Human resource development in Laos

An explorative study on teachers’ opinions about human resource development in the National University of Laos.

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Preface

First of all we would like to thank the respondents that participated in our study for their time and willingness to share their experiences. A special thanks to Keophouthong Bounyasone and her family for the support with our thesis and for showing us the ‘real’ Laos.

We would also like to thank Ann-Louise Silfver, our supervisor in Umeå for all her help, information about the subject in our thesis and patience.

Big thanks to Sida which made our journey possible, it has been an experience for life.

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Abstract

This thesis concerns human resource development (HRD) and educational reform in Laos which is one aspect of poverty eradication in Laos. The thesis aim to describe, understand and analyze how HRD is constructed in policies and among teachers at the National University of Laos (NUOL) and what possibilities and constraints they connect to it. To find answers to these questions we have analyzed national policy documents and interviewed teachers with PhD degrees at NUOL. Educational reform was initiated after the declaration of the Lao People Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) independence in 1975 and with the help of donor organizations efforts have continuously been made to raise the quality of education in Lao PDR in order to improve skills among the population.

Our findings show that in policy HRD is constructed as poverty reduction, meeting international standards and educational development. The respondents have described that HRD can be achieved through staff development, student-centered learning method, development of skills through international cooperation and relevant educational equipment. The biggest constraint according to the respondents is lack of money. After that comes lack of knowledge, inadequate equipment and low incentives for teachers. The main possibilities described are that NUOL is in a position to spread information about education and material to other education institutions; that textbooks are more readily available and that it is getting easier to apply for scholarships for studies abroad.

Key words: Human resource development, Laos, policy, teacher education, poverty, donor organization
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<td>Education for All</td>
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<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
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<td>MOE</td>
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Introduction

With a history of war and French rule the new Lao PDR formed in 1975 and proclaimed its independency. The Lao government had the mission to reach a united population that would overcome the different identities of the 49 diverse ethnic groups. In the construction of a socialist state the new government focused on human resources as a solution to social and economic issues (Pholsena, 2006:54). Human development indicators (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) show that Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world even though it has slowly improved during the last decade. The HDI includes education, health and income and we will in this study focus on human development in the education sector. Keeping Laos economic growth on a sustainable level and to develop human resources with relevant knowledge and abilities will help Lao PDR to reach their future goal of leaving the list of least developed countries by the year of 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The Government of Laos (GOL) has developed a number of policies, plans and strategies to achieve the goals for a national development. Among those are the national education system reform strategy and the Education for All: National Plan of Action 2003-2015 (UNESCO, 2005). In these policies, strategies and guidelines have been set up in order to reach the goals for a better education system. Human resource development is a key aspect to solve these issues, for example through teacher education development (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The National University of Laos (NUOL) also has local goals that include the implementation of national goals regarding educational development at university level. There have been different possibilities for teachers to be involved in projects that aim to strengthen higher education in Laos. Among other things, there is opportunity for university teachers to go abroad to study at, e.g. Master studies and PhD levels, with the purpose of contributing to the development of the country with their newly acquired knowledge when they return to Laos (Bäcktorp, 2007).

Given this background, we want to examine how human resource development in Lao education is being constructed in national policy documents and among Lao teachers educated abroad, in order to learn more about how teachers see themselves as a part of the national improvement efforts for human resource development through education. With ‘constructed’ we mean how the meaning of HRD is shaped in the policy documents and how the teachers of the National University of Laos creates their own meaning of HRD.
Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to describe, understand and analyze how human resource development, as part of the national poverty reduction strategy in Laos is understood among university teachers in Laos.

The following research questions guide our inquiry:

- How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?

- How is HRD constructed among teachers at the National University of Laos?

- How do the teachers describe the possibilities and constraints when it comes to human resource development?

Research review

In this chapter you can read about previous research that gives an introduction to different areas connected to HRD that is relevant to our thesis. These are foreign aid, policy, definitions of HRD and quality of education. We have found relevant literature mainly through books, articles and doctoral dissertations. The following key words have guided our search for previous research: HRD, human resources, Laos, developing countries, foreign aid, and policy document.

Introduction

There has not been a lot of research about Laos but it is starting to increase. Now you can find some research about education reforms and how human resources can be developed through education. To be able to answer our research question which is to describe, understand and analyze how human resource development, as part of the national poverty reduction strategy in Laos is understood among university teachers in Laos, we have gathered literature about HRD. Bäcktorp (2007), Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011) and Bounyasone & Keosada (2011) have engaged in analysis of national policy documents and different interview studies with various actors in the education sector. To widen our perspective we also added additional literature and research about HRD and foreign aid. Through these we could read about educational reforms in Laos and student centered learning in the perspectives of foreign aid and policy’s. We could also read about how HRD was constructed in policies
and among the teachers’ we chose to interview. Due to the lack of research about Laos we have chosen a wide area of knowledge which will contribute to new knowledge about Lao PDR connected to HRD.

**Definition of HRD**

HRD is described by Nilsson, Wallo, Rönnqvist and Davidson (2011) as a collective term for developing humans in their working life through activities and processes. A more detailed description is to develop human resources in a labor working context in groups or individuals. Another researcher, Per-Erik Ellström (1992, s. 106), defines HRD as an “arrangement that is done to improve individuals and groups competence development in their daily work”. The UNDP’s Human Development Report (2011) demonstrates that empowering people and integrating equity into programs and policy’s will change the politic and legal arenas. They describe human development as “expanding people’s choices” and that it has its foundation in shared natural resources. Hirosata and Kitamura (2009) emphasize the importance of a system for capacity development with its main focus on education. They describe education system reforms and the education management as important to capacity development.

Hirosato & Kitamura (2009) state that developing countries needs the support of governments and aid agencies from industrialized countries and the capacity necessary to be able to realize and succeed with the education reforms. To achieve this, “working-level problems” such as system inadequacy, shortages of implementation capacity in the developing countries and also a shortage of capacity and experience from the aid agencies side, need to be solved by both aid agencies and governments.

These different definitions of HRD; human resource development, human development and capacity development build our understanding of HRD. In the context of this thesis, we understand HRD as a broad process on different levels; e.g. as a way to improve skills among the population, strengthening education and a tool to reduce poverty.

**Education reform**

In their analysis of policy documents Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011) write about the need for improved quality of education. They write that the Lao government prioritizes education and that they see education as one of the key elements in human resource development. To develop the education and reach international standards Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011) have identified in policy’s a great need for;
“More teachers, improved professional quality among teachers, a need for an improved teacher training, a need for improved school building and equipment and a need for improved administration and management”. (Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh, 2011:85)

Improving teachers’ skills is necessary since many teachers in the country that do not have proper teacher education. Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh (2011) also ads that the government in Laos needs to support the teachers, who play a big part in improving the educational system, with incentives to motivate them in order to succeed with the educational reform.

**Student centered education**

Bounyasone & Keosada (2011) write that student centered education is concerned with moving away from practices of rote learning. The students should be involved in the learning process, relate to previous knowledge and experiences when learning new things and have the opportunity to express ideas and thoughts. The contrast to learner-centered education is teacher-centered education which is described as the old way of teaching. The teacher is supposed to encourage the students to think by themselves and to inspire to origination of new ideas. Bäcktorp (2007) describes that student centered education in the beginning was not easy to implement everywhere because a lot of schools just did not have enough material or facilities to be able to perform the teaching method.

After the 1990s improvements of the education system teacher development was prioritized by the MOE as was strengthening the national teacher education programs and improving teacher education institutions. This new focus resulted in new ways of teaching and student centered education. The 5-pointed star was an instrument for the teachers to be able to teach according to the so called “new method of teaching” which was the terminology used for student centered education. It guided the teachers to work with activity-based learning, using questions, illustrations and group discussions as pedagogical tools, and focus on the application of education to daily life. This was constructed with the help of development cooperation consultants (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011). There were a number of aspects that were important for the students to learn and needed to be embedded in the student centered teaching. For example:

“Love of homeland, love and appreciation for the natural world, gratitude and respect for leaders, parents and teachers, the willingness to sacrifice personal
Previous research (Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh, 2011) points out that learner centered education among Lao students and teachers were constructed as group learning and individual learning. They discuss that some minority students have a difficult time to keep up in school but that they often have high ambitions despite that. Group learning helps the students to be more active in their learning and is something that the teachers see is beneficial for ethnic minorities. Furthermore they write that their respondents accentuate the ethnic minority groups as eager to learn. For example, one minority group often chooses to stay in school instead of going home to celebrate a festival with their family because they do not want to miss classes in school even though they are given time off from school by the teachers. All the minority groups have different backgrounds which affect their knowledge in e.g. reading, calculus and language which makes it harder for them in school.

