekonomiska strukturer i den globala ordning.
[36] vetenskap, handfasta kontrollsystem och breda politiska tendenser, skapade de blickar som i sin tur skapade eleven, patienten, brottslingen, soldaten, arbetaren, kvinnan […].

discourse contains truth and affects the way people view the world. The social effect and the way it is linked to power is important to Foucault. Foucault has a perspective on the history of ideas that shows how discourses are created, how they are formulated and what the consequences are[37] (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2001: 198).

From the perspective of Foucauldian theory, viewing power as negative is not fruitful. Power is not necessarily something that is imposed upon people from the outside. "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978: 101). Furthermore, there is no value in searching for a set definition of what power comprises:

'Power' is a relational concept, not a thing or a substance which has been acquired by some or many, and which later can be used as a tool (for dominance, repression and so on)[38] (Hultqvist & Petersson, 1995: 22).

Nevertheless in practice, power and the lack thereof can have strong implications on everyday life since it enables, or put obstacles in the way of action (Hultqvist & Petersson, 1995: 22). It is this analytical focus on power that is the interesting one. Which different forms does power take and what are the consequences of having or lacking power within certain discursive orders? Or put differently: who gets access to different discursive arenas? Some discourses are only open to those with the qualifications stipulated within that discursive order:

More exactly, not all areas of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some are forbidden territory (differentiated and differentiating) while others are virtually open to the winds and stand, without any prior restrictions, open to all (Foucault, 1972/1982: 225).

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[37] diskurs har primärt ingenting med sanning att göra. Tag exempelvis den koloniala diskursen kring människoraser och den vite mannens överhöghet. Denna diskurs var i grunden felaktig, men kom att få oerhört stor betydelse för kolonialt förtryck och övervåld. Detta är en illustration av ett mer generellt faktum att diskurserna innehåller sanningsanspråk och påverkar människors världsbild. För Foucault är den sociala effekten och hur den är kopplad till makt viktig. Foucault har ett slags idéhistoriskt perspektiv som visar på hur diskurserna uppkommer, hur de formuleras och vilka konsekvenser de får.
[38] 'Makt' är ett relationellt begrepp, inte ett ting eller en substans som någon eller några kommit i åtnjutande av, för att sedan tillämpas på andra (dominas, förtryck m.m.).

Discourse and hegemony

Discourse inspired by a Foucauldian perspective is important for understanding what regulates action and power within my researched arena. As a complement to further deepen the analysis, I have also included ideas about hegemony for its explanatory value. Hegemony was central to the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, and it has been developed further by other scholars, some of whom I draw on in this discussion. Hegemony can be described as a "condition of power in which the major cultural, social and economic aspects in life are influenced by a dominant group in society" (Dahlström, 2002: 23). In this respect hegemony can be understood as a form of dominance that creates consensus and socially sanctioned agreements on what is right and wrong (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005: 79).

Education is an important arena for creating and maintaining hegemony in a society since education is one of the social institutions that form civil society. "As such, social institutions such as schools and other educational establishments are not 'neutral'; rather, they serve to cement the existing hegemony, and are therefore intimately tied to the interests of the most powerful social groups […]" (Mayo, 1999: 36). Hegemony is however not a static phenomenon. It can be both renewed and recreated and therefore it can also be subjected to counter-hegemonic forces that might well challenge the very basis of existing hegemonies (Mayo, 1999: 38).

From my perspective, hegemony relates to discourse, underlining how power is distributed, negotiated and sustained by those who have access to certain discursive arenas.

Discourse, hegemony and performativity

If discourse governs the way we think about and act in our lives, where does that leave human agency? Are we merely acting within discourses available to us, functioning much like marionettes in the hands of the powerful? Neither Foucault nor Gramsci would assert to that line of reasoning since they believe that both discourse and hegemony are not closed or stable systems. There is in other words room for altering discourse and for counter-hegemonic actions. Judith Butler theorises extensively around these issues and her work has dealt with deconstructing ideas of gender to understand how gender is constituted by culture. She argues, in line with Foucault, that social categories are created; it is not until these categories exist that they can be represented. "In other words, the qualifications for

being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (Butler, 1990/1999: 4). The consequences of this reasoning is that at certain points in history, discourses have formed that have recognised the existence of 'new' categories in societies, such as the 'insane' or the 'sexually deviant' (see for example Foucault, 1980). Simone de Beauvoir suggested already in the late 1940's that this also applied to the category of the 'woman'. She argued that a necessary question to pose was "what is a woman?" She further asserted that not all women would identify themselves as women despite the 'fact' that "they are equipped with a uterus." According to de Beauvoir, this, threatened the idea of femininity and hence women "are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1953: xxxvi).

If certain positions have been established within societal discourse, there are also expectations that come with these positions, expectations of how we should behave or perform. However, there are openings for a reformulation of these expectations:

> *If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means* (Butler, 1990/1999: 43).

Butler (1995: 134) argues that the performative act "is one which brings into being or enacts that which it names, and so marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse." The subject is therefore to some extent determined by discourse but this determination is located within specific times and specific contexts. However, as Butler explains, language is one important tool in this constitutive process:

> *To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other such networks. 'Agency' is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed* (Butler, 1995: 135).

de los Reyes and Martinsson (2005: 19) use the same line of reasoning. According to them, categories and positions are formed within the contexts of societies and they are further:

> *adjusted according to a game plan that is governed by separate logics. But it is at the joints between these logics that we can find the opportunities, expose the mechanisms of power and challenge its use.*[39]

Here, then, are possible means of resisting the formulated categories that we are faced with. We might act according to the positions that are available but sometimes we do not succeed in our performance and new windows of opportunity open up and become visible. Returning to the example of acting according to gendered positions, Butler argues that:

> *the relationship between the 'imitation' and the 'original' is, I think, more complicated than critique generally allows. Moreover it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification – that is, the original meaning accorded to gender – and subsequent gender experiences might be reframed* (Butler, 1990/1999: 175).

There are in other words opportunities and possibilities to be an active subject within the discourses that are available to. These possibilities exist because discourses are socially, culturally and historically constructed and therefore subject to change. In the Lao context, this means that discourses of EFA and gender can be challenged and are challenged continuously in the performative acts of those engaged in development cooperation work.

There is however strategies to deploy in order to maintain the hegemony of existing discourse. These strategies are closely linked to the usage of power and governance, tools which are used both by institutions and individuals in order to sustain societies.

Governing others and governing oneself

One aspect of interest when discussing power and the production of knowledge is how power is established and how it can be exercised. This chapter has so far dealt with concepts which I consider to be key analytical concepts for my work; othering, discourse,

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[39] kategoriseringar anpassas efter en spelplan som styrs av skilda logiker. Men det är också i fogarna mellan dessa logiker som vi kan finna möjlighet att avslöja maktens mekanismer och utmana maktutövande.

power/knowledge, hegemony, and performativity. All these concepts relate to the way that I understand the arena of development cooperation, in which education and gender are central aspects for the scope of this thesis. However, a final Foucauldian concept, governmentality (Foucault, 1978), will be included in the analytical point of departure.

Governmentality essentially deals with questions of techniques of governing. It should not only be regarded as a concept which looks at how states govern their subjects, it also covers how individuals govern themselves. It should in other words be understood as a concept with both a wide and a narrow scope, which lends itself to the study of "the conduct of conduct" (Gordon, 1991: 2). In this sense governmentality can be regarded as an attitude towards that which is the object of governance (Larsson, 2001: 29).

At a societal or macro level, governmentality can be understood as embodied power and knowledge relations, which give rise to a certain mentality towards the objects which need to be controlled. In this sense it could be understood as the relationship between political rationality and social practices. One of the key questions that macro level governance has to deal with is how to combine mechanisms of control with equal measures of guidance and stimulation; i.e. to balance the whip and the carrot, to put it bluntly. Governance is however always dependent on the extent to which the subjects of governance agree to be governed. Therefore, macro level governance always has to balance its use of whips and carrots in order not to turn the governed subjects against the governing power (Hultqvist & Petersson, 1995; Larsson, 2001).

On a micro level governmentality deals with how we as subjects understand our subjectivity, the attitudes we have towards ourselves which render us willing or resistant to governance. Subjectivities can therefore be understood as embodied discourses and the embodiment of power and knowledge relationships (Hultqvist & Petersson, 1995; Larsson, 2001).

In the case of my research context I consider there to be two discursive macro arenas which cooperate and co-exist, yet not on an equal footing. On the one hand, there are the development cooperation organisations representing the governments of the first-world-north, e.g. the World Bank, UNESCO and Sida. On the other hand, there is the Lao government. These two macro level arenas cooperate, set agendas separately and jointly and exercise different types of governance that are resting on sets of political rationalities

which are interacting with different social practices. These arenas also operate with contextually shaped discourses which are expressions of contextually shaped relationships of power and knowledge. Development cooperation organisations rely for instance, at the beginning of the 2000's, on discourses of liberal democracy and market-economical rationalities. These discourses spring from a foundation that emphasises the logic of the market, the choice of the individual and multi-party democracy. The Lao government represents a political practice that is one of the five remaining one-party states in the world. It is, further, a country that has close historical experiences of colonisation and war having been, during the last century, under colonial rule, an independent monarchy,[40] and a communist one-party state. Nationally there has in other words been a struggle between different types of political rationalities and the shape and form of power-knowledge relationships have shifted. In the meeting between these two different discursive arenas there is an imbalance. The development cooperation arena is made up of a large number of countries which more or less subscribe to neo-liberal political rationalities and the discourses it represents (see for example Kurian, 2000, for an extended discussion on agenda setting in the World Bank). The Lao Government on the other hand has been forced to move away from many of the communist ideals that it had at the time of the revolution in 1975. It has gradually moved towards a market economy, increased interactions with countries outside the former Eastern Block, increased poverty and increased dependence on support. In the context of development cooperation the Lao government appears therefore to be the weaker party. As such, it also has to incorporate the political rationality of the development cooperation arena when seeking support. Despite this the Lao government has struggled to maintain governance over the Lao population, trying to balance discourses of revolution, with the discourses of the powerful organisations of the first-world-north. The discourse of the peoples' university has for example been replaced by a discourse of EFA which has obtained a hegemonic status within official educational discourse. Remnants of colonial discourses and power structures, the privileged position of first-word-north knowledge, and the insights of post-colonial scholars therefore need to be taken into account.

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[40] It is important to note that many would disagree with the description of Laos as a sovering state under the Royal Lao Government from the late 1940's and until 1975 since American and French influence continuted to be strong.

For individuals working within the Lao government sector, governmentality is also a useful concept. The respondents are all part of the state apparatus and thus their subjective understandings can illustrate the embodiment of various discourses active in Laos today. As state officials they have to respond to a government discourse that is both national and international given the influence of donor discourse on Lao policy-making. The respondents are also individuals with experiences from earlier social practices which they embody and carry with them in their current lives. Throughout their lives they have positioned themselves in relation to different discourses and in some cases, have resisted positioning, as when women have resisted being deprived of education. As individuals they have navigated between different political systems, and thereby learnt to adapt in their daily lives. The interviews point to the complexity of different power structures and how they intersect in the local context. From the perspective of the donors, gender and ethnic minorities receive special attention in development efforts, something that is also expressed in Lao educational policy. Social practice, however, is much more complex. Having access to the right types of networks, being considered to be an elder, or having a certain position in a hierarchy that matters might be much more influential in shaping practices that work against official policy.

Discourse, power and knowledge are intimately intertwined in any given historical and cultural context, affecting both societies and individuals. Economic, political, social, cultural and historical contexts create intricate patterns, forming hegemonic discourses which many times become agenda-setting and create 'truths'. These processes do not go unchallenged though, and even if we are all part of the larger discursive arenas that are available to us, there is still room for resistance and change. Individuals and collectives can challenge the positions that are available, simply because these positions are not pre-existing in some 'divine' manner. Therefore, the interesting questions become to what extent societies and individuals relate to and practice governmentality, and which discourses and systems of power and knowledge that are activated and gain hegemonic status?

In analysing the material that I have collected for my thesis I find many advantages in the theories that I have included; the concepts are all applicable to both macro and micro contexts, and they can be used to interpret multiple types of material. My basic assumption is that all types of statements, verbal as well as textual are expressions of

available discourses. Therefore the theoretical tools described in this chapter allow for an analysis that stretches from the local to the national and the global arenas. Within these different contexts, multiple discourses can be active, forming different hegemonies that sometimes are conflicting. In the specific case of development cooperation there is however a colonial history that, from my understanding, has to be incorporated into the analysis. Within education it is clear that the discourse of 'Education for All' has reached hegemonic status, and one important part of this endeavour is to include gender into the process by mainstreaming women. Which discourses form these programmes and which social and cultural contexts they are to be embedded in, need to be understood more clearly. This will be the focus of part two of this thesis where national and donor policy documents on education and gender, alongside with in-depth interviews with Lao education officials, are reported and analysed.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL STEPPING STONES

At the heart of this thesis lies an ambition to develop knowledge about different discourses relating to the intersecting issues of development cooperation, education and gender. Put differently, I have aimed at trying to discover which discourses regarding development cooperation, education and gender become visible in policy documents and interviews. The previous chapter provided the theoretical points of departure which can roughly be described as post-colonial and post-structuralist. In this chapter, I will elaborate on my methodological stepping stones as well as the empirical material analysed in the thesis. There are principally four different areas I will pay attention to; ethnography, analysing discourse, ethical considerations and reflexivity in the research process.

Working Ethnographically

In the middle of 2003 I arrived in Vientiane, Laos, for the second time in my life. I had previously spent five weeks there, getting acquainted with the place and the people, deciding if this project was feasible. Would I be able to work and make a life for myself in a country that was a stranger to me and where I was a stranger; where I did not speak or understand the language of the majority, and where I had a limited network which could support me in my effort? Consequently, I spent the first six months establishing myself at the FoE, building relationships with not only Sida/SAREC participants, but also with other members of staff. Keeping a diary became a vital part of my process during this time since it allowed me to make record of the situations I encountered. It also forced me to reflect about a multitude of issues and maybe most importantly, about my own actions and thoughts.

According to Berg (2001), there are many different ways of describing and applying the ethnographic method, but however many interpretations we can find, "the main point about the concept of ethnography, regardless of one's language and terminological preferences, is that the practice places researchers in the midst of what

ever they are studying" (Berg, 2001: 134). There are different degrees regarding the extent to which a researcher chooses to interact with the studied context. However, researchers engaging in different styles of qualitative methodology are according to Ellen (1984: 77) exercising some type of 'subjective soaking':

> *Put simply, the idea of* subjective soaking *is that the fieldworker from the outset abandons the idea of absolute objectivity or scientific neutrality and attempts rather to merge him/herself into the culture being studied.*

Emerging one self in the studied culture can be done in several ways. Ferguson (1998) for instance, takes a stand where she calls for actions which have far-reaching consequences. She claims that as researchers from the first-world-north we must strive to build bridge identities if we are truly interested in breaking down the privileged positions that we as members from the first-world-north hold. In order to do this 'white' people need to "define themselves as multiracial because of their friendships or chosen kin or family connections" (Ferguson, 1998: 107). My own experience was that I indeed engaged in subjective soaking but that it nevertheless was difficult to move beyond being an outsider within. Griffiths (1998: 137) argues that "no one in educational research is a complete insider or outsider." For me this manifested itself through my ability to share my professional experiences with my Lao colleagues where we could together identify ourselves as teachers and PhD candidates. However, the discourse of white privilege was nevertheless inscribed on my white body, carrying with it a position that I might not myself want to be placed in. As Nyström (2007) discovered during a visit to post-apartheid South Africa, her female gender was 'lost' and instead she gained a sense of race. In the Swedish context, her race was not anything she had had to reflect upon. Instead her position as a woman in a Swedish society, still marked by unequal gender relations, was far more prominent. In the South African context however, Nyström realised that the colour of her skin bore connotations that she had never actively had to reflect upon, but which became unavoidable in South Africa where skin colour was associated with a history of repression.

My experience from field work in Laos were that time and interaction with the local context was indispensable but that I was also required to constantly reflect on the situations that I encountered, which in one sense was a type of subjective soaking. The ability to engage in subjective soaking and ethnographic work depended on getting access to the context where I collected my material. Getting physical access

was not a problem since my presence was legitimised by the Sida/SAREC project. Within the framework of this cooperation, my own department was engaged in working with the FoE and through this, I had 20 per cent employment in the project. Even though my study initially was not presented in detail everyone knew that I was there for two reasons, to collect data for my doctoral thesis and to work part time at FoE. However, getting access to the people and their experiences was not anything that automatically came with the physical access. Burgess (1991: 43f) holds the view that access is "negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research process" and "that access is based on sets of relationships between the researcher and the researched established throughout a project." This process became emotional for me in many ways, both mentally and physically. I in many ways embodied 'the other', in possession of that, which Ferguson (1998: 107) describes so aptly, as socially dominant categories. I belonged to nearly every single category she mentions: "white, middle or upper class, heterosexual, academic and what is particularly relevant to our discussion, citizen of the North versus citizens of the South," Therefore my task became to try to do something about the barriers that these categories created between us. Thus, I began walking around and talking.

Coffee and tea, sticky rice and long conversations

The first month of my stay in Laos was, if not a difficult time, at least a time during which I many times felt lonely and certainly questioned what I was actually doing there. Being a *falang*, a Westerner, and a guest at the FoE, I was treated with the utmost respect by Lao colleagues and I was often met with shy interest from the people around me. I also received a large office that I was sharing with the supervisors from Umeå when they worked at NUOL. An office of this size was normally shared by six to eight Lao staff and therefore granting the project such a large office could be interpreted as a display of how significant it was to the faculty.[41] Honoured as I was by this special attention, it also placed me in a state of isolation. I spent many hours in the office on my own with the odd visit from the 'daring', and I finally decided that if 'Mohammed doesn't come to the mountain then the mountain has to go to Mohammed'. That was when I took my coffee mug and started making visits to the other offices in the faculty building. At the very beginning my visits were

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[41] Another change that was also made was that the office was turned into a Sida/SAREC resource room that the PhD candidates at FoE could use as a workplace.

probably a bit uncomfortable for all of us, primarily because of language barriers. The level of English among the staff at the FoE was generally quite low and my Lao was basically non-existing which made us all a bit self-conscious. We however persisted, and as time passed by we started finding common grounds of communication and all of us cared less and less about the linguistic mistakes we made. These even gave rise to quite a lot of laughter along the way since I was eager to practice the Lao I was trying to learn in private tutorials, making many mistakes along the way. So, I had coffee, tea and sticky rice[42] with my new colleagues, and took up much of their time talking about every subject under the sun.

This approach was to the best of my judgement the only viable one to take for two reasons. Firstly, I firmly believed that if I was going to do research in a new country it was necessary to interact as much as I could with my new colleagues. Secondly, in order for me to be successful in my research I believed that it was vital for me to gain the trust of the people around me since Laos as a society still struggle with issues of openness. Evans (1998: 5f) described the reactions in communist states, which have opened up to the outside world in the following way:

> These latter regimes [referring to China, Vietnam and Laos] are now best described as authoritarian, which roughly means that while they do not try to control all information and activities in their societies, they do make strenuous attempts to control particular sorts of information, especially politically sensitive information. This means that certain topics are not able to be discussed publicly, and discourses about the past, present and future are monopolized by regimes which also attempt to control memory and the construction of it.

The importance of establishing trusting relationships when doing qualitative work is not only an issue in a country such as Laos. It is discussed in much literature on qualitative research methods, where closeness to the subject and trust are considered to be key issues, matters which Patton (1987: 97) addresses:

> the evaluation observer must learn how to behave in the new setting, the participants in that setting are deciding how to behave toward the observer. Mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual cooperation depend on the emergence of an exchange relationship

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[42] Sticky rice is a glutinous rice, that is a staple food in Lao cuisine

> *in which the evaluator gets data and the people being observed*
> *find something that makes their cooperation worthwhile.*

At the onset of my fieldwork I often had the feeling that people were diplomatic when discussing everyday matters such as their salaries or career opportunities, or any given matter that dealt with the government versus the lives of 'ordinary' people. The general answer would be "step by step, in Laos things have to be taken step by step." Then there would be moments where for instance, the lavish life-styles of high positioned officials could be commented on in informal settings, issues that would not be raised in a more formal setting. One of my respondents described this quite straight to the point saying that:

> *People generally recognise that the policies and the*
> *implementations are not the same. It's very much different. It's a*
> *very big gap, but criticism is very rare […]. People in this society,*
> *officially people don't critique any policies or anyone; that is for*
> *sure, people don't do that.*[43]

As time went by, I began to establish what Wax (1971) labels 'reciprocal relationships', gaining trust and confidence from the people around me. "[T]he essential factor in this transformation is the assistance and support – the reciprocal social response – given him [the researcher] by some of his hosts" (Wax, 1971: 20). For me, this entry was made possible not in the least through the extended coffee breaks where I learned about Lao culture, language, religion, customs and habits. Little by little I was also let into to the private spheres of my new colleagues. They not only opened their homes to me but increasingly also shared their thoughts about living and working in Laos. They taught me about education in Laos, I accompanied them to their classes, and through their stories I learned about the different layers that made up Lao society. They also provided me with contacts to other parts within the education system, which proved to be useful for my continued work, since getting access often was an issue of personal connections. During this first period of time in Laos I thus functioned as an ethnographer, whose first priority was to learn more about the context, introducing myself to it and recording my observation.

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[43] Interview nr. 1, 258-261

Remembrance and reflection

One important way of keeping track of the situations that I faced was as mentioned earlier, to keep a research diary. Not only did it allow me to reflect upon the situations that I found myself in, it also served as an opportunity to reflect upon myself as a researcher. I carried it with me daily and tried to make entries as often as possible. It became a journal that had a varied appearance, ranging from descriptions that were quite lengthy to pages that were filled with keywords and short sentences, structured observational data and sections of more or less elaborate sketches. This process was not free from problems though. Literature on qualitative methods in general and ethnographic methods in particular stress the importance of producing detailed descriptions (see for example Berg, 2001; Widerberg, 2002). As time went by, I realised that I was making fewer entries, which troubled me as I was reflecting upon it. Then I stumbled across some advice about time spent in the ethnographic field that said:

> *Limit the time you remain in the setting. Field-note writing operates at approximately a 4:1 ratio with the time in the field. If researchers spend two hours in the field, it may require as long as eight full hours to write comprehensive field notes* (Berg, 2001: 160).

Upon scrutinising this in relationship to my own work I realised that even though I in many ways was using an ethnographic approach, it was only an approach. I could not expect of myself to keep comprehensive notes in relation to every situation that I found myself in; it would rather be a tool to record things that I found particularly important. Since I was in the field for almost a year and a half, the things that I encountered that were brand new would certainly decrease since my familiarity with the situation grew. In the end, the diary came to function more as a means for me to collect and reflect over my experiences rather than a pivotal part of the material analysed in this thesis.

Empirical Materials

The materials that form the basis for the analysis made in part two of the thesis, consist of documents and interviews. The documents include international donor policy on EFA and gender, and national policies dealing with EFA, gender, poverty alleviation (which is the envisaged effect of EFA within the donor community), teacher education strategies and more general policies regarding educational

development (see appendix A for an overview of the selected documents). The documents were selected on the basis that they were all policies representing multilateral donors such as the World Bank and UNESCO, bilateral donors such as Sida and finally the Lao government. As such, these policies formed the basis for the practical work with educational reform in Laos. The policies of the Asian Development Bank were not included into the analysis as the World Bank is considered the principal policy-making bank. Eleven interviews, which transcribed, totalled 280 pages are also included into the analysis. These can be divided into three groups; those made with education officials, engaged in development cooperation efforts, at ministry and university levels, those comprising life-history interviews with education officials working in teacher education, and those conducted with Lao nationals on the topic of *nayobay*[44] (see appendix B). This material has in this forthcoming presentation (see chapter VI) been organised into three different parts which I have labelled arenas. The policy arena traces discourses that can be found in the above mentioned policy documents. The policy-practice arena and the contextual arena give examples of how practice is talked about among education officials. The respondents in these two groups are all what I call 'education officials'[45] in some capacity. However, the difference between the respondents in these two arenas are that the policy-practice arena reports on interviews with education officials in their capacities as employees in the government sector where local policies are produced and where donor policies are disseminated. The contextual arena reports on life-histories of education officials. These interviews however, reflect the ways in which education and gender are discussed from a life-experience perspective rather than a policy-practice perspective.

Tracing discourses and constructing meaning

The discourse analytical field is wide and builds on a range of different approaches which have both their common and separate ways of analysing different materials discursively (Phillips & Winther Jørgensen, 2002; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). As discussed earlier, my entry into the discursive field has been via the ideas of Foucault and applications of these by other scholars. Foucault's

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[44] I consider nayobay to be an organising principle for Lao society which serves as an alternative, contextual discourse and practice that collides with development cooperation logic and first-world-north principles.
[45] I interchangeably refer to these respondents as education officials or officials.

theoretical work also provided tools for analysis. As Carabine (2001) notes, Foucauldian theory does not provide a toolkit for analysis, however, there are common features among those engaging in a Foucauldian inspired analysis; namely the "application of Foucault's concepts of discourse-power-knowledge and therefore the lens through which they view their data" (Carabine, 2001: 268). There are also other common social constructionist points of departure which unite many discourse analysts; a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge, the focus on historic and cultural specificity, the connection between knowledge and social processes, and finally, the connection between knowledge and social action (Burr, 1995: 5ff). If pursuing a discursive analysis that has its roots in Foucault's understanding of discourse, it becomes necessary to direct one's gaze towards the triad of 'discourse–power-knowledge':

> *To understand discourse we have to see it as intermeshed with power/knowledge, where knowledge both constitutes and is constituted through discourse as an effect of power. If our study of discourse is to be more than a study of language, it must look also at the social context and social relations within which power and knowledge occur and are distributed* (Carabine, 2001: 275).

In working with my materials I have attempted to keep my gaze on the relationship between discourse–power–knowledge, in the analysis of the interviews and documents. The practical work with both the documents and the interviews have been to read and re-read the material. During the different readings I have tried to focus on discourses that have been especially relevant to education, gender and development cooperation. From a Foucauldian perspective, I have worked under the assumption that when issues of education and gender have been discussed in both policies and interviews, it has been done by activating different types of discourses available for activation. The discourses available in a context are further understood as effects of how power relations have sanctioned different types of knowledge or understandings regarding for instance education. I have further tried to understand and analyse which other discourses have intersected with and affected the above discourses, and what the practical effects of these different discourses are perceived to be among the respondents. As Carabine suggests, "discourses have effects" (Carabine, 2001: 272), and it is these effects I have attempted to trace.

Regarding the documents, the approach has been slightly different, not in the sense that I have had a different attitude to reading and re-

reading in order to understand the discursive formations within the documents. However, I have done the reading with an a-priori understanding that the international donor documents represent a hegemonic discourse on education and gender, which will have consequence for developing countries seeking support. This understanding has its foundation in the post-colonial perspectives discussed in the previous chapter and the claims made that there is a persistent inequality between the first-world-north and third-world-south due to the colonial history of Europe and her former colonies. Furthermore, I also believe that we need to acknowledge Samoff's discussions about externally initiated reports (see chapter II) and the potential effects this can have on how we understand policies and reports.

