Civil Society: A Powerful Concept

A critical discourse analysis of the relationship between DFAT and NGOs in Laos

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Abstract

"Civil society" is a powerful concept. The neoliberal discourse of civil society has been dominant within international development work since the 1990s. This discourse views a strong civil society as a facilitator of democracy, which serves as the premise for "good development". The discourse has been adopted by powerful Western governments and is promoted in Non-Governmental Organisations' (NGO) development projects all over the world. This is due to an imbalance of power in the donor-NGO relationship. NGOs rely on donors for funding and must therefore adhere to donor requirements, even if these are not in line with the priorities of the NGOs. This thesis examines the relationship between the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and NGOs in Laos. More specifically, it investigates how "civil society" is conceptualised in this relationship, and how this discursively shapes development practices. By applying the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, documents produced by DFAT on the subject of civil society, as well as DFAT's policies towards Laos, were analysed in order to conclude whether or not DFAT's conceptions of civil society are based on the ideology of neoliberalism. Interviews were also conducted with international NGOs in Laos on their relationship with their main donor, and on their conceptions of civil society, both as a general concept and specific in the Lao context. These conceptions were held up against those of DFAT in order to see whether NGOs in Laos were challenging the neoliberal order of discourse or merely reproducing it. The findings showed that DFAT promotes a neoliberal discourse of civil society as inherently good and apolitical, and that NGOs in Laos adhere to this in their conceptions of civil society. However, in their characterisation of Lao civil society, the NGOs' representations were more in line with a Neo-Marxist view of civil society as a site of struggle for power, making civil society political and not necessarily inherently good. Two NGOs funded by DFAT and two funded by another main donor were interviewed to test whether or not a specific donor had an ideational influence over an NGO. The theories of Resource Dependency and Neo-institutionalism were used to discuss if NGOs in Laos have the power to contest donor agendas. The conclusion of the thesis is that NGOs in Laos are able to negotiate donor agendas to a certain extent, but that the neoliberal discourse of civil society is so inherent in development work that both donors and NGOs accept it as "true". The ideology of neoliberalism thereby dominates the order of discourse and the practice of development work.

List of abbreviations

AEPF	Asia Europe People's Forum
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DGD	Directorate-general Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPA	Non-Profit Association
ODE	Office of Development Effectiveness
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation

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1. Introduction

> "'Development' is as much a set of currently existing institutions and practices with an international remit and compass as it is sets of concepts containing powerful ideological visions with normative tools of reforms on behalf of economic growth and poverty alleviation. Development is therefore at the same time rhetoric, official practice and political theory, while also serving as a framework for descriptions, on a global scale, of human misery and hope"
>
> (Rew 1997: 81).

Within development, "civil society" is a powerful concept. It has risen to become of great importance in aid policy and development practice all over the world, serving as an ideological tool. Civil society is often celebrated as the "hero of liberatory change" (Forte 2014: 9) facilitating democracy and contributing to "good development". Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) often adhere to this discourse, adopted and promoted by their Western donors, even though these expectations of civil society might not comply with the local context the NGOs are operating in. A discourse is powerful because it not only represents the world, but also constitutes it and gives it meaning (Fairclough 2008b: 18). This discourse of civil society – of "good development" – thereby "identifies appropriate and legitimate ways of practising development as well as speaking and thinking about it" (Grillo 1997: 12). Because NGOs are dependent on donors for funding, donors' discourses and policies are important for the activities of NGOs and the ideas they are promoting in their work.

The thesis investigates the impact of the policy and practice of the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) on NGOs operating in Lao PDR (henceforth Laos). By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the thesis examines how DFAT conceptualises civil society, and how it affects the discursive dynamics within NGOs in Laos. The thesis focuses on the concept of "civil society" in current development work. "Development" refers to directed social and economic change in what is called "the developing world" (Grillo 1997: 2). It is connected to "foreign aid" as a policy tool. Foreign aid is the "voluntary transfer of public resources, from a government to another independent government, to an NGO,

or to an international organization (…) with at least a 25 per cent grant element, one goal of which is to better the human condition in the country receiving the aid" (Lancaster 2007: 9). "Development" is, as we established earlier, however not only a practise, but is also connected to language.

The main argument of the thesis is that NGOs in Laos have adopted and reproduced a particular neoliberal idea about civil society in their discursive and social practice. This idea is connected to a wider understanding of "good development" for which a vibrant civil society is the premise. This discourse serves as the hegemonic discourse within development work, and is promoted by Western donors in their relationship with NGOs. This particular discourse is contributing to forming particular social processes and structures in the NGO sector in Laos, and essentially constrains NGOs' civil society activities. In this way, the neoliberal discourse of civil society is core to the practice of development.

1.1. Research question

Civil society is a normative concept, and NGOs tend to align themselves to civil society conceptions adopted by donors (rather than the other way around). It is therefore important to study the link between donors and NGOs, as this relationship implies asymmetry of power. This thesis will therefore study the role of DFAT in promoting ideas about civil society through its aid to NGOs in Laos.

The research question of the thesis is:

How is "civil society" conceptualised in the relationship between DFAT and NGOs in Laos, and how does this discursively shape the social practice of development work?

1.2. Analytical approach

To analyse how DFAT and NGOs conceptualise civil society, and how this affects the practice within development work, the principles of CDA will be used. This method is based upon the idea of social constructionism. In this perspective, the ideas that NGOs express in words contribute towards shaping their actions. As Jørgensen and Phillips states, "our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and

social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them" (2002: 1). By applying the principles of CDA, empirical texts, and the ways they are produced, will be analysed in order to understand how ideas, manifested in discursive practice and text, motivate social behaviour. A key question in the analysis will be whether the discursive practice under examination reproduces or challenges the existing "order of discourse" (which it will be argued is dominated by a neoliberal ideology). In this way, the analysis will be critical in the sense that it "aims to uncover the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of unequal power relations" (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 64). Evidently, in an order of discourse some discourses are strengthened and acknowledged as more "true" than others, and different discourses are struggling to dominate the order of discourses (Fairclough 2003: 206). The relationship between the transfer of resources (money, personnel, technology etc.) and language (discourse), in the donor-NGO relationship, underlines the importance of studying how specific actors relate to this "order".

Discourse is a social practice, which stands in a dialectic relation to other social dimensions. To analyse discourse as a social practice, it is insufficient merely to use discourse analysis, since social practice has both discursive and non-discursive elements (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 86). To shed light on the broader social processes, the theories of Resource Dependency and Neo-institutionalism, will be included. Using these two theories, the aim is to explain why some NGOs might adopt donor discourses and some are able to resist donor agendas. The Neo-institutional perspective will argue that NGOs passively conform to and adopt norms in their environment without resistance, while the Resource Dependency approach will argue that NGOs are able to negotiate donor agendas based on the scope of dependence on the donor. These two perspectives together, the Neo-institutional and the Resource Dependence, thus provide a framework for understanding how organisations may adopt, negotiate, or contest donor pressure (Rauh 2010: 30).

1.3. Structure of the thesis

Starting with chapter 2, the thesis' methodology, which is based on the use of case study, is outlined. Chapter 3 will account for the theoretical and historical background to analysing development practitioners' conceptions of civil society within Laos. This chapter will deal with "civil society" as a normative concept, and will outline how

civil society came to be important for foreign aid. Moving on from here, foreign aid is conceptualised as a form of "gift giving", which contributes to shaping power imbalances between donors and NGOs. Building on this conceptualisation, the theories of Resource Dependency and Neo-institutionalism are introduced. These theories will be important for discussing the scope and agency of actors in NGOs in Laos. A contextual overview of Laos, particularly focusing on civil society, will then be provided before turning to how development work can be viewed as a *social* system. The argument is that both the flow of resources and language, and thereby the construction and reconstruction of ideas, is what makes it into a *social* system, which eventually affects organisations' behaviour. Chapter 4 will then outline the analytical framework and methodology for examining DFAT's ideational influence upon NGOs in Laos. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 are the thesis' analysis. Chapter 5 deals with DFAT's conceptions of civil society and chapter 6 with the NGOs' conceptions of civil society. The discursive practice of these texts will be discussed in these chapters as well. This will lead us to chapter 7 where we will discuss the discursive practice in relation to the social practice. DFAT's and NGOs' conceptions of civil society are linked and related to the prevailing normative concept of civil society in foreign aid and to the Resource Dependency and Neo-institutional theories. Chapter 8 will conclude on the thesis' research question.

2. Methodology

This chapter will account for the methodology of the thesis, which consists of a triangulation of methods and data. Section 2.1 will account for the use of case study as a research method. Following, section 2.2 will outline the selection of the sources of evidence that this thesis draws upon.

2.1. Case study

The thesis uses case study as a research method. Laos was selected as a case study because the authoritarian regime in Laos constrains the emergence and development of a neoliberal civil society. It is therefore interesting to study how Western development practitioners grabble this issue when attempting to foster a civil society that can favour citizen participation and act on, and counter to, the Government of Laos. The choice of research *method* relates to the thesis' research *question*. The

research question poses a "how" questions about a contemporary complex social phenomena over which the researcher has little or no control. According to Yin, if these conditions exist then a case study is the preferred strategy (2002: 1, 9). On the contrary, research questions such as "what", "who" and "where" are likely to favour surveys or economic research (Yin 2002: 6). The case study method allows the researcher to retain a holistic view of real-life situations and circumstances, such as international relations and organisational processes (Yin 2002: 2). When using a case study method, one seeks to cover contextual conditions, because these are believed to be highly relevant to the phenomenon of study. The research strategy of a case study is comprehensive, since it relies on multiple sources of evidence with data converging in a triangulating fashion (Yin 2002: 13-14). In this way, case study is best seen not as a single method, but rather as a combination (triangulation) of methods (Aronoff & Kubik 2014: 49-50). This triangulation of methods is a big advantage, since the use of several sources of information makes the conclusions in a study much more convincing and accurate (Yin 2002: 98). It also allows the researcher to double check information and to confirm the results of the research (Wilson 2014: 74).

This leads us to defining the case study method as:

> "A research strategy that seeks to generate richly detailed, thick, and holistic elaborations and understandings of instances or variants of bounded social phenomena through the triangulation of multiple methods that include but are not limited to qualitative procedures"
>
> (Snow and Trom in Aronoff & Kubik 2014: 50).

The use of triangulation of multiple methods is thereby the strength of the case study data collection (Yin 2002: 85, 97). Let us turn to the thesis' sources of evidence and use of triangulation.

2.2. Sources of evidence

The thesis uses two main sources of evidence: documentation and semi-structured interviews. Documentation is in the form of policy documents and progress reports from DFAT. Three documents were chosen for in-depth analysis. These documents include a general framework for Australian Agency for International Development's (AusAID) (the former DFAT) engagement with civil society, DFAT's framework for

working with NGOs, and a program performance report on Laos. The documents are all published by DFAT and found on their webpage: www.dfat.gov.au. The advantages of using documentation as a source of evidence is that the documents can be reviewed repeatedly and that they are unobtrusive, meaning that they have not been created as a result of the case study. The researcher does however have to be careful not to be biased in the selection of documentation (Yin 2002: 86). To help avoid this, researcher must keep in mind that all documents have been written for a specific purpose and audience, and thus not for the specific case study. They reflect a communication among other parties attempting to achieve an objective outside that of the case study research. The researcher must therefore ensure that the selection of document data is broad in order to avoid biased selectivity (Yin 2002: 87). This is why three documents were selected for the in-depth analysis, limiting the risk of picking bits and parts from a high number of documents that might result in a biased reporting. The reason for choosing DFAT as the donor under analysis is the fact that Australia is both a regional neighbour as well as a major donor to Laos, providing a total assistance of an estimated AUD 55,9 million in 2014-15 (DFAT 2015b). According to DFAT itself: "Australia and Laos are long-standing regional partners and share a strong and diverse relationship underpinned by deepening economic ties, community links and development cooperation" (DFAT n.d.). DFAT was formerly known as AusAID, which became integrated under DFAT in November 2013. This is explains why one the analysed documents is an AusAID document and not a DFAT document.

According to Yin, one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview (2002: 89). Interviews can provide important insights into a situation (Yin 2002: 92). The semi-structured interview bears particular potential because of its flexibility. It allows the researcher to address specific dimensions of the research, while at the same time leaving space for interviewees to offer new meanings to the study topic (Galletta 2013: 1-2). In this way, the semi-structured interview "creates openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory" (Galletta 2013: 2). The semi-structured interview is therefore fitting for this thesis' focus on language in constructing knowledge and ideas. The semi-structured interview is furthermore particularly relevant to a multi method case study, where it "reflects an aspiration to not only study social problems but also play a role in

disentangling the threads contributing to the problems" (Ibid). Again, the semi-structured interview is relevant to this research, where the aim is to examine power inequality between donors and NGOs, which creates certain discourses that eventually effect the action of NGOs. An interview guide was made prior to the interviews, and the researcher therefore followed a certain set of questions. However, the interviews assumed a more conversational manner and elaborative questions were asked based on how the interview developed. The advantage of using interviews as a source of evidence is that they are targeted and focused directly on the case study topic. However, questions must be constructed properly to avoid bias, and to avoid the interviewee from answering what the interviewer wants to hear (Yin 2002: 86). In total, four NGO employees from four different NGOs were interviewed. The interviews were not conducted face-to-face, but via Skype call. NGO #D was not interviewed via Skype call, due to unavailability. The interview questions were instead sent via email, and answers were received as written responses. Two of these NGOs were funded by DFAT, and the other two were not. Since all informants chose to remain anonymous, they have been given aliases and numbers refers to their respective NGO. Their position within the organisation is however real. Following table shows the divide:

NGO	Interviewee	Donor
#A	Nalone Phongsa Acting Country Director	DFAT Government of Australia
#B	Tara Parker Assistant Country Director	DFAT Government of Australia
#C	John Doe Technical Advisor: Civil Society Organisations	Directorate-general Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) Government of Belgium
#D	Earl Powell Country Representative	Global Affairs Canada (GAC) Government of Canada

Table 1: List of informants

The criteria for selecting the NGOs were that they were international NGOs, they had a long-term presence in Laos, and that two of them were funded by DFAT and the other two were not. The criteria for selecting the interviewees were that they had been in Laos for more than one year and had worked with their respective NGO for more than one year. This was to ensure that they were familiar with the context and that they had knowledge about the donor in question. The reason for interviewing two NGOs funded by DFAT and two not funded by DFAT is to be able to test the thesis' hypothesis, namely that donors have an ideational influence over NGOs. By interviewing two NGOs with the same donor and two with different ones, we are able to see if there is a resemblance between the two DFAT funded NGOs' definition of civil society, as well as if there is a difference between these two and the two that are not funded by DFAT.

