Policy Development of Education in Laos from 1990-2000:  
A historical perspective

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Abstract:
This paper draws from a wider study that analysed the roles of external support in the policy development of education in Laos from 1990 through until 2010 (Phommalangsy 2013). The sources for data were key policy documents and interviews conducted with over 40 key stakeholders. This paper focuses on the 10-year period of 1990s and seeks to have better understanding of ‘how’ and ‘why’ the education policy was influenced by global policy and agenda. This particular period was chosen because there were key moments that occurred in the education sector, especially the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), which was being launched into the discourse of development worldwide. This historical event heavily influenced the education policy and reform in Laos during the subsequent 10 year period.

A postcolonial lens is used to analyse the engagement of external support in policy development from 1990 to 2000 through provision of education reform programs. Laos is one of many ‘developing’ countries, where education policy has been influenced through substantial financial and technical support from development partners. The country was only recently ‘re-born’ from colonial regimes, a lengthy and damaging civil war, with limited capacity and is thus unable to resist or mediate donor policy agendas, which are global conditions and pressure.

Key words: education policy, policy influence, development partners, external support, EFA
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Introduction and the context
As in all countries, the education development in Laos is based on its history. The national education system is embedded from a heritage of indigenous culture, colonialism, socialist revolution, market economy and privatization, and more recently, global conditions. After more than eighty years of colonial rule (1893-1975), the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (short form ‘Laos’) was established on 02 December 1975 under the leadership of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (Phomvihane 1981). The country in this newly independent situation is described as a ‘re-born’ state, since many well-educated people fled overseas, due to not being able to trust the power of the ‘revolutionary’ government.

Ten years after the liberation, Laos began its transition to a market economy in 1986 (GOL 2000, 1996a, 1991). This was a government-wide reform initiative, which was a remarkable starting point for a market economy reform and opening the country in the context of an emergent post-Cold War world. Later, the government had implemented several important education reforms, with the aim to develop a well-articulated formal education system with a legal (ADB 2000b; Adam et al. 2001). Reforms within the system included upgraded teacher education, the
introduction of a supporting supervisory system, new curriculum, and revised textbooks; these reform programs were mostly implemented through external support (ADB 2000a; World Bank 2001). However, this reform process opened the national education system to receiving more external investment; as a result, the external development partners wielded considerable influence on policy development (Noonan 2011). Basic education was a primary example of donor influence, which has been a key policy agenda for external support since the early 1990s.

This paper provides an analysis of external support and describes the impact of colonial and historical relationship on the policy of basic education in Laos, a small and poor country in Southeast Asia. The paper draws attention to the policy development within a particular period (1990-2000), which was a launch of the first EFA conference into the discourse of development worldwide. This period also marked the changing direction of the Lao government toward receiving support from western capitalist countries and international aid agencies after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. At this time, Laos was engaging for the first time with the principles of a new market economy, while dealing with the legacies of colonial occupations, a lengthy and damaging civil war (Stuart-Fox 1997).

A postcolonial policy analysis in this study demonstrated residual colonial and neo-colonial effects in the Lao education policy in the context of contemporary globalisation (Fox 2004). It is argued that the country of Laos was only recently ‘re-born’ from colonial regimes, with limited capacity and was thus unable to resist or mediate donor policy agendas. The nature of the power relationship between development partners and government is explored through an analysis of the policy documents developed at that time as well as the perceptions of conditionalities attached to aid during that decade, as recalled by both government officials and those working in the aid sector.

The study and framework
The paper seeks to have better understanding of how the education policy was influenced by external support. The research design required data collection through semi-structured interviews with relevant personnel in both the national government and development partners in Laos. There was a directed focus on talking to expatriates whose missions were related to education policies in attempting to understand how they transferred their global concept about education reform to the Lao context. The views and opinions of representatives of the Lao government about the influence of these concepts were also sought.