The Lao national documents included in this thesis are limited to the English-language policies that are sanctioned by the MoE. This was a demarcation I decided upon for principally two reasons. Firstly, I was interested in documents that were produced locally after Jomtien. Secondly, since I was not able to read Lao, it was also a practical decision. However, one should be cautious when assessing the content of the Lao policies. Therefore, I will pose some questions that merit further research: Are these documents de facto written by Lao policy makers or are they produced by international consultants? If the latter indeed is the case, are the reports sanctioned by the MoE because the opinions expressed, are shared by the ministry or are the publications to be regarded as an effect of current power-knowledge relations? In order to answer these questions in an intelligible manner I believe that a genealogical analysis, where the production of key policy documents in Laos is carefully traced, would be in order.

One important aspect to note regarding the interviews is, that even though I did interview individuals, I have through my theoretical approach not analysed the interviews as the expressions of individuals merely. I have rather understood them as expressions of different discourses that have been available for activation by the respondents. Therefore, the interviews are regarded more as expressions of discourses than of individuals, which have had consequences for how I have chosen to analyse and (re)present the interviews in the coming chapter. Before elaborating on this however, I will briefly discuss how the interviews were conducted and processed.

The interviews were done by me with the individual respondents. They were recorded onto a minidisk and conducted in English. The decision to conduct the interviews in English was a decision that

followed some consideration. The education officials at ministry and university levels were accustomed to using English as a working language due to involvement in development cooperation. This was not the case with all of the life-history respondents which is why I initially considered involving an interpreter so that the respondents would have the opportunity to express themselves in their own language. The life-history respondents did not express much hesitation about the presence of an interpreter. Despite this, I finally made the decision, with their consent, to at least try to conduct the interviews in English since I believed that the presence of a third party might affect the types of stories they were willing to share.

Once the interviews had been conducted, the arduous work of transcribing them started. After transcribing them word for word, I returned them to the respondents who had the opportunity to read through the material and make any corrections they saw necessary. One of the respondents took the opportunity to make a minor change; all the other interviews were returned to me unchanged.

I also discussed issues of research ethics with all the respondents. These discussions included issues of confidentiality and how the material would be processed and presented. In these discussions I extended my intentions to present the material as expressions of discourses, not as expressions of their individual views and opinions. The respondents were thus promised confidentiality and the opportunity to read transcripts for editing purposes. They were further informed that they had the opportunity to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. I have tried to honour my promise of regarding the interview material as expressions of discourses by keeping close links between context, theoretical perspectives, the way I have engaged with the interview material and how the analyses have been organised consequently. The quotes included in the thesis have also been edited to increase readability, as spoken language seldom translates well to written language.

When the transcribed interviews were returned to me by the respondents, I began the process of reading and re-reading. Once I started feeling comfortable with the material, I focused my reading on trying to find discourses that dealt with or related to the themes of education, gender and development cooperation. This was a 'hands on' process where I worked with copies of the transcriptions in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other hand, physically cutting the transcripts into pieces. This was a process I resorted to after trying various ways of organising the materials in themes and categories with

the help of my computer, which left me feeling unsatisfied with the lack of overview of the materials. Therefore, I worked through the interviews, one by one, cutting out the parts that I understood to be related to issues of development cooperation, education and gender, subsequently organising them into categories that I felt were appearing. As the work with the interviews proceeded, these categories and themes by which I organised the material changed continuously. In that way, there was a dialectical relationship between me and the material where I had a sense of speaking to the material but also of being spoken to by the material. Even though the process of interviewing is a dialectic process between the interviewer and the respondent, it is at the end I who takes full responsibility for the analysis. Doing discourse analysis, especially on empirically close materials such as interviews, requires some ethical considerations. As Widerberg (2002: 176) has put it:

> *Firstly, it is almost impossible to avoid that the respondents recognise their own statements. Secondly, the experience of having one's statements scrutinised, examined and categorised in terms of conflicting discourses or positions in discourse can be offensive. Thirdly, the interpretations might not at all correspond with the interpretations of the interview person.*[46]

Since the search for 'discourse–power–knowledge' is not the search for truth, the analysis that I present is one of many possible readings and interpretations, and one which should be read against the perspectives presented in this thesis. Furthermore, this thesis cannot and should not be understood as a piece of work representing the whole of Laos. It can only speak for the context that it is situated in; i.e. the education sector and the people present there, whom are part of a privileged, although not coherent, group, in Laos, living in an urban environment, where mostly people of the majority ethnic group, Lao Lum are to be found.

Time for Reflection

Being an outsider within is never easy, especially when one becomes such an active outsider within as I was. I experienced my position as a researcher as complicated at times. I brought my whole being into the

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[46] För det första är det nästan omöjligt att undvika att personen ifråga känner igen sig. För det andra kan det upplevas som sårande att få sina påståenden skärskådade, rannsakade och kategoriserade i termer av motsättningsfyllda diskurser eller diskurspositioner. För det tredje kanske tolkningarna inte alls överensstämmer med intervjupersonens egen syn.

process and formed personal relationships with individuals that were part of my research effort. I think it is safe to say that my presence affected what happened around me, by the same token as I was affected by what I encountered. Not only did my close contacts with the people around me deepen my understanding of what it meant to live and work in Laos. It also forced me to deal with the privileged position I held. This is not always an easy task. I tried endlessly to downplay my own role, emphasising to my Lao colleagues that I was but a doctoral student, because that was how I wanted to see myself. Notwithstanding, I did had have a dual role during my fieldwork in Laos as I was employed part-time as a resource person in the FoE's Sida/SAREC project, which indeed place me in a different position to that of the doctoral student. However, I also believe that it was important for the FoE, where I had my base, to promote me as a foreign expert since having one reside there for a longer period of time brought status to the faculty. And the physical signs of my importance were all there. I had in my wallet the paper proof, a yellow identity book that labelled me as a foreign expert. The faculty prepared an office space for me and the project that proved to be grander than any of the other offices at the faculty. Moreover, they had a Western toilet built that was twice the size of any regular toilet. The door was painted green, setting it apart from the otherwise brown toilet doors, and a small sign put up where the word expert was written. Furthermore, I was on a regular basis asked by the FoE to sign documents with requests of the release of funds from the central level at NUOL despite the fact that the FoE budget was theirs to handle without any involvement from outsiders. Many of these things put me more in a position of an expert, than a doctoral student in Laos to collect material for a thesis. This gave me cause for occasional anxiety. Did they really understand what my main intentions were? Did I somehow violate my Lao colleagues and my respondents through the multiple roles that I was assigned and assigned myself; as the expert, the PhD student and the friend? And last but not least, what have been the consequences, intended and unintended of my actions?

What I did learn was that by the time I returned to Sweden, I had only begun to scratch at the surface of the context that I was trying to understand and that is hopefully reflected in the analysis of this work - the efforts of a 'researcher–in–becoming'.

PART TWO

V. THE DISCURSIVE ARENAS OF EDUCATION

The second part of this thesis deals with how development cooperation, education and gender are discursively constructed in and around the Lao context. I will begin by focusing three different arenas; the policy arena, where discourses in donor and national policies are explored; the policy-practice arena that explores discourses among education officials in Laos; and the contextual arena, which explores discourses activated in life-histories of Lao educators. The arenas represent 'sites' where development cooperation, education and gender were given certain meanings and where these meanings were also negotiated and contested. The policy arena also includes an example of a Lao societal principle, nayobay, which in concrete ways has effects on the education sector. Nayobay is here understood as a discursive logic that has historical and cultural traditions, building on, among other things, principles of the collective and kinship. The thesis will conclude with an analysis of how discourses emanating from the different arenas interact and collide, which, it is hoped; will reveal some of the complexities underlying educational change.

The Policy Arena

Jomtien 1990 – Dakar 2000: Global visions of education

Something happened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. The happening I refer to, we now know as 'Education for All' and it was nothing short of a world declaration on education as the subsequent documents describe (UNESCO, 2000). The ideas were by no means new. They were rather attempts to inject life into an issue that had been around for nearly half a century, namely "everyone has a right to education" as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted and proclaimed on December 10, 1948 (UNESCO, 2000: 74).[47] One of the central points of the Jomtien Declaration, was that in 1990 it was considered that, "basic education for all – for the first

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[47] See also www. un.org/Overview/rights.html, 070524

time in history – [is] an attainable goal" (UNESCO, 2000: 74). At that time, a point had apparently been reached where the accumulative effects of advancements in numerous areas of societal life made it possible to talk about education for all as something other than a mere vision. This realisation prompted the participants in Jomtien to declare that the task for the future was "Meeting Basic Learning Needs" (UNESCO, 2000: 74) of all children, youth and adults.

Ten years later a follow-up of the Jomtien Conference took place in Dakar. 'The Dakar Framework for Action' reaffirmed the commitments of the Jomtien 1990's slogan "Meeting Basic Learning Needs," replacing it however with "Meeting our Collective Commitments" (UNESCO, 2000). The commitments to be met involved the international community, national governments, civil society and local communities, just to mention some of the stakeholders. These goals, according to the Dakar conference, constituted a vision that had remained "pertinent and powerful" (UNESCO, 2000: 12, article 4). From a wider perspective, the vision was described as providing a "broad and comprehensive view of education and its critical role in empowering individuals and transforming societies" (UNESCO, 2000: 12, article 4). Its key points were:

> *universal access to learning; a focus on equity; emphasis on learning outcomes; broadening the means and scope of basic education; enhancing the environment for learning; and strengthening partnerships.*

The Jomtien goals included the pledge that all children, youth and adults were entitled to have their basic learning needs met which included "learning to know, to do, to live together and to be" (UNESCO, 2000: 12, article 3). However, the continued support for the Jomtien vision in Dakar was accompanied by a 'reality check':

> *Tragically, reality has fallen far short of this vision: millions of people are still denied their right to education and the opportunities it brings to live safer, healthier, more productive and more fulfilling lives. Such a failure has multiple causes: weak political will, insufficient financial resources and the inefficient use of those available, the burden of debt, inadequate attention to the learning needs of the oppressed and the excluded, a lack of attention to the quality of learning and an absence of commitment to overcoming gender disparities. There can be no doubt that the barriers to achieving Education for All are*

> *formidable. Yet they can and must be overcome* (UNESCO, 2000: 12, article 4).

Universal access to education was thus regarded as a goal that continued to constitute an enormous challenge, regardless of how well prepared the world was to meet it according to assessments made in Jomtien in 1990.

The Dakar conference continued to set an ambitious agenda for 2015. The goals included ensuring that all children in all societies have access to 'quality' primary education without cost, a 50 per cent improvement in adult literacy, and elimination of gender inequalities regarding access to and participation in basic education (UNESCO, 2000). Ambitious plans such as these place many expectations on national governments and international organisations. Even though the EFA framework includes countries worldwide, it is clear that the emphasis is on education as a means of poverty reduction, which focuses on the poorer countries of the world. This issue is addressed in the Dakar Framework where the targeted countries were expected to:

> *develop or strengthen existing national plans of action by 2002 at the latest. These plans should be integrated into a wider poverty reduction and development framework, and should be developed through more transparent and democratic processes, involving stakeholders, especially peoples' representatives, community leaders, parents, learners, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and civil society. The plans will address problems associated with the chronic under-financing of basic education by establishing budget priorities that reflect a commitment to achieving EFA goals and targets at the earliest possible date, and no later than 2015. They will also set out strategies for overcoming the special problems facing those currently excluded from educational opportunities, with a clear commitment to girls' education and gender equality* (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 9).

The international community on the other hand, was expected to "deliver on this collective commitment by launching with immediate effect a global initiative aimed at developing strategies and mobilizing the resources needed to provide effective support to national efforts" (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 11). Apart from working for increased funding and debt relief, the Dakar Framework also suggested that the international community should undertake "more effective and regular monitoring of progress towards EFA goals and targets, including periodic assessments" (UNESCO, 2000: 9, article 11). The

international community was in other words given a dual role of conducting as well as evaluating this initiative.

Different discourses within donor documents reveal that there is an ambiguous attitude towards the relationship between donor and recipient countries. On the one hand partnership is emphasised; in the case of Sida it is stated that *"[p]artnership* is a key principle in all Swedish development cooperation and is becoming an internationally shared concept of significance" (Sida, 2001: 22). This partnership is, however, conditional on a "common framework" of development targets established through "international conventions"[48] (Sida, 2001: 22). Sida, however, emphasises that "support to the education sector is always based on partner countries' own education programmes" (Sida, 2001: 11) but the policy also makes claims that research has shown that "the best preparation for future roles – family-life, citizenship, the world of work, as well as further education and training – is good general comprehensive education, including universal values and basic learning skills" (Sida, 2001: 12). Sida also points out that the education sector is an arena where "struggle and tension between inclusion and exclusion, global and local identity, democratic and anti-democratic values and practices" (Sida, 2001: 35) are to be expected. Therefore it becomes the task of "[d]emocratic governments" (Sida, 2001: 35) to make sure that all groups in society are included into the educational system, an endeavour that is dependent on "the presence of strong political commitment to education for all" (Sida, 2001: 41).

However bleak the prospects for EFA, it still led to developments on the policy arena. Both at Swedish Sida and in Laos, EFA policies were agreed on, and in the case of Laos, four different policies were produced between 1995 and 2005. These English-language policies were all part of the dialogue that Laos needed to have with the donor community, especially as official development assistance (ODA) amounting to 80 per cent of total public investment in Laos. "As such, ODA contributes importantly to building the necessary conditions for sustainable growth and poverty eradication" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d: 18).

In Lao educational policy-making after 1990, one of the earliest attempts at crafting a policy in the spirit of EFA was the *Concept*

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[48] These values, norms and visions, which the donors refer to, build on discourses of human rights. This can and should be discussed since Laos is identified as a country that not always respects some of the so called internationally agreed upon conventions. See for example http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/lao-summary-eng.

Paper for Primary and Lower-Secondary Teacher Education (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994). As already mentioned in chapter I, the most concrete outcome of this policy was the 5-pointed star teaching method, which was hoped to lead to a more learner-centred teaching and learning environment. The Concept Paper also discussed the following key points that "the young generation" needed to understand and demonstrate:

- *Love of homeland,*
- *Love and appreciation of the natural world,*
- *Gratitude and respect for leaders, parents and teachers,*
- *Respect for elders, workers and those who sacrificed and died for the nation,*
- *Respect for rules and regulations,*
- *Avoidance of extravagance and selfishness,*
- *Responsibility and initiative in assigned work,*
- *Unity with all ethnic groups and other nations, and*
- *The willingness to sacrifice personal interest for the sake of the collective good* (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994: 4).

Four policy documents followed, each identified as vital to achieving EFA and hence eradicating poverty: The 'National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d), 'The Education Strategic Vision Up To The Year 2020'[49] (Ministry of Education, 2000), the 'Education for All – National Plan of Action, 2003-2015' (Ministry of Education, 2005), and the 'Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015, Teacher Education Action Plan 2006-2010'[50] (Ministry of Education, n.d). These plans all shared a common platform, as key strategies for education and poverty reduction. Furthermore, they formed the basis for discussions with donors by providing frameworks of action, that were in line with the goals set up and monitored by the international donor community.

The highway to educational hegemony?

During the 15 years that followed Jomtien, the assessment was that concrete advances had been made in many countries. The expected goals were, as already mentioned, not reached but the discourse of

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[49] From hereon referred to at the Education Strategic Vision
[50] From hereon referred to as the Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan

EFA was established on a global scale.[51] Education was talked about as the cure to many of the illnesses that the world suffered:

> *All Sida's work towards the overriding goal of poverty reduction, and the goal of human rights and democracy, gender equality and sustainable development, depends on and promotes education, training and competence* (Sida, 2001: 5).

The Dakar Framework considered education as:

> *the key to sustainable development and peace and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century, which are affected by rapid globalisation* (UNESCO, 2000: 8, article 6).

The Sida EFA policy clearly states that it builds on "internationally agreed concepts and goals" (Sida, 2001: 13) which in turn, rest heavily on a rights-based perspective: "promoting democracy and human rights, equality between women and men, and sustainable development" (Sida, 2001: 13). Sida further states that according to research and experience: "comprehensive education, including universal values and basic learning skills" (Sida, 2001: 12) is the optimal way of preparing citizens for their roles as members of society, family and for a career as life long learners.

The Lao 'National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy' describe education as "a major determinant in meeting the goals of poverty eradication" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d: 68). The link between education and development (achieving poverty eradication) is established and talked about in such a way that it constitutes a global truth. Poverty will be eradicated and the world as a whole will look forward to sustainable development that builds on principles of equity, harmony and peace. The Lao EFA, National Plan of Action formulates the education objectives much in this spirit. It also attempts at reproducing what can be considered to be Lao national values:

> *To build a young generation with global scientific knowledge, patriotic values, a spirit of solidarity with ethnic groups in the country and with friendly countries in the world; to know their rights and interests and obligations as citizens, how to preserve and expand the traditions and culture of the nation, and how to*

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[51] A Google search on the exact phrase 'Education for All' rendered 1 150 000 hits which provides an indication about the impact of the the concept (061218)

> *be self-dependent and self-strengthening; to be economical and know how to harmoniously combine personal interests with that of the collective; to equip themselves with general knowledge and knowledge in specialized fields, specifically in science and technical fields; to be moral, disciplined, responsible, and dutiful; to be healthy, innovative, and of a civilized mind; and to be prepared for the defence, construction and development work of the nation* (Ministry of Education, 2005: 12).

Despite the general nature of these policies, there are still some areas of educational development that are highlighted. Dealing with widespread illiteracy is one area and gender disparities is another. In Laos, policy formulation has attempted to embrace the most fundamental areas; namely, equitable access, quality, relevance and education management (Ministry of Education, 2000). These four main areas are operationalised as "quality improvements for developing national human resources to meet the need of the country's socio-economic development plan" (Ministry of Education, 2000: III). This socio-economic development plan deals mainly with developing the economy by interacting more with regional and international industrialisation and its markets. To be able to move in this direction would also require a move from a natural base economy to a market oriented economy. This reform has been considered necessary because:

> *The revolution in modern science and technology has been developed to an unprecedented level, especially the development of the Information Technology (IT), which becomes an important factor for profound change in this era called the "Globalisation Period"* (Ministry of Education, 2000: 3).

This period of globalisation places certain demands on the country, demands which are interpreted as being close to technological advancements and education as a life long endeavour:

> *Internationally and regionally, Lao P.D.R. is moving towards an era of the non-boundary information and new scientific and technological research in which computers, English language and Internet are necessary tools for communication for business. Resulting from a rapid change in economic development over the past years, not only has human resource development been managed in equipping personnel with knowledge and skills but also in developing their capabilities to adapt themselves to this fast changing world for existence, survival and development. Consequently, human resource development in the 21st Century*

will be carried out in accordance with the period of life-long learning for life–long employment under these four pillars of education:

- *Learning to learn,*
- *Learning to do,*
- *Learning to live together,*
- *Learning to be* (Ministry of Education, 2000: 5).

These four pillars are to the last letter corresponding to the goals set by the international community during the Jomtien summit, which can be interpreted as a discourse that indeed has travelled between these different policies. However, attending to these four pillars is not considered to be enough to rectify the educational 'back-drop' in Laos. The regional and international pace of development, and the Lao government's goals of moving into the community of countries considered well-developed and well-educated, is recognised to be a grand challenge. Assessing the development goals up until 2020, the Lao government considers the education system to be "in an early stage of development […]. At its current level, the system *may* (my emphasise) provide basic literacy to those who graduate from primary school" (Ministry of Education, 2000: 10). Furthermore, if the country is able to move in the desired direction and indeed industrialise to a larger degree and incorporate more technologies in various sectors, "the current quality of basic education will be inadequate even for those who complete it" (Ministry of Education, 2000: 10). There is therefore a double dilemma facing the government in its efforts. There are not enough students who actually enrol and finish primary education, and even if these numbers would increase, it is considered that the current level of quality will not even ensure that students achieve basic literacy. From this perspective another dilemma presents itself; how can efforts to support and achieve basic education for all be combined with efforts to build a scientifically and technologically competitive educational system? In this respect there seems to be a struggle within the visions and goals for educational development that ultimately faces the following problems:

the development of Lao education in terms of quality, access, and equity is to be done in a relatively difficult context. High demographic growth, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, scattered habitat, economic and financial constrains and low

> *institutional capacity constitute a big challenge to the country*
> (Ministry of Education, 2000: 2).

Returning to the issue of equity, the MoE remarks that quantitatively, there have been improvements in enrolment rates. However, there are still many problems relating to narrow coverage of knowledge. According to 'The Education Strategic Vision' there are not enough qualified teachers, not enough teaching materials and not enough school buildings, especially in the rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2000: 8). These issues are addressed in the 'Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015, Teacher Education Action Plan 2006-2010' (Ministry of Education, n.d) which identifies five strategic areas; improved policy analysis, improved management of teacher education, improved teacher education programmes, improved in-service training programmes and improved incentive systems for teachers and teacher educators. Emphasis is put on ensuring professional standards of "moral integrity, revolutionary attitudes and characteristics that help teachers to support the goals of the Party" (Ministry of Education, n.d: III). How these standards can be further understood is not elaborated in the strategy document. However, when discussing curriculum content the document states that the teacher education curriculum needs to be:

> *more holistic and flexible enough to reinforce the integration of*
> *new important world issues and appropriate educational topics,*
> *such as, multi-grade class teaching, inclusive education, gender*
> *issues, reproductive health, life skills and morality* (Ministry of
> Education, n.d: 3).

Quality improvements and their control have further been difficult to assess. The reasons for this, according to the 'Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015, Teacher Education Action Plan 2006-2010', are that rules and regulations for quality control have been difficult to implement as "there was no feeling of ownership over the mechanism" (Ministry of Education, n.d: 4). Similarly, there is no mention as to where from these rules and regulations originated. Yet, since this strategy paper is part of the communication with donors[52] it might be a fair assumption that these rules and regulations and their monitoring emanated from the donor community. If so this could be

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[52] In the introduction to the Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan, the minister of education conveys to the international and donor community, the government's continued commitment to achieving the EFA goals.

one explanation of the lack of ownership felt by the Lao teacher education officials.

There is an acknowledgement in Sida's EFA policy that there can be no universal solution to educational challenges and "that general measures to improve access and quality are not enough." (Sida, 2001: 25). In line with this reasoning, Sida points to a number of considerations that need to be made. Sida as an organisation commits itself to work for educational development that especially targets weaker groups in societies by contributing to sector analyses, monitoring efforts and evaluations (Sida, 2001: 25), all in line with UNESCO's 'work description' for donor countries. More specifically, Sida's work has been guided by a set of priority concerns, including:

- *the transformation of conventional top-down approaches into participatory rights-based, learner-friendly and gender-sensitive approaches to teaching and learning*
- *transparent and accountable management of education at all levels, in particular the education expenditure/budget systems*
- *making basic education compulsory and truly free of charge for all children*
- *drawing up educational legislation and policies in line with the Human Rights conventions and the EFA goals*
- *meeting the special needs of children with disabilities, ill health or other learning problems through "inclusive education"*
- *removing gender, language or ethnic barriers, and enhancing bi- or multilingual learning*
- *mobilising rural communities to allow for education for girls*
- *improving conditions for access and learning ("quality") simultaneously, avoiding interventions aiming at only either access or quality)*
- *enhancing literacy for all – children, youth and adults – through formal and non-formal education, as well as informal means, such as books, newspapers, and libraries* (Sida, 2001: 26f).

Sida's goals are all emphasised in different ways within the policies included into this analysis. The Lao policies have as already mentioned, translated these goals into equitable access, quality, relevance, and education management. However, some issues need to be raised, especially that of 'quality' as it has become an often mentioned issue. It is continuously discussed within the different policies, but what really constitutes 'quality' is not properly discussed or deconstructed. The Lao policies for instance return to the 'fact' that 'quality' within Lao education remains low. The donor policies

likewise emphasise the 'quality' aspect which in the above quote from Sida's EFA policy is defined as conditions for access and learning. However, 'quality' seems to have become yet another concept that is given much attention and space in the ongoing debate on education but it remains ambiguous and difficult to get a good grasp of. My own view is that the discussion of quality must be understood in context which also links quality to the issue of relevance. What type of education is relevant for the Lao context? And how does the issue of relevance in turn reflect on the issue of quality?

Equitable access is another aspect that receives much attention in Lao policy where it mainly refers to promoting access among females and ethnic minorities. In this thesis, the issue of equitable access is however limited to issues of gender, which alongside learner-centred education, is a focus for the Lao-Swedish cooperation at NUOL.

Discursive constructions of gender

In 2002 the World Bank published a report regarding strategies for integrating gender into its field projects. In the first chapter it notes that including gender has nothing to do with "political correctness or kindness to women." Rather, "inclusive" development supports reducing "poverty" (World Bank, 2002: 1). Furthermore, the World Bank has also included a definition of gender as:

> *culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviors of males and females. The term distinguishes the socially constructed from the biologically determined aspects of being male and female. Unlike the biology of sex, gender roles and behaviors can change historically, sometimes relatively quickly, even if aspects of these roles originated in the biological differences between the sexes. Because the religious or cultural traditions that define and justify the distinct roles and expected behaviors of males and females are strongly cherished and socially enforced, change in gender systems often is contested* (World Bank, 2002: 2).

The strategy paper also states that the main aim of the World Bank is to reduce poverty by an inclusive approach. From a gendered perspective, this entails that steps must be taken to ensure that both women and men voice their opinions with regard to the development process. Since conditions differ between countries it is important for projects to make needs-assessments on a country by country basis (World Bank, 2002: 1f). These needs assessments are however to build on a gender mainstreaming strategy, since gender

mainstreaming from the Bank's perspective refers to a crosscutting approach:

> *Basically, mainstreaming gender into development means understanding the differing needs and constraints faced by women and men that affect productivity and poverty; and then designing actions so that gender-related barriers to economic growth and poverty alleviation are reduced and the material well-being of men, women and children is enhanced* (World Bank, 2002: 42).

Even though the World Bank puts much emphasis on gender as a social, cultural and religious construction, its rhetoric is still heavily based on the economic benefits that arise from the inclusion of women. For example, the Bank states that:

> *The links between female human capital and growth are by no means the entire story […] gender relations also affect economic growth through access to physical capital and the functioning of markets and institutions* (World Bank, 2002: 7).

Thus, if women's situations could be improved, time they would spend doing unpaid labour for the family could instead be allocated toward sectors where their work would contribute to a country's economic growth. As a result, the Bank's projects involve activities such as "training, operational tools and services to implementing agencies" (World Bank, 2002: 28), that form part of nutritional, population and health training courses, development of technical modules for implementing gender aspects, and the assembling of operational toolkits (World Bank, 2002: 29). The question however is if these technical tools provide the ability to address gender issues at the core? Equally, it is interesting to reflect over how these general tools address the diversity of situations found in different countries? In other words, if gendered societies vary according to their cultures and histories, can gender issues be addressed through using the same tools? And will the expected outcomes also be the same?