Prior to the thesis, the researcher had spent six months in Laos interning at an NGO. This had important implications for the research, since key informants were relied on for setting up the four interviews. Earlier interviews with NGOs and Non-Profit Associations (NPA) in Laos in the autumn of 2015 are used as references in the Contextual Overview of Laos - section. These interviews, however, are only used in the contextual overview and not in the discourse analysis. The reason for this is that new interview questions were needed in order to answer the thesis' specific research question.

The data for this analysis thereby relies on primary sources in the form of interviews and researchers own expertise knowledge on Laos, and on policy documents and evaluations from DFAT.

3. Theory and background

In this chapter, the relationship between foreign aid and civil society will be outlined theoretically as well as within the context of Laos. In section 3.1, the concept of civil society is discussed. The concept is traced from its origin – showing how the concept is shaped normatively by the context in which the term has emerged - to its universalisation and acceptance in contemporary development discourse. Section 3.2 provides a brief account of how this thesis views foreign aid, namely as unreciprocated giving, which reveals a power imbalance between giver and receiver.

This section will lead us to the thesis' theoretical foundation. In section 3.3 two theoretical perspectives are explained: the Resource Dependency perspective and the Neo-institutional perspective. These two theories will serve as a foundation for discussing the relationship between DFAT and NGOs in Laos in chapter 7. Section 3.4 provides a contextual overview of Laos, where particular attention is paid to the 2009 approval of a legal framework for registration of local associations, and the implications this has had on the role of civil society and on donor priorities in the country. The last section in this chapter, section 3.5, will argue that foreign aid, as we know it today, has emerged to become a social system where language serves as an essential part in its construction and reconstruction. From this perspective, language, and the flow of ideas, affects the behaviour of organisations.

3.1. What is civil society?

"Civil society" has become such a strong buzzword within development work that all donors and NGOs have incorporated a civil society - component in their programmes. Official international documents have even been produced, and development partners all over the world have agreed on the concept's role and function. In the Accra Agenda for Action from 2008, governments, donors, and civil society organisations all agreed that the independent role of civil society was fundamental in engaging citizens and therefore for the general development of a country (OECD 2008). But civil society has not always been part of a larger development discourse. In fact, the concept has had different meanings and understandings since its origin in the Enlightenment era.

In this section, the concept of civil society, starting from European Enlightenment philosophers up to the contemporary discourse on civil society in development work, will be explored. As will the mechanisms by which the concept came to be central to foreign aid and to the relation between donors and NGOs.

3.1.1. Tracing the concept

Civil society has come to be one of the most notable and debated concepts in the social sciences. The concept has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by the whole army of social scientists, and yet there is no consensus either on its intension or its extension (Aronoff & Kubik 2014: 198). As Edwards states, "Civil

society is much talked about but rarely understood" (Edwards 2005). This is due to the fact that civil society is not a coherent theory or concept (Edwards 2014: 4). In order to engage in the discussion about the concept, one must understand the origins and how the idea of civil society has developed since. This development can be categorised into three phases.

A) European philosophers

The idea of civil society emerged in the Enlightenment era with thinkers such as Rousseau and Kant, for whom civil society was synonymous with the state or the political society. In fact, civil society was a type of state governed by a social contract agreed among the individual members of the society (Kaldor 2003: 584; Spurk 2010: 4). With the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Adam Ferguson and Francis Hutcheson, a major shift in conceptualising the idea occurred, when civil society's role was viewed as the protection of personal freedoms against state powers (Peck 2015: 550). Civil society began to be separated from the state, and was viewed as voluntary associations organised as part of a resistance against state intrusions on individual rights and freedoms (Edwards 2014: 7). With Hegel, civil society became understood as the intermediate realm between the family and the state (Kaldor 2003: 584). Civil society according to Hegel had to do with greatly differing representations of social reality and conceptions of the interaction with the state and the market (Pouligny 2005: 497). Civil society actors were not always in harmony but rather in conflict, as citizens mainly followed their own self-interest (Spurk 2010: 4). This theme was taken up by historian and political thinker Alexis De Tocqueville and later by academic Robert Putnam, who are today the two most associated with the idea of a vibrant civil society as the foundation of a stable democratic polity (Edwards 2014: 7). The definition narrowed again in the twentieth century, when civil society came to be understood as occupying the space outside the market, state, and family. In this way, civil society became the realm of culture, ideology, and political debate. The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, is the thinker most associated with this definition (Kaldor 2003: 584). According to Gramsci, civil society was part of the superstructure in addition to the state, but with a different function. Here, the state served as an arena of force and coercion for capitalist domination, and civil society served as the field through which values and meanings were established, debated, and challenged (Spurk 2010: 5). Despite the changing content in the term, Kaldor argues that all these

different definitions had a common core meaning, since they were all about a rule-governed society based on a social contract among individuals (2003: 585). From this time onwards, civil society was seen as oriented toward the state and also acting on and counter to state powers (Spurk 2010: 4).

B) The 1970s' and 1980s' social movements in Latin America and Eastern Europe

The idea of civil society flourished again in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America and Eastern Europe. The concept became widely used to describe social movements against military dictatorships and totalitarianism. People realised that overthrowing regimes from the top-down was not realistic. It was necessary to achieve changes from the bottom-up; changes in the society (Kaldor 2003: 586). Civil society here referred to the potential for local people to change the relation between state and society, striving for more democratic governments, and a redistribution of power and economic wealth (Leeuwen 2009: 27). The new understanding of civil society represented a withdrawal from the state and a move towards global rules and institutions, where social movements were able to create political space through international links and appeals to international authorities (Kaldor 2003: 587-588). As an outcome of these conflict contexts, the expectations of civil society grew high. State institutions had proven to fail in providing security, accountability, and basic services to its citizens. Civil society became considered more effective than governments in providing development needs (Leeuwen & Verkoren 2013: 160). The idea of civil society as a precondition for democracy spread during the 1990s.

C) The 1990s' neoliberal agenda

With the end of the Cold War in 1989, the idea of civil society broadened significantly again, and became understood in different ways. For social movements and activists concerned with issues such as human rights, climate change, AIDS/HIV, etc., the term civil society expressed their brand of non-party politics (Kaldor 2003: 588). For Western governments and international institutions civil society came to be interesting for "good governance" objectives within the neoliberal "New Policy Agenda". International donors and governments were certain of the positive contribution of civil society to the promotion of democracy and for facilitating market reforms. Here, civil society basically came to stand for NGOs, both international and

local (Leeuwen 2009: 28), and the term came for many to be interchangeable with the concept of democracy itself (Ferguson 2004: 384). Thus, many people today view civil society as a necessity for democracy everywhere, in all contexts. They would agree with the neo-Tocquevillian belief that the solidity of a liberal democracy depends on a vibrant and strong sphere of associational participation (Aronoff & Kubik 2014: 199). This view has been criticised for being ethnocentric. Social scientists, in particular anthropologists, argue that the civil society concept is Eurocentric; something born out of the Western cultural context, and does therefore not apply to contexts that has more traditional organising structures (Aronoff & Kubik 2014: 211). As a response to this critique, another trend in the understanding of the term therefore, was the notion of civil society as forms of organisations, often non-Western, representing a check on state power. These organisations included local traditional institutions as well as religious and ethnic movements (Kaldor 2003: 590; Leeuwen 2009: 28).

Let us turn to how these developments of the concept have influenced the contemporary discourse on civil society.

3.1.2. Dominant contemporary civil society discourse

Civil society is a normative and descriptive concept (Kaldor 2003: 589), and it is closely tied to the context for which each version of the concept was shaped (Edwards & Foley 1998: 125). There are a variety of conceptualisations of civil society that influence the international development discourse, but according to Edwards and Hyden, it is the ghost of Tocqueville that prevails (Hyden 1997: 8; Edwards 2014: 10). Particularly is a focus on associational activity, civility, and deepening democracy, which is often imagined through terms such as voice and activity (Peck 2015: 551). Democracy for development is a particular hot topic in the development discourse. The idea of civil society is connected to a wider neoliberal understanding of "good development" for which democracy is the premise. As civil society is seen as a necessity to achieve democracy, civil society, by implication, too becomes central to achieving "good development" (Hyden 1997: 4). In relation hereto, civil society is perceived as naturally "good" in the sense that it seeks justice and fairness (Fowler & Biekart 2013: 465). Civil society is furthermore associated with NGOs that seek to influence, or claim space from, the state, and with the positive role that these

organisations can play in development (Ferguson 2004: 384; Peck 2015: 551-552). In sum, the dominant contemporary discourse on civil society is one where NGOs stands for civil society, which is celebrated as the hero of liberatory change (Forte 2014: 9).

"Civil society" has, in the space of a few years, and with little regard for historical context or critical genealogy, thus been universalised (Ferguson 2004: 384). However, "civil society" as a concept in foreign aid did not gain in prominence before the 1990s, when "aid for development" emerged as a core element between the "developed world" and the "developing world". The next section will outline the emergence of the concept in foreign aid relations.

3.1.3 Foreign aid and development work

Foreign aid, as we know it today, originated from Cold War diplomacy (Lancaster 2007: 26). Previously, there had been programmes of humanitarian relief, but foreign aid as the gift of public resource transfer from one government to another (or to an international NGO), with the purpose of improving humanitarian conditions, did not exist (Lancaster 2007: 2). Because of the Cold War threat, the United States initiated programmes of aid and put pressure on other countries to do so as well, and by year 2000 aid was a common and expected element in relations between rich and poor countries (Lancaster 2007: 5, 33). Foreign aid experienced its most significant rise in the 1970s and 1980s, where aid worldwide exceeded eight billion US dollars. It was also in this period that "aid for development" gained in prominence (Lancaster 2007: 33-34). This was shown by the significant rise in the distribution of aid, which was oriented towards the poorest countries, rising from just over 10 per cent of total aid in 1970s to 25 per cent a decade later in the 1980s (Lancaster 2007: 39). A larger proportion of overall aid began to be channelled through multilateral aid agencies, and the number of NGOs increased. These aid agencies began to produce official statements and development strategies. The increasing professionalisation of aid agencies was a sign of this growing seriousness of aid for development purposes (Lancaster 2007: 34, 41). In the 1990s, foreign aid experienced changes with the end of the Cold War, which meant a decline of the diplomatic relevance of aid giving for some governments, and emerging new purposes of aid. These purposes were economic and political in their essence, where democracy promotion and post-conflict resolution now became relevant in the former socialist Eastern European countries

(Lancaster 2007: 45). "Democracy for development" picked up momentum across the developing world, and by the end of the 1990s, foreign aid had acquired "new" prominent purposes: Promoting economic and political transitions, addressing global problems, furthering democracy, and managing conflict (Lancaster 2007: 46-48).

Civil society became an increasingly hot topic within foreign aid, where civil society's role became perceived as buffer against autocratic regime intervention, global economic neoliberalism, social justice, as well as a source of economic wealth and personal happiness. Donor agencies and governments have therefore increasingly focused on the strengthening of civil society as a formula for democracy (Lang 2014: 33). Due to the increasing number of NGOs in the past two decades, civil society has become associated with NGOs (Peck 2015: 552). By the mid-1990s international NGOs numbered roughly 28,000, which represented a 500 per cent increase from the 1970s. By the early years of this century they numbered 40,000 (Forte 2014: 6). This NGOisation of civil society marks a shift from rather loosely organised and broadly mobilising social movements to more professionalised and structured NGOs (Lang 2014: 62). The enormous rise in development NGOs reflects a new order, where NGOs have moved from the periphery of the development community to being professionalised and important agents in development work. They are now today central to contemporary development discourse and practice (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 67; Forte 2014: 7; Lang 2014: 71).

It is now clear that the relationship between donor and NGO is a crucial part of the foreign aid system. Donors provide NGOs with aid in return for the implementation of projects that contribute to the overall development of the world. This relationship might at first glance seem rather innocent, but if we examine more closely, it is a relationship of unequal power. The concept of aid as free and disinterested does not exist. Rather, the "gift of aid" is contributing to constructing and reproducing an unequal power relation between giver and receiver, where donors have something that the NGOs need and desire. Let us turn to the conceptualisation of foreign aid as "gift giving".

3.2. Foreign aid as gift giving

According to Hattori, what most clearly defines foreign aid is the symbolic power politics between donor and NGO (2001: 633). In the partnership between donor and NGO, power is manifest through the control and flow of money. This type of "partnership" is not one of equality, mutuality, and shared responsibility, but rather a relationship of power inequality expressed through the control of one partner over the other (Reith 2010: 446-447). Money is central in this relationship since NGOs are dependent on money for their ability to work towards their missions and ultimately on their survival, and donors value money because it gives them the ability to influence development in the direction of their own agendas. What the partnership between donor and NGOs is based on is the inequality in the control of money, where donors are giving it, and NGOs are receiving. In this way, the relationship between donor and NGO is one based on power, reflected in the act of giving money (Ibid).

Following the argument of Marshall Sahlins, there are essentially three types of resource allocation in human society: economic exchange, redistribution, and giving. Foreign aid falls in the third category, since it is commonly perceived as a gift from one country to another, or from a donor to an NGO (Hattori 2001: 635-636). The sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss was the first to theorise gift giving. He argued that gift giving has to be seen in the context of systems of exchange which involve obligations to give, to receive, and to repay (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 70). Thereby Mauss argued that with a gift comes the obligation to reciprocate, if the social relation is to persist. Mauss, however, developed his theory in a system of social equals, and according to Sahlins, in social systems, where there are larger social divides, "negative reciprocity" characterises the relationship between these social in-equals, where the universal obligation to reciprocate no longer holds (Hattori 2001: 638). Hattori argues that foreign aid falls into this type of gift giving, where the gift cannot be reciprocated, namely *unreciprocated giving*. This is due to the fact that the social relation, in which the gift is extended, reveals material inequality between donor and recipient; the fact that the donor has resources to give that the other lacks. Following these arguments, foreign aid can be understood as what Bourdieu calls *symbolic domination*: A practice which indicates and maintain social hierarchies (Hattori 2001: 639). The extension of the gift transforms a donor's status from the dominant to the *generous*, and when accepting such a gift, the recipient becomes the

grateful. This type of relationship between the generous and the grateful is what gives the practice of unreciprocated giving its social power. "Giving" thereby is the allocation of material goods that are needed or desired by the recipient (Hattori 2001: 640). To sum up, following Mauss, Sahlins, and Bourdieu, what gives the gift symbolic power is the fact that it involves real goods and services that fulfil real needs and desires; the donors having the goods that the recipient desires (Hattori 2001: 646).

