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# **“Humanitarian transition” in Laos: a cartography of the actors, dynamics, and modes of governance**

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## Résumé

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Cette recherche interroge le sens et la portée de la « transition humanitaire » au Laos, un pays qui n'est pas considéré comme prioritaire car il ne subit pas de catastrophes naturelles de grande ampleur ou de conflits armés. Pourtant, les besoins humanitaires existent : le Laos reste un des pays les plus pauvres du monde. En couplant une démarche de socio-anthropologie du développement avec une analyse spatiale à travers l'utilisation des SIG (systèmes d'information géographique), ce projet de recherche avait pour objectif de faire un état des lieux de l'action humanitaire au Laos et de décrire les transformations de son champ d'intervention en nous intéressant notamment au renouvellement des pratiques, au positionnement éthique, et à la définition d'une stratégie au sein d'un environnement politique et économique complexe. À partir d'enquêtes réalisées au Laos entre juillet 2014 et août 2015, cet article propose une cartographie du paysage humanitaire et une analyse à la fois qualitative, quantitative et spatiale de ses acteurs, des activités, des dynamiques et des modes de gouvernance. Nous avons questionné la place du dispositif humanitaire dans un contexte où la priorité est donnée au développement. Le cas du Laos est riche d'enseignements car il fait clairement apparaître la grande porosité des frontières entre humanitaire et développement, à la fois pour les populations concernées, les acteurs de terrain, les bailleurs de fonds, et les gouvernants. Nous avons tenté de décrire les difficultés et les dilemmes rencontrés par les acteurs. Comment travailler dans un contexte autoritaire ? Comment se positionner ? Les acteurs humanitaires doivent-ils se retirer pour laisser la place aux acteurs du développement ou doivent-ils évoluer et adapter leurs interventions au regard du contexte politique, de l'évolution des besoins et des modes de financements ? Enfin, la dichotomie classique humanitaire/développement est-elle pertinente au Laos ?

**Mots-clés :** Laos, cartographie, transition humanitaire, développement, transformations, régime autoritaire

## Summary

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This research examines the meaning and scope of "humanitarian transition" in Laos, which is not considered to be a priority country since it is not subjected to large-scale natural disasters or armed conflicts. However, humanitarian needs do exist: Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world. By associating an anthropology of development approach with spatial analysis through the use of GIS (Geographic information systems), this research project aims to compile an inventory of humanitarian action in Laos and to describe the transformations of the field of intervention, focusing particularly on the renewal of practices, ethical positioning, and the definition of strategies in a complex political and economic environment. Based on investigations conducted in Laos (five months of fieldwork between July 2014 and August 2015), this paper offers a cartography of the humanitarian landscape and an analysis of its actors, dynamics, and modes of governance which is at once qualitative, quantitative and spatial. We questioned the place of the humanitarian aid system in a context where priority is given to development. The case of Laos is highly instructive, since it clearly shows the porosity of the boundaries between humanitarian aid and development, in the case of the populations concerned, the actors in the field, the sponsors and the governors alike. We have attempted to describe the difficulties and dilemmas encountered by the actors. How to work in an authoritarian context? How to position oneself? Should humanitarian actors make way for development actors or should they evolve and adapt their interventions in light of the political context, the evolution of needs and modes of financing? Finally, is the classic dichotomy of humanitarianism/development relevant in Laos?

**Keywords:** Laos, cartography, humanitarian transition, development, transformations, authoritarian regime

## **“Humanitarian transition” in Laos: a cartography of the actors, dynamics and modes of governance**

This research examines the meaning and scope of “humanitarian transition” in Laos, a country which is not considered to be a priority since it is not subjected to large-scale natural disasters or armed conflicts, and because priority is clearly given to the development process. However, humanitarian needs do exist: Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the UNDP's Index of Human Development, Laos is ranked in 133rd position out of 179. But in order to escape the group of “least advanced countries” before 2020, the communist government has decided to promote foreign direct investments (FDI) centred on the exploitation of natural resources. Since the launch of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986, the country has been emerging from a long period of isolation, evolving very quickly from a subsistence economy to a market economy based on exports, in the context of a dynamic regional ensemble stimulated by strong Chinese development (Tan 2011, 2012, 2014 ; Pholsena 2011). Laos is exploiting to excess its only comparative advantage, which is the abundance of its land, forest and mining reserves, to supply its neighbours with raw materials. It also has the greatest hydro-electric potential which could make of it “South East Asia's battery”<sup>1</sup>.

The effects generated by these mega-projects are particularly devastating for the overwhelmingly rural population, composed of numerous ethnic minorities who are the main victims of the monopolisation of the land and resettlement programmes led by the Lao State in the name of development. Despite the warnings issued by international NGOs, the government has no intention of changing its strategy of “Turning land into capital” (Dwyer, 2007) since it allows the country to maintain high growth rates—on average 8% per year in the last few years—and to reap considerable revenue for the State.

Though Laos remains highly dependent on international aid, its actors find themselves in competition with each other, and in a difficult position with regards to foreign investors' interests. Whilst in 2002 the Official Development Assistance (ODA) represented 23.4% of the GDP, it had drastically fallen to 4.4% of the GDP by 2011 (that is to say 363.1 million dollars). During the same period, according to the World Bank, net FDI represented 0.3% of the GDP in 2002, compared to 3.6% in 2011, representing the equivalent of 300.7 million dollars (Mana Southichack 2013). International NGOs find themselves used to alleviate the negative effects of these projects which lead to forced displacement of populations, increased migration, human trafficking and prostitution. The usual problems linked to the coordination of aid and its actors observed in developing countries can also be found in Laos. However, these difficulties have intensified due to the authoritarian context within which international NGOs have little room to manoeuvre. By associating an anthropology of development approach (Olivier de Sardan, 1995) with spatial analysis through the use of GIS (Geographic information systems), this research project aimed to compile an inventory of humanitarian action in Laos and to describe the transformations of the field of intervention, focusing particularly on the renewal of practices, ethical positioning, and the definition of strategies in the

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<sup>1</sup> In February 2014, 17 dams were operational and 17 others were under construction; 23 further dams have been planned, 3 of which will be on the main stretch of the Mekong, and 58 projects are under consideration (Tan 2014).

context of a complex political and economic environment. This project aims to contribute to the debate on aid efficiency through the production of new practical tools. We believe that improving aid efficiency depends on relevant geographic and thematic targeting, and a better understanding of the context in which it is put in place.

Based on investigations carried out in Laos (five months of fieldwork between July 2014 and August 2015), this article offers a cartography of the humanitarian landscape and an analysis of its actors, dynamics, and modes of governance which is at once qualitative, quantitative and spatial.<sup>2</sup> We questioned the place of the humanitarian aid system in a context where priority is given to development. The case of Laos is highly instructive, since it clearly shows the porosity of the boundaries between humanitarian aid and development, in the case of the populations concerned, the actors in the field, the sponsors and the governors alike. We have attempted to describe the difficulties and dilemmas encountered by the actors. How to work in an authoritarian context? How to position oneself? Should humanitarian actors make way for development actors or should they evolve and adapt their interventions in light of the political context, the evolution of needs and modes of financing? Finally, is the classic dichotomy of humanitarianism/development relevant in Laos?

## **The dilemma of humanitarian NGOs: to stay or to go?**

Between 1975—date of the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR)—and 1986, only three international NGOs were allowed to operate in Laos: American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, and Save the Children UK (ADB 1999, 2011).<sup>3</sup> These organisations provided humanitarian assistance in certain authorised regions and under strict administrative control. Since 1986, other NGOs have progressively obtained the authorisation to establish themselves in Laos, most notably in the field of community development.

### ***A controlled civil society***

In 2014, more than 170 NGOs from 21 different countries had projects in Laos. 78 of these organisations were formally registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and had an office or a representative in the country. According to this Ministry, more than 340 million dollars were committed to these NGOs over the last five years.<sup>4</sup> A large majority of the registered NGOs are members of the iNGO Network,<sup>5</sup> the coordination for international NGOs which we followed during

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<sup>2</sup> Our qualitative investigation is based on fifty in-depth interviews carried out with both Lao and expatriate professionals from international NGOs, ministries, sponsors and international organisations. We also carried out participant observation with iNGO Network, the coordination for international NGOs in Laos. This collective gathers together the overwhelming majority of international NGOs registered in Laos. We followed the DRRM work group (Disaster Risk Reduction and Management), and in particular the consortium of international NGOs coordinated by the French Red Cross around the project « Scaling-up Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction », financed by ECHO. Our quantitative analysis is based on the iNGO Network database compiled in November 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Some organisations such as the French Red Cross or Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) were already present before Laos' independence in 1953, but they only returned much later, in 1993 and 2001 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> « INGOs important contributors to development », *Vientiane Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> First created in the 1990s to connect NGOs operating in Laos, iNGO Network did not really manage to function. The network was relaunched in 2005 thanks to funding from the World Bank. Today, iNGO Network still does not have an official status but functions thanks to its members' funding. In 2014, iNGO Network had 75 members of which 6 were in the process of being registered, cf.

our investigation in Laos. In November 2014, iNGO Network took a census of 67 organisations and 222 projects,<sup>6</sup> representing a total financial volume of 289,276,854.37 dollars. Though this database gives a good image of the NGO landscape in Laos inasmuch as a large majority of members responded, it remains important to highlight the fact that it does not reflect the totality of the ongoing projects in Laos, but only those whose MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) had been signed at the time that the data was collected by iNGO Network. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the true financial commitment of NGOs is much higher.

We can observe that the number of NGOs has not significantly increased in Laos since around 80 NGOs were registered at the end of the 1990s (Riska 1999). Their presence and influence are less significant than in the neighbouring countries. In Vietnam, also a Communist country, 950 international NGOs and 400 local NGOs were active in 2013.<sup>7</sup> As for Cambodia, around 3,500 NGOs were registered in 2012 (2 982 local NGOs and 511 international NGOs), but in reality, only some 1,350 NGOs were truly active.<sup>8</sup>

The civil society situation in Laos is particularly critical. The NPAs (*Non-Profit Associations*) have only had a legal existence since the decree of the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, ratified by the law of May 2011. This progress remains relative since the process of registering with the Ministry of the Interior is long and does not systematically come to term. In November 2012, the Ministry of Home Affairs received 100 applications; only 35 NPAs were registered, and 15 received a temporary license. NPAs registered at the national level are free to operate in all the provinces of Laos, whereas NPAs registered at the province level can only take action in their province. 70 NPAs were registered at the province level. Given the difficulty in obtaining official recognition, twenty associations are registered as social enterprises or organised in informal networks (Kepa, 2005). These CSOs (*Civil Society Organisations*) remain embryonic and severely lack human and financial resources.

