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Cooking in someone else's kitchen

The influence of INGOs on civil society in Lao PDR

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Abstract

During the past decades, an increasing amount of support and attention has been paid to the status of local civil society in developing countries. At the same time, a transnational civil society has emerged, a complex web of organizations within which professional and institutional INGOs take centre stage.

This thesis investigates the role of INGOs in the evolvement of local civil society in authoritarian regimes. This has been done through a case study of Laos, one of the least developed countries in the world, where what is still an embryo of civil society is beginning to proliferate. Material has been gathered through interviews conducted with INGO workers in Laos during an 8 week long field study.

The opinions and reflections of the INGO informants show how various strategies are used to promote events and activities that can be considered beneficial for the status of Lao civil society. The INGOs choose differing courses in their ambition to support civil society and take adverse stands on what role they should play in this process and how they should act in relation to the state. This further highlights the complexity of the tangled relationships, channels and methods brought into play by different actors.

Keywords: *Laos, civil society, NGO, democratization, authoritarian regime*

Acknowledgements

Glossary

CSO	*Civil Society Organization*
INGO	*International Non-Governmental Organization*
LWU	*Lao Women's Union*
NGO	*Non-Governmental Organizations*
MO	*Mass Organization*
NPA	*Non-Profit Association*
LPRP	*Lao People's Revolutionary Party*
UNDP	*United Nation's Development Program*

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1 Introduction

> The United Nations once dealt with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnership involving governments, international organizations, the business community and civil society. In todays world, we depend on each other.
>
> UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, 1998

In Laos, one of the least developed countries in the world, UNs vision of civil society and transnational interdependence seem distant.

Laos is an anonymous country, which since its independence in 1975 has been governed by a single party communist system. In 1985 the government began opening its borders for trade and travel (CWW 2008-08-07). Today, tourists visit the country, often backpacking their way between Thailand and Vietnam, rarely reflecting over the fact that they are visiting a prevailing autocracy where the government control is absolute.

The government is currently in the process of partially opening the economy and concedes to increasing external influence. In this context it is intriguing to investigate the situation for civil society since the political system itself has not altered. Laos is mentioned, together with North Korea, as one of the last countries lacking a legal framework on the regulation of civil society organizations. Civil society, or the lack of it, is important to analyze since its presence can provide opportunities for social mobilization on democratization.

This opportunity depends on both internal and external actors. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Laos interact with the government, mass organizations (MOs) and local non-profit associations (NPAs) as well as with parallel global networks and movements. They may offer mechanisms to renegotiate the political and social contracts at a national level.

Even so, INGOs have their own objectives and their impact risks tying NPAs to agendas alien to the grassroots. In addition, the INGOs are not always groundbreaking in the work for civil society and democratization.

1.1 Purpose of Study

This study aims to provide an understanding of links between civil society and democratization in authoritarian regimes. To explore and describe civil society mechanisms that may constitute democracy-promoting factors we conduct a case study of the situation in Laos, an authoritarian regime in a prelude transition towards more openness and increased civil society.

The stated problems derive from the concept of civil society as a stimulating factor for democratization. Its possibilities for citizen participation and ways of channeling opinions, interests and values form an important base for a transition towards democracy.

Our ambition is to identify strategies that transnational civil society organizations in Laos apply or try to obtain in regard to this matter. In order to investigate this topic we pay specific attention to the relation between INGOs and other influential actors such as the state, MOs, and NPAs.

Our two questions consist of one theoretical and one empirical:

What is the role of civil society in a democratization process?
How can the role of INGOs be understood in relation to Lao civil society?

The concepts that the first question emerges from are *civil society* and *democratization.* The theoretical assumptions that can be drawn from exploring of the first question provide the tools necessary for interpreting the research material when answering the second question. It is the latter questions that make up the primary problem and more distinctly defines the precise purpose of this study.

Based on substantial interview material, including personal experiences and reflections, mainly of INGO workers, the Lao case is analyzed. Here, civil society is operationalized as *INGOs* and it is the democratization potentials of *their* operations that we intend to determine.

1.2 Disposition

We start by giving a presentation of the Lao setting. This is followed by an account of the theoretical framework, describing conceptions of democracy and civil society. This part is completed with the specific definition of civil society applied in the thesis.

Hereafter, the methodology is discussed, shifting focus from theoretical conceptions to the case study and the gathering of empiric material. The empirical material is thereby analyzed and structured in five parts; Actors, Interests, Channels, Relationships, and Methods.

Lastly we conclude our findings and engage our notion of democracy with the empiric material.

2   Background

2.1   The Case of Laos: Country Context

Laos is a one-party state with no political pluralism. In 1975 the Communist Party, *Lao People's Revolutionary Party* (LPRP), obtained sole political power and has been ruling the country ever since. The constitution, first formed in 1991, stipulates that the LPRP is the only allowed party and that it is not permitted to criticize the political system.

The country is in economical transition and attempts to combine socialistic politics and market economy. A change towards more openness could be seen, including the opening up for tourism in 1999 (CWW 2008). Although this shift indicates an initiation of liberalization, no similar change is experienced regarding the political system (UPI 2008:6, 10).

Even though Laos is in economical transition, the country is one of the poorest and least developed countries in East Asia (UPI 2008:14). The Human Development Index[1] (HDI) displays the poor quality of livelihood and a great necessity of aid from foreign countries.

2.2   Civil Society Organizations in Laos

2.2.1   Mass Organizations (MOs)

MOs are, from the perspective of the government, representing civil society. Their network stretches from central down to village level and they take part in development activities at all levels. For example, they are active in rural areas implementing donor-funded programs. They promote and monitor the implementation of government policy, the constitution and judicial laws and are closely attached to the Party[2]. They are the only interest organizations for women, workers, youth and ethnic minority groups[3] (ADB 1999:1-3).

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[1] Human Development Index is an index measuring three basic dimensions of human development – a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living.
[2] Party is commenced with a capital letter to emphasize its dominance in a single-party system.
[3] The Lao mass organizations are Lao Women's Union, Lao Trade Union, Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union and Lao National Front for Reconstruction.

2.2.2 Non-Profit Associations (NPAs)

Recently, a few associations that can be perceived as local NGOs have been established. These are called NPAs and are often community-based organized around social welfare issues (ADB 1999:2).

The Lao constitution stipulates that forming associations and organizations is permitted but until now there has not been any legislation concerning the establishment of associations and the implementation has therefore not been possible (ibid.). At the moment of writing a draft law on the presence and registration of associations is under discussion. The launch of this law could be seen as a step towards increased freedom for engagement in, and establishment of NPAs.

The draft law defines principles and regulations for establishing associations, as well as for the nature of their activities and management. It also states that it "aims to stop and prevent activities that are risky for national security, social order and freedom of others" (2008-05-08). NPAs should not be in conflict with "the constitution, law or good tradition" of the country and ought to contribute to socio-economic development and poverty eradication (ibid.).

The draft law prescribes a complicated registration process for the NPAs and the government will control all associations.