Thus, what at first glance seems a free and disinterested gift becomes part of a system of interested exchange (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 76). The donor's agenda is often expressed through funding requirements, and it is up to the NGOs to demonstrate how they fit into this agenda. In this way, donors tend to give money only to NGOs whose aims and agendas are similar to their own. If NGOs fail to show these similar objectives, their applications are typically rejected (Reith 2010: 451). It is important to understand the competitive context of the aid system, where NGOs are increasingly dependent on donors and are therefore also increasingly vulnerable to donor demands. This sometimes leaves NGOs with little choice but to accept donor funding, even if it means them sacrificing their own goals for the donor's and thereby becoming "servants of an externally imposed agenda" (Commins in Reith 2010: 448-449). In practice, therefore, the donor sets the agenda, and the receiver is accountable to the donor for the assistance it receives. When offering aid the donor demands in return that projects are implemented in accordance with the donor's idea of development (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 76). In this way, there is no such thing as a free and disinterested gift (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 66).

This theory of aid as gift giving is similar to the perspective of the Resource Dependency theory, which will be outlined in the next section. This theory, together with Neo-institutional theory, is relevant when discussing donor-NGO relationships, and in discussing the scope and agency of actors in NGOs in Laos. An outlining of the two theories is needed before we can start to discuss foreign aid and civil society in the context of Laos.

3.3. Organisational theory

The Resource Dependency theory together with the Neo-institutional perspective can explain why some NGOs might adopt donor discourses and some are able to resist

donor agendas. The Neo-institutional perspective will argue that NGOs passively conform to and adopt norms in their environment without resistance, while the Resource Dependency approach will argue that NGOs are able to negotiate donor agendas based on the scope of dependence on the donor. These two perspectives together are tools to understanding the agency of organisations in the unequal power relationship between donor and NGO (Rauh 2010: 37).

3.3.1. Resource Dependency theory

According to the Resource Dependency strategy, developed by Pfeffer and Salancik, in order to understand how organisations behave and make decisions, it is important to understand the environment in which they operate (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003). The survival of organisations is dependent on its interaction with other organisations in the environment for obtaining resources. Dependence is defined by Pfeffer and Salancik as "the product of the importance of a given input or output to the organisation and the extent to which it is controlled by a relatively few organisations" (2003: 51). The greater dependence an organisation has on an external organisation, the more the organisation's behaviour is influenced (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003: 59-60). Understanding the conditions of social control of organisations makes it possible to understand the decision and behaviour of organisations when they either comply with or avoid influence. Organisations will in general tend to be influenced by those who control the resources they need for operational purposes and for survival in general (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003: 44). Organisational strategies are often driven by power dynamics, and power is therefore crucial for understanding the actions of organisations. If two organisations are dependent on each other, then there must be asymmetry in the exchange relationship, if one organisation is to hold power over the other (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003: 53).

Take for instance the donor-NGO relationship. NGOs are dependent on donors for the activities and ultimate survival of the organisation. The donor depends on the NGO to undertake project activities that comply with their view on development. However, the resource (money) that the donor exchanges with the NGO is only a small proportion of the donor's overall operations. The exchanged resource is, on the other hand, a large proportion of the NGO's operations, and the NGO is therefore highly dependent on this resource exchange. Resource exchange has in this way two

dimensions, which determines the scope of dependence of one organisation on another: The relative magnitude of the exchange and the criticality of the resource (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003: 46). According to this perspective then, organisations make active strategic decisions when attempting to maintain organisational autonomy and power within their environments. Moreover, if individuals within organisations are trying to maximise their own benefits, this must mean that these individuals are rational actors, which reflect upon their choices and behaviour (Rauh 2010: 31).

To sum up, interdependence is created by mutual dependence combined with power imbalance. The ideas of the theory are that social context matters, that organisations make strategic decisions when attempting to enhance autonomy and in pursuing interests, and that power is particularly important in understanding these internal and external action of organisations.

3.3.2. Neo-institutional theory

The Neo-institutional approach was developed as a reaction to the assumption that organisational actors make choices based on rationality. The Neo-institutional approach seeks to account for the non-rational behaviour often seen within organisations (Rauh 2010: 31). The theory assumes that organisations passively adapt to and adopt norms in their environment. They do this without any form of resistance, even though these norms might not lead to greater efficiency (Meyer & Rowan 1977: 340). Where the Resource Dependency perspective attributes an organisation's survival to resistance, the Neo-institutional perspective attributes it to obedience: to passivity rather than activeness, and to the internalisation of norms rather than political acts of manipulation (Oliver 1991: 149). This act of internalisation of norms is what makes organisations similar to one another. In this process, organisations conform to taken-for-granted organisational forms and practice (Rauh 2010: 33). Theorists of this Neo-institutional perspective claim that if organisations follow structures that are culturally accepted and practices that are supported by legal institutions and normative authorities, their survival rate is higher (Rauh 2010: 32).

NGOs are therefore extremely dependent on their external environment, and must often adapt to dominant discourses and practical requirements that emerge from donors or government agencies on which they are dependent. This means that NGOs

often acts counter to their own objectives and goals, even if this means that the organisations become less efficient. Trying to balance the needs and requirements of funding agencies, government officials, the media, beneficiaries, the public, etc., NGOs are often restricted in their actions and work (Timmer 2010: 265). The Resource Dependency and the Neo-institutional theory can be used together to attempt to explain how organisations balance these external requirements. According to Tolbert and Zucker, the Resource Dependency and Neo-institutional perspective can be seen as two ends of a decision-making continuum in explaining processes and behaviours (1996: 176). The two theories can thereby explain how organisational change is either adopted or resisted within a given field (Rauh 2010: 32).

Following the argument of these two theories, it is important and most crucial to one's analysis to understand the context and environment that these organisations are a part of. Before the analytical framework described above is used for analysing the donor-NGO power relationship, the relationship between foreign aid and civil society in the context of Laos is outlined.

3.4. Contextual overview of Laos

"The Lao PDR has one of the weakest civil societies in the world" (Delnoye 2010: 16). Civil society organisations in Laos are characterised as nascent and the concept of civil society is widely unknown to the Lao people. This is due to the fact that a legal framework for local organisations did not exist until 2009. Civil society is therefore young in experience, has limited capacities, and limited diversity (Delnoye 2010: 11, 16).

This section will provide the reader with a contextual overview of Laos. First, examining the situation of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and NGOs[1] respectively before the Decree on Associations was approved in 2009. Then, examining the consequences of the Decree, as well as a few years after the passing of the Decree when the space for civil society narrowed again. This will serve as the basis for discussing the role of the local NPAs from the Government of Laos's point of view, the international development partner's point of view, and from the NPAs' point of

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[1] CSOs in this section refer only to local organisations while NGOs refer only to international organisations.

view themselves. Lastly, we will discuss donor priorities in the country and how these have affected how civil society is talked about and understood in Laos.

3.4.1. Prior to 2009

Prior to the Government's adaption of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, which opened the country up to foreign investment and development aid, there is little documentation of Lao civil society. The Lao Constitution from 1991 states that, "Lao citizens have the right and freedom of speech, press and assembly; and have the right to set up associations and to stage demonstrations which are not contrary to the laws" (Lao PDR 2003: article 44). However, up until the early 1990s, with the exception of mass organisations, CSOs were not allowed to operate and were not recognised as legitimate (Belloni 2014: 355). Prior to the approval of the Decree on Associations in 2009 the legal environment for associations was largely non-existent and in practise organisations existed in a legal limbo. Only a very few local independent organisations were active and these operated under the control and leadership of the authorities (ADB 2011: 1-2, Kepa 2015: 1, Kunze 2013: 155). The only popular associations permitted to operate were organising committees for religious functions, peasant producers, water-user associations, school associations, and sporting clubs; none of which were remotely political (Stuart-Fox 2011: 4). Registration happened through various de facto means usually through a personal connection to a government agency (ADB 2011: 2). Development activities were mostly carried out by mass organisations, which were controlled by the Government. These quasi-governmental organisations carried out typical civil society tasks, delivering basic social services, disseminating information, and consulting the public (Frohofer 2014: 7). Mass organisations continue to fulfil many civil society roles, but are primarily accountable to the state and not to their members (ADB 2011: 2).

3.4.2. The Decree on Associations

In 2009, the Government of Laos could no longer refuse to include civil society as a partner in development, due to pressure from the international community. The Decree on Associations was drafted and approved by the Government in April 2009 and came into effect in November the same year. The decree has been judged as "ground-breaking" (Kunze 2013: 155) since, for the first time in the history of Laos, a central registration of local associations was in effect (ADB 2011: 2). The passing of

the decree signalled an opening up to civil society and a recognition by the Government of the role that local associations can play in the development of the country, and how they can help the Government meet its goals (Kunze 2013: 155). The objectives of the decree are to promote the organisation of associations contributing to socio-economic development and poverty eradication. The objectives of associations are to be consistent with the Lao Constitution, national, local, and ethnic traditions, and to be non-threatening to national stability and social order (Lao PDR 2009: 1). It is relevant to note that the term non-governmental, or NGO, is not an appropriate term for CSOs in the context of Laos, since it implies that organisations are in opposition to the Government and party politics (Kunze 2013: 155-156). Even though the decree has opened up for important advantages and avenues for civil society in Laos, some of the provisions appear to be more constraining than enabling. The decree demands a long and complex process of organisational creation, and the registration process is rather complicated and lengthy, which is a burden for both Government and associations (Belloni 2014: 360). Registering as an association remains a huge problem for NPAs, since it is very difficult to get a permanent operating licence. For instance, as of April 2011, sixteen months after the decree was enacted, only two NPAs (out of 72) had been approved and had obtained a permanent license (Kunze 2013: 156). Instead, NPAs are provided with temporary licenses, which means that they are not allowed to carry out project related activities. The decree has, nevertheless, made CSOs in Laos more legitimate, more acknowledged, and more organised (Doe 2015).

Local associations are not the only ones affected by the disenabling policy environment in Laos. Between the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 and 1986, only three NGOs (the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, and Save the Children UK) were allowed to operate. These organisations provided humanitarian and development services in restricted geographical areas, but operated under administrative limitations. After 1986 more NGOs gained permission to operate, but it was not until 1998 that NGOs were able to register officially under Decree 71, and still rules and policies on registration and operations were not detailed enough (ADB 2011: 1, 3). A new revised Decree 013 was therefore passed in 2010. Here, NGOs are defined as organisations working for development assistance or humanitarian aid without profit.

NGOs are obliged to work by "contributing to the implementation of the socio-economic plan and poverty eradication in the Lao People's Democratic Republic" (Lao PDR 2010: 1-2). NGOs are required to work in close cooperation with government officials, and they need to submit evaluation reports as well as monitoring and financial reviews on a regular basis (Lao PDR 2010: 13).

3.4.3. From opportunity to fear

A legal environment for civil society organisation was now in place and there was hope that a Lao civil society would emerge, and that the Government would accept civil society as a partner in development. However, the situation quickly turned around just 3 years after the passing of the Decree on Associations. In 2012, the capital of Laos, Vientiane, was chosen to be the venue for the 9th Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF). With Lao civil society having been absent in international civil society platforms, this was a unique moment for civil society and it signalled a Lao Government, which was beginning to widen the space for civil society in Laos. Civil society hoped that the AEPF, which took place from 16 to 19 October 2012, would mark a new era of Lao civil society and that the visibility and legitimacy of Lao CSOs would increase. However, the AEPF did not proceed as expected. Undercover government agents were disturbing various discussions and workshops. The two most shocking incidents, however, happened a couple of months later. On 7 December 2012, the Country Director of Helvetas Laos, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was ordered to leave the country within 48 hours, after having sent out a personal letter of concern to the country's development partners (Priebe 2013; Kepa 2015: 5). In the letter, she criticised state repression in Laos and advocated for a frank dialogue and inclusive partnership, which she argued was essential for a meaningful participation in development priorities (Gindroz 2012). Furthermore, just eight days later, on 15 December, the highly respected civil society leader Sombath Somphone, former director of PADETC, was abducted at a police check and has not been seen since (Priebe 2013; Kepa 2015: 5). These events caused Lao civil society to relapse into an even worse state than prior to AEPF and left Lao civil society in trauma. People were in a state of insecurity and fear, and the trust between Government and civil society receded remarkably (Kepa 2015: 6). Agencies, even those larger ones most able to speak up, were silenced following the events and only few NGOs spoke of Sombath's abduction. Most, however, were, and remain, unable to mention the disappearance,

Sombath's work, or even his name, since advocacy for his case or other rights issues may threaten or disrupt important work (Arnst 2014). Furthermore, those critical CSOs that were emerging during the period leading up to the AEPF have either closed down or significantly reduced their work. People working in the civil society sector are now feeling insecure when they speak of issues that differ from, or are critical of, the Government (Kepa 2015: 6). Amongst CSOs themselves sensitive matters are not discussed, since people fear that there are spies amongst them reporting back to the Government (Clark 2015). Those that have occasionally attempted to speak up against the Government in public have not been successful. For instance, a radio host criticising land issues in the country had his radio station shut down shortly after this criticism (Kepa 2015: 6).

In the past two years, the Lao Government has enforced more restriction and control on the participation of civil society in important venues. The participation of CSOs in Sector Working Groups and Round Table Meetings with the Government is limited, and representation is usually from NPAs that are closely aligned with the Government (Tracey et al. 2014: 6-7). The Government of Laos has taken a stronger control over the Lao NPA community. Even though some government officials have become more open towards engaging with CSOs as development partners, the meaningfulness of the engagement remains questionable. The Government is discouraging CSOs from working with NGOs, and NGOs and government staff from working with CSOs (Supporting Civil Society in Lao PDR 2014-2015: 8).

