

**Civil society's role and contributions towards good government and
poverty reduction in the Lao PDR**

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Word Count: 16,786

Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate to receive financial support from the Open Society Foundations to complete my MSc study in Sustainability, Culture and Development at Ustinov College, Durham University, UK. I am very grateful for the assistance.

I would like to express my great appreciation to Dr. Ben Campbell for the on-going patience and professional support from a distance as I returned early to Laos in August.

My sincere thanks to mentor and friends regardless of their formal and informal role; each of them contributed to this research from their own areas of professional expertise.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the interview participants in this study. Surely, this research would not have been possible without the kind cooperation of the staff of civil society of both local and international organizations.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to review the form of engagement between civil society associations and local state agencies by exploring the constructive role of civil society organizations, particularly the local nongovernmental organizations such as Non Profit Associations in influencing the good governance and their contributions toward the poverty reduction in Laos.

In line with this study, the project explores the various means that are associated with the concept of civil society in the context of Laos through project implementations of NGOs that are advocating and supporting the community livelihoods and interests in Savannakhet and Vientiane provinces.

This study also presents a gap between the policy document and practice of the enabling environment process for NGOs to grow by creating the space and cooperation with some degree of trust within a society.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background:

Around the world, there is wide recognition that societal, economic and environmental problems cannot be solved by governments acting on their own, and meanwhile there is a **growing role** for non-state actors to play in this regard (Brinkerhoff, J.M., and Brinkerhoff, D.W, 2002). This demonstrates the need for partnerships between the state and civil society for policy implementation, focusing on the basic factors partnerships need to deal with, to be effective. These include specification of objectives and degree of convergence, mechanisms for combining effort and managing cooperation, determination of appropriate roles and responsibilities, and capacity to fulfill those roles and responsibilities (Derick W. Brinkerhoff., (1999).

Globally, civil society organizations are playing an increasing role in supporting the formal government with new ways of doing governance work and creating public value within the present economic and policy climate (Patsy, H. 2014). Thus, it is argued that at the level of the United Nations, donor and civil society partnership experience helps in identifying opportunities and constraints, (Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff (2004). Some scholars have also suggested that merging the civil society discourse in democracy theory, with the development and civil society peace building discourse leads to a much clearer and focused understanding of social development, conflict prevention and reconstruction.

Regionally, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), civil society will continue to grow and strengthen the links between people in the region (Jo Ann Fagot Aviel, 2000) and furthermore it is also argued that the key missions of civil society are to promote and support the poor and marginalized groups with full participation in development processes which are free from dominating groups (Michael, E. 2004). Similarly, Alan Collins (2008) states that in ASEAN the prospect that ASEAN is moving away from being state-centric and elite-driven to one that is “people-empowering” has brought ASEAN onto the sensor screens of civil society organizations (CSOs).

Nationally, with one-single political party (Lao People’s Revolutionary Party) ruling the country over four decades, space for political discussion is extremely restricted and the population is disconnected from political processes. Since the beginning of 1990, civil society organizations

have played a critical role within the national socio-economic development framework and their valuable contributions were found more visible at the grassroots levels associated with community service delivery.

Today, the Lao government is riding a top-down vehicle of development where wheels are oiled with a vocabulary of bottom-up discourse (Grillo, R.D. et al 1997). As a result, the issue of good governance remains one of the biggest challenges in the Lao PDR. This is particularly relevant to ensuring that the poorest actively participate and truly voice their concerns to benefit from development processes, particularly in regard to promoting local knowledge and natural resource management. A number of research papers (Polonyi, 2011) argue that socio-economic development in Laos does not benefit substantial parts of the population, while the disparities in terms of income and access to basic services are growing rapidly and continuously.

1.2 Current Problem

The mass organizations, including the media, are state run, the trade union movement is a branch of the government, there is only one political party, space for political discussion is extremely restricted and the population is disengaged from the political process. In the absence of an organized civil society, mechanisms for public accountability or debate about government policy in the public domain remain extremely limited (Delnoye, Rik. 2009).

Originally, the Lao government did not accept the concept of civil society, but today civil society has become one of the central subjects in the dialogue between development partners and the Lao government. Also, the civil society contribution to development has been acknowledged by development stakeholders (aid agencies, governments and communities, among others). However its role in influencing an inclusive development governance and poverty reduction is still limited and is yet to be defined and integrated in the policy as well as the implementation levels.

Despite good economic progress made in the past two decades, the Lao PDR remains one of the poorest countries in South East Asia and large parts of the rural population, particularly ethnic groups, have virtually no channels to voice their interests. To address this, civil society could still be instrumental in promoting and contributing to a more inclusive development policy and practice, responding to the needs of the people. Similarly, civil society could also be instrumental in advocating for increased social engagement with the possibility of addressing community

rights and leadership empowerment. To justify this, over two decades, CSO's contributions were found more visible at the grass-root level associated with community service delivery.

In 2009, the central government Prime Minister's Office has issued the PM's decree 115, which gave legitimacy for CSOs to progressively expand their work and services in rural communities throughout the country. Now, over 160 NPAs operate in Laos, delivering development services in various sectors, such as agriculture and rural development, education, environment, unexploded ordinance, gender, health and natural resources management.

With more than 47 ethnic minority groups present in Laos, the majority of those groups have no channels to voice their interests. Basic rights and needs of other vulnerable groups in society are not met. The situation is even unclear on the engagement of local civil society associations with local state agencies (at provincial, district and village levels) in the Lao PDR. As a result, opportunities and constraints are difficult to identify and address respectively. However, it is believed that local civil society organizations could advocate for a more balanced sharing of benefits and empower local communities to raise their voice in expressing their livelihood interests. Therefore, this study attempts to assess the forms of engagement between local civil society associations and local state agencies (provincial, district and village functionalities in the Lao PDR).

1.3 Research objectives and research questions

In the light of the said overall goal of the study, this piece of research has aimed to review the forms of engagement between local civil society associations and local state agencies in the Lao PDR. By exploring the constructive role of civil society organizations, particularly the local non-governmental organizations such as Non Profit Associations (NPAs) in influencing good governance and their contributions to poverty reduction in Laos, it will seek to answer the following research questions:

- i) How do local associations and provincial state agencies describe themselves, their objectives and their activities?
- ii) What impact does the engagement of local state agencies and associations have on priority livelihood sectors in the communities?
- iii) What role do local associations play in channeling citizens 'voices' to local state agencies?

iv) What strategies should local associations use to overcome problems they face when seeking to engage local state agencies?

In line with these research questions, this dissertation argues that the forms of community engagement are diversified and are leading to the NPAs adopting different engagement approaches. In the light of this similarity, it is observed that the government recognizes the importance of increased effective partnerships with local non-governmental organizations, through which people's participation is central to ensuring the smooth implementation of the national socio-economic development plan III (2016-2020)¹ and thus to foster better service delivery and also to enhance transparency, accountability and inclusiveness in development. Strong and well organized civil society, particularly the local organizations that engage with community-based skills training and resource management capacity can lead to better, more sustainable solutions which meet the needs of all local community stakeholders. In this connection, it has been argued that policymakers can do their best to remove legal and regulatory barriers that stand in the way of business innovation and investment, while civil society groups can encourage the government to make more sustainable choices and provide community-based development models that combine betterment of livelihood of the poor with protection of the non-human environment (Campbell, B. 2012).

1.4 Overview of civil society development in Laos

In Laos, civil society is a relatively new concept and there are still no models or benchmarks for a functioning civil society. At the conceptual level, civil society is normally treated in terms of associations or as an arena within which ideas about the ordering of social life are debated and contested (Hickey, S., and Mitlin, D. C. 2008).

Civil society is a broader term with no common or consensus definition, and therefore it is critical to understand that, as E. Michael argues, the core principle of civil society is to provide space for the poor and discriminating groups to participate in political and public debates, which are free from the dominating groups (Michael, E. 2014).

Historically, referring to Article 71 of the UN Charter (United Nations, 2009), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) deal with issues of human rights, environment, equality and peace (Lukaszczyk, A., and R. Williamson. 2010). Today, many people in development industry tend to

¹ Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan III (2016-2020), pp 108

believe that NGOs, by and large, have contributed a positive force in domestic and international affairs, working towards good governance, poverty alleviation, the protection of human rights, and the preservation of natural resources and the environment. But, there is another fundamentally different idea in today's society, involving a degree of trust and cooperation from within a society, which helps to solve a particular problem (Michael, E. 2014).

In Laos previously, the potential role for civil society and its contribution to development was somehow based on a misperception, and the translation of the concept of 'development' into local terminology - '*Kan Sang Sa*' – instead of '*KanPhatTha Na*'. The Lao government never used the term '*development*', they called it '*reconstruction*' and that was only associated with *politics*. In other words, the concept of civil society does not really exist in the political and development discourse in the Lao PDR.

Back in the 1990s, at first this word 'development' was not accepted; all had to listen to the Party, and it was hard to speak that word, as it was a new word that came to Laos at that time, and the only way to convince the government was to show, through activities the meaning of "development", and so make the 'system' understand it. This approach was also used for the so-called new, imported words and concepts, such as: *sustainable development, environment, community development, and 'people's participation in the development process'*. From my past fieldwork experiences while I was working with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Laos, in October 1998, at the *Participatory Planning Workshop* organized by UNDP in Oudomxay province, in the north of the Lao PDR, I recall that one government staff member said, "*I can't say whether we agree or not to let you put up the sign 'Participatory'*", so finally he just said, '*Put it up yourself!*' We used it there for the first time and then, after that, we could use it elsewhere, and so eventually many people understood, which took many years of field demonstrations and good practices.

Since then the Prime Minister's Decree 115 was endorsed, in 2009, recognizing the role of civil society organizations in the inclusive delivery of services to communities². However, despite the formal recognition of the role civil society, it is arguable that CSOs working in Laos are restricted in challenging any government policy, and in particular the issues related to peoples' participation in public and political debates.

