A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES OF DEVELOPMENT
IN THE
LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

BY

ANNA POLONYI

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Department of Anthropology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of development discourse in the Lao PDR, what it reflects, and how it affects the relations between Lao and the global economy. It asks: is there a dominating discourse representing an international community promoting capitalism, and if so, how successful is this discourse in achieving its objectives in Lao? Correspondingly, are there local sites of resistance that are manifested in contesting discourses? This perspective involves understanding development in the context of an investigation of Western modernity as a culturally, and historically specific phenomenon. Data-collection included an extensive literature review, and a one month fieldvisit to the Lao PDR, to gather written materials, and conduct interviews with Lao and non-Lao development workers. The collection of written materials in the Lao PDR included documents, reports and publications produced by the Lao Government, 15 NGOs and 5 multilateral agencies.

International development discourse constructs Lao as an object of knowledge, and asserts its authority of "knowing" Lao and its problems, and the corresponding solutions by persistently replicating the trope of a poor, remote, rural, and ethnic Lao. The trope serves to depoliticise the political and economic forces of global capital that are mediated by international development, by grounding the problems of Lao poverty in the "natural" inefficiencies of a rural society, and the "unproductiveness" of subsistence economies. The solution suggested by the trope is to join the market economy. While the production of a trope serves to depoliticise, so too do the silences of the discourse. Preoccupation with the rural subsistence farmer, in particular, the upland shifting cultivator, as central to the object of development homogenizes Lao society, and obscures

the role of the many different groups of actors in development. The power of the mainstream development discourse is resisted and contested locally by development workers, who fill the silences of the mainstream discourse and make visible the interests of International Financial Institutions and market forces, and construct an alternative representation of Lao society that challenges development's trope of Lao.
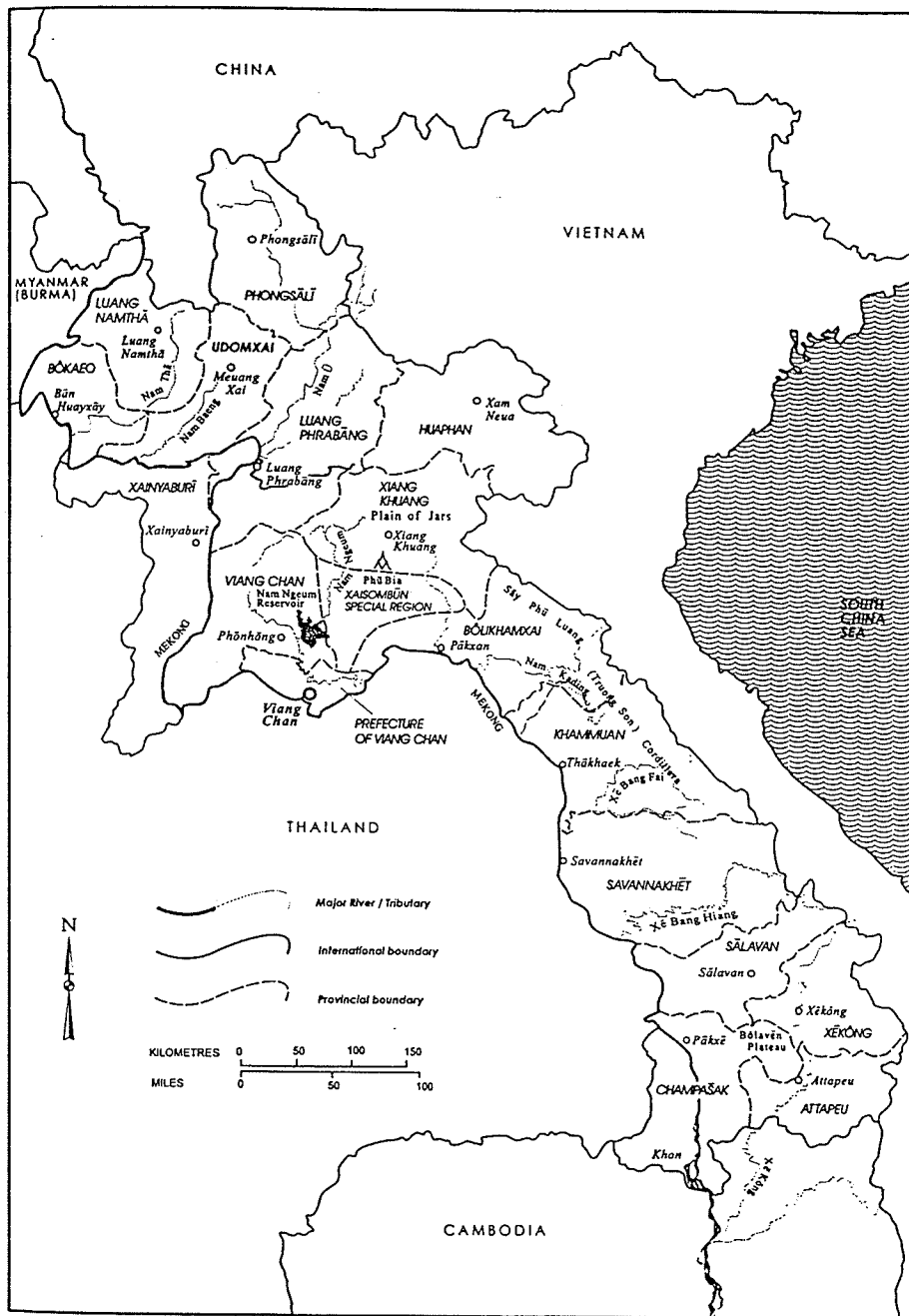
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CIDSE	Cooperation Internationale pour le Development et la Solidarity
CUSO	Canadian University Services Overseas
CWS	Church World Service
GOL	Government of Lao
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LDC	Least Developed Country
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCAA	Community Aid Abroad Oxfam Australia
PL	Pathet Lao
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCA	Save the Children Australia
SNV	Netherland Volunteer Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDCP	United Nations Drug Control Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UXO	Unexploded Ordinance
WFP	World Food Programme

Map 1. Lao People's Democratic Republic

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

> It may well be that the simple insertion of the word "development" into the lexicon of legitimacy for global capitalism is the single most important facet of its hegemonic project: the notion of development adds much luster to the dream pursued by most of the world today. Coupled with its derivative, "modernisation" it may well define that illusive image.
> Moore (1995: 5)

Romantic images of the Lao PDR[1] as a "forgotten land" (Do Pam 1994) are being replaced by predictions that "as Laos enters the next millenium, its political system will come under stresses and strains caused by modernisation, regional integration, and globalisation" (Thayer 2000: 48). The direction for Lao's future, if it is to be determined by a global community of donors and international financial institutions, points to three major areas of "development": 1) the exploitation of natural resources, in particular logging and hydropower, involving the resettlement of large numbers of people; 2) a service sector indirectly built on a transport and communication route from China to Southeast Asia and; 3) the shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture and further integration into the market economy. All three projects of development hold the potential for contributing to societal transformations, that could result in the removal of rural farmers from their land, leading to new forms of stratification and disparities among the Lao population. The unfettered exploitation of natural resources may compete with the development of commercial agriculture, given the limitations on the availability of arable land, and could in turn lead to further urbanisation, and the emergence of a landless class of rural people flocking to the cities looking for employment. These are common consequences that have occurred in other countries that have experienced decades of

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[1] The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is the officially recognized term for the country. According to Grant Evans (2002) some confusion exists as to the use of "Laos" or "Lao" as a noun in

development following colonialism.

The changes that global integration and development are bringing to Lao, are recognised by the Lao people themselves: "what most concerned thoughtful Lao, however, was the pace of change and the impact this was having on both the Lao material and social fabric" (Stuart-Fox 1998: 75). Are these changes inevitable? Or is there opportunity that "as a "latecomer" [Lao] may have the advantage that in the spirit of Buddhist epistemology, [it is] able to learn from both the painful and valuable lessons of others who have pursued the path of "modernity" and globalisation economically, politically, and socioculturally" (Fry 1998: 148). As a development worker in Lao I was confronted with the question: does the introduction of development allow the people of the Lao PDR to have the space not only to learn these lessons, but to pursue their own path? This study began with the desire to understand what the role of "development" is, in the transformations that are occurring in Lao, and is based on the premise that an understanding of these changes would require looking beyond the material to the less visible and tangible forces at play. This premise is born out of my observations that in Lao, "development" entailed an elusive process of negotiation that represented struggles far more complex than those for control over material gains.

Escobar (1995) has argued that anthropologists have overlooked the ways in which development operates as an arena of cultural contestation and identity construction. Development is conceptualized as an overriding but neutral project in which class conflict is absent. Developmentalism is an ideology of modernization: "its logic is quite simple: we are economically backward, we need to develop very fast. In

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English. In preference to "Laos" I will use the term Lao with the understanding that I use it as the abbreviated form of the Lao PDR.

this task of development, we cannot afford the luxury of politics" (A. Kiondo quoted in Sachikonye 1995: 181). The word "development" still informs the activities of a good number of politicians, bureaucrats, field-workers, grass-roots activists, captains of private enterprise, and the people who work for them. According to Moore, the way to investigate and chart oscillations in the theory and practice of development is by unravelling the relationships among institutional discourses on development, within agencies, and to examine how these forms of knowledge and practice have reflected, and affected the much larger spheres of international political economy and social movements (Moore 1995).

This study attempts to examine the role of development discourse in Lao, what it reflects, and how it affects the relations between Lao and the global economy. It asks: is there a dominating discourse representing an international community promoting capitalism, and if so, how successful is this discourse in achieving its objectives in Lao? Correspondingly, are there local sites of resistance that are manifested in contesting discourses?

> Indeed, as one surveys the development discourse of the last half-century one can perceive an ideological and political battlefield – carried on inside and outside of development agencies, within and between nations, and by those for and against capitalism. It would be wise not to ignore these battles and their protagonists. It would be astute to pay special attention to struggles for and against "reform" within the dominant discourse of development, because both reform and reaction are born of clear challenges to orthodoxy and thus imply, in their own ways, revolution.
> Moore (1995: 144)

Development discourse has been defined as the symbols, actions, and institutions concurrent with economic, social, and political transformation in "underdeveloped" parts of the world (Moore and Schmitz 1995:xxi). If development discourse acts as a

component of hegemony, as one of the means by which a dominant social class organizes its rule so it seems "natural" to its subjects, then "as long as capitalism exists and lays ruin to much in its wake, so too will its development agencies...which will continue to generate their own kinds of discourse, will construct objects of knowledge on them, and intervene accordingly" (Moore 1995: 5).

Ferguson (1995), referring to Africa, suggests that attention must be paid to the formidable institutions "governing" from afar, the transnational financial institutions (World Bank, IMF, foreign banks) and development agencies (USAID, UNDP, UNHCR, etc) as well as the churches, missions, and so-called "non-governmental organsations" (NGOs).

> These transnational institutions continue to be very little studied, in spite of the fact that they clearly play a very central role in the de facto governance and administration of the continent today. We will not have a balanced understanding of the actual processes through which Africa is governed until we move beyond the myth of the sovereign African nation-state to explore the powerful but almost wholly unaccountable transnational institutions that effectively rule large domains of African economy and society. Ferguson (1995:144)

The search to find a theoretical framework to understand the development encounter led me to an examination of knowledge and power as it applies to the discourse of development. How does looking at development discourse contribute to an understanding of the changes that are taking place in Lao? This perspective involves understanding development in the context of an investigation of Western modernity as a culturally and historically specific phenomenon, in other words, an anthropology of modernity (Escobar 1995). According to Escobar many people in the West today, and in many other parts of the world, have great difficulty thinking about "less developed

countries"[2] in terms other than those provided by the development discourse. From many non-Western spaces, however, "even the most reasonable among the West's social and cultural practices might look peculiar, even strange" (Escobar 1995:12).

> We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal...make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world. Rabinow (1986: 241)

Following this approach, I attempt to "anthropologize" global development and its discourse, through an examination of the representations of social reality that it constructs, and an attempt to identify discourses in the Lao PDR that challenge the global discourse's constructed representations. This thesis looks at this question through an examination of discourse at the level of interaction between the Lao Government with international development agencies operating in Lao, including multilateral agencies, NGOs, and International Financial Institutions. These development agencies do not represent a homogenous "voice," as they represent varying interests. Development actors are also differentiated within a hierarchy of the development community, some are closer to the institutional centres of global capital, while others are closer to the local grassroots.

An examination of written material and documents looks at how discourse functions to produce knowledge about Lao, and tries to understand how the production of this knowledge is used to direct relationships with the state and the formation of policies. Interviews with development workers, on the other hand, reveal the effect of discourse closer to the ground, both in the ways development workers think and act at village level, and attempts to postulate how this practice could affect the everyday life of Lao people.

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[2] Escobar (1995) uses the term "Third World" reflecting post-World War II divisions that were integral to the creation of the development project. I will use LDC to reflect the contemporary context and discourse.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter two will present the theoretical framework that will guide the approach to this study. Chapter three will outline the historical and political context of the Lao PDR. In Chapter four, I will discuss the methodology used in collecting materials, conducting interviews and analysis, along with issues of reflexivity. Chapter five develops a characterisation of a mainstream global discourse, and proposes how this discourse operates in the Lao context. In particular the global discourse functions by constructing an object of development, by means of a trope, which serves to define specific problems and corresponding development solutions. The global discourse also serves to depoliticise the role of development agencies and the state, which enables the discourse to reinvent itself while never reaching its objectives. In Chapter six I examine how the global discourse is contested and politicised by the voices of development workers in Lao. Chapter seven looks at the use of the language of "governance" and the role it plays in the relationship between the development community and the Lao government which potentially resists this discourse by employing a Lao moralizing discourse of its own. The Conclusion of the thesis contemplates questions for further study and the dynamics of development discourse as a hegemonic process.

CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will develop the theoretical framework employed to undertake a critical analysis of discourses of development in the Lao PDR. Several existing examinations of development discourse are derived from Foucault's work on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality. Foucault has been instrumental in revealing the mechanisms by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking, while disqualifying and even making others impossible (Escobar 1995). Said (1979) has employed discourse to examine Orientalism, and demonstrated how it is possible to understand European culture's enormous systematic discipline that facilitated the management and production of the Orient. The image produced by the West universalizes and homogenizes "Third World" cultures in an ahistorical fashion. Development discourse is governed by the same principles as colonial discourse in creating an efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about it and the exercise of power over the "Third World." Since coming into existence, development discourse has not ceased to produce new arrangements of knowledge and power, new practices, theories, and strategies. On the other hand, the power that the West attempts to exercise encounters a variety of forms that are used to resist development interventions, and alternative ways of being and doing created by people at the local level (Escobar 1995).

2.1 Discourse, Knowledge, and Power

The analysis of the discourse of development employed here undertakes an approach based on Foucault's conceptions of power, knowledge, and language. Foucault's examination of the past four centuries of the history of Western society

illustrates how a series of discourses emerged that were designed to construct programmes for reshaping society. Foucault argued against treating dominant forms of social knowledge as ideologies that serve only to legitimate oppressive relations, and proposed that the positive dimension of power was the production of "regimes of truth." Power relations construct human subjects who act and think in a certain way, which cannot be reduced to "false consciousness" (Gledhill 1994).

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. Foucault (1977: 194)

This productive (as opposed to repressive) power is not located in institutions, rather it circulates through networks of social relationships. Schemes of disciplinary techniques ("technologies of power") act upon the body and reconstitute subjectivity through knowledge/power systems. A Foucauldian analysis refuses to separate practice from discourse, and attempts to identify and expose power effects of knowledge/power on individuals, their reconstitution, and self-management. Cultural concepts constitute knowledge/power systems that produce the "truths" of life and do not merely reflect material relationships, but constitute the very experience of reality. The organization of capitalist production is embedded in, and is transformed, through cultural discourse/practices (Ong 1987).

It is necessary to understand how regimes of truth are produced, before it is possible to understand how they might be subverted in social practice. "It is of vital importance that programmes of power elaborated in discourses must be implemented through technologies which encounter the recalcitrant material of real societies and real

people" (Gledhill 1994:148). Foucault's notion of the "tactical polyvalence of discourses" also proposes that we should not imagine a world of dominant and dominated, or accepted and excluded discourses. We are asked instead, to think of a "complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy"(Crush 1995: 20).

Foucault distinguished between what he referred to as programmes, technologies, and strategies of power. Programmes of power define a domain of social reality that is turned into an object of rational knowledge. Technologies of power are the apparatuses designed to implement that knowledge, and include the techniques and practices for the discipline, surveillance, administration, and shaping of human individuals. Strategies of power are what agencies do in practice in exercising power and in operationalising programs and technologies. Strategies of power are improvisations that develop in response to changing circumstances, and may be strategies of domination or resistance (Gledhill 1994). By applying Foucault's framework of power and knowledge, development is understood as a historically singular experience, leading to the creation of a domain of thought and action. Forms of knowledge are produced that refer to development, through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, and theories, and a system of power serves to regulate its practice (Escobar 1995).

2.2 Development as a Regime of Representation

A Foucauldian analysis of development may be outlined in terms of regimes of discourse and representation. The notion of regimes of representation is a theoretical and methodological principle for examining the mechanisms for, and consequences of, the

construction of the "Third World" in and through representation. Regimes of representation are analyzed as places of encounter where identities are constructed and also where violence is originated, symbolized, and managed. Regimes of representation are also places of encounter between languages of the past and of the present (e.g. languages of "civilization" and "barbarism"), internal and external languages, and languages of self and other. Employing the notion of regimes of representation entails examining how the "Third World" has been produced by the discourses and practices of development, and who produces knowledge about the "Third World" and from what spaces (Escobar 1995).

According to this notion, development discourse has successfully deployed a regime of government over what was constructed as the "Third World," and serves as a space for "subject peoples." The social production of this space is implicit in terms bound with the production of differences, subjectivities and social orders. This strategy was initiated in the United States and Western Europe and became a powerful force in the "Third World". "What we envisage is a program of development based on concepts of democratic fair dealing...Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace" (Truman quoted in Escobar 1995:3). The discourse and strategy of development produced the opposite of the American dream of peace and abundance that it promised. Forty years of development have produced massive underdevelopment, impoverishment, exploitation and oppression (Escobar 1995).

2.3 *Mechanisms and Strategies of Development Discourse*

> The thoughts and actions of development bureaucrats are powerfully shaped by the world of acceptable statements and utterances within which they live; and what they do and do not do is a product not only of the interests of various nations, classes, or international agencies, but also, and

at the same time, of a working out of this complex structure of knowledge.
Ferguson (1990: 18)

The analysis of how development discourse operates in the Lao PDR assumes that development has been deployed through a principal mechanism of the professionalisation of development knowledge, and the institutionalisation of development practices. A basic system of categories and relations produces rules of statements that must be followed by "development speak." As Western experts and politicians started to see certain conditions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as a problem, often perceived as poverty and backwardness, a new domain of thought and experience produced a new strategy for dealing with the alleged problems. According to Escobar (1995), the single most influential force shaping the development field from above, is the discourse of development economics and its accompanying planning practices. From this privileged space economics has functioned to pervade the entire practice of development. The image of the average "Third World" person becomes constructed through the use of statistics and certain categories (Mohanty 1991). Implicit in these representations is that Western standards are the benchmark against which to measure the situation of people in the "Third World." A body of techniques such as planning, methods of measurement and assessment, professional knowledges, and institutional practices organize both forms of knowledge and types of power relating to one another in the construction and treatment of specific problems such as malnutrition and hunger (Escobar 1995).

One particular strategy employed by global development discourse that is relevant to the Lao context is to depoliticise the role of development agencies, and the role of the state. According to Mitchell (1991) international development has a special need to overlook its internal involvement in the places and problems it analyzes, and to present

itself instead as an external intelligence that stands outside the objects it describes. Depoliticisation involves the construction of an image that sets up the object of development, which thereby allows the global development discourse to constitute itself as an expertise and intelligence that stands completely apart from the country, and the people it describes. Much of this intelligence is generated inside organizations such as the World Bank and USAID. The geographical realism with which a "Third World" country is so often introduced helps establish a deceptively simple relationship that avoids discussing questions of power and inequality. Development discourse needs an object that appears outside itself, in order to remain silent on such questions, in which its own existence is involved. By constructing the development agency as a rational consciousness standing outside the country, and ignoring it as a central element in the configurations of power within the country, the discourse removes from sight the participation of development agencies in the dynamics of a country's political and economic life. As a discourse of external rationality, the development literature can never describe its own place in this configuration of power. If an organisation is part of the problem it wishes to eradicate, it cannot diagnose itself as an integral aspect of the problem because the discourse of development presents itself as a rational, disinterested intelligence existing outside its object. In a similar manner international development depoliticizes the role of the state in producing and maintaining inequalities. Political questions that ask, whom does the state represent and who benefits from the wealth it appropriates, are avoided and transformed into a question of proper resource management. The proposed solutions involve increasing efficiency, by decentralizing the state, and transferring some of its powers to the "market." Depoliticized, the state's role

in agriculture becomes a problem of management, and ceases to be a question of power and control over people's resources and lives (Mitchell 1991).

2.4 *Local Discourses of Development*

According to Escobar the impact of development representations is profound at the local level. At the local level, the concepts of development and modernity have a cultural productivity that are resisted, hybridized with local forms, and transformed. The circulation and effects of languages of development and modernity in different parts of the world are specific to each locality. How development discourses and practices are introduced in community settings, their mode of operation, the ways they are transformed or utilized, their effects on community structures, and identity formation require local-level ethnographic studies (Escobar 1995). An earlier study conducted by Pigg (1992) suggested that the development encounter should be seen as an intersection that creates situations in which people come to see each other in certain ways. The development encounter cannot be reduced to a clash of two cultural systems, or a simple assimilation or appropriation of Western models. Pigg found that the prevailing forms of social differences do not disappear, but are represented in new ways, are given new meanings, and new forms of social position emerge.

The depth of the local-level ethnographic study that Escobar suggests is required to understand the impact of global development discourse locally, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Escobar's formulation of global development discourse appears to be limited to its operation within the international development community, and does not account for the possibility of the production of other discourses of development. A number of recent studies undertaking an analysis of development discourse at the local level critique

Escobar's work for its emphasis on hegemony and lack of agency (Everett 1997, Hilhorst 2001, Mercer 2002). Mercer claims that Escobar (1995) and Ferguson (1990) have privileged the effects of a dominant, global discourse over the role of local actors in shaping and re-appropriating the symbols, practices, and trappings of modernity and development according to their own world views.