3.4.4. The role of NPAs

The enabling environment for civil society, as well as the capacities of NPAs, is very limited. The role of civil society in the development processes of Laos is in delivering services in partnership with the Government, and with support from development partners (Frohofer 2014: 13-14). Different expectations to and definitions of the role of civil society in Laos do exist though.

The Government of Laos expects civil society to collaborate closely in delivering services and in poverty-related activities, where these are in line with government policies and priorities (Lao PDR 2009). Civil society is thereby understood as an economic actor with no independence or autonomy from the state. The Government is

generally very sceptical towards CSOs since it is frightened that civil society actors are motivated by self-interest and might assume a more political character, and eventually involve themselves in advocacy for human rights and democracy (Belloni 2014: 358). This fear is partly due to examples shown in neighbouring countries, such as Thailand. The Government is afraid of "the voice of the people", since it relates it to violent protests such as those experienced in Thailand (Walker & Phillips 2015).

Development partners and NGOs acknowledge that civil society has a key role to play in development. They are, however, aware that civil society's role in Laos, as defined by the Government, is as service providers more than partners in socio-economic development (Cox 2015; Hall 2015). Some NGOs might expect Lao civil society to take on a more diversified role, such as advocacy, that goes beyond service delivery (Belloni 2014: 364, Frohofer 2014: 11), but most NGOs are well aware of the fact that the capacities of NPAs are not strong enough for this. Rather, focus is on building the institutional capacity of Lao NPAs in order for them to be able to function efficiently and to carry out projects effectively.

NPAs define themselves as "the right arm of the Government" (Reed & Sanders 2015). NPAs view themselves as service deliverers supporting the Government in helping to implement the laws in the communities. They see their strengths as supporting government policies and providing services in remote areas (Reed & Sanders 2015). They are proud since they feel that they are contributing to the welfare and wellbeing of the people (Doe 2015).

In this way, with different expectations to the role of NPAs, NPAs are experiencing pressure from both the Government side and the donor/NGO side. They find themselves in a difficult situation, since they need government approval in order to operate, and therefore feel pressured to focus on poverty alleviation and avoid activities and statements that are critical towards the Government. At the same time international donors, who are funding these local organisations, may push them towards more politically sensitive activities (Frohofer 2014: 11-12; Wood 2015). An NPA staff stated that, "We sometimes feel trapped between the demands from the Government and from our international partners. It is confusing. And sometimes we do not know whom to listen to" (Wood 2015). Being torn between the extensive

needs of both Government and donors, NPAs therefore may have little time or resources left to respond to the needs of their members or local communities (Arnst 2014, Wood 2015; Walker & Phillips 2015).

3.4.5. Donor and NGO priorities

Fostering local ownership and empowering civil societies is incorporated into dominant development policies and practices (Kontinen & Onodera 2012: 328). The development of a civil society sector in Laos has been prioritised by international donors and NGOs as a key component in their work since the mid-2000s due to the enormous development challenges in Laos (Belloni 2014: 356). Major interventions by NGOs to strengthen the sector have been the support to the Government of Laos in the development of the Decree on Associations, the establishment of networks and joint initiatives, supporting CSOs in project implementation, and capacity strengthening of NPAs (EDC & SDC 2009: 6). By building and strengthening a Lao civil society, NGOs hope that this will not only improve service delivery and contribute to the development of the country, but will also play a role in the acceptance of citizens' participation in public life, and perhaps even foster democratic change (Belloni 2014: 354). It is widely recognised that the capacity of local CSOs in Laos remains extremely low. Nevertheless, most donors and NGOs have included a capacity building component for their local CSO partners in effort to strengthen civil society as a whole. Focus has mostly been on organisational capacity building; developing capacities to plan, implement, analyse, and evaluate projects (Belloni 2014: 361).

However, few international organisations in Laos have experience in cooperating with local Lao civil society. Even 5 years ago, many NGOs were carrying out activities themselves, and there were no particular recommended strategy to engaging in partnership with Lao CSO. Often NGOs have guidelines for working in partnership with civil society in general, but express that these guidelines are not very applicable to the Lao context. NGOs are themselves learning-by-doing when it comes to engaging in partnerships in Laos (Cox 2015). Often this type of partnership, between NGOs and NPAs, is forced by the donor. Donors are pressuring NGOs to engage with local civil society, and NPAs are therefore frequently put into projects by NGOs that they do not really want to be in. This results in NGOs often engaging in partnership

with too many NPAs for them to handle (Cox 2015; Doe 2015; Turner 2015). NGOs are also competing to work with the "good" NPAs because there are so few capable of implementing a project from beginning to the end (Belloni 2014: 361). In this way, donors are pushing an agenda on the NPAs via the NGOs. Often the NGOs end up implementing the project activities themselves, because the capacity of their local partner is too weak or because the visions of the organisations are different. In these situations, NGOs see no other way than to do the work themselves, since they are the ones being held accountable to the donors, and therefore need to ensure the quality of the funded projects, even if it means excluding the local partner in the process (Mitchell 2015; Turner 2015).

As demonstrated, in the Lao context a civil society independent from the State is an unfamiliar concept and not well recognised. Civil society and government are not separate, but rather go hand in hand (Delnoye 2010: 31). The role of Lao civil society is as service providers and partners of the Government in poverty alleviation. The example of Laos shows the difficulties of applying the common Western neoliberal concept of civil society to a country such as Laos, which has adopted principles of a market economy, while still maintained a socio-political environment that is deeply rooted in communism.

So far, we have discussed civil society as a concept within foreign aid, the relationship between donor and NGO, as well as the Lao context. Before turning to the analytical framework for analysing these concepts and theorisations, it is important to understand language as an essential part of the construction and reconstruction of development work as a social system.

3.5. A social system and its discourse

With the "aid for development" scheme and the central role of NGOs in development work, a new international system emerged. This system is today a worldwide system, which circulates billions of dollars every year, and which engages thousands of NGOs, and assists hundreds of millions of people (Tvedt 2002: 368). Following the logic of the Resource Dependency theory, the system is produced and reproduced, and defined and redefined, by the flow and transfer of money, and the character of this resource transfer (Ibid). Actors within this international system are structurally

integrated primarily through resource transfer. However, the same language and the same buzzwords are deployed by all actors within the system be they NGO employees or donors. Tvedt argues that there exists something that can be called "NGO-speak". This language is organised around a symbolic - a dichotomy of "good development" versus "bad development" (2002: 369-370). Buzzwords such as "civil society" have become integrated in the discourse and universally accepted as a force for development, even though there has been a historically vibrant disagreement about the term (Cornwall 2007: 472). This rise of the term "civil society" shows what is lost when buzzwords are domesticated by development agencies. The term once provoked strong differences in perspectives, but now it is something that no one can argue against (Cornwall 2007: 475). The buzzword "partnership" is also at the heart of contemporary development discourse and it suggests that groups, individuals, communities, and organisations are working, and strive to work, with each other towards a common goal (Reith 2010: 447). In development work NGOs and donors present their activities in terms of partnerships. Rather than supporting or working through local organisations NGOs work *with* partners. The relationship between NGOs and donors, or between NGOs and local associations, is not presented as a relationship between giver and receiver. It is presented as a partnership between two equal organisations, which bring different but equally important resources and skills to the work on development issues (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 75). These buzzwords in development have gained their grip and power through their "vague and euphemistic qualities, their capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, and their normative resonance" (Cornwall 2007: 472).

The discourse of this international development work system, serves as a transmission belt of Western neoliberal concepts of development (Tvedt 1998: 75). It could be argued that this is so because the system is donor-led, and donors are typically powerful Western governments or Western initiated international organisations, such as the World Bank. The system is donor led, because: 1) the NGO-speak is adopted by donors, and 2) NGOs are accountable to their donor because of the transfer of foreign aid as the "gift of money". Where it is the flow of money and the character of the resource transfer that produces and reproduces the system, it is the NGO-speak, the discourse, which makes it into, and reproduces it as, a *social* system (Tvedt 1998: 77-78; Tvedt 2002: 370). In this way, ideas about civil society are transmitted from

donor (giver) to NGO (recipient) because these are part of the same social system. This crucial link between resource transfer and language is therefore important in understanding the power relationship between donor and NGO.

To sum up, the material structures (funding) are what enable the donor-NGO interaction, but it is the use of language, and thereby the construction and reconstruction of ideas, that eventually and essentially affect organisations' behaviour. The core assignment of the analysis is then to answer how these ideas (discourses) of the Western donor, DFAT, shape the discursive practice within Lao civil society.

4. Analytical framework

In this chapter, the analytical framework for examining DFAT's ideational influence upon NGOs in Laos is established. The analytical framework is based on the ontology and epistemology of social constructionism. According to social constructionism, our knowledge of the world is dependent on language and social interactions, and knowledge is therefore a social construct (Burr 2015). In other words, the (social) world is socially constructed through the use of language (Fairclough 2003: 8). In this way, how we understand the world, our ideas, is constructed through how we talk about it, and this determines our actions and behaviour. It is therefore crucial to understand the social relationship between NGOs and their donors, in order to be able to explain why they behave as they do. The ideas that are articulated and communicated between NGOs and donors are of particular interest, since this affects how both parties view the world. It might seem that NGOs are strategically adapting to donor agendas in order to get funding. However, both donors and NGOs are constantly exposed to new ideas that might eventually affect and change their own ideas and behaviour. From this outset, organisational theory (Neo-institutional and Resource Dependency theory) cannot alone explain the donor-NGO relationship, since it is not the material factors that constitutes and shapes relationships, but rather social interactions in which ideas are constructed and mediated.

The most fitting approach to analysing the construction of ideas in the relationship between NGOs in Laos and their donors is CDA. The aim of the discourse analysis is to determine how meaning is generated and changed through the use of language, and

how language affects our understanding of the world. Essentially we want to understand is how this knowledge motivates social behaviour (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). This chapter is divided into two sections. First, it will outline the analytical framework, which is based upon the British linguistics professor Norman Fairclough's version of CDA. Then the second part of the chapter will present the analytical questions used in the analysis of DFAT and NGOs in Laos' conceptualisation of civil society.

4.1. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

A discourse is "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 1). Furthermore, "our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them" (Ibid). In this way, besides reflecting the world, a discourse also constitutes the world and gives the world meaning (Fairclough 2008b: 18). A discourse therefore has three functions: an identity function where it constructs social identities, a relational function where it constructs social relations, and an ideational function where it constructs knowledge- and meaning systems (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 79; Fairclough 2008b: 18). An empirical study of text, and how text is produced (discursive practice) can help us understand how ideas, which are manifested in text and discursive practice, motivate social behaviour. CDA combines detailed linguistic analysis and other social theories, which are non-discursive, in order to analyse a discourse and its implications for social behaviour within a particular social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 72, 78).

This section will outline the theory and method of CDA as presented by Fairclough with a particular focus on his three-dimensional model.

4.1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis: A Theory and a Method

There are different approaches to discourse analysis, where CDA is only one of many. These theories rest on a social constructionist foundation, as outlined earlier, as well as on structuralist and post-structuralist language philosophy. The claim is that language serves as an entry-point to reality. Representations of reality are created by the use of language, and these representations are never just reflections of an already

existing world, but are rather contributing to creating reality. This does not mean that reality does not exist, but the physical world is only granted meaning through discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 17). The difference between CDA and other discourse analysis approaches is that CDA views a discourse as being part of a dialectic interaction with other social practices, so that the discursive practice and the social practice mutually constitute each other (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 65). Fairclough's approach, within CDA, is the most developed theory and method (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 72). The aim of the theory is to investigate and map out power relations in society, where focus lies in the examination of *change* (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 11, 16). The ultimate aim of CDA is to reveal the role of the discursive practice in upholding the social world, and hereunder social relations, where relationships of power inequality exists (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 63). Social practice *constitutes* the social world, but is at the same time also *constituted* by other social practices, and discourse is an important part of social practice. In this way, discourse contributes to shaping and reshaping social structures, but at the same time, discourse reflects these social structures and processes too (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 74). Summed up, the discursive practices and social practices constitute our world, since these stands in a dialectic relationship where they reproduce and change each other (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 28).

Since language is an irreducible part of social life, an analysis of what has been said and written is crucial to discourse theory. Fairclough focuses on textual analysis, where he adopts a broad definition of texts, which can be newspaper articles, television programmes, interviews, etc. Textual analysis is therefore an essential part of discourse analysis. But discourse analysis is not merely the linguistic analysis of texts (Fairclough 2003: 2-3). Textual analysis by itself is limited, and to assess the ideological effects of texts, one therefore needs to take a multidisciplinary perspective, where textual analysis is combined with social analysis. This can be organisational analysis, for example. In this way, the microanalysis of text is linked to the macro analysis of power relations (Fairclough 2003: 15-16).

This leads us to Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA.