The World Bank does admit that the gender framework is not without its problems:

> *More generally, in the context of the clarification, revision, and updating of operational statements into the Operational Policy, Bank Procedures format, the issue of the treatment of gender considerations will be taken up […] although the existing policy framework is consistent with the Bank's mission and contains a mix of comprehensiveness and selectivity that many find*

> *appropriate, the existing policy documents contain ambiguities that need to be removed if Bank staff are to fully understand the policy's implications for operation* (World Bank, 2002: 57).

This presents an interesting question from the perspective of those who are to implement a gendered framework in accordance with World Bank policy. If there are problems for staff of the World Bank to conceptualise what implications the policy will have at grassroots level then it is fair to assume that this uncertainty may have a 'spill-over' effect. Interestingly enough, no example is discussed about the type of ambiguities that might occur. It is rather a general statement which makes it hard for the readers to assess what part of the policy that causes operational problems. My view is that this omission is typical of development cooperation funded projects because policy documents that are produced, even locally, are mediated by consultants. Ultimately the end users of development cooperation funding, are denied understanding and ownership of what is to be implemented.

Like the World Bank, Sida has a policy for gender issues; *Promoting Gender Equality in Development Cooperation* (Sida, 2005). It paints the larger picture of the principles that guide Sida's development cooperation with partner countries. In line with the World Bank policy, Sida also takes a constructivist position in its definition of gender. Gender is seen as "an overarching and fundamental variable" (Sida, 2005: 4) in relation to other phenomena such as race, class, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability and locality. Furthermore, Sida places its understanding of gender in a socio-cultural context, emphasising that gender roles and patterns arise from socialisation and that neither sex nor gender are easily defined but rather "[b]oth concepts should be considered as contextual and subjectively formulated" (Sida, 2005: 4).

Just as education is regarded as a key component in the fight against poverty, so is gender. Sida's policy asserts that "[g]ender discrimination is one of the main causes of poverty, and a major obstacle to equitable and sustainable global human development" (Sida, 2005: 4). Sida also points to the importance of how key concepts are interpreted and how history and contextual factors have shaped gendered patterns and relationships. The policy states that "the societal context is therefore important for how gender equality should be promoted" (Sida, 2005: 6). There is in other words a strong focus on gendered patterns as constructed through historical and societal processes. It is in this context that Sida wishes to place

gender mainstreaming efforts "identifying relevant areas for further collaboration as well as the appropriate approach to use" (Sida, 2005: 7). The practical implications of these attempts at formulating an understanding of gender is then translated into three priority areas; active applications and integrations of the gender perspective, targeting specific groups or issues, and conducting gender-aware dialogue with partners. One point that Sida makes regarding these priority areas is that gender mainstreaming efforts tend to overlook the two latter priorities; instead focus is often (mis)placed on the first priority, i.e. active applications and integration of gender perspectives into all interventions (Sida, 2005: 7f). For Sida, the main objective is to 'strike a balance' between men and women in order to come to terms with what Sida assesses to be unequal effects of development cooperation; a situation which Sida hopes to rectify by including gender mainstreaming into all development cooperation efforts (Sida, 1999).

Since development cooperation organisations such as the World Bank and Sida aim at mainstreaming gender into all development cooperation activities, these aims are, as the educational policies show, included into all policy fields. As a result, gender is included not only in donor development policy but also in the partner country policies. In the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d: 8), gender is considered to be a 'cross-sector priority' and it states that "[e]nsuring equal access for women to basic services and productive resources is a matter of equity, efficiency and effectiveness."

In Laos, one concrete effect has been the production of a national *Gender Profile* that has been written with World Bank support. The primary goals of the Gender Profile are to:

> *facilitate the implementation of the National Poverty and Eradication Strategy (NGPES) by providing sex-disaggregated data and information for planning gender sensitive programmes; providing a baseline document for Government ministries and institutions, donor community and international organizations in their work aimed at reducing poverty and promoting gender equality and empowerment; and enabling a better understanding of the roles and status of men and women in the Lao PDR in the development process, consequently leading to policies and programs that address gender imbalances or disparities* (GRID, November 2005: 9).

The Gender Profile also points to the role of donors and NGO's in Laos, indicating that some organisations often have internal policies dealing with gender mainstreaming in their development activities. "As such, they have often pushed for enhancing gender awareness and training in the country, including for example through the establishment of GRID" (GRID, November 2005), a UNDP project. The profile has also included sets of definitions regarding gender concepts, stating that gender "refers to the differences between women and men within the same household and between cultures that are socially and culturally constructed and that change over time" (GRID, November 2005: 11). Furthermore the profile points to the difference between gender and sex, where gender is understood as socially constructed while sex refers to the biological and physical differences between men and women. It also defines gender equality as equality of opportunity, access and influence and finally also defines the Gender and Development approach in the following way:

> The **Gender and Development Approach (GAD)** *identifies and analyzes women and men's position in society, accessibility to and control over resources such as land, employment, credit, livestock, income and capital; and access to and levels of participation in the social, economic, and political spheres. The GAD approach contributes to understanding the situation of women and men by ensuring that development planning takes into consideration their needs and interests. The approach challenges the unequal gender relations that exist between women and men* (GRID, November 2005: 11).

The Lao Gender Profile points to the importance of understanding how gendered patterns are produced through historical and traditional customs which will have socio-economic impacts on both women and men. The Gender Profile for instance points to the institution of marriage as one cornerstone in understanding gendered relationships across ethnic groups in Laos.

> *Marriage is considered a core value within society, there is tremendous weight placed on Lao women to marry and remain married, no matter the circumstances. This is confirmed by a Lao saying, "A woman without a husband is like a ring without a stone; there is nothing of worth in it." In this regard, marriage customs and patterns […] are very important for understanding the status of men and women in Lao society* (GRID, November 2005: 20).

Despite recognising the social and cultural shaping of gender roles (GRID, November 2005: 19), a gender mainstreaming approach is much emphasised in the Gender Profile in its focus on access and availability. The Gender Profile for instance states that:

> all Government ministries are expected to develop strategies and action plans to promote gender equality at all levels. In this regard, sex-disaggregated data contained in this Gender Profile is a useful resource for ministries to plan and develop programs and projects that ensure equal participation and benefit both men and women (GRID, November 2005: 9).

Regarding strategies for education, gender gaps in literacy, enrolment and completion rates in schools, increased availability, relevance and quality at both primary and secondary level, making vocational training available for women, and increasing access to non-formal training are the prioritised areas that are mentioned, goals which extend to the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (GRID, November 2005: 32; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d: 114).

In other policies included into this analysis, gender issues are discussed from a similar viewpoint. In the Lao EFA-policy, a number of gender equity goals are formulated. These include establishing gender and education policies, the systematic use of sex-disaggregated data, goal setting specifically targeting women and girls, educating parents about the importance of supporting education for their daughters, introducing incentives to promote school attendance among girls, and supporting ethnic minority girls and children with disability (Ministry of Education, 2005: 23). 'The Education Strategic Vision' also has equitable access as one of the three main pillars (alongside quality and relevance). However, this document expresses a slightly different understanding of the meaning of equitable access. Gender issues are mentioned but equitable access within the 'Education Strategic Vision's' first five year plan is included as part of general access goals (e.g. school expansion, school renovations, facilitating the role of the private sector, setting up specific programmes for disadvantaged groups increasing non-formal education and distance education) (Ministry of Education, 2000: III). 'The Teacher Education Strategy and Action Plan' points out that strategies and plans drawn up should be in line with the goals set in the Lao EFA policy, which has implications for equity issues. These issues are not disentangled however. Both inclusive education and gender issues are mentioned when discussing new curricula for teacher education, as is the need for recruiting more female teachers

of ethnic minority background, but the issue of gender equity is not disentangled from other versions of equity (Ministry of Education, n.d: 3).

Discourses on a global world tour

The various documents included into this thesis are examples of how discourses do travel between different documents. The discourse of EFA as well as gender equity and mainstreaming concepts can be found in both international donor documents as well as in national Lao policy. The Lao policies all express their function and place in the ongoing 'discussion'; their relevance lie in that they represent the Lao governments commitment to the universal values of basic education for all and equitable development in the fight against poverty reduction.

Few would at first sight disagree with the goals expressed in the discussed policy documents, since the rhetoric is appealing. Some questions however come to mind: To what extent are these discourses indeed examples of hegemonic discourses arising from first-world-north power/knowledge spheres? How much room is there for creating goals in a spirit of partnership? Are these discourses open for negotiation? To what extent are these universal human rights values and norms, deconstructed both by the donor community and the recipient partner countries in order to understand and define what is really meant? Maybe most importantly, what are the consequences when attempts at turning policy into practice are made, i.e. when first-world-north policy-making enter a local context?

The remainder of the policy arena will be devoted to an example of one local policy, nayobay, and its practical implications. Nayobay is a general policy and practice that has old traditions in Laos and can serve as an example of the possible collisions that can occur at policy-practice arena, when different policies meet.

The discursive logic of nayobay

When I started my work at FoE in September 2003, I was ready to make plans for the semester together with the PhD candidates. I however had to adjust the planning to the fact that in Laos as well as Sweden, the start of the new academic year was in September, therefore my colleagues where busy preparing for their teaching duties. My own experiences from working as a lecturer at university level in Sweden led me to expect that the intense period at the

beginning of the semester would be replaced by a less hectic period half way through the semester. However, when approaching the middle of November, 2003, I started realising that some things were not what I had expected since the staff, not only at the FoE, but at NUOL in general, still were talking about how busy they were as it was the beginning of the academic year. My curiosity was awakened since, according to my logic, the semester should be well on its way in November, but in the context of NUOL there seemed to be something different going on. Therefore I began to ask more questions about the situations that the teachers were dealing with at the beginning of an academic year and after a while I began to realise that an expression in Lao, nayobay, came up in the discussion on a regular basis.

Nayobay – an official policy

The Lao constitution establishes that "Lao citizens irrespective of their sex, social status, education, faith and ethnic groups are all equal before the law" (article 22).[53] Thus, all members of society have the same rights and obligations. However, in Laos, members of minority groups, for example, have not had equal opportunity to education, since the language of instruction is Lao. This has prompted discussions regarding how the system can support students who have been discriminated by it. Nayobay has provided an avenue for doing this.

How can we then begin to understand nayobay? In the lexical translation of the word, nayobay means policy, as for instance government policy or work environment policy, the type of formal, written documents that make up part of an organisational framework. One definition nayobay describes it as:

> *a policy of the State or of any specific sector/institution to promote or exempt a specific group of people from certain restrictions. For example, children of teachers have a priority to enter into a programme of teacher training without exams.* Nayobay *is applied to both the quota and the non-quota systems although sometimes it is not very clearly spelled out* (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004b: 8, footnote 3).

Furthermore "*[n]ayobay* targets family members of teachers, national heroes, retired persons and leaders. No children of peasants are

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[53] See p. 26

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considered for *nayobay*" (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004b: 9).

One of the consequences of this system according to the above report, is that academic performance and exam results, are set aside since the number of entrances through nayobay in some cases widely surpasses other forms of entrance based on academic merit (Ministry of Education, TTEST Project, & Teacher Training Department, 2004b: 10).

Up until 2004, nayobay was widely used through the entire university system. However, a decree from the MoE limited nayobay admittance to special courses in an attempt to secure the quality of education. This meant that officially nayobay could only be used for the special courses where the students had to pay a yearly tuition fee of 600 000 kip[54] and nayobay quotas were only applied if the number of students were below the number of places offered at every course. The system of nayobay did put a strain on the practical work at faculty level. The first step in the process was to establish criteria for nayobay, which was done at central level at NUOL. As noted earlier, the criteria were often directed toward enabling people already connected to the official system to receive special provisions. This meant, that if you were a government employee or had ties to the war effort or otherwise considered a 'very important person', a VIP, then the request for nayobay had to be considered. One interesting aspect of the criteria is that, for instance children of disabled persons also had to be considered but only if their disability is a result of participation in the liberation war.[55]

At the beginning of the academic year of 2004/2005 the FoE could offer 500 study places for the special English course. 3000 students applied and sat for the entrance exam with only 300 students passing. After the test results were made public the applications for nayobay started flooding in to the faculty and at the end over 1000 applications had to be considered. This process went through three different stages and even after the vice-rector of NUOL declared the process closed, the applications and the visits from eager parents still continued.[56]

The attitudes toward the practice of nayobay were both positive and negative among those who had access to it. On the one hand many of

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[54] 10 000 kip roughly equals US$ 1
[55] Interview 10
[56] Interview 10

the educators whom I spoke with, both in formal and informal situations, expressed dislike towards the whole practice of nayobay. Their experiences were that their own children, for instance, did not apply themselves to their studies since they knew that their parents could claim nayobay once time came for them to enter university studies. One of the respondents said that he had tried to motivate his child to study without any success since the child rested assured that the situation would be taken care of due to the fact that the respondent held a high position.[57] On the other hand the system had been institutionalised to the degree that even though people might criticise it there was still a lot of disappointments expressed among many teachers when the rules surrounding nayobay changed. The reason for this was that their children had not yet reached the age where they could benefit from having a parent employed at the university.[58]

Nayobay – a social safety net

Nayobay builds to a large extent on personal relationships and loyalty to the system, which means that if you have served the government for a long period of time there is at least a reassurance that the system will take care of you and your family. This security is not a one-way street though. For organisations where nayobay apply there is a sense of security in knowing that the person who is given nayobay is not unknown since the social network surrounding the person is well known by the organisation. That is considered positive in many ways. One example given was that if someone applies for a job, the very first question asked is if the person knows anyone already working in the organisation. If so, the chances of employment are radically improved, regardless of formal qualification since a lot of faith is put in knowledge of the applicant's background. Kinship is in other words regarded as a trustworthy criterion.[59]

There is also another perspective that can be put on nayobay as a social safety net. One of the logics that was expressed was that nayobay can be seen as part of the effort of ensuring the goals of EFA, in the sense that having nayobay quotas opens up the education system for people who would not have been able to enter into studies otherwise. There was also another concern expressed where more social aspects were focused. The concerns were that if the system did

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[57] Interview 10
[58] diary entry 040119
[59] Interview 1

not open up and accept individuals who did not have the formal qualifications, there might be a risk that those turned away by the university ran the risk of ending up in all sorts of trouble, becoming criminals, prostitutes or ending up working for slave wages in neighbouring Thailand.[60]

During the interviews that I held on the subject of nayobay, I asked the respondents if they could see any similarities between nayobay and corruption. This question was prompted by the World Banks commitment to fight corruption. The Bank claims that unless corruption is fought "there is not much that can be done that is effective" (World Bank, 2007b). What then does the Bank consider to be corrupt behaviour? One of the issues raised by the Bank relates to political patronage:

> *The practice of political patronage in public administration continues to be an important source of corruption in many developing countries. Political patronage can be a source of accountability to the patron, but it can also undermine continuity and the development of standards, institutional values, and memory in the public sector. This opens the way to conflict of interest, misprocurement, and theft of public funds. The short-term and uncertain nature of many political appointments also decreases the time horizons of public sector workers, creating incentives for predatory behavior* (World Bank, 2007a).

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines patronage as "the right or power to appoint somebody to or recommend somebody for an important position" (Hornby, 1995: 850). This definition would in the Lao context qualify nayobay as corrupt practice since it is a policy that also merits appointment through personal connections. The respondents were however reluctant to compare nayobay to corruption even though there were opinions expressed about the negative aspects of nayobay; one being that it mostly favoured those already connected to the official system. Despite this, positive effects such as collective responsibility and *saam aki*, cooperation, were described as constructive sides with nayobay since cooperation would have positive effects that could have its rewards through nayobay. It is also important to acknowledge that these practices exist everywhere and that one principal difference in this case, might be that nayobay is a sanctioned policy in one sense, at least in its official form. In the Swedish context for example, a similar practice is well known; the

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[60] Interview 10

'brother-in-law politics,'[61] where people are recruited through informal channels and through personal connections. The question is however, whether this would be considered to be corrupt behaviour or if this judgement is reserved for third-world-south nations?

One interesting angle on nayobay was its relation to *jot mai noi*, the small letter. The practical translation of the small letter was described as 'pulling of strings' that rested much upon power relations. One request in the form of a small letter could not be refused by the receiver of the small letter since the person receiving the request could suffer negative consequence if choosing to refuse the letter. If a person turns to an official at university level requesting admittance for a child to university through a small letter, the official receiving the request cannot refuse it. This especially applies if the author of the letter holds a comparable or higher position within the hierarchy. If the person receiving the request refuses it, there might be consequences for the future if the paths of those involved cross. Since Laos is such a small country the chances of this happening are perceived to be big so no one risks it. There was in other words a dimension of nayobay that pointed to a person's position in the hierarchy and the potential use one could make of this position.[62]

Nayobay and educational reform – reflections

The practice of nayobay has repercussions on all official sectors in Laos, including the educational arena. The discourse of nayobay markedly differs from development cooperation discourses which in rhetoric are meritocratic, thus discursively constructing nayobay as corruption. However, in the Lao context this is not as clear-cut. To educators, nayobay represented a double-edged sword. It went against ideas of acceptance on merit, which could be regarded as a development cooperation discourse that educators had to incorporate. Further, it manifested itself as a display of power within the system, i.e. it was not guaranteed that those receiving nayobay were the children of educators, for whom nayobay would have been an incentive compensating for low salary levels. Despite this, nayobay was not regarded as something all-together negative. It had deep roots in Lao society and was a way of regarding merit in a different light. Merit was afforded by one's background and kinship rather than through one's academic or other 'measurable' attainments. It was also

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[61] Svågerpolitik
[62] Interviews 1, 10

considered as a means to rectify patterns that previous regimes had established; therefore it could be regarded an affirmative action. This argument was used when addressing the fact that the Lao educational system to a high degree had discriminated against many groups in society that were not Lao Lum. Nayobay could therefore grant students, of for example ethnic minorities, entry to the educational system as an acknowledgement that the system discriminated against them and therefore made it difficult to gain entry on merit. There seemed however to be a gap between nayobay as a societal equaliser and nayobay as a supporting structure for those already connected to the system. Whichever way one chooses to view nayobay, it is still a policy and a practice rooted in Lao society that is not acknowledged in the educational policy documents analysed in this thesis. Neither is it discussed among the education officials in the following section in any explicit ways. Nayobay is however, discussed among the life-history respondents in the last section of this chapter, which indicates that it is a contextual discourse of some importance.

The Policy - Practice Arena

EFA has had large policy implications for Laos. The implications also extend beyond policy. International support to the educational sector has grown since the mid 1990's, creating openings for the establishment of development cooperation projects in the country. For Laos, and for those working with education in Laos, this has had consequences which will be focused in this section. How do Lao officials within education describe the conditions of working with educational policy and practice? How do they deal with the aims of the national government, the conditions in the local context, and how is this balanced against the visions of global educational movement in the shape of the international donor community? The material below was gathered from interviews conducted with education officials at ministry and university level. They have all, in different ways, been concretely involved in developing education in collaboration with development cooperation projects funded by international cooperation agencies and NGO's.

Managing educational development

The MoE and NUOL, with its faculties, were both engaged in development cooperation and therefore, many officials working there had much experience of dealing with development cooperation funded projects. For NUOL, the Sida/SAREC project gave the

university an opportunity to work towards realising its entire mission of teaching, conducting research and providing service to the community. From 1996, when the university was inaugurated, and onwards, the university has not successfully been able to meet more than one of the missions, namely providing teaching to students. The reasons identified for the inabilities of NUOL to meet its missions were linked to lack of funds, lack of research capacity, lack of time and lack of experience.[63]

The FoE also identified the same challenges. The faculty was described to be in the slightly precarious situation of being caught in the midlands of the educational structure. On the one hand it was the institution in the country that provided the highest level of studies within education; on the other hand, it had to some extent also become 'the forgotten faculty' in the race for development cooperation funding. Laos has mainly received funds from development cooperation organisations within fields other than education, and whenever funds were directed to education, primary education was the focus. Since Laos is on the LDC-list, poverty alleviation was given priority over higher education. Combining factors such as these, with an otherwise underdeveloped educational sector inherited from previous political regimes, support for higher education had not been prioritised. Previous and prevailing educational policy created problems in daily teaching practices according to the respondents. For the FoE this was reflected in what the respondents would label as a lack of 'professionalism'. One respondent pointed to the need for upgrading teaching practices at faculty level. "I would like to improve the quality of teaching because the Faculty of Education who is responsible for pedagogy, for how to teach but you yourself, you don't know how to teach."[64] Another respondent concurred with this view, stating that in comparison with other faculties at NUOL, the FoE had problems with unqualified staff: "Many of our lecturers here, five years, eight years ago and this year, the same text, the same book. No changes, no additions."[65] The respondent also raised issues of the gap between theory and practice since the MoE in the middle of the 1990's had introduced what was commonly known as 'the new method of teaching' or the 'five pointed star'. On paper, this 'innovation' as the respondent called it, had been successfully communicated to teaching institutions around

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[63] Interview 12: 174-189
[64] Interview 7: 462-465
[65] Interview 2: 456-457

the country but in reality little changed with the introduction of the five pointed star: "we still stick to the traditional mode from primary level to teacher training college level and even to university level." [66] He went on to say:

> *They talk about group activities; they talk about using charts, statistics. They talk about computers; they talk about instructional materials but it's only words. So that is why our students, when they complete their study here and become teachers of upper-secondary level; low quality, low quality.* [67]

All of the respondents reflected on what they perceived as the relatively low quality of education in the country, and the failure to implement learner-centred educational practices, through the five pointed star. One of the respondents pointed to the strong traditions of earlier educational systems where the teacher was the authority, delivering knowledge upon the students. Breaking this habit was "a difficult challenge", not in the least because "it's very easy for teachers as we teach now." [68] They could stick to their old ways of teaching without having the added pressures of reform. In the Lao context this was significant in the sense that the daily struggle to make ends meet was difficult. "The teachers spend eight hours each day at school and after that at home they have housework to do, no time to prepare the new lesson plan." [69] Another respondent pointed to the fact that it is easy to blame the teachers for the state of education, but that this would not be justified. Blaming teachers or blaming curriculum design was according to the respondent not a fruitful approach. In order to get a clearer picture, research was needed but despite this, there were some factors the respondent discussed as potential explanations of the situation. Firstly there were shortcomings within teacher education itself. Teacher Training Schools and Teacher Training Colleges [70] had difficulty to live up to the teaching practices that the student teachers were expected to use once they began their careers as teachers. If the teacher trainers themselves could apply what the respondent labelled as "communicative" teaching practices then the student teachers would be better prepared for the task. Instead the student teachers referred to the ways in which they themselves had

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[66] Interview 2: 525-528
[67] Interview 2: 492-495
[68] Interview 7: 551
[69] Interview 7: 558-560
[70] Teacher Training Schools and Teacher Training Colleges are located in the provinces of Laos and offer teacher education programmes preparing teachers for primary and lower-secondary schools.

been taught, and this became the primary socialisation into the professional practice. Nevertheless, this situation was exacerbated by the rapid increase in enrolment rate, an increase that did not correspond to the availability of qualified teachers:

> *Even if the teachers try hard they cannot achieve because their knowledge is not suitable. I think controlling the enrolment for each stage should be considered, it should be related to the economic situation.*[71]

The respondent further exemplified this by saying that teachers without the necessary qualifications were recruited to meet the demands of enrolment. A position at upper-secondary school level which formally should have been filled by a graduate from university was therefore often filled by teachers who themselves only had an 11+1 background (eleven years of schooling plus one year of teacher training college): "you see, how is the quality good?"[72]

One crucial aspect, linked to the above, was the lack of funding and the inner tensions that this brought to the educational system. One of the respondents at NUOL recognised the needs within lower levels of the system. There, not all children of age were actually given the opportunity to study because of "lack of schools, lack of teachers, so if you develop the upper-secondary school or the higher levels of education, the policy does not fit the reality of the country."[73] One conclusion that could be drawn from the above is that there was a perceived tension between 'want's' and 'can's' in the sense that the officials were aware of different needs that would support upgrading of education in the country. The needs however, had to be prioritised, leaving gaps not only between the different educational levels but also within the levels. This created a situation were neither quality nor quantity could be assured. In this sense the Sida/SAREC project brought with it the possibility of upgrading at university level which had previously not been targeted by other development cooperation projects. For the FoE, this opened a window of opportunity for establishing itself as an educational institution to be reckoned with; and the opportunity to claim the position as a change agent of Lao education.

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[71] Interview 9: 340-342
[72] Interview 9: 339
[73] Interview 7: 657-659

FoE – an educational spearhead or a forgotten faculty?

The educational sector in Laos, as in other parts of the world, is not one coherent system where the resources are divided evenly among the educational levels. Nor is it a system viewed holistically by the donors, according to one respondent.[74] The EFA policy of UNESCO has focused on primary education, leaving higher levels of the education system without equal support.

High ranking officials at NUOL pointed to the fact that the Sida/SAREC project was the first larger project to support university education. The FoE had previously had difficulty in finding donor support and therefore, the Sida/SAREC project was a welcome cooperation partner. One respondent explained that:

> The target of Sarec is NUOL while the others projects [function] in the field of teacher education, so their target is on the teachers training colleges and teacher training schools. But Sarec, just according to the concept of Sarec, is research and development, so that's why NUOL is the best partner of Sarec and I hope that this will be of great importance to the capacity building of NUOL as well as of our faculty.[75]

According to the respondents the newly developed cooperation with Sida/SAREC, was above all, made possible through Sida/SAREC's outspoken emphasis on research. Other development cooperation organisations mainly focused on the development of teacher education aimed at lower levels of the education system; namely primary and lower-secondary levels. The effect of this was that FoE's vision of being a spearhead within teacher education had not been achieved. The bulk of the funds had been directed toward provincial teacher education colleges and teacher education schools, rendering them the primary institutions for teacher education. One of the respondents reflected on the fact that the policy of the donors was understandable from the viewpoint that primary education is vital. However, at the same time the direction of funds leads to a considerable gap:

> You have good primary education but after that you have very bad education at the level of lower and upper-secondary school. It

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[74] Interview 7: 620-638
[75] Interview 2: 218-223

> *is not good I think, it's not the system approach, we have to have a system approach.*[76]

The problem was further complicated since the MoE in practical terms had little influence over the flow of development cooperation funds. According to the respondent, the MoE was basically obligated to follow the visions of the donors since the ministry itself had little funding to direct toward its own field of responsibility. Therefore the MoE was in effect forced to accept the policies of the donors. The ministry had made its efforts to negotiate support for upper-secondary school education and higher education but its efforts had seldom been considered. This respondent further reflected on whether this depended on different definitions of what basic education consists of:

> *Because now the policy of the world is basic education. Teacher Training Colleges and Teacher Training Schools prepare teachers for both primary school and lower-secondary school so donors have to support Teacher Training Schools and Teacher Training Colleges. But Faculty of Education is the faculty, which prepare teachers for upper-secondary school. Because you know, we consider the primary school as the basic education, not the lower and upper-secondary school. In your country, maybe basic education is the general education from primary to upper-secondary school, but in Laos primary school is basic education so the donors have to support basic education first and Faculty of Education is not covered by different projects.*[77]

Officials at university level felt that the FoE was stuck in a difficult position. On the one hand there was a strong vision at the faculty of being at the forefront of educational development; both in terms of providing high quality education for their graduates and in terms of leading research activities that also could develop the educational sector. Officials at the faculty recognised that the road to achieving their goals was long and that the faculty would need much assistance. One respondent pointed to the many needs of the faculty; human resource upgrading, developing language competencies and upgrading information technology competencies. The respondent also pointed to needs at different levels. Not only was there a need of developing the teacher training undergraduate programmes, there was also a need for in-service training since many of the lecturers also had limited

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[76] Interview 7: 676-678
[77] Interview 7: 580-598

knowledge. This was not something that could be done single-handedly according to the respondent. In connection to issues of professionalism there was an outspoken need for "specialists and consultants from abroad to help us."[78]

Among the respondents there was a realisation that the educational system in many ways lacked both economic and human resources which hindered developing education in Laos. FoE was not exempt from this and, possibly, had some of the more difficult challenges to overcome. Both at the level of faculty and at the central level of NUOL, FoE was described as a faculty that had problems with both levels of teaching qualifications and level of skills. It was also a faculty whose language competency levels were considered a problem within the framework of the Sida/SAREC cooperation. One respondent at faculty level discussed how weakness in English language was complicating the situation:

> If we compare the Faculty of Education to the other faculties, we are weak in English language so the process of starting the Master programme and especially the PhD programme is quite slow compared to the other faculties. Not because of the area but because of the language, so it's quite hard.[79]

The challenges facing the FoE were acknowledged centrally by the university. The faculty was however, also recognised as a good example for other faculties in terms of its potential for development and its attempt to form cooperation links with outside organisations. It was also recognised for its wish to build a close link between research and educational practice through action research.

