Across the Borders
A Study of Counter-Trafficking Work in Lao PDR

Based on a Minor Field Study in Lao PDR and Thailand March to May 2009

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Abstract

In the wake of state borders becoming more porous the flows of people crossing them in search for opportunities have increased. This trend is evident in Greater Mekong Sub region where the economic boom of Thailand attracts thousands of migrant workers every year from neighboring countries making Thai industries dependent on the cheap labor. Alongside these developments, human trafficking, the slave trade of our time, has emerged as an increasing challenge.

In Lao PDR the historic ties to Thailand make for a long history of cross-border relations and flows. With the relative economic differences, labor migration to the richer neighbor is becoming an accepted way of improving family conditions. However, the risks involved, exploitation and trafficking, are not widely known in the communities.

Counter-trafficking work in Lao PDR has been evolving over the passed 10 years. This study has, through an ethnographic approach to organizational work combined with reflections and observations, tried to create a picture of the counter-trafficking work on the ground. Using semi-structured interviews projects, aims and assumptions could be derived and three main problems identified: Trafficking is hard to separate from labor migration, thus making it hard to effectively target; there is a dissonance between perceived and actual inter-sector communication, and; the trafficking sector is isolated from other sectors as dialogue across sector borders appear to be nonexistent. Reasons given for these discords mainly came down to dependency on donors and a need to meet their requirements. Essentially it seems that organizations working with this open-border phenomenon are rigidly closed to each other.

Key words: Human trafficking, migration, organizational work, Lao PDR,
Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the participation, help and support of the organizations and individuals working within the counter-trafficking sector of Lao PDR. Although not mentioned by name, I wish to express my gratitude for the time you all gave me. In meeting you I learned valuable insights for this study but I also took great personal interest in each encounter. A special thank is given to my field contact, whom without, this journey would not have been realized.

Thank you

Emma Hansson
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1. INTRODUCTION.....................................................................................................................1

1.1 PURPOSE AND PROBLEM..................................................................................................3
1.2 METHOD...............................................................................................................................4
  1.2.1 THE STUDY .....................................................................................................................6
1.3 MATERIAL ...........................................................................................................................7
  1.3.1 OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS ...................................................................................8
1.4 DISPOSITION.........................................................................................................................9

2. BACKGROUND......................................................................................................................11

2.1 LAO PDR AT A GLANCE....................................................................................................11
2.2 CAPTURING CROSS-BORDER FLOWS.............................................................................13
  2.2.1 CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS ..............................................................................14
  2.2.2 IMPACTS OF LABOR MIGRATION .............................................................................16
  2.2.3 TRAFFICKING ..............................................................................................................17
  2.2.4 GENDER CONSIDERATION IN TRAFFICKING WORK ................................................18
2.3 THE SITUATION IN LAO PDR............................................................................................19
  2.3.1 REASONS FOR LEAVING LAO PDR ............................................................................19
  2.3.2 TRAFFICKING IN LAO PDR ........................................................................................21

3. FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS....................................................................................24

3.1 AIMS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN PROJECTS.....................................................................24
3.2 PROBLEM 1: WORKING AGAINST TRAFFICKING.........................................................26
  3.2.1 VIEWS OF MIGRATION ...............................................................................................27
  3.2.2 FACTORS BEHIND CROSS-BORDER MOVES ............................................................29
  3.2.3 PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS ........................................................................................32
  3.2.4 INTERNAL CRITICISM .................................................................................................33
3.3 PROBLEM 2: INTER-SECTOR COMMUNICATION............................................................35
  3.3.1 VERTICAL COMMUNICATION ...................................................................................35
  3.3.2 THE ROLE OF UNIAP ................................................................................................36
  3.3.3 OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO TRAFFICKING .................................................................37
  3.3.4 DONOR FASHION .......................................................................................................38
3.4 PROBLEM 3: CROSS-SECTOR DIALOGUE ....................................................................39

4. BRINGING IT TOGETHER......................................................................................................41

5. FUTURE CHALLENGES .......................................................................................................46

6. REFERENCES..........................................................................................................................48
1. Introduction

Globalization. The theme of the 21st century. The word everyone talks about but few can capture in reality. It is a word celebrated by some and criticized by others. Globalization is, however one chooses to see it, here and it affects us whether we want it to or not.