**Foreign aid**

All of the three doctoral dissertations about Laos that we have included in this thesis have one analysis in common. This analysis centers on donor organizations request about certain conditions where the reforms are to be implemented within. However, these conditions are not necessarily always positive for the implementation of the reforms in a local setting. Odén (2009) points out that industrialized countries often have motives other than charity when it comes to aid giving, i.e. it is a part of the foreign affairs which includes supervision over military issues and raw material resources etc. Since all countries are affected by each other in some ways, for example in security and economy, he continues to say that this enlightened self-interest (authors’ translation) increases the motivation to give aid to countries in need. This also gives donor organizations influence and power in the decision making in how the receiving country is distributing the resources. This is also why foreign aid is being criticized because it results in negative political issues.

The Lao government needs to improve the standards for transparency and foreseeability regarding government processes. In order to do this the government has obliged to strengthen practices, policies and regulation. Corruption is now considered to be a nationwide issue and although there are regulations against corruption more progress must be made. Important work has been done by the government with help from donor organizations although the root of the problems, e.g. resistance to change, cultural obstacles etc. need to be dealt with in order
to solve the problem. Fighting corruption is a combination of both legal enforcement and people’s behavior. In Lao culture, spirituality and control systems have a large impact on people’s behavior and that makes it important to inform the government about which impact their moral values have on decision-making, the political culture and the exercise of power to be able to strengthen the ethics among those in control. Although Buddhism with values of self-discipline, morality and honesty has a major impact on Lao people, the government does not always seem to perform their work according to these (Keuleer, 2002). Bäcktorp (2007) also bring up the discussion about how donor organizations discuss corruption in Laos. The donors regard the Lao government to be authoritarian and an assumption that corruption was widespread was made. The government then was positioned as not trustworthy and a superiority among the donors appeared through closer monitoring.

Since the culture has a large impact on people it is difficult to transfer knowledge and research between two different cultures. Especially when the research in Western culture is based on self-criticism and individualism and the Lao culture is shaped by communal and homogenous values. The norms, culture and political system in Laos are not as coherent with critical challenging decisions, opinions and orders from authorities as it is in the West. When it comes to cultural change it is rarely easy to harmonize a new method of problem solving with the old way of communicating. In many cases a country as poor as Laos do not have the opportunity to experiment with different problem solving methods, especially in rural areas where they depend on their established everyday routines in order to survive. This makes a cultural change even harder (Stephens, 2007).

The same question is brought up by Tabulawa (2003) and Bäcktorp (2007) who writes about aid agencies and their interest in third world countries and also learner-centered pedagogy. They write that the western pedagogy is being implemented in third world countries which at the same time implements standards for the ‘preferred’ society and people. This leads to westernization of third world countries. These pedagogical ways of teaching carries with them structures, values and ideas which underlie individualistic Western culture. This means according to Tabulawa (2003) that by promoting democracy learner centered education reproduce capitalism where it is being implemented which is in third world countries where that is not according to their culture. Bäcktorp (2007) also write about concerns that have been expressed about the implementation of the western educational system where the need for an educational system made by the Lao for the Lao was expressed. This was because Laos could not adjust to new educational systems that were not adapted to the needs and resources
available. Lao PDR was in great need of money which made them reliant on foreign aid and the suggestion for an education system made by the Lao, for the Lao could not be realized as envisioned.

Policy to practice

Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011) write that education in Laos is a main topic in policies generally. Education is the core of HRD and the national policy documents that have been constructed in Laos are therefore guidelines and goals. The policy documents have been established by the MOE and donor organizations and one essential part in the reform is to implement student centered teaching.

There are attempts in Laos to create a decentralized system of education through giving areas of responsibilities to districts, regional, village levels but much is still controlled from ‘the top’ (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011). Bäcktorp (2007) write that discussions about learner centered education and EFA must be locally anchored in order for the educational reform to be successful. She writes that the people in Laos who are the end users of the money from donor organizations cannot gain the ownership and understanding of what they are supposed to implement because the documents are mediated and produced by consultants.

The decentralization of the content in policies is controlled by the MOE and the centrally governed education system. This creates tensions between student centered learning approaches and traditional teacher centered practices. The teachers are guided by curricula, lesson plans and textbooks by the governing system in their teaching which makes it more difficult to have a student centered approach which builds on bottom-up knowledge more than top-down directives. Some teachers feel there is a need for change so they can teach according to student centered teaching but they feel obliged to follow the guidelines from the top. This shows the difficulties in changing the procedures and former organizational control which is needed for the policies to be actualized (Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh 2011). Donors need to leave more of the decision making to the receivers of aid so that a more equal partnership between donors and aid receiving countries becomes possible. This argues Bäcktorp (2007) could lead to more successful reforms.

Teacher centered educational practice has been and continue to be a central teaching method in Laos. Today attempts are made to replace this with student centered teaching. In teacher centered education, the teacher is the authority which is the case for the entire school system. Lao people are brought up with respecting the elders, teachers and leaders and to put their
own interest aside. This is conflicting with the student centered education where the individual is in the center and the teachers are not the authorities but the facilitators. This is a great challenge for all involved to overcome in the move from policy to practice (Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh 2011).

After defining our own view on HRD we can more easily understand the content in the policy documents and how the teachers construct HRD and the possibilities and constraints connected to it according to their own experiences. We also get a wider perspective of how foreign aid could have an effect on the work with policies which in turn could affect the human resource development and the quality of education in Laos.

Method for data collection and analysis

*In this chapter you can read about our chosen methodological starting points. We also describe how we have proceeded with interviews, analysis of policy documents, methods of data collection, method for analyzing the data and ethical considerations.*

Methodological starting points

The purpose of qualitative research is to clarify the character of a phenomenon by focusing on its meaning. When it comes to performing interviews the researcher uses the conversation to get access to the respondents’ stories and understandings about the phenomenon (Widerberg, 2002). In this study we have taken a social constructionist approach, which means that knowledge is created between people and social interactions. This kind of research focuses on the unique and specific through deep knowledge rather than producing generalizable knowledge (Bryman, 2011). We believe that this approach helps us to get valuable information since we are looking for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that can answer our research questions.

Delimitations

Since we are interested in human resources and its impact connected to developing countries we wanted to do a study about human resource development linked to national policy documents in Laos. To make the topic more manageable we chose to narrow it down to a specific profession that operates in a concrete workplace that has a strong connection to the goals in the national policy documents regarding human capacity development. Therefore we decided to conduct our study at the National University of Laos localized in the capital
Vientiane where we had access to teachers who have participated in a project to get their PhD abroad as a part of the human resource development in Laos.

**Methods of data collection**

**Policy documents**

We chose to do a discourse analysis of four Lao policy documents produced at different levels of the official system. The documents include the “National Growth and Poverty Eradication strategy (NGPES)” written by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Education Strategic Vision up to the year 2020” written by the Ministry of Education (MOE), “Teacher Education Strategy 2006-2015 and Teacher Education Action plan 2006-2010” also written by the MOE and “Strategic Plan National University of Laos 2011-2015” written by NUOL. These documents reflect how the problem of poverty is being discussed connected to improvements regarding education on different levels; on a national level, and in relation to teacher education and at NUOL. The reason for doing the analysis is that we wanted to get a deeper knowledge about dominating discourses in policy connected to HRD. During the analysis we got inspiration from the discourse analysis in Fejes & Thornberg (2009) and also by Bacchi’s (2009) “What’s the problem represented to be?”-approach. We decided to include parts of Bacchi’s approach because we believe that it is important to study the silences to get a better understanding of the written text and also to be able to unveil issues hidden in the policy documents (ibid).