In the last few years, sponsors and international NGOs have reinforced their support of Lao civil society. In August 2010, Helvetas, CORD, Oxfam, and the French Embassy financed the creation of the Learning House for Development (LDH), a space destined to reinforce CSO capacities. The process of inclusiveness seemed to be on right track until the tragic events of 2012. In November 2012, the 9<sup>th</sup> summit of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) took place in Vientiane. For the first time in its history, the Lao government was allowing NGOs and CSOs to debate publicly on sensitive issues such as environmental justice. The optimism provoked by this gathering was quickly extinguished by the expulsion of one of its organisers, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, the director of the Swiss NGO Helvetas, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, for having criticised the government in a letter she had addressed to a small circle of partners. One week later, it was the turn of Sombath Somphone, a close collaborator

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<http://www.directoryofngos.org/ingo2/static/12>

<sup>6</sup> The projects in the census are ongoing or finished, some projects having started in 2008 and others scheduled to finish in 2020. According to this database, at the end of 2014, 91 projects with a combined total budget of 75,032,941.7 dollars had finished. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2015, 131 projects were active, mobilising 214,243,912.67 dollars.

<sup>7</sup> "Vietnam-Foreign NGOs cooperation under review", VOA, 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2013, cf. <http://english.vov.vn/Society/VietnamForeign-NGOs-cooperation-under-review/268645.vov>. The 28 000 projects put in place by international NGOs over the period 2003-2013 total an investment of roughly 2.4 billion dollars.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. The Cooperation Committee for Cambodia. CSO Contributions to the Development of Cambodia 2011, March 2012. In 2010, 200 million dollars were committed, but the report suggests that this sum is much less than the real amount.

of Gindroz's and a respected leader of Lao civil society, to be kidnapped. To this day, he is still missing.<sup>9</sup>

These events had a dramatic effect on the commitment of Lao civil society and international NGOs. The most active CSOs closed down or noticeably tempered their criticisms, whilst international NGOs feel increasingly monitored and censored in their work and in their expression. The Lao government is preparing a new decree intended to further restrict the already narrow margin of manoeuvre of international NGOs. Indeed, NGOs must fully comply with demands from the Lao authorities in order to obtain the signature of their MoU, an essential document for operating in Laos. This MoU must be signed by the competent ministry and then validated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is not uncommon for NGOs to have to sign a MoU at the district and province levels before being allowed to sign at the national level. This process is consequently extremely long and can take over a year,<sup>10</sup> which thereby considerably delays the start of projects, since NGOs cannot recruit or purchase equipment without this MoU, and can potentially lose their funding. This administrative onerousness has significant repercussions on the quality of actions, since the NGOs have less time to meet their objectives and must hurry to "pay out" their funding – even if the sponsors are aware of the situation and may grant an amendment. NGOs are strictly monitored and directed by the local and national authorities in the implementation of their actions, and they depend on their goodwill for the upkeep and renewal of their missions.

UN agencies and international organisations are not exempt from this monitoring process. Thus, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) signed the MoU for its project "*Strengthening the Capacity of the Government of Lao PDR to Manage and Provide Assistance in Response to Humanitarian Emergencies*" on the eve of its scheduled end. The IOM obtained an amendment from its sponsor (USAID/ Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance), but the agency has only six months to carry out actions which were scheduled over 14 months (interview with the project manager, 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2015).

In the field, NGOs have to work alongside the local and national authorities (primarily the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Forests, Education, Work and Social Affairs, and the Environment), but also with public organisations such as the Laos Women's Union (LWU), the Laos Youth Union (LYU) or the Lao Red Cross.

In the new regulation project that is being developed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will not only need to approve all projects, but also to give its consent for the recruitment of personnel and the creation of a Lao desk. International NGOs will have to submit an annual financial report taking stock of the project's progress. Those who do not comply may see their projects suspended. NGOs will have to inform the Ministry of Finances and receive its consent in order to receive significant funding. In the future, interventions will be limited to agriculture, education, public health, sciences and sports, and NGOs will not be authorised to broach sensitive topics such as the construction of civil society. As for the NPAs, they will have to inform the Ministry of Finances when they receive more than 50 million kip (6,215 dollars), and will have to obtain the authorisation of the Ministry of Finances, of the Interior, and of Foreign Affairs in order to receive financing greater than 100 million kip (12,430 dollars).

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<sup>9</sup> "Civil Society in Laos: Gone Missing", *The Economist*, 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Projects financed by the European Commission begin with an average of 14-15 months' delay (interview with the *chargé d'affaires*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015).

These restrictions will certainly have the effect of reducing the volume of international aid in Laos, but according to a community activist, "the government is not worried inasmuch as foreign investors are clamouring to invest in the natural resources sector" (interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2015). NGOs reproach the United Nations, and the UNDP in particular, for supporting the government more than civil society.<sup>11</sup>

Though the reinforcement of civil society capacities has become a priority for sponsors, NGOs encounter difficulties in finding partners. For example, the European Commission set up a sizeable fund of 2 million euros destined for "non-state actors", but it remains largely inaccessible for CSOs since the selection process is too complex and ill-suited to the Lao context (interview with the *chargé d'affaires*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015). The Learning House should have allowed for the reinforcement of CSO capacities, but in 2015, the members split into two different entities—the Learning for Development Association (LDA) and the Lao CSO Network (LCN)—leading to confusion and divisions at the heart of a civil society in its infancy. The LCN handles the sharing of information between CSOs, whilst the LDA coordinates NPA actions and provides training for its members.<sup>12</sup> In the eyes of some NGOs, the NPAs are in large part composed of former civil servants tasked with spying on international NGOs and diverting the increasing funds destined for civil society. In order to pursue the work begun by the Learning House, a consortium of NGOs accompanied by iNGO Network and PADETC<sup>13</sup> was created in May 2012 thanks to the financial support of the SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation).

### ***Adapt or leave***

The case of Laos perfectly illustrates the complexity of the humanitarian landscape, as well as the challenges of the reshaping of this field, raised by Jean-François Mattei in *L'urgence humanitaire, et après: de l'urgence à l'action durable* (2005). Should humanitarianism be restricted to emergency aid? Positions vary according to the humanitarian organisation concerned. Whilst for MSF, reconstruction does not fall within the remit of humanitarianism but under State responsibility, the Red Cross differs on this point. The Red Cross considers that "the reconstruction of people also requires the reconstruction of their environment necessary for them to regain their footing in life". Thus, reconstruction falls within the humanitarian field. "Even better, humanitarian action is fully realised in the pursuit of the sustainable effects of its intervention" (Mattei, 2005: 52), making a plea for "sustainable humanitarianism".

Laos represents a real dilemma for humanitarian NGOs: to stay or to go? Indeed, Laos is not considered a priority country since it is not subjected to major humanitarian crises, but its needs are nevertheless substantial if one considers the critical level of base indicators: 28% of the population lives below the poverty line (1.25 dollars a day); Laos has the highest rate of maternal and infantile mortality in the region; 44% of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition, this number reaching 58% in the north of the country according to the WFP (World Food Programme), which is the second highest rate in South East Asia after East Timor; the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) considers the situation in Laos "alarming"; the country is ranked 61<sup>st</sup> out of 76 in the Global Hunger Index. Given the small population size of Laos (6.7 million inhabitants), certain responsible parties acknowledge that "the volume of humanitarian actions is not sufficient to allow NGOs to 'live' off this alone without also doing development".

<sup>11</sup> "UNDP Wants NGOs to be Closely Involved in Laos Policy Debate", RFA, 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Learning for Development Association: <http://www.lida4dev.org/index.php/en/aboutus/background>

<sup>13</sup> Participatory Development Training Centre, CSO founded by Sombath Somphone.



Some NGOs, whose identity is based on emergency actions, have therefore made the choice to close down their programmes in Laos or to transfer them to other NGOs who possess a dual mandate of humanitarian aid and development. This was the case between ZOA Refugee Care and World Renew (formerly Christian Reformed World Relief Committee—CRWRC), two faith-based organisations. ZOA, based in the Netherlands, had been taking care of the repatriation and reintegration of Lao refugees in Laos since 1991.<sup>14</sup> The NGO observed that the villages in the north of Laos which welcomed the new refugees were also in need. From 1994, ZOA began to develop an exit strategy since the repatriation programme under the aegis of the UNHCR was scheduled to end in 1995. In 1997, the humanitarian NGO drew closer to World Renew. The two NGOs worked together on integrated community development projects (combining health, education and agriculture) in the most isolated villages of Xiengkhuang and Phongsaly until 2003, the year in which World Renew obtained its official registration with the Lao authorities, whilst ZOA re-centred itself in Asia on countries that were more affected by humanitarian crises such as the Philippines, Burma and Sri Lanka (interview with the director of World Renew, 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2015).

The case of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) illustrates the difficulty for emergency action NGOs to deal only with emergencies in Laos, and to stay in a context where development has become a leitmotiv, as much for the Lao government as for the sponsors. MSF is the leading French international NGO for emergency medical aid, both historically and in terms of operational deployment. Anxious to preserve its financial autonomy, 96% of the organisation's resources are of private origin.<sup>15</sup> No funds are accepted from the French government. The NGO has always claimed an institutional preference for emergency action over development (Siméant, 2001), and a "timescale ethic" precluding a prescriptive humanitarianism, tainted by "neocolonialism" according to Rony Brauman, president of MSF between 1982 and 1994 (Rambaud 2009, 727). On its website, MSF notes that the closing-down of a programme reflects the specific mandate of the NGO dedicated to providing humanitarian medical aid.<sup>16</sup>

MSF has been operating in Laos since 1989, but tentatively. MSF began by introducing antiviral treatments for people infected by HIV/AIDS, at a time when the disease had not yet been recognised or treated by the authorities. The objective was to transfer HIV care to the Lao authorities and to involve other NGOs and sponsors such as the Global Fund. This objective was met in 2008, and MSF closed down its programme.

In parallel, MSF provided humanitarian assistance to Hmong refugees fleeing persecution in Laos. In 2004, some 5,000 Hmong crossed the Mekong to find refuge in Thailand. Detained in a camp in Huai Nam Khao, in the north of Thailand, they were also subject to abuse by the Thai military who pressured them to return to Laos and prevented them from accessing the MSF's medical centre. MSF was forced to stop its programme in May 2009<sup>17</sup>. Following an agreement between Thailand and Laos, the Hmong refugees from Huai Nam Khao were all forcibly repatriated to Laos at the end of

<sup>14</sup> These refugees were made up of ethnic minorities from the north (namely Hmong) who had fled towards China and Thailand during the Vietnam War.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. <http://www.msf.fr/comptes>

<sup>16</sup> Cf.: <http://www.msf.org/closing-programme>

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MSF. *Hidden Behind Barbed Wire. Share Plight of Hmong Refugees Held in Detention Camp in Northern Thailand Ignored Amid Ongoing Deportations to Laos*, 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2009. Available at : [http://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/old-cms/fms/article-images/2009-00/MSF\\_Thailand\\_Hmong\\_Hidden\\_Behind\\_Barbed\\_Wires.pdf](http://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/old-cms/fms/article-images/2009-00/MSF_Thailand_Hmong_Hidden_Behind_Barbed_Wires.pdf).