In conclusion, the picture that was painted of the FoE was one of vision that nevertheless was not easy to fulfil. The situation at the faculty was described as one of internal challenges marked by a general lack of human and other resources. However, there were also ambitions to build functioning cooperation partnerships with international agencies providing money and know-how. As an overarching goal, the FoE aimed at reaching a level of capacity that would fit the policy of the ministry concerning learner-centred education; i.e. the five pointed star. The faculty and teachers in general were aware of the aim of the MoE to introduce learner-centred teaching practices but there was also an awareness of a general failure to move from policy to practice:

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[78] Interview 2: 627
[79] Interview 7: 310-313

> *The ministry adopted the student-centred method in 1995 and informed that each teacher from primary to upper-secondary school had to use the principal of student-centred teaching. But very few teachers, very few institutions can do that.*[80]

Since FoE had a vision of becoming the leading teaching institution in the country, a window of opportunity was provided by the money and support of the Sida/SAREC project. There was still one obstacle to overcome, the issue of what learner-centred education really was, which the faculty hoped it could master through the PhD projects that were aimed at mapping and changing teaching practices at FoE. The faculty was not alone in questioning what it meant to apply learner-centred education. It was discussed by several of the officials who provided philosophical and practical discussions of how learner-centred education could be understood.

Learner-centred education and gender – clarity and confusion

In previous sections, the officials described the educational situation as needing attention in a number of ways. The economic situation was harsh and there was not enough room for providing satisfactory pre- or in-service training. One of the respondents for instance spoke of professionalism as one area that required a lot of thought and effort in order for the FoE to be able to provide high quality education to its students. In this case, professionalism was discussed as something that was separated from issues of learner-centred education which the faculty, according to the respondent, already had a good grip of:

> *We need consultants from abroad to help us in terms of professionalism but for learner-centred education, we can help ourselves because we have experience in the new teaching, we observe in many classrooms abroad and we know what it's like in terms of learner-centred.*[81]

The different interviews with the officials gave rise to a complex picture of the issue of learner-centred education. The respondents had, due to their positions in the Lao educational system, actively been thinking about and discussing the concept of learner-centred education, and how it corresponded to already existing practices within education. For all intents and purposes, learner-centred education was the five pointed star, but it was also referred to as the 'new method of teaching', 'learning by creativity' and 'learning by

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[80] Interview 7: 497-502
[81] Interview 2: 630-633

doing'. Higher official within education felt comfortable enough with the concept: "we are very familiar with the five point star."[82] Despite this, there was an acceptance among the respondents that even though it had been used for a number of years, there were still many issues to tackle as far as its practical application was concerned. One of the respondents described that it was introduced "from the outside" and that it had not been very successful for a number of reasons:

> *It seems as if our situation is not suitable enough because we lack resources, and we lack teachers, good teachers. That's why it is difficult to promote this kind of teaching. When we think curriculum should be child-centred, we train teachers to use, but when they go back they teach the same. They cannot change. One thing depends on the situation of the class, is too big, the table are not movable, and one thing is the knowledge, how to prepare. The teachers sometimes understand that [group-work] is learner-centred but when I observe, they make groups of five or six students, children, but the teacher still teach teacher-centred because they don't understand.*[83]

Whether the new way of teaching really was so different from the old way was also a question raised by the respondent. The respondent argued that many of the techniques that were presented as new ones were quite similar to the once used in previous systems. The only visible differences that were discussed were practices of physically arranging the students in smaller groups, i.e. moving the tables and creating smaller work units. Apart from this the respondent concluded that in previous systems the teachers also used teaching aids, prepared lessons and activities, and had conversations with their students. Apart from the previously outspoken group-work dimension, what marked a difference was that earlier, the student groups were generally smaller due to lower enrolment rates, and the teachers better qualified.[84] What was interesting to note was that the respondent, despite the dismissal of any major differences between a learner-centred approach and seemingly more 'traditional' practices of teaching, did hope that there would be some potential for change with the learner-centred approach but that this also depended on the abilities of the teachers to use the new method:

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[82] Interview 2: 517
[83] Interview 9: 167-176
[84] Interview 9: 270-282

> *If you can use the new method [well] you can have more creativity. In our time we also asked questions but there was not much involvement from the students. We did not let them think or work together and share ideas. They just worked individually, answered individually. Actually, they couldn't move, they had to behave, keep quiet and listen only to the teacher who pointed to who will answer, so something is different with the new method.*[85]

The examples of some of the views and opinions expressed among the respondents concerning learner-centred education show how multilayered the issue really was. According to the respondents, there seemed to be a clear understanding of the dimension of learner-centred education, through its conceptualisation as the five pointed star, at all levels of the education system. However, only one dimension of the five point star seemed to be discussed, namely group work. Apart from this, the other issues that were identified as obstacles of implementation were lack of materials (ranging from school buildings to text books and teaching aids) and know-how (in the shape of qualified teachers and high quality pre-and in service training). The situation in the actual schools where the implementation of the 'new method of teaching' was expected to take place was in other words evaluated as problematic and an area where much improvement was needed. In this context, the Sida/SAREC project was seen as possibility to make a difference, not only for the good of the FoE but also for the larger system. The project would not only train researchers within the field of education; it also had a concrete dimension of doing contextually based research which was emphasised as important by all of the respondents. One respondent expressed it in the following way:

> *Research and the teaching/learning process connect. Because they do research in the field, after that they know what the need of the local population is. After that they can adjust, revise the curriculum to meet the objectives of how to upgrade and how to handle the teaching/learning process. If you separate, I don't think it's a very good way. We have to connect together.*[86]

The connection between research and practice and the implications that research could have for the teaching/learning process was something that was thought about and discussed within the

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[85] Interview 9: 293-298
[86] Interview 12: 725-729

framework of the project. It was also reflected in the choice of research methodology (action research).

The gender component was a somewhat different issue. It was also emphasised as an equally important component in the research proposal, but in the interviews with the officials, little attention was given to gender issues in connection to developments in teaching/learning practices. Gender was largely discussed in numerical terms. The gender mainstreaming perspective of the donors seems, in other words, to have made a lasting impression on the gender-related discussions that were held among the respondents. An additional aspect of interest was also that the discussions about gender tended to revolve around the teachers and other officials, rather than the students. This meant that when issues of gender within the Sida/SAREC project were discussed, it was mainly discussed from the perspective of including women into the project, not from the perspective of how gender could be understood and introduced into educational practice. One respondent explained her understanding of gender in the following way:

> *The term gender is fashionable now in any kind of work. But in practice it's still abstract for me, not concrete, even though we say female, male, equality, whatever. But for education, I have some doubts about how to put it into the curriculum, how to put in the textbook and what kind of education really that we can bring about gender. So far we say that we should enrol females, men; encourage females to go to school. It's okay but how do we really teach gender, that's the question to me. I don't know. Everybody says it should be like this.* [87]

The above was mirrored in much of what the other respondents said about gender. One could say that different discourses crystallised in the interviews. Gender as mainstreaming was a strong discourse that often was related to development cooperation strategies. Gender was also by and large made to be a women's issue, in the sense that it was women who needed to upgrade themselves to be able to compete with men about positions, power and so on. In relation to this, a discourse of competency was also raised, namely that women generally did not have the same level of competence as male colleagues for instance and therefore, higher officials had to encourage women to want to upgrade themselves. Furthermore urban/rural differences were discussed and gender equality was often described as

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[87] Interview 9: 428-438

a rural problem while the urban environment was talked about as an arena of equal relations between men and women. Parallel to the talk about 'urban equality' there were also discussions about how 'traditional' values put obstacles in the way of women; not only in the rural area but also in the urban setting and at the university. So there were numerous tensions between different gender discourses. I believe that these, on the one hand were connected to the fact that the respondents tried to get a grip of what meanings 'gender' brought with it. On the other hand, there was also a wish to show the achievements that had been made in the so-called gender area, and finally there was a discourse that also aimed at marking differences, not only between urban/rural areas, but also along lines of ethnicity. There was in other words also an 'othering' expressed in the ways that the respondents discussed gender issues, where gender equality more or less explicitly was accorded to the Lao of the cities, i.e. the Lao Lum, while unequal gender practices more readily were said to be found among ethnic minority groups.

Since there seemed to be confusion about what working in a gender oriented way could be, mainstreaming was something that was concrete and that offered some hands on strategies to work towards. One of the respondents said that:

> For gender issues, FoE is well aware and we will do our best to give equal opportunity to both sexes, including the training abroad. Luckily, many projects that offer scholarships and fellowships, they clearly identify that 50 and 50 men, women so it's good. I have heard that SAREC also stresses gender issues; that women are given first priority in SAREC programmes so that's why we encourage our women to study harder, to work harder. At every staff meeting at FoE, twice a month, we take this opportunity to talk about gender issues. We always encourage women to upgrade, to step up.[88]

The discourse of women having to work and study hard seemed to be quite strong among the respondents. There also seemed to be a gap between how the situation was perceived. On the one hand there was talk about the great awareness about gender issues. On the other hand, it was also stressed that this was a new idea that had not quite made the move from policy to practice. This seemed especially true when discussing implementation of gender issues into the classroom practice:

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[88] Interview 2: 554-569

> *I haven't had opportunity to talk about gender in the classroom. I just discussed with different people that this idea should be implemented at the faculty. But in term of selecting women teacher for different work, for many projects, we have talked about that for a long time. But this idea is quite new. I have to insert it in my speech, in my year plan that teaching in class, teachers have to encourage women students to work more than men.*[89]

Furthermore the respondent was not sure that teachers would be very positive to implement ideas of focusing more on female students because of the size of the class. This argument was also used among the respondents in relation to the difficulties with introducing learner-centred educational practices.[90] The gender issues that were primarily discussed were issues connected to donor project policy and the situation of (female) staff within government. Not much was said about gender issues concretely relating to classroom practices.

There was a feeling of having achieved much in Laos in terms of rectifying gender inequality. In the regional context Laos was considered to have done significantly better than neighbouring countries "in terms of pushing up the women to step up. We have women taking the very high posts in Lao government; in Lao Assembly. It's a great achievement if we talk about the national level."[91] Even so, the respondent recognised that there was still "a contradiction in the real situation"[92] and that Lao women were suffering in many ways, not in the least within the family. Another respondent also attributed gender inequality to traditional values and practices and described Lao women as being conservative. When attempting to describe in what ways women were conservative, the respondent said:

> *It is just in the city that women are equal with men. In the countryside they are not equal. They respect man, wife respect husband, but sometimes husband don't respect wife. It is not equal and it seems that women accept that situation, and how to change that? Because women here, not all of them have their origin here, they are from countryside. The tradition of the countryside is moving to the city too.*[93]

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[89] Interview 7: 1046-1050
[90] Interview 7: 1054-1063
[91] Interview 2: 588-591
[92] Interview 2: 584
[93] Interview 7: 936-941

The respondent was also concerned about which avenues that could be taken to change 'traditional' gendered patterns that according to him had concrete impact on women's abilities to develop in their careers. He thought that the Lao Women's Union could play a role in this, not in the least by turning the focus from informing both women and men about gendered patterns, to focusing more on providing training for women in the areas for instance of management.[94] From his perspective, that was the area where women were lacking most in comparison with men who had more experience in both management and administration.

Another respondent discussed how a changing society and urban lifestyle had impacted on the 'traditional' way of life. Previously there had been a division of labour between men and women. This was based on an idea of fair distribution of the workload:

> Because in Laos, there are some parts, some minorities that exploit women, okay. But mainly in Laos, in general we separate the work, like females cook or work with something not very heavy but men mostly work in the field, the hard things are mostly done by men. But now I think that even if gender is fashionable it also has some good influence on us because now, women and men mainly work in the office. The work is more similar so gender is understood differently from the people in the village where they separate the work.[95]

So while circumstances had changed for those living in the urban areas, the respondent still considered the former division of labour to be fair and the cases where women were exploited did not represent the mainstream. Nevertheless, the respondent noted that "[t]he one thing that is a problem in Lao culture is that men don't want to accept women."[96] The respondent explained this further:

> It seems they accept but deeply they cannot accept. I think it takes time. Sometimes when we talk about gender, they say it's a good opportunity to include female but at elections, male don't want to elect female.[97]

According to the respondent it was necessary to take a step back and see changes in gendered patterns as a process that would take time and that depended on education and information. The respondent

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[94] Interview 7: 981-989
[95] Interview 9: 470-476
[96] Interview 9: 482-483
[97] Interview 9: 487-489

also stressed that if women wanted to be accepted by men, they would also have to be reasonable in their demands and inform men of the new role and function of women and men, but not in an aggressive manner: "If women ask too much, people will be reluctant to give. If we ask reasonably, I think they can adjust, but I think it should take time."[98] The respondent also raised some issues of importance; for instance, even though education was thought to be the right way to go, the question still remained as to how these educational efforts could take shape. Another issue that the respondent addressed was how differences between men and women could be understood, and how this understanding affected what was thought to be possible: "I think biologically and psychologically we cannot ask men to work as good in the house as women. I think they can help but we cannot ask them to do exactly like woman, but they can help."[99]

That something had to be done in order to change gender patterns in society at large, as well as within education, was not an issue of dispute among the respondents. It was slightly more difficult to get to grips with how it could and should be done, not in the least because there seemed to be many questions about what working with gender issues could encompass. There were also several conflicting discourses that the respondents attempted to understand. They talked about how small a problem gender issues presented as, especially, urban men and women were equal, and how inequality was to be found in the less developed rural areas, primarily among ethnic minorities. The 'gender problem' was in other words constructed as a non-problem that was placed elsewhere; i.e. among women who were too aggressive, not aggressive enough, or under-educated. Or it was identified as an ethnic issue stemming from backward practices. The men however were not identified as part of this 'problem' as they were identified as being more biologically determined than women, which removed them from the formulation of 'gendered problems'.

However, it was clear that the respondents recognised that part of the discourse of equality had not yet taken the leap from policy to practice and that even within education, where the majority of employed officials were women, there were still challenges that needed to be met. This was indeed a challenge for the FoE as well:

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[98] Interview 9: 499-502
[99] Interview 9: 521-522, 528

> *We have more women than men, so it's good in terms of gender issues but in practice we still receive some feedback, when they go and work in the field,[100] so discriminations is still seen. For example, more men go to other provinces and work in the field because they think that women are not suitable, they are not very strong with the new environment, they are, something like, they are weak. Here it's okay but outside it's not good for women to work, to do research, something like that.[101]*

In conclusion, one could say that there were high expectations on what development cooperation at large could bring to Lao education both in terms of learner-centred education and gender issue. As the interviews also show, other concepts were used by the respondents which would merit deconstruction. 'Professionalism' and 'traditions' were mentioned several times, but these concepts were never clearly defined by the respondents. Regarding 'professionalism, this seems to be a concept that is closely linked to the teacher profession. There was a stated need for more professional teachers, but it was not discussed as something that was linked to the practice of 'learner-centred education'. This might indicate that there were insecurities surrounding learner-centred education and what the role of the teacher would be within this line of pedagogical thinking. Further, 'tradition' was something that the respondents constructed as negative or 'backwards', something that one mainly could see expressions of in rural areas and among ethnic minorities. It was almost as if teachers could not become professionals if they were leaning on 'traditional' discourses. The discourse of the 'traditional' could also be used as an example of how modernity is constructed; namely as something that requires those involved in the 'modern' project to discard established discourses and ways of thinking.

However, the respondents recognised that at this point in the process, they were only taking the first few steps of a long journey that seemingly required replacing old ideas about education and gender with new ideas that were still not very well articulated. Development cooperation projects had firstly to be implemented at, and managed by NUOL, a process which will be the explored in the following section using examples from the Sida/SAREC project.

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[100] Field work refers to academic field work and is not to be confused with agricultural work.
[101] Interview 2: 543-550

Technical hurdles

The Sida/SAREC project was a big project, including several faculties at NUOL, operating with a large budget, which meant that there were many decisions to be made about how to manage and implement the project. Further, Sida/SAREC was one of many development cooperation projects at NUOL, something that not in the least was made visible in the de facto infrastructure of NUOL; one entire building was devoted to housing offices for different development cooperation projects.

Dealing with many projects meant dealing with many different sets of regulations and as one respondent noted, each organisation had a different set of rules that NUOL had to adjust to. In the case of the Sida/SAREC project, one respondent referred to Sida /Sarec as "very strict." He pointed to both the demands placed on NUOL and the involved faculties, and the problems that arose in the efforts to meet these demands:

> *We have to respect the process, the format of how to make the proposal, how to do the progress report, how to audit and after that, how to respect the time in terms of the cooperation system. Up until now [2004], after two years it's not easy to respect the regulation of Sida because they have, we have some misunderstandings at the level of faculty, department, and coordinators. It depends on that they do not have enough experience in cooperation, in project management; they do not have enough English proficiency to understand the regulation of Sida.*[102]

All of the respondents agreed that there were some problems and disruptions that affected the course of the project, and efforts to explain and localise the roots of the problems, gave rise to a complex web of understandings and interpretations of the situation. There were firstly many logistical issues that the respondents felt had to be resolved. These ranged from having qualified and competent staff at all levels of NUOL, to how the project was practically organised at both NUOL and Sida/SAREC. Secondly, issues of training, support and control from the donor were also discussed as important aspects that were connected to issues of know-how and organisation, and management of the project. Comparing other projects with the Sida/SAREC project, the respondents also felt that considering the size of the latter, they were left to organise and manage the project

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[102] Interview 12: 209-218

too independently in the sense that they felt somewhat abandoned by the donor. One respondent had the following to say about this:

> *Because for someone, they just start the cooperation with Sida/SAREC, they have no experience in this matter and sometimes, all papers, all documents are in English. They try to translate to Lao or explain in Lao, but I'm not sure maybe 50/50 they understand. They are lacking experience and English proficiency, so they have to train. I think for the second phase we will do better, step by step, slowly, but now I think that Sida is not very glad with our team.*[103]

Another respondent concurred with this and said that the two major obstacles were a lack of English language proficiency among the Lao staff and a lack of experience in writing proposals for development cooperation. Even though the respondents generally refrained from criticising the donor openly, they still had opinions of the ways in which Sida/SAREC chose to organise the cooperation. The respondent laughingly described the approach of Sida/SAREC as "student-centred." There had been some workshops preparing for the cooperation and there were some booklets on how to write proposals but in terms of more specific guidance, this was not offered by Sida/SAREC:

> *It seems Sida don't like to send some specialist to help each faculty to write the project proposal. Sida don't like that, I know that Sida don't like this methodology. Sida wants each faculty to be able to write the project proposal by itself.*[104]

Another issue that was addressed was that in the absence of face to face communication with representatives of Sida/SAREC, they were left with using different technical solution, primarily focusing on IT communication. However, since the dependability of these solutions were low they felt that it was difficult to have fast and reliable contact with the donors who were all stationed in Stockholm, Sweden. Furthermore, there was a feeling that there might be a lack of understanding of the Lao situation among the Swedish counterparts at Sida/SAREC:

> *There should be a representative of SAREC in Vientiane instead of staying in Stockholm. There are many, many possible ways of dealing with the issues. Having somebody from SAREC to work here at Dongdok campus for example. Because the situation in*

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[103] Interview 12: 292-304
[104] Interview 7: 250-254

> *Laos may be different from, I think totally different from the situation in Sweden, in Stockholm. There are many, many things that maybe the staff in Sweden, in Stockholm, don't understand.*[105]

Not everybody would agree that there was little understanding of the Lao context at Sida/SAREC. On the contrary one respondent recognised that the staff at Sida/SAREC and the Sida staff stationed at the Swedish Embassy in Vientiane understood the Lao situation well. Therefore they should be able to give sound advice and good recommendations as to how NUOL could proceed with the project. When the respondents discussed the management and organisation of the project, one pattern became quite clear. There was an appreciation of the autonomy that NUOL was given by the donors. However, there was also a feeling of being put in a situation that was difficult to handle; not in the least because the demands of the donor were hard to live up to given the situation at NUOL. As one respondent put it, the office that had the overall responsibility for coordinating the project at large, was staffed by competent people but there were just too few of them considering the fact that they not only were coordinators of the Sida/SAREC project, but also responsible for many other projects operating at NUOL.[106] There also seemed to be issues of delegation of power emanating from the hierarchal structure at NUOL. According to one respondent, the case could be that if the head of the coordinating team was not available, the whole process came to a halt and therefore a so-called 'Project Working Unit' that only dealt with the Sida/SAREC project could be one important improvement for the project at large.[107]

Despite these challenges there were still high hopes for the future of the project. However, according to the respondents, success was thought to be difficult to achieve in the shorter perspective. There remained both a need for building administrative systems as well as training staff in relevant areas in order to ensure well managed projects. One of the respondents remarked that the situation was such, that since the involved faculties could not handle the processes required by Sida/SAREC, i.e. writing proposals, budget lines, and progress reports up to the expected level, the money was withheld. As a consequence, the whole project was slowed down. It seemed as if the respondents felt as if they were caught in a 'catch 22 situation'.

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[105] Interview 2: 114-120
[106] Interview 12: 610-617
[107] Interview 2: 288-298

There was an understanding among the respondents, of the strict regulations required by Sida/SAREC, but they also had to face the lack of capacity in meeting the demands that were placed upon them. Furthermore, the structures at Sida/SAREC and at NUOL meant that there were complex sets of rules to live up to both from the perspective of the local context as well as the donor.

Within the framework of development cooperation, the respondents also gave examples of what I interpreted as ideological dilemmas that were located both in the Lao context and on the part of the donors. Development cooperation had according to one respondent not focused on education due to the political situation in Laos. The Lao government had from independence primarily worked with other communist countries but slowly adopted an open door policy that widened their contacts internationally. Support for education was therefore a rather new phenomenon since both the Lao government and countries outside of the communist block had had their hesitations about cooperation due to differences in political perspectives:

> *The donors thought that to help education in Laos, as a communist country so it's not good to work with Ministry of Education, because at that time we are very, very reserved, having a shut door policy. So we turned to Vietnam, to China, to Cuba and North Korea. But when we adopted the new policy, many international organisations turned to help Ministry of Education with many projects.*[108]

If support to education was quite young, support to other fields in Laos had quite a long history of cooperation behind them; forestry and agriculture were two fields mentioned by the respondent. However, "in terms of education, because we have communist education, so that's why it takes time for the Ministry of Education to know what is what."[109] Political persuasions seemed to have played an important role within development cooperation in other words, not in the least within education which is a field that is highly politicised. Once the Lao government had opened up its doors to countries outside the communist block, the Ministry of Education was overloaded with projects funded by donor organisations, according to the respondent. There seems, in other words, to have been a significant shift both on the part of the Lao government and on the

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[108] Interview 2: 147-153
[109] Interview 2: 176-178

part of the international donor community which made it possible to cooperate around education.

Another change that gave NUOL and the faculties access to development cooperation was that the increased autonomy of NUOL. One respondent explained that:

> Our society is highly top-down so that's why most international organisations work, most funds, external funds mainly work with the ministry level. So the university is marginalised and FoE is doubly marginalised. Since the establishment of NUOL, now year by year, we gain more and more authority, we gain more and more autonomy so that is why now [2004], I can say two years ago, that NUOL has some power to decide.[110]

Funding was understandably a key issue among the respondents since the situation was such that no money, meant no means to develop the practice. One dilemma that this gave rise to was made visible in one of the interviews I conducted. I raised the issue of which areas were especially important to develop in order to improve practice. The respondent remained silent for a while and said:

> It is very difficult to talk, without mentioning funding, without talking about funds in terms of the cooperation between the two institutions. But if you ask, like besides the funds that we need so what other requirement? I would say… I don't know, but I would say that what we would like to improve, what we would like to develop, is the staff, human resource development.[111]

As an interviewer with some insight into the project I was rather surprised for two reasons by this answer. Firstly I was surprised that the respondent had such a vague idea about what were important goals for the cooperation with Sida/SAREC since there were two overarching goals for the project; learner-centred education and gender. Yet, the respondent seemed to have trouble to verbalise what needs this could bring about in terms of practical implementation issues. Secondly, I was both surprised and impressed that the respondent had the courage to say that the funds were most important because that also gave me an important insight into the reality of development cooperation. The funding was, according to this respondent, the primary driving force for development cooperation and the actual content took the back seat which was

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[110] Interview 2: 179-185
[111] Interview 2: 405-409

hardly surprising given the acute lack of money within the government.

The Sida/SAREC project in its design also gave rise to some dilemmas that had a concrete effect on the practice. The sandwich system as such had a tendency to scare off participants. It was thought to be quite hard in the sense that it expected of its participants to be able to do their regular duties parallel to studying at PhD level.[112]

There was also a worry that the level of competence among potential PhD candidates was not high enough for them to succeed in gaining a degree. Therefore, investing time and money might turn out to be a waste of both. Furthermore they might return with their degrees and have expectations that might not be possible to fulfil, neither in terms of a higher salary or different work assignments.[113] Language proficiency was yet another worry. There was a general need to raise the level of especially English language proficiency, and there was also a wish to send candidates to English speaking environments. Doing so, might risk the success of the studies though, which was why the majority of Master students, for example, were sent to neighbouring Thailand, returning to Laos with a Masters Degree but without more knowledge in English language.[114] There were in other words numerous dilemmas that somehow had to be addressed within the framework of the project which at times maybe diverted the attention of the work at hand, namely, as in the case for the FoE, to develop learner-centred educational practices and understandings about gender issues within education.