2.2.3 International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)

Since the Lao government opened up the economy the presence of INGOs has augmented. Currently, there are about 100 active INGOs working in the country (2008-05-08), all obliged to have governmental counterparts and approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Every INGO need to sign a Memorandum of Understanding before even coming to Laos. The Memorandum is signed with a local government counterpart, usually the best-suited Lao ministry. While working in the villages its a government requirement that INGOs have a government counterpart with them joining their activities. The governmental control makes the process slow and bureaucratic.

Even so, as long as the INGOs contribute to development and poverty-reduction of the country and do not seek involvement in any issues that can be considered political the government welcomes them (ADB 1999:2).

2.2.4 Donors

Since Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world, it is to a great extent dependent on external assistance. The main bilateral donors[4] focus primarily on education, health, rural development and environment. UNDP,

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[4] Japan, Germany, Sweden, France, Australia, and Norway.

World Bank and Asian Development Bank are also important providers and work on poverty reduction, agriculture, natural resources management, rural energy, environment, transportation, communications, and social infrastructure. They are also involved in the creation of an enabling environment for private sector development (UNDP 2008; USAID 2005).

3 Theory

This chapter gives an account of our theoretical framework, i.e. our conception of democratization and the notion of civil society related to different actors and events. In exploring the link between civil society and democratization, these two concepts will be closely connected.

3.1 Democracy and Democratization

3.1.1 Democracy: A maximalist understanding

A divide within democracy studies is apparent between the maximalist and the minimalist conception of democracy. The minimalist conception sees democracy as a political sphere defined by procedural and institutional arrangements while maximalists finds democracy to be including all aspects of society and also pays attention to social democracy (Rindefjäll 2005:20; Boussard 2003:26).

The wider maximalist definition is criticized for being unable to distinguish a clear breakpoint between democratic and non-democratic regimes wherefore the minimalist definition purports to better provide methods for empirical studies (Rindefjäll 2005:32). This assumption could however be criticized because of the problems with equating democracy with procedural arrangements such as elections[5] (Boussard 2003:30).

In this thesis, we apply a maximalist understanding and stress the substance of democracy, referring not only to political institutions but also to actual possibilities for people to participate in the political process (Boussard 2003:26f). Laos is not a democracy in a maximalist sense, nor in a minimalist sense, and the country is far from fulfilling standards for democracy. Some scholars argue that a country should fulfill the procedural factors before it is interesting to discuss the substantive. Even so, we believe that a deepened analysis of the potentials for a democracy is offered through discussing the qualities provided by a maximalist conception and not the procedural arrangements alone.

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[5] What Boussard calls "the fallacy of elections" and refers to the fact that elections rarely are a good indicator of democracy.

3.1.2 Enlightened Understanding as a Democracy Criteria

For a more distinct definition Robert A. Dahl, a classic democracy scholar, has detailed a broad conception of democracy through listing five required criteria for a democratic process[6]. To fulfill these criteria seven institutions are needed. From a civil society perspective, the criteria *enlightened understanding* is crucial since access to information and pluralism of ideas are recognized as important for people to shape their own opinions and spur democratization. To satisfy this criteria three institutions are needed; *freedom of expression*, *alternative information*, and *associational autonomy*.

With *freedom of expression*, Dahl means the freedom to express political opinions and critique without fearing consequences or punishment. *Alternative information* implies that citizens must have the right to seek alternative sources of information and *associational autonomy* signifies the possibility to get organized in sovereign organizations (Dahl 1989:221f).

Dahl argues that in a democracy each citizen should have adequate opportunities for discovering and validating her choice and to decide what would best serve her interests (Dahl 1989:112).

Since the criteria enlightened understanding is highly relevant to civil society activities the required institutions come to be useful analytical tools in the exploration of linkages between civil society and democratization.

3.2   Civil Society

3.2.1   Conceptualization of Civil Society

Civil society can be conceived as an intermediate realm located between the state and the family sphere (Rindefjäll 2005:51). Only organizations that are free from the direction of the state can be considered part of the civil society (Boussard 2003:80f). The term indicates non-profit activities, which makes it distinct from the economic sphere, since it is driven by a different logic.

The civil society realm serves as an arena for citizen participation and voluntary formed organizations to protect or extend interests and/or values (White, quoted in Rindefjäll 2005:50f). It includes a range of non-coercive institutions, non-state and non-market structures.

Apart from a place where free associations can emerge, civil society indicates the ability of society as a whole to structure itself and coordinate its actions through its associations. The extent to which the ensemble of associations actually can influence the course of state policy is an important determent of the quality of civil society (Taylor 1995:88). Important influential functions of civil society

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[6] These five criteria are *effective participation*, *voting equality at the decisive stage*, *enlightened understanding*, *control of the agenda*, and *inclusiveness* (Dahl 1989:221f).

include representation of interests and placement of issues on the agenda of the state (Boussard 2003:80f).

Civil society is preferably attributed by a high level of inclusion to allow for maximum expression of interest, opinion, and perspective. This inclusion is dependant on existence of institutions and channels through which people can interact. If people are able to interact, opportunities for social mobilization to push for demands are made available. This mobilization can be aimed at placing a topic on the public agenda, and influence governmental policy-making (Rindefjäll 2005:26, 76).

3.2.2 State and Civil Society Relations

Civil society and the state are often referred to as separate from, but still complementing, each other and Western liberal tradition cannot envisage a civil society existing outside of its relationship to the state (Baker 1998:81).

The state is often the actor with superior capacity to process societal claims (Rindefjäll 2005:52-5). In this sense, the state can be an enabler of civil society as it provides political framework, financial support and state protection. At the same time, it can also restrict civil society. This means that civil society must try to resist subordination to the state *and* demand inclusion into the political structures (Boussard 2003:91,110f).

Depending on the political context of a country, civil society is not exclusively a counterweight to state power but can act supportive of the state e.g. through providing civic education (Boussard 2003:89).

Nonetheless, if associations become too incorporated into the state apparatus, rather than acting as an independent force, they cannot be considered part of a functioning civil society (ibid.). For example MOs, who are said to serve a common public interest, can get co-opted, allowing the state to define their interests (Boussard 2003:110f)[7].

3.2.3 Civil Society and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes

The space for civil society is considered to be greatest in democracies and smallest in authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes often seek to manipulate civil society making its organizations serve the interests of those in power. However, these kinds of regimes could in some cases see the benefits of civil society, albeit restricted. Here, civil society organizations (CSOs) may exist but in fear of the state and outside a legally protected realm. The absence of such realm is problematic and explains the delayed institutionalization of civil society in Asia (Alagappa 2004:37, 475f). Common to early stages of democratization is the creation of a legal framework for autonomous associations which is often strongly supported by international aid (Carothers 1999:214).

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[7] As in the case of Nicaragua where the policies of mass organizations often responded to the Party rather than to their members (Boussard 2003:110f).

Nonetheless, experience from communist regimes in central and Eastern Europe shows that civil society can be a factor in delegitimizing authoritarian rule. Actors like INGOs have important roles to play in these regimes since they can constrain the state power and do policy advocacy, which later could lead to creation of a public sphere (Alagappa 2004:5).