The data collection was framed by a ‘policy trajectory’ approach (Maguire and Ball 1994), which deals with policy across the stages of the policy cycle beginning with elite interviews, concerned with policy development and often internecine politics involved in the actual text production through implementation. The interviews were conducted with a wide range of participants, using a free-flowing conversational style. The main focus of the interviews was the degree of donor engagement on education policy in Laos, the existence of aid conditionality, and questions of national ownership and independence in establishing policy agendas in education. Particular questions and approaches were prepared differently depending on interviewee status and their roles in the policy development process.

The key participants were senior officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE), such as directors and deputy directors of relevant departments, who were classified as policy makers.
implementers were also interviewed, technical staff who hold junior positions but have extensive experience in actually implementing projects at the field level. In the international aid agencies, program managers and senior advisers involved in the policy making processes were interviewed. Most of these people were expatriates, while the national local staff who held junior positions such as program officers were also included because of their involvement in policy implementation. Significantly, many of them provided insights into how global policy impacted on the policy development in Laos in the 1990s.

Policy analysis in this study is used through a postcolonial lens. This is because the policy development during the 1990s through education reform programs seemed to be an exercise in the form of ‘educational neo-colonialism’ (Nguyen et al. 2009); the northern philosophies have an impact on education systems of the southern nations, like Laos, through global pressures. Young (2001), argues that the word ‘neocolonialism’ ‘… was a fitting term to describe the immediate set up of the postcolonial epoch’ (p.45). Bray (1993: 334) refers to neocolonialism as the ‘control of states by external powers despite the formal appearance of constitutional independence’. In this context, the paper draws from postcolonial perspective as political aspiration (Young 2003), through an analysis neocolonial practice in the Lao education programs during the critical moment of the1990s period.

Key moments causing the education reform in 1990s
During the early 1990s, the development of basic education in Laos moved into a period of major reform. At the same time, there is a growing in power of multilateral agencies and influence in education, and decentralization policies were introduced across the world to improve the efficiency of education system (Robertson et al. 2007). Below are the key moments in this period, which reflect the wider global context at that time.

The first key moment involved sector studies by UN agencies during the late 1980s and early 1990s that suggested the national education system was in poor shape. A national study was carried out jointly by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education and provided important insights into the reasons why the education sector was in desperate need of improvement (UNESCO 1991). An observations made by UNICEF (1992:10) also indicated that ‘teacher qualifications and competencies were singled out as major problems in the primary system, with 35% of primary school teachers having no or incomplete training and some of them had only primary education themselves’.

The second key moment was when the ADB and the World Bank carried out a sector analysis during 1989-1991 that confirmed the poor diagnosis of the UN studies, highlighting major problems at all levels of the education sector (ADB 2000a, 2000b; World Bank 1999, 2001). These major issues included level of teacher qualifications in the primary and lower secondary system, the need to improve the primary and lower secondary curriculum, the need to increase access to school, and limited capacity in educational planning and management. These development partners discussed with the government large-scale education programs for improving the effectiveness of the country’s education system. This important mission opened up the whole system to intensive appraisal, leading to recommendations for major programs of education reform and development (UNICEF 1992).
The third key moment influencing the education reform was the World Conference on EFA, convened at Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990. This conference brought together a wide range of participants from governments, international agencies, NGOs, professional associations and leading personalities in the field of education from around the world (WCEFA 1990). At this conference, senior government officials and donor agencies, signed a world declaration on EFA and a framework for action, committing them to ensure the vision of meeting basic needs for children, youth, and adults. The EFA conference was clearly a major milestone in the international dialogue on the place of education in human development (Chabbot 2003). The agreement reached in this meeting gave renewed impetus to the world drive to provide universal primary education and eliminate adult illiteracy (Mundy 1998, 2007). The consensus also inspired efforts to improve the quality of basic education and to find more cost-effective ways to meet the basic learning needs of various disadvantaged population groups (UNESCO 1994).