Bacchi’s (2009) “What’s the problem represented to be?”-approach is a part of a discourse analysis. This way to analyze policy is a post-structural method towards policy analysis according to Bacchi (2009). It digs deeper to understand the meaning-making in policy formulation. She started her analyze method approach with public policies. This approach is however also applicable to bigger contexts e.g. when understanding national policies in international frameworks since it has its’ focus on methodology and application. Bacchi (2009) wants to give new dimensions to how to think about governance through polices, where problem questioning is essential instead of problem solving. All policies have different cultural dimensions that reflect on those who try to implement it. Through asking questions about how policy is constructed and through which sources, helps to understand what implications policy has and how governance takes place.
Interviews

Since we only had questions about the teachers’ experiences regarding HRD with no answering alternatives we have done structured interviews with open questions according to Trost (2010). These eleven questions can be viewed in our interview manual (see appendix 1). Open questions were chosen to be able to get the most complete and informative answers from our interviewees (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Doing interviews is according to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) a good way to find out people's subjective experiences and how they see the world. This was therefore a good alternative for us because it gave us the opportunity to have conversation-like interviews with the chance to ask follow up questions when needed. We did our interviews with seven teachers; five from the Faculty of Natural Science and two from the Faculty of Education at the National University of Laos to get their point of view regarding the subject.

After we had constructed our interview questions we categorized them into themes that concerned the same area so that it would be easier for us to summarize and analyze the results.

Selection of respondents

In order to fulfill our purpose we decided to do interviews with teachers working at the National University of Laos to get their perspectives on HRD. The teachers we interviewed were former PhD students that have been abroad for PhD training. They were aware of the investment in human resource development at the university and that their own experiences from their education were a part of that which made them appropriate respondents for our study. We chose to do a strategic selection, in this case to select former PhD students, so that the respondents would fit the purpose of our study. This was a good way for us to achieve variation among the respondents (Trost, 2010), that is respondents from different genders and different departments in our case. Our strategic selection also resulted in that we got in touch with English speaking respondents which made us exclude the alternative of using an interpreter. After discussing the matter with our supervisor at the National University of Laos she made a list of candidates to interview.

Before we were given the list of candidates our supervisor from NUOL had contacted the candidates to tell them about the request for respondents. After that we called them and
booked an appointment at a time that was suitable for them. We also informed them about confidentiality and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Further on in this report we will refer to the teachers as “respondents” or “teachers”.

Data collection

Prior to our interviews we decided to do a pilot interview. We interviewed a teacher at NUOL, who also has done a PhD abroad, to test the questions and to see if we had to revise the structure of any of them to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. The questions were constructed to answer our purpose and our research questions about the teachers’ opinions about the human resource development at the National University of Laos. When the teacher did not have any remarks on our questions we chose to use that interview along with the other interviews since we thought it was a useful and informative source. Since we decided to also use our pilot study as a part of our result we had 7 interviews in total in the end. The right amount of respondents is attained when a sense of saturation is reached (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After we had done our seven interviews we felt that we had reach a saturation point where further interviews would not have made that big of a contribution of new knowledge to the result.

Before each interview started we handed over a sheet of paper with the interview questions and the purpose of the study to the interviewee. We did this so that the respondents understood the purpose and the subject of the interview. In some cases we changed some words or phrases in the questions to ease the communication and increase the understanding of the questions true meaning. We also asked each respondent in the end of the interview if they had any questions or thoughts they wanted to share so that they had the chance to straighten out any possible question marks or to clarify some statements.

We wanted to perform the interviews at NUOL since it is the workplace and a natural place for our respondents. This was because we wanted to create an open environment so that the teachers participating in our study were comfortable and could share their real thoughts and opinions with us. During two interviews there was another person present in the room which might have had an effect on the respondents. The other interviews were conducted in empty offices with no disturbing phones or other distractions which creates an interview environment that is wished for (Trost, 2010).
Our strategy during the interviews was that one was responsible for asking the questions and the other one took notes and had the opportunity to ask follow up questions if needed. We felt that we would benefit if we both were present during the interviews because when we later analyzed the result we could discuss different possible interpretations which in turn increased the reliability in our interpretations and analysis. The interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone, with the respondents’ permission, and lasted between 45 minutes to 64 minutes. The recording helped us to remember the conversations in detail and gave us the opportunity to listen to important parts more than once.

**Method for analyzing data**

Before analyzing our result we transliterated all the recorded data word by word. We first organized the respondents’ answers after each interview question since they were constructed to help answer our purpose with this study. We then summarized the answers within the categories “Background”, “Producing skilled graduates”, “Teachers’ possibilities and constraints” and “Future” that was in our interview guide. By doing this we got an overview of the respondents’ opinions. We then summarized the answers within the different categories by using meaning concentration which makes it easier to identify the core in the respondents’ statements (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

After reading the written interview material and the meaning concentrations several times we started to sense different themes among the respondents’ answers that we could connect to our research questions “How is HRD constructed among the teachers at NUOL?” and “How do the teachers describe the possibilities and constraints when it comes to human resource development?” These themes were staff development, field related knowledge and teaching and learning process. When analyzing the result we tried to find common factors and discrepancies between the teachers’ statements and also connections with the policy documents. We also used previous research and literature to support and understand our findings in the result and to help us draw our own conclusions in the discussion.

**Reliability and validity**

Since we chose to do qualitative research we were aware of four steps to increase our credibility. Bryman (2011) writes about reliability and validity in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability regarding qualitative research. Ensuring that the research has been carried out according to the procedure that is applicable is one way of strengthening the credibility of the research. Qualitative research sets to study the unique and
the meaning of the aspect that is being studied, through the socially constructed reality in which transferability can be verified. Dependability is created through thoroughly auditing that there is a full description of all the steps in the research process. Conformability means that the researcher makes sure that the study is carried out without personal values or theoretical background has affected the conclusions of the research (Bryman, ibid).

**Ethical considerations**

When doing interviews there are some other important aspects you need to be aware of. These aspects are considered to be required to be able to perform an ethically approved study. The requirements are approval, confidentiality, consequences and researchers role (own translation). Approval means that the respondents are aware of the purpose and structure of the study and the risks and benefits that may affect the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To meet this requirement we informed the respondents about our purpose and the conditions that concerned them. We also encouraged them to ask questions to us before, during and after the interview to clarify any ambiguities.

Confidentiality means that you cannot reveal any kind of data that will make it possible for anyone to identify the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To keep the respondents anonymous we did not reveal any names, gender or departments where the respondents work. We also felt that this kind of information did not have an impact on the result and the analysis to answer to the purpose of our study so we have not lost any important information by not taking it into consideration.

The researcher further needs to be aware of the consequences that may appear to the participants. To minimize the participant’s experience of any discomfort or harm the researcher needs to take the possible consequences into consideration and compare it to the benefits of the scientific research and see if it is still worth it (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In our research based on interviews we have not identified any severe risks for our respondents.

Finally we have the researcher's role in the study. There is a risk that the researcher will get affected by different factors during a study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Our aim was therefore to act as neutral, open-minded and sensitive to the respondents’ answers as possible so that we would not have an effect on our respondents. We were especially aware of this since we did not share the same cultural, economic or linguistic background with the respondents.
Result

Part 1. How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?

In this part we have analyzed and summarized the policy documents to answer our first research question which is “How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?” We have identified the following categories; poverty reduction, reaching international standards and educational development as the dominating discourses in the policy documents when it comes to how HRD is constructed. The policy documents write about poverty reduction, reaching international standards and education development as common goals that can be achieved through HRD.

Poverty reduction

The NGPES (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d. s. 4) defines poverty in the following way:

*Poverty is the lack of ability to fulfill basic human needs, such as: not having enough food [i.e. less than 2,100 calories per day/capital], lack of adequate clothing, not having permanent housing, not capable of meeting expenses for health care, not capable of meeting educational expenses for one’s self and other family members, and lack of access to transport routes.*

Since a large group of Lao citizens live under these conditions, the aim of the government is to improve the quality of life for Lao people, especially for farmers in the agricultural sector that live under the poorest conditions (Ministry of Education, 2000). The goal is to eradicate poverty in Laos and to be taken off the list of least developed countries.