The partnership factor

Working within development cooperation projects meant more than merely making the technical aspects run smoothly. It was also a question of navigating in unknown contexts, both for representatives of the donor agencies and for the Lao counterparts. It was also a collaboration that at its base rested upon unequal distribution of power. One respondent pointed to the fact that with some counterparts a friendship had developed. This made him 'rest easier' than he would in his contacts with Sida/SAREC, since he felt that he did not know the policy well enough. This was important not in the least because he felt that he had to adapt his work to fit the policy of

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[112] Interview 7: 372-377
[113] Interview 9: 353-354, 358
[114] Interview 12: 635-639

Sida, a situation that made him "pay more attention with Sida." That this was part of the strategy of the respondent might not be too surprising but it was the emphasis on the importance of forming friendships that caught my attention. The respondent explained that the giving of funds in itself was not the most important thing; it was how it was given: "Giving funds to someone, is for the person who receive a very good opportunity but the second aspect is more important; how to give."[115] The idea about how funding was given was also linked to the conduct of those arriving to work in Laos:

> *I like the friendship. We have to work together, friendly, openly. Because for some projects, the experts that come to work here, they are not good. They don't know the environmental condition of work in Laos. They don't know this deeply. I don't know in their country, if they work like that or not.*[116]

Another respondent also discussed the importance of understanding each others' backgrounds when cooperating:

> *If we would like to have a good cooperation for both sides, for mutual profit, I think it's better to know each other better in terms of culture, of way of thinking, way of life. Not only the way of Sweden/Laos but also Lao/Sweden. I think that if we know each other better it helps us to make a good cooperation.*[117]

This respondent also stressed the importance for foreign counterparts to 'get out of their offices' since "Laos is not only Vientiane."[118] If there was not sufficient knowledge about the situations and living conditions of the population outside of the capital city, there was no real basis for forming good plans for development.

Knowing the field of cooperation was in other words not enough to form a successful cooperation project according to the respondents. Contextualised understanding and a sense of friendship was also emphasised. Judging from the way the Sida/SAREC project was organised, there were not many arenas for this kind of relationship-building. Representatives of Sida/SAREC were all stationed in Stockholm, Sweden, and although they did visit Laos occasionally, the actual time spent at for instance faculty level was, according to my experience, limited. There were representatives of Sida stationed at the Swedish embassy in Vientiane, of which one had some kind of

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[115] Interview 7: 814-815
[116] Interview 7: 763-771
[117] Interview 12: 536-542
[118] Interview 12: 558-559

involvement in the ongoing Sarec programme. During the three semesters I spent at NUOL, this representative, to my knowledge, visited the faculty on one occasion. This visit was more ceremonial since there was no delegated authority from the office in Stockholm to this person.[119]

My own personal reflections from participating in meetings with Sida/SAREC representatives at FoE were that both the SAREC representatives as well as representatives from FoE found themselves in difficult situations. SAREC had to criticise the budgets since they many times were not well developed while FoE tried to explain how they had reasoned, and many times their explanations were not convincing. The meetings in other words rather took the shape of the parent telling the child what had been done wrong, and what needed to be changed. One concrete example from one of these meetings that can illustrate the above was a budget line where the faculty had included ten workshops, specifying the number of participants and additional costs such as travel, accommodation and per diems. The problem from the perspective of SAREC was that there was no content to the workshops, i.e. nowhere could SAREC find information about what topics the workshops would deal with and how the workshops were thought to develop practices at the faculty.[120]
It would be easy to put the blame on the faculty claiming that if they only complied with the regulations of Sida/SAREC, this type of meeting did not have to take place. I believe however, just as the respondents indicated, that the situation was much more complex. If the regulations and practices of Sida/SAREC had been understood, the risk of this happening would be reduced, since any mistakes made, slowed down the progress within the project. A budget that was not accepted hence had quite severe consequences.

Transferring policy to practice thus turned out to be more difficult than one might have expected. The reasons behind this could be any number of different ones, but one aspect might well be that education reaches far beyond rational goal setting. Changing educational practices is not just about putting new methods in place; it is about changing traditions, cultures, norms and values. In these processes, partnership of a more practical nature could have made a difference, possibly allowing for the incorporation of both technical upgrading and more contextual understanding into the planning and implementation of the project.

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[119] Diary entry 040223
[120] Diary entry 040507

The Contextual Arena

If we accept that educational development entails more than replacing old methods with new, establishing 'educational contexts' can provide deeper insight into the development process. I have chosen to do this by exploring how educational life-histories can provide additional understanding about how history, culture, and tradition shape individuals into becoming part of the larger society. The following life-histories do not represent mainstream members of Lao society since all of them work within the educational sector. Therefore they do not in their current positions represent the majority of the population which can be found in rural, agricultural areas. The life-histories do, however, provide understandings about how education has been accessed in Lao society. It investigates societal contexts and how these have shaped perceptions of education and the educated citizen; hence providing the middle ground between policy and the strife for implementing new educational practices.

War-time education

Life in Laos has to a great extent been influenced by the war that raged in parts of the country at the time of the Vietnam War. Laos had up until 1975 had a colonial administration followed by the RLG that in many ways was closely linked to the previous colonial power. In 1975 the Pathet Lao took political power and this lead to an attempt to radically reform and redefine the country.

During the war, access to education was quite limited and in the provinces most affected by it, schooling was nearly non-existing since many teachers joined the revolutionary force, i.e. the Pathet Lao. Therefore, sending ones children to other parts of the country was one way of securing schooling for them. It also protected the children from having to take part in the war effort since young teenagers otherwise could have been recruited as soldiers.[121]

Both literature and interview materials support the conclusion that the situation regarding education and access to education has been quite varied during the different political regimes. One explanation to this can be found in the different discourses surrounding education; i.e. what was education good for, what was the point of education in the respective systems? The respondents gave many good examples of this. Some of them started their education in the pre-revolutionary

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[121] Interviews 3: 11-14; 6: 915-920

system that was modelled after the French educational system where the primary language of instruction was French. One of them stated that "if you finish primary school, if you would like to continue you studies in secondary school you should pass the entrance examination. It was very strict, because it was the French system."[122] Having French as the language of instruction was not an easy task and it had effects on the type of learning that was made possible:

> My native language is Lao but I should learn in French. It was very difficult, some things very difficult to understand. It was very hard to study. Every day we should learn something by heart without understanding.[123]

Before even arriving to the point of being part of the schooling system, there were many obstacles to overcome however. One issue was, as I noted previously, that the war made schooling difficult. War is disruptive in any society, especially for those who lived in the regions that were mostly affected by it. One description of the situation was: "no teaching, there was education only in Xieng Khouang province, Xam Neua province, Houaphanh, and Vietnam only."[124] Education was in other words only available in the provinces that were controlled by either side in the conflict: "In former times Lao PDR was divided in two zones, two areas; the Vientiane area belonged to the Americans or someone else. The Xieng Khouang province belonged to the Pathet Lao or to the revolution."[125] The war then gave rise to certain circumstances for access to education and being born in a rural area provided yet other challenges. A reoccurring theme in several of the life-histories addressed the situation for those who were born into rural farming villages. Traditionally there was little need for literacy in the Lao society since it predominantly was a farming society. Instead, a rich oral tradition passed on necessary knowledge about history, tradition culture and so on. Granted that this was an arrangement that dated back to before and around colonisation, there still seems to have been remnants of this in the life-histories that I were told. If one was born in a rural community, education beyond primary level seems to have been quite unusual and it often required a geographical move. As one respondent said: "I was born in the farmer's family. In my village there was no school. If I would like to study, I should walk to another village far

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[122] Interview 5: 259-261
[123] Interview 5: 307-309
[124] Interview 6: 926-927
[125] Interview 5: 59-61

from my village."[126] Apparently this was not an uncommon practice in the sense that if one wanted to study it was basically the only option: "If your parents are in the rural area or far from the city, if you would like to learn, to study, you should move and you should stay in the temple."[127] Or in the words of another respondent: "So my grandmother decided to take me to the capital of the province"[128] as a means of securing continued education. Children who came from these circumstances and still were able to get access to education were not constructed as a norm in the life-histories. Rather they described themselves as quite unique, both in their communities and in their families: "My classmates, nobody studied. I study together with them since primary school but nobody finish Bachelor Degree, only me."[129] Another respondent said: "In my family we are seven children I am the oldest. No one else study and now they are farmers."[130]

That there seems to have been a rural/urban divide was quite clear. Having an urban upbringing in some cases meant that the attitudes toward education, and life choices in general, were different: "My family told me, you should study higher because maybe your life will be perfect."[131] The same respondent connected this encouraging attitude from the parents as the result of them being educated. She also attributed it to the fact that the family lived in an urban area and were not involved in farming.[132] In another case, one respondent's family moved from an urban to a rural area. The respondent remained in the city since she feared that a move would impact on her possibilites to further her education: "maybe I could not study, only work in the rice field and I never do *dam na* (work with rice, my note)."[133]

The educated (boy) child

Those who shared their life-histories with me had quite different backgrounds. One thing they did share despite whatever other differences and similarities they might have had was that they all had reached somewhat comparable positions within the education system. This common ground had been reached regardless of aspects such as

[126] Interview 5: 9-11
[127] Interview 5: 45-47
[128] Interview 6: 927-928
[129] Interview 3: 485-488
[130] Interview 6: 131-132
[131] Interview 8: 329-330
[132] Interview 8: 283-287, 390-392
[133] Interview 4: 1076-1077

gender, social and political status, and geography; all of them had ended up in the capital city, holding positions within the education sector.

How they got there is quite a different story though, and one prominent feature is gender and the possibilities and constraints that where placed upon them depending on if they were boy or girl children. Maybe not surprisingly, gender as an outspoken factor in educational opportunities, was not given as much weight in the life-histories of the male respondents as it did in the life-histories of the females. One thing that was pointed out was the relative importance of the Buddhist temples for boys from rural areas who wished to continue their education despite lack of funds within the family. The temples provided not only shelter, but also food which made it possible for the male respondents to study.[134] The temples basically provided two paths for young boys; one could either become a novice, receiving religious education through the temples, or one could stay there as a 'civilian' and get a roof over one's head and some food whilst attending a regular school.[135] Thus, for a poor family with many daughters the options for providing education were quite slim. One of the respondents happily shared the secret behind how his grandmother became literate. The monks simply could not tell if a child was a girl or a boy up until a certain age and therefore his grandmother was able to attend temple school as a young child: "They didn't know the male from the female. They mixed the class and the monks teach them to write."[136]

Among the female respondents, there wasn't one common story as to how their parents viewed the relevance of education for their daughters. One of them described the attitude within her family in the following way:

> *Respondent: They did not control about your decision, not only order. My father never order the children. Only tell you this and that will be good for you. And you should choose by yourself in my family.*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you think this was unusual for the time in Laos?*
>
> *Respondent: Yes. I heard some families should order everything about their children, have a discipline in the family. But for my family, no. You should get everything yourself, get new experiences*

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[134] Interviews 5: 134-139; 6: 61-63
[135] Interview 5: 195-200
[136] Interview 6: 910-911

> *by yourself and you should decide what you will become for future.*[137]

In this particular life-history, the family was constructed as quite unusual by Lao standards at the time. She explained this with her family, especially the mother, being educated: "My family decided this because my family, my mother, have education too."[138] She also pointed to the fact that "my father didn't discipline about your ideas, your opinions. He was free about it."[139] This in combination with the family not living in a rural setting were important factors from her perspective as she saw her birth town as "a place for civilisation,"[140] hence education was given more weight than it might have been given in a rural setting.

This life-history contrasted quite dramatically to the life-histories of the other women. One of them told me that she and her sisters wanted to attend school but the response from the mother was: "you don't go to school because you are women."[141] A similar story was told by another woman whose family encouraged her to aim for marriage: "You should get married and have a family,"[142] something that she did not agree with: "I don't like that; I choose by myself that I should study high education or try to study. I think it's better, I don't like to get married."[143] She accorded her parents attitude to culture:

> *Maybe it was my culture; my parents depend on Lao culture. That means that female don't study much, only work and help the family, and not go outside or study. Because when I was young, my parents always let my brother go to study English or French. They paid for him but for me, I only worked at home.*[144]

Another dimension of this was the following:

> *In Laos, men or family, they would like their wives to follow the husbands, so husbands have to be stronger and have high position, high education, high knowledge. Higher than the wife, because he would like to control the family. When the wife gets high position or higher education than the man, he feels that he is not good.*[145]

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[137] Interview 8: 371-378
[138] Interview 8: 390-391
[139] Interview 8: 366-367
[140] Interview 8: 406
[141] Interview 3: 35
[142] Interview 4: 946
[143] Interview 4: 946-949
[144] Interview 4: 954-957
[145] Interview 3: 1237-1240

The relevance of being educated as a means of progressing in society was also a question that might have impacted on how the parents viewed the importance of educating their children: "In my hometown nobody studied high before. If you finish primary school you can work, so my parents say that, you learn, finish primary school, okay, you can work."[146] At the same time, the lack of role models seems to have provided a sense of ambiguity insofar that once a child reached a certain position, the parents showed a great deal of pride in the accomplishment of their child; even though there was little support along the way. One way of understanding this was provided by one of the women:

> I think maybe they don't know about the good way. Before a person gets a position; what did they do? They don't think about that. They would like their daughters to get high positions but to improve before getting high positions; they don't know, I think.[147]

The perceived ignorance regarding the link between education and possibilities for better employment could also be understood as a consequence of the nayobay system. From the perspective of these parents, education might not have been the key to receiving good positions, as other merits such as kinship or other engagements might have been regarded as more important.

Women's accomplishments could also be understood by how well they took care of their families which seems to have been one important measurement for the 'good woman':

> They understand that women's work, after marriage, she stay at home. In their opinion, a woman is good if she can take care of the family and do house-work well. And love her father-in-law and mother-in-law well. No high position, no high education, only if you take care of children, okay. Because my mother, she did not go away and did not go on study tour. They don't know about many, many situations, only the small village.[148]

Despite these seemingly strong attitudes about the role of women, quite a lot of resistance can be found in the life-histories: The women did resist their families' wishes for them to become wives and mothers primarily, and this raises questions about how this resistance was possible. One of the women reflected that despite the horrors that war brought to the country, and how families were separated due to

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[146] Interview 3: 298-299
[147] Interview 3: 977-980
[148] Interview 3: 568-582

the fighting, it also provided opportunities that might not have been presented otherwise:

> *If I cannot separate with my family maybe my parents give me to get married to someone already. Because when I studied secondary school my parents always said, don't study more, you should get married.*[149]

The stories also dealt with the mothers as the main keepers of tradition which the following quote illustrates:

> *My father he don't depend on us. If I would like to study, if you don't, okay, everybody don't study. He said that you should have a plan by yourself. You think if you want to study high. If you don't want to study depends on you. But my mother didn't want to let her children study high.*[150]

It thus seems that the women bore the main responsibility for preserving the family traditions, and at this point in time, and in this rural setting, the norm for women was to get married and start a family. Since the family was the main responsibility of the women, they were also the ones who had responsibility for maintaining these norms.

How it became possible for the female respondents to break the norm is open for debate. The situation during the war might have been one explaining factor; another aspect might have been the new educational policy that was put in place after the revolution. The number of schools in the country increased rapidly, at the same time a majority of those who were already educated chose to leave the country. Laos was in other words put in a situation where there were needs for having an educated population, at the same time as education had a specific focus, at least in the early years after the revolution; namely political education. These circumstances might have contributed to the girl's and women's' abilities to resist traditional norms that kept them out of education and in the homes. Since schools became more readily available, parents might also have been more inclined to send their children to school.

Geography and gender issues have, as I have discussed in the above sections, had an impact on access to education or at least on the attitude towards educating children and primarily girl children. In the

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[149] Interview 4: 1026-1030
[150] Interview 3: 377-381

next section I will turn the focus to another important factor; the availability of networks.

Politics, networks and nayobay

Getting access to education often builds on previous successes, usually in the form of grades; at least once one has progressed through primary and secondary educational systems. The Lao system as it was described in the life-histories does not appear different in this respect. Educational success and being in the top percentage of ones' class was one way of getting access to higher education. As Evans (1998: 161) notes, due to the situation in the country after 1975, studies at higher levels had to be undertaken in other countries. Due to the political situation, the countries that were providers of higher education for Lao nationals were other communist countries; Vietnam, the former Soviet Union and other countries in the Eastern Block.[151] If students had good grades they could receive a scholarship straight after secondary school and continue their studies abroad, which was the case for some of the respondents. Otherwise, one could attend some of the institutes for higher education available in the country.

There are some differences between the life-histories that developed depending on what paths were taken. In the cases of those going abroad, somewhat different life-histories unravel compared to those who stayed in the country.

As already mentioned, there were different opportunities available around the time of the revolution. Many Lao chose to leave the country and it seems as if it was not only affluent people who had the chance to study in the West. Those who had previously worked for the French or the American side, and their children, also had a good chance of starting over in the West. None of the respondents who could have done this took the opportunity. The reasons for staying differed. Outspoken dislike of the colonising countries was one reason:

> *I don't go, because I hate the, some colony. I don't like Americans and Thais because they did bad things. Like in Iraq now and I would like to work against them.*[152]

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[151] Inportant to note is that this was not the only option; many Lao chose to leave the country post 1975 and hence got their education in other countries; primarily in France, the USA and Australia. But as one of the respondents suggested, that depended on both economic and political factors (interview 5).

[152] Interview 5: 101-103

In other cases, emotional and practical reasons made them decide to stay in Laos:

> *Because if I went to another country, maybe it would be very difficult for me. So I decided to live here, and not go to another country. It means I work with my government. When I studied high school they tried to teach me that everything with communism is bad. Every time I can observe politics, something is good and not good, the same as before. Living here with communism or with USA or France or another country, maybe it's the same. If I get work, that's very good and I can study higher and maybe become a good person with good work. I think like that, so I changed my mind [about going abroad]. I live here and die here.*[153]

It was at times also a strategic choice based on class issues:

> *I think for the rich young, it's okay, they can choose to go to the United States or France. The poor people maybe they should join the revolutionary party because in that time, on the Vientiane side, the rich people and the American soldier had more power. But the poor had less power. So most of the poor people joined the revolution, against the rich and the Americans. The rich they didn't join the revolutionary party. Poor people, we should think; now, who has power, more power? We should know the power and join.*[154]

In other life-histories these issues are not so prominent[155] which might be understood from a generational perspective. Some of the respondents were at an age where these choices/situations were a reality, while others were not old enough at the time of the revolution, to be affected by two parallel regimes.

In these cases, continued education either meant studies in Laos or in countries in the former Eastern Block, and as already mentioned, scholarships were given for the purpose of studying abroad. Three of the five respondents went to the former Soviet Union and all of them mentioned the importance of having good grades: "When I study at high school I like to study and I got a good score when I took the examination and I get some award."[156] Another one said: "I passed the examination very, very easy."[157] This was also combined with working

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[153] Interview 4: 277-284
[154] Interview 5: 545-559
[155] For example interviews 3 and 8
[156] Interview 8: 32-35
[157] Interview 5: 244

for the new government and consequently being given an opportunity for further studies: "I worked in the provincial office for two years and I received the opportunity to continue study higher education in Russia."[158] Being able to study was not always what the respondents had expected though. All of them arrived in the former Soviet Union having visions of what they wanted to study. However, upon arrival it became clear that their abilities to choose according to their interests were limited, or rather non-existing: "They looked; the committee looked; now we don't have the resource person maybe for the agriculture area, the education area or something else. So they divided and send you directly, no choice, no choice."[159] According to the respondents this meant that the visions they had for their careers could not be realised. It also meant that they had to study subjects that were not their preferred subjects. Despite this, there was a unanimous opinion among them that in hindsight, they were still happy with the course their lives had taken. All of them were content to be educators and having had the ability to help their country.

Despite the expressed relevance of grades it seems as if other mechanism were equally important in practice; i.e. good grades might have given some possibilities to go study abroad but it was not those with the good grades that necessarily got the best opportunities: "No, they didn't look at the academic score. And before I think they, the good field you see, they give to their children."[160] The same respondent went on to explain:

> The government already, someone who is responsible for this they already know the plan of government. This year what field of study there is in Soviet Union you see. And they put their cousin, their son up for the good field.[161]

Another respondent talked about how relatives and friends had been given scholarships to go abroad but once the time came for them to go, they had been taken off the lists:

> Yeah. I mean like that. It means that the Ministry of Education they know, that this person studied very well in high school. Ministry of Education they know well and they choose my relative; you should study over there. But some official or person who has a high position, they need to change to their cousin or

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[158] Interview 6: 99-100
[159] Interview 5: 388-390
[160] Interview 6: 243-244
[161] Interview 6: 266-268

their daughter or their son. They substitute this person and they can do this.[162]

The importance of having these connections seemed to be part of a collective knowledge of how the system worked. A Lao proverb was even used to symbolise it; *siin pai, paa ma*, (meat goes, fish comes), a proverb that roughly could be translated into 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours'. As the above respondent noted, she never had any expectations about being able to study further "because I have no cousin, and nothing else. But until now, it has gotten better and better."[163] One way of interpreting this is that even though there were aspects that were perceived as unjust, the situation still had improved to the point where those who formerly would not have had a chance to study, had been given the opportunity.

Being from a rural setting also could mean that there were few options for advancing educationally which made the lure of the bigger cities even plainer. Therefore being able to study in the capital city of Vientiane for instance, could mean a chance that would not present itself in the provinces, especially the more remote ones:

> *I think, if I went back to my province I wouldn't have opportunity to study because very far from everything. No school, no education. Dongdok [the university campus] would best for finding the funds to study Master Degree so how can I study, how can I stay here? So I tell myself, I should get married with a teacher.*[164]

The power of having networks affected the lives of the respondents in concrete ways. One of them recounted how she came to the capital city having few contacts but by chance happened to meet a friend of her parents who at that time worked at the Ministry of Education. This person encouraged her to apply for a scholarship which she also got: "If I cannot meet him, maybe everything would have been very dark."[165] Another managed to get a lot of support from senior government officials who attended primary level studies where she was the teacher. They were people with "high position but low education",[166] and since she was a young teacher whom the officials took a liking to, they also had the means to support her upgrading. This respondent had the luck to meet the right people, in the right

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[162] Interview 4: 314-320
[163] Interview 4: 881-882
[164] Interview 3: 894-899
[165] Interview 4: 1230
[166] Interview 3: 807

places who thought that they themselves were too old for further studies and therefore they decided to support her instead: "I am very old and I think I can't continue to study so I support you to study high."[167]

Getting access to education was therefore not just a matter of geography, gender, and grades; having the right connections was also important. These connections could activate principles of nayobay; principles that could also be used in ways that had a negative impact on the abilities of the respondents to make choices according to their own interests. Geography and gender could, however, have a concrete impact on women's abilities for further studies. Within this material one of the respondents who came from outside the capital city had to make a crucial choice to secure her future abilities for studying. In her case, marriage to a man in the capital city made it possible to stay and get access to the educational system. This would not have been possible if she had returned to her home province where educational opportunities where few. Furthermore, expectations tied to gendered roles could also have restricted her possibilities for a career outside the home. In this case, marriage legitimised her stay in Vientiane and it also gave her the necessary connections that kinship provided. Therefore she was able to pursue higher education and a career as a teacher in the capital city.[168]

'Objective' measurements such as grades were in other words not unimportant for those who wanted to continue studying, but an equally powerful tool was the connections one could utilise. These connections could be activated through different channels. For two of the respondents, an active commitment to the new regime provided opportunities for further studies. Two others had the good fortune to have connections at ministry or provincial government levels, and one was able to get nayobay through family connections which opened doors for employment within education. This in turn, provided opportunities for continued upgrading. Only in one of the respondents stories was there no mention of networks and nayobay which might be understood from the perspective that it was this respondent that constructed education as an important 'family affair'; i.e. the parents gave their full support and commitment to making sure all their children were educated.

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[167] Interview 3: 851-853
[168] Interview 3: 497-521, 526-529, 894-899, 903-306

In the following section I will explore how the educational systems that the respondents were brought up in affected their views regarding educational practice.

Making the move from being a student to being a teacher

In chapter I, educational policies of past and present regimes were discussed, with their different implications on educational practice. Neither the colonial nor the post-colonial administrations had as their main goals to have a highly educated population, possibly stemming from a fear of educating insurgents that could pose a threat to the government in power. However, there was a definite change in the enrolment numbers after the LPRP came to power, which points to an increasing provision of educational opportunity after the revolution. These changes do not seem to have altered educational practices at the core though. In light of this, it is not surprising that all of the respondents talked about practices of rote learning, where the teacher was the authority in the classroom, as a key element in their educational experiences. Since all of them were educators by profession, with experiences of both French colonial education, post-revolutionary education, and from both studying and working abroad, their life-histories offer insights into the intersections of different educational systems.

Both from experiences of being teachers and students in Laos, one conclusion that was made by all the respondents, was that teaching and learning in Laos put the teacher at the centre of the process. The task for the students was to memorise. One of the respondents said: "Lao style is teacher-centred, not student-centred but those who have education from abroad try to make a point with the student, more than only give students lessons."[169] Others related to their experiences of being students and some of the below descriptions capture the way education was perceived: "Because in that time, it was teacher-centred, not student-centred. Teachers only talk, talk, talk, talk and you wrote down and remembered everything. If you didn't remember; not good."[170]

Memorising, not understanding thus became the main learning activity:

> Maybe we don't know the concepts, maybe history or geography.
> Very difficult to understand the concepts, We should learn by

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[169] Interview 8: 860-861
[170] Interview 5: 320-322

> *heart, maybe sometimes study all night because if you went to school in the morning, the teacher should ask you to stand in front of the class and you should, I think remember by heart.*[171]

According to the respondents, much had remained the same. One of the respondents talked about the reactions she received from students when she tried to employ a more learner-centred approach:

> *It's so hard for them, so difficult for them. They have never learnt by this style but I tell them, you should try, never mind if you don't know, you should ask me. When I give them examination I say you should understand, not only remember. I don't know, I try to do this until now [2004]. I don't know about other teachers, but for me I continue with this style and I think this style is good for students, for their future practice, their work.*[172]

One of the major problems, that was pointed out by the respondents regarding educational reform in the Laos, was the conditions of teachers. Being a teacher or a government employee in general, was not a lucrative trade. The monthly salary was not enough to provide for one's family which meant that the majority of the teachers had to have other jobs in order to make ends meet. One of the respondents put it in the following way:

> *I think in the Lao PDR, if we don't provide more salary, it will be very difficult to change, to reform education. If the salary is the same, very difficult. When you ask, you explain to the teachers, to other staff, they told you, oh very small salary, I cannot, I cannot.*[173]

Another respondent concurred with this and added:

> *The connection of the lives of teachers is not good you see. The teachers cannot think about things, cannot be responsible for their courses you see. They think about their life. When they finish their course they go to look for food.*[174]

In his opinion, trying to make changes in teaching practices was difficult. It was almost impossible to encourage teachers to engage in reform work since that demanded much effort: "The policy and practice do not fit each other. You see now, we ask teacher to teach by constructivist or by learner-centred methods. But when they do

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[171] Interview 5: 313-316
[172] Interview 8: 868-880
[173] Interview 5: 1117-1120
[174] Interview 6: 505-507

evaluations, they teach the other way you see."[175] Apart from being a practical issue, it could also be emotional to be an educator in a system that was considered to need reform, something that became especially clear when the respondents had been abroad and seen other examples of teaching and learning. One of them said: "When I went abroad I see the system and when I came back I loose my heart."[176] He continued: "I think why is our system like this?"[177] Change was in other words considered a difficult task by many of them. Even though they tried to make small changes in their own practice, they identified the structural situation as such that reform was difficult to achieve: "I think in the past, and from past to now they, the government, didn't try to solve this problem. You see, the education, especially teachers' problems, they didn't give this attention."[178]

Another aspect that was also brought forth was, that within Lao society, those with perceived authority, be it as a consequence of age or formal position, were given the right to make decisions. In the life-histories this was described in a number of ways, but most prominently it was verbalised in connection to major educational decisions that were made by the respondents. The majority of them never wanted to become teachers when they went into higher education[179] but they accepted the decisions made by their government. Some of them also received opportunity to continue studying after undergraduate level but again, their government decided they were needed in Laos, decisions which the respondents accepted.[180] In general, there was a great degree of acceptance among the respondents when it came to the decisions that others made regarding the development of their careers. Therefore it seems as if they lived by a strategy where they as individuals were not important. Rather it was the good of the country that was their first priority. What the consequences will be of a shift toward an educational policy that emphasises the needs and knowledge of the individual, such as learner-centred education, remains to be seen. However, the discourses revealed in these life-histories can be merged with other discourses and practices as a means of understanding educational development in Laos. Therefore, the remaining chapter of this thesis will be devoted to a discussion that attempts to explore how we can

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[175] Interview 5: 500-502
[176] Interview 5: 1090
[177] Interview 5: 1102
[178] Interview 6: 692-693
[179] For example interviews 5, 6, 8
[180] See interviews 5, 6

understand the processes that unravel within educational development cooperation.