2009. MSF was unable to help them in Laos since the Lao government forbade every NGO and international organisation from taking action in the zones where the Hmong refugees were repatriated.

MSF returned to Laos in 2011 with an obstetric and neonatal health programme aimed at children under 5, in five remote districts of Huaphanh. The MSF teams worked with district hospitals and health centres to put in place mobile medical clinics in order to reach the remotest and most disadvantaged communities in the province. But MSF left Laos on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2013, before the scheduled end of its programme.<sup>18</sup> The MSF team quickly observed that the low rate of patient attendance, the dispersal of health establishments in the province, but also the difficulties in recruiting qualified Lao personnel and in importing the necessary medicine indicated that the objectives of personnel training and patient treatment could not be met. The decision was taken to not pursue the programme beyond the end of 2013.

Now more than ever, humanitarian NGOs are compelled to rethink their strategies, missions and identities, not only due to budgetary restrictions which limit their resources, but also in order to give a meaning and a purpose to their action. Humanitarian NGOs find themselves confronted with the choice between leaving—and therefore no longer having a foothold in the country allowing them to intervene rapidly in the case of a crisis due to administrative slowness—or adapting to the context and to the needs, at the risk of overstepping their traditional missions. The objective of this research is precisely to describe the adaptation strategies of humanitarian NGOs, which we will discuss in detail in the second half.

### ***The taboo subject of the forced displacement of populations***

The under-representation of humanitarian NGOs can be explained foremost by the strict monitoring of international aid by the Lao authorities. NGOs cannot take action where they choose—but this is equally true for international organisations—and sensitive subjects such as human rights are clearly impossible to broach. However, the paradox of the Lao case is that situations which fall within the field of emergency humanitarian aid, linked to resettlements provoked by the multiplication of large projects financed by FDI (dams, large plantations, mines, etc.)<sup>19</sup>, and by the governmental policies of rural development and poverty-reduction (*National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy* – NGPES), well and truly do exist.

Yet this subject is henceforth taboo. The problems linked to resettlement are no longer treated by aid agencies and NGOs due to a strong instrumentalisation by the government in the past. Research has shown,<sup>20</sup> for example, how in the years 1990-2000, Western agencies lent moral and financial support to the resettlement policies carried out by the Lao State in the context of its struggle for the eradication of opium and the slash and burn agriculture practiced by ethnic minorities in the mountains, identified as the main cause of poverty and environmental degradation. The Lao State's ambition was to "develop" and "civilise" these minorities in the mountains, considered "backward",

<sup>18</sup> MSF signed its MoU on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2012. The programme, with a total budget of 3,847,782 dollars, was supposed to end of the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2016 and involved 46 staff, of which 6 were expatriates.

<sup>19</sup> Currently, nearly 5 million hectares have been granted in the form of concessions (including projects in progress and scheduled ones), which represents around 21% of the total surface of the country (Wellman, 2012). To put these figures into perspective, rice is the leading agricultural product in Laos, and yet rice-fields only occupy a total surface of 0.97 million hectares (cf. Schönweger et al. 2012). The World Bank (2011b) estimates that the number of people displaced to promote hydroelectricity is between 100,000 and 280,000. These people come from the poorest families in the country and are more likely to belong to an ethnic minority group.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. amongst others Goudineau (1997); Goudineau and Evrard (2004); Chamberlain (2001, 2006); Baird and Schoemaker (2005); High (2008); Baird et al. (2009).

by settling them in the plains, integrating them into the global economy and assimilating them into the Lao culture (Ducourtieux 2009). The State would never have had the means to implement this policy of surveillance and assimilation on such a large scale without the involvement and funding of development agencies and bilateral overseas development programmes. The government hoped to settle some 180,000 families (around 1.5 million people), 60% of them before 2000. Though this figure was not reached,<sup>21</sup> the vast agrarian reforms led by the State nevertheless had a significant impact on all the provinces of the country.

Resettlement, which entailed realigning remote villages with main roads, led to dramatic situations for the populations, especially since the new host areas lacked infrastructures and arable land. Due to environmental changes, the displaced communities were confronted, in the first years, with high mortality rates—certain northern villages losing up to 30% of their population, in large part due to malaria.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the resettlements did not reduce opium consumption and even sometimes contributed to the development of new addictions, notably to meth-amphetamines (Cohen and Lyttleton 2005; Cohen 2009).

Action Contre la Faim (ACF), present in Laos since 1991, worked for a long time in the poorest and most isolated districts of the Luang Namtha province, which were particularly affected by the resettlement programmes. The province was also at the heart of the new government strategy aiming to attract foreign, especially Chinese, investments, in order to transform traditional subsistence agriculture into commercial agriculture. This incentivising policy had, and continues to have, significant effects on the landscape, environment, economy and above all, on the populations' way of life. Indeed, commercial farming exerts considerable pressure on land and little by little takes the place of subsistence farming, leading to problems of food security in the long-term.

The ACF's approach was two-fold: on the one hand, to keep the mountain populations in their environment by developing infrastructures and improving their means of subsistence (namely by working on rural development), thereby demonstrating that an alternative to resettlement was possible<sup>23</sup>; and on the other hand, taking action alongside the displaced and isolated populations by improving their living conditions (work against food, tool distribution, irrigation, building/rehabilitation of water networks, hygiene promotion). The reasoning was that to fight against malnutrition—the primary mission and identity of the NGO—"it was necessary to treat the causes of the problem since it was no use putting on a Band-Aid" (interview with the latest ACF project manager in Long, 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2015). Despite their work being recognised and appreciated by the Lao authorities as well as by the sponsors, the humanitarian NGO decided not to renew its project in 2008, when the financing provided by the European Commission came to an end. Yet ACF could have continued to benefit from this funding. A process of reflection began inside ACF regarding which strategy to pursue. As the latest ACF chief of mission reminds us (interview in Bangkok, 27<sup>th</sup> of August 2015):

*"Headquarters decided that the mission carried out in the North no longer fell within the purview of the NGO job description, that development was taking precedence over emergency action, and that it was preferable to reinforce action in countries considered priority countries, such as Burma. The evaluations had shown that acute malnutrition was not alarming enough*

<sup>21</sup> In the absence of consistent national data, it is impossible to accurately quantify the number of people affected by resettlement.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Goudineau (1997) but also ACF reports, namely Daviau (2001, 2006) ; Romagny and Daviau (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Lao law states that all villages with fewer than 200 inhabitants must be displaced and regrouped.

*to justify the continued deployment of resources in Laos. However, chronic malnutrition in Laos is extremely significant, there would have been work to do, but headquarters decided to stick with an identity and approach that were more centred on humanitarian aid.”*

ACF's departure unquestionably hastened the tipping point in aid agencies' positioning relative to resettlement. Thus, in the years 1990-2000, sponsors and NGOs adopted a pragmatic approach to resettlement. The recurrent discourse was that “resettlement is inevitable”, and that “if you do not support this policy, you cannot operate in Laos” (Baird and Shoemaker 2005, 878-879). Some claimed that their humanitarian mandate, that is, the obligation to assist people who are suffering—whatever the factors leading to their desperate situation—justified the support given to this resettlement policy, in spite of its negative effects.

The studies and reports produced by ACF and other researchers contributed to changing this situation.<sup>24</sup> Sponsors decided to stop taking action on this very sensitive issue. Today, no projects involving recently relocated villages receive financing. The European Commission is nevertheless reviewing its position since resettlement is a complex, varied phenomenon (between “forced”, “voluntary” or “induced” resettlement) and little documented, especially with regards to its impacts (Petit, 2009). “Given that this question will continue to occupy a central position in the Lao rural development strategy, it is important that Western agencies have a coherent position in order to build a policy together with the government that is more respectful of the populations” (interview with the European Commission's *chargé d'affaires*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015). At any rate, even if the European Commission no longer funds projects in recently relocated villages, this governmental policy has a direct impact on the implementation of projects that it does fund: conflicts between locals and displaced people; reticence of the villagers to begin work in case they are relocated again (SOGES, 2011). Luxembourg is in charge of carrying out a study of this question in order to define a common European position.

In terms of NGOs, they cannot, *de facto*, implement projects broaching this question since they would find no funding. The opinions of the actors are divided on the right position to adopt since in fact, in the field, NGOs do take action in districts where the villagers have formerly been relocated. Some NGOs set themselves the rule, for example, of not taking action in villages displaced less than 3 years ago. Others avoid taking action in villages next to dams due to the high risk of resettlement. But these criteria are of limited relevance in a context where the decisions of the Lao authorities remain opaque. NGOs sometimes learn in the newspapers that the villages in which they had built infrastructures and equipments are going to be flooded in order to make way for a dam. The latest ACF project manager in Long returned several years later to certain villages where the NGO had taken action: nothing remained but the water fountains built by ACF in the middle of ghost-villages, because the villagers were eventually relocated.

Numerous questions arise for the actors: How to deliver assistance to those who need it most without being instrumentalised? Does the fact of taking action amongst resettled populations amount to supporting government policy, or is it simply a mission in service of the populations? The question of population displacement is a crucial subject whose importance will become increasingly dramatic in years to come due to the impact of big projects on the environment. “Laos will very soon have its 'environmental refugees', but this problem has not been anticipated by the actors of

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<sup>24</sup> Namely the report “Lao PDR. Is Resettlement a Solution for Human Development?” (September 2005) distributed – under the table – to the partners and sponsors.

international aid, and even less so by the Lao government” (interview with a humanitarian NGO director, 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2014).