If Escobar's position is more relevant to Western development workers or industry, then how do we understand the production and operation of local forms of discourse? It appears that Escobar places the most potential for resistance within New Social Movements. In the current Lao political context the scope for the emergence of NSMs seems very limited. Are there other forums for challenging a dominant discourse of development? This study recognizes the hegemonic effects of global development discourse within the realm of international development agencies and actors, but seeks to understand what are the limits of this power to shape the production of knowledge at the local Lao level. Are local Lao discourses produced that challenge the concept of a hegemonic global development discourse, and can then appear as influences or elements within Lao development discourse?

Hilhorst (2001) argues that it is not very helpful to think about discourse in terms of hegemonic structures, making a case for stepping away from notions about hegemonic discourse which fall short on two grounds: the existence of a multiplicity of voices within development; and the relation between dominant and counter-discourses that are dynamic and lead to renegotiations at the interfaces of discourse encounters. Hilhorst claims that the interplay of discourses are overlooked by proponents of hegemonic discourses of development who assume that the discourse is for the most part immune to

the influence of counter-discourses, or that it is incommensurable with local knowledge. Hilhorst sees the meaning of development notions as being renegotiated in the local context, and claims that there are multiple meanings of development in a community that are not imposed by outsiders, but that draw on sources of modernity and tradition. According to Hilhorst (2001) social patterns are negotiated, power distributed, and development is shaped by actors' use of multiple discourses. Differential uses of development discourses can shape hierarchies and pattern relations, and the everyday allocation of discourses is a constituent element of social change in the local context.

> Even though actors are affected by (dominant) discourse, at the same time they reshuffle, circumvent, and accommodate it. Local actors are not merely overcome by development: they interpret, bend, and negotiate it through their agency. Discourses forms structuring elements, but in their multiplicity lies room for maneuver for actors to renegotiate them. Hilhorst (2002:402)

Rather than assuming the existence and operation of dominant discourses, an examination needs to be undertaken of when and how discourses become powerful in relation to other discourses, and what this means in practice.

2.5 Hegemony

The divergence between Escobar's work and his critics may reflect the difficulties that are encountered in attempting to reconcile analysis of development discourse in ideological terms from those of local practice. Moore (1995) attempts to overcome this by subsuming the meaning of "discourse" under the phrase of "practice and theory," which involves an ideological analysis where the discourse remains much closer to the practices of discrete institutions, the struggles within them, and their "micro-power," than is ideology. Moore also frames his analysis within the context of a Gramscian notion of

hegemony. I will adopt the concept of hegemony as it explains why it is possible for a development discourse employed by forces of global capitalism to be contested.

According to Williams (1977) in practice hegemony can never be singular, and its internal structures are highly complex. Hegemony does not merely, passively exist as a form of dominance, but has to be continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own. To the concept of hegemony it is then necessary to add the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice. Hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, while by definition is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in society. Following Williams, a global development discourse is employed by the hegemonic project of capitalism and is continually "renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" as it is continually "resisted, limited, altered, and challenged" at the local level.

CHAPTER 3. THE LAO CONTEXT

This chapter will provide an outline of the Lao historical and political context necessary to an analysis of Lao development discourses. Although the introduction of "western development" to the Lao PDR is often portrayed as beginning with economic reforms instituted in 1986, the ground work for development discourse can be traced back to earlier periods of French colonialism (1893 to 1945), and the Indochina War (1963 to 1975). The contemporary context of the Lao PDR has been shaped by several key historical events, which have shaped the current construction of Lao nationalism and identity (Evans 2002, Stuart-Fox 1997). Issues of nationalism and identity are in turn critical to the Lao Government's current understanding, response, and strategies to development.

The Lao PDR is a landlocked country in South-East Asia bordered by Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and China. Two-thirds of the country is made up of rugged mountains and plateaus ranging from 200 to 2800 meters. The country is endowed with rich natural resources, and forests cover about 47 percent of the total land area. About 10 percent of the country's land area is arable but this area is, to a significant extent, contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO), dropped by the United States during the war, which is a serious cause of concern and a major obstacle for developing rural infrastructure and agriculture. The Mekong River runs through the entire length of the country providing fertile plains for agriculture, and serves as a major route of transportation and trade with other provincial capitals and with neighbouring countries. The country has a population of about 5.2 million inhabitants, 80 percent of whom are estimated to live in rural areas, and are scattered over an area of 236,800 square

kilometers, with a population density of 21 people per square kilometer, the lowest in the region (IUCN 2002).

3.1 Ethnicity

Historically, the Lao PDR has been multi-ethnic in composition, and without a unifying common culture or national identity. After 1975, the post-war government gave priority to attempts to develop a national identity, but today the results may be seen as a threatened fragile Lao identity subject to varied influences (Stuart-Fox 1997). To understand the complex relations that currently exist among the numerous ethnic groups of the Lao PDR necessitates a brief summary of the historical migrations of the people who came to settle in this region.

The Lao population is composed of 47 officially recognised ethnic groups (Lintner 1997: 32), but unofficially it is estimated that there are a minimum of 131 different groups (Chazee 2002). No single ethnic group forms a majority, but the ethnic Lao (Tai) are somewhat greater in number and hold a socially dominant position. After 1975 the Lao PDR government institutionalised an official classification, in an effort to emphasize national unity by suggesting that a common Lao nationality was most important, despite the lack of cultural commonality between the various ethnic groups. All groups were classified into the three general categories of the Lao Soung (highland Lao), Lao Theung (midland Lao), and Lao Loum (lowland Lao). These categories were based on cultural origins as well as traditional residence patterns (Ireson and Ireson 1991). Since 1989 this classification system has been losing popularity but is still widely used (Chazee 2002), and remains prevalent in the development literature on Lao.

The earliest peoples to inhabit the Southeast Asian peninsula have done so for

several thousand years, and were made up of Austro-Asiatic groups. In official classification these groups are categorized as the Lao Theung but include several groups that belong to the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family. The Lao Theung presently comprise 25% of the population of the Lao PDR. The second wave of settlers to the peninsula probably originated from southern China about 1000 years ago. These migrants were known as the Tai-Lao. The Tai-Lao brought with them a political system based on local chiefs and they eventually conquered or displaced the indigenous Mon-Khmer. The size and power of the Tai-Lao principalities increased over several centuries and by the fourteenth century the first Lao kingdom was founded. Since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, the king made payments to representatives of the Lao Theung groups for their land and to acknowledge their prior rights. The Lao Theung in turn recognized the legitimacy of the king. The Tai-Lao were categorized as the Lao Loum and make up 65% of the population in Laos. The third wave of migrations began in the beginning of the nineteenth century with Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples who were seeking new lands not under Chinese control. The Hmong and Mien made up most of this group, and were categorised as the Lao Soung, constituting 10 % of the Lao population (Ireson and Ireson 1991).

The Lao Loum clearly dominated the political and economic affairs of the kingdom during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lao was under Thai suzerainty immediately prior to French colonialism, but at no time in history prior to the late 1970s did any national government have an effective presence at the village level. Intermixture between the three groupings was rare, as inhabitants lived in ethnically homogeneous villages with different preferences for village sites and farming practices.

In the early 1900s a number of rebellions against the Tai-Lao and the French did occur by both the Lao Theung and Soung. Although these rebellions were suppressed, ethnic tensions continued to persist (Ireson and Ireson 1991).

Led by lowland Lao nationalists, the struggle for independence from French colonialism succeeded after World War Two and Japanese occupation. The next period of Lao history saw a polarization resulting in royalist and leftist Pathet Lao (PL) movements. The royalists, supported by the U.S. and the West, were almost entirely Lao Loum except for U.S. Central Intelligence Agency guerilla soldiers who were recruited from among the Hmong, Mien, and Lao Theung groups. The PL were supported by Vietnam and the U.S.S.R. and recruited many Lao Theung, and Lao Soung to their movement. The conclusion of the second Indochina war in 1975 resulted in a PL victory and the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Ireson and Ireson 1991). The impact of the war, however, was massive, with damages in heavily bombed areas that turned a quarter of the population into refugees in their own country (Stuart-Fox 1997). Some anti-communist insurgent activities creating instability in certain rural areas continued in the decade following the war, and a low level insurgency continued into the late 1980s, but did not pose any serious threat to the government (Ireson 1998).

The establishment of the new socialist state was framed in terms of a multiethnic society, and many of the new government policies were responses to the question of how to consolidate a nation of such a large and diverse number of groups. Constraints such as limited budgets, personnel, time, vision, and training, hampered efforts to develop a national unity and identity. Despite this, Ireson (1998) observes that within the first decade after 1975, the government was able to make substantial progress in integrating

the scattered villages and districts into a single country with a common identity, a task that had never before been accomplished in Lao history.

3.2 Economic and Political Context

The twentieth century has seen the intervention of greater foreign powers in Lao. French colonialism was imposed from 1899 until 1954, a period when Lao was treated as a periphery to Vietnam, which had a greater potential for exploitation by the French (Gunn 1990). Evans (1990) maintains that only with the arrival of the French were Lao peasants and highland minorities drawn into a relatively stable national political structure. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 granted independence to Lao as a nation-state, but Cold War efforts against China, North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union and the geo-politics of Lao's role as a buffer state drew it into a period of civil war inextricably linked with the Cold War (Adams and McCoy 1970, Dommen 1971, Toye 1968). American involvement altered the balance of political forces, and was aimed at direct interference with the political process within Lao. In just over three years from 1955 to 1958, $US120 million was given to Lao from the United States. Little was spent on social welfare, infrastructure or industry, but corruption became endemic and moral standards declined.

> Thus the accumulation of wealth took precedence for the Lao elite over the responsible exercise of political power for the national good. Moreover, as real power increasingly lay with the US Embassy and USAID mission, the American presence fostered a dependent neo-colonial mentality which easily repudiated responsibility for political decision-making." (Stuart-Fox 1997: 92)

From 1963 to 1973 the United States conducted a "secret war" against Laos (Evans and Rowley 1990). The US dropped an estimated average of one bomb every eight minutes on Lao over a nine year period (UNDP 1999). As a result fifty percent of the land is inaccessible to cultivation due to contamination with unexploded ordinances (UXO)

which continue to seriously injure and kill the Lao population (GOL 2001).

The 1975 takeover by the communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) saw the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Agricultural collectivization was attempted, but did not succeed as a result of the conflicts it presented to the traditional livelihood of peasants who withdrew their cooperation through passive forms of resistance (Evans 1995, Ireson and Ireson 1989, Stuart-Fox 1997, and Thayer 1983). By 1979, the Party faced serious challenges due to the failures of economic policies, resulting in the 1980-85 economic plan that leaned toward a more pragmatic liberal "line"(Joiner 1986). During this period the Soviet Union took on the primary role of supporting the Lao PDR in its development efforts. In 1990 the Soviet economy collapsed and withdrawal of Comecon support to the Lao PDR followed (Zasloff 1998).

The introduction of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) is generally cited as the marker of transition from a centrally planned to a market economy in the Lao PDR. Transition in the Lao PDR appears to have been initiated from the top leadership of the LPRP who advocated abandoning the "old way of thinking" and called on the mass organisations to serve as key players in the implementation of the new line (Joiner 1988). Sundara (1998) claims that due to protracted macroeconomic imbalances and the deterioration of people's standard of living under central planning, the government reacted early to reduce regulation and restrictions, and to create incentives for private sector activities. Beginning in 1979, the government began the processes of deregulation, and of decollectivization of the agriculture sector. The deregulation of the SOEs [State Owned Enterprise] followed in 1983. In 1985 the Lao government, in anticipation of the inevitability of encroachment of free-market forces, instituted a program known as the

New Economic Mechanism (NEM). In 1989 the government adopted a medium-term adjustment program which was supported by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and bilateral donors (Sundara 1998). International organisations and bilateral donors quickly jumped in to fill the vacuum left by Comecon support. Lao was seen as a "star pupil." "The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have worked closely with the small coterie of economic planners within the Lao ruling party, and they can point to notable progress growing out of faithful application of their advice" (Zasloff 1998:134). Sundara (1998) maintains that the open policy created opportunities to develop the Lao PDR's comparative advantages in preparing for integration with the economies of the region and the world. These comparative advantages include water, forestry, mineral resources, trade, and tourism. In order to finance faster socioeconomic development projects without having to rely on debt-creating external financing, the development of hydropower, mineral, and forestry resources would provide the government with additional domestic resources (Sundara 1998). The start of a new hydropower project exporting electricity to Thailand in 1998 was expected to contribute 7% of the Lao PDR's annual GDP (Lintner 1998:53). The most important challenge that faces the government, in sustaining natural resource utilization, is environmental protection, according to Sundara. With the assistance of the World Bank, the government was able to establish the National Environment Plan, which reflects the policy of reducing slash-and-burn agriculture in order to protect forestry resources (Sundara 1998: 81).

In 1997, the Lao PDR joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with a view to gaining potential economic benefits from integrating its

economy with the more dynamic economies of the subregion, and improving its access to foreign capital and technology (Sundara 1998). Another factor that may have influenced the decision to take on this costly membership, is that it may offer the advantage of making it easier to resist pressure to make Western style democratic reforms by donor countries (Bourdet 1997). Under the terms of ASEAN membership, however, Lao will be required to adhere to the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) which requires members to impose wide ranging tariff reductions (Walker 1999). Stuart-Fox also predicts that AFTA will have long term effects on the economic development of Lao. Lao will be expected to reduce tariffs to below 5% by the year 2008. This will force the government to introduce fiscal reforms to offset the 20% of its revenues that have been derived from tariffs (Stuart-Fox 1999). Bourdet (1998) on the other hand points out that AFTA membership would not only contribute to integration of Lao in the region, but may accelerate trade liberalisation. Walker (1999) suggests that the downside of this, is that Lao may be faced with pressures to reduce barriers to trading companies and transport operators from ASEAN countries. If the main investors of large-scale infrastructure projects also happen to be ASEAN members, then the pressure may become especially intense. Walker (1999:165) expresses concern for the negative consequences of the Lao PDR's "relatively recent arrival on the fringes of the global capitalist system." He suggests that due to a poorly developed Lao State with weak bureaucratic institutions, and a rudimentary legal framework, the government will be forced into "policy-making on the run." With little control over powerful logging interests in neighbouring Thailand, the Lao PDR seems not to have the power to prevent widespread deforestation (Walker 1999). Stuart-Fox (1998) in discussing the Lao PDR's move to join ASEAN points to

two other issues of concern; the effect of tourism, and the need to strengthen national identity. Thai influence in both economic and cultural spheres has increased over the past decade since the implementation of NEM, and, as its main trading partner, Thai banks dominate Laos's financial sector and contribute about half of the foreign investments coming into Lao (Stuart-Fox 1998).

Within Lao the rapidly growing Thai economic, cultural, linguistic, and media influences are of major concern, and reflect some of the policy decisions taken. Policy-makers in Lao, however, are themselves not in agreement in their response to these pressures. In general it appears that the technocrats see the rapid changes as inevitable, and integral to the internationalization and globalisation processes taking place around the world. High-ranking Party officials tend to be more concerned about the rate of change and fear that the country is changing too quickly (Fry 1998). While Lao may appear to be a "star pupil" in taking up measures to privatize the economy, there are also indications of some resistance to wholesale liberalisation. Unlike governments in some areas of Russia, Eastern Europe, and other parts of the world, the Lao PDR has shown no willingness to reduce the size of its public sector or impose "draconian dehumanizing" measures (Fry 1998:149). The Lao PDR has also shown a particular caution in borrowing internationally which may be due to lessons learned from past debts incurred and still owing from both the post-colonial and post-revolutionary periods (Fry 1998). The Lao government has also been slow in responding to the Southeast Asian economic crisis, despite mounting pressures for remedial action. Due to its trade dependency with Thailand, Laos was extremely vulnerable to the external shocks, and by 1999 it was in a precarious economic state which precipitated leadership changes and unprecedented anti-

government demonstrations (Thayer 2000). The inability of ASEAN to respond to the crisis collectively left Lao turning for support to its nearest neighbours and socialist allies. Most significantly, an informal summit meeting between Lao, Cambodia, and Vietnam which led to the decision to create a developmental triangle, may be an indicator that the Lao response to neo-liberalising forces is in a protectionist direction within a hoped for security of the remaining socialist elements in the region. Bourdet (1997) suggests that strengthening relations with China and Vietnam may be considered necessary to compensate for the growing influence of Thailand, feared by many.

The most recent and perhaps challenging effect of globalisation for the Lao PDR has been in dealing with the consequences of the Asian economic crisis. In response to the crisis the International Monetary Fund demanded further liberalization and the Lao technocrats were in agreement, but the government wanted less liberalization. Lao officials claimed that it was too difficult and expensive to implement free-market reforms. Another problem Lao faces is that it is too dependent on foreign aid to develop its own resources. Foreign assistance accounted for only 6.25% of the Lao PDR's GDP in 1985, increased to 10% by 1988, and was well over 15% by 1998. Lintner (1998) argues that this level of dependency will make it difficult to achieve self-sufficiency and sustained development. Immediate needs have driven policies and goals such as expanding infrastructure, invigorating the economy, and integrating the country have been achieved to some extent. The viability of the current strategy that focuses on short-term growth, in an attempt to bridge the period to sustainable longer-term growth by relying on exploitation of available natural resources, is questionable (Ireson 1998). Bourdet proposes that the success of Lao economic policy will depend upon the political

system, among other things. The structure of the political system in Lao, since the revolution, has increasingly tended to reflect urban interests and does not pay enough attention to the needs of the rural population, agricultural sector and remote areas. "The risk of perpetuating a dual society, resulting in exacerbated social tensions and eventually ethnic and political tensions, is ever present" (Bourdet 1996:94). Ireson and Ireson (1991) claim that forest land use and resettlement policies present a life and death issue for ethnic minorities, and that resettlement projects may become a means of assimilation under the guise of development. Lintner (1996) claims that rapid growth following the implementation of the NEM resulted in severe income disparities between rural and urban areas, and that economic factors may be exacerbating the cultural differences that interfere with development of a sense of national unity. "The conflict must be seen in ethnic terms because it is the minorities who are subject to the most obvious control and resettlement efforts" (Ireson and Ireson 1991: 933). The resulting restrictions on swidden agriculture are not enforceable since there are few subsistence alternatives or immediate possibilities for other economic activities (Ireson and Ireson 1991). It has been suggested that perhaps the major challenge facing the current regime is the creation of an integrated Lao society bringing together all people living within the borders of the Lao state. The future of Lao as a political entity may very well depend on how this challenge is met (Stuart-Fox 1986).

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

In determining how to approach a research endeavor in the Lao PDR the question is asked: is there a place for Western anthropology in Laos, and if so how should such an endeavor be undertaken? This question is raised in light of earlier calls for examining how anthropology has been subject to "Western ways of creating the world" (Strathern 1988: 4). This led to changes in the discipline, and an examination of other possible ways of representing the interests of 'Third World' peoples (Clifford 1986). Escobar (1995) states that cultures are characterised by ways of knowing, but relying exclusively on the modern Western system of knowledge has led to the marginalisation and disqualifying of non-Western systems of knowledge. It is proposed that an attempt to carry out research in Lao should guard against imposing the hegemony of a Western paradigm by looking for Lao material that would challenge Western constructions of reality. Escobar (1995) suggests that it is precisely with non-western ways of knowing that we may discover alternative rationalities that turn away from reductionist ways of thinking. This involves investigating the particular ways each local group mediates its encounter with capitalism. An analysis of both global forces and making visible local constructions is required. The intention is not to set up a dichotomy, but to discover different discourses that would help to formulate different ways of knowing. I hoped that this in turn would allow me to develop a context that indicated self-representation, values, and ideologies that informed local mediations. I also searched for evidence to support or challenge Western representations of Lao society and people. This approach follows Ferguson (1990) in asking what is the image of Lao that development agencies present, what is the justification for this image, and what evidence supports or challenges

this image. Ferguson was able to demonstrate that the World Bank's image of Lesotho as a subsistence economy was not supported by historical, statistical, ethnographic sources or local Basotho discourse.

Is it indeed possible or even appropriate then, for a Western anthropologist to learn from the lessons that may be offered by Lao experience and knowledge? Can these lessons contribute to the process of 're-imagining' anthropology, which Escobar claims is still under way and will have to be deepened, perhaps by taking the debates to other arenas and in other directions. "It is becoming increasingly evident, at least for those who are struggling for different ways of having a voice, that the process of deconstruction and dismantling has to be accompanied by that of constructing new ways of seeing and acting" (Escobar 1995:16-17). This research project attempted to undertake the first step in constructing "new ways of seeing and acting". On one level this serves to bring to light what is not part of the constructed reality of Western development. On another level this may also demonstrate new ways of seeing and acting that are currently being formulated through processes of mediation and reconstruction that are an outcome of the interaction or struggle with the West. In practical terms this involves searching for representations that are common, and for those that differ, and for the intent and justifications behind these representations. It also involves the examination of terms and their meanings; have terms changed over time, are they used differently by different groups, and if so, how? According to Spradley (1980: 3) "Fieldwork, then, involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people."

Ethnography is usually conducted to discover the cultural knowledge people are using to organize their behaviour and interpret their experience (Spradley 1980). To understand a Lao way of knowing requires avoiding the "spontaneous impulse to look in every society for 'economic' institutions and relations separate from other social relations, comparable to those of Western capitalist society" (Godelier 1986:18). This is particularly relevant to societies where culture, politics, and economics have not been separated into autonomous domains as they have been in modern Western society (Escobar 1995).

4.1 Data-Collection

Data-collection included an extensive literature review, and a one month fieldvisit to the Lao PDR to gather written materials and conduct interviews. The collection of written materials in the Lao PDR focused on obtaining materials that had the potential of reflecting different discourses of development. This included documents, reports and publications representing various sectors such as development agencies (UN and NGOs), and the Lao Government. There are no local Lao NGOs but there are approximately sixty international development organisations including Multilateral and Non-Governmental Organisations operating in the Lao PDR. Written materials were obtained from 15 NGOs and 5 multilateral organisations (see Appendix A). The mulitilateral agencies chosen included the UNDP, ADB, and World Bank because of their major roles as funders in Lao development, and with an aim to collecting key documents that would indicate policy formulation and donor and government strategies. The NGOs included in the sample of organisations were limited to Western programmes that focus on rural development rather than specific sectoral targets such as health, education, or demining. I also attempted to approach NGOs that represented a diversity of philosophies and

approaches, that varied in size, and differed in the length of time working in Lao. Relative to the multialteral agencies, I also expected that NGO staff would offer views informed by more extensive field-based experiences working with rural Lao communities. Government reports were also collected from various development agency libraries. Two other venues where I obtained materials included a monthly NGO Forum meeting, and the annual Tat Luang festival. At the NGO meeting I obtained a copy of the Video Compact Disc (VCD) presentation, "Roads to the Future" which discussed the issue of human trafikking and was viewed during the meeting. At the Tat Luang Festival a number of development organisations and government departments set up demonstration booths which I visited and collected brochures or examined displays.