Some senior officials from the Lao government also attended this EFA conference and agreed to the declaration and framework. Significantly, this meeting brought Lao educators into the mainstream of world thinking on educational development. This participation gave an important signal in ending the long period of isolation during the socialist revolution and moving towards a market economy and privatisation. The Lao participation in the World Summit for Children in 1990 in New York also reinforced the government’s commitment to basic education. Particularly, this summit drew attention to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and therefore ensured that basic education remained a critical priority (UNICEF 1992).

The production of education policy
Interestingly, Laos did not have any comprehensive and recognised education policy documents prior to the year 2000. However, the government did have some papers that were education-related, like EFA targets by 2000, a medium-term policy framework (1995-2000), and long-term objectives (UNESCO 1998). Education objectives were also stated in the Party Congress and were outlined in the national five-year plans, known as National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) 1991-1995 and 1996-2000 (GOL 1991, 1996a, 1996b). In analysing the impact on policy development, these general government documents will be investigated where various education strategies and targets were outlined and discussed. These key documents seemed equally important in leading to education reform programs. In some way, it looked as if the EFA conference in 1990 itself was a motivating factor for the reform, even though the mission studies of the UN agencies and the banks were already in progress before the conference, but the results of their analyses were published after the conference. It could be argued that it was the convergence of these policy pressures that led to resultant effects in Laos.

Following the EFA conference in 1990, the Lao government organised its national conference in August 1990 to disseminate the results and follow-up on the commitments made at the conference. The meeting was attended by MOE senior officials and representatives from line ministries. At the same time, the government developed the national five-year development plan (1991-1995), which outlined an overarching objective for the education program, as follows (GOL 1991:27):

1. Achieving the nationwide primary education and improving the literacy skills among the target population,
2. Improving teacher qualifications in both in-service and pre-service training programs,
3. Improving quality education through reforming curriculum, teaching methods to be relevant to the needs of society, providing more teaching materials, and
4. Supplying teaching materials and equipment in secondary, and technical and vocational schools, in some areas.

The above educational targets were associated with the EFA conference, as well as connected with the early mission studies. To implement these goals and objectives, the government was committed to rebuilding and strengthening the education system from scratch (a situation remained from the colonial regimes and socialist revolution) in order to increase access and improve the quality of education.

As mentioned, the key moments influenced the educational targets of the national five-year plan; at the same time, these also influenced the MOE’s EFA targets. For example, the government established the national EFA steering committee in December 1991, which was consisted of members from the line ministries and other government institutions (MOE 2000). This resulted from the national EFA dissemination workshop in August 1990. This committee set up goals and objectives to the year 2000 to ensure the commitment made at the EFA conference would hold. Here are the overall targets and objectives related to basic education (MOE 2000:17):

- Expand primary education so as to accept more children in the 6-10 years age group, increasing enrolments from 63% (1990) to 80% (2000), while reducing class repetition and school dropout rates,
- Increase the rate of surviving students enrolling in grade 1 to grade 5 from 27% (1990) to 63% (2000), and
- Eradicate illiteracy among the population in individuals of 15 to 40 years olds to increase the national literacy rate from 60% (1990) to 80% (2000).

The EFA conference seemed to precipitate the first national education policy, which was a comprehensive sector policy framework that had never been previously articulated by the state. In the national report on EFA 2000 assessment, the influence of the EFA conference on national education discourse and policy was clear (MOE 2000). The government identified formal education as central to national identity and realised the necessity of providing all people with an opportunity to acquire a quality education. In particular, the strategy was aimed at eradicating recurrent illiteracy, and organising and stimulating the development of complementary education, giving priority to efforts to mobilise school-aged children to complete primary school. Therefore, the government cooperated with development partners to prepare key basic education projects. Quality features in these reform projects included curriculum development, textbook production and distribution, and teacher training improvement, with an objective to ‘revise and upgrade the previous primary and lower secondary curriculum …’ (MOE 2000:24).