*The general goals of our future development are to elevate Lao PDR from being one of the least developed countries by keeping the rate of its economic growth at a moderate and stable speed; and to develop human resources who will be equipped with suitable knowledge and ability* (Ministry of Education, 2000:5).

In order to succeed different areas have been identified that needs to be improved. These areas are social services, e.g. education, rural finance, markets, sustainable technologies and last but not least human resource development. These areas need to be mutually supported and improved to be effective (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d). When it comes to poverty reduction through HRD it can be achieved by developing and improving skills among the
people of Laos, for instance by implementing EFA and professional development, e.g. TEI (TESAP, n.d. p. 2).

Since poverty eradication is the overarching policy goal it is given space in the majority of the documents. Poverty eradication depends on the coordination of many different areas, one of which is HRD which in itself cannot eradicate poverty. HRD is however, according to the analyzed policies one important factor in the task of eradicating poverty.

**Reaching international standards**

One of the main goals in the studied polices is to develop the country so that it can compete on the global market. Reaching international standards therefore becomes an important aim, which relies on developing the skills of the population.

> Future socio-economic development process, formerly based mainly on natural resources will be reduced, will concentrate more on human resources which implies a high value for a population characterized by intelligence and scientific and technological knowledge (Ministry of the Education, 2000;10).

HRD is, as the quotation indicates, constructed as a tool in the effort to meet socio-economic needs. By generating qualified people with experience Laos sets out to reach international standards, for example by abolishing illiteracy and improving education and research (Ministry of Education, 2000:6). The concentration on human resources includes modern science, more technical knowledge and management improvements inter alia (Ministry of Education, 2000:11).

> ...it is of high priority to develop human resources of high competency, skills and experience to comply with their assigned positions, particularly leadership cadres, administrators and professional staff (Ministry of the Education, 2000;10).

The documents point out that improving the management of different institutions e.g. TEI or administration is an important factor in the human resource development (Ministry of Education, n.d, p. 3). This implies an underlying assumption that leadership is essential for building effective institutions.
**Education development**

The Ministry of Education (2000:11) discusses education in relation to human resources as follows:

*Education is considered as the core of human resource development by upgrading people’s knowledge, alleviating poverty, providing job opportunities for young people as well as building adequate number of experienced intellectuals.*

There is an agreement across the analyzed policies that HRD depends on the general improvement of the education system, and that education for all, EFA, is a policy target. This improvement includes strengthening basic and higher education, developing technical and vocational training, e.g. teacher training and eradicating illiteracy (NGPES, n.d). The rational is that a better educated population will strengthen labor productivity and as a consequence reduce poverty.

When the policy makers state that poverty can be reduced by developing and improving the education they establish that the real problem is lack of quality education. In turn this implies that the people of Laos lack skills. That is in line with the country’s history of being a third world country and their goals to reach international standards.

**Other important discourses**

The discourses we have found to be dominating in the policies are connected to HRD and poverty reduction but during the analysis we also found competing discourses. These discourses were not related to neither HRD nor poverty reduction but instead connected to conserving culture and to raise ideal citizens. The policy makers of the official documents presuppose that for instance teachers should work in line with the political party’s guidelines and work for conserving their own culture, values and the unity of Laos.

*The general goals of education in 21st century are to educate Lao people to be good citizens and loyal to the country and to the people’s democratic regime*  

The slogan for Lao People’s Democratic Republic is: “Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity” which gives an indication of the policy makers’ presupposition in this case. The strategic plan for NUOL (National University of Laos, 2011; 13f) is clear with the fact that it is important for the personnel at the university to “have good behaviors, morals and
generosity” and also to be “the best stereotype of the society” and to train the teacher to “solidly master the political traits” and to train them “to comply with the political party…”. The same document also writes that one mission is to “Preserve and sustain culture, customs and tradition of the nation, and selectively accept international cultures and traditions” (ibid).

Although the main focus is on poverty reduction these quotations give an indication of values that also are important to strive for locally which point to that the GOL not only is concerned with adapting to international influences but it also actively pursues national goals.

What fails to be problematized in the documents?

It is not only important to identify the dominating discourses in the policies, it is also important to scrutinize the policy documents in order to reveal the limits in the documents. For example, what fails to be problematized and what is not written as a part of the problem? Where are the silences? (Bacchi, 2009).

One issue that is being excluded in the national policy documents is the problem with corruption facing Laos. According to Keuleers (2002) corruption is a huge problem in Laos, mainly because of factors like increased donor aid, weak legal regulation, low salaries and new possibilities enabled by the recently implemented economic policies. Acknowledging this in policy documents is not common but the issue of corruption is, according to Keuleers (ibid) being recognized by the government in Laos to be a direct obstacle in their goal to eradicate poverty and to achieve the development goals.

The policy makers also formulate goals for how to gain new knowledge and competence as a step in HRD but fail to establish a strategy for how to put it into concrete use. For instance, when it comes to improving education they promote the teachers and students to go abroad for higher studies to improve their skills but when they come back there is no plan on how to implement their knowledge into new ways to work etc. In the interview result you can see that teachers mention this to be a problem as well.

One exclusion that is of great significance is the fact that these national policy documents are most probably affected by the donor organizations requests of what they think are suitable solutions for poverty reduction in the country. Laos is in great need of the money that donor organizations etc. provide which in turn make the organizations take a favorable position when it comes to making strategies for educational improvements among other socio-economic efforts (Bäcktorp, 2007). Although this is not recognized or discussed in the
policies it is important to remember that the content in the policies most likely are affected by donors’ points of view. As Odén (2009) points out, industrialized countries often have motives other than charity when it comes to aid giving, i.e. it is a part of the foreign affairs which includes supervision over military issues and raw material resources etc. The focus and suggested strategies therefore run the risk of not primarily being based on local needs and conditions but rather to strive to fulfill the expectations of donors and how they think would be an appropriate way to solve the problem of poverty in a developing country.

Part 2. How is HRD constructed among the teachers at NUOL?

In this part we have summarized the interview result in following central themes; “Staff development”, “Field related knowledge” and “Teaching and learning process” that answer our second research question “How is HRD constructed among the teachers at NUOL?”

Staff development

Some of the respondents think about HRD as something that is essential for developing the country through more knowledge among the people and through more research. Many teachers mention that education in Laos is of low quality and that the skills among teachers and students need to be improved. One teacher talks about the fact that both primary and secondary school needs to be developed in order to provide better education before students enter university. The respondents also said that many teachers do not know English so well. To develop this takes time and money. According to one of the respondent, a way to develop teachers’ knowledge is to establish cooperation with other countries. The teacher continues to say that they would like to go and study in Thailand or Vietnam for example but that they are worried that these countries will not accept them because of their low quality education.

One way is to develop teacher through a study link in other country. We would like to go to study in Thailand, Vietnam or something but we are afraid they won’t accept our grade there because they think we have to low quality.

Cooperation between the faculties is also needed to be able to change education the teacher adds.

Since there is a lack of teachers in rural areas one respondent says that a policy should be written so that more teachers will go and teach in remote areas. The reason for this is that some teachers who have taken their degree do not want to go to the countryside to teach, most of them want to stay in the city where the salary is a bit higher. Another teacher adds that it
would be a good idea to raise the salaries for the teachers who work in the rural areas so that more teachers would be motivated to work there. The respondent also explained that they need to spend their own money on material such as books, paper, pencils and computers etc. which is not always easy with the low salary the teachers have.