² Prime Minister's Decree 115/PM, on Association, dated 29 April 2009

In recent years the donors, including the UN agencies expect Lao civil society to take up a broader and more diversified role beyond community service delivery. Their *rational support* for civil society recognizes the need for an improvement in governance, the *promotion of pluralism and raising voices* of communities especially the marginalized: women, youth and disadvantaged people in Lao society³.

The *suspensions, and misunderstanding* between civil society and government still exist and pose challenges to developing good and inclusive governance including inactive, low profile participation in activities by local non-profit associations in regard to assuring that fair and equal voices are raised in meetings, consultations and other forums. The situation of *misunderstanding* between these two development stakeholders (Government and CSOs), in particular at the central level, has become more challenging since the forced disappearance of a local civil society leader on December 15, 2012; until today, no news or relevant information has been released in this regard despite the fact that the government has received huge international pressure demanding a thorough and independent investigation into this case⁴.

Since 1975, the Lao PDR has been ruled by one single party named the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which has absolute control over the press and civil society. Information is difficult to get hold of and even local journalists, who often have close links to the government, complain publicly, if respectfully, about the impenetrability of government departments. Press freedom in Laos remains highly restricted. Despite advances in telecommunications infrastructure, government control of all print and broadcast news prevents the development of a vibrant, independent press and civil society.

In Laos, it is paradoxical that while most interpretations of civil society include autonomy from the state as a central characteristic, the groups most widely recognized as civil society are those legally sanctioned by the state, with the foremost among these being non-governmental organizations. It can be argued that civil society organizations are all those groups of people that act in the arena in which people come together to advance the interests they hold in common, not for profit or political power, but for something they care enough about to take collective action (Edwards, M., & Gaventa, J. 2014). In this sense, the foundations of civil society are essentially

³UNRC Opening Remarks for 2014 RTIM. The Round Table Implementation Meeting 2014 Reviews Progress in National Development. 14 November, 2014. UNDP in Lao PDR

⁴ Amnesty International 25 June 2015: Conduct a thorough and independent investigation. (<http://www.amnesty.org>, Date of Access: 15-09-2015)

self-interested and self-activated social capital. Another way to envision these foundations, or informal civil society, is to ask what served to mediate within and among local groups and communities before the development of the state? What governs these groupings in sectors where the state is absent? Thirdly, what governs in those areas where people do not wish to be externally governed? I will further elaborate these questions in the following Chapter, providing the portfolios of five civil society organizations (iNGOs and NPAs), their conceptualization, functions and role in raising community voices in expressing the livelihood interests of local communities.

When we look at more closely at CSOs' local government counterparts, we see that the role and authority of traditional leadership, village elders, and the like be being supplanted by positions or bodies either appointed or sanctioned by the state, such as mass organizations, village headmen, and various committees for mediation, schools and development projects. In a similar manner, local customs or mechanisms for the management and sharing of common land, forests and other resources are being replaced by laws and legal codes of which local populations, particularly in rural areas, have limited understanding and to which they have even less access.

Recently, the increased capacity from state-building efforts, largely enabled through development aid, combined with growing opportunities for income through private sector initiatives and corruption, have brought a marked change in sources of livelihood, security and therefore loyalty. *Subsistence, self-reliant economies and the foundations of civil society are giving way*; decision-making and power are moving from local groups and communities to the state and the private sector.

1.4.1. Nearly all iNGOs' work focuses on the development, capacity-building and service provision that extends from and supplements official government policies, programs and objectives. Local officials implement nearly all field activities. In addition, rights or advocacy-based organizations promoting civil rights, good governance, transparency and accountability are not allowed to operate in the country. Nevertheless, while iNGOs in other countries operate as advocates, lobbying for local civil society in the Lao context has, until recently, not yet been strongly envisaged. But again, a 'soft' diplomacy approach seems to be the mutually accepted and the most appropriate route (Delnoye, R. 2009).

1.4.2. Further, while most NPAs are single-purpose, often project-dependent and play a limited or no roles in broader advocacy, virtually no consideration is given to various business and

professional associations, production and user groups, farmers' organizations, and other local groups. Finally, there is also generally little mention of those institutions that, while not usually considered part of civil society, are nonetheless fundamental in enabling it to function effectively. These include autonomous media, unions, religious and academic institutions and the like which, by and large, do not exist in the Lao PDR. Among donors and in development circles, it seems that most hopes for the future of Lao civil society rest with Decree 115/PM, which establishes the legal basis for Non-Profit Associations that are often described as the local equivalent of NGOs.

Until now, only 160 NPAs have registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs and are operational in development related fields. The majority is based in the capital, Vientiane, and many of them are young and still building up experience and capacities.

1.5 Methodology and fieldwork

The aim of this dissertation is to review the *forms of engagement between local civil society associations and local state agencies in Lao PDR through exploration of the positive contribution of local civil society organizations with a particular emphasis on supporting community livelihood interests in preserving local knowledge and cultural diversity* in two selected rural communities of Savannakhet and Vientiane provinces. In order to achieve this objective, it was vital to undertake two qualitative village case studies, which would enable this study to capture the positive changes happening in these villages after being engaged in project implementation supported by civil society organizations, and local non-profit associations in particular.

1.5.1 Desk Study

Analyzing the key relevant documents such as organizational profiles and annual reports of three selective local non-profit associations working on community livelihood improvements is the first approach employed in this study. The three above mentioned NPAs are Gender Development Association (GDA), Life Skills Development Association (LSDA) and Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC). Obtaining these reports did not require a formal written consent form as these documents are made available for public use and are also accessible on their official websites. These NPAs were chosen out of ten visited Vientiane-based civil society organizations, because three of them strive for community empowerment and betterment of livelihoods, through which the promotion of local knowledge and issues of natural resources are central to their mission.

and vision. The means applied to accomplish this end are different. LSDA aims to empower the communities via life skills training activities, while, PADETC seeks to engage community participation in project activities that strengthen community ownership by providing research and documenting skills. Finally, GDA works to empower women's groups using their knowledge and skills to better earn incomes for their families. All obtained reports were carefully analyzed to better understand their scope, framework and context, within which the community-based engagement of these local organizations in supporting local knowledge and natural resources management was initiated.

15.2. Word Frequency and Coding

Because the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) was not available due to a technical problem in downloading from the internet, I decided to use Microsoft Excel instead to code information obtained and found in the reports. Coding is a practice as I have learnt that involves classifying main categories and word frequency; it reduces stories to a core and deconstructs data which has been coded. Additionally, using Microsoft Excel also helped me to visually compare values or differences across a few categories. Morse has argued that through category analysis it is possible to better understand research events in which the data has been collected (Morse and Richard 2002).

Microsoft Excel was also used for cluster analysis related to indigenous knowledge practices, preservation of natural resources, and community participation in project implementation. It helps me to look at the relevant segments of narratives, extract the important phrases and words, from which the most commonly held opinions of the informant are expressed, while addressing the issues of community livelihood interests.

Some of the informants, villagers in particular, seemed reluctant in their responses and therefore only provide short replies. In this regard, in some cases the analysis will only be focused on certain words or phrases, which are indirectly part of the narrative interview as a whole.

1.5.3. Fieldwork: Qualitative, explorative approach

The fieldwork was conducted through a qualitative approach, which allows me to get on the ground (known as grounded theory⁵ originally developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and

⁵ Theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process.

Anselm Strauss), an explore the inner experience of participants, to understand how civil society's role and impacts were conceptualized in theory and applied. It was important to also see how these were manifested and demonstrated in practice in a local context rather than examine variables (Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. 2008). Similarly, as argued by Abraham (2001), the discourse not only refers to how phenomena is described and talked about, but also to how it is thought about, by bringing forward its underlying assumptions and practices.

In Vientiane, ten civil society organizations were visited, followed by field visits in two PADETC' project targeted villages namely Ban PhakPheuak in Savannakhet and Ban NaYang in Vientiane respectively. Meeting with these CSO's representatives, my first question was '*How does your organization present itself in connection with community empowerment?*' to better portray the presence and constructive role of local civil society organizations in supporting the local community to express their voice and livelihood interests, such as local knowledge and natural resources. Using this method, as a researcher, I did not begin the project with a preconceived view in mind but rather began with an area of study (Ban PhakPheuak) to offer insights, enhance understanding and provide a meaningful guide to action (Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. 2008).

1.5.3. Semi-structured interviews – this form of interviewing was adopted during my field visit to one of the selected villages in Savannakhet province. It provides an assessment of true views between the theory or concepts and thoughts of various groups of people (Fetterman 2010; Barnard 1995). Similarly, it helped me to better understand how people see differently the notion of community-based engagement of local non-governmental organizations, as well as local government agencies. This was captured, across the community, between these two development stakeholders.

During my fieldwork, 26 interviews were conducted (Annex 2), all of which were documented. Prior to the start of the conversation with the informants, I asked for verbal agreements, particularly in relation to confidentiality, and fortunately they all agreed to take part in my fieldwork study.

Conducting the interview with 20 selected villagers from two villages, it was somehow not an easy thing for them to answer my questions (Annex 1) as the district/village authorities appeared concerned some issues would be politically sensitive. As a result, the majority of the

answers obtained from villagers are found to have a lot of similarity and to be pre-prepared with well structured answers. Based on the perception that the informants in the villages would need to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive subjects such as the rapid degradation of natural resources, and the high risk of disappearance of local knowledge affected by development projects, in Ban PhakPhueak it was decided to conduct single-person interviews choosing different locations for each individual informant. In Ban NaYang, however, the focus group discussion approach was applied with 10 village informants as suggested by the village authority who accompanied me throughout my site visit in this village.