The written materials collected were limited to documents that were either available to the public or that organisations allowed me to have access to. These included Lao government reports written for a donor audience, Round Table Meeting reports, government development strategy documents, annual agency reviews, country director reports, specific project evaluations, and publications such as the UNDP Human Development Report on Lao. Several research survey reports funded by the UNDP, UNHCR, and ADB were also obtained. Materials chosen also reflected the search for the construction of different representations or images of Lao. As I looked for diversity I also looked for the presence of consistent patterns, and sources of contradiction. I attempted to collect documents produced in different years in order to see if discourses had changed and if new or different discourses have been produced. The majority of documents collected were produced between 1997 and 2002, however, I did manage to collect a government report dating back to 1990 and some other agency reports dated

between 1992 and 1996. Materials were examined for the history of the development of agencies within the Lao PDR and the types of programmes and project objectives in order to contextualize discourses. Documents that indicated the global objectives of international organisations, the source of directives, and the political agenda of the organisation provided a macro-level context. An examination of Lao country reports to agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank also provided a comparison of the discourse with a Western and a non-Western agency. Written materials were photocopied or purchased and brought back to Canada for analysis. Materials collected were limited to English. Most of the materials to which I had access were written in English, and materials written in Lao were not included due to my limited knowledge of that language and the difficulties of translation.

Twelve interviews were conducted with individual development workers, both Lao and non-Lao. The number of interviews were determined by accessibility and restrictions of time. All of the interviews took place in the capital city of Vientiane where most organisations have country offices. The qualitative approach that I took aimed to gather a diversity of views that would represent as many discourses as possible, and was not directed towards the collection of a representative sample. Given the major limitation of time I made the decision to approach organisations that focused on development projects but represented what I assumed would be different approaches based on religious, national or issue-based priorities. Programmes that narrowly focused on health, drug control, etc were not included. Collection of data from Lao Government sources was also limited to publicly available material as I was unable to carry-out interviews which would have required ethics approval and in-country permission that I

did not have time to obtain. An analysis of discourses based on material gathered from Lao villagers and local levels of government were also excluded for the same reason.

In most cases cold calls were made to arrange an introductory meeting or an interview. Twelve interviews with individual development workers (seven with Lao and five with non-Lao) each from a different organisation were conducted, ranging from one and a half hours to three hours in length. Nine additional meetings were held with individuals who provided background information on their organisations and valuable insights into working in the Lao context. At the time of data-collection all the individuals interviewed were based in Vientiane, and had varied experiences working at village-level. One limitation of the perspective of the individuals that I interviewed was that, whether Lao or non-Lao, they represented a relatively urban, educated, English-speaking, middle-class group. Another major limitation of this study was that only materials written in English were collected, and development workers who did not speak English were not interviewed.

Bernard (2002) states that there is a continuum of interview situations based on the amount of control the researcher attempts to exercise over people's responses. These different types of interviews produce different types of data that are useful for different types of research. Unstructured interviews are based on a clear plan in mind, but are also characterized by a minimum of control over people's responses.

Ethnographic interviewing employs questions to discover the cultural meanings people have learned. Such interviews make use of descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. The type of interviews used here were informal ethnographic interviews, using semi-structured and unstructured questions. This approach is determined by an

inductive approach with the expectation that answers will lead to new questions, or the modification of previous questions (Spradley 1980).

Interview questions focused on the discourse of development and corresponding local discourses. Written questionnaires or other materials were not distributed to informants. Interviews with development workers were verbal, open-ended, and directed towards the kind of information requiring clarification of specific documents. Additional exploratory questions were asked that served to contextualize written materials. Interviews were conducted in English, although some specific Lao development terminology was discussed in some cases. Interview responses were recorded by note-taking, and did not involve the use of any type of recording device. In summary, interview questions explored the philosophy of the organisation, the perspectives held about other development actors and the Lao Government approaches to development, Lao development terminology and language, concepts of development, emerging themes such as dependency, ethnicity and gender, and the impact of development at the village level.

The analysis of both interviews and written materials involved identifying recurring themes, and patterns. In particular I examined the use of terminology in constructing representations, as well as trying to identify what was absent or which issues were not discussed. Analysis of data began as interviews were being conducted and helped to formulate questions for future interviews. As analysis proceeded, general categories were identified and an attempt to identify the relationship between categories was made (Spradley 1979). Citations from interviews and documents were used to draw out a broad coding of data into general themes and sub-themes which were then

examined for similarities and contrast (Berg 1995). The examination of the data for descriptors that contributed to the construction of images of Lao provided the basis for identifying a trope. The comparison of descriptors was also made between documents produced in different years to see if images had changed over time. A deeper level of analysis of identified themes then revealed oppositional and contrasting categories to the trope. Interview data and agency documents were compared, looking for patterns of similarity and difference between that of official agency philosophy, and development workers' observations. A comparison was also made between Lao and non-Lao development worker interviews in order to identify consistent themes between these two different groups.

4.2 Reflexivity

The project of understanding a worldview that is not the researcher's and increasing the validity of ethnographic research methods requires a reflexive approach. Intentionally or not, it is likely that one judges on the basis of one's own culture's assumptions, unthinkingly assuming that they are universal (Bohannan and Van der Elst 1998):

> What is at issue is the way in which we unavoidably bring into our understanding of what goes on around us those codes and conventions which we are familiar with from our own culture and to which what we observe seems most assimilable. In other words, we use ourselves and our personal experience as primary research tools. We are, however, rarely conscious that we are playing this dual role of investigator and instrument, that is, we rarely step outside ourselves in order to reflect on how our own life-histories are contributing to the perspectives we are accumulating. Watson (1999: 5)

The approach taken to account for reflexivity at all stages of research was that of "disciplined subjectivity," or the practice of rigorous self-reflection about one's own

preferences, prejudices, hopes and concerns. Disciplined subjectivity serves as a necessary practice for all careful ethnographers, as well as a check on misinterpretations. This kind of systematic self-reflection takes place before, during, and after the field experience. It involves identifying biases, prejudices, and patterns of thought that, although they are taken for granted, constitute culturally specific ways of viewing the world, and the beliefs and behaviours of others that could jeopardize their ability to see clearly in the field. In practice this involved following the approach of Kirby and Mckenna (1989) through journaling, and reflecting on conceptual baggage. Commitments to specific research topics and outcomes, as well as the potential that such behaviours might have for biasing or negatively influencing research results were also considered. From these questions, personal viewpoints were identified that could keep one from obtaining a well rounded set of data for analysis and asking questions to counter these prejudices and expand one's database (LeCompte et al. 1999).

In reflecting on the personal biases that I carried into the field both my theoretical perspectives on development and my experiences as a development worker in Lao were sources of bias with regard to the materials I collected and was familiar with. In some cases, for example the UNDP, I was drawn to documents that I knew existed, but was also directed to materials by development workers in the organisation. The choice of organisations that I approached and the individuals I chose not to interview were to some extent also influenced by my knowledge and perceptions of an agency. I attempted to counter this bias by searching for organisations that were less visible and with which I had no previous contact. In terms of the interview questions that I asked and on the level of analysis my past experiences of living at village level and in the Northern Regions

influence my conceptions of poverty, and my understanding of subsistence in the Lao context. This had a bearing on the directions that I took within interviews and the questions that I did or did not ask. The experience as a development worker may also have contributed to making assumptions or taking things for granted that I would otherwise have questioned.

Beatty (1999) points out that the epistemological problems of cross-cultural understandings are compounded by the practical constraints of fieldwork. The researcher begins by sharing the networks of hosts or friends, and needs to recognise the implications of this obvious point. The way the researcher is socialised into another culture is bound to reflect the position in the social space of the host community, something partly beyond the researcher's control.

> In practice we are defined by a certain position which commits us to a certain kind of way of acting, and this feeds back into the kind of things people let us know. How we come to learn another culture is a far from transparent process and it cannot be tied to the vicissitudes of experience. This gradualist position entails a rejection of a reflexivist privileging of dialogue. Beatty (1999: 85)

Beatty also questions the assumption that, by writing ourselves into the ethnography, we are somehow making everything plain, being more honest; showing the reader not only the facts but how, in dialogue, the facts are constructed. Beatty argues that some of our most critical experiences in the field remain opaque and resist analysis; meaning remains elusive because it is inaccessible for reasons bound up with the paradox of participant observation. The meaning of the event may pertain to others' motives which are beyond investigation; it may require a linguistic competence not yet possessed; it may be more complex than provisional interpretive models can comprehend. "And of course we can hardly claim full knowledge of the historical contingencies, let alone the immediate ones,

which determine our situation" (Beatty 1999:80).

The constraints Beatty discusses are intended for the investigator undertaking participant-observation. These constraints were also applicable to the particular situation of data-collection that I conducted in the Lao PDR where I previously spent three years as a development worker. This prior experience involved being socialised into the local Lao culture, into the culture of the development community, and forming connections within a network of individuals, two of whom were interviewed for the purposes of this study. It was necessary, therefore, to anticipate that the way I was received, perceived, and responded to could be influenced not only by my current position as a researcher but as a former development worker in the Lao PDR. The limitations of fieldwork in general are related to the fact that much of what the researcher discovers depends on being accepted, being invited into people's lives, and being volunteered information. This involves winning trust, respect and friendship (Ellen 1984). Introducing myself as someone who had previously lived in the Lao PDR and worked for both an NGO and the UNDP appeared to facilitate the process of meeting development workers and gaining access to documents. As one individual whom I interviewed observed, it was understood that I knew the context of the Lao situation which in turn made it easier to speak of issues to me that would not be apparent to a newcomer. This assumption along with the camaraderie of having experience as a development worker contributed to building trust with development workers whom I interviewed. On the other hand this relationship may also have inhibited me from asking questions that would be perceived as a direct challenge. Perhaps the most difficult and least tangible constraint that influenced my methodology, however, was my own position as an "insider" in the Western development

community and the potentially hegemonic influence of the discourse on my own thinking.

4.3 Ethics

Bernard (2002: 217) advises that "there is no ethical imperative more important than seeing to it that you do not harm innocent informants who have provided you with information in good faith." The first ethical decision made in research is whether to collect certain kinds of information at all. Once that decision is made, the researcher is responsible for what is done with that information, and must protect informants from becoming emotionally burdened by having divulged information. They may suffer anxiety over how much they can trust the researcher to protect them in the community (Bernard 2002). This was particularly relevant within the relatively small development community in Lao, and the need for sensitivity within the Lao political context, where development workers perceive that the GOL does not welcome criticism. Great care was taken to ensure that individuals interviewed understand that they need not share any information or answer questions that they may not want to, and that agreements of anonymity and confidentiality would be respected. Informants were also told that quotes would not be used. An explanation of the purpose and nature of the research was given prior to obtaining oral consent.

Gardner (1999) points out that ethical problems are not only limited to data collection, but there are also ethical problems with what we would do with that data. Shore (1999) also explains that fieldwork can be highly sensitive and politically fraught, raising all sorts of ethical dilemmas about confidentiality, and how data could be manipulated if it is allowed to be published.

To suggest that anthropologists need not worry about political or ethical issues because their first duty is to academic truth therefore borders on irresponsibility. Instead what we learn and what we write is unavoidably subjective, because we are all located in particular political positions. The epistemological assumption of anthropology, that we are simply objective conduits for our data, is clearly deeply flawed; for what and how we know is endlessly influenced by our various shifting locations. Rather than being passive conduits for the data, we are proactive in choosing what we learn and what we write. Gardner (1999:70)

Gardner (1999) demonstrates how the topic of research, itself, can pose ethical issues, and that problems exist on several levels. On a practical level, Gardner has had to censor her work, "There are some things which I simply cannot write about, for if I did, it might directly endanger my informants and their families" (1999: 70). Gardner also found that she had to balance the need to be politically sensitive to the dangers of racist misinterpretation, her desire not to offend the community studied, and her anthropological responsibility to be as true to her data as possible. Gardner concludes, however, that it is impossible to please everyone.

In attempting to be sensitive to the ethical issues of the possible impact of what I wrote, I was also concerned with how to balance this with the issue of representation. In considering how to represent the "voices" of development workers in Lao, I felt constrained by the limitation that I could not use quotes. What I chose to ask during interviews and later to write, and the themes that I chose to include, were circumscribed not only by my own interpretations but by my censoring of material in a desire to be politically and ethically sensitive. Based on my previous experience working in Lao, I made assumptions that the inclusion of certain information could: lead to the identification of individuals; create tension between different groups of development workers; create tension between the development community and the Lao government.

My understanding of the ethical context was based on a perception that when development workers in Lao have directed criticism at the Lao government, or raised sensitive issues, they have sometime had to face repercussions. In the past, repercussions have ranged from, shutting down the internet, surveillance, disbanding the organisation of an NGO forum, or refusal to grant visas, and dismissal of non-Lao development workers. Writing within this context, I felt constrained by a sense of loyalty to mitigate any possible risks to development workers who I interviewed. The ethical need to protect these informants outweighed attempts for me as an ethnographer to embody, and to differentiate the voices and the subjectivities of the individuals interviewed. Regrettably, this concern also led me to incorporate more text from NGO documents than material from the interviews.

CHAPTER 5. CONSTRUCTING THE OBJECT OF DEVELOPMENT

5.1   The Development Trope of Lao

> Lao PDR is a very special country. Nestled between giant neighbours, it sits like a peaceful green jewel in a region of hustle and bustle and rapid development. The low population of Lao PDR has meant that much of its natural resource base is more intact than that of other countries in the region. Lao PDR is also home to unique biodiversity, both plants and animals... IUCN (2002: v)

Objects of analysis do not occur as natural phenomena, but are partly constructed by the discourse that describes them. The more natural the object appears, the less obvious this discursive construction will be. The visual imagery of an opening paragraph can establish the entire relationship between the textual analysis and its object (Mitchell 1991:18-19). The visual imagery of Lao as a "peaceful green jewel" emerges out of only one of the sources that I collected, a World Conservation Union (IUCN) document. This image of Lao appears romantic and utopian juxtaposed with the prevalent image of Lao produced by the international development discourse of global capitalism. Ferguson (1990) has demonstrated that an essential feature of the international development apparatus is the construction of "Third World" societies as "less developed countries," and that such tropes repeat themselves in an endless number of situations and with many varieties. The construction of a trope by development discourse which portrays Lao society as a "less developed country" is far from romantic, and in contrast to highlighting how special Lao is, the trope reduces the country and its people to a statistic, a number that confers upon it the unfortunate membership in a club for which the primary objective is to "graduate." The production and replication of such a trope was evident in documents that I collected from the World Bank, IMF, ADB, UNDP, the Government of Lao (GOL), and several NGOs. The trope is commonly represented in the opening paragraphs of the country

situation or context section of reports written for donors, country offices, or the international development community in general. The trope sets the scene for the analysis of "development challenges" and the proposal of corresponding programmes and projects designed to alleviate poverty in Lao.

5.1.1 *Poverty*

> "The Lao PDR is a 'Least Developed Country" (LDC) and as such is considered by the international community to be one of the poorest countries in the world." UN (2000a: 16)

Development reports invariably open with a description of the Lao country context such as the following one from a World Bank report:

> With an estimated per capita income of US$ 400 in 1997, the Lao PDR is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the East Asia Region...Social indicators in Lao PDR are among the worst in the region, and closer to the average for Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank (1999: 1)

Of note is that Lao is not only described as poor but comparatively the poorest, and the worst, in a region that is developing. This presents an interesting contradiction when reports describing other countries in the region resort to a general image of poverty that has a homogenizing effect. For example an ADB report on the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)[3] explains that "economic transformation has made the GMS a new frontier of Asian economic growth. However, poverty is still widespread, and the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is only about US$ 1 per day in most of the region" (ADB 2001: 1). A comparison of the economic indicators presented in the same report reveals that the 1999 per capita GDP figures range from US$ 254 to US$ 2000 within the GMS.[4] In terms of distribution, in Thailand the wealthiest country, 12.9 percent of the

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[3] The GMS includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan province of the Peoples Republic of China.
[4] Cambodia: 254, Yunnan: 526, Lao PDR: 281, Thailand: 2000, Vietnam: 354, Myanmar: no figures.

population lives below the poverty line, and in Yunnan, the second wealthiest area, 10.8 percent of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line.[5] Figures for the remaining countries are higher with Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam at 36.1, 46.9, 22.9, and 37.0 percent respectively. Despite these higher figures, the three poorest countries combined only have a total population close to the population of Thailand alone.[6] How accurate is it then to claim that the GDP per capital is about US$ 1 per day in most of the region? If the GMS in general is this poor, the extreme position of Lao pictured in the World Bank report does not appear that remarkable. One explanation for this seeming contradiction is that the trope of poverty is replicated in an arbitrary fashion to suit the purpose of the discourse. The ADB description of poverty made little attempt to remain consistent with economic indicators. Another characteristic feature of the Lao trope repeatedly calls upon one specific ranking indicator.

> The Lao PDR lies 143rd (out of 173) in UNDP's 2002 Human Development Index (HDI) ranking it among the world's least developed nations. Using a new poverty line, calculated according to the nutritional requirements of the Lao population a recent participatory poverty assessment (ADB, 2001) classified some 38.6% of the population as poor...World Bank (2002: 13)

According to the UNDP National Human Development Report on Lao PDR (2002), the UN- designated "least developed countries" are determined by three criteria: low income, as measured by GDP per capita;[7] weak human resources (based on indicators of life expectancy at birth, per capita calorie intake, and combined school enrolment and adult literacy); and a low level of economic diversification. There were only 22 LDCs in 1991.

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[5] The 1997 national poverty line for Yunnan, PRC is given as Yuan 640 (about US$ 77); no figures are included for Thailand.

[6] Total population ('000) for: Cambodia - 10,716; Lao PDR - 5,163; Myanmar - 44,497; Thailand - 60,300; Viet Nam - 60,300; Yunnan - 41,440. Combined population of Cambodia, Lao and Myanmar is 60,376.

[7] The threshold for inclusion in the current list has been a GDP per capita of US$ 800 and the threshold for graduation has been a GDP per capita of US$ 900.

Currently there are 49 countries designated as LDCs (UNDP 2002). An earlier UNDP report states that "Nearly one out of every two Lao people is poor, according to a study by the World Bank in 1995, which defines a poverty line for Laos in monetary terms" (UNDP 1996a: 4). Figures and indicators produced by the ADB, UN, and World Bank appear to be called upon and recycled between these agencies to support descriptions of poverty in Lao. These indicators also widely appeared throughout other agency reports that I examined. One NGO report, for example, stated that "The 2001 UN human development index placed Laos at number 131 (out of 162 countries)." This report also noted that in the year 2000, the Lao PDR was ranked 140 out of 174 countries (Concern 2001a). No discussions of why the number of countries included in the HDI changes from year to year or how this affects Lao's ranking were found in any agency reports.

Access to earlier reports was limited, but it is interesting to note that a 1993 report by the same NGO not only does not refer to the above indices or rankings, but there is no evidence of a trope or discussion of poverty (Concern 1993). The report focuses on project activities concerning the repatriation of refugees. A 1995 report by the same agency indicates that project work on repatriation continued, but in addition included the statement that, "In the UN list of countries, ranked in terms of Human Development Index (HDI), Lao PDR is ranked 133" (Concern 1995:2). No reference is made to economic indicators and images of Lao as poor are absent. These variations may be a reflection of different authors, or that citing the HDI, which first appeared in 1990 (UNDP 2002) had not yet become widespread. A comparison of the GOL, 2001, *Action Programme for the Development of the Lao PDR 2001-2010*, prepared for the United Nations Conference for Less Developed Countries with the 1990 GOL version of this

report reveals a similar pattern. The 1990 report, which was written only four years after the introduction of the NEM, focuses on the economic performance of Lao in the 1980s. Any description of Lao as poor, or reference to poverty, is absent, and, given that this report was written for a conference on "the least developed countries," this seems all the more striking. The report focuses on economic development and cites the problems that need to be solved, such as those of infrastructure, a lack of capacity, and savings. This simple comparison serves to raise questions regarding when and how the image of Lao as "poor" was constructed? The 1990 GOL report does not relate Lao's LDC status to poverty, rather, it states: "The country is, however, confronted with a number of serious obstacles that prevent it from undisturbed and accelerated development: inadequate physical infrastructure, shortage of technical and managerial skills, and a chronic lack of domestic and foreign savings" (GOL 1990: 1). The report goes on to state that, "In comparison with other Least Developed Countries in the region, the country's economic performance was slightly better, and it is significantly higher than the average rate of 1 per cent recorded by LDCs in the Pacific and Africa" (GOL 1990: 1). The report reflects a focus on economic development, and it appears that "development with a human face" had not yet surfaced in Lao reports.

More recent reports suggest that the focus on poverty in development discourse originated at a global level. "The eradication of poverty is one of the core principles of the UN Programme for Reform and forms the basis for a number of initiatives being undertaken by the UN System… coordinated follow-up to world conferences and the implementation of a concerted UN public information and advocacy strategy" (UN 2000b: 7). A GOL report written in 2000 states that, "The 'poverty reduction' concept

has become a major reference, endorsed by all member states at the UN Millenium Summit" (GOL 2000a: 24). This has translated into "The Lao PDR's overarching goal is to graduate from the status of least developed country by the year 2020...A condition for achieving these goals is to increase the pace of economic growth to reach a higher sustainable level, while the necessary foundations are laid for industrialization and modernization," and "Increased emphasis will be put on regional economic development, infrastructure development, and implementing the government's decentralization policy, all of which should have a direct impact on poverty reduction" (UN 2001: 6). An earlier UNDP report demonstrates the introduction of the poverty concept at the local level, in preparation for its endorsement globally. "Poverty eradication is the ultimate development objective of the entire United Nations system in the Lao People's Democratic Republic" (UNDP 1997a: 5). The same report states that:

> A National Poverty Eradication Plan will be prepared, pursuant to agreements reached at the World Summit for Social Development. The Government's main strategy for poverty eradication is to enable the poor in rural areas to gain access to basic social services and to markets. UNDP (1997a: 2)

Although claims are made that poverty is widespread in Lao, the above statement gives an indication of how poverty is constructed in a specific manner: "Overcoming rural poverty is the biggest challenge in Laos" (UNDP 1996b: 9). The linkage between poverty, rural areas, and access to services and markets is rooted in another feature of the trope constructed by recent development discourse, that is already evident in the earlier 1990 GOL report, which opens with the observation that:

> The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a land-locked country with a population of about 4 million and a land area of 236,000 square kilometers. The bulk of the population lives in the fertile plains along the Mekong river and almost four fifths base their existence on agriculture.