Working as a teacher is not a popular job according to one respondent therefore the government has made a policy to reward those teachers that do well in order to achieve the goals for HRD. Those teachers can get a higher academic position in the university and also get their salary raised with 30 – 40% the teacher continues to say.

\[ It \text{ is not many who want to become teacher now but the government has a policy for them. If you do a good job and is a skilled teacher then you can get an academic position in university. If you get this “award” you get a 30-40\% higher pay. } \]

The same teacher explains that the living costs are increasing but the teachers’ salaries are still low compared to other jobs. This forces some to stop working as teachers even though they like their jobs the respondent says. Another teacher repeats the problem about the fact that some teachers are absent during office hours except during their classes because they work at their extra job which makes in-service training difficult. This is a big constraint in the human resource development process.

\[ Living \text{ conditions are increasing and compared to other jobs teaching salary is very low. Some have to stop teaching even though they like it. Teachers do not come to their office at all, just do their class and then go home to their extra job. } \]

According to a teacher at one of the natural science departments, the department is well equipped and therefore NUOL offers in-service training for teachers from other schools. It is however difficult to gather the teachers since they have extra jobs that take time, the same teacher adds. According to some respondents, the construction of a Research Centre in Laos is necessary. If this is not accomplished it will be difficult to develop capacity among teachers and students, one respondent concludes. An obstacle according to one respondent is that the government does not understand which important changes that needs to be made in order to improve education. The respondent continuous to say that teachers are trying to explain to the government the importance of improvements they feel need to be realized, so that they will understand and provide support of different kinds.
The researchers and the teachers know what they need to do and what’s important but the government does not understand they do not understand why we need to establish a Research Centre of Laos. We have to explain to them so that they can improve. They can get funds from abroad and human support.

Field related knowledge

Respondents from natural science emphasize the importance of practical ‘know-how’ to develop human resources, for example that the students are able to do laboratory work and experiments. Another one also says that learning by doing is important. The teacher explains that the students need to know how to do experiments and handle equipment if they want to study on a higher level e.g. Master or PhD. The same person also says that in order to get skilled graduates they need both experience and theory and that the teachers also try to promote students to continue to study in order to keep producing skilled graduates.

HRD is among the science teachers constructed as the ability to handle technical equipment. This is not only restricted to laboratory equipment but is also discussed in terms of computer skills. The students need to learn how to use the equipment and there is also a wish from the teachers that the students should learn to use some computer programs, e.g. MathLab and Microsoft Office. One teacher says that this is necessary when studying on a higher level and that there is not enough equipment for the students right now to learn what is needed. To make this happen another respondent wants to make all their old equipment ready for use in order to improve the quality of the teaching. The respondent however points out that putting efforts on repairs and maintenance can have negative side effects for teachers’ private economies:

I would like to study how to use [the old equipment] in class and make some research on that. In the beginning...if I do that I need to put down extra time so little bit money to support my family. If I do that I can’t go to extra teaching.

Both social and natural science teachers think it is important with a functioning infrastructure and teaching materials and methods in the teaching and learning process. Teachers from social science emphasize the need for proper classrooms and student centered learning to help the students to think by themselves and other analytical approaches.

In Lao policy we try to promote the quality education development in the teaching method, promote the student to learn to think and do by themselves. Student
centered teaching is very important. Now it is too much reading from textbooks and summaries them, we need to bring forward the students ideas.

Teaching and learning process

New pedagogy
Several respondents talked about the importance of implementing the so called new pedagogy which is described as a student centered approach which focuses on teaching students to think critically and independently rather than to recite textbook content which according to the respondents is a common practice in Lao classrooms at all levels.

In Lao policy we try to promote quality education development in the teaching method [we] promote the student to learn to think and do by themselves. Student centered teaching is very important. Now it is too much reading from textbooks and summaries [of] them, we need to bring forward the students ideas.

One teacher says that ethnic background also could have an effect on the students’ knowledge. The teachers’ experience is that different ethnic groups have different amount of knowledge and also diverse ways of believing in knowledge and knowledge production. The teacher continuous to say that students from one ethnic group generally does not like learning natural science while students from another generally think that knowledge can change their living conditions. Students from the first group only likes social science and according to the same teacher a possible reason for this might be that their cultural beliefs do not correspond with the “laws of nature” taught in natural sciences.

It is also important according to one teacher that HRD can occur when the teachers learn from the students, e.g. by continuously evaluating the teacher to be able to improve their teaching which will develop teachers professional competence.

And also I am teacher but when a student explains I have to learn from them...For example when I finish teaching in one semester I have to ask them to evaluate my teaching, how I can improve in the future. So I also learn from them.

Another teacher agrees and also says that they need the students to share and develop their ideas. According to the respondent some teachers use an evaluating process but some do not. The teachers who do not use the evaluating process think pretty high of themselves and they do not care about the students that much the respondent adds.
**Students’ participation**

There are somewhat different ideas among the respondents regarding where the main responsibility for improving the teaching and learning process should be placed. One teacher says that now it is the teacher’s duty to improve their teaching. “It’s my duty now how to improve my teaching”. Another respondent however argues that HRD also depends on the will and motivation of the students. The quality of education can not only be improved by the teachers and the teaching, the students also have a big part in strengthening the quality, e.g. if the students know English they are able to take part of more textbooks, research and documents.

*Everyone needs to be aware about the goals. If I can make my students to think by themselves I can strengthen the quality of education. It is also very important that the teachers learn by the students as well.*

**Internship**

Another issue that was brought up among respondents was the relationship between the university and the surrounding society. There were problems identified regarding the sustainability of HRD since many times, when the students have received their degree it is not always easy to get a job within the profession they are educated for, one teacher says. To increase their chances of getting a job natural science students for instance, go to different factories on internships, both to get the students experience but also to find out what the companies need in terms of work force so that they can change and adapt the programs at the university after the demand in the labor market, the teacher explains. “It is difficult to get a job in the profession you have thought, for example physics. We let students go to factories and see what they need to easier get a job and develop the program.”

**Strengthening education through cooperation**

In order to succeed with poverty reduction another teacher emphasizes the importance of education. In order to reduce the poverty, the teacher continuous, they should strengthen the education by inviting teachers from Vietnam, Korea and Thailand to come and teach at NUOL. That will give the Lao students a chance to practice languages and learn new knowledge.

*Yes, I think that...but of course we need to improve the student, yes. Right now we try to connect to the other university, for example in the Vietnam to come here to teaching some subject, yes. And, yes, but not too much, just only two or three subjects.*

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Development of the curriculum is another part of HRD that needs to be improved one respondent says. They also need to enhance the teaching and learning at the university through scholarship the respondent adds. The respondent continuous to explain that there is a great need for improvement but that it is impossible to do everything now because there are many obstacles to overcome, but gradually there can be a change.

Yes, yes step by step, little by little. I improve little by little, slowly slowly. But sometime I need to jump to the high level, I need to improve, that’s impossible now, okay step by step. Not fast but I continue little bit, little bit. Try to do everything I can do.

The respondents mainly identify HRD through teacher development, sufficient supply of equipment, sufficient funds, student centered teaching, cooperation abroad, students’ background knowledge and incentives for teachers. Within these they identify possibilities and constraints in the process of HRD.

**Part 3. Teachers’ constraints and possibilities regarding HRD?**

In this part we will attend to research question number three “How do the teachers describe the possibilities and constraints when it comes to human resource development?” The result is, as in part two presented under the following themes: staff development, technical resources and teaching and learning process, where we specifically look at constraints and possibilities.

**Staff development**

**Constraints**

One concern that has been expressed is that when teachers return from studies abroad they get higher positions at NUOL but their new knowledge is not being used.

No when they [teachers that have studied abroad] come back these people have more ideas, good ideas in how to work. But I had a meeting earlier. When many people come back they have improved their knowledge they need some high position so they change from academic style and come to the administrator. That mean in term of academy we not use people who we train.

The same person also expressed that some teachers that go abroad to upgrade their knowledge only want the certificate and do not care about the quality of the education. “Some people
when they have opportunity to [study abroad] they think they like to have some certificate or diploma but they do not think about the quality [of education]”.

Another respondent thinks that some teachers only teach because they need the money not because they are eager to improve the quality of the teaching.

One constraint to staff development is lack of funds which effects numerous of things e.g. possibilities to equip schools in rural areas and teachers’ possibilities to undergo in-service training. Without funds teachers from other cities cannot afford accommodation and transportation during in-service training one respondent explains. “I do teacher training here for the teachers who are able to come, those without money do not come. Some teachers want to come and learn but they have no funds for it”.