1.5.4. Focus Group Discussion

As suggested by the village headman of Na Yang, I have shifted my research method from single-person interview to focus group discussion. By nature, due to the group discussion environment, some participants have an issue concerning community voices about the rapid environmental degradation that has happened in their villages in the last decade, but other participants in the group have found this a challenging issue, which leads participants to justify the current policy and provide examples to elaborate their points. It does not bring out the full variety of perspectives, but the challenges to these issues prompt rationalizations and further discussion, providing greater details and uncovering various facets of the issues (Hennink, M., I. Hutter and A. Bailey, 2011). However, the information received in a focus group discussion is the product of interaction between 10 informants, and therefore may not fully represent the individual perspectives of each informant. So, along with this, I have decided to make a visit to the family of Ms. Da, aged 34 years, who freely expressed her individual concern about local knowledge, specifically '*weaving activity*' for example, that may be gone soon.

1.5.4. Observation

It is obvious that the presence of civil society organizations and local state agencies in two villages of Savannakhet and Vientiane provinces is physically visible, but the meaning of these two spheres of influence is socially constructed, through verbal communication, by the members of communities as well as by local government officials. In this regard, civil society is engaged by contextual factors like cultural diversity, social factors and history (Bernard 1988:137). During the fieldwork, I was particularly aware that my own theoretical concepts of civil society's community engagements and state were most likely perceived differently by the local community

members. To explore this observation further, before my field trip, in Vientiane I met with the relevant representatives of NPAs and iNGOs in order to get an understanding of their operational work and project implementation. In the villages, after completion of the interviews, I went for a walk around the villages, to take photos and to get a feeling of the village life in general, but also verifying the information obtained during the interviews.

1.6. Characteristics of Lao Civil Society.

1.6.1 Introduction.

Civil Society Organizations constitute the four types of regulation agent identified in the AUGUR project that make up a structure of governance that reacts to and acts upon the major economic and financial trends⁶. In this respect, Lao CSOs are created by none-state actors referring to local nongovernmental organizations to fill the gap left by markets, since the state is often not able to cover the full range of needs of the citizen resulting from economic growth and rapid development changes. Since the approval of the PM Decree 115 on the formulation of NPA in April, 2009 and PM Decree 13/PM on the Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations in January 2010, civil society development in Laos has taken a more structured form and progressively expanded work and services in rural communities throughout the country, now having a more important role to play in meeting local needs and enriching good governance (Headley, P. 2015). Nevertheless, as stated in the Survey on Civil Society Development published in 2009, a number of challenges need to be addressed in order to develop a well rooted civil society, as it was noted then that very limited experience exists in engaging in community-based development involving civil society, among all development stakeholders, in particular NPAs.

1.6.2. International Non-Government Organizations (iNGOs).

1.6.2.1 Cord Laos – As part of Cord for Asia, in 2010, Cord Laos has begun to operate with full capacity, after having spent a few months of introductions to Lao development partners. As part of Cord for Asia, Cord Laos is pursuing the globally adopted 2012-2016 strategy of peace as its vision, and peace building as the mission of the organization. With the recent MoU signed with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) in February 2014, Cord's immediate scope is the development of outreach workshops, ongoing coaching and advisory support to MOHA aiming to

⁶The AUGUR project assessing the 'challenges for Europe in the World of 2030' is an international collaborative research project conducted between 2009 and 2012 by a Consortium of seven European institutions and financed by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Program. www.augurproject.eu

raise the awareness of local organizations with relevant ministries and local state agencies⁷. At the moment, about 40 local organizations receive Cord's institutional development supports including the strategic planning, staff capacity development that included conflict management, peace building started with good teamwork, project planning, and proposal writing, etc.

As part of Cord's advocacy mandates, at community level, Cord provides facilitation skills to the local communities and that help them to raise their voices, and concerns in preserving and protecting the community livelihoods. With this, the story about Mr. Songkao' family (Khamu ethnic group) in Beng district, Oudomxay, North Laos called '*Bye Bye middle-men, hello team work and profitability*'⁸ and Mr. Songkao also stated that:

Together we are stronger and as a group we are able to engage in new activities' and working as a group has also strengthened the relationships in the village, we trust each other and back each other when there are problems. The village as a whole has gained from this.

With the purpose of promoting community voice and interest, Songkao' story demonstrates well on how collective power breaks the long existing cycle of trade dependence on middle-men through community partnership and teamwork.

1.6.2.2. Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation started to work in Lao PDR in 2001 with the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project addressing issues related to organic and sustainable agriculture promotion, food security and social equity in the country⁹. Nowadays, following the long-term strategy (2014-2018) in which, four working areas has identified¹⁰, Helvetas Laos also wishes to support the government's efforts '*sharing governance*' in recognizing the valuable role of civil society in the development of the country. In support of this, Helvetas Laos engages with emerging Lao civil society by exploring new forms of partnerships with local organizations and networks, including NPAs and community-based organizations. Today, Helvetas is an active member for Consortium, iNGOs Network, SWG, and etc.

Despite the fact that Lao government has yet seen the role and values CSOs contributed to the national development, through the small grant facility, Helvetas has succeeded to build-up

⁷www.cord.org.uk/News/new-territory (22/10/2015)

⁸www.cord.org.uk/News/bye-bye-middle-men-hello-team-work-and-profitability (22/10/15)

⁹<https://laos.helvetas.org/en/about/laos/> (22/10/2015)

¹⁰ Civil society and State, Education and Culture, Infrastructure in Rural Areas and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources

capacity development to five farmer groups in Xeingkhouan, North of Laos¹¹. But, it is valuable to note that these groups are formed very recent in the year 2014, and characterized by a less formal and often less hierarchical leadership structure (Susan, A. 2013).

Currently, Helvetas provides a series of projects supporting people living in the upland regions of Laos, particularly in the North. With its efforts, Helvetas believes that sustainable development is communal effort and is best achieved in cooperation with other development partners, and particularly in the form of shared governance between state and civil society.

1.6.3. Non for Profit Association.

1.6.3.1. Gender Development Association¹² – formally formed in 1991 as the group of Gender & Development and Women in Development Network and in 2012 the name was changed to Gender Development Association (GDA) after it was successfully registered with Ministry of Home Affairs. Along with key mandates of GDA to improve gender equity improvement and women's empowerment, as well as to reduce violence against women in Lao PDR, thus GDA contributes to a society in supporting grassroots level activities to improve the life of rural people, especially women and children.

In 2008, GDA supported the bamboo traders association in Santhong District, Vientiane Capital through the two-year project titled 'Sustainable Women Empowerment Initiative' and that directly contributing to the achievement of Sangthong District Poverty Reduction Program. At the moment, this project is under the direct supervision of Lao Women's Union and District authority and continues to reach its goal and objectives of promoting sustainable use of natural resources as well as gender equity.

Nowadays, GDA wants to contribute to a society where women are empowered and can live in society without violence and discrimination. To do so, GDA currently has six interlocked development programs namely Facilitating the involvement of civil society in CEDAW monitoring; Strengthening GDA as a resource center on Violence Against Women, Facilitating; Increased cooperation, learning, accountability, good governance and leadership among member and partner organizations; Focus on gender issues with different ethnic groups; Promoting

¹¹ SMG Annual Report 20014

¹² infor@gdglaos.org

women's income and empowerment in rural areas;and Working towards institutional and financial sustainability of GDA.

GDA's operation is currently based on two main target districts such as Sangthong&ThaThom districts of Vientiane capital and Vientiane province respectively. In collaboration with 22 active member organizations including iNGOs and NPAs, GDA employs 7 staff, all are Lao nationals committed to making a just society, in which all women and men are equal.

1.6.3.2. LSDA – established in early 2009 with the aims of providing skills trainings for the young children, teens and marginalized group of people to realize their inner potentials, develop problem-solving skills, and earn better livelihoods under a suitable local environment and via learning cycles within schools, as well as with extracurricular activities. Together with the Department of Physical and Art, Ministry of Education and Sport, LSDA has been conducted various development activities and skills training services at all levels throughout the country.

The main activities are included illegal drugs use prevention within schools and communities, awareness raising AIDS & Sexual Transmission Disease, Environmental education and protection including the conservation and support of local knowledge. The primary target beneficiaries are local government officers (central to local), school children and teachers, youth and community members. At the moment, LSDA is mostly active in the northern part of Laos, where the controversial issues are related to quality and relevance education. LSDA has its strategy 2010-2014 and in early 2015 this strategy was revised and developed into the strategy 2015-2017, and the Participatory Learning and Action(PLA) and Inter-Cultural Education(IEC) are incorporated into its works and focus on building volunteers to lead the activities in target communities.

1.6.3.3. Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) established in late 1996 under the Department of Private Education, Ministry of Education and Sport is one of the very few local organizations that have extensive experience in developing human resource for a sustainable development model. Through various successful project-based capacity development activities,PADETC is a recognized local “champion” in terms of supporting good and active citizenship and in building community leaderships¹³. In line with the recent revised institutional

¹³<http://www.rmaf.org.ph> . The 2005 Ramon Magsaaysay Awards

vision¹⁴, PADETC keeps constantly the alignment of its work with the development of civil society, and strengthening/facilitating policy dialogue and public and private sector engagement.

Throughout my ten-years working with PADETC, I'm convinced that the local communities and village authorities 'PADETC beneficiaries' are closely engaged in and actively participate in project implementations that take place at their communities, especially those are on priority community livelihoods addressing their voice and interests likewise natural resources and cultural diversity management. In these efforts the link to, and active engagement with, local authorities is perceived as crucial and to add on, the synergy and complementary functioning of local civil society and village authorities is the key to the process.

With today context of development in Laos, the empowered local citizens and citizen groups are only able to contribute more effectively to local development while engaging with local authorities to supporting people's voice and interests. Paul Sillito has argued that there are better benefits to be gained by giving more opportunity to local communities to define their futures, and allowing for diversity instead of imposing inappropriate 'global solution' (Silliteo, P., & Marzano, M. 2009).