The country is rich in mineral resources and has vast agricultural and hydro-electric potential. More than half of the country's area is covered with forest. (GOL 1990:1).

The physical characteristics of the Lao PDR are drawn into the construction of the trope that gives it the appearance of being indisputable, making it difficult not to take the role of the geographical context of Lao in development for granted.

5.1.2 Geography

Mitchell's (1991) deconstruction of the simple, but powerful trope, of Egypt's "overcrowded Nile River Valley" illustrates how the topographic image of the river, the desert surrounding it, and the population jammed within its banks, defines the object to be analyzed in terms of the tangible limits of nature, physical space, and human reproduction. The apparently natural boundaries shape the kinds of solutions possible through the improved management of resources, and technology to overcome their natural limits. This apparent naturalness is misleading. An examination and reinterpretation of the assumptions and figures on which this image is based, reveals a very different picture. The limits of this alternative picture are not those of geography and nature but of powerlessness and social inequality. The solutions that follow are not just technological and managerial, but social and political (Mitchell 1991).

The object of analysis constructed by the international development discourse in the Lao PDR is also defined in terms of natural limits and geography. In this case, the image emphasizes that the Lao PDR is mountainous, land-locked, sparsely populated, and isolated. On the other hand, the vast potential of nature calls for the management of resources and the introduction of improved technology. This geographic aspect of the trope is the earliest, and most frequently cited descriptor of Lao in the development

documents that I examined. The following example is taken from a Red Cross Report, which cites the UNDP 1998 Lao Human National Development Report as its source.

> The Lao People's Democratic Republic is [a] landlocked country and 80% of its area is mountainous. Mountain ranges extend across its northern and eastern borders with China, Myanmar and Vietnam, and part of [the] southern border with Cambodia. The long border with Thailand which for the most part follows the north-south course of the Mekong river, with relatively favourable conditions for contact and exchange with the outside world. The Mekong river and its tributaries provides alluvial deposits for some of the fertile plains. Soil conditions in the rest of the country tend to be poor, with a few notable exceptions in the South (Plateau Bolivens). These physical characteristics fragment development and have led to wide disparities in economic conditions between different parts of the country.
> Lao Red Cross Society (2000: 2)

The contrasting geography of Lao highlights two important aspects to the construction of development solutions in Lao. The focus on the mountains produces images of remoteness, isolation, and barrenness. The prominence of the Mekong River, on the other hand, holds the potential for productivity and openness, via the strategic position it offers Lao by running the length of the country and connecting it to all of the GMS countries. These features are key to presenting a picture of development that involves overcoming and exploiting the natural features of the Lao context, in order to enable transition to a market economy and regional integration.

> Geographic conditions restrict both the quantity and quality of agricultural land and pose difficulties in the development of trade, social infrastructure, and transport and communication links. Nevertheless, the Lao PDR is located in the centre of a dynamic and prospering region and as such has the potential to provide a strategic resource base and link to its neighbours – Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and China.
> UN (2000a: 16)

The image develops a relationship between poverty, the rural aspect of Lao, and isolation. It is suggested, that overcoming the latter two physical constraints will provide the solution to poverty.

5.1.3   Isolation

A former IMF Resident Representative who wrote, that his was an "unforgettable experience in a forgotten land," expressed a romantic image of isolation associated with the Lao PDR (Do Pham 1994: 1). This romantic image drew early adventurers and draws tourists today. It also continues to perpetuate early French colonial visions of taming the Lao wilderness, and winning the battle over the impassible rapids of the Mekong River with a view to exploiting it as a major transport link from Vietnam to China (Osborne 2000). The technology of the earlier French colonists was insufficient to win that battle, but in a new era of globalisation the need to overcome the physical barriers has taken on a renewed significance.

> **Land-locked** Lao PDR is one of the world's **poorest** countries...the majority of the country's **widely scattered** and **ethnically varied** population cultivates rain-fed rice at **subsistence levels**. The monetized sector of the economy is limited to a few urban centres ...Transportation and communication links, although expanding, remain limited, with vast areas of the country remaining **extremely isolated**. The delivery of social sector services is poor, exacerbated by the poor quality of physical infrastructure. The lack of qualified human resources remains the country's primary development constraint. UNDP (1995: 3)[8]

To describe Lao as remote, forgotten, and isolated ignores: its historic, geopolitical role as a "buffer state;" consecutive interventions by Siam, France, and the United States; and later relations with the Soviet Bloc and Vietnam (Stuart-Fox 1996). Economically, it obscures that "significant informal cross-border trade has been going on for long between Laos and its neighbouring Countries – particularly with Thailand, China and Vietnam – which cannot be prevented due to difficult terrain, poor infrastructure and poor law enforcement capacity" (GOL 2001: 15). The image of Lao as a "forgotten land" takes the West as its reference point, mythologizing how Lao came to be closed off to the

rest of the World (i.e. the West), when US interests left with the end of the Vietnam War and Communist take-over. For the West, Lao only "opened up" again when it made the transition from a command to a market economy in 1986. Two decades after "opening up," formal economic trade continues with neighbouring countries and has expanded to Japan and the West. According to a 2001 GOL report, total exports in 1998 amounted to US$ 336.7 million (26.7% GDP), and total imports US$ 552.8 million (43.8% GDP). Despite evidence to the contrary the image of Lao as isolated persists. The relevance of this image of isolation, and the problem that it serves to construct becomes evident for economic and political reasons.

> Physical infrastructure is the *sine-qua-non* to transform Lao from a landlocked LDC to a "land-linked" sub-regional hub in ASEAN. It is also critical to ensure national integration. The fact that more than half of the country is inaccessible by road has negatively impacted on local living standards and hindered the establishment of a national cohesion and identity so important to national development. UNDP (1997b: vi)

Rural poverty is caused by lack of infrastructure, (which doesn't appear to inhibit informal trade), and the proposed solution to overcoming the natural limits of this physical isolation is a technical solution: to build roads. GOL, UN, and NGO reports have a tendency to focus on the impact of isolation on local living standards, and or the need to provide services to villagers. Limited references appeared to Lao PDR's transition from land-locked to land-linked and there is no discussion of the significance or possible impact of this transition beyond the context of general road improvement.

> The Lao PDR's aspiration to use its "land-linked" position as a major trump card for regional integration and future development perspectives is the reason for its **important participation in the GMS Road Network.** It may be noted from the "long list" of Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Projects promoted by the ADB, that the Lao PDR is involved in five of the nine road sub-sector projects. GOL (2000a: 70)

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[8] Emphasis mine.

The second limitation of the natural isolation of Lao, is that peasants appear to remain locked into an impoverishing subsistence form of agriculture from which they can escape, only by entering the market economy to join the ranks of the rest of the "booming" region.

> Lao "lies at the heart of the booming sub-region of Southeast Asia" but is a "Least Developed Country", which is currently among the poorest in Asia...At least two thirds of the population lives in rural areas, mostly engaged in subsistence agriculture, with little opportunity to participate in the market economy. Thus far, those that most need to benefit from economic growth – the rural poor – have benefited least. How to integrate small farmers into the wider market place, and how the rewards of national growth will translate into income, opportunities, and improved social services for remote communities are of primary concern.
> UNDP (1996a: 2-3)

5.1.4 *Lacking Capacity*

Escobar (1995) claims that a subtle, ideological operation exists, whereby development discourse attempts to present itself as a detached center of rationality and intelligence. The relationship between the West and the non-West is constructed on these terms: the former possesses expertise, technology, and management skills that the latter is lacking. This lack is what is attributed to causing the problems of the non-West, which can only be solved by the West. This is reflected in the statement that, "poor villagers also recognize that they are often unable to effect solutions on their own" (ADB 2001: xiv). The problem of Lao people in relation to the expertise and technology of Westerners is highlighted by the ethnicity of "isolated," "backward," "hilltribe," peoples who practice "traditional" methods of agriculture that makes them "vulnerable" to the forces of nature: "floods and drought are a part of life for many rural poor in Laos," and "Lao communities are highly vulnerable to disruptions due to natural disasters. Rural

communities living on the edge of subsistence are particularly vulnerable to even moderate climatic disruptions which can jeopardize food security" (UNDP 1996a: 33). This vulnerability presents another natural limitation that needs to be overcome by Western technology. Mitchell argues that once problems are defined as "natural" rather than political, questions of social inequality and powerlessness disappear into the background. The analysis can then focus on how to overcome these "natural" limits of geography and demography. In the case of Egypt, the international development industry proposed and funded two complementary sets of methods as the solution for Egypt's problems: the technological and the managerial. The productive limits set by nature are overcome by the forces of technology, while existing natural resources are made more productive by more efficient management, in particular by dismantling the bureaucracy of the Egyptian state (Mithcell 1991). Not surprisingly similar solutions are imposed on Lao, with the added requirement that a prerequisite to ending poverty entails the shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture.

> The dominant economic activity is rice production, but with low yields and **little capacity** to grow more than a single annual rice crop, Laos faces an uphill battle each year to meet its food needs....The dependence on rice and **lack of crop diversification** leaves farmers not only **vulnerable** to climatic variations, but also in itself contributes to dietary imbalance and high levels of malnutrition. Furthermore, it **limits opportunities for commercialisation** for agriculture. Opportunities for income generation in agriculture and other sectors are restricted in **physically isolated rural areas**, which generally have subsistence economies **and poor access to markets**. UNDP (1996a: 6)[9]

The image is misleading on two levels: it suggests that individual Lao farmers rely solely on subsistence cultivation of rice, and that they cannot survive on this method of farming; on another level the image suggests that Lao as a nation cannot feed itself, because it only

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[9] Emphasis mine.

produces one crop. To begin with, the effect of this description is to homogenize the agricultural practices of all the people of the Lao PDR, practices which in themselves are very diverse, varying from upland multi-crop swidden to sedentary lowland irrigated wet rice cultivation. The image of families trying to survive on one crop, rice, is belied by the following survey findings:

> There are no cash crops, but fruits and vegetables are planted around the edges of their plots – corn, cassava, cucumbers, squash, and beans. After the rice harvest they plant green vegetables in the cultivation land. Around the houses, they had also planted vegetables in small amounts, in addition to pineapple, mango and bananas...All fruits and vegetables are for home consumption only, or for trading with friends and relative for varieties they don't grow themselves. UNHCR (1998: 8)

More recently, GOL reports repeatedly point out that in the year 2000, 2.2 million tons of paddy-rice were produced, resulting in national self-sufficiency.

> In 1999, the total rice cultivation area in the country was 717,577 hectares. Other food crops, such as maize, beans, starchy roots, fruit trees, as well as livestock and fishery are expanding in several regions. Likewise, the output of non-rice crops such as coffee, sugar cane and tobacco are also expanding, particularly coffee, the harvest of which has increased from 8,576 tons in 1995 to 17, 530 tons in 1999. GOL (2001: 3)

As with the generalization that Lao is isolated, to describe Lao as predominantly a subsistence economy is misleading. This image also serves to side-step questions regarding distribution. If the country is capable of rice self-sufficiency, is there equitable distribution, particularly when flooding or droughts occur? The continuation of so-called "traditional" and subsistence agricultural practices is given as one of the causes of poverty, and the solution presented is to shift from subsistence farming to growing cash crops, which requires the introduction of Western, modernized agriculture.

> To facilitate the shift from subsistence to commercial agricultural production, villagers will require the capacity for agro-processing...In the end, one of the keys to fighting rural poverty is strong village

communities, with access to good social services and markets, and the capacity to invest in their own development. UNDP (1996a: 10)

5.2. *Problematizing Subsistence Agriculture*

"Nearly one out of every two Lao people is poor." UNDP (1996a: 4)

Written documents, and research reports produced by the GOL, donors, or development agencies, unceasingly repeat the mantra that the Lao PDR is a poor nation filled with poor people. The power of this image cannot be underestimated, because for the most part, the assumptions that it is based on go unquestioned. A closer examination reveals contradictions, and the construction of an image that serves to target one particular region of the country.

> Lao PDR's poorest population [is] defined operationally as those families whose livelihoods depend on subsistence farming and shifting cultivation in the isolated mountainous areas, and who have in general all the stigmas of poverty. GOL (1998: 19)

Poverty is more narrowly specified: "...it was evident that poverty is inextricably related to culture and ethnicity, and that its locus is with highlanders" (ADB 2001: xiii) and "these problems are particularly pressing to the 60,000 households in northern Laos that cultivate opium" (UNDP 1996a: 6).

Following Escobar (1995), who demonstrated that poverty and hunger were problematized by development discourse, I will argue that the international development discourse in Lao problematizes poverty by making it synonymous not only to non-market food production, but to the very specific form of subsistence cultivation, referred to in the discourse as "slash and burn" cultivation. The deliberate and repeated use of the phrase "slash and burn" in itself evokes a particular image of environmental degradation. This form of swidden cultivation has been associated with ethnicity and has been practiced by

both upland and highland cultivators. "Slash and burn" cultivation is also associated with the cultivation of the opium poppy, by some ethnic groups, in particular the highland Hmong people.

Development documents in Lao consistently discuss the country in terms of three geographic regions: the North, the Centre, and the South. The way that each region is described is telling. The Central Region is "the most developed part of the country, having vast potentials for further development, particularly in the field of agriculture and hydro-electricity" (GOL 2001: 30). The South is described in the following manner:

> a very important strategic area, bordered by three countries…which has enormous potentials for forestry development. There are large plains favourable to rice cultivation, cattle rearing, fishery, cash crop, especially coffee and fruit trees, and non-timber forestry products. Besides, there are also favourable conditions for development of hydro-electricity and mining…The area is also endowed with beautiful scenery and historic and cultural sites…and therefore, is propitious to tourism. But its problems lie in its poor infrastructure, particularly transport and communications.
> GOL (2001: 31)

The Northern region, with 30 percent (1.5 million) of the country's population and 40 percent of the land area is, by contrast, portrayed in a much more negative light with particular reference to the people of the region :

> On the whole, the people's education level is low; the major part of the land is mountainous; forests have been destroyed a lot, thus affecting greatly the environment and the ecosystem. The people's living conditions are still very harsh; it is the most underdeveloped part of the country. GOL (2001: 30)

It is worth noting that the Central and Southern regions are portrayed as having significant potential for development, or "favourable conditions," that simply require technical solutions. Constraining factors, such as some of the highest concentrations of land contamination by UXOs in the country, are glossed over by the image of "beautiful

scenery and historic and cultural sites." Poverty in relation to the characterization of the regional population is not discussed. This pattern is repeated as the report goes on to list some key areas to be addressed for the development of each region. No mention is made of problems in the South and Centre, for example, the rising prevalence of illegal human trafficking (including labour and the sex trade) or urban youth addiction to meta-amphetamines, and the corresponding increase in vehicle-related accidents and deaths. The Northern region, on the other hand, calls for "Settlement of shifting cultivation for rice growing purposes and stopping of opium poppy and cannabis growing [and] arrangement of sedentary life for villagers and poverty eradication" (GOL 2001: 30). Reference to poverty is made only in reference to the Northern region.

In comparison an examination of the UNDP Human Development Index for all three regions reveals that the differences between the North and South are not as extreme as the image portrayed. For the year 2000 the HDI was 0,556 for the North, 0,563 for the Central region, and 0,547 for the South. The HDI for Lao as a whole was 0,560.[10] It appears that the problems identified with the Northern region are then generalized to rural development in the country as a whole. The GOL report goes on to introduce the guidelines for rural development and poverty eradication with the statement that, "In the next five years, the rural development tasks have to be expanded and linked closely with poverty eradication in rural areas, resettlement, reduction of slash and burn cultivation and opium poppy cultivation, and UXO clearance (GOL 2001: 33).[11] The need for UXO

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[10] According to the UNDP National Human Development Report Lao PDR 2001 (p14), The HDI ranges from a low of 0 to a high of 1, and has been universally acknowledged as a general gauge of progress, according to the UNDP report. The HDI figures are used as a system of ranking. Vientiane Municipality, for example, is given an HDI of 0.665, which the UNDP report states places it well within the "medium HDI Countries" in the global 2001 ranking. The regional HDI figures do not meet this criteria.
[11] The report qualifies the Lao Government's intentions regarding the term "resettlement" which in the context of stabilization of shifting cultivation is not to move the settlements per se, but to create permanent

clearance is real enough, but what is interesting, is that it is the only reference made in the international development discourse to the impact of the American War. One is left with the impression that although Lao people continue to be injured or killed, and that farming and development activities are obstructed by land contamination, no other disruptions to Lao society resulted from nine years of war. On the other hand, the first three "solutions" emerge as a litany that is repeated in government reports and development agency country documents, by multilateral agencies and NGOs. Is it significant that the trope constructed by the dominant development discourse appears to correspond to one particular region of Lao, rather than to a more generalized representation of the country? If the trope functions to construct an object, and define a particular problem, to be solved in a particular way, how do these three localized problems become significant in constructing Lao as an object of development?

There are also significant differences in resource endowments across the country's three regions. The Central and South, endowed with broader plains along the Mekong, contain fertile soil and irrigable land. The North is characteristically more mountainous and rugged. In the North, the land is mostly poor and acidic, and the potential for irrigation is low. The majority of households in the Northern areas, and many others nation wide, still practice low yield slash and burn. The Central and Southern regions contain 46 percent and 20 percent of the population respectively. Still, in spite of richer resource endowments, the highest incidence of poverty is in the South, where 60 percent of the population live in poverty. According to the Lao Red Cross, the

conditions for livelihood for "unsettled" families. We are told that there is no "forced" resettlement occurring, with the exception of hydropower development projects where villages lie in areas to be inundated. While this is the official government line, this is a contentious and sensitive issue. Some

South's high poverty incidence can be attributed to several factors. This includes an extensive ethnically (Lao Theung and Lao Soung) predominant poverty belt along the Vietnamese border which is severely contaminated with UXO. Inaccessibility to basic social services in the South, especially in the more isolated Southeast, further aggravates regional development disparities. Even though the South is considered the national "rice bowl," high yielding areas are limited to Champassack, and the western-most areas of Savannakhet and Saravane. Ownership of arable lands in these areas, however, is highly concentrated, thus adding to sub-region inequality. Lastly, droughts and floods often hit the South, aggravating the hardship of the rural poor (Lao Red Cross Society 2000: 6-7).

Larger more powerful and external forces are at play involving the state, the military, and the international community. The practice of "slash and burn cultivation" appears to fit Mitchell's analysis, which suggests that the geographical determinism of an image often introduces a construction of history that implies an agricultural order that has remained unchanged in essential ways for centuries. Statements and images that imply that a place has remained essentially unchanged are highly misleading and ignore hundreds of years of far-reaching economic and political changes. In the case of Egypt, "Ignoring such developments creates the impression that the Nile Valley poverty that exists today is the "traditional" poverty of a peasantry that has not yet or has only recently joined the "20th century" rather than very much a product of the political and economic forces of this century" (Mitchell 1991: 24). A similar sentiment is articulated with regard to Lao:

> As far as the Lao PDR is concerned, low productivity in agriculture, particularly rice production, is not the result of population pressure or lack

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observers claim that villagers are "enticed" to move with promises that are not met, or that resettlement takes place under the guise of "village consolidation," "reallocation," or the "focal site" strategy.

of land, but of the reliance by farmers or rural populations on archaic techniques of cultivation and the dependence on climatic conditions.
GOL (2001: 13)

This is contradicted when the issue of UXO is raised and we are told that up to 50 percent of the country's total land area is contaminated, threatening the livelihood and food security of large sections of the country's population. In addition to UXO, defoliants and napalm were also dropped on Lao adding to the delapidated state of much of the land after the war. Another significant impact of the war, which has had an impact on subsistence and agricultural production, but is not referred to by the mainstream discourse, is displacement. According to Goudineau (1997: 159) the present location of many Lao villages is a legacy of the war era. "Village displacement during the Indochinese war altered settlement patterns quite radically, and the memory of displacement is still fresh in people's minds." Being too close to strategic political zones, and heavy bombing caused many villages to completely disappear, so that many refugees were unable to trace their homes.

Low productivity and "archaic" techniques in the North, are associated with "opium production [which] lies at the heart of the widespread poverty in the Northern region" (GOL 2000a: 92).

> Living conditions in rural areas have remained largely unchanged for several generations. The majority of the rural population lives in unhygienic conditions, is illiterate and has low cultural awareness, particularly in the case of ethnic minorities. GOL (2001: 3-4)

The international development discourse remains silent on a critical issue related to stopping shifting cultivation. Despite official government policy, the construction of shifting cultivation as inefficient, and not meeting subsistence needs, is linked to its construction as the major source of deforestation and justification for the urgency to

resettle highlanders to the lowlands. This argument is not unique to Lao and has been used to justify resettlement of "hilltribes" in other countries in the region (CIDSE 1989). Again the discourse remains silent on the larger economic interests and political forces of the logging industry that competes for the very forests that swidden farmers rely on. This is an example of how the development discourse as a political and ideological processes serves to depoliticize and produce silences in the discourse (Ferguson 1990). I will return to an examination of the strategy of depoliticization in Chapter Six in relation to identifying alternative and counter-discourses based on the requirement of politicizing the silences produced by the dominant discourse.

CHAPTER 6 POLITICISING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

> The Silences in this discourse are deafening: where are the transnational corporations, which have so much access to productive capacity? Where are the domestic class forces in these social formations? Are the only dominant groups the "state elite?" Where are local capitalists? Are the "informal sector" entrepreneurs and small commodity producing peasants the only dominated classes? How can the working class be ignored when the World Bank examines labour markets – which governments are, of course, encouraged to ignore because "if left alone, they work well."
> Moore (1995: 18)

The international development discourse constructs Lao as an object of knowledge, and asserts its authority of "knowing" Lao and its problems, and the corresponding solutions by persistently replicating the trope of a poor, remote, rural, and ethnic Lao. The trope serves to depoliticise the political and economic forces of global capital that are mediated by international development, by grounding the problems of Lao poverty in the "natural" inefficiencies of a rural society and the "unproductiveness" of subsistence economies. The solution suggested by the trope is to join the market economy. While the production of a trope serves to depoliticise so, too, do the silences of the discourse. Preoccupation with the rural subsistence farmer, in particular the upland shifting cultivator, as central to the object of development homogenizes Lao society, and obscures the role of the many different groups of actors in development.