The EFA conference influence on policy can also be examined through the wider government goals and objectives. The Party Congress in 1996 emphasized the need to expand and modernise the education system, orienting it toward producing youths and adults with skills and knowledge required to achieve the national development agenda (GOL 1996b). Through the policy discussion process with development partners, the government agreed that the national education system needed reforming in order to achieve quality improvement in moving towards higher standards and to be modernised gradually (GOL 1996a).
The educational targets noted in the Party Congress could be seen more clearly in the national five-year plan 1996-2000 (GOL 1996a). The main objectives in this plan were little different from those of the previous plan which were concerned with increasing access and improving the quality of education and government efficiency, with particular emphasis on educational planning and management. Interestingly, the government acknowledged the education reform projects in this five-year plan, which were previously proposed by the development banks in the early 1990s. Below is evidence of educational policy and targets that were influenced by the Banks’ reform programs (GOL 1996a:25):

1. Continue to implement the Education Development Project (EDP), which is a loan project from the World Bank, to build primary and secondary schools, and to construct buildings for Provincial Education Services and District Education Bureau,

2. Continue to implement the Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP), an ADB support project, for improving teacher education in Teacher Training Colleges and Teacher Training Schools,

3. Invest in the construction of boarding schools, as a target, for ethnic minority students in targeted areas.

From policy formulation to implementation
The EFA conference provided an international standard for new thinking on education development which was why a lot of countries, including Laos, participated in this event and agreed to the declaration. A challenge was raised by an interviewee (ITIP21) who suggested that ‘… was Laos able to implement the EFA goals given the country was just ‘re-born’ from a long history of colonial regimes and civil war? This was not enough to just agree to the framework, but whether the government had resources and technical capacity to implement the entire EFA framework. Obviously, the answer to the challenge was ‘no’. Even though the answer was ‘no’, however, the commitment and acceptance of the principle of EFA was an important driving force for the government to move in that international direction.

Although the results of EFA conference had a positive impact on government policy in accepting the principles, this put much pressure on the government. This was the translation of EFA framework that continued to be a challenge for the government, given its resource base and given the competing needs of the country to address so many development needs. Despite the commitment made, the actual budgetary allocation for education through the 1990s onward was very low. For example, the overall education sector share of total expenditure was approximately 8-9% between 1991 and 1994 (Noonan 2001; Buapao et al. 2000). At the same time, the government could not afford to allocate the bulk of the budget just for education, since it needed to develop other sectors as well. There were so many competing needs for the government to improve the living standard of its people, as it is common in developing countries.

The entire education program during the early 1990s was moving into a significant period of major reform. Policy development was unavoidably engaged by external support due to the impact of EFA conference. At the same time, there was a great desire from the government to rebuild its education system from scratch and reform the national education system. Buapao et al. (2000) acknowledge that the government agreed to the assistance from development partners to develop a program for overall education sector reform. This is to address immediate needs for quality
improvement in basic education and to establish a policy and institutional framework for long-term sector development.

Questions need to be raised as to whether it is the intention of development partners to act in their own interests or do they act because of the government’s desperate need for external support due to the otherwise insufficient availability of funding within the sector. Many interviewees in my study argued that the money in the government’s bank account was just enough to pay for the salaries of teachers and staff. Buapao and his colleagues, who were senior officials, admitted that without external assistance the government would never have achieved their desired education goals (Bouapao et al. 2000). They believed that ‘improvement in basic education quality would be achieved with the assistance of donor funded projects …’ (p.18).

This could be argued that, of course, these officials had to acknowledge the ‘generous’ support of this ‘tied-aid’ because the sector was underfunded and the government was in desperate need of more finance. What would happen if the government had raised some challenging issues arising from the actual implementation and proposed another way of operating aid? It is more likely that the government would not challenge donors because of fear of losing aid, especially during the ‘re-building the nation’ period, and the officials would be blamed by their higher authorities if such opportunities had been lost.