VI. CAN THE FIRST-WORLD-NORTH GO LOCAL?

I began this thesis with a quote from E. M. Forster: "Only what is seen sideways sinks deep." I return to it to bring closure to my argument; namely, we have to start asking different questions. Discourse analysis offers a possibility to ask different questions. It not only offers it, it invites us to do so: "How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?" (Bové, 1995: 54).

What one sees depends on where one stands. Therefore, a given event will never be understood in one single way. We understand and assess situations using the discourses that are available to us. However, encountering other discourses will always force us to reassess our understandings. We might resist this process but it is difficult to avoid it since the discourses we carry with us not only are reproduced but also challenged and resisted and therefore subject to change. My point here is that already at the onset of this closing chapter, I will take the liberty to make one claim; the arenas that I have tried to (re)present in this thesis are far more complicated than the analysis rendered here. But that is to be expected. Any academic work, or any attempt to capture happenings in lived, local contexts are by default reductionist. That might also be one of the main challenges facing policy makers on the one hand, and those put to implement these policies on the other hand. However, in order to provide a glimpse of these complexities, I will throughout this chapter discuss the different discourses that become visible in the three arenas analysed in the previous chapter.

An Analytical Map

The following analysis takes its starting point in the three issues that have been central to this work; development cooperation, education and gender. I have attempted to address these issues through the research questions presented in chapter I, namely:

- How education and gender are discursively constructed in national and international policy documents on education

- How local education decision makers understand and experience nationally and internationally driven interventions on their education sector
- How life experiences shape understandings of education and gender in Laos in the early years of the second millennium
- How international development cooperation brings possibilities and challenges at a local level

In order to answer the research questions, development cooperation, education and gender were discussed in the context of three different arenas, a policy arena, a policy-practice arena and a contextual arena. This presentation should be regarded as an empirical construction that highlights how the issues of development cooperation, education and gender have been addressed in different contexts.

In this closing chapter the focus will however change from the arenas to the discourses produced within these arenas. Consequently, the aim is to understand the effects of policy and contextual discourses on discursive constructions of development cooperation, education and gender among education officials.

Policy Discourses

The policy documents included in this thesis draw on a number of different discourses regarding development cooperation, education and gender. The policies all express that the rationale behind development cooperation within education is that with a rising educational level in third-world-south countries poverty can be eradicated. The potential effects of education according to development cooperation organisations cannot be underestimated. National governments that face the challenges of dealing with the effects of poverty also join this discursive community, which since 1990 has gone under the slogan of EFA. As earlier chapters have shown, EFA is a comprehensive package in the sense that it claims to embrace all members of society and it also places demands that nations include groups that are considered to be disadvantaged, namely girls, women and ethnic minorities.

In this analysis there are two different types of documents to be considered; those representing the donors and those representing the national government. The documents are expressions of two different types of power structures. The donor documents become carriers of power since they set out the premises under which support will be given to third-world-south countries, i.e. 'money talks'. The national

documents on the other hand become powerful in the Lao context since they activate a communist/centralist discourse that builds on a system that is well known in the country. Within this system, decisions are passed down through the hierarchies for implementation, which allocates national policies a strong position. Both donor and national policies however, address issues of education, gender and development cooperation, thus activating different discourses which support and contradict each other. The discourses surrounding these issues will therefore be focused in the following.

Development cooperation: Negotiating partnership and subordination

Development cooperation aims at addressing the inequalities that persist in the world by for instance focusing on poverty eradication. There has however been recognition that development cooperation has had its problems and thus the issue of partnership gained increasing relevance among bi-and multilateral donor organisations during the 1990's, as was discussed in chapter II. The partnership discourse has, for instance, been criticised and I argue that documents at the policy arena point to the tensions surrounding partnership. This claim is made for two reasons. Firstly, there are contradictions within donor policy documents where discourses of partnership collide with discourses that rather point to an unequal relationship between first-world-north and third-world-south 'partners'. Secondly, issues of partnership is unilaterally discussed, i.e. it is something that is dealt with in donor policy, yet remains silent in national policy despite that the included national policies in this thesis are identified as national contributions in international cooperation processes.

In chapter II, the former president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, spoke of partnership as the key to the Bank's work.[181] Sida likewise pointed to the importance of partnership, stating that it is a "key principle in all Swedish development cooperation" and that is further is an internationally agreed upon concept.[182] The Dakar Framework for Action also points to the importance of partnership in the closing sections of the EFA policy stating that: "We wish to strengthen alliances and effective partnerships between countries and the international community to give a fresh impetus to EFA"

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[181] See p. 41
[182] See p. 96

(UNESCO, 2000: 72). Partnership is thus constructed as a discourse that builds on ideas of privileging the perspectives of third-world-south countries. This was expressed by Wolfensohn when he emphasised that projects do not belong to the World Bank, they belong to the fund receiving countries.[183] In Sida's case this is for example expressed when it emphasises that "support to the education sector is always based on partner countries' own educational programmes."[184] This stance is shared by UNESCO when it discusses the role of the international community in reaching EFA:

> *Acknowledging the valuable support and assistance offered at the national level by UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, the World Bank and bilateral donors in pursuing the goals of EFA, we would like to invite these agencies to renew and review their role and strategies* **in conformity with national plans and priorities** *[my emphasis].* (UNESCO, 2000: 72).

Ownership is thus emphasised in all of the included donor policy-makers documents which suggests that there is an ambition to shift the imbalance between the first-world-north and the third-world-south through a partnership discourse.

Within the documents, there is, however, tension surrounding the partnership discourse. The partnership discourse is upheld but by the same token there are expressions within policies that point to a discourse that rather constructs a relationship of superiority and subordination. This is for instance expressed in the Dakar Framework for Action where the responsibilities of donors and recipients respectively are described in the following way: Third-world-south countries are constructed as implementers, i.e. they are expected to develop and/or strengthen national plans before certain set years (e.g. 2002, 2015). They are expected to conduct processes in transparent and democratic ways; they are expected to involve stakeholders from all levels of society and so on. First-world-north organisations are constructed as monitors of these processes, and are, apart from contributing funds, also expected to undertake "more effective and regular monitoring of progress towards EFA goals and targets, including periodic assessments."[185] Regarding Sida's discourse on partnership, the same type of tensions arise. On the one hand, there is strong emphasis that ownership should be held by governments in the third-world-south; however, Sida on the other hand also qualifies

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[183] See p. 41
[184] See p. 96
[185] See p. 95

partnership. This is expressed in Sida's EFA policy where partnership is described as conditional on a common framework of development targets set by the (democratic) international community.[186]

Statements such as these, can through a Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis, be regarded as expressions that bring light to discourse-power-knowledge relations. The first-world-north has, as many post-colonial scholars claim, gained a privileged position in the global knowledge economy. This is an inheritance that not only dates back to earlier endeavours of colonisation but which rather can be traced back to Enlightenment itself where Europe constructed itself as superior. Therefore, the state structures and the structures of production of knowledge, and what we take to be true and right, is also reflected on the policy arena.

In the specific case of Laos and the donor development community, there are obviously different interpretations of what democracy and democratic practices entail. As such, the organising structures of Laos as a communist society would be in stark opposition to the so-called democratic practices of the first-world-north. Laos is criticised by the first-world-north for its lack of democratic practices and lack of regard for human right. Therefore, an idea of a partnership that is grounded in local practices of the fund-receiving country must become quite problematic, since local governance and practices would not be in line with so-called internationally agreed up on ideas of democracy and good governance. Therefore, the politically correct path to take for donor organisations is to rhetorically lean on a discourse of partnership but by the same token insert formulations which focus on monitoring, assessment and evaluation, thereby, retaining control over the development cooperation process. This move becomes possible as the third-world-south understands the premises of development cooperation. It would be fair to assume that these nations are, moreover, not in a position to always actively oppose the discourses of the first-world-north since such actions could put funding at risk. Assessments made by first-world-north and third-world-south organisations/nations can therefore be understood as examples of governance. It is politically rational for donors to address development cooperation through a partnership discourse since this brings promise of influence to the fund-receiving countries of the third-world-south. However, it is equally politically rational for support-receiving governments to seemingly accept the discourse of

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development cooperation since it secure funds that many of these governments and nations, Laos being no exception, rely on. What is further striking is that the issue of partnership seems to be an issue concerning donor organisations as it is in donor policy that partnership is elaborated on. One interpretation of this could be that donor organisations recognise their privileged position and thus feel inclined to be the ones discussing how a re-distribution of power can come about. Another interpretation regarding the absence of partnership discussions in national policies might be that national, fund-receiving governments and organisations know that partnership in reality does not make much of a difference to the distribution of power and ownership.

The interesting question then becomes how the discourses of partnership and subordination are tackled by education officials? These discourses might be constructed but their effects are nevertheless material, which is an issue that will be addressed below in this chapter.

Education for All: Negotiating communist and market-economical discourses

In chapter VI, the broad discussions regarding education and its envisaged role in poverty reduction were addressed. The discourses of the international community surrounding education were drafted already in the late 1940's in the Declaration of Human Rights; "everyone has a right to education."[187] This discussion was brought into the spotlight once again in Jomtien in 1990 under the slogan of EFA. Both in the 1940's and the 1990's, the declarations regarding the rights to education can be understood as drawing on a human rights discourse. The difference was however the envisaged effects of education. At the time of the formation of UNESCO, the primary motif was peace: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."[188] In the 1990's the stated primary goal was poverty reduction and sustainable development, which to a larger extent activated a market-economical discourse, emphasising the value of human resources for development. Education was discussed as a necessity if members of society and societies themselves were to take part in developing and interacting with local and global economies.

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[187] See p. 93
[188] See p. 19

This market-economical discourse was prominent in both donor and national policies using words such as "societies and economies of the twenty-first century," "rapid globalisation," "scientific knowledge,"[189] "modern science and technology," "globalisation period" and "life-long learning."[190] In short, the twenty-first century placed demands on countries and its citizens due to global processes that you either took part in and thus developed or else, risked remaining in a state of poverty. Education was thus constructed as a road to development. As such, EFA had elements of a human rights discourse in its emphasis on the need for governments to provide education to all of its citizens, however, the added perspectives of poverty eradication and sustainable development also constructed citizens as major assets in a market-economy.

Regarding Lao policy making, the Concept Paper from 1994 was an early contribution, in the wake of Jomtien, to the discussion of a 'new' educational direction within Lao education. The visions for what education would bring to younger generations in Laos were formulated in the following manner:

- *Love of homeland,*
- *Love and appreciation of the natural world,*
- *Gratitude and respect for leaders, parents and teachers,*
- *Respect for elders, workers and those who sacrificed and died for the nation,*
- *Respect for rules and regulations,*
- *Avoidance of extravagance and selfishness,*
- *Responsibility and initiative in assigned work,*
- *Unity with all ethnic groups and other nations, and*
- *The willingness to sacrifice personal interest for the sake of the collective good.*[191]

These visions can be analysed as part of the nation-building and national identity building projects that the LPRP engaged in and that quite clearly also emphasised the values considered important for Lao society and Lao education. The position of the nation, the elders, the freedom struggle and the collective are constructed as important features in Lao society which also point to the communist discourses underpinning Lao society after 1975.

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[189] See p. 98
[190] See p. 99f
[191] See p. 97

In the Lao policies following the Concept Paper, formulations such as the above can be found although in a modified form. In the EFA National Plan of Action, the goals of development are linked to a nationalistic project, where patriotic values and the interests of the collective are emphasised:

> *To build a young generation with global scientific knowledge, patriotic values, a spirit of solidarity with ethnic groups in the country and with friendly countries in the world; to know their rights and interests and obligations as citizens, how to preserve and expand the traditions and culture of the nation, and how to be self-dependent and self-strengthening; to be economical and know how to harmoniously combine personal interests with that of the collective; to equip themselves with general knowledge and knowledge in specialized fields, specifically in science and technical fields; to be moral, disciplined, responsible, and dutiful; to be healthy, innovative, and of a civilized mind; and to be prepared for the defence, construction and development work of the nation.*[192]

There is however also inclusion of expressions that serves a dual cause. On the one hand 'global scientific knowledge' could signal a wish to bring Laos into the global knowledge community. On the other hand scientific knowledge has always been a strong 'objective' in Marxism and therefore, this could also express intent to continue in building on Marxist values within education.

What is given more attention in the Lao policies following the Concept Paper are issues of access, quality and relevance and education as four different pillars: learning to learn, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.[193] What is also mentioned, however briefly, in the Lao Concept Paper is the 5-pointed star. This represents an attempt to introduce a new method of teaching that focuses on learner-centred practices through activities, group work, questions, material and relevance to daily life.[194] In the Lao national policies following the Concept Paper, the wording has changed. EFA is here constructed as an issue of the aforementioned access, quality and relevance. The policies thus point to a change within Lao policy-making in the sense that the Concept Paper put more emphasis on patriotic values and less on educational practice. It also identified a model of teaching and learning, namely

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[192] See p. 98f
[193] See p. 100
[194] See p. 55

the 5-pointed star. In later policies, patriotic values were mentioned but the focus was rather on discussions regarding the access, quality and relevance of education.

One reflection that can be made regarding this shift is that the Lao policy discourses have weakened as donor policy discourses have taken over policy language. EFA and its market-economical discourses seem to have gained a hegemonic position on the policy arena. Despite this, Lao policy, however concordant with donor policy, points to the difficulties that EFA imply. The Lao government seems to want to convey that international goals of EFA are also Lao national goals but that these will be difficult to reach due to "high demographic growth, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, scattered habitat, economic and financial constraints and low institutional capacity."[195] If the EFA project risks failure, explanations can be traced back to local, contextual circumstances and in doing so issues of resistance of discourses need not be addressed.

Gender: Negotiating constructionism and gender mainstreaming

Gender issues are important within international development cooperation and are commonly included as a privileged perspective. Sida for instance regards gender as "an overarching and fundamental variable."[196] The World Bank likewise has strategies for including gender into all its field projects since inclusive development supports poverty reduction.[197] The links between education and gender are made clear in that development must include all members of society. Since girls, women and ethnic minorities are often excluded, but still a necessary pool of human resources, steps must be taken to include these groups into development efforts.

Within both donor and national policy-writings on gender, two discourses are primarily activated; gender as socially constructed and as gender mainstreaming. If we begin with the former, both donor and national policies recognise gender as socially constructed, therefore, existing patterns can be changed. Thus the World Bank understands gender as: "culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviours of males and females."[198] Sida formulates its understanding of both sex and gender as "concepts [which] should be considered as

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[195] See p. 100f
[196] See p. 105
[197] See p. 104
[198] See p. 103

contextual and subjectively formulated."[199] The Lao Gender Profile understands gender as referring "to the differences between women and men within the same household and between cultures that are socially and culturally constructed and that change over time."[200] Between these different policies there seems in other words to be a consensus regarding how gender and gendered relations should be understood. This positioning also bears with it a rejection of essentialist gender difference discourses, thus establishing that what is constructed can also be de- and reconstructed.

Donor and national documents thus point to the necessity of understanding gender relations as something that will take different shapes and forms depending on the context. These relations build on different positions of power which would imply that an analysis of power and its gendered distribution would follow a discourse of constructionism.

What seems to be the case however, is that when gender is operationalised at policy level, another discourse is activated, namely gender mainstreaming. The gender mainstreaming discourse has clear liberal-feminist connotations in that it deals with opening up access for women into all spheres of public life. As such this discourse promotes that women gain equal representation to men and if this can be achieved, gender equality will follow.

This line of reasoning is part of the gender framework of all the policies included into this thesis. Sida aims at striking a balance between men and women by incorporating gender mainstreaming into all development cooperation efforts.[201] Likewise, the World Bank aims at "designing actions so that gender-related barriers to economic growth and poverty alleviation are reduced."[202] The Lao Gender Profile further states that their primary goal is to inform the Government in its gender policy work by "providing sex-disaggregated data and information for planning gender sensitive programmes."[203] The question is to what extent the Lao Gender Profile can be understood as speaking from a constructionist discourse rather than a gender mainstreaming discourse? On the one hand the Gender Profile addressed the importance of exploring historical and traditional aspects of gender inequality. One such

[199] See p. 105
[200] See p. 107
[201] See p. 106
[202] See p. 104
[203] See p. 106

example is the discussion of the institution of marriage and how that assigns worth to a woman. On the other hand, it rests much on a gender mainstreaming discourse when it discusses the sex-disaggregated data that the Profile contributes as an important tool for Lao ministries working to "ensure equal participation" between males and females.[204]

Furthermore, the gender mainstreaming approach seems to focus on economic development. As the World Bank states, including gender into policy has nothing to do with "political correctness or kindness to women."[205] Rather, it is motivated by a development rational that points to the fact that women make out half of the population globally and not tapping into this human resource would be highly unwise.[206] This line of reasoning is especially visible in World Bank policy but Sida's gender policy also points to the economic relevance of including women into development since gender discrimination "is one of the main causes of poverty, and a major obstacle to equitable and sustainable global human development."[207]

Previous research shows that gender mainstreaming indeed has a stronghold on the policy-making arena and that discussions regarding gender all too often come to deal with technical-rational issues such as statistics and toolkits.[208] This is also recognised by both the World Bank and Sida who respectively point to problems with their gender frameworks. The World Bank states that its policy "contains ambiguities that need to be removed if Bank staff is to fully understand the policy's implications for operation."[209] Sida further claims that it, to some degree, has failed to include elements such as inclusion of gender perspectives on certain issues, as well conduction gender aware dialogues with partners. Instead gender mainstreaming has primarily come to deal with active application[210] and one can assume that it deals with more technical aspects of gender mainstreaming. This is concurrent with the criticism against the gender mainstreaming perspective that was put forth by scholars in chapter II. One of the effects of privileging technical aspects of gender mainstreaming seems indeed to be that discussions regarding the effects of constructed gender relations are lost. This ought to have

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[204] See p. 108
[205] See p. 103
[206] See p. 104
[207] See p. 105
[208] See chapter II
[209] See p. 105
[210] See p. 106

implications for policy as well: A first-world-north discourse on gender mainstreaming would need to be deconstructed and understood in the light of feminist movements and struggles in the first-world-north, which have had implications for gender politics. If the assumption is made that gender relations are constructed in a specific locality and subjectively formulated through historical and cultural socialisation as Sida suggests,[211] there should be recognition that gender mainstreaming policies carry the marks of a specific contextual, historical and cultural locality, namely the first-world-north (in all its diversity!). This process could possibly cast a different understanding of how gender mainstreaming could be formulated in policy and applied in a specific third-world-south context.

Contextual Discourses

The life-histories generated insights that shed additional light on the issue of education and gender. The stories pointed to how positions in different categories served to strengthen or weaken each other, thereby altering available discourses. As I have mentioned previously in the thesis, the life-histories are not to be regarded as individual accounts but as example of activation of societal discourses by individuals, as such they are to be regarded as representing discourses available in context. As such these accounts are regarded as reflecting society at large with the obvious exception that the society I refer to is the Lao Lum society since all life-history respondents are members of the majority group. One commonality shared by the respondents was however that they had all become teachers at university level as part of the endeavour of developing educational practices. As such they were probable candidates for implementing the directive coming from the policy and policy-practice arenas. My assumption is however that in a process of educational reform, those set to implement also carry with them discourses that reflect the context. Therefore their life-histories become important in understanding contextual influences on the policy-practice arena.

The images that grew from the life-histories showed that educational and gendered experiences had activated different discourses during the life-span of the respondents and that the prevailing discourses to a large extent had depended on what happened in their surrounding contexts. The life-histories for example reflected experiences of the French colonial education system, the communist system post 1975

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[211] See p. 105

and the influences of EFA and first-world north system from the 1990's and onwards. The discourses activated within these different systems have left traces in the life-histories of the respondents, having shaped both their experiences as children, students and teachers. There are however also examples of how these discourses have been resisted and what the effects of this resistance have been in the differing contexts of the respondents' lives.

Getting educated: Negotiating access

The accounts of childhood and adolescence were clearly marked by the situation prevailing in Laos during different stages of their 'educational careers'. Consequently, some of the respondents had experiences of pre-revolution education whilst others primarily had received their education in post-revolution Laos. The respondents that had experiences of pre-revolution education, or in post-revolution urban areas, more clearly discussed access issues in terms of attaining good grades. Getting good grades was thus an important path to further studies.

Pre-revolution education in Laos was modelled after the French education system. This system was perceived to be a difficult system which required a lot of effort: "if you finish primary school, if you would like to continue you studies in secondary school you should pass the entrance examination. It was very strict, because it was the French system."[212] Post-revolution, urban accounts also discussed access as a result of effort: "When I study at high school I like to study and I got a good score when I took the examination and I get some award."[213] In this particular account, the urban context and educated parents were considered to be key factors for continued studies. These statements could further be understood to activate colonial discourses since they were reflections of de facto experiences of colonial education and of being raised in a family with educational experiences from the colonial system. The principles that were dominant in the colonial system were principles of education for the few rather than for the masses.[214] This could explain why grades and effort were constructed as important aspects for access to education.

Discussing access in these terms was not as common for those with rural backgrounds who had their education experiences primarily in

[212] Interview 5: 259-261, p. 140
[213] Interview 8: 32-35, p. 148
[214] See for instance Cooper's discussions in chapter II

the post-revolution system. Interestingly enough, they did not discuss access as a primary issue in the sense that formal access per se was not discussed as an obstacle. Rather traditions, rural living circumstance and attitudes among family members were issues addressed. This could be understood from the perspective that a different educational discourse had entered the system, namely a communist discourse that had practical effects on access. The communist government had, as previous research has pointed to, an agenda to dramatically increase access to education for the entire population. Therefore a colonial educational discourse privileging the few was most probably replaced by a communist discourse privileging the masses. This however, did not mean that issues of access were unproblematic. Rather, it meant that access was discussed from different perspectives, one of which was gender, which played a significant role in the life-histories.

Gendering access to education: For the boys or a human right?

Even though gender was not the sole determining factor for accessing education and position, it was still a prominent aspect in the life of the respondents, reflecting the discourses active in society at that time. Firstly, education through the temples was only accessible to boys which provided an opportunity otherwise not available to the male respondents who came from rural settings. This was for obvious reasons not an avenue open for the female respondents who told stories of facing resistance when wanting to pursue education.[215] The mothers were identified as those who more strongly opposed their daughters' quest for education. That the mothers were the primary opponents to their daughters being educated might not be so surprising. The home was constructed as the women's sphere, where females, at least among the Lao Lum, were considered to have certain degrees of power.[216] The 'natural' place for a women was thus in the home which required a different type of training than that provided by the formal education system. The mothers/women were however part of a larger gendered system that defined positions for women and men within a patriarchal system. As such there was an active discourse regarding 'the good woman':

> *They understand that women's work, after marriage, she stay at*
> *home. In their opinion, a woman is good if she can take care of*

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[215] See p. 143ff
[216] See chapter II

the family and do house-work well. And love her father-in-law and mother-in-law well. No high position, no high education, only if you take care of children okay. Because my mother, she did not go away and did not go on study tour. They don't know about many, many situations, only the small village.[217]

Correspondingly, the male position was constructed as 'the head of the household'.[218] A wife with a higher degree of education could thus been seen to devalue the position of the husband which would be troublesome given that hierarchically the husband stood above the wife. As this seems to have been a gendered discourse of relevance, there was little incentive to educate daughters, which one of the respondents understood as a cultural issue:

Maybe it was my culture; my parents depend on Lao culture. That means that female don't study much, only work and help the family, and not go outside or study. Because when I was young, my parents always let my brother go to study English or French. They paid for him but for me, I only worked at home.[219]

Despite these seemingly strong gendered patterns and positions, the female respondents managed to resist the roles that discourse accorded them. Rather, they seem to have activated a 'human rights' discourse where they claimed the right to an education: "I choose by myself that I should study high education or try to study, I think its better, I don't like to get married."[220] How this was possible is interesting. The Vietnam/American war seems to have disrupted gendered patterns for some of the respondents since the war separated many families. This way, some women were able to escape the influence of their families and make decisions that were available within other discourse. The communist system could have provided discourses that counteracted 'traditional' discourses, since it aimed at providing political education widely.[221] The war thus provided degrees of freedom for women to pursue at least basic education.

Geographical location also mattered. The respondents for instance pointed to an urban/rural divide where urban areas were constructed as more progressive.[222] In rural areas, there was not an outspoken need for educated citizens which made it difficult for both males and

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[217] Interview 3: 568-582, p. 144
[218] See p. 143f
[219] Interview 4: 954-957, p. 143
[220] See p. 143
[221] See chapter II
[222] See p. 143

females to argue for education: "I was born in the farmer's family. In my village there was no school. If I would like to study, I should walk to another village far from my village."[223] In a context where there was a clear gendered hierarchy, it would under these circumstances make more sense to support a son instead of a daughter if the issue of education was raised.

However, the resistance from parents regarding their daughter's education was not as compact as one could have expected. The female respondents did primarily construct the mothers as 'gatekeepers,' nevertheless; they also retold the pride that their parents showed when they were successful in their studies.[224] There was also evidence that the fathers did not interfere too much in their children's choices.[225] This could however be interpreted as a recognition of the construction of the home as the women's domain. Thereby, the fathers did not interfere with the children since they were the responsibility of the mothers.