Globalization has increased the movements across borders and enabled goods, funds and people to become more flexible than nation-states. With the increasing levels of consumer demand, as exports go up, the demand for cheap labor goes up with it. The newly rising economies in Asia and Latin America leaves a void behind as the middle classes expand and people's willingness to work in basic production (the area upon which the wealth is based) decreases. This trend has, over the passed 20 years had a remarkable impact on demographic movements in poor nations. Short- and long term labor migration is becoming an accepted, and often encouraged, method to increase ones living standards.

Exploitation has always been a constant present in low-skilled labor. One of the most basic mantras of successful business-making is to keep costs down to maximize profits. Sweatshop working conditions became infamous in the 1990's as stories of locked factories burning to the ground and children chained to their workstations spread across the world. These worst forms of exploitation can without difficulty be labeled as the slavery of our time, something which has been conceptualized in the context of human trafficking.

It is estimated that 200 million people are living outside of their country of birth, of which 10-15%, or 20-30 million, are thought to be unauthorized. Together they accounted for US$ 337 million being sent back to their countries of origin, 251 million of which reached developing countries in 2007.¹ Taking advantage of the relative conditions in poor countries, dreams of a better future have been turned into a clandestine business. Estimates suggest 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across state borders, generating a total of US$ 31 billion per year.² Yet, a clear separation between labor migration and trafficking can be hard to identify.

Initially, focus was put on women and children being forced into the sex industry either

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¹IOM, 2008
²UNIAP, 2009; GAO, 2006
domestically or internationally. The concept of human trafficking has since expanded to also recognize all people who are moved into any form of forced labor. A declaration was set forth by the UN in 2000 against trafficking and prevention of the clandestine business has since been a hot topic for many development agencies.

Thailand's economic boom in the late 1980's has led to improved living conditions for most of the population, children attend more years of school, more attain higher education and the national average income (GDP per capita) has increased from US$ (PPP) 3,986 to 8,677 in 15 years. In the wake of these developments migrant workers from poorer neighboring countries have been more than eager to fill the newly vacant positions in industries and in the domestic sphere. Efforts to regulate the increasing flows of people have only recently been employed by the Royal Thai Government but much still remain to be done. Looking beyond the economic sphere, these new relations between the countries in the region have also brought problems. Human trafficking and exploitation are two of the most noted non-intentional outcomes of these developments.

Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) shares a long border with Thailand but the historic bonds go further back than the nation-state borders. Similarities in culture, language and ethnographic composition make for strong relationships and in many places the border is drawn by the Mekong River. Recent reforms in Lao PDR have led to economic improvements, however, the majority of the population is considered rural, illiteracy rates are low and societal improvements have had an urban bias. Therefore it is no surprise that thousands of Laotians cross the border every year to seek out opportunities within the richer neighbor.

Trafficking and everything it entails is an issue which awakes strong emotions, especially when it involves children. It is a grave violation to fundamental human rights and it is indiscriminate in its sources and destinations of its activities. No nation is left untouched. However, the efforts made to tackle the problems of trafficking have been futile or at best minute. Recent research on the topic has revealed facts which demand new approaches in order to effectively curb the illegal exploitation of people as well as protect those who have fallen victim to trafficking and exploitation.

Counter-trafficking projects in Lao PDR have been in place since 2000. In these nine

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3HDR, 2007/08
years of practice new organizations have taken interest in the subject, the legal system has developed, and research has been conducted to deepen the understanding of the problem. Yet, no societal problem stands alone but is affected by the society at large, thus requiring holistic approaches in all efforts taken.

1.1 Purpose and Problem

Underlying this study is the notion of an increasing interest among agencies and aid donors of the trafficking issue. In recent years programs and projects have been developed in order to meet this trade in persons and develop efficient countermeasure tools. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in persons, Especially Women and Children, which was signed in 2000 provides for a coherent identification of the problem at hand as well as a common understanding of the issue. Despite these efforts there are no apparent signs of a global decrease in this modern slave trade.

Anti-trafficking measures are a fairly new element in the development efforts undertaken in Lao PDR. Research has been presented on the issue and projects have been put in place together with pressure on the Lao Government to develop and implement stricter laws. Up to date, theoretical commitments as well as detailed project descriptions are available from the Government, and organizations involved in the counter-trafficking sector. However, human trafficking takes place underground, and effects of projects are close to impossible to measure.