Laos is a one-party state, a category with potential to last long since it often show cohesion within the Party, working for the common interest of gaining power or held together by ideological believes. Social activities within society are often controlled by the Party, which complicates any opposition (Hadenius & Teorell 2006:3f).

Civil society is composed by small, independent, local organizations controlled by citizens. Regarding its democratization efficacy, it is crucial to recognize the fundamental value of a local civil society and involvement of citizens. This understanding refers civil society to a source of resistance to hegemonic order and depicts civil society to serve as a forum for expression and activity of the grassroots. Citizens constitute the major beneficiaries for democratic reform as well as the primary interest group. Numerous historic examples show that there is a necessary connection between locally grounded civil society and democratic change in authoritarian regimes (Alagappa 2004:9f).

3.2.4 Transnational Civil Society and Democratization

It is important to put the democratization functions of civil society into an international context. Caroline Boussard identifies international networks of NGOs and transnational social movements as examples of a so-called global civil society (Boussard 2003:115). From this perspective, the understanding of civil society as being isolated from national territories is taken into question and a spectrum of global networks of civil society actors can be envisaged.

Many transitioning countries are developing countries and highly dependent on international support. There has been an increasing tendency by international donors to channel aid to developing countries through CSOs as a way of promoting democratic development. Therefore the contemporary development of local civil society is dependent on external influence and donor funding (Boussard 2003:117f).

Although international aid to CSOs is substantial, not all CSOs are considered potential aid-receivers. Carothers says that CSOs are often only considered to be NGOs and not for example ethnic, social or religious communities. These organizations are not consistent with Western norms and expectations, which renders them invisible (Carothers 1999:210f).

Boussard means that the external influence have potential for strengthening democracy. Especially in early stages of transition the providing of support for oppositional movements struggling against authoritarian regimes is important. However, it could also be negative and pull forward an artificial local civil society that, instead of listening to the grassroots, conduct activities that donors are likely to fund (Boussard 2003:119). This donor dependency could be the reason as to

why NGOs often fail to affect the government (Alagappa 2004:357). One strategy often used by NGOs is to avoid addressing sensitive issues but still prove that they are performing political activities to please the donors (Carothers 1999:211).

A more general challenge is that support from Western NGOs entails external control of NGOs in developing countries. This could jeopardize their ability to contribute to a civil society since they loose autonomy (Hudock 1999:1-17).

3.3   Theoretical Focus

Since civil society in Laos is dominated by INGOs we examine the realm of civil society through their role in advancing change in the direction of freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy.

In Laos, civil society actors have yet to aspire to the mere right of existence and operation and are often bound to being represented through government guided mass organizations (MOs). These bodies will be of importance in our study regarding their relations to transnational civil society, rather than their ability to actually represent popular interests of the people. From a democratization perspective, the MOs are unlikely to play a groundbreaking role in an opening up of society, but remain significant institutions because of their agency and influence on political decision-making.

In comparison to local civil society, the division of transnational civil society includes an alternative set of relations that play important roles in the process towards a democratic development. INGO negotiations, horizontal integration, contractual ties with the government and diverse connections to local civil society actors constitutes factors to be analyzed in order to understand the impact of INGOs on a Lao democratization and local civil society.

3.3.1   Civil Society Organizations as Democratic Actors

Civil society does not only foster democratic organizations, it can also be an arena for anti-democratic associations. Whether or not these groups are to be considered a part of civil society is a matter of definition.

In order to effectively exclude anti-democratic groups from our definition we derive it from Philippe C. Schmitters conditions for civil society. It regards groups that are (1) independent of public authorities, (2) capable of taking collective action in defense of their interests and (3) agree to act within pre-established norms and rules (Schmitter, quoted in Boussard 2007:154).

Consequently, our view of civil society as something that promotes democracy exclude groups that do not act in concordance with democratic ideals, e.g. those who strive to limit democracy in advantage of an authoritarian rule. It also excludes groups whose internal structure is strongly vertical (Diamond 1994). In the Lao case, this excludes MOs.

Since the definition derives from a Western context and is to be applied on a developing country, it is kept broad in order to capture a greater number of additional attributes that may occur.

Considering that the civil society studied is positioned in an authoritarian state, and therefore in an anti-democratic context, the third condition must be explained further. An organization using illegal methods to achieve democracy through sidestepping the authoritarian regime is not excluded from civil society. This wide definition of civil society as democratic and pluralistic facilitates the operationalization (Boussard 2003:169).

3.3.2 Civil Society: A normative and analytical understanding

To understand the relation between transnational civil society and democratization (in terms of increased local civil society) we find it necessary to separate the usage of civil society as an *analytical tool* and *normative ideal*. Transnational civil society, and influence of INGOs, is strictly handled as a conception of civil society in an analytical sense. It is used to analyze social organizing in society and focuses on organizations, their structure and their meaning for Lao citizens (Boussard 2006:149).

In contrast, reflections about INGO influence on local civil society development stems from civil society as a normative ideal. The normative approach on what a good civil society should look like is further explained through Dahls democratic criteria enlightened understanding. Local civil society is discussed in terms of how close or far it is from the ideal.

Here, civil society is seen as a process with different stages. The normative civil society, fulfilling Dahls criteria enlightened understanding, is the ideal. Consequently, *potential* civil societies could exist. These are not yet ideal but some of Dahls institutions are implemented. Civil society could also be *non-existent* where an authoritarian regime prohibits all expression of the same. A non-existent civil society remains interesting to analyze since it offers opportunities to pinpoint occurring constrains for civil society development.

4   Methodology

4.1   Qualitative Research

Different methods and methodological perspectives provide different knowledge. One significant difference between methods is whether they are qualitative or quantitative. We use qualitative method and a hermeneutic approach since we find knowledge to be depending on subjective interpretations by the researcher (Lundquist 1993:41f).

Qualitative research aims to specify the characteristics and attributes of a phenomenon. Thus, the prospects of civil society and its impact on democratization can be determined through a variety of variables depending on the importance the researcher attach to them.

Methods applied in qualitative research usually involve *subjects* since these are seen as bearers of knowledge. Our empirical material is gathered through interviews and highlights the perceptions of involved actors (Widerberg 2002: 15f).

In line with this assumption, we adopt an interpretive approach in emphasizing the importance of grasping the ideas that actors themselves hold about their activities and context. No political reality exists independently of people's ideas. Rather, it is the political discourse in a country that determines these ideas and defines the reality of the people (Hague & Harrop 2007).

4.2   The Case Study

To explore linkages between transnational civil society and democratization we need to probe into underlying dynamics and forces in motion. For this reason, the case study methodology is the most appropriate approach.

A case study allows for intensive investigation of Laos as an example of an authoritarian regime subjected to changes in the sphere of civil society. The ongoing events in Laos are common for emerging civil societies, or repression of the same, and its outcome for democratic transition in authoritarian settings.