There are still some people in charge of the funds for scholarships who are misusing these and prioritizing their relatives so that they will get the money instead of the most qualified.

    I mean that I have my son you have your daughter something like that but I am at higher position. I can take that fund to my son or daughter. Is it the fund limited. Is to everyone who apply. This is the negative outcomes.

Another big constraint to staff development is the low salaries which have a number of consequences that ultimately affect the quality of education and hence visions for HRD. Compared with private companies, teachers’ salaries are much lower. Several teachers say that this causes a lot of teachers to get a second job, e.g. opening your own minimart or doing extra teaching at private schools. The consequences of this, one teacher says, are that teachers do not spend their working day in school except during their classes. There are however differences of opinions around this. Some of the respondents think that having an extra job is a good way of getting an extra income while other think that it takes time from their work at the university and that in turn will lower the quality of their teaching. One respondent said that as long as the extra job is teaching then it is okay to have an extra job.

    Yes, but nobody is, some teachers have two jobs but maybe is, not other job, teaching only. You can teach in the university and then you can go to teach in the private university or high school or something like that...That does not matter because we can have time for teaching is okay.
Another respondent is negative to having an extra job since it takes time from their full time job at the university. "Yes, because some cannot come to the office for work whole day, some teachers come only half day and then they go to the other job”.

**Possibilities**
A positive thing that is being mentioned is that they can apply for funds for research projects and maintenance of facilities and also scholarships to go abroad to do teacher training.

One way that the quality of education is being increased is when the teachers travel to different schools around the country and inform about how they can improve their education in high school one teacher says. The project is supported by the government with specific funds, the respondent adds.

**Technical resources**

**Constraints**
The teachers explain that their Internet is slow and does not always work. The lack of proper Internet is causing problems in many situations. It gets harder to communicate with other teachers, especially teachers in remote areas that do not have any accessible roads and where communication via Internet would support communication. “The books are okay but we need the internet and that’s really slow”, “We have no Internet and are not able to connect to the other teachers. We can only use a few [web] pages”.

It is not many of the young teachers that can use the equipment that the school has because they do not get a chance to use it enough during their teacher training, one respondent says. The equipment is essential to be able to master their future work.

*Yes, sure, we have problem with our program, we have to make, spend time how to use the equipment because the equipment can tell them deep knowledge. Because the formula and the equation they can learn by themselves. But the equipment they have to use by their hands so that’s why we have to spend time for them use the equipment.*

**Possibilities**
On the way towards better education and to improve human resources a positive thing is that most of the equipment that NUOL has is of good quality and high standards, one respondent says. They also have some older equipment that needs to be repaired so more teachers and
students will be able to use it which there is a high motivation to do but there is not much time
to do it.

As a physics teacher I would like my students to learn how to use the equipment
for important labs. Only theory in classes no one uses equipment, I’m going to fix
it. Teachers need time to prepare the equipment if they going to use it. Because
teacher salary is low they have extra jobs instead of preparing equipment.

Teaching and learning process

Constraints
An obstacle according to one respondent is that some teachers only follow the textbooks when
they teach instead of using student centered learning. The teacher says that it is beneficial to
have a teaching method that combines this new way of teaching with textbook reading.

The respondents all mention difficulties in the teaching and learning process when it comes to
facilities. They say there is not enough lecture halls and the standard of those they have is
low. For example the classrooms are missing windows and the lecture halls are too small as
they sometimes have classes with up to 150 students. This is especially a problem during
raining seasons when they cannot go outside one teacher says. “Sometimes over 150 students
I had to organize group work...very difficult for me. For example the second term when
raining season our room is not good”. This does not make ideal conditions for teaching and
learning.

Possibilities
There is a great lack of books and material in Lao language one respondent says. A positive
thing is that they have a library. It is however small and does not have many books written in
Lao language, most of the books are in Thai or English another teacher says. The teacher
continues to say that a lot of the students can understand Thai since it is similar to Lao but
only some students know English. ”But because, we have the Lao version books is not too
much and the library we have some English version but some student can read but some
student cannot read the English”.

Another teacher says that teachers quite commonly translate books into Lao language and also
write books about their teaching subject themselves. Another opinion was that the quality of
the textbooks has increased since they changed them into books with the same content as in
Thailand and Vietnam. “Before it was a different but now the quality is the same. Now our
books is the same as those in Thailand and Vietnam, for example when you’re teaching mathematics in high school the same”.

One teacher believes that it is possible to influence the teaching because they have the possibility to teach indoors as well as outdoors which makes the teachers flexible in their way of teaching. Another teacher from another department thinks that there are not sufficient funds to be able to do field works which would help the students to learn by doing by observing but that this can be applied for. The teaching and learning process is constituted by both practical and theoretical elements and the combinations of these are essential in order to reach HRD.

Another teacher also adds that they try to give the students a lot of help and advice and they also try to bring forward the ambitious and gifted students in order to strengthen the quality and produce skilled graduates.

In summary the teachers list lack of knowledge, low teacher salaries and inadequate equipment as the biggest constraints when it comes to human resource development. The possibilities to develop human resources is that the quality of the textbooks is increased, that the NUOL goes to other schools to inform about education improvements and equipment and also that it is getting easier to apply for scholarships to study abroad.

Analysis

In this analysis we will answer how HRD is constructed in policy documents, how the teachers construct HRD and also what possibilities and constraints they see with the support from our research review.

How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?

Poverty reduction

One issue of significance regarding the policy is the fact that national policy documents most probably are affected by the donor organizations requests of what they think are suitable solutions for poverty reduction through HRD in the country. Although this is not recognized or discussed in the policies it is important to remember that the content in the policies in one way or another also are most likely to be affected by donors’ own interests. As Odén (2009) remarks, industrialized countries often have underlying motives when it comes to aid giving such as monitoring the developing country’s resources. This made us wonder whether the strategies for the improvements stated in the national documents really are the best solutions
for the country of Laos? Or are the policies rather attempts at satisfying foreign organizations and their ideas regarding what would be appropriate ways to solve the problem of poverty in a developing country? Laos is becoming more and more open toward Western influences regarding cultural and economic practices. Even though the Lao authorities seem to be positive towards the Western way of thinking regarding educational development there are still conflicts between the culture and the dominating norms in Laos and the culture and the dominating norms in the West. This results in that the solution for poverty reduction by Western means is not necessarily suitable in the Lao educational context (Stephens, 2007). To reach the goals for poverty reduction and the production of skilled graduates (HRD) continuously student centered education has been implemented in Laos. Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh (2011) write that western policies and the directions of these are neoliberal. This is conflicting with Laos’s policies which are socialist. In the past teacher centered teaching has been the dominating method which gives the teachers an authority position. In Lao culture respect for the elder, teachers and leaders and also to put your own interest aside is important. The switch to where the individual should be in the center and play a part in the production of knowledge is indeed a challenge and a reason to understand the difficulties for Laos and the time it will take to implement the guidelines for HRD written in policies.

**Reaching international standards**

Laos need to reach international standard to be able to compete and to have an internationally known university which is one of the goals in policies. The focus, among other things, is to reach international standards in the work with quality teaching through student centered education and also by establishing a research center that will help to strengthen the knowledge. The national policy documents write about Education for All and student centered learning. All this is included in the education reform though there are numerous constraints to achieve this. First of all to implement a new way of teaching from Western influences, which had decades to develop the education system, is difficult because of culture, money and different political situations. It takes time to accomplish the content in policy documents, ‘Rome was not built in a day’. As Bäcktorp (2007) writes, there are ongoing discussions about learner centered education and EFA among educationalist regarding how to define, understand and implement learner centered education. In the best case scenario this would give rise to a discussion about local needs in the education reform process which donors would take into consideration when creating policies. These needs consist of the necessity for education to all people in Laos which need to be in line with the local possibilities to making
that available. Bäcktorp (2007) continuous to say that if these different needs will be understood, the donor organizations and Laos could meet as equals and a partnership where recognition of the difference in power and as a consequence, the ability to influence the agenda, could be reached.