At the moment, PADETC has executed four interconnected development programs in six provinces of Laos namely Policy Advocacy, Education for Sustainable Development, Lao CSO's capacity development and Service Delivery. PADETC is an indigenous, and has 23 staff, all are Lao committed to making a unique and distinctive contribution in Lao PDR.

1.6.4. Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter provides the notion of CSO' concepts in both academic and donor literature discuss non-state public sphere activity including development oriented NGOs as manifestations of civil society. The term 'civil society' is used by virtually everyone without clear definition. Understanding civil society depends on wider theoretical influences. This follows from the fact that many scholars or founding fathers of social science and contemporary political theory understood the term in different ways (Gray 1999). Because the literature on civil society is diversified that generalization is difficult, there are two main ideas to be considered. First as argued by Alexis de Tocqueville that the civic associations that constitute civil society are an

¹⁴<http://www.padetc.org>. PADETC' Five-Year Strategic Planning (2013-2017)

important means for citizens to moderate the power of state and assert their own interests (Gray 1999). Secondly, civil society is a public sphere or space where political thought is transformed into collective action (Edwards, M., & Gaventa, J. 2014). Indeed, given its *coercive* powers, civil society is most often dominated by the state and decision-making is moving from local groups and communities to private sector.

Returning to development context of CSOs in Laos, the research has shown that the level of suspicions, and misunderstanding between civil society and Lao government is remained challenges, and nowadays it becomes more difficult since the forced disappearance of local civil society leader in December 15, 2012. To reflect this, it has observed that the low profiles and non-active participation in of CSOs, especially the non-profit associations in regard to assuring their fair and equal voices area expressed in meetings, consultations among others. More importantly, the vitality and self-reliance of the more foundational aspects of civil society are being weakened, in large part through state and capacity building efforts supported by donors and development agencies.

In sum, the role of CSOs in developing countries has been increasingly significance and challenging. Their agendas such as development change and good governance cannot be guaranteed due to different interpretation of these terms can lead to conflicts, particularly in a country like Laos, which has a communist-led government, CSOs works related to the promotion of good governance and positive change can be in jeopardy the fourthly years well-established government elites.

1.6.5 Brief country profile.

Laos, a landlocked country is rich in natural resources comparing to its neighbours, with a population of 6.8million comprised of 64 ethnic groups considered as the lowest population density in the region counting 25 people per square kilometre.

Historically, since 1975 Laos – former French-inspired constitution and laws were abolished until 1968. During this time, Laos was ruled by a government that was not really responsible to any parliamentary body, and all were centralized. Only by 1986, the Lao government launched the new Market Management Mechanism, which was turned Lao into an open-market economy

through which foreign direct investment has become the centrality of economic growth in the country until today.

Regardless the recent increased steadily GDP, according to the United Nations, Laos classifies as the 'Least developed country' (LDC) and ranks 139th country place referring to the Human Development Report (UNDP 2014)¹⁵. Over the past decade, the Lao PDR, with significant financial and technical supports from international donor, has pursued a narrow on development of private sectors and monetized economy and this has brought up remarkable growth in the GDP per capita of US\$4,351 (2014), but at the same times, there have been negatively affects on the more fundamental economies that include environmental sustainability, social inequality, and people livelihoods. In this sense, today challenge for the Lao PDR is not to tackle with the *extreme-poverty* on wider scale but how to ensure the modernization does not destabilize and fragment the social and cultural structure and livelihood systems that are in place for generations (Rigg 2005).

Today, in the context of the centrality of foreign direct investment policy is considered as the driving force for promoting economic growth and poverty reduction in Laos. It is observed that this policy direction aims to develop basement for development of other sectors such as health and education, but it is also high risk of creating a lot of space for corruptions (Fullbrook 2010).

It is important to note that in recent years, Laos has seen steady economic growth in increasing foreign direct investment. By December 2010, China surpassed Thailand as the single biggest investor in Laos. Between 2000 and 2010, Chinese investment reached about USD 2.9 billion only in the first six months of 2010, Chinese companies invested in 16 projects worth US\$ 344 million (Phouthonesy 2010). As for Chinese development aid, these figures are confidential and at any rate, not always so clear explanation from investment (Kunze, G. 2011).

There is to be a parallel challenging situation in regard to Lao civil society sector, with focus almost exclusively on its visible and accessible aspects in general and NPA in particular. If the sector attempts to address any political sensitive issues including corruption, land grabbing, environmental degradations, and hydropower plants, they can make the government not happy

¹⁵ Source: 2014 Human Development Report 2014, (www.la.undp.org/content/laos_pdr/en/home/contryinfo/), Date of Access: 10-09-2015

than they can make the CSO work difficult (It will discuss more on this in the chapter 4 – Space for Lao civil society organization).

Chapter 2

Community-based engagement: Local state actors and NPAs

2.1 Introduction:

With the aims to sustain the GDP growth of not less than 8 percent per year, the 7th five-year National Socio-economic Development Plan 2011-2015 (NSEDP)¹⁶ was developed almost entirely based on the growth of the monetized economy, which relies primarily on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and that indeed is heavily on the natural resources exploitation.

With this plan, the government continues to enjoy strong and steady support from the international financial institutions, and but at the same times, the concerns are being increasingly raised about the sustainable use of natural resources with economical sound translation into benefits for Lao population. If the local community participation is not fully involved all levels of development process, the natural resources, in particular the forests could be vulnerable to various exploitations (Escobar, A. 1991).

It is wisely argued that it is impossible to talk of development without the inclusion and consultation of the people, whose lives will be affected and the increased community participation in government decision making produces a lot more important benefits (Renee A. Irvin and John Stansbur. 2004). Thus, the role of civic community as a participatory process in local governance has been received more and more attention in policy development and local government. This is intended to counter what Olimid sees as a manifest form of collaboration or join action (Olimid, A. P. 2014).

As the primary focus of this research is to provide sound understanding the issues related to the form of engagement between local civil society associations and the state agencies in addressing community development issues; this chapter aims to *constructively* review what this notion means to the various CSOs, in particular to NPAs as well as to the local government agencies. The key analysis will be based on the online documents, reports and the information generated during the course of this field research.

2.2. Community engagements on the grounds

¹⁶Source: Vientiane Times newspaper issues 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90. <http://www.savanpark.com/?p=638-670>

Engaging community members is not about inviting them to be foot soldiers for an already determined initiative that is for or about them, but is about effectively including the people, whose lives are or will be affected by an initiative in all decisions making (Kabker, Q.E., & Collier, A.K. 2003). If we are truly committed to bring about community change, then we must be prepared to use a collective partnership in which engage is inclusive every partners participated with equal voice.

Laos country, it is increasingly recognized that engaging with community is valuable, particularly on controversial issues such as degrading natural resources, which is unavoidable impacting the livelihood of communities. The local knowledge and cultural diversity are under the threat from development projects that are often owned by government or state-joint enterprises. As argued by James Ferguson that development project is seen as something that only comes about through government action; lack of development, by definition, is the result of government neglect (Ferguson, J., & Lohmann, L. 1994).

The true engagement with communities on the subject must include both technical knowledge and ability to communicate effectively, and in particular good listening is very important in this context where relationships are central and it is vital that co-developed solutions have better change of long-term success (Kearns, F.R.2012).

Kabker (2003) adds another aspect to this by stating that collective engagement is equal partnership between the local civil society organizations and local government agencies with equal voice and community activism have come together to empower a whole community.

The notion of partnership has been wisely contested in development activities. Fumihiko Saito has demonstrated that partnerships are mutual relations among diverse actors to attain common goals. Partnerships should be formed on the equal participation of independent organizations, and also produce synergy that leading to improved efficiency and effectiveness in utilization of resources (Saito, F. 2012). Hence, as development activities are to bring about community change, than these need to be owned and carried further by local government agencies such as district and village authorities.

Reflecting situation on the ground, such as Ban NaYang (Village of Nayang), Saythany district, Vientiane capital, the role of villagers was relatively least important in term of power in making

decisions, while in Ban PhakPheuak (Village of PhakPheuak), Saybury district, Savannakhet province, situated along Xebang Fai' river, it shows that traditional way of doing the business of community partnership or relationship have been unbalanced, with external driven initiative like NSEDP (state) and control of money like NamTheun2 Dam (private company), often dominating the process.

Hence, the presented situation on the ground above illustrates that there are other ways of articulating partnership as well. These are termed as the three balancing **roles and powers** of the different actors contributing towards *sustainable development*, which are:

- The state creates a conducive political and legal environment,
- The private sector generates jobs and income, and
- The civil society facilitates local groups and communities to participate in socio-economic and political development activities¹⁷.

The discussion above illustrates that working in and with community have to be honest about what it is *we* are asking partners/collaborators to take on. Hence, when community choose to act or separate from local government as a way to achieve a more equally balanced relationship with government as they sought to influence local development decisions (Susan A. 2013). The next section of this chapter will analyze the presence in a form of delivery service oriented civil society as well as its impact on community livelihoods at local level within two target villages of this study namely BanPhakPheuak, Savannakhet province and BanNaYang, Vientiane capital. Meanwhile, there is fairly weak developed awareness and understanding of civil society among development stakeholders. Giving the community-based groups is rapidly on a rise, the need for capacity development is become centrality and urgent¹⁸.