4.1.2. Fairclough's three-dimensional model

An analysis of a discourse has two dimensions: A communicative event and the "order of discourse" (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 79-80). These dimensions stand in a dialectic relationship. An analysis of a communicative event includes an analysis of three levels. The first level is text, which is the analysis of a text's linguistic features. The second level is the discursive practice, which is the analysis of discourses and genres that are articulated in the production- and consumption of the text. The third and final level is the social practice. This includes a reflection on whether the discursive practice is reproducing or restructuring the existing order of discourse, and what consequences this has to the broader social process (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 80-82).
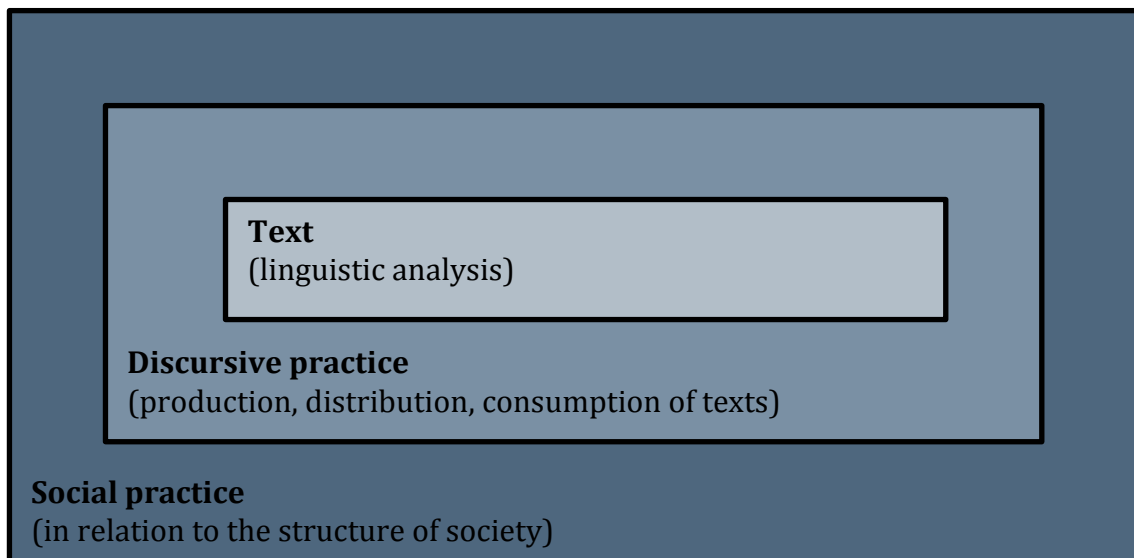
Text
(linguistic analysis)

Discursive practice
(production, distribution, consumption of texts)

Social practice
(in relation to the structure of society)

Figure 1: Fairclough's three-dimensional model adapted from Fairclough (2008b: 127).

The three-dimensional model unites the microanalysis of text with the larger analysis of social practice and social structures. The textual analysis can be viewed as descriptive, while the discursive and social practice aspects are interpretive (Fairclough 2008b: 28-29).

Textual analysis

Textual analysis concentrates on formal textual features, which constructs discourses and genres linguistically. These formal features are: choice of words/vocabulary,

grammar, cohesion, and text structure (Fairclough 2008b: 31-32). (The specific analytical linguistic tools used to conduct a textual analysis will be accounted for below). Fairclough defines genres as way of acting and producing social life. A genre is for example an interview, a lecture, or a news report. A discourse is different from a genre, a way of representing a part of the social world. Discourses are positioned since social actors have different worldviews: different discourses. In this way, discourses differ in how social events are represented, and there are alternative and often competing discourses associated with different groups of people in different social positions (Fairclough 2003: 17, 207). The way the genres and discourses are connected is what constitutes an "order of discourse". That is how different ways of making meaning is socially structured. Within this order of discourse is a discourse that serves as the dominant way of making meaning, where other discourses and ways are marginal, or oppositional. This order of discourse is not a closed system, but is affected by what happens in actual interactions (Fairclough 2003: 207). (This aspect will be elaborated later on, when the concepts of ideology and hegemony are discussed).

It is important to note that there is not a sharp distinction between the division of analytical subjects in respectively textual analysis and analysis of the discursive practice. This is due to the fact that it is impossible to discuss text without reference to the text production and/or interpretation (Fairclough 2008b: 29). This leads us to the next level of analysis.

Analysis of the discursive practice
Discursive practice covers respectively production-, distribution- and consumption processes (Fairclough 2008b: 35). The relation between texts and social practice is mediated through the discursive practice. It is therefore only through discursive practice – where people use language to produce and consume texts – that texts shape and are shaped by social practice. At the same time, text (the formal linguistic features) affects both the production- and consumption process (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 82). The analysis of the discursive practice focuses on how previous discourses and genres are drawn upon by writers in the production of a text, as well as how the receivers of a text also draw upon previous discourses and genres when consuming and interpreting the text (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 81). This is what Fairclough

refs to respectively as intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextuality is when a text draws on elements and fragments from other texts. This can be done directly (manifest intertextuality) where the author of a text refers directly to another text, or it can be done through what Fairclough calls interdiscursivity. Interdiscursivity is when a text is constituted by fragments from, not specific texts like intertextuality, but from elements of orders of discourse (Fairclough 2008a: 85).

Analysis of social practice

A social practice is a particular area of social life, for instance the social practice of a classroom teaching. A social practice is a relatively stable configuration, which always articulates discourse together with other non-discoursal social elements (Fairclough 2003: 25, 205). When analysing the broader social practice, discourse analysis alone is not enough, since social practice has both discursive as well as non-discursive elements. Because, as outlined in the beginning of this chapter, the central purpose of CDA is to map the connections between language use and social practice, one needs to focus on the discursive practice's role in maintaining the social order and its role in social change. To do this, it is necessary to focus on how discursive practice reproduces or challenges the order of discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 82-83). The analysis of social practice therefore has to focus on the relation between the discursive practice and the order of discourse. Attempting to the account for the non-discursive relations and structures in the social practice is therefore crucial for the analysis of the social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 98). It is in this part of the broader discourse analysis that one gets close to questions about change and ideological consequences: Questions about whether or not the discursive practice is reproducing the order of discourse, and thereby contributing to uphold the status quo in the broader social practice, or if the order of discourse is transformed, so that social change is happening (Ibid).

In order to answer these questions, two concepts, which are central for Fairclough's understanding of discursive practice and power relations, are discussed. These are ideology and hegemony (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 86). Fairclough understands ideology as representations of aspects of the world, which contributes to establishing, maintaining, and changing relations of power and dominance (Fairclough 2003: 9). Discourses can therefore be more or less ideological, where discourses that contribute

to maintaining or transforming power relations are the ideological ones (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 86; Jensen 2008: 13).

According to Fairclough, the hegemony concept is useful when analysing how discursive practice is part of a larger social practice, where power relations exist. As explained earlier, an order of discourse is a kind of system, which both shapes and is shaped by specific cases of language use. There are therefore limitations as to what one can say within an order of discourse, but at the same time, the order of discourse can be changed and challenged if the language draws on discourses and genres that are part of other orders of discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 83). A discursive practice can therefore be part of a hegemonic battle where the discursive practice is contributing to reproduce and transform the order of discourse and thereby existing power relations. If discursive elements are articulated in new ways, then discursive change will happen (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 88). In this way, the articulation and re-articulation of an order of discourse is a hegemonic battle (Fairclough 2008a: 53).

4.2. Analytical approach to textual analysis of DFAT and NGOs in Laos

As outlined earlier, this thesis uses CDA as an approach to the textual analysis of DFAT documents and NGO personnel-interviews. It is important to note that the scientist's role, when conducting CDA, is not to "get behind" the discourse in order to determine what people *really* mean. Neither is it attempting to discover how the reality *really* is behind the discourse. The premise for using CDA is that one has to accept that reality outside the discourse can never be reached, and that the object of the analysis therefore is the discourse itself (Jørgensen & Philips 1999: 31). Even though CDA is both a method and a theory, and one therefore has to accept the core ontological and epistemological paragraphs in order to use discourse analysis as a method to conduct empirical inquiries, CDA can be used variously because of its multidisciplinary approach (Jensen 2008: 7; Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 12).

In the textual analysis of DFAT's three documents and the four interviews conducted with NGO personnel in Laos, the analytical framework developed by Fairclough will be used, as already mentioned. Fairclough has summarised questions within twelve themes, which are relevant to ask of a text. The framework is not meant to be fixed as

one can choose to leave out some of the themes and questions in the analysis if these are not relevant, as well as choose to include other sets of questions. For instance, this analysis does not focus on genres as part of a discursive practice, but merely on the representation of discourses. Seven themes have been selected as the analytical framework for the following analysis, based on their analytical utility and relevance to this thesis' focus. Below are the selected themes and questions based on Fairclough's framework:

Theme	Questions
Intertextuality	- Of relevant other texts/voices, which are included, which are significantly excluded? - Where other voices are included, are they attributed, and if so, specifically or non-specifically? - Are attributed voices directly reported (quoted), or indirectly reported? - How are other voices textured in relation to the authorial voice, and in relation to each other?
Discourses	- What discourses are drawn upon in the text, and how are they textured together? Is there a significant mixing of discourses?
Representations of social events	- What elements of represented social events are included or excluded, and which included elements are most salient? - How are social actors represented (activated/passivated, personal/impersonal, named/classified, specific/generic)?
Assumptions	- What existential, propositional, or value assumptions are made? - Is there a case for seeing any assumptions as ideological?
Modality	- What do authors commit themselves to in terms of truth (epistemic modalities)? Or in terms of obligation and necessity (deontic modalities)?

	- What levels of commitment are there (high, median, low) where modalities are modalised?
Evaluation	- To what values (in term of what is desirable or undesirable) do authors commit themselves? - How are values realised – as evaluative statements, statements with deontic modalities, statements with affective mental processes, or assumed values?
Difference	Which (combination) of the following scenarios characterise the orientation to difference in the text? a) an openness to, acceptance or, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference, as in "dialogue" in the richest sense of the term b) an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic, a struggle over meaning, norms, power c) an attempt to resolve or overcome difference d) a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity e) consensus, a normalisation and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses differences of meaning and over norms

Table 2: Framework for textual analysis adapted from Fairclough (2003: 191-194).

These questions serve as the basis for analysing DFAT's and NGOs in Laos' civil society conceptions. It is important to note that when this thesis talks about discursive practice, it refers both to how civil society is conceptualised and to the intertextuality and interdiscursivity that is drawn upon in this conceptualisation. These two things are what constitute the discursive practice. The textual analysis and the analysis of the discursive practice are therefore not separated as they are in Fairclough's analytical framework.

Let us now turn to the textual analysis of DFAT's conception of civil society.

5. DFAT's conception of civil society

As mentioned earlier, three documents have been chosen for analysing DFAT's conception of civil society. In order to enable the reader to critically evaluate my interpretations, it is important to present the texts and the context in which they have been produced.

The "AusAID Civil Society Engagement Framework: Working with civil society organisations to help people overcome poverty" from 2012 was developed based on an evaluation of AusAID's (the former DFAT) previous engagement with civil society, conducted by the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) under DFAT. The ODE assessed how well AusAID helped civil society in developing countries contribute to the development of effective states (DFAT 2012). The document is produced by AusAID, but NGOs has provided information which has been used in the publication (AusAID 2012). The "DFAT and NGOs: Effective Development" document from 2015, is a framework that outlines DFAT's approach to working with NGOs to support development activities. The "Aid Program Performance Report 2014-2015: Laos" is an annual report, which summarises the progress and performance of Australia's aid program to Laos in the period July 2014 to June 2015 (DFAT 2015d). We do not know the specific authors of these frameworks and of the report. It must however be presumed that because the frameworks guide DFAT's engagement with civil society and with NGOs, they reflect the views of DFAT as a department. It must furthermore be presumed that the authors of the Laos performance report are DFAT employees who work either in Laos or closely with partners in Laos. It is therefore presumed that the documents reflect beliefs held within DFAT. This makes the documents valuables sources for understanding the ideas and conceptualisations that shape DFAT policy and practice. As Monkman and Hoffman state,

> "Therefore understanding the discursive meaning of what is written and what is not written in these documents is key to understanding both the forces that shape the text and how the text is intended to influence perceptions of reality"
>
> (Monkman & Hoffman 2013: 68).

The claim is not that these particular texts have been dominant and influential in the Lao context, but rather that they constitute ideas which are likely to effect DFAT's approach and policy toward NGOs and civil society in Laos.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first two correspond to the first two levels of analysis in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. Section 5.1 is the textual analysis of the three texts' linguistic features. The analysis will revolve around **the representation of social actors**, **assumptions**, **modality**, **evaluation**, and **difference**. The analysis is divided into clusters of ideas that constitute DFAT's definition of civil society. Section 5.2 focuses on the three texts' intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Section 5.3 will conclude on DFAT's core civil society conceptions and their ideological foundation.

5.1. Textual analysis

There are three main ideas, in the DFAT documents, of what constitute civil society. These ideas are 1) that civil society is an independent development actor, 2) that civil society is made up of organisations, and 3) that civil society is a protector of "the poor". These ideas do not however dominate DFAT's orientation towards Laos. This will be discussed in the end of the analysis.

5.1.1. An independent development actor

DFAT defines civil society in the two frameworks:

> "The term 'civil society' refers to a wide and growing range of non-government and non-market organisations through which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests or values in public life"
>
> (AusAID 2012: 1)[2].

DFAT also states that civil society is an independent development actor and a powerful agent of change (DFAT 2015c: 4, 6, 8, 14), and commits to supporting "a strong an independent civil society" (DFAT 2015c: 14). DFAT thereby views civil society as an independent actor, who is differentiated from the government and the market.

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[2] The definition in the other framework is almost the same. See DFAT 2015c: 4 for the definition.

DFAT is committed to protecting the nature of CSOs as independent development actors. DFAT states that, "We will protect the freedom of CSOs to contribute to public debate without impact on their funding status" (AusAID 2012: 7). This part implies an accentuation of **difference**, or a struggle over *meaning*. What the texts do not include are alternative definitions and ideas of civil society. This might imply that there are specific **social events**, where CSOs are not free to contribute to the public debate. These events are *excluded* but are nonetheless important for the frameworks since the commitments to supporting CSOs are based on such excluded events and ideas. Similarly, when DFAT states that, "We will ensure that different perspectives and needs, including those of women, young people, people with disability and ethnic minorities, are taken into account when developing policies and delivering services" (AusAID 2012: 7), it implies that the voices of these people are not always heard. The two frameworks generally reflect a bracketing of **difference**, a focus on *commonality* and *solidarity*. They highlight that DFAT and NGOs might have different frameworks for reporting to their communities and to other stakeholders, but that this should be incorporated into existing mechanisms in terms of cooperation been DFAT and NGOs. What is important is the shared commitment to demonstrating results (DFAT 2015c: 8).

In DFAT's definition of civil society, there are two kinds of assumptions: An **existential assumption**, namely that civil society exists in general, as well as an underlying **value assumption**; that civil society is inherently *good*, and something that "must be protected and promoted" (DFAT 2015c: 13). Negative elements are excluded from the definition of civil society. Civil society as an actor is seen as positive and constructive.