Given such dilemmas, it was wondering if the government, as an ‘owner’ of the country, could raise questions with donors such as, ‘Can you help us to improve this area of education?’, rather than the donors saying ‘… I will give you money, can you do it for me?’ The aid agencies appear to hold the authority here in terms of providing assistance and the government could not challenge much because of fear of losing aid. One of expatriates involved in my study and was based at the Ministry during the 1990s (ITIP10), felt very frustrated watching donors negotiating when proposing aid projects to the government. Here is what this person has to say:

*I think most donors have already made up their mind about what they’re going to do and then they go and talk to the Ministry and try and convince the Ministry that it’s what they want to do. I don’t think the consultation is two-way. I don’t think they give the Ministry enough opportunity to come forward and say look, this is what we need and we’re not going to accept anything other than this.*

**Achieving EFA goal as aid conditionalities**

Given a new thinking on education development from the EFA conference, there were increasing efforts to enhance opportunities for basic education in many developing countries. Meanwhile, international aid agencies played a growing role in providing financial and technical support to those countries. Hallak (2000) observes that international organisations have played a highly significant role in allocating external funding in education; at the same time, attaching conditions to the granting of funds, either gifts or loans as their strategic choices. Chabbott (2003) argues further that national compliance with, and/or adaptation of, global initiatives, like the EFA program, does not only mean legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, but also reflects the need for funding to support their own education programs.
It could be argued that achieving the EFA goal by 2000 was one of the aid conditionalities provided to governments of developing nations. This practice of ‘tied-aid’ was being exercised in Laos, where the education program heavily depended on external support for EFA implementation. One of the senior expatriates interviewed, and had always acted as a ‘gate keeper’ for aid agencies, succinctly commented on this relationship. He observed, ‘… clearly, if you sign this agreement you will get more funding to support the education programs in your own country’ (ITIP03). While the donors, of course, do not state this as bluntly, the intended message is clear about conditional aid. When talking to senior government officials, many of them explained that the government was pressured into accepting this message because of the continued reliance on external support for funding and technical expertise.

Some examples of aid conditionality that were operating in the education program in Laos during the 1990s were provided by participants. One senior expatriate who was chief of an education program at an agency observed about the relationship between the government and an aid agency in relation to negotiating a project reflecting an unequal power relation suggesting (ITIP24),

... before you can get this [the aid] you have to come with prioritised costing plan. Before you can get the resources you have to have teacher reform, public service commission reform, and this type of thing. They will say we will never fix this mess unless you undertake some fundamental action. You are not going to get our money until you do ... you get more money but you got to do this.

Another observation was made by an expatriate who was a coordinator for an aid agency and was stationed at the Ministry (ITIP10), who stated:

The donors put a lot of conditions on the money as well ... we’re not going to give you that loan unless you address …; or unless you address participatory approaches; ... we’ll give you that money but you can only build 10 schools. They put restrictions on them [the government] which makes it really difficult for the Ministry to be focusing on what they’re actually trying to achieve.

The following insight shows how the conditionality was attached to aid. This was explored by a senior expatriate interviewed (ITIP03) who commented on the relationship between an aid agency and the government in relation to negotiating a funding project. When asking why the government accepted the conditions from the aid agency, he responded:

... well, because the sector is desperate for money, desperate for finances. I mean you look at the sector, it’s under-funded. The government is only putting 10 or 11 percent of their budget into the education sector whereas the regional standard is about 20 percent. So the money that comes into education is only sufficient to pay salaries to people. So the government doesn’t have any money to do ... investment. So when a donor comes in and says we’ll give you $20 million to invest in this, the government says, ‘yes, of course’... without considering their conditionalities.
Given the sector badly needed money to rebuild education from its poor shape, this attitude is hard to argue against. It is often hard for the government to say ‘no’ to the money even though they realise it is conditional aid. The government faced a dilemma and often they accepted this tied-aid. The government officials involved in my study admitted that the issue of donor influence on policy development and conditionalities attached to aid was not new phenomena; in fact, this is how aid projects have been operated in Laos for many years. Therefore, they thought the government should just take the aid without any undue scrutiny.