As case studies are often multi-method, usage of a range of sources and techniques will be employed in order to deepen the case investigation (Hague & Harrop 2007). The analytical framework is thus developed through a combination of (1) existing theory on democratization and civil society and (2) first-hand empirical material on potentials for an invoked civil society in the Lao setting.

4.3   Interviews

Interviews are used to receive information about feelings, experiences and occurrences through dialogue with people involved in the phenomenon studied.

For this study, interviews are conducted in order to know how people in organizations reflect over their contextual surroundings and how they evaluate their situation. The interviews are unstructured, meaning that thematic topics are decided in advance but during each interview the interviewer follows the aspects that the informant finds to be the most essential (Widerberg 2002:16f).

4.3.1   Performed Interviews

The interviews were carried out during an eight week long field study in Laos. They were conducted with representatives from INGOs as well as with people working within the mass organization LWU.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted; 4 with people within the LWU, 10 with INGOs and one with a Lao run network initiated and supported by a number of INGOs.

No interview has been performed with an NPA. This is partly due to difficulties of making representatives from suitable organizations take part in interviews, and partly with consideration to their sensitivity to public attention and politicization. It should be noted that these organizations are still new and exist only in a very limited number.

Interviews with LWU were conducted in order to check for potentially inaccurate data and to give a substantive empirical understanding of how MOs are to be interpreted. For this reason, we found these conversations valuable, however they did not contribute to the understanding of INGOs democratization potential in any useful way. They are therefore to a great extent excluded from the empirical material that has been analyzed.

The selection of informants is based on the character of the INGOs they work for. The organizations are selected with respect to their area of work and involvement in the field of civil society. In addition to this, we applied the snowball method since we during each interview received suggestions of people that could contribute to our research. This emphasizes the importance of being in the field while gathering material. Several informants were found by following up on recommendations from previous interviewees.

All informants are kept anonymous to guard their integrity and the names of the organizations they represent are unnamed due to the risk of reprisals they might suffer from discussing civil society matters. Instead, we mark that information is collected from an oral source through indicating the date of the interview as reference.

The interviews are analyzed on the basis of preparatory readings related to the subject area; democratization and civil society.

It should be added, that since the interviews were done in English, which is not our first language, unstructured interviews offered the benefit of not limiting the dialogue, as may be the case with a too structured form.

4.4 Methodological Reflections: Power

During research, power is important to consider since it could affect the results of the research (Litosseliti 2003:52). Power imbalance is always present between the researcher and researched, especially in interview situations and the belief that they could be equal is an illusion (Letherby 2003:114f). For instance, the researcher has power to interpret the words of the informants. When researcher and informant are situated in different contexts there is an imminent risk of misinterpretation (Jönsson 2005:141).

During our research the power relation between the informants and us were complex. As researchers we decided the agenda of the interviews as well as interpreted its outcome. However, the informants were older than us and possessed greater experience of Laos and its contextual conditions. In this situation, the level of trust the informants put in us as researchers influenced the relationship. As representatives of INGOs, the subjects discussed were sensitive and could affect the operating freedom of their organization if becoming known to the public.

By conducting unstructured interviews, which give prominence to the opinions of the informants, the control and power of the researcher is diminished (Madriz 2000:838). This method also reduces the risk of the researcher influencing the opinions of the informant.

5 Analysis

5.1 Actors

This chapter provides a deepened understanding of the main *actors*[8] affecting the prospects for democratization through revival of civil society in Laos. It is also where the INGOs and the dialectal relationship between their structural position and the ones of the Lao state, the MOs, supranational funders, and the marginalized local community is examined.

Of great significance is that INGOs are not only dominant actors nation-wide but also part of a transnational civil society. They often serve as intermediaries between the Lao state and official donor agencies.

The INGOs' relationship with the Lao state is especially complex. They are controlled and often deployed to serve the interests that are in line with those of the governments, i.e. related to economic and social development (Alagappa 2004:37).

The INGOs are all the same located in a different societal sphere from the formal national politics. They primarily operate through their connections to international institutions from which they also receive funding (Kaldor 2003:109). Their international relations can be instrumental in achieving change within the territorial boundaries of Laos and their trans nationality might add to their ability of influencing even the more sensitive sociopolitical issues in national politics.

The Lao *state* operates at national level where it has exclusive power as an authoritarian regime. Despite of this, it has been insisted that in reference to civil society it is difficult to talk about the Lao state as if it were one single uniform actor. In relation to civil society the state embodies various actors whose attitude to civil society activities may deviate to a certain degree. This becomes obvious on the matter of the role of MOs.

The Lao state wants MOs to be associated with citizens but INGOs consistently sees them as rather interlocked with the ruling Party.

> I don't think you can really talk about the Lao state as if there is one view. I think certain individuals inside Lao government have promoted MOs as if they were civil society, as if they were, you know, non-government organizations and I think they promoted them in that way to try and get funding from international donors. But I don't think it is the reality. I think MOs are part of the government party state structure (2008-04-03).

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[8] The actors presented in this thesis are those who occur most frequently in discussions on civil society in authoritarian regimes. They also appear as the most relevant to our informants which constitutes the main reason for excluding alternative, less influential actors, e.g. diaspora. We believe that this will not compromise our results but rather helps us draw accurate conclusions.

As actors, MOs can be separated in terms of the level of society where they operate. The decision-making assembly is top-centered and alienated from the INGOs. In contrast, the village level, described as "the lowest level of the state", consists of much collaboration between government counterparts, representatives from MOs and INGOs (2008-04-03).

Neither the MOs, nor the state itself, can be considered civil society actors since *civil society* seeks to create equilibrium between the *authorities* of the *state* and the rights of the *society*. The values and interests of citizens should be protected and extended in relation to the state (Rindefjäll 2005:50f), something that is very rare in the case of MOs.

Due to its authoritarianism, the Lao state remains a key actor with regards to the condition of civil society. An analysis of Lao civil society development that does not subsume the one-party state, nor the MOs as crucial determinants of civil society status is highly inadequate. Because of their position in the institutional arrangement in the Lao regime, as well as being an engaged actor, they remain important variables to analyze.

Not surprisingly, the state is particularly decisive in the area of Lao local civil society. Since organizations that are critical of the government and that propose agendas of sociopolitical change are strictly forbidden, it is often maintained that no local NGOs exist. This could be referred to Muthiah Alagappa saying that the absence of a legalized realm for civil society activities is highly problematic and typical for authoritarian states (Alagappa 2004:475). This statement can be challenged when looking at the rise of local NPAs in Laos, mostly dealing with social issues such as womens empowerment, HIV/AIDS, disability etc.

Today[9], the number of NPAs is low but is expected to rise if the national assembly approves the current decree on associational freedom at the end of this year (2008). Several of the INGOs are certain that the government will follow the example of neighboring countries and open up for more civil society organizations, but this is not to say that the activity of these local civil society organizations will not be under strict state control.