This chapter will examine how the power of development discourse is resisted, and contested locally by some development workers, who fill the silences of the mainstream discourse making visible the interests of IFIs and market forces, and construct an alternative representation of Lao society that challenges development's trope of Lao. Sources of evidence expressing resistance to the mainstream development discourse were found in internal NGO documents written by development workers in Lao, and from interviews with development workers. Research reports commissioned by

development organisations, but written by independent consultants, also provided material that supported (and possibly informed) the observations of development workers. Development workers in the Lao PDR do not form a homogenous group. Lao and non-Lao development workers are differentiated by the positions they hold within the hierarchy of the international development community, and by the their positions within the structure of Lao society. The perspectives expressed by development workers are shaped by these positions, and among other things by their interpretations of agency ideologies and the relationships (or lack of) that they form working with Lao villagers and local levels of Lao government. The views of individual development workers also could not be neatly separated in dichotomous and distinct categories. A development worker might, for example, offer a perspective that challenged the mainstream discourse on one issue but not on another. The following presentation of these varied, and oppositional "voices" of development workers in Lao, is constrained by the absence of direct quotes, which in an attempt to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, have not been included. In an attempt to overcome this constraint I have paraphrased and integrated the statements of development workers with excerpts from agency reports that supported the spirit of their observations, and maintained the context of the statements.

6.1 The Problem of Subsistence Agriculture

The trope constructed by the global capitalist development discourse portrays the image of Lao as a predominantly "subsistence" society practicing a "backward" form of agriculture with low yields that contribute to food shortages and poverty. The generalisation that "subsistence" is rice-dependent also assumes that this form of agriculture is nutritionally limited, and therefore inferior, and hides the interdependency

between the forest, subsistence cultivation, and the structure of community. The relationship of indigenous Lao society to the environment is instead presented as either destructive (deforestation), or vulnerable to the forces of nature (floods and droughts). The contesting views of development workers demonstrates how the global development discourse decontextualizes this relationship, by not discussing how Lao farmers are being forced to change what have been sustainable practices in the past by the introduction of development. The effect of the global discourse is to mislead by suggesting that the substitution of subsistence agriculture by commercialised agriculture will solve both the problems of poverty and deforestation, because the larger forces that are the root causes of poverty and the threats to sustainability are obscured. This proposition avoids addressing how integration into the market economy leads to the transformation of local societies; and it ignores the destructive consequences of these transformations via the "solutions" of development.

> While there is a lack of reliable data, it is clear that food production does not meet demand, particularly in more remote mountainous areas. There is a difference of opinion over how this situation can be improved. There are those, both within the Government and international organisations working in development, who believe the priority should be ensuring that basic food subsistence needs are met first before cash crops are developed. Then there are those in Government and the private sector in favor of promoting cash crop production only. This tension is likely to be ongoing. SCA (2000: 9)

The above observation found in an NGO report questions the authority of the global development discourse. First, the point is made that there is a lack of reliable data regarding food production. Some development workers also pointed out that there is an actual lack of knowledge about the situation in Lao. Development workers may be placed in the role of "expert," but some of them do not unquestioningly accept the

authority of the discourse. The tension to which the above statement refers, illustrates that there are both government workers and development workers, who question the shift to commercialised agriculture. One justification for this skepticism lies in the GOL claim that the country is now self-sufficient in rice production, which a report by another NGO acknowledges.

> Agricultural harvests have been improving consistently over the last two decades. The annual rice crop, the mainstay of the economy, has increased ten fold since 1976. Rain fed lowland rice still represents the most important element in this production although irrigated rice production has been expanding even more rapidly. Figures available for 1999 show that total rice production has for the first time exceeded 2 million tonnes, the level regarded as sufficient to meet the country's immediate needs. Concern (2001b: 4)

Levels of rice production have not remained static but have increased over time, yet in the documents dating back to 1990, the image of Lao as a subsistence society that is incapable of self-reliance in terms of rice production has not changed accordingly.

More importantly the NGO connects this vulnerability to a new problem of land ownership, introduced by development policies and activities, that had until the disruptions of the Indochina war, and even after, been absent in Lao communities. The threat of the loss of land to Lao villagers is also expressed in the following statement written by development workers reporting back from a conference they attended:

> Conference participants identified key issues regarding land rights in Lao. Threats to sustainable and fair land management, such as the trend towards handing over land management to international corporations which distribute land to farmers and control the production and marketing of crops. Also threats to women's land rights. Women's inherited property and their right to common property are at risk because of the tendency to register all official documents in the name of the "head of household". Concern (2001c: 10)

The threat to land ownership lies in two initiatives "encouraged" by economic liberalisation: increased privatisation, and government land allocation programs, which effectively tie shifting cultivators to sedentary land cultivation. The threat to inherited property rights, on the other hand, is not just an issue for upland farmers but is also significant for ethnic Lao women whose bilateral, matrifocal kinship system has in the past ensured women's land rights (Goudineau 1997).

In opposition to the trope's image of Lao farmers as vulnerable, a theme raised by Lao development workers interviewed, discussed how rural Lao communities have traditional coping mechanisms which allowed them to deal with rice shortages. The point was made that villagers have not viewed rice shortages as a problem in the past. According to one development worker, if villagers had rice shortages they could go to harvest food from the forest. For example, this development worker explained that villagers consumed roots that were cooked like rice, and could be stored for a long time. Another development worker observed that in Lao Soung villages, families who are better off help poorer ones by sharing seeds. All Lao development workers maintained the importance of the traditional village structures that exist for village members to help each other. It was also pointed out that different villages, and ethnic groups have a variety ways of assisting themselves that outsiders do not know about. This theme of self-reliance was also elaborated upon by the findings of one NGO-commissioned study, which states:

> Rice straddles both the necessary and unnecessary realms. 'Necessity' is a relative concept due to the persistent rice shortages in the upland environments. People do safeguard by planting corn and cassava, proving that lack of rice is an issue which people consistently deal with, though it is not perceived by villagers as a 'need' that warrants a loan from others who may have more rice. It is understood that everyone (except those

who have some paddy) will run out of rice before the next harvest, and will resort to other staples. Households run out of rice at different times depending on their labour pool and the number of people in the household eating rice. These are well-developed coping mechanisms for dealing with rice shortages, and these are not acknowledged by those who equate lack of rice with lack of food. Karkas (1999: 18)

This statement refers to the fact that in addition to foraging, upland farmers also grow alternative crops to rice. The report attempts to explain the centrality of rice in cultural terms and claims that "rice in the Lao PDR carries nationalist connotations. Particularly sticky rice, which is a national symbol of lowland Lao, as well as most of the Lao PDR's ethnic groups…Hence, food security is equated with rice security by government officials and villagers alike" (Karkas 1999: 13). This seems to suggest that the trope's image of Lao's food insufficiencies caused by its dependence on rice is based on local perceptions and dependency on rice. Attributing the symbolic function of rice, the author of the study, along with the trope, overlook crop diversification as part of indigenous systems of cultivation. Swidden farmers for example also plant fields with maize, cassava, cotton, soybean, groundnut, vegetables, bean, tobacco, sugar cane, fruit-trees, oil crops and indigo (Chazee 2002). The report goes on to say that:

> In the context of the Lao state, the government believes that upland communities can achieve food security by emulating the successes of the lowlands; ie through the construction of more paddy. However, irrigation cannot be provided to all upland communities in the immediate future, so a more realistic option may be to work on strengthening current security measures against rice shortages. This means paying more attention to crop diversification, rather than rice being the focus of the goal towards food security. Currently the intensification of rice cultivation and further development of paddies is supported by the national government and major foreign donors. Karkas (1999: 14)

While it would be difficult to establish the connection between the government's focus on rice sufficiency and the trope's image of Lao's rice dependency, the latter could

certainly be used as justification for the former. Equating rice production with food security may be based on its role as a staple, however, the construction of paddy by upland farmers entails actual movement to the lowlands, and a shift to a sedentary life style.

6.1.1   Resettlement

The issue of resettlement is a prevalent theme in the Lao development literature, and is discussed in the context of infrastructure projects, such as road construction or the controversial Nam Theun II World Bank hydropower project. Although the World Bank claims that this project serves as a model for public consultation, interviews with development workers revealed that the consultation process was a matter of paying "lip service" to NGOs and lacked respect or interest in their views. One development worker explained that all of the critical literature and information concerning the negative impact of the hydropower project, that had been gathered by the NGO, had to be removed under government pressure. The context in which the issue of resettlement was discussed the most, however, by development workers who were interviewed was the reduction of slash and burn cultivation.

According to IUCN 187,000 families (30% of the population) still depended on shifting cultivation in the mid 1990s, and it remains a key and complex issue in rural villages today. Thrusts of the government are to control logging and settle shifting cultivation through decentralisation and partnership with villages (Nurse and Soydara 2002). A Quaker report (2002) also claims that the government continues to see the halting of slash and burn agriculture as important, and it reports that the area of slash and burn cultivation decreased to 110,000 ha in 2001 from 245,800 in 2000. The policy in fact is not a new one, from 1975 to 1989 the government concentrated on trying, largely

unsuccessfully, to restrict shifting cultivation (Nurse and Soydara 2002). The context of this earlier period was one of post-war reconstruction, when the majority of the population experienced internal displacement and resettlement. The GOL did at this time also refer to the reduction of shifting cultivation to stop deforestation, but differentiated between pioneering and rotational shifting cultivation. It appears that in the more recent discourse this differentiation has been lost (Goudineau 1997).

One development worker interviewed explained that the government is currently committed to stop shifting cultivation by the year 2005. According to this development worker some members of the government commented that they were surprised by this policy. The development worker stated that the Lao government thinks that Hmong people destroy the forest, but that this is not really the case. Many individuals in the government also recognise that moving shifting cultivators down to the lowlands is not the right approach, and that the government itself is not ready to undertake the implementation of this approach. This observation was also supported by the findings of an NGO study.

> Even where it is possible to switch to wet rice, there is limited water access and delivery of irrigation systems to all affected areas is not within the capacity of the government at this time. Therefore resentment regarding these policies was expressed. It is difficult for upland farmers to discontinue shifting cultivation and make the transition to wet rice until the alternatives are fully developed. This has been acknowledged by authorities, and they do not require a halt of upland rice cultivation, but that farmers stop burning new fields, and continue to rotate only with fields used in the last few years. Karkas (1999: 14)

In the case of one resettled village, another development worker observed that all the local government staff did not agree with the decision to develop a model village, but tht this decision was influenced by higher levels of government, who are concerned with

what to do to stop the destruction of forests. This development worker explained that although the government has attempted to implement development to benefit the villagers, so far they had not been successful. It was also noted that the government faces external pressures to implement the policy. Another development worker thought that the policy, and the main goal to eradicate poverty by the government was good, but that the practice of stopping shifting cultivation through reallocation may cause more poverty, and that it is not easy to bring people from one place to another. Resettlement could result in cultural, socio-eocnmic, and other negative problems, according to this development worker. Another development worker observed that NGOs are in turn pressured by the government to work with resettled villages, but the sustainability of doing so was questioned. The reason given was the uncertainty of how long villagers were willing to stay in the new village site because of the many problems that arise, often leading villagers to move back to their original site. Problems were related to the government's lack of money, and inability to provide enough land. The development worker stated that when people moved back to their original village they also became poorer, and it was thought that they would learn from this experience not to resettle again. The cost of resettlement was also seen as a problem. Another example given by a development worker was the case where the government invested millions of dollars in one model village. A new 8 km road was built, electricity was installed, new land was opened to grow rice, and many wells and irrigation infrastructure was built. Villagers moved to the new village during the second year, but nothing was ready, everything was still under construction, so the government provided rice and attracted many villagers. The development worker asks how can this serve as a model village if so much has to be

invested for each village? If the government spends US$ 2 million for 200 families, how can this be a model for other places? Another problem identified was that because bulldozers had opened the land good topsoil was lost and villagers were left with only sandy soil, which made it difficult to grow vegetables.

Development workers cited problems of land fertility as a concern with regard to resettlement, and the reduction of fallow periods due to government policies. In the case of continued upland cultivators this has consequences for the amount of labour required and the ability for farmers to continue to be self-reliant.

> In shifting cultivation, labour is the most important variable, the amount of labour a household can mobilise determines how much land can be brought under cultivation. This, in turn, determines the size of the yearly rice crop. Government policies have led to reduced fallow periods in shifting cultivation, and this in turn has led to a greater weed problem, and a corresponding increase in demand for labour to counter this. The ability of a household to burn as much forest as possible, and plant, weed and harvest the largest possible area is of utmost importance to their survival. Since rice shortages are persistent, and a level of subsistence is rarely met, the coming or going of labour into the household has a tremendous impact. Karkas (1999: 15)

One development worker explained that NGOs talk about how much land villagers need to leave fallow and to use again, how to enrich the land, and how to introduce sustainable agriculture systems. According to Karkas, despite policies to encourage other forms of cultivation, shifting cultivation continues to be practiced by 90 percent of the population, and will remain the most common agricultural production system in the foreseeable future.[12] On the other hand, seventy-seven percent of rice production in the Lao PDR is under lowland conditions, even though the majority of the population practices upland dry rice cultivation in the uplands (Karkas 1999: 13-14). If this is the case, and more and

more villages make the transition to lowland wet rice production, tremendous pressures will be put on land availability and productivity.

> For example, one NGO study found that a Hmong village resettled from Thailand was strongly advised by local authorities to move downslope to the roadside. Villagers stated that before moving, they understood they would be given lowland wet rice fields around the new village; to date, these have not been provided. They continue to cultivate upland rice in the hills around the new village, since all the paddy land nearby is already in use by lowland Lao from surrounding communities. There is now better access to the road going to the district capital, where there is access to basic health services and education, but people see that the trade-off was losing more fertile land. All of the groups we visited felt they lacked access to the services of the Lao state. Karkas (1999: 9)

Development workers identified another problem resulting from the resettlement of ethnic minority groups. Even when the strategy is to bring people from remote areas to roads and services, problems occur when the dominant ethnic group dominates minority groups. It was observed that Lao Teung and Lao Soung have gradually changed to Lao Loum culture and that this has a long term negative impact, as it was feared that groups may lose their identity. For instance, it was noted that as Hmong villagers have moved down to the lowland they no longer dress traditionally, and the concern was expressed regarding the uncertainty of how many more things will change to the lowland style. On the other hand, the Lao Government also tries to promote ethnic minority culture especially for tourism. Tourists are encouraged to go see the ethnic minorities and their traditional clothes, because they are told to see "old Asia" before it is gone. According to development workers the villagers, however, say that they do not want to wear traditional clothing, and that they want to wear jeans. Women (including ethnic Lao) are also expected to be the keepers of the culture, and so women are pressured to wear

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[12] The figure of 90 percent cited by Karkas is inconsistent with other sources, and it is assumed this represents a regional figure, since the author cites her source as Stephen Bass and Elaine Morrison,

traditional clothes and the traditional lowland Lao skirt, the *sinh*. It was suggested by one development worker that the promotion of ethnic minority culture may simply be a way for the Lao government to show that it is not clamping down on these groups.

The discussion of resettlement by development workers challenges the notion of resettlement as a solution to poverty, and illustrates how this policy is contributing to problems of poverty. Interviews with villagers in a district of Savanakhet Province, Southern Lao during a project assessment by another NGO, revealed that food security was the main concern of resettled villagers.

> Dependence on lowland rice cultivation (which in many parts of the districts has been affected by natural disasters for a number of years in a row) and the limitation on migration necessary to sustain the traditional swidden agriculture (resulting in decreasing yields from swidden fields) have placed many villagers in a vulnerable position with regard to their food security. Although not an immediate problem, there is a risk that food security will become more serious in the future with deforestation rapidly diminishing the available forest resources, which so far, through the possibility to collect of forest products, have provided villagers with a fall-back option in case of food shortage. CIDSE (1997: 5)

The issue of food security is changing in relationship not only to changes in agricultural practices, but is closely tied to the reliance of villagers on the forest. The global development discourse repeatedly cites "slash and burn" cultivation as the cause of deforestation and the justification for stopping swidden farming. The discourse does also acknowledge that illegal commercial logging contributes to deforestation, but remains silent in proposing solutions or an analysis of this issue. The burden of deforestation and its solution consistently remains focused on the need for highland peoples to take up sedentary lowland, and commercial agriculture to enable introduction to the market economy.

"Shifting Cultivation in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam: Regional Overview and Policy Recommendations."

6.1.2 Deforestation

> Deforestation has a negative impact on family nutrition as well as
> environmental impacts such as increased erosion and decreased bio-
> diversity. SCA (2000: 6)

International development discourse presents subsistence farming as limited, and overlooks the importance of the forest to the self-reliance of Lao villagers. This image is challenged by NGO reports, and development workers provide insights regarding industry's role in deforestation. Lao is one of the most forested countries in Asia and in terms of biodiversity it ranks as one of the biologically richest countries in the region. The Lao PDR has about 10 million hectares of natural forest or 12 percent of the country's land area,, of which about 3 million ha have been set aside as National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs). In Lao, the forests are surrounded by or inclusive of farmers who rely on the forest for their survival. Over 80 percent of the Lao population of five million people live in rural areas, and rely heavily on forest products for food and shelter. Fifty percent of all plants, and ninety percent of animal species, are being used by local people to satisfy their survival needs. Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) are also essential to the Lao people, both to local rural people for subsistence and to the national economy (IUCN 2002).

In addition to the GOL policy to stop shifting cultivation, nine State Forestry Enterprises were established to undertake responsibilities in logging and forest management. In 1989 the first national conference was convened, and made recommendations towards a shift from forest exploitation towards forest restoration, preservation and reforestation. In 1991 the government banned logging in all national forests. This was only partially effective. In 1997, a "2020 vision" was developed by the

Department of Forestry, with the aim of increasing forest cover from less than 47% currently, to 70% by 2020. This vision identified a number of priorities, including land allocated to rural families, developing alternatives to shifting cultivation, and it also incorporated the development of NBCAs. In 1994 the government issued a policy on land and forest allocation, which is the allocation of agricultural and housing land to individual title, and definition of forest zones under village title. The legal authority to implement forest and forest land to the village lies with the village administrative authority (Nurse and Soydara 2002).

Contrary to the image of a society that is isolated from the market economy, the harvesting of NTFPs indicates that participation in the market economy already exists. In Salavan Province (southern Lao PDR) an IUCN Project found that almost all food except rice is derived from the forest. About 40-60% of rural income also comes from NTFPs, and NTFPs are often the only source of income for poor families who have become indebted to buy rice. NTFPs such as *malva* nuts provide a massive income to tens of thousands of local people who collect these fruits in southern Lao, (the trees produce fruits only once every 3-4 years during a few weeks in April, and are only collected from wild stands). Harvesting of cardamom also provides significant economic benefit to villagers; it is the second biggest agricultural export and 70% comes from the wild. Local subsistence use of NTFPs may account for 20-30% of the Gross National Product. NTFPs also contribute significantly to national income. In 1996 they contributed 2.5% of the national export income (there is also a considerable black market cross border trade), at a value of US$4.3 million (after timber, textiles, hydropower, and coffee). The relative importance of NTFPs is growing as the value of timber exports is declining. The main

export destinations are China, Vietnam and Thailand (Clendon 2001: Nurse and Soydara 2002).

NTFPs are a risk insurance system in times of crisis and play a vital role in livelihood systems, defined as comprising the capabilities, assets (both material and social), and activities required for a means of living. There are however, significant threats to sustainability. Resources are in decline following an extended period of civil conflict and resettlement. This, when combined with increased local and international market values on forest products, has resulted in the breakdown of traditional village systems for resource sharing and regulated use (Nurse and Soydara 2002).

In *Ban Nouan* NBCA, seven main threats to biodiversity conservation were identified as: commercial logging; uncontrolled fires; hunting, free grazing; unsustainable harvesting of *malva* nut trees and fish poisoning (Nurse and Soydara 2002). The issue of commercial logging was cited as the most problematic in interviews with development workers. Large scale logging was attributed to both the military and to private companies. In the case of the former, one development worker queried that while people are being blamed for destroying the forest, how can an analysis be carried out to study farmer use and military logging? The military has their own budget which the public does not have access to, and documents indicating how much forest is used by logging and by farmers have not been forthcoming. The question was raised: who has the power to control the military from exploiting the forest?

Development workers also attributed the problem of logging to outside companies and their involvement with local communities. Development workers noted that many of the logging companies are Thai or from Taiwan, but they have joint ventures with Lao

individuals or organisations so that they appear to be under Lao ownership. One development report describes how logging companies arrive and make many different promises to the villagers such as building schools, or dams which appear to benefit the villagers, but that companies will then (hypothetically) claim ownership of the river for five years. Another development worker observed that anything that companies do for the farmers are only promised if there is the potential for the company to receive a profit. Logging companies will also cut all the logs in a district, which was perceived by farmers as not fair. The farmers in turn see that many trees are cut down and sold prompting them to feel that they themselves should not have to pay for logs and can cut down more. In rural areas logging companies also work through the Lao people. It was observed that people, even high government staff, prefer to work with the logging companies in preference to NGOs because they get benefits. One development worker stated that the logging companies have money but no ethics and so were hard to compete with. It was felt that awareness raising is very important among villagers on the part of NGOs.

In the central province of Bolikamxay the NGO, CIDSE, found that the district they were working in was still heavily forested, but the forests in the south of the district had become less dense compared to those in the north, and logging had changed the composition of the southern forest. The NGO found that intensive logging was also taking place along a new road in the northwestern part of the district. The NGO report acknowledges that deforestation is also caused by farmers clearing forest areas to make swidden as well as lowland rice fields, but this is relatively more intensive along the road which is under construction (CIDSE 1995). The report observed that many villagers were anxious about the disappearance of the forest and the destruction of watersheds.

The villagers, however, did not see what they could do to deal with these concerns. Villagers seemed trapped in the dilemma of having to cut forest areas in order to make rice fields and seeing forest resources disappearing, and did not feel able to protect forest resources since they were often forced to use these resources in order to survive. Villagers also felt in an unequal position to logging companies, which were allowed to collect trees, cut in the process of field preparation, and to sell the wood at high prices. Villagers on the other hand, were not allowed to sell wood, or only to sell it at a fraction of the price obtained by companies (CIDSE 1995).

According to IUCN, even in areas where conservation programs have been set up, the Lao state simply does not have the resources to effectively police NBCAs or village forest conservation areas, and to address key direct threats to biodiversity conservation from commercial and subsistence hunting, commercial logging and fire (Nurse and Soydara 2002). One NGO report on the Green Life Project openly discusses the problems of deforestation and conflict between villagers, NGOs, local government and the logging industry. The project is located on the Bolavens Plateau in Southern Lao, which the NGO describes as undoubtedly one of the most important watersheds in the lower Mekong River Basin, but is concerned by large scale deforestation that is occurring there. Logging, the use of chemical defoliants during the Vietnam war, huge agro-industrial concessions, and shifting cultivation have led to the disappearance of much of the original forest cover.