**Government factors contributing to policy influence**

One reason for the heavy influence from external support on the education policy was due to the government commitment made at the EFA conference and the urgent need for ‘re-building’ the nation. The government had a clearly stated policy of upgrading social sector development, but a shortage of financial and technical resources had placed severe limitations on what could be achieved without outside assistance (ADB 2000b; Buapao et al. 2000). As with many other countries, engaged in significant expansion of their education sectors driven by the EFA agenda (Mundy 2007), the Lao government struggled with human resource capacity. This is because the country just ‘re-born’ from the colonial regimes, and following liberation, many highly educated people fled overseas because of not trusting the arrival of revolution government in 1975 and the fear of being sent to re-education camps for indefinite periods.

Human resource capacity seemed to be an issue generally in Laos during the 1990s period. The national common country assessment by UN (2000) found that Laos was critically short of the ‘social capital’ required for development. The report revealed that ‘generally, there is a lack of well-educated and experienced personnel at all levels of society and in all sectors. This poses a serious constraint on development in Laos’ (p.21). This issue was also emphasized by the Swedish aid agency that the main obstacles to the achievement of program objectives were the weaknesses of the Lao administration, and a considerable lack of expertise and capacity (Sida 1999, 2004).

During the early 1990s, the Ministry of Education was not that big and the capacity was, of course, limited in terms of personnel and technical expertise. When development partners came in and proposed numbers of projects, which happened around the same time, the Ministry did not seem to manage these properly. The most important constraint within the Ministry was the shortage of staff with appropriate qualifications and training, and this affected all levels of education sector. There was no cadre of education specialists to draw on, and those few Lao educators with appropriate qualifications were in great demand by the donor funded projects. Development partners had expectations of the people from the Ministry, who had conflicting schedules, to work for their individual projects. Often the donors came in and said ‘No, we want those people to be working on our programs’.

Drawing from interviews with both government officials and expatriates, the capacity of personnel expertise at the Ministry was a big concern in the early 1990s. Some of the MOE senior officials admitted that some personnel at the Ministry did not have enough capacity to perform their tasks as policy makers and implementers. They believed that staff involved in policy making should have had backgrounds in educational management and administration or, at least, should have been trained on these particular topics. This was impossible in Laos, however, given the history of civil war, so some people were just ‘rounded up’ and placed in policy making positions.
From the expatriates’ perspectives, the lack of capacity was very challenging for the government when attempting to handle the external support. One official of an aid agency who was very involved in the policy discussion and dialogues with the Ministry in the early 1990s strongly criticised the government’s capacity (ITIP21). Here is what this expatriate had to say:

*The government has to face major challenges of lack of capacity. Many government officials may not even know what exactly they want. So, if they don’t know what they want, they may ... be easily persuaded by some donors. Today somebody presents these ideas. Tomorrow somebody else presents another idea. The lack of capacity to analyse the situation can make them accept all ideas, which I think is the situation in Laos. You have money. A donor comes in with some money, for this project and that project, and they accept it all, without being very selective of what would suit their situation best.*

**Conclusion**

This paper has analysed the engagement and impact of external support on the policy development of basic education in Laos between 1990 and 2000. The nexus between global policies and the basic education program has been explored in order to understand how development partners played significant roles and affected the policy development. The policy was heavily influenced by development partners that brought the global agenda (e.g. EFA) into the national education system. The evidence was clear that planning and administration at all levels tended to focus on projects that responded to donor-driven initiatives and resources. The influence on the priorities and projects of national plans was very substantial at the time and the influence appeared in the establishment of broad priorities (e.g., basic education), which development partners tended to favour (Adams et al. 2001).

The education policy processes were built up strongly within an EFA genre through a chain of documentation and activities. Rather than embodying the principles of participation and national ownership, McCormick (2012) has identified the policy arrangements and documentation in Laos as ‘a forum for reproducing power imbalances sustaining national elite political interests, and dominant global agendas, through their composition and functions’ (p.35). These imbalances have come from the limited capacity of the country, particularly in the contexts of high dependency on external financial support and expertise.