2.3 NPAs – Presence & Impact on community livelihoods

In conjunction with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in Laos the poverty alleviation remains the main challenge particularly in rural communities and mountainous areas where ethnic minorities are concentrated, with areas of concern including poor access and quality of basic services, and degrading environment. With this, it is critical to strengthening the role of civil

¹⁷ Country Strategic Aim (2014-2018). <https://laos.helvetas.org/en/about/laos/> (22/102015)

¹⁸ Delnoye, Rik "Survey on civil society development in the Lao PDR: Current practices and potential for future growth", 2009, Vientiane: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – Working Paper No. 2

society organizations in promoting the achievement of relevant MDGs, as well as in supporting the implementation of National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) and the 3 Builds¹⁹ – Party Resolution 03/2012 addressing administrative system for better local development and services.

In this sense, the Lao CSOs are equally essential actors for country development²⁰ in one hand, but on the other hand, there are also reinforced by donor demands changing perceptions of the comparative advantage of the state, and possibly put CSOs' more radical role at risk and that has become more challenge for CSOs to offer alternative development model (Bebbington, A., et al. 2008) that is the model upholding four pillars of development with a balance between social development, economic development, and environmental harmony²¹.

With the poverty agenda, PADETC' presence had seen in rural areas throughout Laos for over two decades recognized as a local "champion" in terms of empowering the youth for community leadership and that resulted the prestigious 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Awards were honored to PADETC' Founder²².

Not against modernization, not opposed to economic growth (GDP), but respect and preservation of local community, culture and diversity are the key mandates of PADETC. In 2013, it has been supported 5 communities in Saybury district, Savannakhet province to conduct action research in 9 topics related community livelihood, culture and local knowledge²³. With this community-led research project, it is believed that communities and local authorities have capacity to identify, document and communicate issues affecting their lives especially in the context of rapid changes caused by development projects.

In Savannakhet, beside the traditional associations as mandated by the state (hotels, restaurants, etc.) a few other formalized local civil society organizations are active and well known such as Non-profit Association for Rural Mobilization and Improvement (off-sprint of CIDSE - International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity); Community Development Association

¹⁹ 3 Builds- Building the Province to become the strategic unit, the District as the budget-planning unit, and the village as the implementing unit.

²⁰ European Development Partners' Statement at the Lao PDR's 2014 Round Table Implementation meeting (17/11/2014). http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/laos/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20141117_en_01.htm

²¹ The publication "PADETC: ten year in balance". www.padetc.org

²² <http://www.rmaf.org.ph>

²³ Thaibaan research project: Project Progress Report 2014

and Disadvantage Children, and Youth capacity development Association. The exact number for both registered and non-registered associations is not known, but it seems that the number is growing rapidly.

In Savannakhet province, despite the number of NPAs is on a rise as well as the delivering community development services, the majority of government organizations lack a clear understanding and vision on the role and value of civil society. To exploring this further, one of the informants interviewed who explained that:

“PADETC to me is well known the center for youth leadership training,...today, I was assigned by Provincial Government Office to coordinate with (*your*) project ‘Thaiban Research project’ in promoting local knowledge to integrate into classroom teachings and that is fully in line with National Education Policy (20% is local curriculum), and so I do my best to support the implementation of the project”. (Provincial Education Office),

“I understand and see the project will bring good benefits to my village members the research capacity to documenting/recording a range of local knowledge, and culture which are on the risk....” (Village Authority of Ban PhakPheuak),

It is fairly true that the presence and activity of CSOs are by and large unknown to them, but nowadays this sentiment cannot be generalized for Savannakhet government officers, therefore as it requires more in-depth study on, due to the fact that the newly established Provincial Home Affairs Office is on operations with full capacity.

In Vientiane capital, meeting with village authority team and farmers of Ban NaYang, where the organic rice growing is the main activity of the project supported by Farmer Development Association (FDA) through PADETC’s Small Grant Facility. With the purpose of exploring the use of local rice variety which best described by the informant interviewed who stated that:

“Regretfully expressed by villagers that today the number of native rice varieties, and breeds is exceptional namely SanPaThong, KhamPhai; PhonKeo; NamManh; KheeTomHangNak; PheuanLuang; DorYouane and MakKheuwand they are gone!” expressed by farmers in Ban NaYang.

All above-mentioned varieties have been preserved, shared and adapted within and among communities for generation to best meet local needs and conditions. However, they are quickly replaced by a so called ‘hybrid or improved’ varieties and non-food crops customized the demands of urban and commercial markets.

Despite good evidence of cost and benefit of growing organic rice and other crops presented by FDA to BanNaYang' farmers, many of them have a range of reasons for being reluctant to change. These key reasons are: perceptions of riskiness in making the change; actual financial subsidy; and to change a system that is already working.

The importance of these factors have strongly reinforced with GoL policy 'One District, One Product'. In this respect, Mosse has argued that the thing that make for 'good policy' – policy which legitimize and mobilizes political support, but in reality make it rather un-implementable with its chosen institutions and locality (Mosse, D. 2004).

Regarding the outreach, NPAs are very efficient. In 2013, the Gender Development Association (GDA) has reached out to over 2,000 beneficiaries in Sangthong district, Vientiane capital²⁴, the Life Skills Development Association (LSDA) counts for more than a thousand of trainees in 2013, and amongst them youth and children were the primarily beneficiaries²⁵. Finally, the number of PADETC' beneficiaries were reached over 10,000 people, who were mainly young students²⁶. The significance of arguments made by various development partners is that civil society organizations are efficient in providing services to communities, because they exist and organize themselves of the state independently. This function directly reflects their commitments to building civic participations, and community capacity as well as the understanding the value of oppositional strategies in achieving them (Susan, A. 2013).

During the field study in May 2015, while meeting with a few development partners, the issue mentioned frequently is about the strengthening capacity of civil society, local and young NPAs to effectively implement development activities and to constructively engage constituencies for change. This includes improving overall management, accountability capacities and leadership as well as more technical expertise and knowledge in the development fields they are active in. In 2013, to responding this enquiry, under PADETC's supervision, the small grant facility aiming to increase civic space and the promotion of democratic processes in Laos through the capacity development of NPAs.

²⁴ GDA - 2013 Annual Report

²⁵ LSDA – 2013 Annual Report

²⁶ PADETC-Annual Report 2013

2.4. Discussion and Conclusion.

Community engagement is not huge concept, but it is about the process of having close collaborations with mutual interests among three key stakeholders whose are the state agencies, civil society organizations and local communities. However, as the conclusions of any study are depend on the data, if more data had been obtained and analyzed then different conclusions might have been reached (Cormick, C. 2010).

Addressing the key issues in this chapter related the impacts of engagements of local state agencies and local associations on priority community livelihood sectors, and **these** allows an opportunity to learn a difference in meanings and ways of presenting various forms of engagements. For the government, it is cynical to stating that government and the community have close and mutual interests, as the community elects governments (Cormick, C. 2010), as in this case, Lao PDR is ruled by one LPR party for almost four decades since 1975.

As of today, development partners have committed approximately USD 550 million in support of the implementation of the 7th NSEDP, out of this over 30% of all the Office Development Assistance (ODA) received by the government²⁷. With this significant support from international donors, Lao PDR has pursued a narrow emphasis on the development of the private sector and market economy. While this has brought remarkable growth in the GDP, there have been inevitable effects on the fundamental economies, including public debt, inequality in the society, and destruction of natural environment²⁸.

For civil society there is a variance observed in community engagement practices and this results from what CSOs consider more essential when working with and for local people. Many CSOs work at local level, together with local state agencies and can help communities with strengthening livelihood interests, concerns and voices to protect natural resources and forest that are considering as community supermarket.

In summary, to have any impact toward change it will need to engage effectively and constructively with appropriate constituencies including the public, government or the

²⁷ European Development Partners' Statement at the Lao PDR's 2014 Round Table Implementation meeting (17/11/2014). http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/laos/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20141117_en_01.htm

²⁸ The decline of Lao civil society (15/06/2014). <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/category/laos/2014/20140615>

privatesector. However, the civil society in the Lao PDR is in early stage of development, limited capacities and diversity, and therefore this poses additional barriers in Laos where the very concept of civil society is yet wisely known and understood (Delnoye 2010). As the result, broad awareness of the existence of NPAs would make it more difficult to cancel their development or activities because the public would be aware of their presence.

The multiple roles for civil society in the Lao PDR evolving over time are well seen as stated by many scholars. Given the obstacles to overcome, including the restrictive political context, this will require the long term vision and support from the development partners and government agencies. Moreover, developments will not be linear and will have to adapt particularly to the pace of the government's willingness, ambitions and intentions vis-à-vis civil society.

Chapter 3 – Community’s interests and indigenous knowledge

3.1 Introduction

In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)²⁹ is to begin with single market and production based with free flows of goods and services, investment, capital, and skilled labour. Consequently, AEC will undoubtedly force economic challenges and impacts on less-developed members of ASEAN, and with this the questions for Laos on how to get the local voice heard in the context of development and traditional livelihoods should look like also needs to be addressed.

The regional market integrations, and in-house economic activities, especially foreign investments and development projects bring along with new challenges, which will continuously contribute to mainstream development, looking for real alternative development that provides a prominent place for local perspectives. Indigenous knowledge involves any understanding rooted in the local culture. It varies within and from societies, comes from a range of sources and is a dynamic mix of past tradition and present innovation (Sillitoe, P., & Marzano, M. 2009).

In this respect, this chapter will look at the *barriers* for central state officials to communicate with CSOs, in particular local NPAs and recognize the value of indigenous knowledge in the context participatory development. It will also analyze the reasons behind this by highlighting the project experiences implemented by local civil society organizations such as PADETC ‘Thaibannresearch project – community-let research capacity buildings’ and Farmer Development Association (FDA) ‘Eco-rice growing farmer project’ in two different villages in Savannakhet and Vientiane provinces.