> Inhabitants of the plateau are mainly members of ethnic minority *Lao Theung* groups...raising cattle and practicing shifting (slash and burn) cultivation for cash crops such as cabbage, potatoes and ginger. Over the last few years, they have been increasingly converting forested areas into coffee plantations. The massive and often indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and highly toxic pesticides such as DDT and "Folidol"

> (Parathion, a compound already banned in most countries, including Thailand, but still produced by the German firm Bayer for sale in Lao PDR!) for cabbage in particular, represent a serious threat to the environment and to human health. CIDSE (2001: 196)

The Green Life Project undertook forest restoration activities which involved the planting of native tree species on degraded forest areas:

> Unfortunately, several villages failed to plant all the seedlings that were big enough to be used, as a direct consequence of the intense logging activities by outsiders in their Conservation and Protection Forests...The Village Forest Volunteers...reported large-scale logging in the Conservation Forest of [*Nongsoung* village]. (CIDSE 2001: 199)

Villagers from two other villages also complained about sustained logging in their respective protected areas. The report goes on to describe how not only was the local district government not enforcing restrictions on logging, but was actively preventing the NGO and villagers from reporting the problem.

> The loggers all had documents signed by the District authorities allowing them to cut a certain volume of wood to build a school, a pagoda and a primary health care centre in each village. But countless nightly convoys of 18-wheelers took away most of the wood, leaving the villagers with an unfinished school, not to mention the new pagoda and health centre that still have to materialize. The Project's Liaison Officer at the District level, the Head of DAFOs (Department of Agriculture and Forestry Office) Forestry section...repeatedly censured our quarterly reports that mentioned the logging activities in the Project area. CIDSE (2001: 198)

The lack of political will to enforce the destructive logging practices by companies further compounds the problem, as villagers realize that they cannot compete or that their interests are not defended. As choices become more limited and villagers are faced with increased pressures on land and forest some shift from cultivation to labour.

> The large-scale illegal logging by outsiders in their Village Conservation and Protection Forests...dealt an annihilating blow to the villagers' willingness to participate in conservation and restoration efforts. Some of them even let themselves be hired by the loggers. Village Headmen refused to sign the reports of the Village Forest Volunteers. Any level of

authority solved none of the grave problems encountered. Papers have in some cases been gathering dust for years, as if the Land and Forest Allocation (LFA) exercise, complete in Paksong District as early as 1997, had never taken place. CIDSE (2001: 200)

The concessions for logging are made at both central levels of government, and by the local authorities (village, district, province) which receive a small percentage from the company. The incentives for cash strapped districts are that they can ask the logging companies to contribute funds for infrastructure projects such as building accommodations, offices, or roads. The Green Life Project reported that in 2000 there were around 5000 m^3 of logging approved in the whole district, and that since then logging has continued further in the whole District area. "In a day there are nearly 100 logging trucks going from Saybouathong to Khammouan province. This has made travelling very difficult and quite dangerous due to dust" (CIDSE 2001: 42). The following excerpt illustrates how another incentive for permitting the continued activities of logging companies is that as they build roads, modernisation is introduced.

After people got electricity and good roads many things have changed such as: in the dry season we [NGO] spent 3 or 4 hours travelling from [the provincial capital to the district] but now it only takes 2 hours (14 hours in the rainy season but now only 6 hours). People have bought televisions, video CDs, refrigerators, cookers and fans. Last year Saybouathong had only one restaurant but now they have three restaurants and there are more trucks coming for logging. CIDSE (2001: 42)

Looming Desertification has become another concern according to the NGO. Increasing population pressure coupled with the leasing out of large tracts of traditional village-grazing lands to private sector agricultural companies (softwood, coffee plantations, and cattle farms) represent major threats to the natural resources of the Bolovens Plateau. Shortened fallow periods, the repeated burning off of the vegetative cover, as well as the free ranging cattle are seriously stunting natural forest regeneration

and exacerbating soil erosion and loss of biodiversity. Hunting pressure remains high, and the near extirpation of the seed-dispersing wildlife such as birds and bats is particularly tragic, as it hampers natural forest regeneration by reducing the number of naturally sown seeds. Large areas are threatened by desertification where the remaining forests can no longer satisfy the needs of the population for timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in a sustainable manner. As mainly only weak stands of low genetic value escape the ax, many important timber species are increasingly threatened by "negative selection" (CIDSE 2001: 198).

Forest operations, forest management and commercial businesses associated with commercial logging are under central government control. The Lao government now want to develop the NTFP sub-sector. In contrast to most other countries, most of the elements for an enabling policy environment are in place (Nurse and Soydara 2002). The Forest Law (GOL 1996) provides a legal framework, and recognises and authorises "customary use" of forest and forest land: "which has been practiced for a very long time… involving the collection of non prohibited wood for making fence, firewood, gathering of non timber forest products, hunting of non-prohibited wild and aquatic animals for household use and other customary use" [GOL 1996:8]. According to IUCN there is ambiguity in this statement. The intention of the law is interpreted by Lao development practitioners for rural families to be able to satisfy their "family economic necessity, " including the collection of NTFPs for sale. All applications follow this principle although the law is being applied in a number of ways in Lao rural villages. IUCN argues that NTFPs gathered by villagers in project villages for household use and sale are indeed critical for survival. IUCN recognizes the importance of indigenous

management systems which integrate belief systems with resource use. Rural people have had a high dependency on forest products for survival, but according to IUCN Lao cultural norms related to avoiding conflict, combined with a high rate of forest cover and (until recently) low population pressure, encouraged the maintenance of open access systems for most common pool resources. Some indigenous management systems also developed related to concepts of holy forests, or funeral and spirit forests protected to honour the dead or as a refuge for spirits; family ownership of valuable trees in the common pool resource such as yang oil and cardamom; hunting taboos for certain species regarded as spirits; and resource sharing with neighbouring villages that included the use of streams and forests.

> The combination of open access, spiritual taboos and sharing of valued forest resources are systems that worked well in the past when resources were more plentiful and people few. Over the last 10 years, in IUCN project pilot villages, there appears to be a strong trend of a decline in resource availability and consequent increase in effort required to gather reducing harvests. Villagers say that increasingly people are being selfish and either ignoring traditional norms or collecting wild products before maturity. There is now abuse of fishing for traditionally shared water holes, unauthorised removal of yang oil, wholesale harvesting of bamboo and blatant cutting down of trees within village territory. Fortunately villagers recognise these trends and are willing to invest time in developing and maintaining improved management systems that may provide long term secure use rights for their most valuable resources. Nurse and Soydara (2002: 13)

IUCN concludes that recent disturbing trends point to the breakdown of indigenous systems. Key factors identified with this breakdown are cited as: rapid population growth and population movements during and after the war of 1964-1975, leading to the disruption of traditional social structures; increased market pressures; a growing insecurity of land tenure and access rights; rapid conversion of forest to agricultural land; increased timber production; and low prices for both timber and non-

timber forest products. The discourse of development workers and NGOs highlight the omissions of the mainstream discourse's analysis which does not address the threat of deforestation by commercial logging, or that this also poses a serious threat to the survival of rural populations. Why then does the mainstream discourse choose to focus so much of the blame on shifting cultivators? This feature of the discourse is not unique to the Lao context, as indicated by an earlier 1989 CIDSE study in other countries of the region (Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines).

> In many of the Asian countries, an atmosphere of rationalization prevails, whereas tribal communities that have lived for centuries in a close relationship with their environment are now labelled as destroyers of forests and of the environment. In the name of nation-building, the tribal minorities'cultures, identity and contribution are made subservient to the interests of the state and the dominant power groups. To be loyal, modern and civilized, they would need to be integrated into the main stream of society is the conventional wisdom prevailing today. CIDSE (1989: 9)

It would seem that fourteen years later this passage is still relevant, and that although the international discourse may have become more subtle and sophisticated in disguising this sentiment, the trope continues to promote the image of "ethnic slash and burn" cultivators as the destroyers of the forest while the role of multinational companies remains invisible. The CIDSE report explains why the discourse is so misleading: "Some of these actors feel justified in relegating tribal communities to the twilight zones of hunger and migration, using the doctrine of national interest and the doctrine of resource exploitation for the world market" (CIDSE 1989: 9). The role of these economic forces about which mainstream discourse remains silent are made visible in the next section, and the political forces will be examined in Chapter 8.

6.2 Market Forces

Conspicuously absent from mainstream discourse is any reference to the role of foreign-owned or transnational companies. NGO reports, on the other hand, demonstrate the presence and competitive operation of these companies. The concerns of development workers, expressed in interviews regarding the role of the private sector in the case of logging and deforestation, also extended to the impact of corporations with regard to the introduction of commercial agriculture. As already demonstrated, foreign logging companies are contributing to deforestation and loss of land. NGO reports demonstrate the active presence of foreign and privately-owned companies that are introducing plantations in Lao. For example, a Quaker report explains that the Lao government has stated that it will cease all exports of unprocessed timber, and will now only export processed wood. The report argues that tree plantations, promoted in part by the ADB Plantation Project, can lead to the destruction of *dipterocarp* forests and deprive villagers of forest resources. Another concern is that forests previously managed as commons by communities will be replaced with privately-owned industrial tree farms. BGA Lao Plantations, a New Zealand Company, has been granted concessions to develop eucalyptus plantations on 50,000 ha (Quaker 2002). Japanese investors have expressed interest in the Savannakhet-Xeno Special Economic Zone for possible investment in a sugar mill, or even electronic goods or car assembly plants. Japan will also develop parts of the Boloven Plateau for plantations of organic crops and fruits (CIDSE 2001).

Development workers expressed the concern that these companies were having a significant impact on the life of Lao villagers. One development worker illustrated how foreign companies are appropriating land. The example was cited of a company that approached Bolikamxay province to plant oranges on upland slopes. This development

worker explained that orange tree planting is not allowed on flatlands because of the unsuitability and damage it can cause to the rain-fed wetlands. The company agreed to pay land rental for forty years and this was approved by the province, which saw the company contract as an investment in agriculture. Another development worker discussed how Vietnamese companies had approached villagers to grow eucalyptus trees, agreeing to pay farmers if they had land. Companies would take land if people offered it or rent government land. It also appeared that there was a need to clarify when land belonged to villagers or to the local government. The absence of defined rights of access and use of forest resources was identified by IUCN as a key obstacle to villagers for the development of collaborative management systems. The process of land allocation in Lao is complicated, for example, in that several villages may be legitimately (according to locally recognised use rights) using the forest at the same time (Nurse and Soydara 2002).

In addition to the threat to self-reliance posed to villagers through the encroachment on land by corporations, commercial agriculture poses a serious threat to the fertility and future productivity of the land. If fruit tree plantations on upland slopes are crowding out shifting cultivators, who are forced to switch to lowland farming, this will increase the pressure on limited arable lowlands (Goudineau 1997). On the other hand, the introduction of species such as eucalyptus is inappropriate on relatively fertile soils, since the trees leach the soils and have a negative long term impact because the reduced fertility prevents future cultivation of other crops. This problem was encountered by one NGO in Bolikamxay province, which attempted to raise awareness by taking local officials on a study tour to Thailand, where this problem has already had a devastating impact for local communities. Another development worker, referring to a

different province and a different agency, explained how the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (at both provincial and central levels) promotes the use of chemical fertilizers which they get free from Japan and Germany. In the first year the chemicals were given without charge, and farmers did not know what the impact would be. Chemical pesticides were also used to kill insects but the fish died instead depriving local people of one of their primary food sources. Chemicals were also used for pest management and were given to kill rats and mice. The impact was that the rats did not die but increased very quickly, because the pesticide was killing the cats and dogs instead. According to this development worker government policy is opposed to that of the NGO, which attempts to promote traditional health care and inform villagers who have a right to know of the positive and negative consequences of the use of chemicals. The government did not welcome the NGO's attempts to raise awareness regarding the negative impact of the use of chemicals.

Another critical issue raised, highlights the problem for villagers who shift to commercial agriculture and become more integrated into the global market economy. The NGO, CIDSE, questions the viability of commercialised agriculture and further integration into the market economy.

> The district officials' working approach is different from CIDSE because they are more focussed on commercial production, especially coffee, while the Project is encouraging the villagers to diversify their production, in order to enable them to better adapt to the market situation. World-wide over-production of coffee – especially of the new "Catimor" hybrid variety – has led to a complete collapse of the price paid to the producers, causing them great hardship. Indebtedness is on the rise and some planters have started selling parcels of land in order to survive.
> CIDSE (2001: 201)

This passage highlights how integration into the global economy leaves Lao farmers

vulnerable to the vagaries of market prices, a problem that is overlooked by mainstream discourse.

In addition to economic losses and the threat to land ownership, another problem raised by one development worker in an interview, demonstrates how relationships at the local level between development actors are also disrupted. One NGO project and local district counterparts collaborated with a company to promote cultivation of *Mak doei*, a cash crop by villagers. The company promised that they would buy at a specified price, but when the world market changed they refused to sell at the original price agreed upon, or to sell the product at all, resulting in poverty for the villagers. This kind of situation was seen as creating conflict between the villagers, the NGO and the government. When villagers expectations to get what was promised, were not met, they were disappointed, lost trust, and blamed development.

The lack of markets and access to markets is a cause of poverty that is consistently presented in the discourse. A study commissioned by the NGO, Concern Worldwide, on the operation of microfinance programmes implemented by four NGOs, in four different northern Lao provinces, conducted PRA in eight ethnic minority villages. The study sheds some light on the introduction of credit schemes which facilitate entry or enhance involvement in the market economy. The study concluded that "microfinance is not always an appropriate intervention, and that it is not an essential component of every integrated rural development project; in fact it should not be a component if the context is unfavourable," and that "Co-optation occurred where "women's activities" (by tradition) were taken over by men, once they became more important and/or lucrative due to NGO involvement" (Karkas 1999:iii).

The macroenvironment in the Lao PDR makes it difficult to attain monetary objectives, and yet there is a continuing commitment to credit programming, for several reasons: the social organisation created as a result of the program is seen as a desirable side effect; it can be a means to involve women in an official sphere; and NGOs may be required to continue certain programs in order to fulfill contracts with donors, as well as meet their own social objectives (Karkas 1999). Contrary to the discourse

> It is important to acknowledge that the potential of credit lies within its ability to mitigate the effects of poverty; it does not address the roots. In current development theory, it is believed that the roots of inequity between national (and increasingly international) economies is based on power structures brought to the fore during the period of colonisation, and perpetuation of these dynamics – known as neo-colonialism. Karkas (1999: 7)

6.2.1 Regional Integration

Global development discourse represents isolation and remoteness as features that, through lack of opportunities and access to markets, cause poverty. The proposed solution is integration into the market and global economy. Given Lao's position on the GMS, membership in ASEAN, and the prominent role of ADB, development workers identified regional integration as a cause for concern, as opposed to the mainstream discourse's optimistic predictions of the economic growth it would bring. One development worker suggested that the approach of multilateral agencies was only to look at how Lao fits into economic development of Southeast Asia as a region and look at what Lao can contribute to the region. The development worker perceived the idea of the multilateral agencies is that Lao will be taken along as the region develops. Generally multilateral agencies primarily follow an economic development model that was used in other parts of Asia, in order to build up an environment attractive to foreign investment

with local industrial development to export. Many infrastructure projects are introduced to make the country conducive to investment. There are major flaws in this approach, according to the development worker. It was suggested, however, that investment is not happening, and will not happen. Several reasons were given by this development worker as to why there is no attraction for investment: the population is not large, therefore there are no markets, the pool of labour is small, poorly trained, and does not have a good reputation for working hard, there is no seaport, and costs have to be added on for transportation.

The geographic position of Lao and the Mekong River flowing through the length of it, puts it in danger of becoming a riverine superhighway for China. An NGO report also supports these concerns, elaborating on the expected negative impacts which are never discussed in mainstream discourse.

> Regional debates continue over developmental activities that impact the Mekong River. A plan by China to destroy reefs that impede commercial navigation is very controversial, and has now been put on hold for a review. Also controversial are Chinese plans for additional hydropower dams. Other negative impacts include runoff from chemical fertilizers and pesticides; waste discharge from urban areas; widespread logging; the use of explosives and other non-traditional fishing methods; and increasing population pressure. Opponents say that there is increasing damage to the rich biodiversity of the Mekong, second in the world to only the Amazon, and to local livelihoods. Chinese dams may have worsened the severe flooding this year, by releasing water from rain-swollen reservoirs. Quakers (2002: 6)

The second concern raised by the same development worker was Lao's central, "land-linked" position and the danger that Lao would simply become a "gas station" in the region, getting further into debt as it borrows money to build roads, which would lead to imposing tolls. One example given involved a recent road project, which stipulated that the construction had to be carried out by a Thai contractor. Lao was also not allowed to

choose where to build the road, rather the governments of China and Thailand made these decisions. This highlights the relatively weak position that Lao is in, particularly since Thailand continues to be Laos' biggest foreign investor ($9.16m in 2001), followed by China ($5.36m). Relations remain very strong with Vietnam although co-operation tends to be more political and social than economic with official trade figures between the two countries remaining surprisingly low. On the other hand, unofficial trade (such as timber and wild animals) between the two countries appears to be thriving (Concern 2002).

An Oxfam Australia report gives an indication of how villages do not necessarily benefit from infrastructure projects and the shift to the market economy. For example, in Vientiane province, the NGO works with villages that "have not benefited from the development which has come to districts along Highway 13…Government efforts have focussed on reduction of shifting cultivation." In Sekong province they work in an area inhabited by mostly Lao Theung minorities, who have experienced "sudden changes effected by large-scale infrastructure development and commercial logging have left these communities with drastic erosion of their staple food and other resource base" (OCAA 2001: 2).

In relation to regional integration one of the most contested issues has been regarding hydropower projects. Hydroelectric production once seen as the future saviour of Lao is still beset by problems resulting from significantly decreased demand since the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand in particular. In May 2001, a MOU was finally signed with Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) settling the price of future electricity supplies over 25 years from 2006. This has renewed momentum behind the large and controversial World Bank backed Nam Theun 2 dam which has yet to be

constructed (Concern 2001). Written one year later a Quaker (2002) report confirms that a Nam Theun 2 Power Company contract has been signed, after more than 20 years of research and negotiation. A major problem remains in that Thailand has not agreed to buy the electricity. Construction costs are estimated at US$ 1.1 billion. The dam is expected to produce 995 Mw of electricity for sale to Thailand, and 75 Mw for domestic users, generating about US$ 235 million in gross revenue annually. The dam will flood 450 sq. km. or about 40% of the Nakai Plateau in Khammuan province. The government acknowledges that construction of large hydropower projects can have significant negative environmental impacts. Most of the development workers interviewed were very critical of large scale infrastructure projects funded by IFIs. In the case of the Nam Theun 2 dam the critiques were specifically aimed at the issues of resettlement and environmental impact, by the time of the interviews the World Bank consultation process had already taken place. NGO workers expressed disappointment with the lack of sincere consultation, and with the clamping down by the government at any attempts of activism on the issue.

6.3   Debt and Donors

A Quaker report states that Overseas Development Assistance for the FY 2001 totaled US$ 378 million (of which grant aid was 63%). The report notes that this aid is not well managed and refers to a speech made in Champasak province, by the President of Lao, who emphasized that better management of foreign aid was necessary. The report also quotes Hans Luther, who writes that "there is a high risk that aid programs under the banner of poverty will create new 'cargo cults' (aid dependent economies) in the 49 LDCs if they continue to carry out their 'business as usual' and do not put strong

emphasis on the rule of law and civil rights" (Hans Luther quoted in Quakers 2002). A major concern expressed by many of the development workers was the rising national debt that was being accumulated, the impact that this would have in the future on the Lao economy, and the increased level of dependency. One development worker saw debt as the major issue for the future of Lao, and could not see how Lao will survive the repayment of the loans it was receiving now. The views of development workers were supported by NGO reports. A Quaker report claims that for the FY 01-02, there was a deficit of about $140 million, almost all of it was covered by grant aid and loan projects. The total external debt accounts for a very high 69% of the GDP. Another NGO report also points out that:

> Debt remains very high in Laos and is growing steadily: total debt now stands at $2.4 billion or nearly $500 for each Lao man, woman and child. The debt/GNP ration is twice that of Vietnam, two and a half times that of Cambodia. During 2000 Laos entered negotiations (suspended in 1996) with IMF with regards to securing a debt relief facility during 2001. As part of this process Lao PDR embarked on a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper process. Concern (2001b: 4)

Development workers also discussed the consequences of this debt, that they saw taking place now, and how it constrained the government in two primary ways: formulating policy, and limited budgets. For example it was pointed out that sometimes the government, and particular ministries, have no choice, they know that some policies or initiatives such as downsizing or centralizing certain services are a mistake but very large loans come with these policies. It was acknowledged that if the government wants the next tranche from the IMF, then they are forced to implement policies such as downsizing, and reducing the number of people employed by the government. The economic rationale driving these policies is that it is less expensive if services are

centralised and are a big objective of multilateral agencies.

> One potential difficulty in recovering budget income is attributed to a recent policy of decentralisation (from VT) which the IMF representative also stated may have come too quickly, without adequate fiscal preparation. Development policies are shifted to local governments, since implementation of good public sector management at the national level has proven to be very difficult. However, local governments often do not have capable, well trained officials, and may not be prepared for monitoring and auditing budgets or for collecting local taxes; the potential for local corruption by politicians and vested business interests has also been raised. Quakers (2002: 4)

Other development workers sighted the policies of bilateral donors, in particular Japan, as problematic and closely linked to the private sector. Japan, individually and through its ADB membership, has economic interests in Lao. One development worker noted that the Japanese government has given $US 100,000 million in aid to Lao, and many Japanese organisations fund Lao, but with the aim to promote their own technical sector. Another development worker observed that many complaints have been directed at Japan, because although they provide equipment in reality they want to sell their own exports. It was also suggested that the Japanese government had made a deal to avoid being accused of war crimes during war, but in fact was attempting to exert its economic influence in Lao for the purpose of investment, and to exploit the raw materials and natural resources that it needed.

The effects of debt and donor control were seen as constraining the government's ability to provide services and seriously preventing it in providing salaries. Some non-Lao development workers feared that this will have serious repercussions in the future that could lead to violent protest. One NGO report observed:

> The economic crisis…had a considerable negative impact on the Lao economy, though many would argue that it served to exacerbate underlying structural problems, rather that being a main cause. A very

high rate of inflation (126% in 1998) has contributed to a high increase in the cost of living and a decline in value of salaries, particularly for Government staff. (Average salaries have declined in value from around US$40 per month in early 1997 to about US$12 by mid 2000). SCA (2000: 5)

NGO's also see the impact on the ground. The report goes on to say that as government budgets are extremely limited, this has impacted negatively on services, particularly for children, in education and health care. Ethnic minority groups living in more remote areas are particularly affected by lack of services (SCA 2000). Another NGO reports that government salaries will continue to be quite inadequate, and demands on capable staff's time will be multiple (OCAA 2001).