> I would assume that a one-party state would have some reservations about encouraging the development of organizations as you may not know to what level they will grow. They wanna be in control of the process, they wanna take the benefits of it, which I think they recognize. The benefits of having a larger civil society operation but also don't want to have it get out of hand, grow up to a point when it's gonna be problematic (2008-04-17).

Nevertheless, NPAs are the Lao reply to NGOs and it is suggested that the difference is simply a choice of words[10]. One informant choose to use the term local NGO to mark this feature in the dialogue with donors (2008-04-25).

The situation for NPAs is troubling in numerous ways and their existence is very unknown, especially amongst the Lao population. During a period of time,

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[9] NPAs were starting to appear in Laos around the year 2000, but even before this there existed informal groups meeting on certain topics, for example writers groups (2008-04-25).
[10] *Non-governmental organization* translates to *Anti-governmental organization* in Lao language. This is one reason for naming local NGOs NPAs.

INGOs were restricted from meeting with NPAs and even though the NPAs were not always inhibited from establishing the government made it difficult.

The registration process for NPAs, as for INGOs, is rigorous and complicated. An analysis of civil society organizations in China shows that complicated registration processes are likely to privilege top-down organizations that have often sprung from already existing government and Party institutions. The process also draws the organizations towards intimate contact with the government, which restricts its autonomy (Gallagher 2004:427). This phenomenon is seen in Laos, since NPAs sometimes consist of former government staff.

The NPAs may grow to become fully-fledged NGOs, but it will in all cases be a process that will take decades. NPAs are here to stay, but the step to what may be labeled a local civil society is immense. On the role of NPAs in contemporary Laos, one of the informants expresses the situation as follows:

> [I]t is a small window, because there is no civil society here. The NPAs are very limited right now. But once you open it that far it starts to move. People start to talk and think (2008-04-25).

To sum up, actors within and in relation to local civil society are complex. They all have different interests and objectives and operate on a broad spectrum of levels.

5.2   Interests

This chapter is dedicated to reflections on how the different interests of actors relate to each other as well as to the contextual setting in Laos. The majority of transnational organizations active in Laos are driven by a strong development discourse. This is often a requirement for INGOs to set up offices in Laos and the subject to which all their projects must attend. Democracy, civil society and rights based topics are rarely prioritized issues. Civil society support has however been an increasing aim amongst Western INGOs during the last decade, a common trend according to Boussard, who recognizes it as a way of promoting democracy (Boussard 2003:115).

The joint working group on civil society, that has engaged several of the NGOs working in Laos, is driven by the ambition to develop local civil society. Despite the official aims and MOUs that restrain INGOs from engaging in political affaires, the possibility of joining autonomous working groups still remains. This provides an opportunity for coalition building amongst the INGOs and has proven to be a good forum for internal debate. Many of the informants say that the Lao government identifies the benefits of INGO–work and therefore allows them to conduct development activities. If the government wants to follow their poverty reduction strategy, they recognize that they need to involve donors and INGOs. Alagappa also acknowledges that even authoritarian governments like military and communist governments can see the benefits of civil society,

albeit a controlled one (Alagappa 2004:476). Similarly, INGOs need the support of the government to be permitted to conduct activities.

The Lao *state* is often looking for international cooperation to receive more resources and funding. For example, in the late 80s and early 90s, the international community has provided aid and attention to issues concerning gender initiatives. It has been mentioned that MOs, like LWU, are very suitable to tuck into that kind of international interest in order to attract sponsors for its projects. Placing LWU in relation to the international gender drive has contributed to a view of this MO as representing women inside the Lao party state although its main mission, according to one informant is in fact representing the Party to Lao women (2008-04-03).

Incorporating the interests of a collateral actor in favor of ones own efficacy does not only apply to MOs. INGOs also tend to present their interests in a way that attract funding and are approved by the Lao state. This sometimes urges INGOs to channel their work around sensitive issues that could displease the state (Carothers 1999:211).

The versatile mediation of interests and bargaining amongst influential actors demonstrate the constant renegotiation of democratic civil society space in Laos. The way that actual interests of INGOs are modified, due to their limited action space, calls for a questioning of the civil society nature of INGO operations.

5.3   Channels

This chapter discusses the possible channels for influence that INGOs may use. Many of the INGOs have learned by experience which government representatives or ministry staff that are open-minded and most rewarding to talk to. It becomes apparent that specific *individuals* may function as channels for INGO influence.

Donors are occasionally used as channels by the INGOs to influence the government. Economic sponsorship is often associated with a higher level of influence than a mere vision, however adequate it may be. One informant confirms that the donor community has far more weight than the INGOs because of the money they bring in. Without back up from a donor, the INGO risk being neglected.

> [I]f I try to talk directly they [the government] will be very polite to me, they will listen to me, but they will totally ignore whatever I say (2008-04-08).

In this way, *donors* channel INGO influence on government decision-making, even though their patronage does not guarantee a positive response.

> It does not mean that the government will do what the donor says, but it means that the government will be more open to this, to the donor. And actually it's amazing how open the government can be (ibid.).

Boussard emphasizes that external influence in several cases have affected the strengthening of civil society and democracy-building in a positive way, something that this openness could be a sign of (Boussard 2003:119). This is not in accordance with Ann C. Hudocks critical perception of donors as organizations tying NGOs to themselves fulfill their conditions. (Hudock 1999:16).

Some informants were negative to the donors channeling money directly to NPAs because of the risk of what is called "incautious funding". NPAs are still small and can become corrupted rather than grassroots-orientated if they all at once receive vast funding. Boussard highlights this when discussing "artificial civil society" that is only working to get funding, not for the local people (Boussard 2003: 119).

Instead of the top-down influence facilitated by donors, MOs may function as bottom-up channels. They have an important role in the government structure as well as in relation to INGOs. Their organization is strong; vertically due to the hierarchic structure and horizontally as they figure at all levels of society.

A majority of the informants had experience of collaboration with MOs and several with LWU. Their experiences were both positive and negative but they all agreed that MOs are part of the government and cannot be considered civil society organizations. This is an example of a corporatist system where CSOs are incorporated within the state. The incorporation could make the organizations co-opted by the state, letting the state define the public interests (Boussard 2003:110f).

MOs can be useful channels in the area where they operate, e.g. LWU in promoting women's rights, but cannot promote distinct INGO concerns. One informant says:

> No, not if it was our organizations agenda. I think it would have to be adopted by *them* and it have to be on *their* priority list" (2008-04-27).

NPAs are also seen as important channels for change wherefor some informants collaborate closely with these to support and fund their starting up[11]. Still the already mentioned blocking of INGO support to NPAs may impede their development.

> They're all channels, they're little *tiny* channels, but they're all channeling to something larger (2008-04-25).

NPAs are instrumentally important in improving civil society. Owing to their access to remote areas and national distribution they become strategic for research and provide information that would not be easily accessible to INGOs. The research can subsequently be used in advocacy purposes (2008-04-03).