A problem that some of the respondents point out is the supervision of funding e.g. the money from donor organizations is not monitored and that scholarships are given to relatives instead of the most qualified students. This is an important aspect to deal with for Laos in the case of the poverty reduction since Keuleer (2002) comments that corruption is a direct threat in their goals to eradicate poverty. The problem of corruption needs to be solved on several levels, e.g. legal, cultural and political levels. Although Buddhism has had a great impact in the Lao society and has implemented values as honesty, morality and self-discipline the governance system lacks responsibility and transparency (ibid). Since it is the government that controls how to distribute the money from donor organizations and private investments to schools and universities in the country it is of great importance that all the money is used to achieve its purpose. One might believe that if they can manage to fight the corruption education has a chance to improve considerably resulting in a faster and more qualitative development of human resource that in turn will help to reduce the poverty.

**Education development**

In policy, education is the core of HRD where, among other goals, improving people’s skills is of high priority. In the process for HRD the policies write about the need for more equipment, the ability to speak English and teachers getting more knowledge and experience from other countries with a more high quality education. The focus in policy is to ‘create’ people who are competent and independent and that will contribute to the country’s socio-economic development. There is no established strategy regarding how to put the newly gained knowledge, e.g. from teachers who get the opportunity to study abroad, into concrete use. By failing to do so the new knowledge might not come in handy where it is needed the most. Ellström’s (1992, p. 106) definition of HRD as “an arrangement that is done to improve individuals and groups competence development in their daily work” relates to this issue.

When it comes to getting more equipment and learning to speak English it directly improves students and teachers competence development in their daily work. These are concrete tools that they can use in the education, e.g. the English will help them to get access to more textbooks in the library and the equipment will make them able to do more advanced experiments. In order not to let knowledge go unused a strategy in where it best can come in
handy and passed on could help to reach the goals for HRD. When it comes to spreading knowledge Bounyasone & Keosada (2011) write that education would gain by having a network that starts from bottom to top instead of top to bottom for directives. Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh (2011) also write that student centered learning should be adapted to the local needs in method, form and content. This way the new knowledge, e.g. English and equipment can be spread through the local system.

**Discourses**

An interesting aspect to analyze is the relation between the discourses we found in the policies. We identified the dominating discourses to be poverty reduction, reaching international standards and education development and the competing discourse to be conserving culture and to raise ideal citizens. According to Stephens (2007; 209) the Western culture and Lao culture are conflicting when it comes to education. The Lao people are emphasizing a great deal on good citizenship, discipline and patriotism in comparison to the many Western traditions that focus more on individual performance. This is also something Tabulawa (2003) and Bäcktorp (2007) discuss as an issue for the donors to consider when collaborating with third world countries.

One interpretation is therefore that the policy makers want to meet international standards of education which is a big challenge and going to need several stepping stones on the way. One stepping-stone could be to more actively incorporate Lao culture and traditions which can help policies to be understandable on a local level. Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) and Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh (2011) describe that local ways e.g. cultural and traditions needs to be present in the teaching method, content, networks and more in the formation education reform. There are tensions between what the policies describe to be done and how the education system is organized which is in a hierarchical way. That interferes with the student centered approach and individual learning where the students are supposed to take a lot of room to gain new knowledge which a strict system will not allow. Bäcktorp (2007) writes that these values regarding preserving culture and traditions work as nation- and identity building in a country that has been separated.
HRD among teachers and possibilities and constraints they see

Staff development

A big constraint in the struggle to perform quality teaching and to create skilled graduates is lack of knowledge, low teacher salaries and inadequate equipment which the MOE, as makers of policies, should prioritize in order to reach their goals for quality teaching. It is essential to supply each school with adequate facilities and equipment to be able to improve the quality of education through new methods of teaching (MOE, 2005, as referred in Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 89). According to one teacher it is also important that HRD can occur when teachers learn from students, e.g. by continuously evaluating the teacher with the purpose of improving their teaching which will develop teachers professional competence.

Teachers who come back from studies abroad often get a higher position within administration at NUOL. This means that the teachers’ new skills are not being used in line with the need for more teachers with high competence which is essential in strengthening the quality of education. Another aspect to this is that new knowledge that teachers have learnt abroad still can be passed on due to the fact that they now know English better and can handle equipment better which can be spread via daily contact with colleagues instead of formal classes. More important is that they now have the opportunity to develop research practice at the university which according to Ministry of Education (2000) is a great need for in Laos. The fact that there is no plan in the policy documents on how to implement the new knowledge from teachers that have been studying abroad can be explained by the general, rather than a specifying, character of the documents. There are no detailed plans in the policies, those are decentralized to each involved area. However because the respondents say that there is no plan on how to implement the new knowledge it is an indication that the decentralization is not working properly.

To be able to implement the teacher education reform incentives for teacher development is vital (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011). This is also what our respondents say is necessary through higher salaries so teachers can have one job instead of two which make them more present at work and improvements can therefore easier be achieved.

Field related knowledge and technical resources

Both natural and social science teachers say that it is important to have tools to be able to develop HR. Social science teachers and natural science teachers talk differently about
equipment. Natural science needs more equipment in their subject to be able to do experiments while the teachers in social science emphasize the importance of student centered teaching. The definition of HRD is improvements of individuals and groups in order to strengthen their professional competence (Ellström, 1992). It is important to organize sufficient tools for the teachers. In Bäcktorps (2007) dissertation you can read that student centered education in the beginning was not easy to implement because a lot of schools did not have enough material or facilities to be able to perform the teaching method. This also means that all the newly graduated teachers need to know how to use the equipment which a lot of them do not. If the teachers do not have enough competence when they graduate then it is an indication that the HRD process is not working properly.

**Teaching and learning process**

The respondents talk about the importance of knowing English, both students and teachers. This is something that is being discussed in connection to quality of education. To reach the goals for HRD English can help the teachers to do research and communicate with other countries which in the end will strengthen the quality of education. As Laos still have students that cannot finish primary and secondary school, not enough teachers in rural areas and lack of equipment and proper facilities one cannot help to wonder if that is the right place to put all the energy and money in the HRD process. Although it is still important to develop higher education simultaneously otherwise the quality of education will be increased too slowly and the students that finish primary school will not have a school with high quality to continue to study in. As Hirosata & Kitamura (2009) describe working-level problems that need to be reduced to achieve capacity development e.g. system inadequacy and insufficient management, English can help NUOL to reach the goals for HRD for example through cooperation abroad. Western influences from donor organizations in Lao pervade the policy documents according to Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh (2011). This could have an effect on the way the respondents think about English as something that is important to know which will improve the quality of education to a great extent. This idea might come from donor organizations and their consultants who come to Laos and implement new ways of education and in the same time implies what is “important”.

One conception from the teachers was that there are differences between ethnic groups regarding how they think about knowledge. The teacher needs to adapt their way and speed of teaching after the students’ different levels of knowledge in order to develop skilled
graduates. This can be understood through Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanhs (2011) dissertation where they write about how different students have different needs. For example the teachers need to help ethnic minorities and face difficulties in their education because of their ethnicity and language to be able to strengthen the quality of education. This is where student centered teaching comes in handy to be able to make the students think by themselves and learn after their own ability and by this achieve human resource development.

Discussion

Based on our policy analysis and empirical material, with our purpose in focus, we have drawn main conclusions. In this final chapter we will also discuss our chosen method, ethical considerations, credibility, improvements and then finally give suggestions for further research.

Main conclusions

The purpose of this study was to describe, understand and analyze how human resource development, as part of the national poverty reduction strategy in Laos, is constructed in policy documents and understood among university teachers in Laos. To answer this we had three research questions. The first one was “How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?” To answer this question we analyzed four policy documents about poverty reduction. The main conclusion from these policy documents is that in order to reduce poverty human resource development is essential to be able to strengthen the skills and knowledge among the people in Laos. This will be achieved by strengthening the quality of teaching. The government of Laos aims to reach international standards, which includes improvements of technical knowledge, management and leadership improvements and education development, to be able to develop socio-economic needs. We also discovered discourses that problematized subjects like corruption, donor organizations impact on policy making and lack of strategies to make use of new knowledge from teachers that have been abroad.