Based on field observations of the two project implementation locations, it can argue that there is a difference between the notion and application of indigenous knowledge or local science as called by Sillitoe et al 2002 and this difference results from a number of factors. One the most important factor is that development and state-public buildings under the name of Development of Specific and Special Economic Zones³⁰ and these are moving away the focus and

²⁹ Adopted by ASEAN leaders in Bali, 2003 - Deepening ASEAN economic integration

³⁰ Draft 8th NSDEP 2016-2020

commitments from local cooperation and reliance to marketing mechanism that has significantly diminished control on the population.

3.1 Ways of promoting indigenous knowledge

By recognizing science as a set of intellectual practices it becomes possible to develop a framework within all knowledge systems can be equality compared (Turnbull, D. 1997). It is argued that all knowledge traditions are spatial in that they link people, sites and skills. In order to ensure the continued existence of the diversity of knowledge traditions rather than have absorbed into the great imperialist documentation, Sillitoe has also further argued that we have to interpret natural world through observation and experiment more broadly, that includes noting the results of everyday life experience (Bicker et al., 2004).

In Sangthong district, Vientiane capital, while implementing the community bamboo forest conservation zone land property project, GDA defines the value of local knowledge in terms of community empowerment; this is also reflected in various activities that GDA is engaged with that include promoting women's income and empowerment in rural areas, providing technical capacity trainings for the bamboo trader association; disseminating of information on Violence Against Women issues and other actions related women empowerment and gender equity. These stated activities are undertaken with the purpose of exploring the value and notion of local knowledge which best captured by the informant interviewed who stated that:

GDA has always paid attention to value local knowledge as an entry point for building-up good partnership with them. We 'outsiders', researchers, or service providers should understand system and local situations, value local knowledge, trust in villager's potentials and capabilities that they are experts in their own field and situation and this calls for good and genius partnership buildings with them and others. To reflecting this, together with Sangthong district authority, GDA has been implemented the project titled 'Community land right control and management' in which community members have engaged starting with household land properties and up to the demarcations and frontiers between villages.

Another concerns related to community land rights, the February 2014 Draft National Land Policy gives the government right for forcibly expropriate lands from Lao citizen and foreign investors for any purpose including the private investments³¹. With this, the customary land tenure is a major tenure system in Laos most land falls under customary tenure. It means that people

³¹ Extract from Land Issue Working Group's meeting minutes. 24th February 2014

have no titles or other papers for the land, but they can still legally possess, access, use and transfer it.

In Sangthong district (Vientiane capital), with GDA's project support, five villages received temporary land use certificates to village forest in 2011 as part of a bamboo value chain project³². For the same subject, in Nakai district (Khammouane province), 14 hamlets resettled because of the Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam received permanent title to agricultural land, forestland, and other village areas in 2013³³.

Furthermore, the Vocational Training Center for Indigenous People (VTC4IP) has defined local knowledge differs from that of GDA due to the fact that the way in which the notion of local knowledge is envisioned, and this leads to a variance in conception is in how they see and locally experienced that knowledge. With this, I interviewed who expressed that:

In the Northern part of Lao PDR where Khmu ethnic is the major ethnic groups, particularly in Oudomxay province it covers 80% of population and slash and burn rice production is the major agricultural land-use practice which existed from generation to generations. In recent years, because of unsatisfactory returns to labor and increased expectations, this traditional agricultural practice in the mountainous areas of Laos have changed to a more intensive agricultural system that help farmers to reach a critical point where it will be profitable for them (Roder, W. 1997:9) to abandon their last long traditional knowledge.

The statement above demonstrates that a series of efforts-putting in by government projects is focus largely on increasing food security, rice production in particular by providing advice to farmers on new technologies, which requires intensive investments of both financial subsidy; and technical inputs; and more importantly farmers will need be to adopt and to change a system that is already working. The VTC4IP Director's reaction on this can be best illustrated by the following claim:

We are very much concerned about this and therefore our center works on to preserve and transfer traditional knowledge to young generation within and outside Khmu communities. We will finish 500 booklets addressing various subjects and issues related Khmu culture, livelihoods and concerns will be available for public soon.

Furthermore, during interview, the VTC4IP Director has also been shared that some short-stories among these will also be portrayed an image of Khmu people in the face of development. It is

³² Source from <http://gdalaos.org/sangthong-bamboo-value-chain-producer-group/>

³³ Communal land titles in the Lao PDR: Extracting lessons from pilot initiatives, Tina Schneider, Vientiane December 2013

difficult to conclude that Khmu's livelihoods were not, however against the development projects as such. (Stewart, P. J., & Strathern, A. 2004)

Not against modernization, not opposed to economic growth, but respect and preservation of local community, culture and diversity are the key principals of PADETC in promoting participatory process for sustainable development. In Saybury district, Savannkahet province, together with Ban PhakPhueak authority, in 2013 PADETC has launched the community-led research project promoting local knowledge. With this project, over 20 villagers and their fellows 'youth' have trained on simple action research skills as shown below the research cycle:

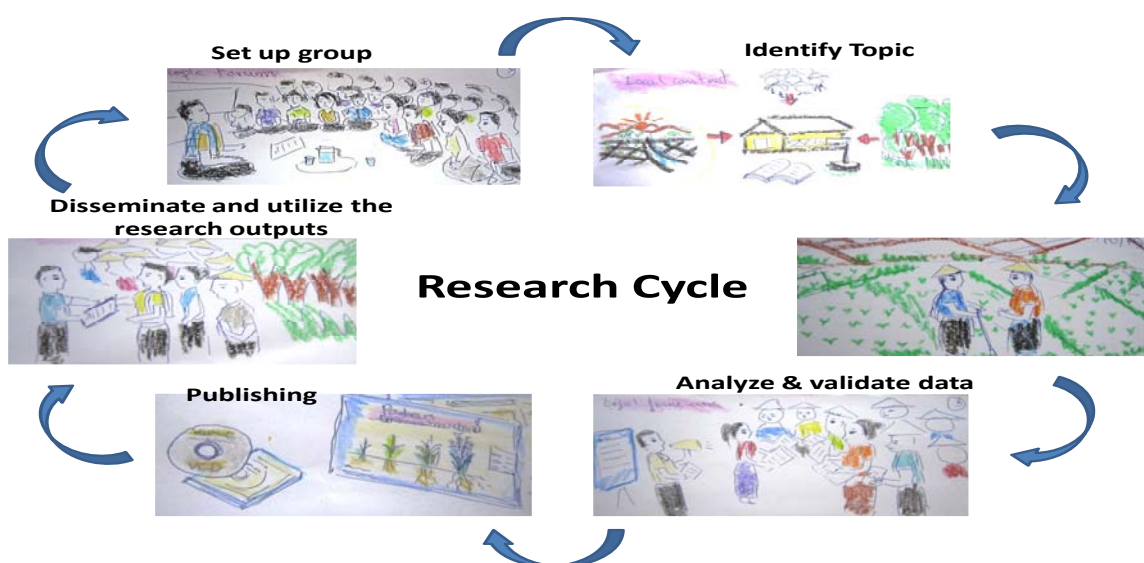


Figure 3.1: Research cycle taken from Project Progress Report 2014

The project achievements were greatly contributed to PhakPeuak villagers to prioritize problems faced and together find the local appropriate solutions. A majority of these villager's narratives also pointed to an increased sense of self-empowerment by regular active participating in project activities, including Project Annual Review Workshop. In this workshop, all project stakeholders are mandatory to attend and it becomes primarily consultation forum for local authority and villagers to collectively work on and define common solutions.

Meeting with Saybury district governor in May 2015, who stated that:

District education office has had the long-term educational development planning, particularly the recent setting-up village committee for education development comprise of village management team, school principal, Lao national front for reconstruction, village women and youth unions, and village agriculture extension unit. Local knowledge is the

centrality of village development plan, which is fully in line with the National Three Build Policy.

However, this is newfound sense of self and pride took a contradicting in light of various incidents observed while conducting fieldwork. This is reflected by the fact that some controversial problems were happen in this village for last ten years since NamThuen 2 was built on Xebangfairiver. The villagers reported that in 2010, the village was severely affected by natural disaster such as villagers use river bank and island as the areas to grow domestic consumption crops. The areas are annually flooded, which is no doubt why the crops grow so well without much inputs from the farmers. Since there is no clear evidence whether there are impacts from Damand then these differentiated perceptions between the villagers and local authority will continue to be a subject for community development plan. It may be too early to justify this without a proper academic environmental research conducted 'Impact Assessment' by independent firm or body.

Again, it is important to note that impact assessments are generally prepared on behalf of project proponents who have a vested interest in seeing their project approval, it would be an obvious advantage to have a neutral agency 'honest broker' involved in commissioning or assessing impact assessment (Fisher, R. 2008).

Returning to the subject, through project training supports, BanPhakPhuek have been produced the booklets that cover a series of indigenous topics addressing local livelihoods and interests such as Phouthai dance³⁴, rice festival and Thampha worship³⁵. With this approach, by analyzing local knowledge as a source for development, Thaibann research project has fully implied traditional knowledge with low level of change, the broad use of local knowledge in its entirety seems to be adequate approach to the needs and requirements of local communities and indigenous people (Antweiler, C. 1998). Furthermore, the research skills that are being taught to villagers are also avenue through which traditional knowledge are 'valued', as they include skills such as mat weaving, and fish catching equipment or tools.

3.3 Current concerns about indigenous knowledge

³⁴Phouthai dance is a unique style of dancing of Phouthai ethnic group. It is very important as identity of the Phouthai women. It finds that this dancing is very popular among all age, starting very young of 6 years old.

³⁵Thampha worship tradition is a unique event in Manilard village. The cave was found recently in a decade and contains many Buddhas statues. The villagers believe that they can pray for goodness in their lives. It is also popular in the area for bringing back lost stuffs.