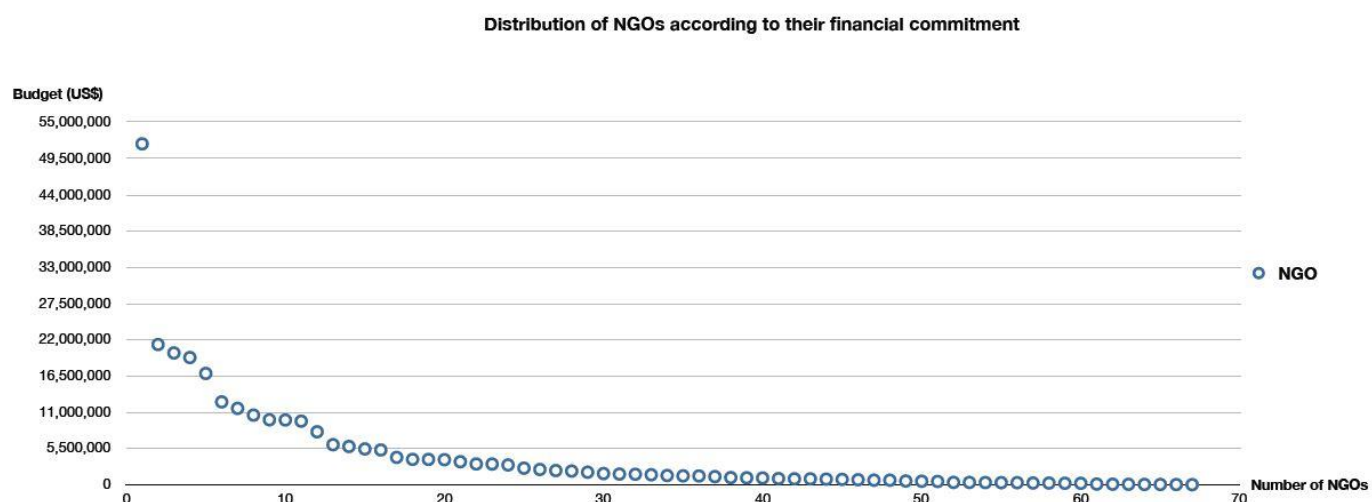
## **The porosity of the boundaries between humanitarian aid and development**

### ***The profile of NGOs in Laos***

The database compiled by iNGO Network reveals the significant place of faith-based NGOs (12 out of 66). These NGOs represent 27.5% of total contributions (or 79,606,888 dollars), World Vision being by far the biggest NGO in Laos. It began operating in Laos in 1968, providing assistance to people displaced by the war in Indochina. World Vision left in 1975 and returned in 1991. With nearly 52 million dollars committed since 2010 (to the end of 2015), World Vision alone represents 17.89% of total NGO contributions. The personnel of World Vision is made up of 450 people, of which only 6 are expatriates. The faith-based NGOs have a greater margin of manoeuvre in the positioning of their activities since they rely for the most part on private donations obtained thanks to an efficient fundraising mechanism. For example, World Vision in Laos receives funds collected by 8 antennas of World Vision based throughout the world (Canada, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong). These faith-based NGOs also seek financing from international sponsors. Thus, CRS (Catholic Relief Services) is in large part funded by the American Department of Agriculture, whereas World Renew receives private and public funding from Australia, Canada, Switzerland and Sweden. These NGOs are unanimous in claiming that the fact of having a Christian identity does not constitute an obstacle or discrimination, the proof of this being the dominant presence of World Vision. According to this NGO, “we refrain from putting in place religious activities and it is not a problem for the government that we are Christian” (interview with the project manager, 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2015).

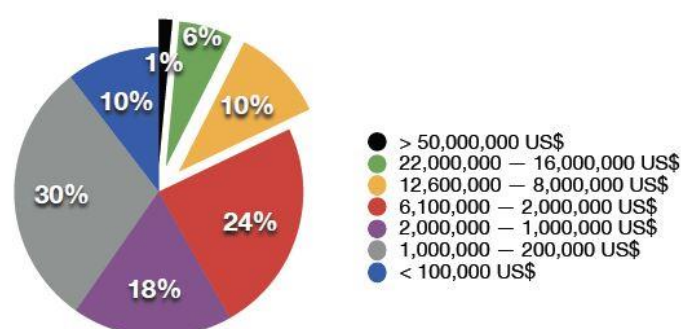
The majority of NGOs in Laos are of small to medium size: 58% (39 NGOs) committed contributions of less than 2,000,000 dollars, of which 40% were under one million dollars. These organisations generally focus on one or two projects. A small proportion of the big, or very big NGOs (12 NGOs – 17%) commit nearly two-thirds of the total project funding (66.2%), the five biggest NGOs providing almost the other half of the total budget (44.7%). Generally, the overwhelming majority of NGOs (81%) undertakes less than 5 projects, and half of these have only one project. Only the big NGOs are in a position to run numerous projects. Oxfam and World Vision stand out with 18 and 14 active projects respectively.

Figure 1 - Distribution of NGOs according to their financial commitment

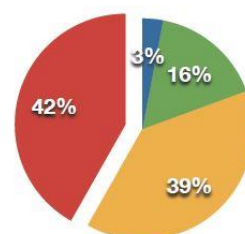


Source 1 : data collected by INGO Network, November 2014, and computerized by Danielle Tan

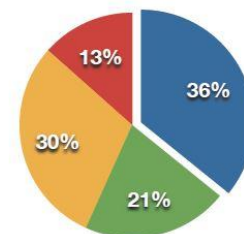
Figure 2 - Financial weight of NGOs and number of donors

**Financial weight of NGOs****Number of projects by NGO**

Number of projects	Number of NGOs
14 to 18	2
6 to 10	11
2 to 5	26
only 1	28

**Number of donors by NGO**

Number of donors	Number of NGOs
1	24
2	14
3 to 5	20
6 to 10	9



Source 2 : data collected by INGO Network, November 2014, and computerized by Danielle Tan

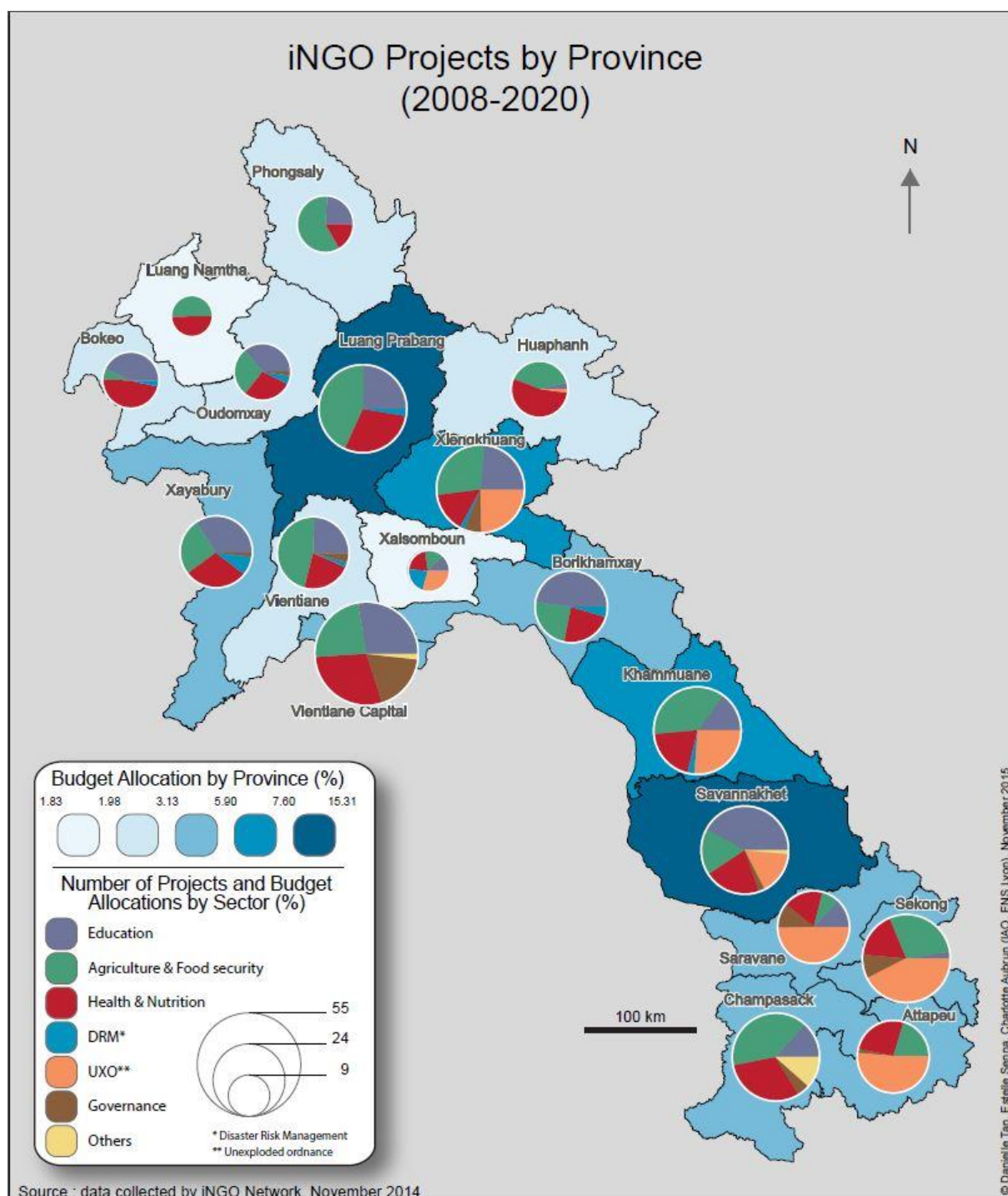
Smaller NGOs are mainly financed by a single sponsor or by their own funds, whereas the more sizeable NGOs solicit numerous sponsors (up to 10 for SNV, 9 for Handicap International, 8 for Save the Children and 7 for Helvetas), with the exception of World Vision and RTR which possess their own funds, Oxfam which only solicits the European Commission outside of its own funds, and Norwegian People's Aid which relies exclusively on bilateral Norwegian overseas development agreements. It should be noted that different federations of the same NGO present in Laos have united or work collectively, following the example of Handicap International, Oxfam, Care International, Save the Children or MDM.

Only the most sizeable NGOs are in a position to take action throughout the entire country, but it is not necessarily the largest which cover the most provinces. For example, Oxfam, which is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in terms of contributions, takes action across the country, except in Phongsaly, whilst SNV (in 5<sup>th</sup>

place) covers 12 provinces, and World Vision operates in 6 provinces. Medium-sized NGOs favour regional integration, or provincial integration for the smaller organisations. Few NGOs (only PSI, Helvetas, et APHEDA) run national-scale programmes.

NGOs are most present in the capital, south and centre of the country. Comparatively, the north receives slight coverage and provision (cf. Map 1). For example, Luang Namtha is the province which receives the least NGO contributions (1.8% of the total budget), and hosts few projects (10) and NGOs (9). Xaisombon also has a small budget (2%), but it should be noted that the province was only just created, in 2013. The capital, Vientiane, has the highest concentration of NGOs (27) and projects (55), but their financial weight is slight (4.7%) compared to Luang Prabang (14.7%) and Savannakhet (15.3%), which receive the most substantial contributions. Champassak and Sekong host nearly as many projects as these best-funded provinces but they are of slight importance in financial terms (respectively, 33 projects representing 5.3% of the total budget allocated by NGOs and 32 projects for 5.9%).

Map 1 - iNGO Projects by Province (2008-2020)



The current state of the iNGO Network database did not allow us to pursue the analysis to the district and village levels.<sup>25</sup> We could have seen the proportions in which NGOs take action in the poorest districts, whether “hotspots” of development are emerging (high concentrations of NGOs and projects in one village or district). The GIS tool would allow NGOs to better define their intervention strategies, in terms of targeting and content: should action be taken in priority in the poorest districts, those least covered by NGOs, or the most isolated? What is the economic

<sup>25</sup> We compensated as much as we could with project documents and websites, but there remain three projects to research in order to complete the spatial analysis at the district level.



environment of the villages identified (in terms of concessions, dam projects, resettlement projects, etc.)? Should action be extended to the province level, into other provinces, into other regions? How to establish a complementarity with other NGOs? Which needs to address in priority?