With regards to this, the purpose of this study is to investigate the counter-trafficking work in Lao PDR to gain an understanding of the situation on the ground. By talking to the different actors involved in the anti-trafficking sector this study aims to capture the organizational counter-trafficking work in order to place it in a larger context. By doing this, this study aims to problematize this complex issue in order to make the work more efficient. For a better overview sub-questions have been identified to guide the study:
• How do organizations work with human trafficking in Lao PDR

• What types of counter-trafficking projects are in place?

• How is human trafficking perceived?

• To what extent is it possible to see coherence between international declarations against human trafficking, research, and local work?

1.2 Method

In essence, this is an ethnographic study with a focus at organizational level. It is based on semi-structured interviews close to open conversations with organizations working in Lao PDR and Thailand as well as observations and reflections during the time in field. Being close to hermeneutic in approach, the study matured as the interviews preceded making the first and the last interviews very different. This inductive approach has lead the analytical work of the completion of the results.

The original idea of hermeneutics is that one issue can only be understood when it is related to the whole context. This in turn leads to the conclusion that “the whole” is made up by smaller parts, and can only be understood on the basis of these. This contradiction is known as the hermeneutic circle. The circle, better viewed as a learning spiral, brings the researcher in between the part and the whole progressively increasing understanding for both.\(^4\) The learning curve during the research process is also described in a circle consisting of preunderstanding and understanding which are constantly evolving placing the study in a place a of revelation of the hidden.

Ethnographic studies are generally used when studying societies and cultures over a long period of time, however, organizations are not far from having developed cultures within themselves. The group in focus of this study is a cluster of organizations all working with the same issue – human trafficking in Lao PDR. An ethnographic approach can thus help to see patterns developing within this group of people and their organizational structures.

Ethnographic approach to research is viewed in various ways, but the essence of the

\(^4\)Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2000:53
method is based on field presence and directed by what is being encountered on the ground. There is thus a “general research orientation, which can then assume a variety of forms”. Key to fully explore the field is the open mind of the researcher thus unlocking untouched areas.

Ethnographic studies entail difficulties of generalization as they are focused on one specific cultural context. This study can therefore only reflect the views of the included organizations and cannot be generalized to cover all organizational work or all projects undertaken in Lao PDR. However, it can suggest patterns, trends and tendencies identified. To better assess results of an ethnographic study triangulation is used to better determine the phenomenon. The idea is to, with the use of other methods, better be able to pin-point the subject at hand.

Considering reality, or truth, as made up of more components than the spoken word, observations and reflections act as filling out the gaps in the silent void. For these reasons, to place the study in a more complex context, field observations, notes and reflections are entwined with the interview results.

Reflexive research is described as having two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection:

“The first implies that all references – trivial and non-trivial – to empirical data are the results of interpretation. Thus the idea that measurements, observations, the statements of interview subjects, and the study of secondary data such as statistics or archival data have an unequivocal or unproblematic relationship to anything outside empirical material is rejected on principal […] The second element, reflection, turns attention 'inwards' towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as problematic nature of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context.”

The value of the combination, interpretation and reflection, is that the latter acts as a critical

5Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2000:45
6Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2000:46f
7Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2000:5f
responds to the first as the researcher is forced to review the own interpretations.

With these methodological tools at hand this study has seen three stages, pre-field, in-field and post-field, of understanding where the hermeneutic circle has taken many turns. Reflections, interview results and previous research are interlinked throughout this paper for reasons of triangulation and to place the results in a broader context.

**1.2.1 The Study**

This study is based on a series of interviews undertaken during a minor field study in Lao PDR and Thailand during nine weeks in March to May 2009, a project which was financed by a MFS grant from Sida. Interviews were held in both Laos and Thailand with a majority being conducted in the capital of Lao PDR, Vientiane at organizations' country office. One interview was held in the south of Lao, in Pakxe. In Thailand two interviews were done in the north, one in Chiang Mai and one in Chiang Rai and two in Bangkok. Phone interviews were held with one organization based in Vientiane and two in Bangkok.