Many of the INGOs attest that employment of formal channels, provided by the government, is slow and bureaucratic. The registration process often takes several months, both for permission to be in the country and for each project they wish to conduct. One informant has experienced that the government control has

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[11] The organization of the informant does not require formal registration, as other funders do, and are therefore able to support the NPAs.

enhanced parallel to the increased presence of INGOs, and that the formal channels often delay INGO efforts (2008-04-17). Despite this, the same informant finds governments control to have positive aspects.

> [W]e're cooking in their kitchen so they want to know what kind of food we're cooking. So, I think that them [the government] being involved in the process is a good thing for the country, but it does mean that our work is slower as it has to be processed through the monitoring of activities (2008-04-17).

In liberal democracies, most interest-group activity is channeled through the bureaucracy (Hague & Harrop 2007:215). This is not the case in Laos where indirect influence through MOs is more common. It is clear that INGOs try to find individuals within the system that may be more overt than the majority. Some INGOs see potential in NPAs as channels for improving the local civil society. All these can be interpreted as informal channels.

5.4   Relationships

> Civil society requires governance to survive and governments, at least democratic ones, draw their strength from civil society (Alagappa 2004:37).

INGO work depends on the relationship with the Lao state. The state is sometimes an enabler of civil society as it provides a political framework, but it could also restrict it (Boussard 2003:91). In Laos, where the state restricts civil society, its hegemonic dominance is problematic (Boussard 2003:110f).

The relationship between INGOs and the government is characterized by *cautiousness*. One factor contributing to this is the lack of support from the international community that INGOs experience. This shows that it is not given that INGOs find the international community to be a guardian. An informant describes this vulnerability:

> I think [...] the possibility to be asked to leave is very high, and the ability for the pressure from the international community to press one issue is probably not very high (2008-04-17).

All informants underline the risk of getting expelled from the country. This risk affects the work of INGOs, and few choose to violate government restrictions. One informant expresses her dislike for risk-taking by acknowledging that this only induces further endangerment for the local population.

> What's the worst thing that can happen? They kick me out of the country, that's it. But for us the real risk is, if we somehow offend them they will close the access that we have to the target population, to deliver services. And the ones that are going to be directly affected are *them*. So we have to be super super careful (2008-04-08).

The extent to which civil society and its associations can influence the course of state policy is of great importance. This is a determent of the quality of civil

society (Taylor 1995:88). To be influential, civil society requires the ability to put issues on the agenda and represent interests of civil society in the collaboration with the state (Boussard 2003:80f). The absence of explicit criticism of the Lao state by the INGOs, due to the forced cautiousness, illustrate a scarcity of influence

Even though the collaborative relations are characterized by coercion from the government, several INGOs experience the collaboration at local level as good and the government representatives as facilitating. However, at higher levels the government is less flexible. One informant describes the Lao state to be as cautious as INGOs in their relationship.

> They don't appreciate too much shaking, supporting what is existing and maybe building up capacity, strengthening people, that's fine. You have to ride in recourses to improve quality of life, that's fine, but trying to shake the system is not, not a welcomed activity (2008-04-17).

Despite this cautiousness the INGOs were invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take part in a dialogue on the modes of NGO efficacy in April 2008. This was interpreted by the INGOs as a promising exception from the normal routine of the government (2008-04-11). But one of the informants says:

> It was a big step that it happened, but there wasn't a huge amount of openness for us [...] and they didn't seem to understand very well some of the issues that we can see (2008-04-11).

Another informant says:

> I think they [the government] truly want to make it easier for NGOs who are considered respectable [...] but also, I think they want to be in a position to say 'thank you very much, we don't want your help' (2008-04-17).

The internal relations between INGOs working in Laos are also important to consider and are characterized by both collaboration and friction. Despite their heterogeneity they attend collective meetings and form joint working groups on different topics. INGOs have both formal and informal meetings discussing cross-country issues that they work together on, e.g. HIV/AIDS. The working group on civil society gathers what one informant call "people testing the water".

Some informants accuse INGOs for being too cautious and for not expressing any demand for a political transformation. On one occasion this is expressed as the dilemma of "rocking the boat" or not (2008-04-25). Occasionally the different approaches used make their internal relations adversarial. Some informants accuse other INGOs for only working through their project plans, getting funding and counting their profits without having any social agenda. Further they are in Laos too short to be able to do anything sustainable. One informant says:

> I don't trust them because they come and they are here for two or three years and people are very energetic and they want to change Laos in three years and you know that's what they'll do and then they leave. And they won't be there to deal with any consequences (2008-04-03).

In summary, the web of relations affecting INGO influence is complex since their approach, roles and functions vary depending on whom they correspond with.

5.5 Methods

Concerning methods, or strategies, practiced by INGOs, the categorization can be done in numerous ways. This chapter briefly outlines the strategies that have been especially mentioned by the informants.

Without doubt, the central mode for promoting INGO agendas, takes place in partnership with the Lao state. Methods used by INGOs may be advocacy, bargaining, diplomatic dialogue, demonstration and providing of alternative information.

The low level of economic development provides for some usage of economic means in pursuing a cause. Since the Lao state is in great need of increased economic resources, funding comes to play an important role for INGOs to affect state actions.

Possibilities for INGOs to conduct *advocacy* are limited because of the risk of being expelled from the country. Even though some INGOs are eager to grasp all opportunities offered to bring their core topics up for discussion, the self-censorship is extensive. An INGO representative declares this duality:

> There are sometimes to press for an issue and there are sometimes to go back and avoid. Because that's the way it works (2008-04-08).

INGO advocacy usually takes place when the government seeks funding for a workshop on a particular issue or want sponsorship to attend foreign conferences (2008-04-11). In these situations the advocacy takes on a character of *bargaining* in the sense that the ability to lobby is connected to resources that are attractive to the government, be it by financial or professional means.

In some cases the INGOs could influence the legislation and policymaking of the state. But in most of the cases INGOs are not a part of the policy formulation but give policy advice. The method used is then to give information and advice to make the government take informed decisions. This could be part of a broadening of the available information, which contributes to the creation of alternative information (Dahl 1989:112). An important issue is, however, if the information stays within the government or will be readily available to the population.

One informant talks about the importance of *providing information* and alternatives to citizens making them take informed decisions.

> One thing that we do is try to offer alternatives [...]. And then encourage them, let them think about these issues, and then make a decision (2008-04-04).

Another informant means that the providing of information has made the government approachable on previously hushed issues.

> There are some issues that sometimes could not be discussed openly but
> now the government ministry is starting to open to discuss these issues, for
> instance HIV and drugs that didn't exist in Laos. Now they are more open to
> consider that there may be some cases and we may need to do something
> about it. So it's an explanation you can bring to the table now that before
> was not an option (2008-04-08).

Putting issues on the agenda is an important function of civil society (Boussard 2003:80f). The informant sees the INGO community as important in advocating things on the development agenda, but adds that they know their limits and that they have to be careful when addressing certain issues.