Nayobay: Renegotiating access

In chapter V, nayobay was discussed as an important aspect in Lao society. In its official form after 1975 it has for example been used as an affirmative action for ethnic minority students who have gotten access to education despite poor grades. Furthermore, nayobay quotas have also been granted to government officials who have been able to arrange for relatives to have employment or further their studies. As respondents in chapter V pointed out, there are both official and unofficial uses of nayobay. Official nayobay has the character of affirmative actions while the unofficial nayobay is more diverse and difficult to 'pinpoint' but seems to be connected to position, social status, networks and favours. As such, nayobay would not always have the intended effects of allocating people who have been disadvantaged or considered to have done great service for the nation, an opportunity in society.

What can further be said about nayobay is that it seems to be a practice that has longstanding traditions in Laos. It is thus not a practice that begun after 1975. The conclusion one can make regarding this is that nayobay most probably has differed under different systems. Nayobay in a colonial or royalist discourse would

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[223] Interview 5: 9-11, p. 141
[224] See p. 144
[225] See p. 142, 145

thus not have the same effects as it would in a communist discourse. Nayobay did have an impact on the life-history respondents, both by creating opportunities but also by putting obstacles in their ways. My interpretation is that nayobay did play a role in all of their stories and that these can be understood from a communist, collective discourse which still had to tackle societal practices that to some extent continued to privileged an elite.

One issue that emerged in all the life-histories regarding educational choices was that the will of the individual was not a priority. This was especially visible among those who were educated in the former Soviet Union, when Laos still had a planned economy, i.e. before the introduction of the NEM. The idea of the collective had a strong hold on Lao societal life, something that was further established through communism. As a result, the life-histories were constructed as stories where the good of the individual that was not the focus but the good of society. Educational endeavours were thus consequences of needs identified in five-year plans rather than of individual interests and ambitions. The respondents accepted this arrangement, and consequently constructed life-histories that turned imposed educational decisions into positive effects on their lives.[226]

The importance of nayobay in the form of networks, and the collective as an organising principle within Lao society probably cannot be underestimated in understanding this aspect of the respondents' life-histories. As examples from the policy arena show, students were expected to adapt to a top-down organisation of society where subordination to those higher up in the hierarchy was expected and encouraged. As such the influence of leaders, elders, parents and teachers was established. Hierarchal structures and positions remained important even under communism, which the respondents were well aware of. Accepting decisions made by others can therefore be understood as a logical strategy.

Educational opportunities after 1975 were made available for people from poorer, rural communities, which probably would not have been available previously. This was also expressed in different ways in the life-histories. Given the historical background of limited access to education, the communist discourse privileged after 1975, offered more opportunities to individuals like the respondents in this study. Neither the colonial regime nor the RLG had as their main priority to provide education widely among the population, and therefore, one

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[226] See p. 148

can understand the efforts of the LPRP as a message conveying that 'ordinary' people in Laos mattered.

For poorer youngsters who supported the Pathet Lao revolution there were indeed opportunities since the discourse-power-knowledge relations changed after the revolution. As one of the respondent put it "we should know the power and join,"[227] which is one example of how discourses were embodied by the respondents. Affiliation to the LPRP and the revolution struggle thus played an important role for the life-history respondents in their efforts to further their education. One respondent for instance got the opportunity to continue to study after having taught members of the LPRP who themselves did not intend to study further: "I am very old and I think I can't continue to study so I support you to study high."[228] Another respondent worked at a provincial office for the LPRP after which he got the opportunity to continue with higher education: "I worked in the provincial office for two years and I received the opportunity to continue study higher education in Russia."[229]

Supporting the new government can therefore be understood as a strategic political and personal choice:

> *Because if I went to another country, maybe it would be very difficult for me. So I decided to live here, and not go to another country. It means I work with my government. When I studied high school they tried to teach me that everything with communism is bad. Every time I can observe politics, something is good and not good, the same as before. Living here with communism or with USA or France or another country, maybe it's the same. If I get work, that's very good and I can study higher and maybe become a good person with good work. I think like that, so I changed my mind [about going abroad]. I live here and die here.*[230]

The respondents who graduated from teaching institutions in the former Soviet Union, more clearly constructed their stories around the influence of the governments decisions on their personal lives. Their life-histories contributed with stories of arriving in Moscow, being assigned a place in an education programme which they then went on to pursue: "They looked; the committee looked; now we don't have the resource person maybe for the agriculture area, the

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[227] Interview 5: 559, p. 147
[228] Interview 3: 851-853, p. 150
[229] Interview 6: 99-100, p. 148
[230] Interview 4: 277-284, p. 147

education area or something else. So they divided and send you directly, no choice, no choice."[231] For these individuals, this might have been a perfectly rational way of being subjected to and subjecting themselves to governmentality strategies. The gains for them as individuals were to be acknowledged by the collective; they in a way became the co-creators of the new Laos, which could explain why they could accept the choices that were made for them. Another way of understanding this is to put a class perspective on the issue. The life-history respondents that identified themselves as having poor, rural backgrounds described that they were not in positions to make claims or have claims made for them through the nayobay system. This is something that they pointed out, both when it came to what alternatives they had around the time of the revolution and how the scholarships for studying abroad were allocated: "No, they didn't look at the academic score. And before I think they, the good field you see, they give to their children."[232] Grades were thus not regarded to be the primary instrument of selection; rather places in prestigious educational programmes were given to those who could exercise nayobay. The effects of this practice was not seldom that those who had been awarded a placing based on grades lost this in the competition with relatives of so called VIP's: "some official or person who has a high position, they need to change to their cousin or their daughter or their son. They substitute this person and they can do this."[233] Accepting this practice, I believe, should be understood from the perspective that Lao society was built on top-down principles, where decisions of those in higher positions in the hierarchy had to be accepted. In this sense, the discourse of subordination that I discussed on the policy arena also applied on the contextual arena since it built on the same principles. As such, hierarchal positions bringing with it positions of superiority and subordination was a familiar way of organising society, and thus part of a repertoire of governance exercised at both macro and micro arenas.

Nayobay is however an example of a discourse that has the ability to challenge other discourse. Laos is for instance a patriarchal society, generally privileging men and boys over women and girls. Nayobay could however alter these patterns and as such studying and later on, career opportunities did not depend solely on gender; networks and social positions also mattered. Even though it could be expected that

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[231] Interview 5: 388-390, p. 148
[232] Interview 6: 243-244, p. 148
[233] Interview 4: 314-320, p. 149

these privileges most often were passed down from men to other men, women were not excluded from nayobay. Networks were built through more outspoken affiliation with the freedom struggle, or through personal connections which enabled the respondents to gain access to the official system through nayobay. As such, the individual could gain benefits by accepting the prevailing discourses of both the context and the party and in doing so they would be accepted by the collective.

Education philosophies: Negotiating teacher- and learner-centred discourses

Regardless of which political systems that set the agenda at different times, experiences of educational practices among the respondents were similar. Rote-learning and placing the teacher in the centre was common practice regardless of which political regime that set the political agenda. The methods might have been similar but as previous research[234] points out, the underlying philosophies differed. The colonial French system, the RLG system and the LPRP system seem to have activated discourses of rote-learning and teacher-centred approaches. However, in the colonial system, the prevailing discourse was not education for all but rather education for the selected few, while the LPRP rather activated EFA-like discourses although in a communist/centralist fashion.

Rote-learning was however a discursive practice, that the respondents were well acquainted with both from being students and teachers. This had created a situation where the ability to memorise was privileged. The students thus concentrated on learning content by heart rather than exposing themselves to possible embarrassment of being called on by the teacher and not being able to answer.[235] This account can be compared with the account of another respondent regarding experiences of encouraging students to use learner-centred methods which did not focus on rote-learning. The respondents described how the students had great difficulty adjusting to a different classroom practice. She tried to encourage her students to focus on understanding; however, she concludes that it was difficult for them.[236] Rote learning had in other words kept a stronghold on educational practice which could be understood from a number of different perspectives according to the respondents. Lack of resources

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[234] See chapter II
[235] See p. 151f
[236] See p. 152

encouraged the ongoing use of teacher-centred practices. This lack also affected pre- and in-service training which promoted this educational practice. Other comments showed the close connection between the conditions for teachers, their private living conditions and the limited reach of reform. With the salaries that teachers were paid for their professional services there were little possibility of maintaining a family and hence, out of office work was more important for providing a living than their day jobs. Devoting energy to improving lesson plans or classroom practice was in other words not at the top of the list of priorities.[237]

The stronghold of teacher-centred practices and rote learning could also be understood from a different perspective; namely that these practices are well suited within a centralist regime and not only the remnants of 'traditional', 'old-fashioned' practices. The ideas underpinning communist societies, deal with utilising the strengths of the collective, thus collective upbringing is more important than the upbringing of the individual. Consequently, the explanations given regarding the problems that were encountered when attempts were made to implement learner-centred education could be understood in a wider context.

There was much relevance in the points made by the respondents regarding the constraints that they had to tackle. However, it might not just have been an issue of a lack of resources. Learner-centred education also signalled an educational shift that required many changes. These included not only practical changes which the life-history respondents considered to be difficult to achieve in the circumstances surrounding the lives of especially teachers. Furthermore, this educational shift also required that the roles of teachers and students in some way had to be renegotiated. This I believe, hit at the very core of societal organisation in Laos and the expected roles and positions of teachers as authorities, and students as younger members in their societies and communities, whose task it was to learn from the elders around them.

These practices which built on discourses of the collective and top-down hierarchies however collided with globalised EFA-discourses of the 1990's and onwards. The respondents encountered these discourses through their professions as teachers, and through study-exchanges they had made. These experiences led to situations where the respondents had to re-negotiate their previous experiences which

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[237] See p. 152f

also led them to reflect over the gaps between policy and practice. As one of the respondents said, the message regarding a new educational practice was there but teacher-centred perspectives and rote-learning prevailed. The respondents claimed that succeeding in implementing a new educational discourse relied heavily on surrounding contextual situations. Without addressing issues such as the situation of teachers, their salary levels and their training, it would be difficult to change ongoing practices.[238] These perspectives of course cannot be disregarded but the issue was probably more complicated. A shift in educational practice also demanded a changed discourse which challenged hierarchal, top-down practices that were well established in Lao society. Another hierarchy that was not addressed in the discussions of different educational philosophies was the gendered hierarchy. There were no explicit gender discourses regarding either rote-learning or learner-centred approaches. This can probably be analysed from the perspective that boys and men were privileged in the classroom and that this was the norm that individual teachers could either resist or support.

Negotiating life within discourse

The life-history accounts point to the complexities that arise when different discourses co-exist. They also serve as a reminder that there is not one hegemonic discourse that sets the agenda for what becomes possible. Rather, any context has to deal with different discourses that both interact and collide and create the 'in-betweenness' that the respondents develop through negotiations. What seems to be clear is for instance that a communist discourse granted the respondents possibilities that they might not have gotten under previous regimes. This discourse was however not strong enough to eradicate other discourses that were more firmly embedded in the Lao context. Nayobay is one such example. Under the LPRP, nayobay was formulated as an affirmative action to promote disadvantaged members of society such as ethnic minorities. However, other formulations of nayobay that rather privileged the already privileged and that built on family background and social positions seems have been more prominent in practice. Likewise, being born a male did not automatically secure an education since the need for education differed between rural/urban areas. There were however additional possibilities for poorer males to find support through the temples, which was not open to females. Placing women in the homes was also

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a strong discourse but it was one that under certain circumstances could be resisted. Thus the female respondents with rural background managed to get an education. Teacher-centred practices and rote-learning seems however to have remained powerful discourses. This could be understood from the perspective of how society was organised. Both within Lao culture and communist policies hierarchies have been an organising principle. There is therefore most possibly a readiness to accept instructions from higher levels of the hierarchy and implementing these, which would also explain the discourse of acceptance among the life-history respondents regarding the ways their lives developed. Correspondingly, this could also explain the resistance that some of the respondents encountered among their students when a bottom-up rather than a top-down perspective was encouraged. From this perspective then, educational reform deals with more than using other tools. It deals with changing attitudes and practices that have taken the form of congealed discursive practices. However, as Butler notes, language and practice might be constitutive within given power/discourse networks. These are nonetheless:

> open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other such networks. 'Agency' is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed (Butler, 1995: 135).

The life-history respondents could be regarded as living their life at discursive junctures. As students they experienced the discursive juncture between a 'colonialist/royalist' and 'communist' system. As teachers, they once again have come across such a discursive juncture. This time it deals with the discursive juncture of a 'communist' and a 'market-economical' system. This juncture can serve to redefine understandings about EFA, gender, and teacher-and learner-centred education.

This far I have presented discourses within policy and context that provide a frame for understanding the positions of education officials who had the task of concretely working with educational reform.

When Policy Meets Context: Discursive constructions among education officials

The education officials had the task of both producing and disseminating policies to different levels of the education system. This position prompted them to take not only policy, but also contextual

discourses into account, a process that gave rise to discursive constructions where the discourses of policy and context were negotiated, transformed and also resisted.

Negotiating development cooperation

The interviews with education officials pointed out that developing education in Laos was not a national project per se, or a project that was limited to for instance NUOL or the FoE. Rather, it was a national project with strong international interventions. Power to define concepts and set out a road for how development could and should be thought about was a process where the influences of organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO and Sida were considerable.

The education officials had to deal with policy instructions but they also had to take the situation in Laos into account. In this respect, one could say that discourses among education officials were influenced by both the policy and context. Furthermore, one can expect that that the education officials also had to balance between donor and national policies since they, as government officials, also would be quite involved in national policy-making within education. The education officials thus had to negotiate between different systems of governance. As such, the task for the education officials was to address issues of education and gender, mediated through national and donor policies, as well as through accumulated experiences of local circumstances.

Development cooperation was generally described by the education officials as a great opportunity to develop education since there, according to the respondents, was a recognised lack of funding and know-how nationally. For NUOL and FoE, the Sida/SAREC project was considered especially important, since it was one of the bigger projects to support research and educational development at tertiary level.

Involvement in development cooperation funded projects however meant meeting different formal requirements. These could often differ between donors, which meant that those on the fund receiving end had to manage different sets of rules and regulations. This was exemplified by one of the education officials who discussed the effects of Sida/SAREC regulations on activities locally:

> *We have to respect the process, the format of how to make the proposal, how to do the progress report, how to audit and after*

> *that, how to respect the time in terms of the cooperation system.*
> *Up until now [2004], after two years it's not easy to respect the*
> *regulation of Sida because they have, we have some*
> *misunderstandings at the level of faculty, department, and*
> *coordinators. It depends on that they do not have enough*
> *experience in cooperation, in project management; they do not*
> *have enough English proficiency to understand the regulation of*
> *Sida.*[239]

Living up to the rules and regulations where issues that were discussed widely among the education officials. Sida/SAREC for instance, was described as having a 'student-centred approach' in the sense that the respondents felt that they were expected to learn by doing.[240] It was acknowledged that NUOL had difficulties in living up to the expectations of Sida/SAREC and that "Sida is not very glad with our team."[241] The education officials however gave their rationale for the difficulties they had in meeting set requirements. They pointed to lack of experience of working with bigger projects, lack of language proficiency necessary to understand donor guidelines and lack of channels of communication.[242] The needs locally were not perceived to be met within the framework of Sida/SAREC. One education official for instance claimed that Sida had a different idea regarding the design of cooperation:

> *It seems Sida don't like to send some specialist to help each faculty*
> *to write the project proposal. Sida don't like that, I know that*
> *Sida don't like this methodology. Sida wants each faculty to be*
> *able to write the project proposal by itself.*[243]

Another education official added that there indeed was a wish for Sida/SAREC to have representatives present locally.[244] One could then argue that a partnership perspective, which in policy privileges local circumstances, in this case amounted to a situation where the local context had to adapt to donor decisions.

Partnership was an important donor policy discourse and as examples from the policies pointed out, development cooperation organisations invite partner countries and projects to set their own agenda. In practice, the officials however, expressed that the partnership

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[239] Interview 12: 209-218, p. 131
[240] See p. 132
[241] See p. 132
[242] See p. 132f
[243] Interview 7: 250-254, p. 132
[244] See p. 132f

discourse was transformed into a discourse of superiority and subordination where the monitoring responsibilities of the donors became dominant. In this process, power relations also became apparent; the development cooperation organisations were the ones with de facto power, as they were the ones with funding. For a third-world-south country such as Laos, there was little room for actions others than those that were in accordance with development cooperation policy. Therefore, managing bureaucratic demands took precedence over practical action.

Such bureaucratic systems were also present in the Lao context, which lead to a situation where those involved in projects had to adjust to numerous different codes affecting the practical projects. This was probably one reason why some of the respondents pointed to the need to have field-based representatives, of in this case SAREC, working in Laos. The perception was that many daily problems could more easily be solved if a SAREC-representative could supply an authoritative opinion supporting lower level officials.

There were in other words differences of opinion regarding the role of the donors. While Sida/SAREC for instance saw their absence in the local context as a way of handing over the mandate to NUOL, education officials at NUOL interpreted it as a lack of interest and commitment. The autonomy was thus not an arrangement that had its intended effects; rather it opposed the idea of collective collaboration that some education officials wished for. Furthermore, there is also reason to believe that a discourse of subordination within development cooperation was easily activated at among the education officials since it was a discourse that was already present in Lao society. As one education official stated, Laos is a top-down society,[245] thus adapting to recommendations and orders from higher up in the hierarchy is a familiar societal strategy. This could also shed additional light on the wishes to have Sida/SAREC representatives present locally, since a foreign expert more easily could resist the logic of national hierarchies.

Cooperation as collaboration

The partnership discourse was given additional content among the education officials that extended beyond ownership and autonomy. The discourse among the education officials was rather shifted to include interpersonal contacts that dealt with building contextual

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[245] See p. 135

understanding, collaborating, exchanging ideas and building trusting relationships. They for instance expressed a distrust regarding how well the donors actually understood the situation in Laos:

> *There should be a representative of Sarec in Vientiane instead of staying in Stockholm. There are many, many possible ways of dealing with the issues. Having somebody from Sarec to work here at Dongdok campus for example. Because the situation in Laos may be different from, I think totally different from the situation in Sweden, in Stockholm. There are many, many things that maybe the staff in Sweden, in Stockholm, don't understand.*[246]

There were also suggestions as to how a real partnership could be built that not only dealt with 'educating' the donors but also 'educating' themselves:

> *If we would like to have a good cooperation for both sides, for mutual profit, I think it's better to know each other better in terms of culture, of way of thinking, way of life. Not only the way of Sweden/Laos but also Lao/Sweden. I think that if we know each other better it helps us to make a good cooperation.*[247]

Partnership was further constructed as friendship:

> *I like the friendship. We have to work together, friendly, openly. Because for some projects, the experts that come to work here, they are not good. They don't know the environmental condition of work in Laos. They don't know this deeply. I don't know in their country, if they work like that or not.*[248]

There seems in other words to have been resistance among the officials as to how the cooperation took shape and what the donors expected. The Lao officials themselves expected and envisaged something more that incorporated a collaborative effort. There were also expressions among the education officials that indicated an understanding of how power influenced the situation: "Giving funds to someone, is for the person who receive a very good opportunity but the second aspect is more important; how to give."[249] This signals that with the act of supplying funds also comes the responsibility of acknowledging the power that funding brings with it. As the

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[246] Interview 2: 114-120, p. 132f
[247] Interview 12: 536-542, p. 137
[248] Interview 7: 763-771, p. 137
[249] Interview 7: 814-815, p. 137

education officials noted, one way of doing this would be to collaborate more concretely to understand each others positions.

The requests among the education officials for an increased presence of donor representatives could also be understood as a familiarity of power structures nationally. As such they had to adapt to two systems of governance, representing the donors and the national government, which put the education officials in situations where politically rational behaviour was difficult adapt to.

Responses to governance

I began this section by pointing to the positions held by the education officials in relation to discourses of policy and context. As I established in chapter III, one way of understanding governmentality is to view it as the relationship between political rationality and social practices.[250] The education officials were in the position of not only balancing different political rationalities emanating from the donors and national government, but to also balance this in relation to social practices that they were part of.

Regarding development cooperation this took on different guises. The education officials had understood that the development cooperation process was defined by an aptness on their part to follow the regulations of donors. Therefore, energy was devoted to 'respecting the process' of donors as that was the politically rational behaviour to secure continued funding. There was however also political rationalities to consider within the national government system, which for instance dealt with hierarchies and concentration of decision-making power which the education officials were well aware of. As mentioned previously, the education officials considered Laos to be a top-down society, which has certain effects on how power is distributed. Therefore, for those in mid-level management positions, a 'foreign expert' could be one channel through which existing local patterns of power distribution could be challenged. Apart from this, one can also reflect over how much of the structures of Lao societal organisation also prompted the education officials' wishes for donor presence. In a hierarchical, top-down context, there is reason to believe that the education officials were used to acting upon clear instructions. In the absence of donor representatives, they were thus placed in positions where this habit was challenged. They were rather

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[250] See p. 75

expected to make decision more independently, which was not part of a contextual practice.

Another way of understanding why donor presence was sought for by the education officials is to understand it as an act of resistance to the type of 'partnership' that they encountered. As such donor presence could enable an attempt by the education officials to redefine what cooperation and partnership entailed. In this respect, cooperation and partnership in their context translated into collaboration which involved developing friendships and trust which was 'a Lao way of doing business'. That this was emphasised among the education officials could also be understood as an attempt to resist colonially marked relationships that placed them in the position of the subordinate, which was one effect of the modus operandi of development cooperation.

Negotiating learner-centred approaches

Policy and contextual discourses regarding education pointed to how the issue was discursively constructed in different ways in policy documents and among life-history respondents. The documents largely dealt with education from the EFA-perspective activating discourses of both 'human rights' and 'the market'. The life-history respondents spoke of education as a teacher-centred endeavour that focused on rote-learning and that did not automatically identify education as something that historically or even recently (in the 2000's) had been available to the entire population. These were examples of discourse that the education officials met and that they in different ways had to deal with. On the one hand they had to address the requirements of different international and national EFA policies, i.e. to provide education for all members of society. On the other hand, they also had to address contextual circumstance which made EFA difficult to achieve due to historical, traditional and fiscal circumstances. The life-histories for instance, pointed out that access to education was a fairly complex issue that was determined by a number of different factors; gender, networks, social status and geography to mention some. This was also addressed in both Lao policy, which has pointed to the rather difficult contextual situation regarding supplying education broadly, and in previous research that has for instance discussed the effects of having Lao as language of instruction.[251]

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[251] See chapter II

While policy discourses constructed education as something concerning all members of society, the contextual discourses constructed education as something concerning only some members of society. The education officials however focused on the 5-pointed star and learner-centred methods in their discussions of education. The 5-pointed star thus went from being a fairly silent policy discourse to being a prominent discourse among the education officials.

The logic of the discourse of the 5-pointed star was that it represented an operationalisation of the concept of learner-centred education. This was introduced in the Concept Paper from 1994, which pointed to the need for a new method of teaching. This was subsequently, identified as learner-centred education. The issue was however how these aims could be reached, which gave rise to the 5-pointed star.

There were some interesting aspects regarding how the 5-pointed star was discussed among the education officials. There was a wide recognition among the education officials that the 5-pointed star was the Lao education strategy of choice. By using the different points in the star, learner-centred methods were supposed to be secured. The experience of the officials was however that the 5-pointed star had done little to change educational practices.[252] This recognition led the officials to activate different discourses regarding education and teacher education, constructing these as being of low quality and lacking professionalism.[253] In this respect, there was however recognition of contextual factors that had been especially visible in the wake of EFA. As one official noted, demands of increasing enrolment, which was an effect of the EFA policy, had concrete outcomes for practice. To meet demands of increased enrolment, under-qualified teachers were recruited to fill teaching positions, and this had effects on the quality of the education system.[254] As the life-histories also pointed out, the situation of teachers could be rather difficult in terms of making a living off of one's work. One education official also reflected about this stating that "it is very easy for teachers as we teach now,"[255] i.e. sticking to well known methods supported teachers who needed to work outside of their teaching professions. Therefore, the demands of access, quality and relevance that were key

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[252] See p. 117
[253] See p. 117f
[254] See p. 118
[255] See p. 117

words for the EFA reform were problematised not only in contextual discourses but also among the education officials.

That the 5-pointed star gained such relevance among the education officials could also be understood as an indication of how the discourse-power-knowledge relation shifted from donors to national policy in the transition from the policy implementation. My argument is that the Lao English-language policies following the Concept Paper in 1994 were produced within a specific context where discourses of the donor community had gained a hegemonic position. Therefore, the consensus regarding the privileged discourses was nearly absolute. Borrowing the words of Daly,[256] discourses travelled well between donor and national policy. From a post-colonial perspective, this could be one example of a geographical flow of knowledge that has its root system in a colonial order, which Landström for instance pointed to: Knowledge is produced in the first-world-north and then exported globally.[257]

Something however happened with EFA discourses when policy was transferred. In this case, the effect were that the 5-pointed star, which was a national policy marked by a communist, collective discourse, gained relevance in education officials discussions on education. Why did the 5-pointed star then have such a strong position in the discourse of education officials?

The 5-pointed star was an expression of a pedagogical model focusing on activities, group work, questioning, materials and relevance to daily life. It was known as the new method of teaching by Lao educationalists.[258] The idea was that the 5-pointed star would lead to learner-centred teaching and learning practices. Among the education officials, there were expressions of having command over learner-centred education[259] while there was also admittance that they were not fully clear about what the concept entailed, and maybe more importantly, that teachers in schools at all levels did not understand this new method of teaching. When learner-centred education made the move to the 5-pointed star it focused one of the points, namely group work,[260] which can be considered to be a fair accommodation to the Lao context where the collective, rather than the individual, was focused.