NGOs are confronted with all these questions in the identification phase and the writing of the project, or reorientation of the NGO's strategy. In order to answer them, NGOs use the data which is available: statistics from ministries, from the Poverty Reduction Fund, studies carried out by researchers, reports by NGOs United Nations agencies (WFP's VAM—Vulnerability Assistance Mapping, UNDP reports), the World Bank and the ADB, new information platforms such as Lao Decide<sup>26</sup> or TABI (the Agrobiodiversity Initiative).<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, data is often incomplete, unequal and scattered. NGOs note that it is often necessary to know someone who works in the identified zone in order to access information. In reality, NGOs are not free to take action where they please. They are doubly constrained by the concentration logic of the Lao authorities and the cost-effectiveness of sponsors. Though their priority is to take action in the poorest and often most isolated districts, their actions are orientated towards the “pilot” villages identified by the government in the context of its village regroupment policy (Sam Sang-Three Builds), which aims to create “hubs” or coherent service provision units at the district and province levels. These villages are not necessarily the poorest or most in need. Generally, NGOs propose a selection of districts and villages which is negotiated with the authorities before the signature of the MoU. As for sponsors, they prefer to fund projects where NGOs are already operating because it is more difficult to start up in a new province. The cost/benefit question is also raised. For example, for the European Commission, Laos is a difficult case since the cost of intervention is very high, around 350 dollars per person in Sekong, for example, whilst the average in other countries is around 30-40 dollars (interview with the *chargé d'affaires*, 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015):

*“We provide a lot of aid, but only to a few people. Should we favour the other option, which would be to reach more people with the same amount? In that case, we would be taking action in easier zones, but which are less in need. In Laos, we decided not to privilege numbers, but to go where others do not go, into the remotest corners, where the problems are serious.”*

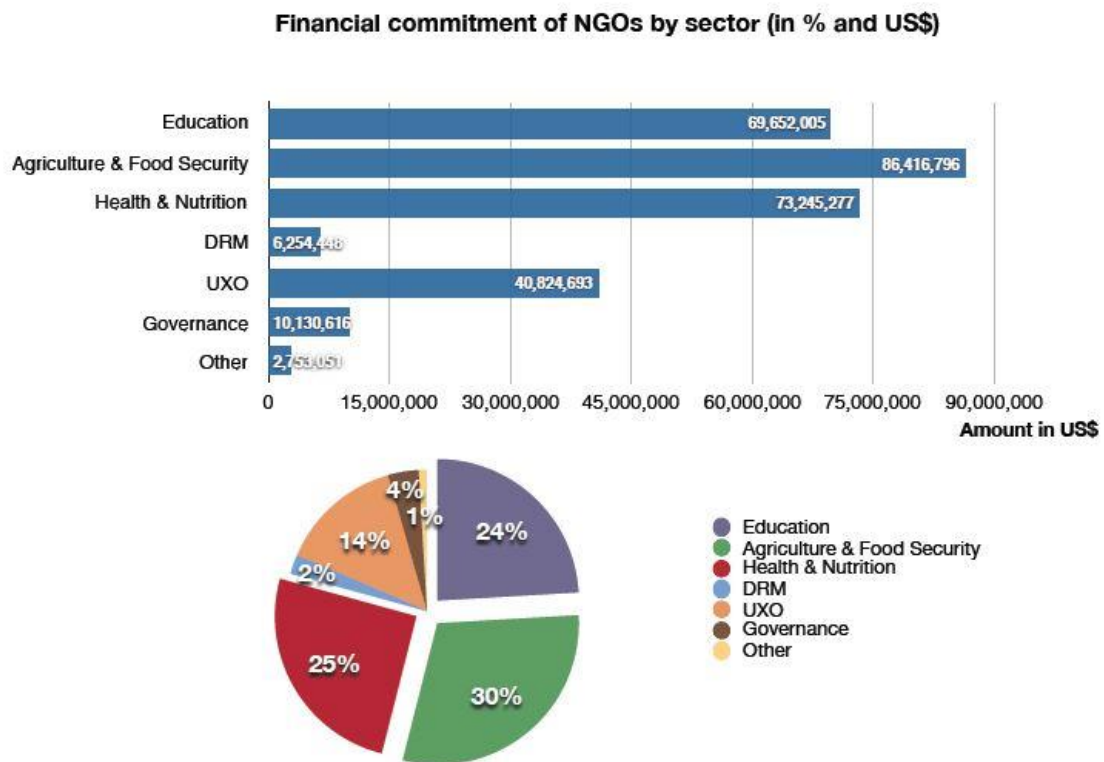
The three most significant sectors of intervention are, in order, agriculture (30%), health (25%) and education (24%), representing together more than three-quarters of total NGO contributions.<sup>28</sup> Next comes the UXO sector (*Unexploded ordnance*), at 14%.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. <http://www.decide.la/en/>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. <http://www.tabi.la/>

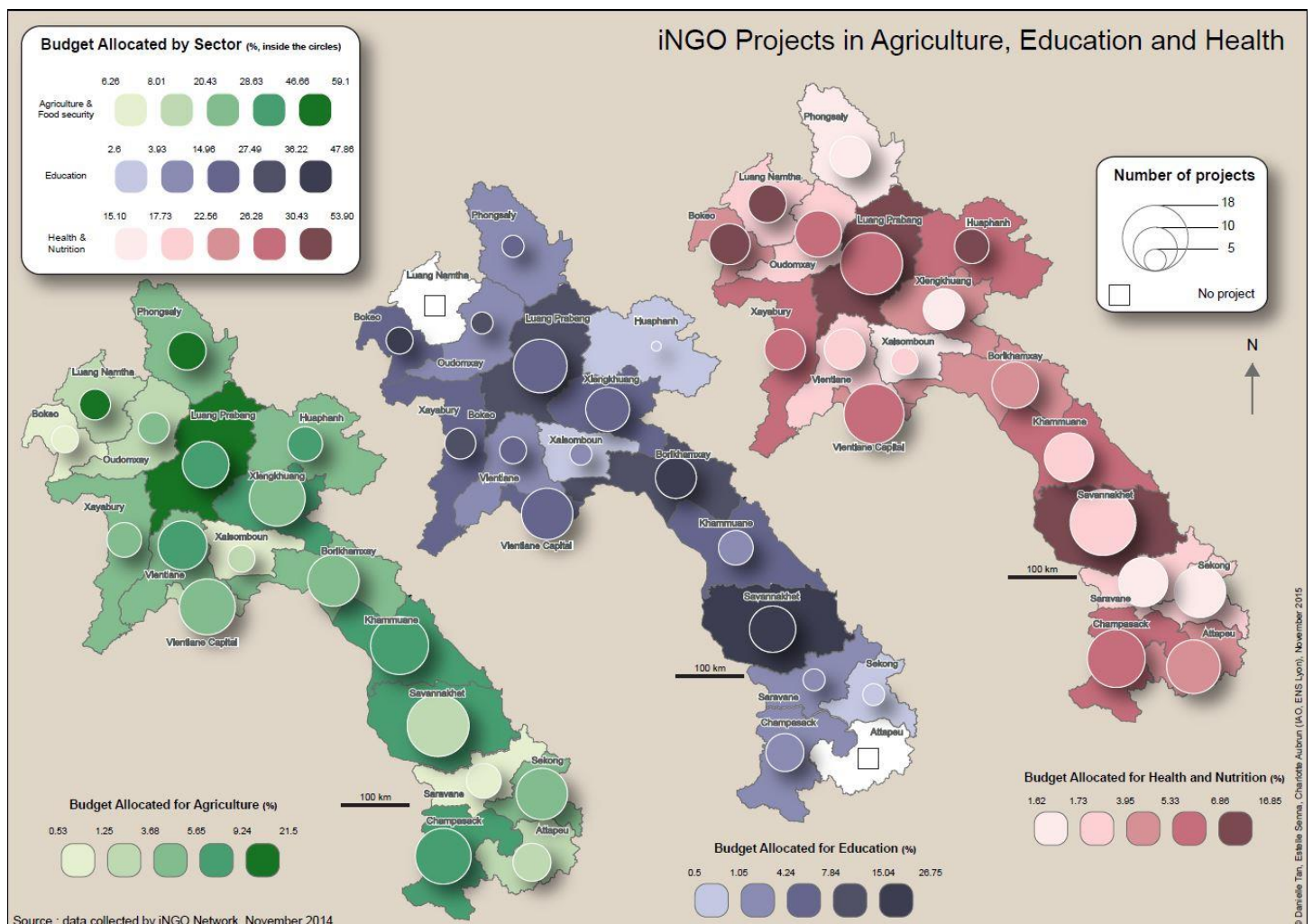
<sup>28</sup> Taking all forms of aid as a whole, the main sectors to receive financing in 2013 were infrastructure (23%), education (19%), agriculture and rural development (18%), health (13%) and natural resources and the environment (9%), cf. Phanthanousone Khennavong (2014).

Figure 3 - Financial commitment of NGOs by sector (in % and US\$)



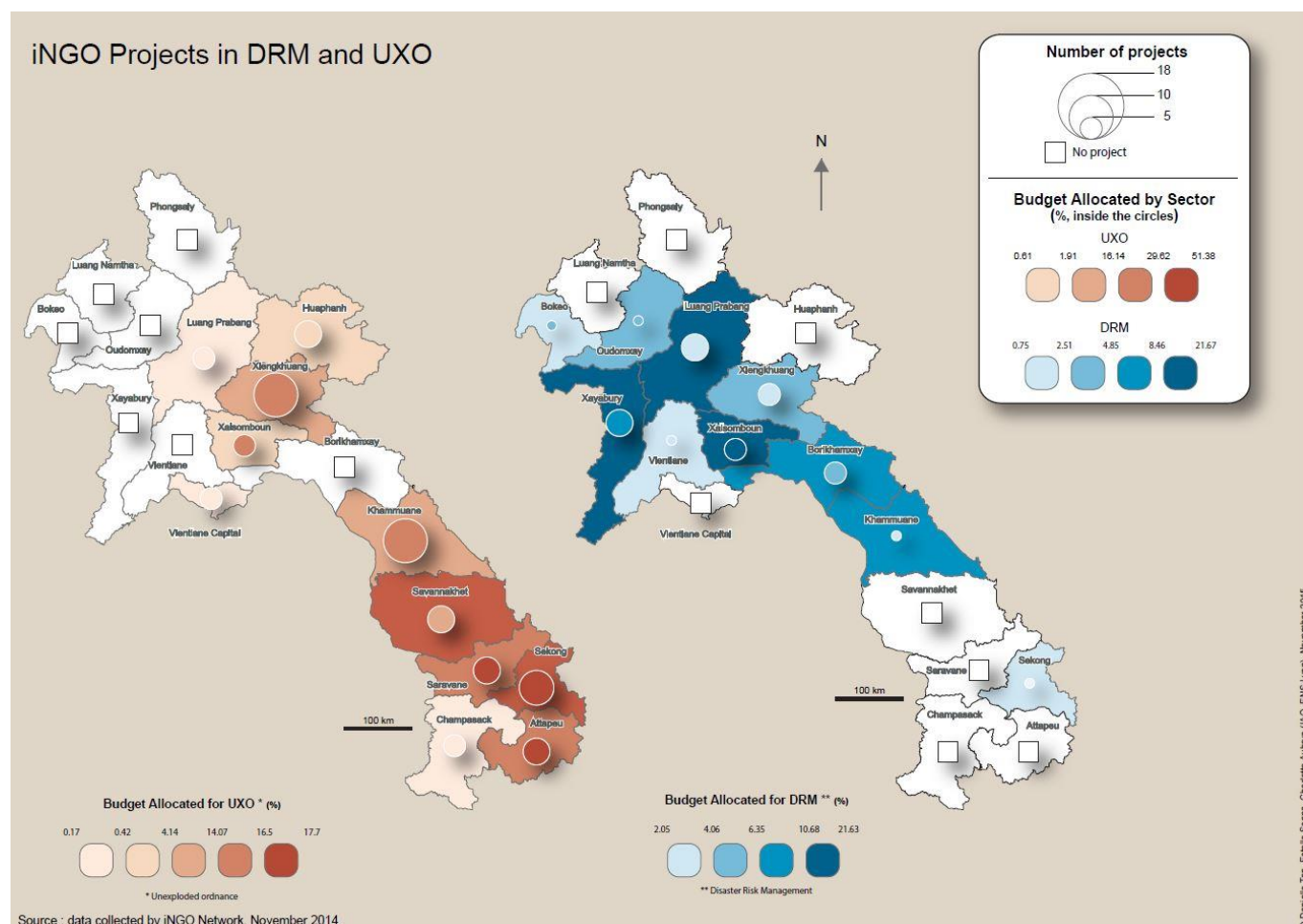
Source 3 : data collected by INGO Network, November 2014, and computerized by Danielle Tan