The different actors interviewed for this study come from three different categories: United Nations based organizations, Inter-Governmental Organization (IGOs) and International and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In total 19 interviews with 15 different organizations were conducted as well as three phone interviews with three different organizations. Out of the 18 organizations three did not have specific anti-trafficking projects in place putting them outside of the trafficking sector. Interviewees' positions ranged from Country Director to Assistant Project Manager. No one at project implementation level was interviewed.

All organizations involved in the trafficking sector are not represented in this study, two actors which were approached could, for various reasons, not participate in the interview process. In Thailand, an additional three organizations working with trafficking were contacted without success. Furthermore, three organizations working outside of the trafficking sector in Lao PDR were also asked to participate, again, without responds. Thus, the selection of interviewees have been based on their positive responds to the initiated contact.

Conducting interviews is a process which develops as it goes along. This study is
based on semi-structured interviews and there was therefore no one interview which was the other like. The same is true for the questions asked. The interviews would be more accurately described as conversations which had a decided thematic framework but otherwise developed according to the topics arising. The point of departure for this framework was always the focus of the organization being interviewed. The initial questions were of a descriptive approach where organizational history, projects and experiences from field were laid down. From this starting point the interviews followed the issues as they arose during the conversation.

1.3 Material

There is limited data available when it comes to trafficking, and the reports which are at hand are still mostly based on estimates, qualified guesses and small scale studies. It is therefore an extremely difficult subject to approach. Moreover, it is a sensitive issue; therefore the Lao Government seems to want to keep discussions down.

Interest for transnational flows has resulted in numerous reports on the subject ranging from labor migration, the connection between remittances and development to exploitation and child prostitution. Views presented depend on where the study was undertaken and the results are sometimes very different. Creating a coherent view on the impact of transnational movements, migration and trafficking is thus very hard. However, all agree that human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and need to be tackled.

Studies undertaken in Lao PDR are usually conducted in conjunction with state actors and have to be approved by the Government before being printed. Censorship of this kind does not necessarily undermine the reports published but it prevents knowledge about things not printed thus giving a controlled picture of reality. These restraints need to be considered when reviewing the material at hand.

The majority of the general country data and figures used in this report come from the UNDP's Human Development Report. Data concerning migration and/or trafficking in Lao PDR are derived from the few reports available on the subject, the majority of which have been produced together with Government actors.
Chapter 3 and 4 are for the large part based on the results of the field study and are thus based on observations and answers given during interviews. As all interviewees in this paper are anonymous no references will be made in these sections unless they are directly to reports or facts about projects found on an organization's website.

1.3.1 Obstacles and Limitations

Research is by its nature limited by time and resources. This is thus also the case in this study which covered nine weeks in field, and two weeks of findings analysis. Lao New Year, PiMai, was celebrated during the time in field which meant offices closed for at least one week and officers took out long vacations thus slowing down the research process. Adding to these traditional research restraints was the denial of access to Government institutions and organizations in Lao PDR.

International organizations working within Lao PDR can only do so if there is an agreement with the state as well as a working cooperation and dialogue. Gaining access or setting up meetings with Government organizations require a long bureaucratic process which does not guarantee the meeting to take place. One meeting with a representative from a Government organization was set up for this study but was canceled in the last minute by a superior authority referring to “official channels”. Other attempts to contact Government organizations were also made but failed.

Reasons for this secrecy and unwillingness towards outsiders can be explained by two factors. Lao PDR has a highly bureaucratic administration in place and as a foreigner all relations with officials should be sanctioned by the foreign ministry. Secondly, and more important, human trafficking is a highly sensitive issue which only recently was recognized and emerged on the Lao Government's agenda.

Development projects in Lao PDR, including anti-trafficking ones, are required to work in conjunction with Government partners and all research undertaken need to be approved before going to the prints. Working with a sensitive issue like human trafficking many interviewees expressed concern regarding the legitimate purpose of this research and at times also regarding their own anonymity. Remarks such as “I want to make sure you are not
“a journalist” or “Don't quote me on this, I have children at home” were made, mostly when discussing Government efforts. For this reason, names of persons and organizations interviewed for this study have been purposely left out and no references to organizations or individuals will be given when presenting and analyzing the interview results.

Most projects of interest for this study are implemented in cooperation with, or entirely by, Government partners. Hence access to the projects and the staff on the ground was not made possible. Reasons given for this included time restraints of the staff, language barriers and that no more information of interest would be gained by such a meeting.