One strategy for INGOs to influence could be through support of local civil society. Among the INGOs there is a vivid debate on whether to push forward the draft law on associations or not. While some argue that they should seek the collaboration and protection of the government instead of trying to command it, others are not ready to wait for the official approval of the draft decree. The latter go on supporting NPAs, convinced that active civil society support must be part of their fieldwork. One informant says:

> [W]hat to be done and what the government says is one thing. And most
> NGOs in this country [...] bend over backwards. [...] They're not very
> progressive. Some of the NGOs have shown some interest in local NGOs
> but they find it risky, they wont take any chances (2008-04-25).

He means that other INGOs are too cautious and refrain from expressing demands for political reform. Other INGO representatives fear that putting the topic of a Lao civil society on the agenda now would presumably jeopardize their ongoing progress in other equally sensitive rights based areas (2008-04-08).

As Alagappa puts it, INGOs could have an important role in constraining state power in authoritarian regimes like Laos, the question is whether they dare it or not (Alagappa 2004:5). The adoption of the draft law could be a rewarding method and Carothers finds that international donors have often been eager to support initiation of legal frameworks for independent associations (Carothers 1999:214).

Alongside NPAs ethnic community associations exist engaged in beneficial social work. These too are examples of local civil society organizations that INGOs may channel support to as a method of achieving democratic change. Still, the international community has shown little or no interest in supporting these associations. One reason for this apathy is said to be the cultural isolation of these community groups. One informant explains why the international community shows little interest in these associations:

> [B]ecause they do not speak English, they don't go to NGO meetings, they
> don't get funding from over-seas, they are self-funding, they collect funds
> from their own members, so they're just invisible I think (2008-04-03).

Tomas Carothers states that efforts to support civil society in developing countries could be much broader than it often is. It could include social, cultural, ethnic or religious groups, which definitely should be considered a part of civil society. He

finds the reason for this being that they are not recognized as bearers of the right norms and cultures according to Western aid givers (Carothers 1999:210f).

To be able to conduct work in Laos, the INGOs often have a rights based agenda but address the issues as development issues. This method, when dealing with sensitive matters, is an important skill in *diplomatic dialogue* with the government. One informant says:

> For example, a major difficulty for women is the time consuming travels to get water. By providing water the rights are also increased. […] This is also in the interest of the government, which makes it a strategic way of addressing a rights based issue (2008-04-10).

This type of methodological approach connects to the idea of *demonstration*. In a globalized world, processes of diffusion and demonstration gain more and more importance (Uhlin 2006:189). One informant describes the difficulties with promoting a proposal and favors the idea of providing real life examples of how an approach already has been implemented.

> [We] generate a real example, which they can feed back into the government and party system. I think for me that's the most effective way of even doing advocacy in Laos. You don't organize a rally, you don't paint a banner, you don't have tv-ads, but if you can do a local district or local level development activity and than have the sorts of results, the lessons, the achievement of that fed back into the government system, it's kind of like invisible advocacy (2008-04-03).

Central to methods such as advocacy is the skill to express desires and suggestions with words appropriate for the "Party ear". Rhetorical considerations can determine the outcome of the conversation.

> We are careful on how we approach and discuss. To raise awareness but in a way that is not confrontational, but still addresses the issue. [W]e are still trying to be creative and it's not an easy solution for this; how can we do advocacy in the Lao context? Because there is definitely a need for it, but it's not so easy to do (2008-04-04).

The Lao setting invoke a number of less conventional strategies for INGOs to influence state authority. The methods often aim at collaboration and coordination between state and civil society, which sometimes blur the distinction between them. Since a confrontational attitude is connected to risks, it becomes rational for INGOs to tone down specific issues and seek gaps in the governmental control where their operations are seen as filling a need.

6 Conclusion

Because of the complex setting in Laos we cannot claim to give an omniscient understanding of its civil society. Nor is the intention to provide knowledge generalizable to other cases. We call attention to the fact that our findings are grounded in subjective interpretation and that it is impossible to give universally true answers.

To draw conclusions on the role of INGOs for Lao civil society, we here intertwine our conception of democracy, outlined by Dahls institutions, with the analysis of the empiric material. These serve as indicators of local civil society in a normative sense but are also useful tools in the empiric analysis.

INGOs, MOs, NPAs and donors, all in their different ways, outline Lao civil society. However, there is still deficient pluralism amongst local actors. This is due to the absence of *associational autonomy,* which indicates that citizens lack possibility to organize themselves in sovereign organizations (Dahl 1989:221f).

By reason of the draft law on associations, associational autonomy might be in the pipeline, but the process is slow. Deficient associational autonomy results in a shortage of grassroot counterparts and INGOs are only to a small extent reaching local citizens. Depending on the outcome of the draft law, and the degree of priority given to it by INGOs, this could improve.

In Laos, the state is a central actor that cannot be excluded from the analysis of civil society. The government recognizes benefits of INGO advocacy and implementation skills, especially since these resources are often connected to financial capabilities. The effectiveness of INGO influence obviously relates to their access to resources usable for the government. Even though INGOs are allowed a realm within Laos and are useful for the implementation of the governments poverty eradication program their situation is vulnerable.

Civil society, and its relationship to the state, is at times a matter of internal dispute among INGOs and their roles are disparate. The main difference concerns their approach to the government and if they should support or counter state policy. Hence, the question of whether to rock the boat or not is crucial.

Even so, it is apparent that INGOs adjust their rhetoric and compromise parts of their agenda because of the risk of being expelled from the country if they are too political or critical. This is undeniably restricting the *freedom of expression* since this criteria connotes freedom to express political opinions and critique without fearing reprisals (Dahl 1989:221f).

The compelled resignation to the authoritarian state places INGOs in an unusual context for civil society work. This generates alternative strategies such as channeling civil society support through supporting government-run operations where state capacity is short or, in contrast, through sidestepping it.

INGOs are required to connect with the government in all projects. The formal dialogue takes an administrative, technical form and thus becomes de-politicized and remains state-dominated. Government restrictions complicate the INGOs ability to fulfill their original objectives and this cause for adjustments according to government ideals in order to conjure higher receptivity for INGO demands and discussions.

The formal channels offered to INGOs tend to be ineffective, bureaucratic and short term. Because of this, many INGOs are using indirect channels for influence. Informal channels are sometimes risky but could also be effective for change.

Regarding provision of *alternative information,* INGOs are both enabling and restraining actors. In some cases, they prove to supply alternative information when giving policy advice. This contributes to the distribution of information to citizens, although this is not always the case. INGOs are also providing alternative information to citizens when working in the field. This is done trough demonstration and submits citizens to alternative sources of information.

In addition, INGOs have an important role putting topics on the agenda that previously have not been there. This can open up for dialogue and new alternatives to be considered. The relative independence of INGOs, as transnational civil society actors, serves to their ability to function as intermediaries in a two-way flow of influence between government and citizens.

Still, many INGOs are in some way tied to donor objectives. This reduces their possibilities to adjust to the Lao context and provide the appropriate aid and information.