Map 2 - iNGO Projects in Agriculture, Education and Health



The predominance of these three sectors can be found in the majority of provinces, apart from Luang Namtha, where there are no education projects, in the provinces of Xaisomboun, Xiengkhuang, Khammuane, Sekong Attapeu, and Saravane, where the UXO sector takes up a significant share of the contributions received, and especially in the southern provinces (between 42% and 51%), cf. Map 3.

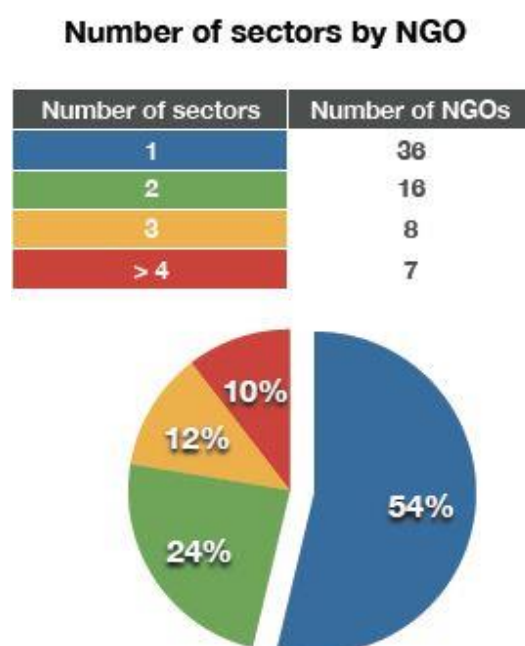
**Map 3 - iNGO Projects in DRM and UXO**



The DRM sector is a new sector (cf. Map 3). Xaisomboun is the only province where this sector is in third place of contributions (21.7%), at the expense of agriculture. Even though the DRM sector is a recent field of intervention and represents a slight share of contributions (only 2%), there is a real awareness of its importance, especially regarding the stakes of integrating this issue in a transversal manner across education, health and agriculture projects. Few projects deal with governance, those that do are located in Vientiane or at a national level. Projects on craftsmanship or the generation of non-agricultural revenue remain marginal (category: Others).

More than half of NGOs (54%) are specialised, which is to say that they concentrate on a single sector; a quarter of them work on two sectors; 22% of NGOs cover 3 to 6 sectors, and a very small proportion (7 NGOs) covers more than 4 sectors. No NGO covers all 7 sectors identified by the iNGO Network. The most prominent NGOs are those in a position to cover several sectors. These NGOs generally run integrated projects covering the three main sectors in Laos. Nevertheless, Oxfam and Child Fund, who are not amongst the 10 leading NGOs, cover the most: 6 and 5 sectors respectively.

Figure 4 - Number of sectors by NGO



Source 4 - data collected by INGO Network, November 2014, and computerized by Danielle Tan

### ***Difficulties in identifying the humanitarian field in Laos***

It is particularly difficult to identify and quantify humanitarian aid in Laos since the data does not exist. Data collection and analysis remains to be done with different actors in order to correctly represent the complexity of humanitarian aid in the country. The International Cooperation department of the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) is setting up a harmonisation platform of aid data (AMP—Aid Management Platform), but it is not yet operational and only keeps a record of development aid.

INGO Network's website indicates that 19 NGOs and 23 projects are registered in the category “*Emergency and Humanitarian Relief*”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, this category does not include all humanitarian NGOs since some take action in other sectors such as health, nutrition or food security. Moreover, their database does not have the same categories. The 7 categories included in this database<sup>30</sup> do not allow us to distinguish between humanitarian and development projects since, whilst the UXO and DRM sectors can be identified as obvious categories of humanitarian action, the majority of humanitarian NGOs find themselves grouped together in the categories of “agriculture and food security”, “health and nutrition” or “education”. Indeed, this methodological problem reveals the heart of the issue of “humanitarian transition” in Laos which is the porosity between humanitarian aid and development.

The interlinking of humanitarian and development projects is characterised by two tendencies: on the one hand, compelled to adapt to the political and socio-economic context but also to financial logics, humanitarian NGOs have had to expand their scope of traditional humanitarian interventions

<sup>29</sup> Cf. <http://www.directoryofngos.org/ingo2/sectorssummary/10>

<sup>30</sup> Agriculture and food security; Health and nutrition; DRM; Governance; Other (non-agricultural activities for revenue generation, craftsmanship, etc.)

and have adopted a long-term approach by putting in place integrated projects, and on the other hand, the projects which fall into the classic humanitarian field of action —UXO and DRM—today follow more of a development approach than one of emergency response or rehabilitation. It follows that the means of qualifying actions and projects has become an extremely sensitive subject, since it implies real financial stakes.

### *1. From humanitarian assistance to integrated rural development*

As we have seen with ACF, this NGO quickly evolved from humanitarian assistance to the implementation of more long-term projects intended to sustainably improve food security through projects of integrated rural development. This is also the case of Triangle Génération Humanitaire (TGH), present in Laos since 2005 thanks to funding from the Rhône-Alpes Region. Established in 1994, this NGO was born of the desire to implement transversal and sustainable expertise by integrating emergency, rehabilitation and development into its projects. In the province of Khammuane, TGH put a number of programmes into place to support agricultural production and irrigation with the goal of achieving self-sufficiency for rice and of promoting crop diversification in a region particularly affected by flooding and natural disasters. Yet apart from the support of decentralised overseas development from the Rhône-Alpes Region, it remains difficult for the NGO to find classic and durable funding to consolidate its interventions because the province has not been considered a priority by international sponsors since the construction of the Nam Theun II dam.<sup>31</sup> TGH was able to receive limited funding from ECHO when the province was affected by the Haima typhoon in 2011. The funding problem is therefore crucial for smaller NGOs who essentially rely on funding from public authorities and who fall between the fields of emergency, rehabilitation and development, since the funding mechanisms for emergency aid and development are different and do not follow the same time scales.

### *2. Coordination and long-term action of privileged actors in the field of health*

The national societies of the Red Cross Movement are a good example of the integration of a long-term and social approach by humanitarian actors. These organisations have a privileged position in Laos<sup>32</sup> due to their status (they are not NGOs but auxiliaries of public authorities), their positioning (neutrality), and their long history in Laos (the French Red Cross, for example, was present before the country's independence in 1953). The national societies work closely together with the Lao Red Cross, which facilitates their relationships with the authorities and their interventions in the field. They obtain their MoUs quicker than other NGOs and play an important liaison role. They are each specialised in a different field but above all, they differ on all levels: they have different modes of financing and possess their own history, identity and philosophy regarding humanitarian action.

The Swiss Red Cross has been present in Laos since 1988. Unlike many NGOs, the Swiss Red Cross encounters no difficulties in receiving funding, which is to say that it does not need to look for new funding constantly. It draws its resources from private support (donations and sponsoring), performance mandates from public authorities, and its own revenues, as well as contributions from

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Cf. [http://www.trianglegh.org/AssociationHumanitaire/Francais/html/Informations/Newsletter\\_Juil2012/TriangleGH-Laos.html](http://www.trianglegh.org/AssociationHumanitaire/Francais/html/Informations/Newsletter_Juil2012/TriangleGH-Laos.html)

<sup>32</sup> The Australian, German, Danish, Swiss and French Red Cross are located in the same buildings as the Lao Red Cross.

other organisations. In Laos, it began with classic actions around health, emergency aid, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), and nutrition. It decided to add a development approach concerning the construction of community-based health systems. Since 2004, it has been providing a free healthcare fund for the poorest residents (a kind of universal health insurance), which has reached around 400,000 people. In partnership with other organisations, it also intervenes to launch micro-insurance systems in the field of health (interview with the director, 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2014):

*"We decided to focus on health because it's what we know best. We work where we have a clear advantage. We initiated these systems in Laos and in Cambodia but have not done so elsewhere. [...] At the beginning, we did everything ourselves, then in partnership with the Ministry of Health, and now, this health insurance system has been integrated into government policy. The State co-finance and co-manages with us. We closely monitor the manner of identifying the poor so that they are taken care of, since the State wants to reduce the number of poor people. [...] We clearly work within a technical and pro-active logical framework and not one of 'voicing' [debates or criticisms]. We must win the trust of the authorities and work in a scientific manner. Today, our contribution in the field of health is as significant as that of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the World Bank".*

Concerning the French Red Cross (CRF), the definition of its strategy in Laos is at a transitional point. Unlike the Swiss Red Cross, the CRF is limited by its constant search for funding but is also submitted to budgetary pressure from headquarters which wants to direct its action at the national level at the expense of the international level, and to re-centre on the field of health. The continual depletion of its human and financial resources limits its scope for innovation and exploration of other projects, raising the question of its presence in Laos but also in the region. Indeed, the AFD (French Development Agency), for example, prefers financing regional or cross-border projects. In fact, the closing-down of projects in Burma, and more recently in Cambodia, has a considerable impact on the sustainability of projects in Laos. For its director, who is fighting to maintain Red Cross actions in the region (interview, 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2015):

*"Humanitarianism must have a macro approach: it is, above all, an attitude and it raises the question of the purpose of action. [...] What sustains us, day-to-day, is not emergency aid. The only way to exist is to innovate, to be creative. We must invest in niche sectors, explore new fields of action, decipher new needs, make ourselves essential in sectors where we are alone in acting, where there is no competition. If we do not cultivate our specificity, we will disappear. We know that sponsors wish to reduce the number of NGOs that they finance and manage, and they are looking for specificities".*

The director of CRF followed this line of innovation in Laos and signed an agreement in June 2015 concerning the reinforcement of capacities and the coordination of actors of the Country Coordination Mechanism (CCM) and civil society, for better governance and planning of HIV, malaria and tuberculosis programmes in Laos. Financed by France via the 5% Initiative and France Expertise International, this 690,000 € project over 36 months (May 2015 to May 2018) aims to reinforce the representation and participation of populations affected by these three diseases in the CCM's consultation and decision-making process, to improve the quality and access to information for people living with HIV in Laos, and, in collaboration with the National Assembly, to reinforce the implementation of follow-up of local laws and policies regarding HIV/AIDS.