5.1.2. Organisations in focus

For DFAT, what constitutes civil society is:

> "community and village-based groups, labour unions, indigenous groups, diaspora groups, charitable organisations, cooperatives, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations,

chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and the not-for-profit media"

<div align="right">(DFAT 2015c: 4).</div>

In this definition only groups and organisations are included as part of civil society. In DFAT's conception of civil society, there is therefore an **existential assumption** about what kind of **social actors** is part of civil society. Civil society is a partner for DFAT in the form of CSOs. But although DFAT describes different types of CSOs, NGOs are the primary focus for DFAT.

DFAT highlights the importance of NGOs in particular as a development partner because of their strong connection to, and knowledge of, the local communities (DFAT 2015c: 4, 5, 11). Because of this connection, NGOs can play a convening role as facilitator between local communities and other development actors. They represent the needs of "the poor and marginalised". Because of this development expertise, they can therefore bring a range of perspectives to governments and other development actors (DFAT 2015c: 5, 6, 11). A particular role of NGOs, according to DFAT, is to strengthen local systems, improving local governance and building local service delivery capacity. The goal is that communities are empowered enough to manage their own lives (DFAT 2015c: 5). In setting this goal, DFAT assumes that "local communities" have low capacity and that they are not capable of managing their own lives. This view of local communities as weak is related to DFAT's representation of "the poor": two terms, which represent the same **social actor**. This is elaborated in the next section.

5.1.3. Protecting "the poor"

Civil society is seen as an important development outcome in its own right (AusAID 2012: 1). DFAT presents CSOs as important partners in working for the "world's poorest". CSOs can help people to claim their rights and can help poor people to participate in the economy and society. They also help these people to shape development policies and partnerships and to oversee their implementation (AusAID 2012: 1; DFAT 2015c: 13). For DFAT, CSOs can be "partners in the delivery of better services, enabling social inclusion and making governments more effective and accountable" (AusAID 2012: 1). This is an **evaluative statement.** This statement

underlines that working with CSOs is *desirable*. These organisations "can bring strong connections to local communities" (DFAT 2015c: 4) and can provide "civil society perspectives on development" (DFAT 2015c: 5).

In the frameworks CSOs and NGOs are represented as *active* **actors**, who make things happen. CSOs are **active** in the sense that they "are the main providers of basic services to the most marginalised communities" (AusAID 2012: 2). Similarly, NGOs are "building local capacity and empowering communities" (DFAT 2015c: 5). "The poor", on the other hand, is the only **actor** that is *passive* throughout the documents. "The poor" refers also to "the marginalised", which includes people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and women and girls. However, this differentiation is made only in the beginning of the "DFAT and NGO" document. Throughout the rest of this document, these specific groups of people are included under general terms such as "the poor", "the poor and the marginalised", "the most disadvantaged" and "vulnerable people/communities" (DFAT 2015c: 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12). In these documents, "the world's poorest", or "people living in poverty" (AusAID 2012: 2, 6, 7), are addressed as a *classified*, *generic* actor. This actor, "the poor", is passive, meaning that it does not make things happen, but is oppositely the *beneficiary*; affected by the processes. In the two frameworks, "the poor" is the beneficiary of the whole DFAT civil society/NGO engagement program. "The poor" is too the reason why DFAT should support CSOs and work with NGOs (AusAID 2012: 2). DFAT is attempting to argue for their development programme and projects, but by creating "the poor" as a passive subject, DFAT erases people from the discourse and connects human subjects with poverty. Subjects are in this way socially constructed as to make certain policies and practices possible. As Timmer argues, to have a humanitarian action one must have a *needy* subject (2010: 266). But the consequence of such a construct is that people have no power to define their own interests (Naylor 2011: 185). Such a discursive relationship, between the active CSO and the passive needy subject, is a manifestation of power between actors in the "developed world" and actors in the "developing world" (Naylor 2011: 178).

DFAT is nevertheless *highly committed* to working for this beneficiary. Commitment to action for the benefit of "the poor" is made in terms of **deontic modalities**: "[The Australian Government and CSOs] will work together to maximise the impact of

Australia's aid, especially for the poorest*"* (AusAID 2012: 6). DFAT also makes an **evaluative statement with deontic modality** when stating that being guiding by "good practice engagement principles" help to define development priorities and identity solutions, to respond to humanitarian crises, to deliver services to communities, and to build capacity in local system (AusAID 2012: iv). In this way, DFAT implies that acting on the basis of values is *desirable*: a good thing to do.

Interestingly, the Laos Performance Report differs a lot from the two frameworks in the sense that "civil society" is barely mentioned. This leads to the question of whether or not DFAT is promoting their ideas and conceptions about civil society in the Lao context.

5.1.4. Excluding Lao civil society as a partner

The Laos specific document allows us to investigate how the ideas represented in the previous section are operationalised in the Lao context. Interestingly, it seems that the general civil society ideas of DFAT are not promoted in Laos, since DFAT makes no definition of Lao civil society in the report. Civil society is mentioned vaguely as an **actor**, whom DFAT draws on for expertise (DFAT 2015a: 5). Specific civil society actors or areas of expertise are not elaborated on. The operating environment for NGOs and civil society is mentioned because it is at risk of becoming more restrictive (DFAT 2015a: 15, 17). NGOs, however, are the only actor mentioned as belonging to civil society. DFAT states that they will, "Continue to monitor the civil society operational context to be better able to manage risk in the engagement of NGOs" (DFAT 2015a: 17). Instead, focus is on the Government of Laos, whom DFAT aims at working in close partnership with: "Australia will continue to improve the management and visibility of Australian aid by working more closely with the Lao Government, rather than funding projects that are managed by other organisations" (DFAT 2015a: 2). The Lao Government is thereby an important *active* actor**,** whom DFAT implements activities with directly. The report states a shift from working with multilateral organisations to working more closely with the Government. NGOs are also mentioned as partners to DFAT (DFAT 2015a: 14), but not nearly as many times as the Government of Laos.

What is clearly excluded is a description of the civil society operational environment. The exclusion of this **social event** has important implications for the report. That civil society is nearly completely excluded from the report could relate to the fact that it is not possible for DFAT to partner with civil society, other than international NGOs, because of the restrictive environment. That might be why focus is so much on the Government as a partner. In this way, CSOs might be present in Laos, but they do not have the power to effect policies, since this depends on the Government's willingness to include civil society in political decision-making.

5.2. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity

In DFAT's definition of civil society, and of the role of CSOs, there is a high degree of **intertextuality**. The World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) are *attributed*, since they have a similar definition of what the term civil society refers to. The World Bank and the OECD are not directly quoted, but DFAT writes that it recognises these definitions of civil society (AusAID 2012: 1; DFAT 2015c: 4). The voices of the World Bank and OECD are therefore relatively *high* in the frameworks. Similarly, when DFAT claims that civil society is an important development outcome in its own, they refer directly to a Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation outcome statement (AusAID 2012: 1). The Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness is also acknowledged as a principle of engagement referring to how DFAT and CSOs will work together and engage with each other (AusAID 2012: 6).

It is therefore evident that DFAT draws on already established **discourses** of civil society and "good" development. DFAT refers to principles of "good development practice" that refers to DFAT's principles for engaging with NGO partners (AusAID 2012: iv; DFAT 2015c: iv, 5). These "good practice" principles carry the implicit assumption that there are practices that are "best" for all contexts and actors. These practices are part of, and contribute to, the homogenising focus on indicators and results in development work (Cornwall 2007: 477). This discourse is related to principles of "good donor practice", where DFAT promotes transparency and accountability (AusAID 2012: 6). The practice also relates to the protection of the freedom of CSOs, and that CSO's difference and diversity from their donor should not have an impact on their funding status (AusAID 2012: 7). The "good governance

discourse" is also drawn upon (AusAID 2012, 1, 9). This discourse found its way into mainstream development in the late 1990s. This discourse carries the neoliberal idea that a strong civil society can facilitate capitalism and democracy in whichever context, as it did in the West (Cornwall 2007: 478-479). For DFAT, working with CSOs is desirable because they can facilitate change from the bottom-up. These so-called buzzwords, such as "good governance", "transparency" and "accountability", evoke a feel-good factor. They are all positive words and they induce only "good things" which the reader cannot disagree with. These words are "intended to invite to automatic approval" (Standing in Cornwall 2007: 475), and there is no basis on which to challenge these assumptions (Monkman & Hoffman 2013: 76). DFAT thereby draws on common "feel good" discourses within development work.

5.3. Findings: DFAT's core conceptions of civil society

What was presented above in the textual analysis were representations of what constitute civil society. Now these will be gathered into core conceptions of civil society as articulated by DFAT. These representation and conceptions are different from discourse. A particular discourse can generate many specific representations. A discourse is identified by its degree of repetition, commonality, and stability over time. It is also identified by how much of the world it includes, and therefore in the range of representations it can generate (Fairclough 2003: 124). We therefore cannot, from this textual analysis, conclude on DFAT's discourse on civil society, because the analysis does not cover enough to conclude on repetition, commonality, and stability over time. We will, however, discuss whether DFAT's representations are part of a discourse, in chapter 7 on social practice. In this section we will conclude on DFAT's core ideas about civil society and whether or not there is any implications for seeing these as ideological.

The core conceptions that are dominant in DFAT's definition of civil society are:

Civil society is inherently good

Civil society actors are viewed as naturally civil and cooperative. Civil society is the genuine representative of the people's interest and their will. It is a service deliverer, who is closely tied to the local communities.

Civil society is an intermediary between the state and the local communities

Civil society is seen as a counterbalance to the state. Its functions are to channel assistance from donor to communities, to be the voice of these communities, and to provide "civil society perspectives" that can help shape policies that will benefit the whole of society. In this way, civil society actors and organisations are the protector of citizen's rights and they can contribute to making governments more effective, accountable, and transparent.

Discourses are inherently ideological and these ideologies constitute our taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works (Monkman & Hoffman 2013: 68). Fairclough states that one cannot simply look at a text and decide which of the assumptions made in it are ideological. One needs to go beyond the textual analysis. We will therefore discuss more about DFAT's ideological foundation and the power this carries in chapter 7 on social practice. Texts can, however, "do ideological work" in their assumptions about reality (Fairclough 2003: 58-59). DFAT assumes that there is such a thing as civil society and that civil society is inherently good. This idea of civil society is connected to a wider neoliberal understanding of "good development" for which the support of an independent civil society is necessary. One might argue that DFAT reproduces the ideas of the neoliberal New Policy Agenda, which came to dominate foreign aid from the 1990s and onwards. This agenda is based on neoliberal economic policy recommendations combined with a commitment to "good governance". In this neoliberal ideology, civil society came to be an alternative to the state with the potential to strengthening the participation and voice of citizens in the society (Lewis 1998: 502). These ideas are promoted in DFAT's policies on civil society and NGOs. DFAT assumes that civil society is a genuine representative of the interest and will of the people. In this discourse, civil society is seen as a rational actor, which is apolitical and acts upon "matters of general welfare" (Kamat 2004: 158). In this way, civil society has replaced some of the State's and other political organisations' functions (Kamat 2004: 158-159). The argument is that because civil society is apolitical, and representative of the whole of society, it can function as a "watchdog", which will affect the State to rule under "good governance" principles, i.e. with accountability and transparency.

As already established, Lao civil society is not included as a priority in DFAT policies toward Laos. It has only been speculated thus far why that might be. Let us now turn

to the analysis of NGO personnel's conception of civil society, which might provide the answer.

6. NGO personnel's conception of civil society

This chapter will revolve around the four NGO employees' conceptions of civil society. These conceptions will be held up against those of DFAT. As mentioned earlier, two of the NGOs, (NGO #A and #B), are funded by DFAT and the other two, (NGO #C and #D), are not. We will see if there is a link between DFAT's and NGO #A's and NGO #B's civil society conceptualisations. Similarly, we will see if there is a difference in conceptualisation between the DFAT funded organisations and the non-DFAT funded organisations. In order to allow the reader to be critical to my interpretation, it is important to present the questions to which the quotes in the analysis provided answers. The interview guide can therefore be found in the end of the thesis as Appendix 1.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first, section 6.1, is the textual analysis of the linguistic features of the four interviews. The analysis will revolve around the **representation of social actors**, **assumptions**, **modality**, **evaluation**, and **difference**. It will furthermore continuously refer back to the analysis of DFAT's conceptualisation of civil society in order to compare. The second, section 6.2, will conclude on the NGOs' core civil society discourses and ideological foundation. It is important to note that this chapter will not discuss intertextuality and interdiscursivity as the previous chapter did. The reason for this is that the interviews do not draw on other texts or discourses. The NGO employees were answering specific questions in a short amount of time, and the possibility of bringing in other texts or discourses was therefore limited.

6.1. Textual analysis

The four NGOs in Laos share a similar definition of civil society. To them, civil society is representative of citizens and citizens' movements. Civil society is also independent and autonomous from the state and national institutions (Doe 2016). There is a focus on the organised part of civil society, on CSOs and NGOs, but also a focus on the role of civil society in decision-making and influencing. Parker from NGO #B defines civil society as:

"I think civil society is, to some extent, representative of citizens and citizens movements. (…) Mostly that then becomes organised, at least in the West, into groups of some kind or organisations of some kind"

(Parker 2016)

For Parker, the role of civil society is both in service delivery and in advocacy and influencing. The role of civil society is to be the voice of the citizens. For Doe from NGO #C, civil society has a responsibility in the society:

"I think it [civil society] is the room or space for citizens to (…) participate in different decision-making and choices in the society. I think it represents people with certain responsibilities of something larger"

(Doe 2016).

In these ideas there is a view of civil society as inherently *good*, just as there was in DFAT's definition. Here again, the **value assumption** about civil society does not include negative or destructive elements. Civil society actors are thereby legitimate and positive, only contributing to constructive and good things.

Nevertheless, the NGO employees' definition of Lao civil society is different. For Phongsa, from NGO #A, a specific characterisation or definition of civil society in Laos cannot clearly be made:

"I am not sure. I think it is hard to define civil society in Laos. But I think this is a group of organisations working together on development in the country"

(Phongsa 2016).