One development worker explained that local levels of government do not understand that development projects involve loans that must be repaid. Local government project partners, therefore, don't take projects very seriously. This development worker felt that the situation would be different if local governments realized the loans have to be paid back, and they would be more inclined to participate in decision-making.

Another development worker explained that for remote villages, if a lot of loans and grants are provided, this also creates problems for farmers by creating dependency, because the loans eventually get forgiven when they cannot be repaid. The problem of dependency was cited by all the development workers interviewed. For NGO workers the problem of dependency interferes with the ability to carry out a "participatory" development approach. Dependency was not seen as something new that has only been introduced with current development. Some individuals felt that it could be traced back to the French colonial period, but the more common view is that it became a serious

problem during the American war and during the post war reconstruction period when villagers developed the expectation to receive assistance.

6.4 Conclusion

Whereas the mainstream global development discourse promotes the solution of development to solve the problems of Lao, particularly the problem of poverty, development workers were critical of development in Lao. In particular, the voices of development workers are critical of multilateral organisations, donors and the government. One development worker suggested that if an analysis of development projects were conducted, 80-90% of the projects would be deemed failures, and that most aid money was wasted. The voices of development workers demonstrate how the mainstream depoliticises, and sanitizes development, by remaining silent about the economic forces that threaten to ultimately undermine the Lao farmers ability to be self-reliant as their land is lost to commercial agriculture and plantation farming. In contrast to the trope of Lao as isolated, rural, poor and ethnic a different picture of Lao development emerges when the interrelationship between market forces, aid agencies, and the Lao government are examined. In the next chapter this relationship is examined in the context of political forces and the discourse of governance.

CHAPTER 7 – STRATEGIES OF POWER

7.1 Introduction

> The process of hegemonic construction and maintenance is by no means easy. It displays many fluctuations as the material base of the economy changes, and as social and political struggles among classes, nations, genders and ethnic groups – as well as among and within the ruling classes – ebb and flow. It takes on many guises as the multitudinous manifestations of capitalism can support; as many strands of oppositional discourse as it can co-opt. Moore (1995: 1)

An examination of the trope produced by the capitalist development discourse of Lao indicates that the trope itself has evolved over time. The earliest feature of the trope highlighted the physical limitations and naturalness of the Lao context, then incorporated measurements of poverty and the indicators of human development. The changing trope appears to reflect the changing rhetoric of development discourse, incorporating the concepts of sustainable development, and development with a human face, while beneath the surface the principles of the economic growth model have never been abandoned or challenged. The most recent addition to the trope, that of ethnicity, may be rooted in the image of the poor, backward, traditional farmer who needs to be modernized, but in the contemporary context of the permutations of development discourse it also holds the potential to challenge or be co-opted by the mainstream discourse.

Following Foucault's notion of strategies of power, the improvisations of the language of development discourse may be understood as developing in response to changing circumstances and include strategies of domination or resistance. In the case of international development discourse these strategies of power are expressed through an international set of rules, and circumscribed within a language used by international organisations: "in sharing North American concepts of efficiency and equity and in particular the language used by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, we

are helping the decision-makers of these countries [in the South] to negotiate better, to keep their autonomy and their right to their own decisions" (CIDA co-director cited in Schmitz 1995:58). This "autonomy" however is "circumscribed within a language which is not their own and within an international set of rules over which they have little or no say." The Northern experts themselves are trapped within the "comforting conceits and fertile mystifications of the hegemonic paradigm – which remains, cosmetics aside, profoundly undemocratic...mostly in its capacity to reproduce structural relations of unequal power within societies and between North and South" (Schmitz 1995: 58).

Responding to changing circumstances two main phases of development discourse emerged in the post-war era, coinciding with the major eras in the global political economy (Moore 1995). The first period was that of international Keynesianism and state-mediated capitalism based on "Fordist" production, American international dominance, and the decolonization and emergence of the third world. The second and current phase emerged during the 1970s and is the world of neo-liberal, de-regulated capitalism of flexible production and footloose capital in which the market reigns supreme. The possible challenges of state socialism, and an ideologically uncertain third world have disappeared in the more recent years of this phase. "Whatever socialist and national capitalist pretensions that the latter had have been drummed out of it, while its split into "Newly Industrialized Countries" and fourth worlds widens." (Moore 1995:2) Within this context of change, the buzzwords within development discourse have formed a core triad of ideological concepts: equity, democracy and sustainability. Equity, addressed issues of economic growth and distribution, democracy addressed the debates around political participation, order and governance, and sustainability answered the

concerns about the viability of the societies and environments upon which the developmental project is imposed. While development discourse came to encompasses environmental, democratic, and distributional concerns, the attention to 'growth' was still paramount. According to Moore the seeming consensus on 'sustainability, participation, and equity' is fragile and, serves to mask the fundamental contradictions with the dominant perception of 'growth' and the interests this ideology serves. The organizers of capitalist hegemony have attempted to lift the language of 'development's challengers into the dominant global discourse but have not altered their basic practice, or, more importantly, the dynamics of the global economy. Moore suggests that "participation" is the most tension-laden of all the notions because if full and substantively democratic participation is allowed to flourish in the "third world" then technocratic and elitist solutions to the problems of 'sustainability and equity' will be denied. "Democracy then is the 'nub' of the new discourse. This probably accounts for the current flurry of activity on 'governance' emanating from the agencies and their intellectuals, and for the importance of their demystification" (Moore 1995: 4).

Schmitz (1995) argues that the fashionable discourses on "participatory development" evade the actual relations of power which keep people poor and dis-empowered. One is unlikely to find much in the way of historical-political explanation in the official literature. While the UNDP at least calls for "radical reforms" to these pervasive market structures to benefit poor countries and people, the ideological premise persists that competitive capitalist development is inherently empowering.

The triad of "equity, participation, and sustainability" are loose enough to hold varying, even opposing interpretations. As contested concepts they are the arenas for

ideological battles. The concepts hold the possibility of preserving what we know of development, or have the potential of reforming, transforming, even transcending the current system of orthodoxy and for this reason deserve unravelling (Moore 1995). This chapter will examine two possible arenas of contestation which revolve around the concept of participation, and the interpretations of governance and partnership which are deployed by mainstream development discourse. The first case involves an examination of the dynamics between the Lao government and the international community, which is negotiated around the language of the discourse. The second case involves the discourse itself and how, building on the trope's construction of ethnicity and poverty, a new focus on culture is emerging which appears to challenge the mainstream discourse but carries the potential to be manipulated to serve the interests of both sides of the democracy divide.

7.2 Governance

> As donors we should sensitize the Government on the enormous potential the private sector has for the development of the country. The Government should abandon the attitude of 'control'. There is a role for the WB, IMF and UNDP to pursue these issues with the Government. UNDP (2000: 10)

Moore claims that the discourse around democracy can be traced back to broken hopes that liberal democracy would ride on the back of exponential growth, until it was discovered that such circumstances could not guarantee "order," and that participation of the untutored masses was unpalatable, even in the West. The brief break of the sixties promised a democratic flowering into "participation" that did not lead to genuine reform.

> Today, the proponents of 'order' have taken the word 'democracy' back on board with their new terminology of 'good governance,' hoping that a resurrection of the formal aspects of liberal democracy can alleviate the strains of newly unleashed market freedoms through a combination of

good management principles and enough space for public elite competition – and that such pyrotecnics will hide the fact that political freedom is restricted to those who play to the rules established by the international financial institutions (Moore 1995:4).

According to Schmitz (1995: 57) the word "empowerment" has been virtually co-opted to ideologically link popular participation to economic liberalization. It is acceptable to plan development projects to appear participatory as long as this occurs within the parameters of the "structural adjustment of politics." This requires a "limited state which dutifully pursues 'responsible' policies ('market-friendly' and meeting the approval of Northern powers) and accordingly is relatively insulated from 'rent-seeking demands from the body politic" (Schmitz 1995: 56).

The problem of the GOL as a "limited state" was illustrated in Chapter Six by development workers who recognized that there are outside "pressures" on the government. Local levels of government also realize that policies such as moving shifting cultivators down to the lowlands were not the right approach, and that the government was not ready to implement this approach. Development workers also connected the situation of debt and donor interests to the formulation of policy. It was noted that this situation also had an impact on the relationship between NGOs and the government. In the past, prior to 1989/90 the Soviet government subsidized the Lao government budget. Then bilateral Soviet aid was directed at the central level of Lao government, and money was given government to government. At that time, NGOs had a lot of influence, but when the Soviet Bloc collapsed and multilateral agencies came in to Lao the focus changed eclipsing the efforts of NGOs.

The attempts of donors and international development organisations to "enforce" the role of Lao as a dutiful state is evident in the development discourse produced within

the process referred to as the "Round Table Mechanism" organised by the UNDP to facilitate aid coordination and promote "dialogue" between the partners in development, the donors and the Government of Lao (GOL 2000b). Participants of the RTM consist of representatives of the GOL, IFIs, multilateral organisations, and ostensibly in the spirit of consultation, NGOs. Records of the RTM process in Lao demonstrate the incorporation of Moore's proposed triad, and the sharing of the imported international language of development. An opening speech by the Deputy Prime Minister at the launch of the RTM claims

> Moreover, the Lao PDR's fundamental conviction to sustained growth with equity as the most important precondition for poverty elimination has further been vindicated by our efforts aiming at the improved well-being of the Lao muti-ethnic people…And above all, with respect to people-centred development – our so often stated objective – we have made considerable progress in decentralisation and rural development based on a participatory approach. GOL (2000b: 15)

Further examination of RTM records reveal that this common sharing of development language superficially masks underlying tensions in the "dialogue" between development "partners."

The introduction of the Round Table Mechanism coincided with a shift that has occurred over the past decade involving a focus on "partnership." This new portrayal of the relationship between rich and poor countries as a partnership stresses global interdependency and mutual obligations, and it appears to move away from the discourse of hierarchical First World-Third World relationships. Examining this shift within the context of development in Vietnam Schech and McNally observe that:

> The discourse of global partnership is heralded as a radical departure from earlier notions of development as a civilizing mission or benevolent assistance … and offers promises for a more equal relationship between the West and Vietnam. While on the surface both sides share the

developmentalist goals and express them in the same international development language, below the surface misunderstandings, cultural and ideological differences, and omissions exist which result in a gap between policy and implementation. Schech and McNally (2001: 656).

Schech and McNally argue that this shift gives the impression of equality and shared visions between international development organizations and the state, in ways that might understate the extent to which these visions are, in fact, quite different. In the Lao context an examination of RTM reports suggests that "partnership" masks a process of negotiation for power and resources. Tensions revolved around differing aims and attempts by the international community to impose control, and tactics by the GOL not to be controlled. Such negotiation revolves around several issues. The donors and international financial institutions see the RTM as a forum to impose policy and surveillance. A donor survey for example revealed that donors expressed a "clash of expectations" at the RT meeting.

> It is felt that the Government's main interest for the RT meeting is new pledges. On the other hand, donors want a **forum for policy dialogue and an assessement** of aid performance. Donors felt RT meeting lacked on several critical requirements: no review of former development objectives, effectiveness of ODA that was disbursed and spent was not measured, and **development policy announced by the Government was not discussed.** None of the donors indicated that they had any active involvement in RT meeting preparations, whether document development, **policy consultation or input,** or RT meeting follow-up. Thus from the donors' perspective the RT meeting is an isolated process that is not part of an on-going RTM cycle. In practice, this has meant that **neither** the RTM nor the RT meeting, **have any direct influence** on bilateral, UN or IFI pledging. UNDP (2000:7)[13]

Donor dissatisfaction with the lack of dialogue around policy, and the possibility of the GOL developing policy autonomously, runs the risk of avoiding the dutiful pursuit of "responsible" policies ('market-friendly' and meeting the approval of Northern powers)

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[13] This report involved a survey of donor views, representing 23 bilateral donors and 11 multilateral

as Schmitz phrases it. In the records of one RTM the US Embassy representative stressed

that aid resources are limited, and that the Lao Government:

> **must provide a policy environment conducive to effective aid implementation.** It was emphasized that the fundamental issues of **good governance, transparency, information sharing** and transparent implementation mechanisms have to be taken into account and dealt with by the GOL. The GOL has the responsibility to foster the **right environment for effective aid implementation.** GOL (2000b: 8)[14]

The World Bank representative at the same meeting stressed that dialogue and

partnership should take place based on mutual understanding and on information sharing,

notably concerning the state budget, economic data and general information on Lao

PDR's development. The need for strong policies both at national and sectoral levels was

emphasized. The World Bank representative stated that policies need to be understood in

the same way by Government and donors (GOL 2000b: 8). The implication is that the

sharing of information is a one way process, where it is the government who gives

information to the donor community, and the mutual understanding of policy involves the

government understanding the requirements for a creating the correct policy

environment. The IMF representative expresses this sentiment under the guise of

partnership: "True partnership involves real sharing of information. The government

should be more open in information sharing especially concerning the state budget and

economic data. Donors need to know where the resources are going as part of a greater

level of partnership" (GOL 2000b: 6). It is the donors that acquire information, at no time

is there a suggestion that this partnership involves the donor sharing information with the

GOL. The façade of "partnership" breaks down under the examination of a report that

reveals the donor perspective on the RTM process which reveals that donors see this as a

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agencies, no NGOs were included. Emphasis mine.

means to impose their own agendas:

> ...the most crucial corrective measure is to transform the RTM into a continuous process integrally linked to the development cycle **and agenda of the donor community**. According to donors', the RTM should be a continuum where development policies and priorities are assessed, past performance reviewed and new strategies to development discussed, implemented and monitored. UNDP (1999: 16)

The heavy handedness of the donor community is revealed in the following excerpt which illustrates how "dialogue" takes on the form of surveillance and that unless Lao complies as the "dutiful state" it is threatened by the withdrawal of aid.

> Donor-Government consultation beyond the formalistic level was acknowledged to be sporadic and insufficiently substantial. Donors felt that UNDP and the leading IFIs had the **leverage**, access and capacity to sustain a policy dialogue and monitor the Government's **compliance**. It was widely recognized by donors that UNDP had the natural leading role in strengthening donor-Government dialogue, and in monitoring development policy implementation. Specifically donors requested UNDP to focus more intensively on leading a **dialogue responsive to development concerns as voiced by the donor community**. This dialogue must include aid monitoring mechanisms and performance benchmarks...Without such an initiative, it was widely held that the relative financial success in terms of **pledges** of the Sixth RT **meeting would not be duplicated** in the Seventh RT meeing. Donors want confirmation that their money and their cooperation with the Government is taken seriously. UNDP (1999: 15)

It also becomes obvious that the role of the RTM goes beyond that of "dialogue" and that the RTM will serve to not only influence policy, but to draw donor input into the Lao system of government on a much more integrated level. The following excerpt, however, indicates that the Lao Government has not been as compliant a partner as desired.

> Many donors felt that the Government currently does not have the human capacity, the management system in place, nor the resources to effectively integrate the RTM process into national administration. In order to achieve a full transition into national management, donors **warned** that this would necessitate significant amounts of consistent and continuous efforts on the Government's part. UNDP (1999: 15)

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[14] Emphasis mine.

The Lao Government response reveals that it recognizes donor attempts to regulate policy formulation and information sharing.

> The GOL noted the role of the RTM in "shaping" development objectives and its contribution to the overall policy debate...The sixth RT meeting, for example, had resulted in the announcement of the overarching GOL target to eliminate mass poverty and depart the ranks of the Least Developed Countries by the year 2020. UNDP (1999: 5)

In turn the GOL states its position opposing the "dialogue" on policy, and stated that despite acknowledging the considerable improvements in the articulation of policies, the GOL considered that the follow-up meetings on Human Resource Development and Rural Development were still too theoretical, and that more emphasis is required on developing practical tools for development (UNDP 1999: 8).

The GOL makes a claim for developing its own policies and noted that if development assistance is to be effectively employed, programmes should be "home grown" and nationally owned. While donors maintain the façade of dialogue and partnership, the GOL perceives the RTM in terms of confrontation by the donors.

> The GOL appreciated the unprecedented level of frankness, openness of the debate and far ranging discussions that had taken place in conjunction with the sixth RTM cycle, but noted that the need to ensure that discussions remained constructive and did not become confrontational, [and that] the RTM should build on partnerships and strengthen understanding between GOL and the donor community rather than highlight differences and negative aspects concerning the pace or direction of development (GOL 2000b: 6).

Justification for this perception is demonstrated by the remarks of donors. The Australian Ambassador, for example, states that the work environment in the Lao PDR is becoming more difficult, especially due to the length of project approval and to the fact that counterpart funding is not forthcoming. On one occasion funds meant for Lao PDR were directed to another country because of the length of project approval. This view

was supported by the US and European Community representatives, and the UNDP. The ADB resident advisor stressed that the ADB expects two improvements, timely implementation of the development assistance programs, the quality and sustainability of the development assistance being raised so that the reaping of the rewards of what has been collectively been delivered can be seen.

In particular, donors stress that the GOL's implementation of ODA funding has been satisfactory but "satisfactory is no longer good enough," (GOL 2000b: 9) and that "the work environment in Lao PDR is becoming more difficult, especially due to the length of project approval and to the fact that counterpart funding is not forthcoming" (GOL 2000:5). It appears that after more than a decade of development, the GOL's earlier status of "star pupil" is beginning to fade. Although the donors veil their dissatisfaction with calls for the Lao government to increase its capacity to manage aid effectively, however, there are indications that point to GOL attempts to resist donor control.

> All donors interviewed perceived the "developmental" working environment in Lao PDR as difficult: the decision-making process is lengthy, the degree of uncertainty is high and every subject matter has become sensitive. Donors have also reported that it has become more difficult to discern whether impasses are due to administrative and institutional weaknesses or to a lack of political will. This overall atmosphere of uncertainty is considered non-conducive to constructive and "result-oriented" dialogue. UNDP (2000b: 6)

Donor frustrations are expressed by the inability of "dialogue" to totally succeed as a tool of surveillance and enforcement, as they recognise the GOL's response.

> The fact that a clear-cut framework of operation does not exist and everything is kept vague aggravates the situation. This attitude from the Government side could be explained as poor understanding of issues at stake, as secrecy and partly done on purpose, as a strategy. Unfortunately,

however, given this prevailing atmosphere it is difficult to establish mutual trust and dialogue. UNDP (2000b: 6)

Donors also stated that "It is difficult to know whom to dialogue with in order to have meaningful feedback. We are aware of the fact that communication works through patronage and Party lines. Informal meetings are not always that useful and formal meetings do not allow for frank discussions" UNDP (2000b: 6)

> On the Government side dialogue is possible, officers are easily approachable and available and we can have "wonderful meetings". The Government counterparts assigned to the task of discussing with the donors are well trained to say what the donor community would like to hear from them, they know exactly how to talk to us and to please us. By experience we know however that this type of dialogue is not effective since it is not followed by any appropriate measure, or decision. It remains at the level of lip service. If one tries over and over to have meaningful conversations leading to constructive agreements, he or she is obviously frustrated when the pattern adopted by the Lao counterparts, as mentioned above, reproduces itself at every occasion. At time we believe there is even too much dialogue, but its impact is nil. UNDP (2000b: 7)

The response by donors to this "prevailing atmosphere" and the limited impact of dialogue is to abandon the euphemism of dialogue: "It would be interesting to have all the issues addressed; however we should not be dreaming about results. The key word in the present context is conditionality. Donors should take a different attitude than just dialogue" (UNDP 2000b: 10). Finally the following admission reveals that perhaps one of the major roles for the RTM to strengthen enforcement of the "dutiful state," is to provide a mechanism that ensures strength in numbers: "The majority of donors believe that there is merit in treating strategic, governance and operational issues as a group since positions reflecting a single donor voice can more quickly lead to issue resolution" (UNDP 2000b: 9).

7.3 *The Culture and Poverty Discourse*

As I have demonstrated in Chapter five, Western development discourse has constructed a trope that pictures the poverty of Lao people associated with ethnicity and "archaic" techniques of agriculture. Earlier government documents did not even relate poverty to the Lao situation. As previously mentioned, for example, the Lao Government report prepared for presentation to the United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in 1990 does not once use the terms 'poor' or 'poverty' to describe the Lao PDR (GOL 1990). This is in sharp contrast to an analysis of current reports written both by development organisations and the Lao Government, which predominantly describe the Lao PDR as poor, and state that poverty eradication is the primary objective of the government's development programme.

There appears to be an emerging focus on culture in the development discourse in the Lao PDR that responds to the association of poverty with the highland groups that practice swidden cultivation. Recent reports by major development agencies illustrate how culture is being used to construct a development discourses that departs from the mainstream global discourse in the Lao PDR. The emergence of this new "culture and poverty" discourse can be trace back to an ADB/GOL commissioned Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) Report. Since the publication of this report this new element of the discourse is proliferating quickly and is cited in the recent UNDP Human Development Report, UNDP project proposals, the World Bank anti-poverty reduction strategy, and in NGO reports. My attention was drawn to the "PPA" by non-Lao development workers who made repeated positive reference to it. The PPA report states that "the relationship of culture and poverty is the most important aspect of poverty in the

Lao PDR, because it underlies all aspects, both physical and spiritual, of livelihood...These in turn relate directly to other aspects of development, such as health, education and gender" (ADB 2001: xiv). Some informants claimed that this latest association of culture with poverty is a new and radical discourse that is critical of development, because it moves away from measuring poverty quantitatively, and argues for understanding poverty from the cultural perspective of ethnic groups. "Ethnic minority villagers continually face the problem of misunderstood ritual technology or their holistic worldview. They find their traditional practices labeled as "backward" and "primitive" by Provincial and District officials, as well as by decision-makers..." (UNDP 2001:60). The discourse correlates the incidence of poverty to the highland ethnic minorities who practice swidden or shifting cultivation, but unlike the dominant discourse poverty is not seen as endemic, it is described as "new," not indigenous, and is said to be caused by disruptions to the livelihood systems of people. This new poverty is attributed to environmental changes that are caused by the poor implementation of development projects (not the policies), that are due to the government's dominant Lowland Lao worldview because of which they do not understand the cultures of other peoples in the Lao PDR (ADB 2001 and UNDP 2001).