### 3. Nutrition: a humanitarian or development field?

The field of nutrition clearly illustrates the extent to which categorisation is a sensitive subject with financial stakes attached. For the Lao government, food security is associated with the



development of agriculture (which implies an improvement in rice production) and not with nutrition, and the government has long refused to take this question into consideration. This position recently changed due to pressure to meet the Millennium Development Goals, malnutrition being amongst the number one objectives. For sponsors—namely the European Commission—nutrition has become a top priority due to the worsening of the situation. Repeated floods and droughts over the last few years have threatened food security for the most vulnerable, that is, the rural and ethnic minority populations especially. The situation is worrying, to the extent that actors face the question of whether to qualify malnutrition as a humanitarian crisis. For example, for the European Commission, development projects are financed by the general direction of Development and Cooperation/EuropeAid (DevCo/EuropeAid) based in Vientiane, whilst humanitarian interventions are financed by ECHO, based in Bangkok. For the moment, projects concerning nutrition fall into the DevCo/EuropeAid financing structure, but the European Commission is considering reinforcing the financial commitment to nutrition from ECHO (interviews with various people from the European Commission in Vientiane and Bangkok, June-August 2015).

NGOs have also reacted to this question. In 2014, the Scaling Up Nutrition-Civil Society Alliance in Lao PDR (SUN CSA),<sup>33</sup> hosted by Plan International, set as an objective the improvement of action coordination in the nutrition field, and the integration of this issue into other sectors such as agriculture, health and education (22 priority actions were identified in these three sectors). NGOs, and especially sponsors, recognise that mapping would be very useful since it would allow easier identification of priority zones and the planning of types of action. SUN CSA, with the help of the European Commission and UNICEF, is currently preparing a cartography representing those projects directly or indirectly linked to nutrition (interviews with the SUN CSA coordinator and the Head of Nutrition from the European Commission, 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2015).

Nevertheless, though nutrition has become a priority for sponsors, the lack of flexibility in funding mechanisms can lead to absurd situations for small to medium-sized NGOs who “have to go hunting for funding in order to survive”. This is namely the case for Health Poverty Action (HPA), who greatly contributed to raising the European Commission's awareness of the seriousness of the situation (interview with the HPA director, 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2015). HPA arrived in Laos in the wake of a dengue epidemic which struck the south of the country in the 1990s. The NGO continues to work on epidemic assistance and prevention (malaria, dengue, cholera) in the south of Laos and in cross-border regions with Cambodia, mainly financed by ECHO and the Global Fund. HPA expanded its interventions with development projects centred on malnutrition, in a region where the expansion of rubber tree cultivation has greatly reduced the subsistence resources of the poorest residents. The projects around malnutrition will come to an end this year and run the risk of stopping completely. Indeed, according to HPA's director, the NGO has been encountering difficulties in finding funding to pursue its actions in the field of nutrition in the south and in the long-term, since the priority of the European Commission for the coming year is to focus on the north of the country. Yet HPA does not want to start a new project in the north—a region it is not familiar with—because it has been present in the south for over 20 years and wishes to capitalise on its experience and savoir-faire in this region.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. <http://www.suncsalaos.org/en/>

#### 4. *Managing natural disasters: a plea for a long-term approach*

Natural disaster response is a classic field of humanitarian action. Faced with a proliferation of crises, it is generally accepted that crisis preparedness and the reinforcement of resilience capacities contribute to reducing the negative effects for the most vulnerable populations, and to cutting back on funding. Laos is not subjected to large-scale natural disasters but rather regular and frequent low-intensity crises caused by climate change and the intensive exploitation of natural resources. Between 1970 and 2010, 33 natural disasters were recorded (mainly floods and droughts), affecting 9 million people, and causing economic damages of over 400 million dollars (World Bank 2011b).

International agencies (WFP, UNDP, IOM) and the World Bank have factored this new risk into their programme, namely by providing management and risk-reduction support (DRM and DRR) to the government with the goal of defining a national strategy and better coordinating the actors. Currently, *the National Disaster Management Office* (NDMO) falls under the authority of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, which is a new ministry with limited human and financial resources.

Over the last few years, NGOs have increasingly begun to involve themselves in the fields of DRM and DRR since natural disasters have a severe impact on food security, access to drinking water and irrigation, health, the environment and the living conditions of a large majority of the population in Laos, inasmuch as over 70% of inhabitants are dependent on agriculture and natural resources. NGOs are in universal agreement in considering that the problem of natural disasters in Laos requires a social and economic development approach rather than a humanitarian approach, with better environmental management (monitoring systems, land planning, forest protection, education in schools, etc). They seek to transversally integrate the DRR and DRM dimensions in their programmes (interviews with Save the Children, Oxfam, World Vision, ADRA, FCL, HPA, Child Fund, and the French Red Cross, July 2014-August 2015). For example, the Luxembourg Caritas Foundation (FCL), which took over Concern Worldwide's activities in 2010, is now seeking to combine disaster preparedness with livelihood security, climate change, education, and WASH. For the head of FCL, “if we do development without taking disaster preparedness into account, the schools that we build will not be of any use” (interview, 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2014). For World Vision, “flooding does not constitute an emergency since we know it is going to happen regularly. We must therefore put development actions in place for the long-term” (interview with the project manager, 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2015). Faced with the seriousness of the problem, Oxfam began to set up a humanitarian programme after the Ketsana typhoon in 2009 alongside a long-term DRR intervention to reinforce resilience. Oxfam is thereby seeking to reinforce both the national and local authorities and the communities, by supporting NPAs (interviews, July 2015).

NGOs are compelled by sponsors to work together complementarily through the creation of consortiums. The Australian overseas development programme AusAID financed the Lao Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (LANCOGA) over 7 years (2007-2014) combining UXO, DRR, economic activities, WASH, public health, capacity reinforcement and advocacy through the consortium composed of CARE, Oxfam, World Vision and Save the Children.

Following LANGOCA, the CRF introduced another consortium with Save the Children, Care and Oxfam around the project “Scaling-up Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR)”, financed by the European Commission's Disaster Preparedness ECHO programme (DIPECHO). The CRF is in charge of coordinating the project for the consortium. The aim of this project is to create a national



coordination and capacity-reinforcement platform regarding DRM and DRR. Save the Children lends its expertise in education, Care in gender, and Oxfam in disaster preparedness. Given the funding cuts and heightened competition to obtain financing, more and more consortiums are being created. The idea behind these consortiums is that coming together to run a project and pooling the specialities of each partner will facilitate funding access for everyone. One may ask to whether this regroupment constitutes a natural and intelligent process of cooperation, or whether it is in a way imposed by the sponsors. Does the consortium procedure produce cooperation and sharing of expertise? Does it contribute to improving aid efficiency? In the case of this DIPECHO project, we can observe that the 18-month financing of DIPECHO is ill-adapted to the Lao context due to its slow administrative procedure. Tensions may appear within a consortium when NGOs find themselves at different stages of the process due to delays caused by the signature of their respective MoUs. A significant amount of coordination is required. Furthermore, the implementation of DRR and DRM projects on short funding constitutes a real challenge due to the complex political context where it is necessary to reinforce weak and emerging institutional actors (DDMCC—*Department of Disaster Management and Climate Change*) and where the Lao authorities deal differently with NGOs and international organisations (namely the UNDP). In the end, we can say that the positive aspect of these consortiums is that they have improved action coordination and information transfer within the DRRM working group, created by the NGOs by associating international organisations and research units.

##### 5. *From humanitarianism to development: the evolution of financing mechanisms in the UXO sector*

It must be remembered that Laos is the country with the greatest history of bombardments (per capita). Since 2010, Laos has taken on the 9<sup>th</sup> Millennium Development Goal with the reduction of UXOs. In a few figures, over 2 million tonnes of munitions were dropped on the country between 1964 and 1973, but 30% of these anti-personnel mines or “bombies” (as they are known locally) did not explode, that is to say around 80 million UXOs. Nearly 25% of villages are contaminated by UXOs and 41 of the 47 poorest districts of Laos have UXOs. More than 50 000 people were victims of UXO accidents between 1964 and 2008. Over 41% of them survived but remained handicapped and in the course of the last decade, 40% of victims were children (NRA, 2010).

At the beginning, it was the NGO Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) which started to work on the issue of UXOs. Established in Laos since 1975, it first dealt with populations displaced by the war. Other NGOs, such as MAG, NPA, World Education, and Handicap International later joined MCC on this issue. The government also asked the army to develop de-mining expertise. Since 1996, the main actor in this sector has been UXO Lao. This public institution was created by UNDP and UNICEF and is financed by international sponsors through a common fund managed by UNDP (*International Trust Fund for Humanitarian Mine Action*). In 2013, UXO Lao moved from under the direction of the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs to the National Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication, attached to the office of the Prime Minister. Since 2004, this sector has been strictly regulated by the NRA (*National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action in Lao PDR*), a public institution created by the Lao government. It orientates, coordinates and accredits international operators. Only 4 NGOs have received this accreditation: MAG, HI, NPA and Halo Trust. Dan Church Aid (DCA) is waiting for accreditation. Other NGOs may take action in this sector through training, raising awareness or victim support (for example AAR, CRS or World Vision). Private operators linked

to mining and hydroelectric companies have begun to invest this field and may equally be accredited (for example AusLAO UXO or Milsearch).

A consultant in charge of evaluating this sector for the SCD described to us how the humanitarian discourse evolved into a development one in order to secure durable funding and expand the field of action (interview, 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2015). Indeed, before 1996, the UXO sector received only occasional and irregular financing linked to humanitarian assistance. The creation of UXO Lao and its funding by international agencies allowed for planning over several years and especially, an increase in funding<sup>34</sup>. Actors have linked the UXO problem with development objectives, namely that of reducing poverty. For UXO Lao:<sup>35</sup>

*"In rural communities, high levels of poverty—and risk—are clearly linked to high levels of UXO contamination. Villagers living in such impoverished conditions often find that they are confronted with "enforced risk-taking." They either continue to live in acute poverty, and in many cases chronic malnutrition, or risk injury and death by working UXO-contaminated land".*

Though UXO reduction is now integrated into the development process, actors know that total de-mining will take time: "a good hundred years", according to actors (interviews, June 2015). Some sponsors now face the question of whether to prioritise the funding of this action and demand results relating to the link established between de-mining and poverty reduction. Yet it is difficult to prove this link in a quantifiable way, and UXOs are no longer as deadly as before. Research carried out by Handicap International showed that the number of accidents has decreased significantly. Between 1973 and 1976, there were an average of 1,100 accidents per year; this figure fell to 360 between 1977 and 1986, then to 240 between 1987 and 1996. In 2012, there were only 56 victims. "This year there have been 22 accidents and 16 deaths linked to UXOs, which is much less than the number of deaths and injuries caused by road accidents per month in Vientiane", the consultant confirmed. Some sponsors are considering withdrawing from this field of action which seems to be less and less of a priority. "Yet de-mining remains a considerable problem. Maybe we should return to a more humanitarian discourse and motivation, and a justification of action based on the question of morality: we have to de-mine, quite simply", suggested the consultant.