This definition, nonetheless, shares similar characteristics with the previous definition made by Parker, namely that civil society is made up of organisations. It thereby bears the **existential assumption** that organisations are civil society actors. However, these organisations do not include all organisations. For Phongsa, they only refer to NPAs, and sometimes NGOs, but not wider than that (Phongsa 2016). Parker shares the same

attitude, arguing that mass organisations such as the Lao Women's Union and the Youth Union, as well as trade unions, are too political to be classified as civil society, because they are too aligned with the Government (Parker 2016). For her the new NPAs, which came with the 2009 Decree on Associations, do not represent the real civil society in Laos, "Because as soon as they are registered there is government oversight and regulation" (Ibid). She explains that in Laos there are more and more GONGOs, Government Organised NGOs, which are former government servants setting up NPAs, which are doing what the Government would like them to do. The challenge is that these NPAs look like civil society on paper, but they are not "truly representing the thoughts and the desires of citizens of the country" (Ibid). For her, it is the unregistered groups that are the most interesting. Here, there is not the same **evaluative statement**, as there were in DFAT's statements, namely that working with civil society is desirable. Civil society on paper might *not* be constructive and might *not* be good or desirable in reality. Powell states that NGO #D has even moved away from attempting to support civil society on a broader level, to supporting fragments of civil society in terms of groups of people, such as women and youth (Powell 2016).

The characterisations of Lao civil society also represent an *accentuation* of **difference**. Doe states that Lao civil society questions the international and Westernised way of seeing civil society. NGO #C works with civil society in other countries mostly on advocacy, but in Laos the collaboration is focused on service delivery. Doe explains that because citizens are represented directly by official national institutions, and by the party and mass organisations, "there is no specific role for civil society because there is no need or call for that" (Doe 2016). This consideration of difference, between the international Westernised way of seeing civil society and the reality in Laos, implies a struggle over *meaning*; a meaning of what civil society is, and if it is possible to make one broad definition that fits all contexts.

Powell from NGO #D has a different take on the whole civil society question and definition. For him, the civil society definition discussion is not relevant. NGO #D has revised their civil society strategy. Previously they were attempting to make broader changes in the enabling environment for CSO development, but did not see any success in this strategy. Now they are instead focusing on specific target groups within civil society, such as indigenous minority groups, including women and youth.

Their focus is on making tangible changes for these groups, as well as on building the capacity of selected NPAs and producer associations. This too represents a struggle over *meaning*. NGO #D has disregarded the common strategy applied by most NGOs in Laos in their attempt to support civil society. That they do not want to take part in the discussion on what defines civil society implies an accentuation of **difference** and conflict, and a struggle over *meaning* and *power*. (This will be discussed further in the findings of the analysis). Powell though makes a short statement on the space for Lao civil society, which is similar to that of Doe:

> "The space for civil society development and progression is relatively limited, constrained and controlled. Consequently the diversity of what constitutes civil society in Laos is quite narrow and the scope for active participation is likewise curtailed"
>
> (Powell 2016).

In the NGO employees' attempt to define Lao civil society there are no clear **existential statements** about what actors are included. In their definitions of civil society in general, it was clear that organisations were the **social actors** that constituted civil society. But in the definition of Lao civil society, it becomes unclear what actors are included, and what their role is. The Lao civil society definition too differs from the general civil society definition made by the NGO employees in that it does not include a role in decision-making and influencing. The NGOs are aware of the constraints and opportunities for Lao civil society, and that civil society is not able to exercise broad influence in the society.

When asked about their organisation's role in Lao civil society, the NGO employees emphasised support to and coaching of NPAs with the aim of organisational development, including project strengthening. The reason for this is to build the capacity of the NPAs so that good, strong Lao CSOs emerge, which can take over from the international NGOs (Parker 2016). NGO #B and NGO #D also emphasise the support of what we can call the unorganised part of civil society, for instance village-based organisations, rural women, and farmers. The aim is for the women, for instance, to have more voice, improved status and more decision-making power in the community (Parker 2016; Powell 2016).

6.2. Findings: NGO personnel's core conceptions of civil society

As mentioned earlier, we cannot conclude on the NGO personnel's civil society discourse. It will, however, be discussed, in chapter 7, whether the NGOs, as well as DFAT, are contributing to reinforcing a particular discourse on civil society or if there is a struggle of hegemony and power.

The core conceptions of civil society represented by the NGO personnel are quite similar to that of DFAT:

Civil Society is inherently good
Civil society represents the voice of the citizens. Its role is to influence society and policy for the benefit of the citizens, as well as to create room and space for all people to participate in the society. Overall, civil society contributes to a country's development.

The NGO employees do, however, challenge this conception themselves when they discuss civil society in Laos. Here, what is civil society on paper is not necessarily an inherently good and constructive civil society. Some CSOs in Laos take the form of civil society, but are in reality too affiliated with the Government. This leads us to the next discourse.

Civil society is apolitical and differentiated from the state
In Laos, CSOs might take the form of civil society in that they are registered under the 2009 Decree on Associations. However, some of these CSOs are too political because they are closely tied to the Government. "Genuine" civil society is therefore seen as apolitical and differentiated from the state.

Not all the NGOs promote these conceptions, and some promote only parts of a conception. For instance, for Powell civil society refers not only to organisations, but also to other groups within civil society, such as indigenous groups, women, and youth groups. For Phongsa, however, civil society refers only to organisations in terms of NPAs and NGOs. The NGOs should therefore not be seen as one homogenised group that promote a single conceptual framework. They do though in general promote the same neoliberal idea of civil society as DFAT, namely a civil

society that is inherently good and represents the genuine interests of citizens in a society. But what is interesting is that there is an emphasis on differences between their own common civil society definition and civil society in the Lao context. Doe specifically underlines that the Lao context challenges the international/Westernised way of seeing civil society: Civil society as active participants in the decision-making in the society. In the last chapter, we saw that there is no evidence of DFAT engaging with civil society in Laos. It was speculated that the reason for this could be that the environment for civil society in Laos is too restrictive, and that CSOs do not have the power to influence, because the Government of Laos is unwilling to include civil society. The NGO employees confirm this hypothesis. As Powell outlined, the space for civil society in Laos is limited, constrained, and controlled (Powell 2016). Doe stated similarly that there is no need or call, at least by the state, for a civil society in Laos (Doe 2016). Parker also mentions that it is difficult in Laos to know what the wishes and desires of citizens are (Parker 2016). All this means that the possibility of active participation is reduced (Powell 2016).

To sum up, the NGOs generally promote the same civil society ideas and conceptualisations as DFAT. But when it comes to defining civil society in Laos, NGOs' definition differs from the general civil society definition made. There is no distinct difference between the four NGOs and their civil society definition, both in terms of a general and a Lao one. There is therefore no evidence that the NGOs funded by DFAT promote different ideas than the NGOs funded by other donors. This is a different finding than what was expected. As stated in the introduction, we would expect that NGOs acquiesce to donor influence both because of funding opportunity and because of power inequality. We will discuss this, as well as the relationship between DFAT conceptualisations and NGO conceptualisations, and what implication this has for donor-NGO relationships in terms of power, in the next chapter on social practice.

7. Social practice

The focus of this chapter is to connect DFAT's and the NGO personnel's use of language with the broader social practice. In section 3.5 it was argued that an international development work system emerged with the "aid for development" scheme and with the central role of NGOs to development work in the 1990s. It is

argued that this system, *development work*, is a social practice, which is defined by different types of elements: Specific social relations, persons, material artefacts, knowledge and language (discourse), and particular actions and interactions (Fairclough 2003: 25). In this way, "social practices define particular ways of acting" (Ibid). This level of analysis corresponds to Fairclough's third and final level of CDA. To make the connection between language and social practice, it is necessary to reflect on whether or not the discursive practice, namely how DFAT and NGOs conceptualise civil society, is reproducing or restructuring the existing order of discourse, as well as which consequences this has to the broader social process (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 82). Fairclough's concept "order of discourse" has already been discussed, but let us briefly refresh the definition. An order of discourse is the sum of discourses used within a social institution, or a social practice, and the relations between these discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999: 83). In an order of discourse, some ways of making meaning are dominant, where others are marginal or oppositional. In this way, discourses are fighting to obtain hegemonic status (Fairclough 2003: 207; Fairclough 2008a: 53). It is not in the scope of this thesis to determine and outline all discourses within the social practice of development work. Instead, two mainstream competing ideas about civil society are discussed in relation to DFAT's and NGO personnel's conceptualisations. These are the Neoliberal idea versus the Neo-Marxist idea, where the former dominates the order of discourse. It is therefore in this part of the discourse analysis that we get closer to questions about change and ideological consequences.

This chapter will focus on questions of ideology and hegemony, which are central to the analysis of the social practice and to CDA in general. It is discussed whether or not the discursive practice of DFAT and the NGO personnel is reproducing or restructuring the existing order of discourse. In doing this, section 7.1 discusses what the two dominant ideas on civil society within development work are, and how DFAT and the NGO personnel relate to them. In section 7.2, the relationship between DFAT and the NGOs in Laos is discussed, focusing on questions of power. This is discussed in relation to the two organisational theories: Neo-institutional theory and Resource Dependency theory. The third and final section of this chapter will sum up the findings in regards to the three key concepts of this chapter: Power, hegemony, and ideology. Here the question about why the conceptualisations of the four NGOs do

not differ in terms of who is funded by DFAT and who is not, is addressed. It is also here that it will be discussed whether or not the NGOs' conceptualisation of civil society are contributing to *change* within the social practice of development work.

7.1. The order of discourse

Arturo Escobar argues that since the Second World War, there has been a global language of development and underdevelopment (Hilhorst 2003: 8). In section 3.1.2 it was argued that this global language of development is one where NGOs are representative of civil society, and where these organisations facilitate liberatory change. It was also argued that the Tocquevillian perspective dominates the international development discourse. Sarah Peck endorses this by stating that there are a number of assumptions, which dominate the global development discourse on civil society. These assumptions bear a focus on "associational activity, civility and deepening democracy, often imagined through terms such as voice and participation" (2015: 551). Within this discourse, civil society is considered as an important channel through which development happens (Peck 2015: 552). It can therefore be argued that the order of discourse is dominated by a neoliberal foundation, where the focus is on NGOs facilitating civic and associational participation and in inspiring "good governance". Even though this neoliberal idea of civil society holds hegemonic status, there is, as stated earlier, another central understanding of civil society within development work. These competing ideas in relation to DFAT's and the NGO personnel's conceptualisations of civil society are discussed below. The central question now is how DFAT and NGOs relate to this order of discourse. Are they challenging the order or are they merely reproducing the hegemonic discourse?

Following Leeuwen & Verkoren (2013) it is argued that there are two key ways of understanding civil society, which constitute the order of discourse. The discourse that holds hegemonic status is the Tocquevillian. According to the Tocquevillian perspective, civil society is apolitical and inherently good. Counter to the Tocquevillian perspective on civil society stands the Gramscian inspired discourse. The Gramscian perspective, antithetically, views civil society as a sphere of hegemony (Buttigieg 1995: 4, 6-7): A site of struggle, thereby making civil society political. DFAT holds an optimistic assessment of civil society, which reflects the Tocquevillian conceptualisation of civil society. For DFAT, civil society is

considered as separated from the state, acting counter to it. Civil society is furthermore seen as "civil" and thereby inherently good. The same goes for the NGO personnel's conceptualisation of civil society in general. But as Grant Walton (2015) contends, there are many instances, particularly in developing countries, where civil society fails to live up to these ideals. This is reflected in the NGOs' conceptualisation of Lao civil society. The boundary between civil society groups and the State in Laos is blurred. Civil society is not always "civil" in that it does not always represent the interest of the citizens, as Parker explain. What on paper looks like civil society might be co-opted by the state, thereby making civil society political. These conceptualisations relate more to the Gramscian view of civil society than to the Tocquevillian perspective. Gramsci stresses the blurred lines between state and civil society, arguing that civil and political society often overlap, and therefore cannot be understood separately. This means that civil society is political and thus not separated from the state, because the state comprises both civil and political society. For Gramsci, civil society consists of groups who are struggling to resist or reinforce hegemonic ideas about social life (Buttigieg 1995; Walton 2015). In this way, civil society becomes a site of struggle for power (Buttigieg 1995: 27).

The examples of NGOs in Laos show why some believe that the world of development is starting to take a more Gramscian view of civil society given some of the failures of policies aimed at supporting local civil society organisations (Walton 2015). Cathy McIllwaine argues that the role of civil society has shifted. Circumspection about what civil society can actually deliver in practice is discussed and debated, as opposed to civil society merely being adulated (Walton 2015). McIllwaine believes that this shift, this "falling out of love" with civil society, can be considered as a shift towards a more "realistic Gramscian interpretation of civil society" (McIllwaine in Walton 2015). By adhering to a more Gramscian understanding of civil society, at least in the Lao context, the NGO personnel are challenging the order of discourse. In their general definition of civil society, they are, however, reproducing the neoliberal idea of civil society. How should this be understood: The fact that NGOs share the same conceptualisation of civil society as DFAT, a donor, but at the same time are moving away from the idea of civil society as inherently good and apolitical? I argue that this has to do with the fact that in order to access funding and influence, NGOs must employ the same language as their

donors. To attract funding, they must use buzzwords such as good governance, transparency, accountability, partnership, etc. They also must also create a "needy subject" to claim that their work is necessary and to gain visibility (Forte 2014: 12).

That the NGOs are both adhering to a neoliberal discourse of civil society and at the same time challenging this discourse seems contradictory. Let us turn to discussing the relationship between these NGOs and their donors in terms of power. The degree to which the NGOs are adopting, negotiating, or contesting donor pressure will be discussed by including the theories of Neo-institutionalism and Resource Dependency.

7.2. Donor-NGO relationship

As Islah Jad argues, NGOs are often represented as "passive recipients of external influence" (2007: 662). Often the donor-NGO relationship is seen as one of power inequality. NGOs are dependent on their donors for resources and must submit to donor requirements in order to survive (Reith 2010: 447). However, the relationship between donor and NGO is more complex than that.

The two organisational theories, Resource Dependency and Neo-institutionalism, have different perspectives on the agency of organisations. The Resource Dependency theory portrays organisations as actors, who have a degree of control over resources and over their exchange partners. Opposite stands Neo-institutionalism, which portrays organisations as passive actors, who conform to norms without reflection or resistance (Rauh 2010: 37). In this way, organisations survive, not because they are active, but because they are passive recipients of external influence. Neo-institutionalism argues that organisations adapt to donor practices in order to increase their legitimacy, even though this might reduce their effectiveness (Rauh 2010: 31-32). Resource Dependency theory, on the other hand, argues that organisations survive as long as they are effective and produce results (Rauh 2010: 32). Rauh argues that integrating these two theories can help shed light on the various strategies NGOs use in their relationship with their donors (2010: 29). How is the relationship between the NGOs in Laos and their donors characterised from the perspective of these two organisational theories: Are the NGOs merely passive recipients of donor influence or are they able to negotiate donor agendas? Or is it in fact a mix of both?