This discourse appears to deconstruct the misleading image of the trope that problematizes shifting cultivation. Perhaps more significantly the culture and poverty discourse does attempt to challenge the role of the state in producing and maintaining inequalities, an issue that the western development discourse depoliticizes. It does not, however, critique the policies of resettlement, the intention to stop swidden cultivation, or the shift from a subsistence economy to a market economy. The discourse appears to

argue that these changes can be carried out if the cultures and worldviews of ethnic groups are understood and taken into consideration in project implementation. Most telling are the solutions of poverty that are cited in the report, which claim to be based on the local understandings of poverty by Lao villagers. The main solutions to poverty that were cited mostly seem to be related to closer integration with the market economy: increase the amount of production land (in relation to rice-cultivation); increase livestock holdings; solve livestock disease problems; microfinance in general and provide funding mechanisms for increasing livestock holdings; more reliable cash cropping; extension services including roads, access to markets, better schools, improved health, clean water supply, electricity. Specific solutions related to women were given as skills development for income generating activities and marketing of products, family planning, birth spacing, and rice mills to reduce women's labour (ADB 2001).

7.3.1 *Impact of the Culture and Poverty Discourse in the Lao PDR*

I propose that while the construction of a discourse of culture and poverty in the Lao PDR may be drawing attention to the real needs of ethnic minority groups, there are other, less evident effects resulting from the production of this discourse. In particular, the culture and poverty discourse appears to: obscure the global context of development; depoliticize poverty; and defines "Development" solely as an activity of the Lao Government thereby obscuring the role of donors and development agencies in the development process. As Mitchell (1991) observes, international development has a special need to overlook its internal involvement in the places and problems it analyzes, and to present itself as an external intelligence that stands outside the objects it describes. Questions of power and inequality are not discussed. Although the culture and poverty

discourse has the potential to challenge the inequalities rooted in Lao society and reflected in government implementation it continues to stand outside the object of the state, and ignores the complicit relationship between the state and development organisations in the formation of development policies.

Focusing on the critique of project implementation allows the culture and poverty discourse to ignore the external forces of the global economy, and the corresponding demands by donors and Structural Adjustment Programmes on the production of policies and approaches to development in this emerging discourse. The rising popularity of the culture and poverty discourse, particularly among International NGOs, may be understood by the identification with civil society and human rights interests that many of these organisations have but cannot openly advocate for in the Lao political context. The culture and poverty discourse may offer a forum to indirectly raise these issues, but by focusing attention on the implementation of development and avoiding an analysis of policy formulation, this discourse appears to have more potential to be incorporated into the agendas of "good governance".

7.4 GOL Discourse

> It will be useful to have documents without propoganda and ideological stand...As donors we should insist on 'good governance' and human rights principles. It will be good to keep on reminding the Government that these principles belong to our framework of work. UNDP (2000b: 13)

Moore points out that making ideological attacks on states are easy, but that reforming them to better match the will of capital is a harder task and requires much more delicacy. "Ammunition for targeting the state can be easily drawn from the arsenals of neo-classical economics and anarcho-populist ideologies"(Moore 1995:18). An examination of the RTM's utilisation of development discourse demonstrates that resistance to

attempts to reform the state do exist by the Lao government. Another source of resistance that needs to be examined is within the discourse that the GOL produces, that does not conform to the mainstream global discourse.

> Since the days of the Royal Lao Government 'ethnicity' has become a much more potent idea throughout the world, and is a guiding idea in the policies of aid agencies. LPDR rhetoric is in line with this 'politics of ethnicity', but reality is another thing. Evans (2002:212)

Hidden beneath the prominence of the international development discourse in English language government documents, a closer look reveals another discourse which draws upon a nationalist agenda. This discourse is used to develop the Lao Government's concept of "Human Resource Development" and is part of its development programme to eradicate poverty (GOL 1995).

Whereas mainstream development discourse interprets human resource development in terms of building capacity, the Lao Government alongside its commitment to education, offers a different focus. The overall objectives of human resource development in the Lao PDR are defined in the following manner:

> To develop people as good citizens who love the country, love the new regime, have good discipline and abide by the law, know how to accept and harmoniously combine the three interests, i.e. personal interest, collective interest and national interest, as well as know how to implement the obligations, having the accountability for the duties; to develop people to be knowledgeable, professional, skillful, laborious, innovative and to know how to live economically having good health and civilized spirit, i.e. having humanity, justice, generosity and correct preferences and taste.[15]

Human resource development must also be carried out to ensure peace, and the sustainability of the Lao PDR. The most important objectives of personnel development activities are to:

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[15] Resolution of the Party Congress, 1991; Resolution of the National Conference on Public Service, 1995 quoted in GOL. 1995. *A Document of Human Resources Development in Lao PDR.*

...become personnel who are faithful to the Party and people, being honest to the common interest of the Nation and the revolution, having firm political attitude and class stand, conscious of having independence, self-determination, self-reliance in creating richness and strength, friendship; unity, determination in the implementation of the all round reform program of the Party and possessing international solidarity.[16]

Reference to the Party, the revolution, and the new regime reflect the tone of the political discourse used by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to maintain solidarity and discipline within its ranks and among the population in general (Anonymous 1999). That such a discourse exists is not surprising, what is not obvious is why this discourse appears in Government documents intentionally produced for an audience of Western donors. Further examination reveals two related themes that run throughout this discourse and persistently raise the issue of culture. The first theme speaks to the issue of national unity and calls for "understanding and knowing the values of the culture in order to preserve and expand the good culture of the country and that of the ethnic groups" (GOL 1995: 3). The discourse calls for

> ... the preservation and development of the common traditions of the national culture, promotion and support must also be given to different ethnic minorities in the transfer and inheritance of varieties of traditions and cultures which are of numerous colours and forms so they can constitute the overall culture of the national community, combining with the acceptance of the best things from the world culture. GOL (1995: 8)

Academics agree that the survival of the LPRP depended on their ability to incorporate and gain the support of the various ethnic groups in order, to first of all defeat the Royal Lao Government, and then to maintain unity once the Lao PDR was established. There is disagreement, however, as to the sincerity and success of these efforts. Stuart-Fox (1997) argues that the LPRP does represent the ethnic make-up of the country through the

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[16] Resolution of the Party Congress, 1991; Resolution of the National Conference on Public Service, 1995 quoted in GOL. 1995. *A Document of Human Resources Development in Lao PDR* .

membership of the National Assembly. Evans (2002) claims that the top leadership remains lowland Lao dominated, and that the regime has become less dependent on minority support and minority demands.

> The LPDR's pervasive propaganda claims to represent Lao minorities has ironically produced its own problems, because it has made the minorities more aware of their ethnic differences while simultaneously raising their expectations about social advancement. Under the RLG the various ritual forms centred on royalty partially accommodated ethnic differences as hierarchical ones, thereby muting potential conflict, whereas the modern secular state simply trumpets ethnic equality – but it is clear to everyone, especially to the minorities themselves, that they are not equal citizens. Evans (2002:212)

The consistent references that Lao Government documents make to the development of ethnic minorities and women, conforms to the mainstream discourse which may simply be a matter of propaganda. A closer look at the state's discourse, on the other hand, reveals a second theme that incorporates Buddhist values and speaks directly to the perceived threats of modernization, and outside influences. "The good and beautiful culture and traditions of our county is being affected by the bad effects of the external culture" (GOL 1995: 14). The organisations of the Lao PDR are called upon to "play an increasing role in educating people so that they could understand principles of good Buddha teaching, particularly about the civilization of the mind, generosity, know the good, beautiful culture and traditional custom of the country" and elders are asked to "address the deteriorating and regressive phenomenon among young people, particularly youth living in urban towns" and all citizens have the obligation to "prevent all phenomena of filthy, spoiled and obscene culture" (GOL 1995: 9).

This theme seems to be significant in two ways. First, the government discourse echoes the fears expressed by some development workers regarding the negative impact

of modernization and development, the lack of morality, and the problems of drug addiction and prostitution. Second, in contrast to the dominant discourse which portrays "tradition" as "backward" and the cause of poverty, the government discourse emphasizes the beauty and goodness of the traditional culture and calls upon it as the solution to countering the downside of development and in particular, urbanization. Although this discourse does not reject the philosophy of Western development, it may be better understood as opposing the "cold, technocratic, economistic reasoning" that reflects the style of legitimation of IFI structural adjustment (Ferguson 1995: 131). Economic policies of scientific capitalism continue for example to be understood by Africans in moral terms, and have sometimes been received and resisted accordingly. It has for instance been argued that this style of legitimation has met with an insistent moralizing that is very much a part of discourses on the economy across areas of Africa.

> ...the production of wealth...is understood to be inseparable from the production of social relations. Production of wealth can be understood as prosocial, morally valuable 'work,' producing oneself by producing people, relations, and things; or alternatively, as an anti-social, morally illegitimate appropriation, exploitative and destructive of community (Ferguson 1995: 131).

Local moral discourses may offer fundamental questions that "the reformers and ideologists of 'governance' have so conspicuously not addressed, and perhaps cannot address" (Ferguson 1995: 143). The question in the Lao context is whether or not drawing upon the morality of a Buddhist discourse offers the possibility to "moralize" international development discourse.

Although the propaganda and ideology of the Lao government and the ruling LRPR are associated with Leninist-Marxism and "communism" which one would expect to reject ideologies of religion, recent history reveals that in Lao there has been a

manipulation of discourses. The French colonial period brought with it a separation of the *sangha* and the state, thereby eliminating the political influence of Buddhism. The post colonial period saw a resurgence of the *sangha* which then became drawn into the civil and Indochina wars between 1946 and 1975. Both the rightist and leftist sides of the conflict attempted to make political use of Buddhism to support their positions. The communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party deliberately drew a parallel between Buddhist asceticism and selfless dedication to the revolution. American intervention involved injecting large amounts of "aid" in an attempt to create a corrupt puppet regime. The *sangha* became increasingly critical of this Americanisation on Lao culture and morality. Conspicuous consumption, adoption of Western lifestyle, prostitution, and drug addiction were all strongly in opposition with Buddhhist principles of morality. Once in power the ruling LPRP reduced the *sangha* to an instrument of its political will. Lao politicians no longer looked to the *sangha* for political legitimation, but to the constitution and the electorate. In the popular mind however the high social status of elected officials was still underwritten by a Buddhist worldview. It was the belief in *kamma* that enabled such men to claim political office. Positions of wealth and social prestige were implicitly accepted by right of accumulated merit. In this way Buddhist conceptions continued to influence Lao politics by reinforcing the claims to wield political power by a conservative social elite.

Lao PRP strategy was to argue that Buddhism and socialism were compatible beliefs. Monks were told that Buddhism and socialism both taught the essential equality of all people, and the promotion of happiness through elimination of suffering. The Buddha was considered to be socially progressive because he had rejected the class into

which he had been born out of compassion for the common people and so he was a great man. Through a process of adaptation to new social and political circumstances it was said that the timeless core of Buddhism had survived through the ages. Capitalism however had corrupted Buddhism and used it in support of an unjust and exploitative social order. Socialism would purify Buddhism of all superstition and unnecessary dogma to become a vehicle for moral and social progress. Among these superstitions was the belief that *kamma* depended on accumulation of merit, and the popular belief in the animist worship of innumerable spirits *(phi)*. The attempt to forbid such worship by the Marxist regime had little effect, and today the Party no longer even tries. Members of all levels of the Politburo may now be seen attending and participating

Buddhism and Marxism, however, sought very different goals. Buddhism offered the hope of individual salvation through eventual escape from the cycle of rebirth. Lao Marxism offered the transformation of society through the 'three revolutions' of production, technology and consciousness. "The 'new' socialist person' who would lead the struggle to build socialism in Laos was a world apart form the traditional Lao peasant resigned to acceptance of things as they are in the hope of a 'better' rebirth" (Stuart-Fox 2001: 162).

During the harsh years of 1976 and 1977 the economy collapsed, drought ravaged the rice crop, regime struggled to enforce its power. At first the Party tried to limit celebrations of Buddhist festivals on grounds that they were a waste of scarce resources, but as resentment mounted the policy reversed. Prohibition of fertility celebrations were blamed on the drought and other restrictions led to some potentially damaging confrontations. Women in particular stubbornly continued to give food to monks and

117

attend their local temples. Buddhist conceptions of *kamma* and merit still shaped the view of the world for the vast majority of the Lao people. The conditions to return to Buddhist observances were present when the Party was forced to relax its hardline policies in the face of the failure of agricultural co-operativization. Buddhism continues to be practiced in Laos and as the Director of the Department of Religious Affairs has implied it would be unthinkable that Laos should ever cease to be Buddhist, "to be Lao was to be Buddhist" irrespective of the regime in power (Stuart-Fox 2001:166).

There may be indications that Buddhism at a grass-roots level is manifesting itself as a form of resistance and the revival of ritual merit accumulation. Cohen (2000) examines the emergence of charismatic Buddhist saints who he claims have thousands of followers, including ethnic minority groups, in northern Lao and Thailand. In terms of the GOL recourse to Buddhist morality and discourse (which is associated with ethnic Lao and not other groups) this may serve the purpose of imposing a national identity and unification of all ethnic groups. Another unifying aspect that is ignored by academic and development writers, however, are the roots of animist beliefs which continue to persist among all ethnic groups in Lao. The early syncretisation of animism and Buddhism resulted in a social formation where religion, economics, and power were closely interrelated (O'Connor 1989). The economy was embedded and not separated into an autonomous domain. The combined rituals and Buddhist commodification of merit served as important sources of redistribution of wealth which have not yet disappeared. One question that needs to be pursued is how do the essential elements of an animist morality persist and continue to inform the way development is understood locally.

Lao development workers when asked about government discourse such as *chin tanakhan mai* ("new way of thinking") which was introduced with NEM and informs the government's human resource development strategy (GOL 2001) could not say what this meant and stated that the effectiveness of the spreading of such ideas was limited in Lao. On the other hand, most Lao development workers interviewed discussed their observations of the impact of modernisation in terms of morality much like that expressed in the state discourse.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

> Visitors to Laos are usually charmed by the people's grace and good humour, and are consequently prone to romanticise the country. Lao also traffic in romantic images of themselves, but the idea of an 'untouched' Southeast Asian idyll has its flipside: Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world...the 'untouchedness' so beloved by tourists is often a consequence of failed development plans and enforced communist isolation for almost two decades. Young Lao today are impatient for real change. Evans (2002:ix)

The reference by Evans, to failed development plans and enforced communist isolation, expresses the sentiment of a liberal democratic critique that links democracy with capitalism. These assumptions underlie how development discourse now encompasses environmental, democratic, and distributional concerns while still maintaining primacy to "growth." In other words, "the organizers of capitalist hegemony have attempted to lift the language of "development's" challengers into the dominant discourse, but have not altered their basic practice" (Moore and Schmitz 1995:xxii). The discourse of class has been transformed by de-politicizing notions of partnership into "stakeholder," conflict into "participation," and "partnership" and "struggle" into "dialogue," while downplaying any existing power relations (Laungaramsri 2002). Bond (1995) argues that concepts of sustainability, equity, and participation are merely a distraction in terms of the success of establishment development agencies such as the World Bank, US AID, various UN bodies, international foundations and the like, in co-opting progressive discourse, while applying ineffectual policies inspired by neoliberal economic theory.

While the global development discourse directs attention to "governance" and the hegemony of the state, the voices that contest this discourse point to how IMF- sponsored policies have provoked legitimation crises for the states which have to confront the consequences of their actions, in ways that the World Bank and IMF do not.

"Technocratic reason may be good enough to sell World Bank/IMF dogma in the international arena. But someone, somewhere down the line, has to implement these policies, at which point questions of legitimacy and popular reception must be addressed" (Ferguson 1995:139).

> Development discourse will be conceived as an integral part of capitalism's organizers' ongoing attempts to gain and maintain hegemony – to make capitalism seem the natural order of things – all over the world.
> Moore (1995: 7)

Moore maintains that this process of hegemony is inherently contradictory. One source of contradiction is that the people who work at its organization do not represent a homogenous or coherent group. "Development workers, administrators and teachers are indeed Gramsci's intellectuals, but they are not necessarily of one class. Nor do they come from one place" Moore (1995:8). The employees of the development industry may be viewed as a mediating social group "occupying an uncomfortable position between capital and labour, core and periphery, powerful and marginalized" (Moore 1995:8). Although members of this group serve as the "supervisors" of the projects that maintain the legitimacy and encroachment of development agencies, their allegiance is not guaranteed, as their physical proximity to the people whose lives development attempts to transform, may lead them to take various positions and varying positionality (Moore 1995).

Understanding sources of opposition to the development discourse of global capitalism involves an examination of the dynamics between the agencies of development, Lao development workers, the Lao government and Lao people. As I have demonstrated, the voices of development workers contest the mainstream discourse by repoliticising the discourse, while the Lao government attempts to resist the role of a

compliant and "dutiful" state. Analysis of the relationship between these two groups of local actors to the global development discourse needs to take into account the heterogeneity of both groups. The Lao Government's response to development discourse reflects various positions and interests of different actors including the LPRP "old liners," the up and coming "technocrats," and the military. In general, it is understood that the founding members of the LPRP hold the more cautious view, and advocate for a slower pace of transition and integration into the market economy. The military and the "technocrats" on the other hand, appear to be more open to change. The military, in particular, may have vested interests in promoting transition into the market economy since they are heavily involved in the logging industry and road building projects (Anonymous 1999). Further investigation is needed to reveal if these various positions contribute to the production of a moralizing discourse by the "old liners", or the manipulation of the mainstream discourse to suit the purposes of the military, who compete with shifting cultivators for forestry resources. Another position that needs to be examined is the Lao government's concern with national stability and security. Although the country has been relatively secure since 1975, low level insurgency attacks continue to this day, and are often associated with the highland Hmong, and perceived as supported by outside interests from the United States and Thailand. Does the mainstream discourse offer a convenient guise for the Lao government to move shifting cultivators to focal sites, or lowlands, for purposes of surveillance?

Non-Lao development workers and NGO reports tend to take the position that "civil society is non-existent in Lao." Lao development workers on the other hand, echoed the sentiments of the GOL's moralizing discourse as they expressed concerns that

modernization and the introduction of a consumer culture were leading to a "moral decay" in Lao society and the breakdown of community structures. While this study has been limited to an initial attempt in identifying and suggesting that this common critique exists, I would propose that further investigation of this moralizing discourse may hold the potential of developing a framework of analysis that steps outside the boundaries of an anti-state Western civil society model that not only obscures larger global forces, but simplifies the relationships between development actors within Lao society.

Laungaramsri (2001) provides some insights that may be taken as a starting point for analysis by recognizing that in the West, civil society is closely related to the notion of the public sphere, the intermediary of individual and state, but that in Thailand the late twentieth century's state-promoted discourse of civil society stresses state-civic partnership to foster developmentalism based on mutual cooperation. Laungaramsri claims that in the countries of the Mekong Region, a tension and negotiation has emerged within divergent discourses of civil society between the center and periphery that have constantly redefined each other's position. Such negotiation has emerged particularly at the grassroots level where the state-imposed, donor-driven idea of civil society is being questioned. At the national level, the conventional discourse of civil society is perceived to be a crucial mechanism for an opening-up of a "closed" society in order to gear towards a "new regionalism." In this sense, the conflation of civil society with market, NGO, and private sector, is predominant while participation has come to mean "supporting the Government's goals of poverty reduction, decentralization and improved governance" (Vietnam 2010:2). Luangaramsri proposes that unlike the international agency's view, what is occuring with the people in this region is not "an emergence of

civil society," but emergence of the dialogue about distinctive views about civil society and their roles in redefining the state-society relationship. It is this arena or dialogue which will be significant for the river basin management in the Mekong region according Laungaramsri. Laungaramsri's analysis suggests a need to question the assumptions made by NGOs and non-Lao development workers who advocate for the introduction of a western, liberal, democratic model of civil society in Lao. Interviews with Lao development workers, revealed a noticeable lack of reference to "civil society." Lao development workers pointed out that changes were occurring in Lao and that there was more "openness" to speaking out and expressing criticism, particularly in the media. Although Lao development workers have been "trained" by development agencies and are conversant in the mainstream "development speak" there is a need to investigation how they mediate and possibly transform the language of development at the local level. For example, one view expressed in an interview with a Lao development worker was that Lao people want to be economically well off, but they do not want to be "capitalists" in the sense that outsiders understand capitalism. Laungaramsri's framework for a "state-civic partnership" based on mutual cooperation, could point to alternative directions for analysis that examine the relationship between Lao government and Lao development actors, which explore the expression of a common Lao moralizing discourse and the ideas that inform it.

Ferguson argues that scientific capitalism seeks to present itself as a non-moral order, in which neutral, technical principles of efficiency and pragmatism give "correct" answers to questions of public policy. Yet a whole set of moral premises are implicit in these technicizing arguments. Notions of the inviolate rights of individuals, the sanctity

of private property, the nobility of capitalist accumulation and the intrinsic value of "freedom" (understood as the freedom to engage in economic transactions) lie just below the surface of much of the discourse of scientific capitalism.

> Often, too, there seems to be a puritan undertone of austerity as punishment for past irresponsibility...But the larger point is that these moral premises on which the technicizing justification of structural adjustment depend almost always remain implicit. The moral and cosmological assumptions on which ideological justifications of structural adjustment often rest are unacknowledged and even actively denied by those who hold them (Ferguson 1995:138).

Capitalism, it is suggested, will have to learn to drop its "scientific" pretensions and speak a local language of moral legitimation. Ferguson proposes, that in Africa, wealth has long been understood as first of all, a question of relations among people and that this is a politically and theoretically rich understanding, vastly more so than the IMF/World Bank's impoverished conception of the economy as an amoral, technical system.

> Against the truly fetishized view that would see "the market" as a natural force to which human life simply must submit, the African insight that markets, prices, and wages are always human products is a powerful one. African traditions of moral discourse on questions of economic process may thus be understood not as backward relics to be overcome, but as intellectual and political resources for the future. Seeds sown for a different kind of economic reform, another "structural adjustment" one that would unabashedly speak a moral language. Ferguson (1995:139)

The case of the African moral discourse cannot be superimposed onto Lao, and if a moral discourse does exist in the Lao PDR it may hold a completely different critique, yet it does warrant pursuing. Does the persistence of such a discourse suggest that there are local discourses produced at a grassroots level that are mediated by the voices of development workers? Is there a discourse that the Lao government taps into to gain legitimacy with the Lao people, and at the same time hold off the repercussions of IFI

imposed policies?

A critical analysis of discourses of development in the Lao PDR supports the findings of Ferguson (1990: 256), that an international development discourse exists which serves to depoliticise "everything it touches," but also that this is a very political and ideological process. Although the apparatuses of development will continue to proliferate along with the expanding capitalism of which they are an integral part, just as capitalism is rife with struggles, is formed out of struggles, so is "development" (Moore 1995). To understand these struggles it is necessary to heed local Lao voices speak what development discourse would make us forget, to naming capitalism as the principal force behind development. Or as one Lao development worker explained: capitalism is blamed for the disunity of community and family; for a phenomenon of moral decay because of consumerism; and for the loss of self-sufficiency as our people follow capitalism and become slaves to money.

APPENDIX A

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