No trade unions in Thailand were included in the study. This excludes a large component of the trafficking problem and thus undermines the creation of a picture of the project reality which organizations in Lao PDR have to work with as the demand side set the exploitative conditions. Moreover, the organizations interviewed on the Thai side had their focus mostly on Burmese victims of trafficking as they make out the highest numbers. Their knowledge of Laotians in Thailand was thus limited. However, they presented a description of the legal realities and approaches of Thai authorities including the police and border officials when dealing with illegal immigration and trafficking.

1.4 Disposition

Starting off, this paper will present a brief background of Lao PDR to place the issue in its geographical, economic and social reality to provide the reader with the relevant context. Chapter 2 will also discuss the trafficking concept in relation to other cross-border movements as a point of reference for the forthcoming results and discussion.

Chapter 3 is the main part of the paper where the results from the field study are presented and discussed. The chapter is divided into four sections, each focusing on separate issues which emerged from the interviews. These themes are then brought together for analysis in the light of available studies and research in chapter 4. This chapter will also discuss possible implications of the identified and perceived problems. Chapter 5 concludes the study with reflections of future challenges.
Map 1. Map of trafficking flows, Lao PDR

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Map 1. Map of trafficking flows, Lao PDR

[Image: Lao PDR: Human Trafficking Routes]

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SUNIAP: http://www.no-trafficking.org/images/lao_large.jpg
2. **Background**

This chapter will present the complex reality in which the organizations work to counter human trafficking. It is divided in three sections starting by contextualizing Lao PDR in its social, economic, and political situation and placing it in relation to Thailand. The second section aims to capture the differences in cross-border flows by discussing different concepts and presenting previous studies on the subject. The final section draws on previous studies, reports and evaluations to place Lao PDR in its migration and trafficking situation.

### 2.1 Lao PDR at a Glance

Lao PDR gained independence from France in 1953 leading to a civil war which lasted over 20 years. The Communist Party eventually seized power in 1975 and set up a one-party state with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in charge. Economic reforms were undertaken in the 1980s when price controls loosed and foreign investments were encouraged. Elections to the National Assembly are held every five years, the LPRP is the only legal party. Corruption within the government is said to be widespread, and Government officials are known to be involved in commercial enterprises exploiting natural resources. Moreover, bribes are common within the legal system, as is the prevalence of torture, political and religious arrests, and ethnic discrimination.

All media is owned by the Government, thus restricting freedom of speech. Journalists who criticize the Government risk legal retribution. In similar manners, collective action and meetings are restrained, and organizations which are not connected to the Government are prohibited from following any political agenda.9

Trustworthy statistics for Lao PDR are hard to find, population numbers range from 5.7 to 6.5 million10 and the figures from United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have changed from the publication of 2006 using statistics from 2006, and that of 2007/08 using statistics from 2005. Being the most recent, the majority of figures presented here are drawn

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9Freedom House Laos 2008
10UNDP state 5.7 (2007), the World Bank and the Lao embassy to the USA gives 5.9 (2007), UNESCO 6.0 and USAID 6.5 million (2007).
from the 2007/08 report.

The latest Human Development Reports (HDR) from UNDP ranked Lao PDR 130 out of 177 countries with a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.601. The economy and social conditions in Lao PDR has been on a steady increase since the 1980s (see tables 1 and 2) and recently passed from being a low human development country to a medium one. It is a relatively young population where 40% are under the age of 15.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite Lao PDR's geographical position, as placed in the center of a region which is experiencing fast economic growth, the country has until recently benefited little from these advancements. In 2005 the GDP per capita (in PPP) was US$2,039 in comparison to the US$8,677 found in Thailand the same year. Thailand's overall standards of living also exceeds Lao's by far, at place 78 in the HDI ranking with a HDI score of 0.781 the differences are evident.\textsuperscript{12}

Educational levels in Lao PDR and school attendance are below the regional average. The adult literacy rate in 2004 was 68.7% (60.9% female, 77% male) which is 5 units under Cambodia that has the second lowest score. Youth literacy, ages 19-24, is somewhat better at 78.5% but this is still low in comparison to the region. Primary school enrollment is 84% but drop-out rates decreases the number to 63% reaching 5\textsuperscript{th} grade.\textsuperscript{13} This is often explained by the poor access to roads in rural areas as villages without road access generally have lower school enrollment compared to villages with road access.\textsuperscript{14}