### ***Humanitarianism versus development: bridging the divide?***

It emerges from our interviews that humanitarian NGOs have adapted to the political and socio-economic context in Laos by expanding their fields of intervention to include development in order to "keep a foothold in Laos and be able to intervene quickly in case of emergency". It would indeed be very difficult for an NGO that is not already present in Laos to respond to crises due to the administrative constraints put in place by the Lao State. In concrete terms, it is the most prominent NGOs who are in a position to respond to emergency situations, whether they relate to humanitarianism or to development. Nevertheless, the classic dichotomy between humanitarianism and development seems even less relevant in the Lao context (Duffield, 1997). Indeed, it seems that "humanitarian transition" has already taken place in the field and at the heart of organisations. NGOs whose DNA was based on development dedicate a part of their budget to crisis management. This is

<sup>34</sup> According to the NRA, the UXO sector received nearly 90 million dollars between 1996 and 2008. Since then, the sector has received around 20 million dollars per year (over 23 million in 2013). In total, 191,335,514 dollars have been committed by international sponsors to reduce UXOs. The main sponsors are the United States, Australia, Norway, Japan, and the UNDP through the common fund.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. <http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/9.2/focus/sisavath/sisavath.shtml>

the case with Helvetas, for example, who decided to provide emergency aid in case of flooding in the villages it takes action in, but the same is also true of Child Fund. This NGO is working on an integrated community development approach centred on children (education, health and nutrition, agriculture and food security, economic activity). The Child Fund Alliance put in place an Emergency Action Fund and a special team to respond to humanitarian crises (armed conflicts, droughts, natural disasters). After the floods in Bokeo last year, Child Fund was able to send a team even though this province is not included in its zone of intervention. As for Save the Children, the development NGO has repositioned itself in the last few years in response to the increase in crisis situations. It now considers itself to be a "full-spectrum organisation", which is to say it combines humanitarian and development approaches (interview with the director, 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2014).

The big NGOs now claim a dual mandate for intervention. Though the protagonists recognise that emergency aid and development are two separate areas of intervention requiring specific expertise, the reorganisation took place at the level of headquarters and federations. For example, CRS now provides humanitarian assistance by integrating a sustainable development process to reinforce the resilience of vulnerable populations. Laos is considered to be a country with a low intensity of crises, and actions are therefore governed by development logics, but in the case of crises, a special team is dispatched by headquarters to respond to the emergency. Humanitarian experience is required by CRS in order to work in countries where the main form of intervention is development, in order to be able to manage potential crises (interview with the director, 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2015).

This reorganisation does not only apply to Western and Anglo-Saxon NGOs. AAR Japan (Association for Aid and Relief) was founded in 1979 to assist Indochinese refugees. This Japanese NGO was formerly known as Association for Aid and Refugees, but had to change its name since the Lao government did not want the word "refugees" to appear—on the other hand, its Japanese name has not changed and has preserved this term. The NGO proposes different kinds of intervention depending on the country's situation. It first specialised in the manufacturing of wheelchairs for handicapped people, then in assisting the victims of UXOs, and handicapped children in general. Like many Western NGOs, AAR is constantly seeking funding. The NGO was compelled to redirect its action since the Japanese overseas development programme no longer wished to fund UXO projects "due to inconclusive results and a long-term commitment, and preferred to favour short projects (over 2-3 years) with quickly perceptible results" (interview with the director and project manager, 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2015). Thus, since 2012, AAR has been developing projects in the field of revenue generation (fish-farming and mushroom cultivation) to support handicapped people. On the other hand, in Nepal or the Philippines, AAR intervenes as a humanitarian NGO, responding to emergency situations.

Most of the actors interviewed were somewhat perplexed when we mentioned the subject of "humanitarian transition", since the question of establishing a continuity between humanitarianism and development (concepts of "continuum" and "contiguum"<sup>36</sup>), and of preparing populations for crises (concept of resilience) seemed to be an old debate already enacted in the field. "Is humanitarian transition a new concept? What does it add to previous concepts?", the professionals

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<sup>36</sup> The "continuum" approach considers the concept of « *linking relief, rehabilitation and development* » (LRRD) as a chronological succession of these three phases, whilst the "contiguum" approach considers these three phases of assistance simultaneously (cf. Pirotte and Husson, 1997). Groupe URD (Urgence-Réhabilitation-Développement) has been defending the "contiguum" approach for years, claiming that it better reflects the complexity of situations involving overlap between short- and long-term actions, and different spatial dynamics, cf. <http://www.urd.org/Lien-Urgence-Developpement>.

asked us. For them, the question of the classic dichotomy or divide between humanitarianism and development has been superseded, since, in the field, NGOs have had to adapt and be flexible. Faced with the increasing complexity of crises, the questions no longer concern a harmonious transition between emergency and development, but the cross-fertilisation of *savoir-faire* between different practices, in shifting spatial and time dynamics. As numerous professionals who have also worked in Sri Lanka remind us, humanitarian organisations had entered a transition towards development after the tsunami in 2004 but they quickly had to return to emergency interventions as the end of the civil war in 2009 provoked significant population displacement.

One might ask whether this dichotomy between humanitarian aid and development is not a French debate. Johanna Siméant (2001, 2004), who retraced the history and trajectory of activists within French emergency and development NGOs, shows to what extent these notions are complex and full of representations. First of all, emergency is the primary vocation of "French" humanitarianism as it was invented by MSF following the Biafran war of 1968. Emergency medical care has become a French speciality and French humanitarianism stemmed from a reaction to development which was considered an imported colonial practice. Yet in reality, even those humanitarian missions whose public image is more oriented towards emergency aid (*Médecins du Monde*, *Médecins Sans Frontières*...) are not, for the most part, short-term missions and do not respond to "crises" (wars, natural disasters, famines...). These missions reveal the porosity which often exists between emergency action and development, between short- and long-term projects. In spite of everything, the reminder of this porosity can be experienced as shocking by the members of Third World and development associations who feel opposed to "emergency" humanitarians, whilst humanitarian NGOs do not want to become like big Anglo-Saxon agencies since they are considered less activist and more bureaucratic. Johanna Siméant highlights the fact that though humanitarians sometimes agree on the scant relevance or intellectual interest of this debate, they are the first to recognise the tripartite practical, identitary and financial reality of the opposition.

Indeed, the budget lines and organisations of the big sponsors are different (for example ECHO and DevCo/EuropeAid—from the European Commission for Europe); the duration of funding and procedures is also different, and the possibilities for fundraising from private donors are clearly more linked today to emergency action than to development. Which is why French NGOs cannot do without emergency aid.

We questioned *Médecins du Monde* (MDM), which distinguishes itself from the strictly "emergency" positioning of MSF (interview with the coordinator, 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2015):

*"For MDM, emergency aid remains a significant dimension, but our interventions also take place in the long-term. Nevertheless, we are not going to talk about development. We do not have the same capacities as MSF with regards to emergencies, we cannot build a hospital in two days for example, but we also take action in France, unlike MSF; it's in MDM's DNA to be here and elsewhere. The three pillars of the organisation are treatment, witnessing and social change. [...] Laos has never been considered a country requiring emergency aid. We were present in Laos, in Savannakhet, until 1997, and it was hard to come back. Since 2011, we have been running a mother/child health programme with MDM Japan in the province of Champasack. MDM France manages the obstetric section whilst MDM Japan deals with paediatric side. It is their first international project and they want to develop in Asia, which is why Laos was an important project for them. We are also developing a free healthcare system in partnership with the Swiss Red Cross. [...] Up until March 2014, MDM France received funding from the AFD but we were unable to find other sources of funding since the European Commission does not have a health approach. The obstetric section runs on our own funds."*

At the end of the project, MDM Japan wants to capitalise on the paediatric section in other provinces, whilst MDM France wants to explore other approaches such as unwanted pregnancies aimed at the young from more urban areas, which could be a way into civil society. “But everything depends on the funding that we will be able to find since it is a new approach that does not fall into classic criteria” highlights the MDM coordinator.

## Conclusion

The case study of Laos reveals the great porosity of the boundaries between humanitarian aid and development. The classic dichotomy between these two fields of intervention seems to be a rhetorical debate that has been superseded according to the actors in the field, since “humanitarian transition” has already been acted out. NGOs have been forced to reorganise themselves and to adapt to the political and socio-economic context by overstepping the boundaries of their traditional missions and exploring new approaches. In the end, for the actors, whether we speak of “transition” or “contiguum”, the issue puts into question modes of action, our reading of crises and our approach to aid at a global level in order to find more appropriate coordination, communication and financing mechanisms to better work together. The harmonisation and efficiency of aid constitute a real challenge for all the actors involved in international aid, since although the interlinking of humanitarianism and development is obvious in the field, the financing and project governance mechanisms of humanitarian aid and development cooperation at the institutional level remain compartmentalised.

Whilst Laos gives no signs of good governance and continues to reinforce its control over civil society, the country has seen an almost 300% increase in its grant from the European Commission due to the reorientation of its priorities towards the poorest countries (200 million euros in 2014-2020 compared to 70 million for the previous period). The “development income” and “humanitarian income which appears as one of its variations” (Olivier de Sardan, 2011) are therefore to be taken seriously if we wish to consider a reorientation of international aid. This question arises sharply in the case of Laos, where international aid too often reinforces the elites in power who use aid to superficially cover up the wounds of its non-sustainable development (Phraxayavong 2009) : how to ensure that the money reaches the poorest and those most in need?

This research project aimed to build a cartographic tool which would allow different actors of international aid to better understand the environment in which they operate and, eventually, to help them to better redefine their strategies. Nevertheless, this process has its limits if the tool is not adopted by all of the actors involved due to issues with information transfer and transparency, and if the data is not collected and analysed in a homogenous way. If that were the case, cartography may induce error and show a false image of the situation, potentially leading to inadequate policies. We hope that this work will be pursued by members of the iNGO Network and the CDE (Centre for Development and Environment, Université de Berne<sup>37</sup>), as was originally planned.

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<sup>37</sup> Namely through the information platform Lao DECIDE info, [www.decide.la](http://www.decide.la), put in place by the CDE.

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