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[256] See p. 58
[257] See p. 67
[258] See chapter II and p. 116
[259] See p. 123
[260] See p. 123

Another aspect that came forth among the education officials was the discussion of whether learner-centred education really was such a new invention, since similar ideas had been utilised in previous systems as well. However, the education official that reflected over this still concluded that there were differences:

> *In our time we also asked questions but there was not much involvement from the students. We did not let them think or work together and share ideas. They just work individually, answered individually. Actually, they couldn't move, they had to behave, keep quiet and listen only to the teacher who pointed to who will answer, so something is different with the new method.*[261]

The education officials held a slightly ambiguous attitude to the new educational policies and the implications that these had for practice. There was recognition that the current system was failing to live up to the expectations of national and international policies:

> *It seems as if our situation is not suitable enough because we lack resources, and we lack teachers, good teachers. That's why it is difficult to promote this kind of teaching. When we think curriculum should be child-centred, we train teachers to use, but when they go back they teach the same. They cannot change. One thing depends on the situation of the class, is to big, the table are not movable, and one thing is the knowledge, how to prepare. The teachers sometimes understand that [group-work] is learner-centred but when I observe, they make groups of five or six students, children, but the teacher still teach teacher-centred because they don't understand.*[262]

Allowing the 5-pointed star to primarily activate a group-work practice can be regarded as a rational strategy for a number of reasons. There was a resource problem that was indicated at both the in policy and among the life-history respondents. Thus, focusing on one point was better than to not accommodate policy at all. Further, in a collectivist context such as the Lao it might also make good sense to focus on the group-work dimension since new educational discourses always have to be incorporated into already existing discourses. The strong position of group-work as a learner-centred strategy could then gain meaning within the local context. It becomes a discourse and a practice that makes sense. What seems to be the case among the

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[261] Interview 9: 293-298, p. 124
[262] Interview 9: 167-176, p. 123

education officials however was that instead of speaking of group-work as a contextually wise approach to learner-centred education, they expressed insecurity. Since the education officials were in the midst of a negotiation process regarding education policy in practice, this was not surprising. They for instance, claimed that the key concepts in national policy still were badly defined, giving rise to questions of how learner-centred education could really be understood. This indicates that there were collisions between different discourses, which from a Foucauldian perspective can be understood as an expression of power-knowledge relations. In this case, EFA and learner-centred education were discourses that had to be acknowledged as that was the politically rational behaviour for acquiring support. As one respondent noted, not focusing on the funding was nearly impossible.[263] Thus, since EFA was such a strong discourse within development cooperation it was difficult to resist it in the rhetoric among educationalists. This did however not necessarily mean that it reached a hegemonic position practice. The experiences among the education officials of living in Laos provided closer links to and better knowledge of contextual circumstances. This led them to negotiate issues regarding 5-pointed star and learner-centred education. Was it communicative teaching, was it learning by doing, was it a technique, or was it a philosophy? These expressions of uncertainty regarding national and donor policy goals and their accommodation to practice could also be interpreted as resistance of development cooperation discourses, and the demands that these put on the Lao government.

Effects of nayobay

When education officials activated the discourse of the 5-pointed star in their discussions regarding educational philosophy and reform, they to some extent escaped discussions of access. Not discussing education in terms of EFA and thus access, they did not have to address nayobay either. Nayobay was closely linked to contextual practices regarding access and it was also formally and informally recognised in Lao education policy. Acknowledging the position of nayobay could potentially created conflict regarding development discourses on access and equity.

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Nayobay did have an effect on education officials practice, but let us start with recapturing some of the central points of nayobay from chapter V.

Nayobay could from one perspective be regarded as a policy of affirmative action that corresponded well with the policies of EFA and the emphasis on inclusion of women and ethnic minorities. This perspective was also pointed out in the nayobay interviews as one of the intended effects; namely that those previously disadvantaged should have a fair chance to enter the education system.[264]

What seemed to be a more common application for nayobay was that those, already, part of the official system could extend nayobay quotas to family members and other relatives. In the case of NUOL, there were also criteria set for each year for entrance to university studies. As the education official explained, these criteria were decided at central level and then dispersed to faculty level where the entrance requests were administered.[265] The formal criteria included persons who for example were considered to be 'very important persons', or those who somehow had previous connections to the official system such as children of teachers.

There was also another more unofficial aspect of nayobay described in the interview, namely that of the *jot mai noi*, the small letter, where informal requests for nayobay were made. This instance represented one that did not seem to be incorporated into the official reach of the nayobay policy but which rather represented one of the unofficial sides of nayobay. As such it represented a request that could not be disregarded if the inquirer held a similar or higher position to the one receiving the request.[266]

One point of criticism regarding the nayobay system was that it had effects on academic performance. Since nayobay entrances were not based on academic merits, it was feared that the students admitted would not have the necessary qualifications for higher level studies and thus the quality would be affected.[267] On the other hand nayobay was also considered to be a locally relevant path to ensuring the goals of EFA[268] since it made way for students who otherwise might not have been admitted to university studies. As such, nayobay was

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[264] See pp. 110, 112
[265] See p. 111
[266] See p. 114
[267] See p. 111
[268] See p. 112

reformulated into a discourse that was in line with the goals of providing access, i.e. education for all.

Negotiating, reformulating and resisting educational discourses

The discourses of the education officials provided examples of what happened when policy discourses on education reached a level where implementation was more focused. The argument here is that this can be understood through the lenses of Foucault's discourse-power-knowledge theorising.

Policy discourse was an expression of how discourse-power-knowledge was structured in a policy context. As suggested earlier in this chapter, policy discourse can be understood as an expression of the hegemonic position that the first-world-north holds in formulating preferential right of interpretation. The suggestion is that the education officials were well aware of this and thus subjected themselves to certain techniques of governance in order to secure funding.

There seemed however to be a shift occurring in how closely development cooperation discourses on education were followed when educational practice was actually addressed by the officials. It was as if the prerogative of donor discourses on EFA was weakened, and instead the 5-pointed star was activated as a common discourse regarding educational reform in Laos. How can this process then be understood? Donor discourses obviously have privileged positions within policy-making which in turn effects which discourses education officials activate in certain situations. In other situations, there is however evidence that donor policy discourses loose their position and instead, discourses crafted within nationally policy gain relevance. The conclusion that can be drawn is that power is relational. Discourses can have hegemonic positions in certain contexts and these can also be privileged in the global economy of knowledge production. From this perspective, discourses are intimately connected to structures of power and the knowledge that these discourses produce and re-produce. However, these processes are bound to contexts and as such they can never attain an absolute, global status. Thus, in the local context of educational development in Laos, donor discourses on education are one set of discourses that have to compete with discourses produced locally which also express certain structures of power-knowledge relations.

In this sense, the education officials are part of an apparatus that produces and re-produces discourse locally. The closer they came to educational discussion of implementation character, the stronger locally constructed discourses on education became. The 5-pointed star and local interpretations of learner-centred education were starting points for the discussions. In activating these discourses, the education officials pointed to the unrealistic demands that EFA put on the education sector in Laos. Resisting the demands of EFA by referring to local constraints could also be interpreted as a resistance to what education for all would entail since it would also mean that education nationally would have to reformulate the Lao Lum privilege that came with the current system. This could also be one explanation of attempts at formulating nayobay as local translation of education for all. The life-history accounts of nayobay constructed it as a practice that had closer links to positions of power, and that as such, privileged those already privileged. From this perspective, it could hardly be regarded as a principle or a practice that would promote education for all. There was however other dimensions to nayobay that rather challenged how issues of access could be regarded. From this perspective, a meritocratic view on access privileging previous (educational) performance was not necessarily considered to be the only or even the best way to foresee educational success. Rather, someone's kin or background was a guarantor as good as any other. This system would however be problematic within a discourse promoting education for all when contextual factors were such that there were limited possibilities of actually offering education to all. The education officials were familiar with this context and they were also familiar with how privilege was organised within the Lao context. Therefore, the negotiations surrounding education entailed to rather place themselves within local power-knowledge discourses that with the logic of the local context explained education as a collective endeavour, i.e. group work, and where local practices also could be constructed as means for ensuring access for all.

Part of the EFA framework and the Sida/SAREC project also emphasised the inclusion of gender and ethnic minorities since these groups often had been excluded from receiving education. One of the issues that arose was correspondingly what it meant to extend a new pedagogical practice to also include girls, women and members of ethnic minorities?

Negotiating gender

Policy and context gave examples of different discourses regarding gender that the education officials had to negotiate. Policy discourses were quite coherent both internationally and nationally in describing gender as socially constructed and as such, historically and contextually constituted rather than grounded in biology. Further, gender mainstreaming also had a privileged position within policy, rather reducing gender issues to a technical-rational exercise that bore the marks of a specific type of struggle for gender equity that had taken place in the first-world-north.

The life-histories added to this by problematising lived experiences that showed how gender did play a role in an educational career. The life-histories however, also addressed a greater complexity made out of social relations, networks, nayobay, geography, and specific historical junctures that affected for whom, how and why education became a possibility.

The education officials were well aware of the importance of including gender into their work. What gender referred to was however subject to negotiation.

A women's issue or a problem of the 'Other'

Some officials would argue that gender was not really a problem; female officials were to a larger degree being promoted and given opportunities for upgrading and a lot of these opportunities came through development cooperation:

> *Luckily, many projects that offer scholarships and fellowships, they clearly identify that 50 and 50 men, women so it's good. I have heard that SAREC also stresses gender issues; that women are given first priority in SAREC programmes so that's why we encourage our women to study harder, to work harder […]. We always encourage women to upgrade, to step up.*[269]

A gender mainstreaming discourse often guided the discussions and only to a limited extent did it touch upon the teaching/learning situation but when it did, it marked a wish to move beyond gender mainstreaming:

> *The term gender is fashionable now in any kind of work. But in practice it's still abstract for me, not concrete, even though we say*

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[269] Interview 2: 554-569, p. 126

> *female, male, equality, whatever. But for education, I have some doubts about how to put it into the curriculum, how to put in the textbook and what kind of education really that we can bring about gender. So far we say that we should enrol females, men; encourage females to go to school. It's okay but how do we really teach gender, that's the question to me. I don't know. Everybody says it should be like this.* [270]

That gender issues and gender mainstreaming were two different aspects was also acknowledged by other education officials:

> *I haven't had opportunity to talk about gender in the classroom. I just discussed with different people that this idea should be implemented at the faculty. But in term of selecting women teacher for different work, for many projects, we have talked about that for a long time. But this idea is quite new. I have to insert it in my speech, in my year plan that teaching in class, teachers have to encourage women students to work more than men.* [271]

Gender was in the above quote constructed as a novel idea that apparently was understood as different to gender mainstreaming practices which was constructed as a familiar practice. However, what was also expressed was that gender issues was a women's issue which required women to take action in order to change current gendered discourses and practices. Working with gender thus entailed to push "women to step up." [272].

Furthermore, gender was constructed as 'problem' placed outside urban area and outside the Lao Lum group. It was instead constructed as a 'rural problem':

> *It is just in the city that women are equal with men. In the countryside they are not equal. They respect man, wife respect husband but sometimes husband don't respect wife. It is not equal and it seems that women accept that situation, and how to change that? Because women here, not all of them have their origin here, they are from countryside. The tradition of the countryside is moving to the city too.* [273]

and as an 'ethnic problem':

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[270] Interview 9: 428-438, p. 125
[271] Interview 7: 1046-1050, p. 127
[272] See p. 127
[273] Interview 7: 936-941, p. 127

Because in Laos, there are some parts, some minorities that exploit women, okay. But mainly in Laos, in general we separate the work, like females cook or work with something not very heavy but men mostly work in the field, the hard things are mostly done by men. But now I think that even if gender is fashionable it also has some good influence on us because now, women and men mainly work in the office. The work is more similar so gender is understood differently from the people in the village where they separate the work.[274]

This processes served to construct discourses of the 'Other' thus marginalising those already in disadvantaged positions in Lao society, i.e. ethnic minorities in rural localities. Another issue that the above quote also raised was that a gendered division of work that built on ideas of gender complementarity which constructed women as physically weaker, and therefore not as able as men to do hard labour. This view on gendered differences had however made its way into urban office contexts affecting views on who could do what, which marginalised women opportunities within the government.[275]

The education officials however recognised that there were some issues that needed to be addressed that went beyond constructing gender as an ethnic, rural problem. As one official noted, the issue that constituted a problem was that "in Lao culture […] men don't want to accept women."[276]

There was however education officials that extended the discussions to more openly included perspective on gender that activated a biological, essential discourse. As one official remarked "biologically and physically we cannot ask men to work as good in the house."[277]

Given that gender equity had been on the agenda formally since 1975,[278] and that gender was a prioritised area within development cooperation it can appear somewhat surprising that gender issues seemed to invoke such insecurity among the education officials. However, there are a few reflections that can be made regarding this. There is an acknowledgement even among donors that discussions on gender equity focus too much on mainstreaming issues.[279] Therefore, it is less surprising that those seeking funding try to understand the

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[274] Interview 9: 470-476, p. 128
[275] See p. 130
[276] See p. 128
[277] See p. 129
[278] See for example Ng's (1991) discussions of the social agenda of the LPRP
[279] See p. 106 where Sida points to this very discussion

discourse among the donors in order to comply with donor policy. Gender mainstreaming thus becomes the modus operandi. Furthermore, as Stuart-Fox point out, the socialist project in Laos still placed women primarily within the spheres of the home,[280] leaving little room for a 'gender revolution' within the communist revolution. As a result, many of the higher posts within Lao government at all levels were filled by men, NUOL being no exception to the rule. The only staff category where women were in the majority was the administration and apart from this, the majority of all other positions were held by men, whom also had better qualifications in terms of degrees (National University of Laos, 2006: 5). This can also explain the focus on upgrading female members of staff. Notwithstanding, as one of the respondents said, the discourse on gender equity was there but in practice, women were rarely elected to positions of power.[281] The patriarchal structures that organised life in Laos thus collided with a gender mainstreaming discourse. In this respect, donor policy could however function as means to break patriarchal privileges by pointing to mainstreaming demands from donors, thus creating opportunities for women to enter male dominated arenas.

Negotiating, reformulating and resisting gender discourses

The education officials somehow had to incorporate gender into discussions of education reform as that was an explicit perspective in both international and national policy. The issue of gender was however not uncomplicated. There were different discourses surrounding gender which positioned the issue differently and in doing so, it also pointed to the validity of Butler's reasoning; namely that gender is an "ongoing discursive practice […] regulated by various social means."[282] These social means are, according to Butler, created by and within discourse which serves to explain why the education officials activated different discourses in their attempts to discuss the issue of gender. The education officials moved beyond different contexts in their efforts to understand gender in general and gender in relation to development cooperation. As a result, they also activated different discourses depending on which discourses that were more common in a given context.

Since discussions of gender were so intimately connected to development cooperation, it is not surprising that gender

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mainstreaming was a recurrent way of constructing gender. That this further was more focused on staff than on students and the pedagogical situation was equally understandable since the projects that many of these education officials participated in were directed towards capacity building, which was certainly the case within the Sida/SAREC project. Thus, the discourses of development cooperation which also pointed to the argument made earlier in this chapter, namely that gender mainstreaming was a discourse with a stronger hold than the discourse of gender as a social construction. This was reflected in the education officials' statements regarding the relative ease of incorporating gender equity goals into policy and practice, while still battling with the persisting difficulty in understanding what gender actually could mean.

The discussions also reflected the local constructions of gender that were present in the Lao context which reflected a view of gender as complementary but that also signalled the relative difficulty for women to attain a different status. There were expressions that pointed to this dilemma, namely that in rhetoric, gender issue were promoted but in practice, were resisted. This could explain why gender was constructed as a women's issue; i.e. the education officials were well aware of the 'fact' that men would not join the struggle to open up for women and therefore, women themselves had to challenge existing gendered discourses and practice.

The different ways that the education officials however positioned gender in their discussions can be understood as an indication that gendered discourses have come across a juncture between what de los Reyes and Martinsson call separate logics.[283] These different logics represent discourses that figuratively are fighting for the preferential right of interpretation. What is at stake here is the power to define what constitutes development cooperation, education and gender. How processes such as these develop, have to be continuously examined and reflected upon but the expected outcomes also depend on where we stand in our understanding. It is argued here, in line with Landström, that policy discourses mirror "political and economic structures in the global world order."[284] Discourse analysis however offers the possibility of understanding these structures as constructions which have their starting point in European Enlightenment which claimed a privileged position for first-world-north knowledge. Power is however fluid. And therefore we are now

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[283] See p. 74
[284] See p. 70

at a point where easy answers need to be deconstructed to reveal the complexities of how discourse-power-knowledge relations create 'truths'. This is not in the least done through the deconstructions that take place in local contexts, just as the respondents in this thesis has engaged in.

Reflections on Discourse, Power and Knowledge

At the beginning of this chapter, I borrowed the words of Bové who pointed to some important questions to consider when engaging in discourse analysis. How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?

It is clear that different discourse govern the strategies and ways of thinking and acting at the different arenas. Following the thoughts of Foucault, discourses are produced as a result of certain power-knowledge relations that provide indications of how power and preferential rights of interpretation are distributed in a certain context. Development cooperation does not escape this.

For third-world-south nations, development cooperation might be a 'risky business'. There is real risk that funding will be withdrawn if processes are not up to standard with the demands of development cooperation organisations. In the case of Sida, this attitude is understandable since funding is based on taxes. Sida therefore has to show the Swedish population that the tax money has been wisely spent. This leads, however, to a situation where monitoring aspects become important, and where standards for good governance, democracy, education and gender build on notions that originate from the first-world-north. This puts development cooperation organisations in a privileged position where the potential room for partnership can be questioned. The important question that arises from this is; do these bureaucratic systems allow for the contextual analysis that is emphasised in donor policy? Is there room for a process where deconstructions of key concepts are made possible, and where fruitful discussions and questionings can take place regarding issues such as development, learner-centred education and gender?

The possibilities are there. Many fruitful discussions take place among educationalists in Laos and it is through these discussions that reform comes about. The life-history respondents are proof of this. They are examples of interested educationalists that have worked and continue to work in order to upgrade themselves and their teaching practices.

They have observed and reflected over different educational practices, and they also have good contextual understanding regarding both the positive and negative within Lao education. The discourses which these individuals embody should be given more attention within development cooperation. Doing so could be the start of a process that accepts that the discourses of EFA, learner-centred education and gender are constructed and therefore open to deconstruction.

Lao voices are quite silent in the national policies that are available in English. By this I mean that some discourses such as EFA and gender mainstreaming have certainly travelled well between donor and national policies. The interpretation I make of this, based on my theoretical outlook, is that the post-colonial claims of the privileged and hegemonic position of first-world-north knowledge have more than observational value. It has real impact on developing countries that need financial support, thus putting the whole discourse of partnership into question. EFA has established itself as a powerful discourse that has spread globally as an effect of the existing power-knowledge relations. Questioning this discourse is today nearly impossible because what would that imply; that citizens of third-world-south should not have the same rights and access to literacy as citizens of the first-world-north? Or that gender issues should not be focused in an attempt to secure the rights of girl-children and women? If context matters, which is acknowledged in the policies, how, then, are the contextual factors taken into account?

Many of the respondents in this study have discussed the organisation of the Sida/SAREC project at NUOL. On the one hand the project has brought great opportunity to the university and its faculties, on the other hand the whole project is vulnerable to the misunderstandings and demands that are difficult to live up to. This has been apparent throughout the whole process and there are different ways of assessing the situation. I have previously in this thesis given examples of how meetings between Sida/SAREC representatives and staff at NUOL could evolve. It was not uncommon that a discourse of superiority and subordination developed placing the Sida/SAREC representatives in the uneasy position of the superior and the staff of NUOL in the equally uneasy position of the subordinate. The agenda of these meetings was to establish how money had been and would be used, to be able to trace it and to determine whether it has been used in unsanctioned ways. A discourse of superiority and subordination is however difficult to combine with a partnership discourse as the former serves to establish

which rules that govern, and in this case it is the rules of Swedish development cooperation that have to be adhered to. The risk is that not sufficient energy is put into finding models that are more contextually relevant, and more importantly trying to have an open mind to contextual discourses and practices. Nayobay is one such example which by many would be considered to have corrupt elements. How could we otherwise understand the practice of securing a place of study for one's child or employment opportunities for one's husband or wife? Or do we dare to take the thought one step further, deconstructing our own discourses of the importance of grades and merits? If we do so we might find it highly logical that this practice exists in the Lao context. Kinship matters; the collective matters and it might be sound social practice, given the low salary levels, to have alternative strategies to keep educated staff on the less than lucrative pay roll as they are crucial for the needed educational reform. If context matters, it needs more attention than it is presently given. But this also requires that we, who represent the first-world-north in one capacity or another, are willing to acknowledge the privileged position we hold in relation to the third-world-south. Only then can contextually sound reforms of for instance education and gender come about.

On April 13, 2007, the news broke that the president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz, had been involved in what, by the standards of the World Bank, could be regarded as corrupt activity. He had, according to the New York Times online edition, "arranged a pay raise for his companion at the time of her transfer from the bank to the State Department" (Weisman, 2007). This was especially conspicuous since even employees at the World Bank, according to the article, had questioned Mr. Wolfowitz's policies: "especially those cracking down on corruption in which he suspended aid to several countries" (Weisman, 2007). The news broke rather timely for me, as I for a long time had thought about how to represent nayobay. That same evening I watched the news, hearing Mr. Wolfowitz's plea for understanding, acknowledging that he had made a mistake, using as an explanation that he was recently appointed president when this happened and therefore did this out of ignorance. I have not included this in order to point a finger at anyone. Rather, I hope that it will serve as a reminder that we should be humble before we judge the actions of others. Thus, if the president of the World Bank has difficulty understanding rules and regulations, maybe it is not so surprising that the same can apply to people elsewhere involved in development cooperation.

So can the first-world-north go local? My answer to that would be yes and no. The first-world-north is from the perspectives that have guided this analysis, privileged in the global production of knowledge and is thus, placed in a position of power. Despite this, hegemonic systems are not static and are furthermore open to negotiation in the local context. They might invoke performative acts, but the result of these acts in local contexts will most probably be a reformulation. In this sense, power can indeed be understood as relational and any attempt to imitate a perceived 'original', or even resist it, will eventually give rise to different practices, understandings and meanings.

The discursive interactions and collisions within development cooperation can therefore be understood as moving in two different directions; one where the local context is de-powered and one where it re-powers itself. The de-powering is a covert process where development cooperation makes its way into local contexts under the guise of partnership, invoking positive connotations among those receiving support. The partnership discourse offers the possibilities of jointly working with reform and it signals a distribution of power among the involved parties. What become the effects of development cooperation is however that the partnership discourse is put into question when it becomes clear that the partners in fact have different positions within the framework of development cooperation. The first-world-north does have a privileged position that has been established through colonial, political and economic processes which have established the first-world-north in a position where it has agenda-setting privileges. Thus, discourses of EFA and gender mainstreaming gain a hegemonic status in policy, and become discourses that also are activated among education officials and life-history respondents. One would notwithstanding be deceived if it assumed that the processes end here. There are of course also discourses in local context which do not cease to exist with the introduction of discourse from other contexts. It is here that I believe that a process of re-powering takes place. Local discourses are part of a context's preferential right of interpretation and if these discourses are contested processes are likely to be set in motion. Thus, EFA and gender mainstreaming might be accepted rhetorically but through different strategies new formulations are taking shape which can alter the effects intended by the donors. As such, EFA becomes learner-centred-education which becomes the 5-pointed star. Likewise, gender mainstreaming might be used to promote female government officials that would have gained positions anyway; not through the

merits of their gender but through the merits of their social networks. In doing so, the preferential right of interpretation can be re-claimed and the local context can re-power itself.

Where does this leave educational reform in Laos? There is no doubt that different political, cultural, historical and contextual discourses are active on the different arenas presented in this thesis. These discourses have different reach and different effects within and between the arenas. There are however effects. Development cooperation organisations might have the upper hand in many respects given their positions on the global market of economy and privileged knowledge. This does, however, not guarantee that the intended effects are reached. What is clear is that since 1994, donor intervention into Lao educational policy-making has had effects insofar that there is an active discussion regarding issue of EFA and learner-centred education among educationalist. What is also clear is that this reform has sparked discussions regarding local circumstances that need to be taken into account within development cooperation projects. Therefore, discussions regarding the provision of education for all members of society have to be balanced against the local possibilities of providing this. These discussions must of course also include how educational change can extend to disadvantaged members of society, which in the Lao context would include a discussion about including girls, women and ethnic minorities into the process. Part of this discussion deals with acknowledging that it can becomes problematic to privilege gender over other social categories as the importance of gender is strengthened as well as weakened by other intersecting social categories. Therefore, it was for example possible for the female life-history respondents to resist local expectations for their futures. Understanding more about these local and contextual strategies would be highly useful also in development cooperation as this could shift the focus from first-world-north perspectives to local formations of discourse-power-knowledge relations. Then the spirit of partnership that is sought for within development cooperation might become a reality rather than rhetoric.

As I write the final sentences in this thesis yet another example of third-world-south nations' vulnerabilities unfortunately presents itself which can have concrete effects on Laos. Sida decided in August 2007 to limit the number of countries which it will cooperate with. Among the nations which are eliminated from the list, is Laos. The consequences of this decision are yet to be seen, however, it can certainly put a stop to a partnership at university level that has been

under construction during the past seven years. This also points to the arena that this thesis has not explored, namely the arena where individuals from the first-world-north and the third-world-south collaborate and form partnerships locally under the axis of development cooperation. There are many such examples in Laos that involve grassroots activity where local and contextual issues are explored and where hegemonic understandings and discourses are challenged. This would certainly add to understanding the arenas represented in this thesis.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Overview of analysed documents

Donor policies	Lao policies
The Dakar Framework for Action - Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments (UNESCO, 2000)	Concept Paper: Primary and Lower-Secondary Teacher Education (Ministry of Education & Teacher Development Centre, 1994)
Integrating Gender into the World Bank's Work: A Strategy for Action (World Bank, 2002)	The Education Strategic Vision Up To the Year 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2000)
Striking a Balance: On women and men in development cooperation (Sida, 1999)	Education for All: National Plan of Action 2003-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2005)
Education for All: a Human Right and Basic Need. Policy for Sida's Development Cooperation in the Education Sector (Sida, 2001)	Lao PDR Gender Profile (GRID, November 2005)
Promoting Gender Equality in Development Co-operation (Sida, 2005)	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d)
	Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015, Teacher Education Plan 2006-2010 (Ministry of Education, n.d)

Appendix B

Interview guides

Themes for nayobay interview, 1
•The possible translations of nayobay
•The significance of nayobay in Lao society, historically, presently
•On what principles does nayobay build (nayobay vs. corruption)
•Nayobay vs. qualification
•Effects of nayobay; within government, university and so on
•What happens if nayobay is no longer used?

Themes for nayobay interview, 2
•Background nayobay, historical roots?
•Nayobay in theory and practice (official and unofficial sides of nayobay)
•Which sectors of society does nayobay apply to?
•The concrete example of NUOL and FoE, applications of nayobay
•Effects of nayobay, positive/negative?

Themes for Education official interviews at NUOL
•The start of the Sida/SAREC process – how was it initiated?
•What role do you have in the process
•Reasons for applying for funds from Sarec
•Experiences of working with cooperating institutions in Sweden (i.e. Sarec, Umea University)/Faculties at NUOL (positive/negative/amount of input in the process)
•Prioritised areas within the cooperation
•Visions for the cooperation
•Research vision for NUOL in general; how is the situation now, what needs to be changed, who are the stakeholder? Connections between research and the practice of teaching?

•General experiences of working with donor organisation (donor perspectives versus national perspectives, Western academic perspectives versus national academic perspectives etc.)

•Additional themes?

Themes for Education official interview at MoE

•Background of the MoE

•Teacher training; important issues presently

•Connections to the FoE

•Learner-centred education:

- Theory (understandings of the MoE)

- Practice (Teacher Training Colleges/Schools, Pre-in-service, within teaching practice)

- Within development cooperation projects

•Gender

- The situation of gender and education in Laos

- Challenges facing education regarding gender issues

- Contextual factors regarding gender

- Gender and development cooperation projects

Life-history interviews

Introduction to interviews

The aim of the life-history interview that you are about to grant me is that I want to get more of an understanding of how you have ended up where you are, i.e. as a highly educated person working within the academy in Laos and what, in your opinion, has been important influential factors in your life and on the academic choices and opportunities that you have had.

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