In the development context of Laos, it has seen in recent years steady economic growth and increasing foreign direct investment³⁶ and so the practical application of indigenous knowledge is not presented itself as a comprehensive knowledge system, but activity-based knowledge (Antweiler, C. 1998) what shown here is by referring to farming related knowledge in BanNaYang, Vientiane capital. The preservation of native rice varieties has not been achieved as anticipated, despite a series of skills trainings provided by the project. To be best captured the current agriculture practice, villagers interviewed have stated that:

At the moment many native rice varieties and local seeds namely SanPaThong, KhamPhai; PhonKeo; NamManh; KheeTomHangNak; PheuanLuang; DorYouane and MakKheu have gone and they were quickly replaced by hybrid or improved varieties and non-food crops tailored the demands of urban and commercial markets.

Of course all these varieties have been preserved, shared and adapted within and among communities for generation to best meet local needs and conditions. Similar concerns ‘*sustainability*’ were found also during my fieldwork in BanPhaPkeuak, Savannakhet province, where the informants have expressed that:

Younger generation is not very interested in the tradition, such as Phoutai dance, as the dancing style is changing and actually developing. Moreover customs are also changing to more fancy. The elder express depreciation of that, and call for all to help educating their children to keep the traditions, as well as to the teachers to teach the practice in the primary school.

With this concern, to further link school and communities, PADETC through the Thaibann research project has already been working with local community experts ‘elders’ to develop local curriculum materials as the basis for streamlining indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum³⁷.

Like many parts of Laos, the local government is the key actor of development process for all levels from national down to village level and therefore there is a need to get alternative views of development onto the political agenda, convincing authorities that there are benefits to be gained by giving more opportunity to local communities to determine their own future, and allowing for diversity instead of imposing inappropriate top-down solutions (Sillitoe, P. 2009:18-19).

³⁶Draft 8th NSDEP 2016-2020

³⁷Thaibann research - Project Annual report 2014 (in Lao language)

In the course of the globalization process under the way today, local knowledge and its utilization need to be seen in wider political and economic context and by that time it simply becomes a marketable good and an important resource for external financing, of the development process argued by Christoph (1998:472). Furthermore, development agencies are cutting seed-money down and emphasizing on short-term results-oriented projects. In the respect, short-term results driven development may obstruct the incorporation of indigenous knowledge, which as we have seen requires both time and resources Sillitoe (2009:19-20).

3.4 Conclusion and Discussion

While the previous chapter the various form of which CSO' engaged with and define the notion of Community' engagement by analyzing a series of service delivery they aim for and the reasons behind those services. This chapter builds on the findings of previous chapter and reflected on some extent to which the notion of indigenous knowledge and the realities on the ground converged or diverged via analyzing informant's views, quotes and research cycle diagram that lead to better portray situation on the ground related community interest such as local knowledge and *natural resources*. It was observed that project stakeholders including local government and villagers are key players in communicating or empowering communities to raise their voice to state agencies in expressing their livelihood interests such as supporting indigenous knowledge. To reflecting this, for example, Saybury district authority has called upon that all relevant government officers should extend their fruitful cooperation with Thaibann research team to multiply its outputs into other villages, and neighboring districts as much as possible.

This chapter demonstrates why both BanPhakPheuak and BanNaYang have practices that are quite different from their conceptualization of local knowledge shows in the last chapter. This divergence best explained by Christoph's (1998:473-476) concept of the 'local knowledge as process' and the fact that every thematic field of local knowledge and locality has a different nature, function, and social organization of knowledge and form of local knowledge.

Upon analyzing various factors and project field activities, it was observed that local knowledge is relevant to all grassroots of beneficiary-oriented efforts, as it is the knowledge which across themselves possess and which is subject little irrelevant influence (Christoph 1998:470-473). It can therefore contribute to measures which begin where people are, instead of where others want them to be.

The project practices of these four local NPAs demonstrate that there are more spaces that development partners can learn from. For example how they manage to work effectively at the local level, interacting between local ideas and practices and national development strategies or even global development initiatives such as *post MDGs* agenda. Meanwhile there are further challenges from valuable work of many NGOs around the region, and Laos in particular. Within mainstreaming development, it is now considered important that NGOs facilitate inclusion governance, and even being assigned as special place in the development arena and encouraging the formation of genius development partnerships between the state, private sector and donors³⁸.

³⁸Summary of Results: Consultation workshop on Aid and Development Effectiveness. Vientiane, 16th November 2011

Chapter 4 – Space for Civil Society in Laos

4.1 – Introduction

In 2001, Abdullah Badawi, deputy prime minister of Malaysia has been argued that civil society is almost always portrayed as an absolute good...the truth, however, is that like government and private sector, there is good as well as bad civil society... the countries of Southeast Asia must seek to foster a vibrant civil society that works with government and the private sector for the common good (Alagappa, 2004:25).

In view of the above, it is clear that the responsibility does not rest with only state actor alone. In this chapter, the focus will be **on how and why CSOs become well known** in the Lao society referring the two important legal documents, although an inclusive picture is yet available, nonetheless some studies demonstrate that the CSO sector in many respects a *positive force* of the state in supporting democratic governance (Alagappa, 2004:25). For example, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated that:

Civil society is the oxygen of democracy and we see this clearly in the world's most vibrant and stable democracies, where Government and civil society work together for common goals. He further states that the United Nations continues to work towards a democratic, pluralistic future for all, the State and civil society can and should be partners in building the future people want.

This statement is somehow challenged by following the arguments of Antonio Gramsci, who argued that democracy is not the because of having a strong civil society, but the result through which political thought is transformed into action (Gray, 1999). In this sense, it has also argued that the potential to construct particular tensions working within a state system that western donors and development discourse portray as a one-party state that is undemocratic and lacking civil society (Polonyi, 2011). Indeed, civil society is most often dominated by the state.

To use this argument, in the Lao PDR, where there is still home to multiple political systems (Alagappa, M. 2004:7), the state has created the frameworks 'Decree 115/PM – formulation of NPA' issued in April, 2009 and 'Decree 013/PM – iNGO guidelines' endorsed in February, 2015 respectively, within which CSOs operate, and control over the political space available to CSOs remains strong and firmly in its hands. The following section will argue that civil society exists or that matters, and also to go beyond that by exploring the nature of the decrees on associations, and its implication in promoting democratic governance in the direction of open, participatory and accountable political systems.

4.2 - PM degree '119 – NPA' and its implication

In April 2009, the Decree on association No. 115 endorsed by the Prime Minister's Office with the stated aim to increase the number of associations, streamline the registration process, and improve oversight (Kunze, G. 2011). In November 2009, the Decree, which took effect, defines an 'association' as being a non-profit civil organization set up on voluntary basis and operating on a permanent basis to protect the rights and legitimate interests of the association, its members or communities (Lao PDR 2009).

With this Decree, the government has received the great signal of acknowledgements by the donor agencies inside and outside Laos and it seen as the wellspring of Lao civil society. It is relevant to note that these gave a legitimacy for local organizations called Non Profit Associations to progress their works and services throughout the country, and it reflects the view of the Lao government that civil society has a role to play in national development and people participation in development process, which was not previously official recognized (Nanthanavone, T. 2014).

In accordance with this streamlining registration process, as I have experienced myself, NPAs are required to go through a strict approval process, and often taking well over one year. Founding committee and board members must undergo police check, and association names, charters, goals and membership are often required to change before receiving approval. After that, the regular submission of plans, budgets, and reports for approval by MOHA at the central, provincial and district levels is also required in order to continue operating. In light with the above, it is also best stated by one of NPA' heads interviewed at the organization who state that:

The government policy towards the NPAs is changing all the times. So whatever the official policy is, in practice the lately decision or order has made that work more difficult for many non-profit associations (informal conversation on 15th May, 2015).

For examples, the Development Environment and Community Association (DECA) had submitted the papers to MOHA in February, 2012 and yet got the approval, the Learning for Development Association (LDA) is waiting for MOHA's approval, while the papers were submitted in late 2013, and lastly the Rural Development Agency (RDA) submitted the papers in January, 2014 and today no progress. While waiting for the final approvals 'NPA' Certificate', the stated associations are inevitably taking various consultancy works for public and private sectors as the means for their survivals.

Analysis of the trends in civil society development reveals that Lao NPAs are most falling into the second and fourth stages of the ongoing development of civil society that is **emergent**, in which independent social groups seeks limited goals in a public sphere which is sanctioned or agreed by the party-state, and **institutional**, in which publicly supported leaders endorse laws guaranteeing autonomy of social action (Weigle, M. A., & Butterfield, J. 1992).

About 160 registered NPAs with Ministry of home Affairs (MOHA) operated in the country, delivering development services, but during my fieldwork conducted in May 2015, the number of registered NPAs was fallen to 70 NPAs that are currently active in the country³⁹. The majority of associations that are already formed, are at between the first and fourth stage of the ongoing development of civil society and most capacity building supports on project planning, proposal writing, financial management, and the like, primarily needed to meet donor requirements (Delnoye, R. 2010).

Hence, given the elusiveness of development buzzword, there is a need to address the issues related ‘*capacity building of NPAs*’ and accommodate them more transformative agendas within donor policy discourses. Thus the claim is that NPAs are not a positive step, but they are only one piece among a much broader development setting.

Returning to the Decree 115/PM on Association, the space for CSOs in particular NPAs has become more restricted as expressed by European Development Partners at the Round Table Implementation Meeting that:

..... While we acknowledge the consultations that have taken place around the revision of the new NPA decree, we remain with serious concerns as regards the more restrictive definition of permitted activities for NPAs and ceiling introduced for external financial support without prior approval.

This indicates that an objective of the Decree is to facilitate NPAs so that they assist in the realization of government program and policies. It is important to note that NPAs may agree with the programs, but they do not necessarily use the same approach to achieve them. Hence having NPAs deliver certain public services such as supporting reproductive health, sanitation, education will reduce the existing burden that is government placed on government budget⁴⁰. Therefore

³⁹ The Director of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in 2014, Lao PDR.