There are evident geographical differences in Lao PDR. Poverty rates in the cities are much lower than in the rural areas. The northern, most mountainous provinces have a higher population living under poverty line compared to the southern, and the central provinces. Vientiane and the central provinces have the lowest poverty rates.\textsuperscript{15}

Communications and technological are however on the increase going from 35\textsuperscript{16} cellular subscribers per 1000 inhabitants to 108\textsuperscript{17} in a few years. Despite these advancements, poverty rates are high at 74% estimated to live on less than US$2 per day and 38.6% living

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{11} HDR, 2007/08
\bibitem{12} HDR, 2007/08
\bibitem{13} HDR, 2007/08
\bibitem{14} Phatsiriseng, 2007:24
\bibitem{15} Phatsiriseng 2007:22
\bibitem{16} HDR, 2006:329
\bibitem{17} HDR 2007/08
\end{thebibliography}
under the national poverty line. Aid flows are decreasing from 17.2% of GDP in 1990 to 10.3% in 2005; however, the debt service has increase from 1% in 1990 to 6% of GDP in 2005.\textsuperscript{18}

Agriculture make out the most important source of income and livelihood in Lao PDR as 80% of the population are considered to be rural and about 70% state that they are self-employed farmers. In a 2002/03 survey it was revealed that 6% of the population were paid employees with great regional differences averaging at 17% in urban areas and 1-3% in rural without and with access to a road.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Table 1. HDI changes in Thailand and Lao PDR 1985-2005\textsuperscript{20}}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Lao PDR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.679</td>
<td>0.448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0.712</td>
<td>0.478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td>0.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0.781</td>
<td>0.601</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 2. GDP in US$ (PPP) per capita 1990-2005\textsuperscript{21}}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Lao PDR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3.986</td>
<td>1.100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>6.074</td>
<td>2.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6.402</td>
<td>1.575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8.677</td>
<td>2.039</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\section{2.2 Capturing Cross-Border Flows}
At the basis of any discussion on migration lie the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights which in Article 23 state:

\textsuperscript{18}HDR, 2007/08:292
\textsuperscript{19}Phatsiriseng, 2007:29
\textsuperscript{20}HDR 2007/08
\textsuperscript{21}HDR 2007/08
(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.\(^\text{22}\)

Choosing where to work and being free from exploitative labor is hence a right everyone is born with. The article gives no reference to state border or national identity but states are obliged, by signing the Declaration, to ensure these rights to everyone.

### 2.2.1 Conceptual Considerations

The most common terms used when talking about transnational movements are “migration”, “smuggling”, “trafficking” but the distinction between the three is sometimes blurred. Therefore this section will discuss some variables which need to be considered when dealing with cross-border movements.

A first differentiation can be done between voluntary and involuntary movements and a second between legal and illegal movements. Consent to the movement is off course a key point and it can be broken down a further step separating “consent” and “informed consent” as misinformation or deception can be used as tools to exploit people. For a deeper and more complex picture of why people decide (or are forced) to uproot from their homes a distinction between want and need based decisions can be done. A want to move can be defined as a voluntary decision based on a desire to see and do other things. Need-based movements are decisions forced on a person due to external circumstances such as poverty, diseases and security reasons. They are decisions executed but not taken voluntarily. Long-term and short-

\(^{22}\)Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23
term stays as well as internal and transnational movements are further categories to be considered. A generalized division of the basic differences are given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The different reasons for transnational movements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Voluntary</th>
<th>Involuntary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Increased living standards</td>
<td>Basic needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>No or poor legal options (Smuggling)</td>
<td>Trafficking (Smuggling)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Returning to the conventional terms we can conclude that migration is the broadest definition of movements including voluntary moments, want and need based decisions, it can take place internally as well as across borders and be both legal and illegal. Smuggling narrows the definition to include only international movements that are illegal but based on a degree of consent. Trafficking is the most difficult movement to define and identify as it can include all the categories mentioned above. Apart from not being legal it crosses in between both migration and smuggling thus blurring the boundaries between the three.