The paper has also provided some insight into how the education policy was actually influenced by development partners, whose role was to provide substantial financial and technical support for the implementation of EFA programs in Laos. Development partners have made major contributions to the development of national education system. These partners have played significant roles in assisting the government by convincing policy makers that Lao education policy should align with global agendas. This has significantly impacted on ‘policy ownership’ and independence in prioritising the national goals and objectives as conceived by the Lao government. In countries as aid-dependent as Laos, the national ownership of education sector development is at risk when external financing agencies provide substantial support in accordance with global policy and agendas.
The sector development through external support seem to be playing a ‘game’ in relation to funding support. This game is viewed as ‘educational neocolonialism’, which results in an unequal power relation between development partners and the Lao government. The former seem to be in the position of authority in giving out assistance, whereas the latter feel uncomfortable to challenge and negotiate the relevance of aid and policy suitability in the Lao context. As the research evidence illustrates, because of the government’s fear of losing aid, as well as their desperate need for financial to support the sector, the government appears to have no room to manoeuvre. This situation might be seen as a syndrome associated with being an aid-dependent country. McCormick (2012) argues that aid-receiving governments are sometimes identified as being more beholden to their funders than their citizens. He notes further that:

*Deconstruction [of] how policy is produced, by whom, and under what historical and social circumstances provides evidence for those seeking to hold donors and governments accountable for commitments of equitable resource distribution and the right to relevant education of good quality (p.42)*

**Author’s Reflection**

There was general agreement from those interviewed for this study that the national government should take control of external aid and guide the support, rather than allow them to control both the processes and the focus of policy. Unfortunately, the countries where external aid is most needed are the ones which experience the most serious constraints in articulating and asserting their positions strongly and convincingly (Torres 1999). The Lao government has always said that they want to be the driver of their development agenda. To take the lead in its own development, however, the government should be prepared, especially in terms of technical capacity, and know exactly where they are heading, in order to advise all development partners who are willing to support these policy directions. However, if the government is not sure and has a tendency to listen to development partners, they are likely to lose control of the way to go. It is also the responsibility of development partners not to give confusing signals to government. This is very important for donor coordination, as well as the absorptive capacity that the government needs to assume in leading the sector development.

For successful development, it is very important that the government, as the representative of the Lao people, should be in the driver’s seat in terms of defining policies, objectives and other development matters. Today, Laos enjoys substantial support from development partners, whose roles are ostensibly to assist the government in its agendas for development. However, the extent of this in reality is questionable. It is believed that the government should take a strong lead in the national development agenda and act as an ‘owner’ of the country.

Evidence of external influence on education policy in Laos has been substantial for a long time and is directly related to the capacity of Lao government institutions, which have appeared to be weak at times. Government officials have been under pressure to effectively coordinate and meet the demands of the large donor community; for example, the education sector has a number of major projects that are capturing almost all the resources of their own Ministry and they are therefore struggling to cope. This means there is little opportunity for the Ministry to plan their own priorities due to heavy reliance on external support. This means a weakening of government capacity and opportunity for mediation and indicates that national ownership of policy development can get lost.
This paper discusses the policy influence and the influence can be positive as well as negative. For example, if development partners provide information and knowledge to the government, which is not available to them and which is beyond their capacity to obtain, and if it helps the government to make informed choices among the decisions to be made, then the influence is very positive. This knowledge is provided to help the country improve the quality of whatever education is provided by the government to its citizens. Obviously, there is influence of collective development agencies on the policy, but such influence is not necessarily a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing. An evaluation of this influence depends on the particular contexts. I think the government has recently been very open to accepting the ideas that come from development partners, especially in the development of sector plan and implementation.

In principle, all development partners come to Laos with the good intention of supporting the government, in order to make the sector more effective and more responsive to the needs of the Lao people. However, the proposed approaches and strategies may not necessarily be lined up with what is needed locally, but this does not arise from bad intentions. Rather, it is probably a result of the lack of comprehensive understanding of how the local situation is contextualised. Perhaps this comes from a lack of ability or a top-down approach, who think that they can use a successful program from elsewhere, which worked very well there, and simply implant it in the Lao situation, thinking it would also work in the Lao situation, without any consideration of the specific Laos context.

References:


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