⁴⁰ UNDP – A Suggestion Paper: The Proposed Revision of Degree on NPA, Jul 2014

NPAs should be given good support and allow them to registered with less administratively heavy process.

4.3 –Decree 013/PM on INGOsand its implication

Analysis of the documentary data reveals that the conditions of for INGOs to emerge and operate in Laos are found in two laws: the Constitution of Laos and the Decree on INGOs. With this, Nanthavone (2014:47) has argued that these two can consider as the fundamental principles of democracy governance and liberal values regardless of the country being described as a community state. He further argued that some of these principles and values are individual rights, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and association. However, the interpretation of these two laws should be viewed cautiously, because the Constitution in Article 44; which states that individual's activities must not be contrary to the laws.

The Decree on INGO (Prime Minister's Decree 013/PM on the Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations in Lao PDR dated 8 January 2010) defines the rules and regulations and framework in which the operations of all INGOs must comply. Having studied this Decree, the government of Laos looks satisfactory with the presence of CSOs, in particular INGOs and shares the MDG's vision by seeing them as development counterparts or contributors to national socio-economic development and poverty reduction.

In February, 2015 the new guideline for the implementation of Decree 013/PM was issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affair (MoFA), that instead is to facilitate INGOs in supporting the implementation of the government plans and priorities, but is become sources of concerns or disagreements. As European Development Partners' Statement at the Lao PDR's 2014 Round Table Implementation Meeting (17/11/2014) reflects that:

.....it is encouraging that government has explicitly recognized the important contributions made by INGOs to national development and we hope that in this spirit the new INGO guideline will be implemented in a transparent and predicable manner at central level and across provinces.

This indicates that the aim of the Decree is to create enabling environment for INGOs to operate and effectively contribute to the implementation of the 8th National Social-Economic Development Plan (NSED) projected from 2016 to 2020⁴¹.

4.4 – Lao CSOs: Opportunities and Challenges

Laos remained amongst the poorest countries in the world regardless it has seen steady economic growth in recent years and increasing foreign investment. The 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan is almost fully based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which heavily relies on natural resources exploitations. It is important to note that in recent years, Laos has seen steady economic growth in increasing foreign direct investment.

As already stated that by December 2010, China surpassed Thailand as the single biggest investor in Laos, during which only six months their investments have reached up to USD 2.9 billion (Phouthonesy 2010). Of course, these investment figures are confidential, and at any rate, not always transparent from investment sector.

Donors and international development organizations has shown great interest in supporting the role that civil society can play in good governance, poverty alleviation. But access to foreign investment capital, especially to Chinese makes much easier for Lao government to obtain it economic growth without having the financial supports from the aid agencies that come along with complications and conditionality of the grants (Kunze, G. 2011).

Despite, the government accepts that CSOs have a role in service delivery, if the CSO attempts to address any political sensitive issues including corruption, land grabbing, environmental degradations, and hydropower plants, they can make the government not happy than they can make the CSO work difficult. One example is delayed signing or renewing MoUs with,

Most development related NPAs are Vientiane-based organizations, and the gap between their staff and the beneficiaries is generally big. The NPAs are not grassroots based focusing on service delivery and often accountability goes upwards, towards donors. It is also interesting to note that

⁴¹ Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan III (2016-2020).

anumber of NPAs are run by former state officials⁴² and that might create a conflict of political interests among the NPAs.

4.5 - Conclusion

The observations discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the space for civil society in the Lao PDR is remained practically complicated, despite the recent legal documents endorsed by the government. These observations suggested that there are motivations for the government to permit some civil society development in the country, including meeting development goals, international legitimacy. Thus, there are also motivations for keeping it tightly controlled, so as not to interfere with state's stability or economic growth (Kunze, G. 2011).

Another observation was made for donor supports there was no significant increased in terms of funding for civil society organizations, but that come along with complications and conditionality of the grants. It might be valuable to argue that some donor agencies, such as the United Nations and Swedish Development Cooperation Agency have less focuses on a critical understanding of civil society concept and have come to the conclusion that if CSOs are supported and strengthened, eventually will be forcing the state to become more accountable (Nanthavone, T. 2014).

In this respect, it has also argued that by default of a strong state, civil society is awarded an important role to play, as they are not only engaged in implementation, but also in planning and priority setting (Rombouts, H. 2006:32).

The question also rises around the capacity of civil society organizations, the NPAs in particular that are in the early stage is the primarily needed to meet funder requirements (Delnoye, R. 2010). Furthermore, the capacity of associations to speak and act outside of and sometimes challenge state power is essential to civil society.

⁴²Lao Civil Society Consortium. 2015. Overview of Civil Society Organizations in Lao PDR. Vientiane. July 01, 2015

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The significant parts of the arguments I make in this research paper derived from the role and contributions of civil society organizations at the heart of civil society in the Laos context. Over some decades, a civil society has yet fulfilled its potential to impact on the state, according to Delnoye (2009), and despite the most widely admired examples of civil society based service delivery and advocacy addressing the people's concerns and interests, Yarrow (2008) has also observed that civil society organizations are commonly seeing unity purpose in terms of the contributions to the opening-up spaces and the creation of a lively 'civil society'.

It is also valuable to note that civil society organizations in other countries such as Thailand, and Vietnam as an advocate and lobbying for local civil society has up to recently, not yet strongly envisaged in the Lao context, but with soft diplomacy approach seems to be the mutual accepted and the most appropriate route (Delnoye, R. 2009). This dissertation provides insights into why these barriers persist despite the fact that some scholars (Van, 2013) have been suggested that civil society is now seen to have an important role in helping country development by being engaged in discussions and dialogue about the policies and in holding government to account for that policy commitments are met (Nanthavone, T. 2014).

In the first chapter of this dissertation, the focus was on the notions and assumptions that are connected to the concept of CSOs by the non-state actors in Laos and how these notions and assumptions are exercised in the social context. The results of my analysis of these two faces demonstrate that the term 'civil society' is used wisely by everyone without clear definition and most interpreted as political sensitivity concept rather than the important means for citizen to moderate state's power and assert the people's interests (Gray 1999). This interpretation has shown that some degrees of misunderstanding between civil society organizations and the Lao government are remained challenges.

Chapter two of this study presented that despite the lack of common understanding and the ways in which the notions of civil society is conceptualized, the rhetoric that most of these organizations are truly engaged in supporting local communities to raise their voice in expressing community livelihood interests. With the relevant local state agencies, through various community-based delivery training service projects provided by CSOs such as projects

‘ThaibannResearch’; ‘Eco-rice growing’ and ‘Bamboo trade and value chain’ have been designed to develop skills for the community-based groups in two provinces and these skills served to empowering community ownership for what future they want to go. Furthermore, the development of these skills allows civil society organizations to formulate interventions ‘projects’ that are designed to leverage the civil society’s positive impacts on community livelihoods as well as the understanding the value of oppositional strategies (Susan, A. 2013).

In following-up on this matter, the chapter three addressing local knowledge shows that these organizations have best demonstrated their ability and efficiency to implement the projects that development partner can learn from. For example, how they manage to work effectively at the grassroots level, and constructively engage local state agencies for change. This includes overall management, accountability, capacities and leadership and knowledge in the field that they are active in.

However, the concerns about ‘sustainability’ of local knowledge have become more critical, due various internal and external development factors. With this concern, Sillitoe (2009:18-19) has argued that there is a need to get alternative view of development onto the political agenda, convincing authorities that there are benefits to be gained by giving more opportunity to local communities to determine their own future, and allowing for diversity instead of imposing inappropriate top-down solutions.

According Susan (2012), when civil society is valued only as a bulwark against, watchdog over or substitute for weakness of the state, this discourage civil society organizations from mutually beneficial engagements with the state, but instead retains their capacity to make choice whether to work with or against the state then, this is truly democratic forms of governance become possible. In this respect, the chapter four of this dissertation demonstrated that all the organizations operated on the assumptions of their full legitimacy referring to the ‘Decree 115/PM – formulations NPAs and ‘Decree 013/PM – iNGO guidelines and their activities aim at delivering development services in different sectors such as health, education, agriculture, rural development, environment and natural resources management.

Despite the Decree 115/PM endorsed by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2009 and since then the number of NPAs successfully registered has fallen down from 160 NPAs (2009) to 70 NPAs

(2015) and that contradicts with the objective of the Decrees 'facilitate' NPAs registration process. Another observation was made for donor agencies is that some donors have less emphasis on critical understanding of civil society concept, and may have conclude that if CSOs are supported and strengthened, eventually will be forcing the state to become more accountable. Thus, the funding for civil society organizations is increasingly limited and that come with complication and rigid conditionality. One observation can also be made is that if the CSOs attempt to work on any political sensitive issues that make the government unhappy than they can make the CSOs work difficult.

Within the political governance systems of Laos, I would agreed as Susan (2013:522) has argued that real power to make public decision is socially produced through negotiations by state and non-state actors. Governance in this sense is neither anti-government nor intended as a substitute for government.

It must be noted that this dissertation does not intend to speak on behalf of all CSOs in Laos nor does it state that the view of CSOs' role and contributions that these organizations represent is the only view reflects in the Lao PDR, through various studies shown (Delnoye 2009; Kunze 2010; Polonyi 2011 and Nanthanavone 2014). However, the organizations' under considerations in this dissertation assign to the definition of local knowledge and community engagement can be assumed as a narrow view of development.

With today uncertainty regarding development change towards the monetized economy, there is a need as Susan's (2013) has claimed that civil society organizations should not be the only initiators of governance relationships between the state agencies and civil society. It means both the state and civil society need to change '*equal development partner*' that would make them to build good governance.

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Annex 1- Questionnaires

Annex 2 – Consultation & Interview meeting in Vientiane and Savannakhet provinces