To summarize, the institutions analyzed are in many aspects not fulfilled in Laos. The role of INGOs in relation to Lao civil society can only be understood in the light of the prevailing political climate. Activities of transnational civil society actors are conditioned, controlled and in consequence blunted compared to the more insurrectional functions that civil society may hold. Nevertheless, the trend towards a more open and accommodating situation is explicit. This suggests increased influence of INGOs in areas where they can play an instrumental role and offer capability in advancing development. The openness can in it self be understood as beneficial for civil society status but regarding the local actors within civil society there is an obvious need for INGOs to be capable of handling over responsibility and prerogatives. Handling over as well as inviting local actors to collaborate must however be done without absorbing them into a Western development discourse dictated by donors.

This study has generated an understanding of how transnational civil society can influence local civil society in Laos. Aside from an analytical description of the institutional and organizational circumstances influencing this sphere, the thesis has also accentuated the prosperous contribution of NPAs. What the future holds is still misty and the growth and endorsement of NPAs is essential to further observe, since they may be the embryos of a local civil society.

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7.2   Oral sources

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2008-04-25. Interview with Program Coordinator. Vientiane, Laos.

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Appendix: Set Ups

Set Up for Interviews with INGOs

Due to the use of unstructured interviews, the conducted interviews changed form and content during the field study. The following set up is the original one. After the initial set up, some additional questions that were added through out the process are presented.

First Set Up

"Welcome, and thank you so much for taking the time to come here and answer some questions. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss your ideas, opinions and experiences of how it is to work as an NGO in Laos. The things we discuss here today will be of great value for us in our study and we are very thankful for your help. You are of course welcome to ask any questions you might have about our study and about this talk, now, during the interview, or afterwards.

We have contacted you because we believe that you can give us an important view of how organizations work in Laos. There are no answers that are right or wrong and all aspects and negative or positive comments are of value for us. Of course it is all up to you how much you tell us, so don't worry about what is expected of you.

We would also like to accentuate that we are by no means experts on this subject. We are her to learn more and obtain some of the knowledge you have about how it is to work as an NGO in Laos.

This conversation will take one hour maximum and it will be a quite informal conversation concerning some major key questions we have prepared.

To make sure that we do not miss any important details of your statements we would appreciate if we could record our conversation. Is this okay with you?

All the material that we gather will be guarded safely and if you prefer to stay anonymous this is perfectly fine with us.

I suggest that we introduce ourselves more accurately and then maybe you could describe your organization and how long you have been in Laos."

1 – Personal Experiences

How is your daily work planned and carried out?

How do the circumstances differ from countries where your organization is based?

Are any situations in your daily work affected by the ministerial administration in Laos?
Do you, in your organization, discuss the political system in Laos with each other?

 2 – Absence of Local NGOs

What is it like to work in a country with no local NGOs?
Is it somehow affecting your work as an international NGO?

Which state governed organizations do you have contact or collaborate with?

3 – Civil Society

How do you experience the role of the ethnic minorities in Laos?

4 – Relation to the State

What legal documents and frameworks is your work directed by?

What social or political issues do you find most urgent to work with?

What are the main obstacles you encounter in your daily work?

Could you describe your view of the state structure and of the mass organizations? Where do the international NGOs fit in?
    Eventuellt ombeds informanten här rita upp strukturen.

5 – Cooperation with Mass Organizations, e.g. Lao Women's Union

Have you ever worked or collaborated with the LWU?

How would you describe the structure of LWU and its relationship to the government?
How would you say that their relationship with the state is carried out?

Are they able to put things on the agenda of the state?

Does their work result in any visible changes for their target group?
Have they recently reached any major political or social achievements?

6 – Is there anything you would like to add to the discussion?

Additional Questions

Do MOs in any way mantle the role of local NGOs?

There's a dialogue taking place between the government and the INGO community, what is your opinion about that?

The government consider opening up for more NPAs- local NGOs. What are your expectations on this process?

Are NPAs the same thing as NGOs?

What is your view of the NPAs? A social movement? Fishing for funding? Kinned with the government?

Is there any ways for local people to push for democracy? Organize themselves?

Why do you think that organizing for women's rights is legitimated but not organizing for human rights?

Can mass organizations, like LWU, achieve a social change in their work for women's rights? Can they stimulate rights based discussions? Encourage raise demands?

What are the future prospects for civil society in Laos,?

Community service groups, other associations, could they empower people?
Does this represent a general step towards greater pluralism and openness in society?

Would you say that LWU are able to address women's right issues in a good way?

Set Up for Interviews with LWU

"Welcome, and thank You so much for taking the time to answer our questions. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss Your ideas, opinions and experiences of how it is to work with women's rights in a mass organization like the LWU in Laos. The things we discuss here today will be of great value for us in our study and we are very thankful for Your help. You are of course welcome to ask any questions You might have about our study and about this talk, now, during the interview, or afterwards.

We find Your view of social work in Laos very important and all aspects - negative or positive comments - are of value to us.

We would also like to accentuate that we are no experts on this subject, we are merely students writing our bachelor thesis in social science. We are here to learn more and obtain some of the knowledge You have about how it is to work in a strong popular organization.

This conversation will take maximum one hour and it will be a quite informal conversation concerning some major key questions we have prepared.

To make sure that we do not miss any important details of Your statements we would appreciate if we could record our conversation. Is this okay with You?

All our informants will stay anonymous in the report we are writing and we will guard the material safely. You will get to read our referral of this interview before anyone else sees it.

Initially, we suggest that we introduce ourselves more accurately and You are welcome to ask any questions You would like to have answered before we continue to the questions."

1 – Personal Experiences

How is Your daily work planned and carried out?

How did You come to be involved in the LWU?
Where You approached by someone?
How is LWU advocates recruited?

How do people react to You strong engagement in Women's Rights?
What do people in general know about the LWU?

2 – The Mass Organization Phenomena

What is the role of mass organizations like the LWU?

What differs mass organizations from other governmental bodies?

How is the concerns of the target groups determined (i.e. the Lao women)?

How do the popular mass communicate their needs to the mass organizations?

Could You describe the structure of the mass organizations?

How do you experience the role of the ethnic minorities in Laos?

3 – Relation to the State

How would You describe the structure of LWU and Your relationship to the government?

Are any situations in Your daily work affected by the ministerial administration in Laos?

Are Your organization assisted by any specific ministerial department?

How do You communicate Your needs to the government?

What legal documents and frameworks is your work directed by?

Are You involved in any other (governmental) organizations or in public politics?

4 – Collaboration and Networking

What is Your relation to the INGOs?
Where do they fit in the political system?

Who make preparations and take responsibility for official representation, e.g. the international UN conferences?

5 – Agenda Setting and Political Impact

What are Your strategies to bring about social change and achieve You goals?

What social or political issues do You find most urgent to work with?

Does their work result in any visible changes for their target group?
Have they recently reached any major political or social achievements?

Have You recently achieved any goal or bewitnessed any major change in the situation of Your target group?

What are the main obstacles You encounter in Your daily work?

6 – Funding

How is the LWU funded?

How are the resources divided between the different activities and projects?

How do You plan Your budget? *Who controls the expenses?*

How would You like to see the LWU advance if You had more financial resources?

7 – Is there anything You would like to add to the discussion?