Another main conclusion is that Western influences affect the content in Lao policies, which is in line with the previous research we have presented. The cultural differences between the donor organizations and Laos need to be understood and the need for local traditions and culture must be implemented in the policies and the educational system in Laos. This way, Lao policy could possibly be better suited for Lao needs.
The second research question is “How is HRD constructed among teachers at NUOL?” HRD was spoken of in terms of teacher development which in turn relied on availability of equipment, funds, ability to practice student-centered teaching and cooperation with educational institutions abroad. According to UNDP (2011) and Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh (2011) these are all essential to get Laos to reach their socio-economic goals and to leave the list of least developed countries. They are steps in the work of reducing the poverty in Laos through which more people can go to school which will lead to more educated people in Laos. The last research question is “How do the teachers describe the possibilities and constraints when it comes to human resource development?” The teachers identified lack of knowledge, low teacher salaries and inadequate equipment as the biggest constraints. The possibilities were that the quality of the textbooks has increased, teachers at NUOL work pro-actively with informing other schools about education improvements and equipment and also that it is getting easier to apply for scholarships to study abroad. This can be understood in line with Hirosata & Kitamura (2009) who write about the goal to leave the list of least developed countries through an education system reform and improvements of the education system and social development. Today there are also quite many teachers that have a Master or PhD degree at NUOL that helps to achieve this goal with knowledge in English, knowledge about equipment and possibilities to implement more research at the university.

**Critical reflections on method**

We found our method of data collection to be the best for our type of study. By performing qualitative interviews we were able to get a deeper knowledge, for example by observing the respondents’ body language and facial expressions as Bryman (2011) writes. We could not have done that if we were to do observations or surveys. We also found the number of respondents to be enough to be able to do a quality research, which also Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) write is important to achieve, without getting additional work that would not contribute with any new knowledge.

Since we did a pilot interview before the other interviews we had the chance to revise our interview guide in case of any ambiguities which ensured the questions to be valid and comprehensible. In retrospect we see that the questions in the interview guide were well made to answer our research questions and our purpose. The fact that we used the pilot interview in our result did not affect the result since we did not make any changes in our interview guide afterwards. Also the pilot interview was performed in the same way as the other interviews.
We got a list of respondents to interview which were teachers that had been abroad for their PhD. As there is not that many teachers that had the possibility to go abroad the amount of respondents were limited. Because we wanted to get each individual person’s opinions it did not matter that we had gotten the list of interview candidates from our supervisor in Laos and therefore it also did not affect the result. We think it is highly unlikely that our supervisor would give us a list of people that would only answer in a certain way, especially when the interviews were anonymous.

Another thing that should be mentioned is the language barrier. The language could be identified as a problem in this study since we performed our interviews in English and neither our respondents nor ourselves have English as our mother tongue. Although we sometimes experienced misunderstandings with our respondents we often solved it with the help of each other by clarifying or rephrasing our questions. We also found it to be of great use that we actually lived in Laos and visited NUOL during the time we did our research since it made us to get an understanding of the context and conditions in which our respondents live their daily lives in. We would never get this kind of understanding by doing telephone interviews or writing emails.

Validity and reliability is important. Though, it is also important to not put too big of a focus on this since it can hinder the creativity and variations during the interview. When we interviewed the respondents we got to improvise and follow up interesting thoughts instead of strictly following the interview guide which made the result more useful.

**Areas for improvement**

Although we are in overall satisfied with the way we have performed our study we have identified some areas of improvements. In our interview guide in question number five "Have you experienced any positive/negative outcomes of human resource development in your own work at the university?" we should have divided the question into two questions. Firstly we should have asked about the positive outcomes and then the negative outcomes to reduce any confusion the respondent might have experienced by asking two questions in one. This resulted in that we sometimes had to repeat the later question to get an answer from the respondent. In the end it did not have an impact on our result but just to make it more clear for all parts involved.

The second thing is that during two of our interviews there was another person present in the room because the interviews were held in their office which is shared by a couple of teachers.
We did not identify this to be a problem, especially since the teachers got to choose the room themselves, and we did not feel that our two respondents were inhibited to give their honest opinions but to be sure we would choose to not have any other persons present in the room during the interviews in the future.

**Ethical considerations**

Regarding the selection of respondents we were interested in having teachers from different departments to see if there were any differences in how they experienced HRD and the work with it. We found differences between the departments but mainly differences that were connected to the Faculty of Natural Science and the Faculty of Social Science. Consequently we chose to only mention these differences between the faculties when we found them to have an impact on our result. We therefore decided to leave out the respondents’ names, gender and departments in order to protect their anonymity since it did not influence our conclusions. Protecting the respondents’ anonymity is important according to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) to minimize any discomfort or risk that they otherwise may experience.

When it comes to the researcher's role we were a bit worried about the fact that we were two students from a western country and that our age and position could have an effect on the interviews in terms of the respondents wanting to give answers that satisfied us instead of their real opinions. Since all of our respondents have been living in a western country for several years during their PhD we did not perceive this to be a problem during any of our interviews.

**Credibility**

By working in a systematical way in our preparations before the interviews, during the interviews and after the interviews with the compilations of the result we believe that the credibility of our research is high. We have worked with the material thoroughly in every step, particular during the transliteration, compilation and analysis of the result to be sure to not miss out on any important information. We also believe that we have benefited from being two persons performing this research since we have had the possibility to discuss different perspectives in viewing the collected material. By getting this wider angle it made it easier for us to do the analysis.
Further research

For further research it would be interesting to interview more teachers and to include both primary and secondary schools around the country. This would enable teachers from the countryside to give their opinions about HRD and what constraints and possibilities they see. This would especially be interesting since the consequences of poverty are the biggest on the countryside. It would also be interesting to redo this study in a period of five to ten years to see if HRD policy and practice remain much the same or not.

Last words

This thesis has been interesting to write and the fact that we could travel to Laos and conduct our interviews there has given us extra inspiration. Our study has given us a deeper knowledge about HRD in a third world country and also knowledge about different ways in how HRD can be performed that could be of use for us in our future work as human resource managers.
References


Appendix 1

Interview guide

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to describe, understand and analyze how human resource development, as part of the national poverty reduction strategy in Laos, is understood among university teachers in Laos.

The following research questions guide our inquiry:

- How is HRD constructed in policy documents in Laos?
- How is HRD constructed among teachers at the National University of University?
- How do the teachers describe the possibilities and constraints when it comes to human resource development?

Interview questions categorized in themes

Background

1) Tell us about your position at the National University of Laos and which tasks it includes. (How many years have you had this position? How do you like your job?)

2) What made you travel abroad to become a PhD? (In which country did you study, what did you study and when?)

Human resource development at NUOL

3) What is human resource development to you?

4 a) Are you familiar with the national goals regarding human resource management?

4 b) What effect do you think that national goals for human resource development have on the teaching at the university?

(Summary of human resource development in national policy documents:

- Meet the need for skilled graduates with knowledge in modern science and technology.
- Strengthening teachers’ competence at all levels through teacher training.
- Raise the quality of the education through supply of more teaching and teachers, learning equipment, renovation of existing schools and new text book developments.
- Rural areas will be given more opportunities to strengthen the competence among teachers and students.
- Increase and the gender equality and girls’ participation in school.)
5) Have you experienced any positive/negative outcomes of human resource development in your own work at the university?

6) How do you think that the teaching practices at the university can contribute to “producing” skilled graduates?
*Skilled graduate= educated professionals, student with a high level of education*

**Teacher’s constraints/possibilities**

7) Do you feel that you have the resources you need to perform quality teaching?

8) What is your view on your own ability to influence your own teaching? (Do you feel that you can adapt your way of teaching to your own desire of what is best for the purpose of the course?)

9) Which are the main constraints for the university and its teachers to achieve the national goals regarding human resource development?

**Future**

10) Do you see any connections between the production of skilled graduates at the university and poverty reduction in Laos? (How do you think that skilled graduates can contribute to poverty reduction?)

11) What are your thoughts regarding teaching at university level in Laos in the future?