In the conversation with the NGOs in Laos, all emphasised good relationships with their donors. NGO #D for instance stated that their relationship with GAC was characterised as a "Strong, long established relationship with good understanding, mutual respect and levels of cooperation and commitment" (Powell 2016). All NGOs emphasised long relationships with their donors, which where *strong* and *good*. NGO #C and NGO #B highlighted flexibility too. NGO #B stressed that even though the NGO personnel in Laos did not talk directly to DFAT, they were *unique* and *flexible* (Parker 2016). For NGO #C their relationship with DGD was based on *trust*, and their flexibility made it *comfortable* for the organisation (Doe 2016). NGO #A stressed that they worked closely with DFAT and that DFAT was very *supportive* of the organisation and their work (Phongsa 2016). When asked about funding conditions, and whether or not the organisations were able to hold on to their own priorities and beliefs, all characterised the funding conditions as "not that strict" (Doe 2016) or "quite flexible" (Phongsa 2016). NGO #D stated that the funding conditions set by their donor, GAC, "are very compatible with our organisational objectives and priorities" (Powell 2016). NGO #B stated that, "we definitely were able to keep in mind with our interest and priorities. (…) We do not apply if it is not in line with what we want to do" (Parker 2016). No negative words were said about the donors. The NGO employees were also asked to reflect upon donor interference. They were asked whether or not their donor was pushing for their own definition of civil society. NGO #D stated that GAC was supportive of proposed actions by NGO #D and was not pushing for its own definitions and conceptualisations as such (Powell 2016). NGO #B stated that DFAT does not understand the local context of civil society, but that NGO #B has the power to decide how they are going to conduct their projects, and their projects therefore have not "been influenced and unified by DFAT definitions". She elaborates that DFAT "do not force us on anything. (…). Either that we have to work with CSOs or that we should not" (Parker 2016).

The statements made by the NGO personnel imply that the NGOs in Laos have more power in their relationship with their donors than assumed. This might have to do with the fact that there is a high degree of interdependence between the NGOs in Laos and their donors. Alnoor Ebrahim argues that NGOs and donors are highly interdependent. He argues that the relations between NGOs and donors is characterised and structured by "resource exchange". More specifically, the

relationship is characterised by "the exchange of information for funds, or of symbolic capital for economic capital" (Ebrahim 2003: 101). Thereby, seen from a Resource Dependency perspective, NGOs are not just dependent on the donors for money and influence, but the donors are at the same time dependent on the NGOs for project implementation and for "information" which can serve as evidence that the money donors provide NGOs are well spent (Ebrahim 2003: 155). DFAT for instance states that it works with "effective partners (…) to maximise the impact of our development activities" (DFAT 2015c: 3). It is however important to stress that it is unknown how dependent the NGOs in Laos are on their donors for resources. What we *do* know is that the NGOs depend on more donors for their survival. In the case of NGO #A, it depends on DFAT for 60-70 per cent of its total funding (Phongsa 2016). NGO #B, on the other hand, has two other main donors beside DFAT, where some of the funding also comes from a range of smaller donors (Parker 2016). The same goes for NGO #C who depends mostly on DGD and the European Union, and to a lesser extent on DFAT (Doe 2016). It is at the same time not known how much the donors depend on these specific NGOs for project implementation. The degree of interdependency is therefore unknown.

However, as it was conceptualised previously in the thesis, foreign aid is not a free, disinterested gift, but has to be reciprocated in some way. The act of giving money thereby serves as an expression of power. Because these NGOs in Laos are dependent on their donors for money, power is manifest in the donor-NGO relationship through this control and flow of money, as Reith argues (2010: 446). But the NGOs in Laos themselves have stated that they are able to negotiate donor agendas, and that they do have the power to decide for themselves. Ebrahim argues that NGOs draw on specific strategies to minimise donor influence. Such a strategy can be "professionalising" by adopting the same development language, terms such as participation, sustainability, cost-benefit analysis, impacts, indicators, etc. In this way, the NGOs are "professionalising" themselves in order to be able to communicate their objectives and activities in terms that are acceptable to donors (Ebrahim 2003: 99). The textual analysis of the NGO personnel's conceptualisation of civil society shows that the NGOs are promoting a similar discourse of civil society as DFAT. There is, nevertheless, as discussed earlier, a struggle over the meaning of civil society in the specific context of Laos. The NGOs agree that their common definition of civil society does not apply to the Lao context. That the NGOs are promoting the same

civil society discourse as their donor might just be a way of "professionalising" themselves; adhering to their donor's development language in order to access funds. Because the NGOs are dependent on their donors, "NGOs cannot be sustainable if they disregard or fail to adapt to hegemonic discourses emerging from funding and governmental agencies" (Timmer 2010: 265). In this way, adhering to the global development language is a way of increasing legitimacy with the donors and thereby securing the survival of the NGO.

Resource Dependency theory has helped us understand how the relationship between NGOs and their donor is dependent on resource exchange. We have thus far argued that NGOs in Laos are able to negotiate and contest donor influence. But what we have not fully understood is why the NGOs are promoting and endorsing the Tocquevillian perspective of civil society, when they adhere more to a Gramscian understanding of civil society in the local Lao context. From the Neo-institutional perspective, NGOs adopt to these practices because they are so inherent in the social practice, in development work, and therefore so taken-for-granted, that they cannot be resisted (Rauh 2010: 32). Leeuwen and Verkoren similarly argue that, "although there is increasing recognition that Western civil society discourses do not fit well with local circumstances in many places, intervening actors nonetheless have largely been unable to let go of these discourses and their accompanying intervention models" (2013: 160). In this way, adhering to the global development language becomes not so much of a rational choice in order to increase legitimacy with donors, but more of a non-choice where NGOs do not reflect upon the meaning of the discourse and implication that adhering to the discourse might have for their actions.

Arguing from the perspective of both Resource Dependency theory and Neo-institutional theory, the NGOs adapt to the hegemonic discourse on civil society in order access funding and gain legitimacy. Resource Dependency theory will argue that this choice is made based on rationality. But it can be argued that this choice, promoting a Neoliberal discourse of civil society, does not lead to efficiency because the discourse does not fit the local context. Adapting to the hegemonic discourse on civil society might thereby not lead to improved efficiency, which makes the choice non-rational. The NGOs are therefore subject to a cultural influence, where non-rational actions occur and are maintained through taken-for-granted conventions, relations, and discourses. In what end of the spectrum can we then place the NGOs in

Laos: Under *passive conformity* to donor influence or *active resistance* to donor influence (Rauh 2010: 32)? It is argued that NGOs in Laos do have an active choice in their relationship with their donor. NGOs are actors, who are able to resist donor agendas to some degree, dependent on the scope of resource dependency. The example of the NGOs in Laos shows that organisations are able to choose strategies, which allows them to obtain resources while maintaining a degree of autonomy. This might have to do with the fact that the NGOs rely on multiple donors. In this way, they are not dependent on one donor for resources. At the same time, the donor, DFAT for instance, might be highly dependent on the NGOs for specific project activities.

7.3. Power, hegemony and ideology

It has been established that NGOs in Laos do have a certain degree of power to negotiate donor agendas. However, there will always exist an inequality in the relationship between NGOs and donors in terms of power because the relationship is characterised by the "gift of money", which is a gift that cannot be reciprocated. In this way, donors will always hold, what Bourdieu calls, *symbolic domination* over NGOs, who are receiving the "gift of foreign aid". In this way, foreign aid both indicates and contributes to maintaining social hierarchies (Hattori 2001: 639). Because of this power imbalance, NGOs need to adhere to the hegemonic discourse on civil society within development work in order to secure funding, and thereby survival, and to increase their legitimacy with their donors. The NGOs are aware that the neoliberal civil society perspective does not fit the local context, but this Tocquevillian civil society discourse is nevertheless so inherent in development work that the NGOs without reflection accept it as true. As it was established earlier, the NGOs' conceptualisations of civil society do not differ depending on who their main donor is. The original hypothesis was that the NGOs' differing conceptualisations would show that donors have an ideational influence over NGOs. But the argument is that because the social system of development practice is led by powerful Western donors, the system's discourse is internalised. Following this argument, whether or not an NGO is funded by DFAT, GAC, or DGD do not make a difference as to what discourse on civil society is promoted. Norms, practices, and language are internalised in this social system of development work, leading to the organisations becoming similar to one another and thereby promoting the same taken-for-granted

feel-good discourse. In this way, even though power inequality exists between donors and NGOs in terms of money, by adhering to a certain civil society discourse, NGOs in Laos are actively shaping the practice within development work. In this way, the social order, and the order of discourse, is maintained. The ideological consequence is thereby that a neoliberal view of civil society is promoted, and the field of development work is where it was in the 1990s, when civil society became the buzzword of the century.

8. Conclusion

"Civil society" has risen to become a powerful concept within development work. The concept was introduced in the Enlightenment era with thinkers such as Rousseau and Kant, for whom civil society was synonymous with the State and the political society. The understanding of civil society and its role shifted, and with Tocqueville civil society came to stand as the foundation for a stable democracy. Civil society was seen as oriented toward the State and acting counter to State powers. This idea of civil society spread when social movements in Latin America and Eastern Europe overthrew their totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, realising civil society's potential in the promotion of democracy. With the end of the Cold War in 1989, civil society came to be important for the neoliberal agenda, promoting "good governance" all over the world. This was reflected in Western governments and international organisation's aid policies, which began channelling money through NGOs, whom they believed could influence, and claim space from, the State, facilitating associational activity and democracy. NGOs came to be synonymous with civil society, and the rise of these NGOs reflected a new order, where NGOs would become central to contemporary development discourse and practice. The relationship between Western government donors and NGOs thereby became central to the practice of development. But this relationship reveals inequality in power, which is manifested in the control and flow of money. Foreign aid becomes a type of gift-giving, which cannot be reciprocated. The extension of the "gift" transforms the relationship to one where the NGOs are grateful for the donors' generosity, providing the donors with symbolic domination over the NGOs. Because NGOs are dependent on donors for funding, they are vulnerable to donor demands. The donors' agendas are often expressed through funding conditions, where it is up to the NGO to demonstrate how they fit into this agenda. It has been argued that donors promote a

neoliberal understanding of civil society, and that NGOs adhere to this discourse even though these expectations of civil society do not comply with the local context that the NGOs are operating in. By applying the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis it was examined what conceptions of civil society was promoted by DFAT and how these conceptions transpired in their relationship with NGOs in Laos. DFAT was promoting representations of civil society as inherently good and as acting as an intermediary between the State and local communities, promoting citizen's rights and contributing to making governments more effective and accountable. These representations are connected to the neoliberal discourse of civil society, where civil society is seen as a rational apolitical actor, representative of the whole of society and acting upon the matters of general welfare. However, the context of Laos suggests that these expectations and ideals of civil society do not apply with the local context of Laos. In Laos, CSOs are obliged to operate under close inspection of the Government, and the role of CSOs is limited to service delivery. NGOs in Laos are aware of this and their representations of Lao civil society reflects this. For these NGOs, Lao civil society is limited to a few organisations, which have enough power to influence development policies. However, most CSOs in Laos, according to the NGOs, are not representative of genuine civil society since they are affiliated with the Government. That Lao civil society does not comply with the global neoliberal discourse on civil society is reflected in DFAT policies too. In their development policies in Laos, civil society is not at the core. Civil society is not a partner to DFAT in this specific context. Lao civil society is in fact almost excluded from their policies because it does not comply with their general perception of civil society. Even though NGOs in Laos are well aware of this fact, they still promote the same civil society discourse as their donor, DFAT, namely that civil society is inherently good and that it represents the will of the people, contributing to facilitating room and space for participation. In this way, NGOs in Laos' representations and definition of Lao civil society bears more similarity to the Gramscian view of civil society as a site of power struggle, making civil society political in essence. Nevertheless, this counter discourse to the neoliberal discourse, which serves as hegemonic, is still not a big enough threat to challenge this order of discourse. Even though, as the case of Lao civil society showed, NGOs are aware of the fact that the concept of civil society might not apply to the local context, the Tocquevillian inspired neoliberal civil society discourse still holds power in the social practice of development work. As the perspectives of

Resource Dependency showed, NGOs in Laos do have a certain degree of power to negotiate donor agendas, because they are dependent on several donors for funding. Nevertheless, arguing from a Neo-institutional perspective the NGOs in Laos are adhering to the neoliberal discourse adopted by their donors, because this discourse is so inherent in development work that it is accepted as "true". In order to survive, the NGOs must accept this discourse. Discourses are thus powerful because they can exercise ideological influence, which defines ways of thinking about and acting in the world. The representations of civil society that are conceptualised in the relationship between DFAT and NGOs in Laos thereby discursively shapes the social practice of development work by reproducing the neoliberal "good governance" agenda, which became influential in the 1990s, and which still dominates development practice all over the world.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

Introduction to the interview

Inform the interviewee that:
- The interview will be used as data for a masters thesis
- The interview will be recorded and saved (also for later use)
- The interviewee will be cited but can decide to be anonymous

Make sure that the interviewee understands these conditions. Ask if the interviewee still wants to participate in the interview. Ask if the interviewee has any questions before initiating the interview.

Semi-structured interview questions

- What is your role in the organisation, and how long how you been involved with the organisation?

- What is the organisation's vision and mission?

- How is the organisation funded and by whom (which donor) primarily?

- How would you characterise your relationship with your main donor?

- What are your main donor's conditions for funding? Are they in your opinion too strict? Is the organisation able to conduct projects funded by your main donor that remains true to the organisations objectives and priorities?

- How do you define the term "civil society"?

- How would you describe/characterise Lao civil society?

- Do your own definition of civil society and your characterisation of Lao civil society match? How are they similar? How are they different?

- What is the organisation's role in Lao civil society?

- Does your main donor understand the civil society context in Laos? Or is it pushing for its own definition and conceptualisation?