In the cases of smuggling and trafficking a third person (one, but most often more) is involved. In the case of trafficking this person acts as a broker (often referred to as trafficker), a middleman between locality and destination. Deception and luring tricks are common factors and it is not uncommon that the broker is known to the victim before the journey. However, people can also be picked up by brokers at either side of the border. Adding to this are the numerous “agents” (who are sometimes referred to as brokers in the material at hand) who act as referrals between employers and workers. They can take out fees for their services and act as informal employment agencies.23

Brokers are commonly confused with smugglers or “helpers” who assist people wishing to cross a border illegally. Although there are apparent similarities the difference is, nevertheless, important to note as traffickers work with deception as tool and exploitation as a

23For more definitional discussions see UNIFEM's Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Asia: A Briefing Kit
goal while smugglers “only” aid the migrant to his/her destination.\textsuperscript{24}

With these notions it can be concluded that trafficking is highly interlinked with migration and smuggling as all three processes can be involved in one journey. One can start as a migrant, use a smuggler to cross the border and be caught by a broker on the other side.

\subsection*{2.2.2 Impacts of Labor Migration}

Overwhelming positive reports on labor migration tend to focus on the educated and qualified work opportunities presented outside of one's locality. A trend which, if discussed as a negative, points to the “brain-drain” of skilled, educated young people in poor countries. Studies have, however, concluded that it is the poor, unskilled workers who are more likely to send back remittances.

Remittances from migrant workers are an important contribution to developing countries' economies and often exceed the amounts received in foreign aid.\textsuperscript{25} The economic contributions to family members left behind are important for the local development and are beneficiary to the local markets. Furthermore, the short-term migrants can bring back knowledge and technical skills upon returning which can be passed on to others. However, migration can drain societies of educated, skilled and young people and thus preventing development on rural localities. Low-skilled migration can increase the individual household incomes substantially, however, as development researchers have concluded, social development require more than cash inflows. Remittances does not ensure political or social power and can thus only act as stabilizer of economic fluctuations and insecurities.

Conventional theorizing around the relationship between migration and national poverty rates has mostly been based on remittance percentages and absolute poverty measures. Yet, recent evidence from countries with high labor exports reveal that migration might not be a long term solution in the fight against poverty or an effective strategy for national development.\textsuperscript{26} These contradictory results suggest that the conventional measures of remittances and migration are blinded by the same economic restraints which caused

\textsuperscript{24}Huijsmans, 2008; MLSW/UNICEF, 2005:22ff
\textsuperscript{26}Gammage:2006
development to be measured solely in economic terms only 30 years ago. However, development is not strictly limited to GDP increases, or per capita incomes. Migration entails more aspects than remittances which also need to be included in the analysis, as well as considered when evaluating the impacts of labor migration to the sending country. Social cost to the local communities is one aspect which need to be included in the equation. Moreover, reliance on international migration puts the sending country at a substantial risk as it makes it dependent on another country's Government and policies. This makes the entire system of work migration and remittance dependence highly vulnerable to fluctuations.

### 2.2.3 Trafficking

The definitional problems of trafficking become obvious when reading the material at hand. The variation of cross-border movements, as showed above, sometimes makes it hard to distinguish between migration, smuggling and trafficking. In the cases where children are involved the definitional blur becomes even greater. Trafficking has been defined in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children as:

> “Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power of position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”

Furthermore, exploitation was defined in the same protocol

> “Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”

In cases involving children, people under the age of 18, the Protocol states that the means

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27UN Trafficking Protocol, 2000, article 3a
28UN Trafficking Protocol, 2000, article 3a
involved are irrelevant but the act in itself shall be regarded as trafficking. This means that consent in these cases is disregarded as children are viewed as unable to give consent.\textsuperscript{29} Transnational smuggling and internal movement of a child for the purpose of labor or sexual exploitation should thus, in all cases, be considered as trafficking.

Trafficking often involves the movement of a person between many different agents, a person can be bought, sold and transferred numerous times and every act is covered by the Protocol which categorizes the case as trafficking. It can be both domestic and transnational. It is thus not only the movement itself which is defined as trafficking but also the surrounding activities and exploitation of a person. Trafficking is not, despite common perceptions, restricted only to the sex trade. People can be sold into any industry or activity; it is the exploitation of another person, the gross violation of fundamental human rights which determines if it is trafficking. The most common activities, a part from the sex industry, where trafficking is used to ensure cheap forced labor are factory work, the fishing industry, domestic work but other low-skilled, low-paid jobs are also involved.\textsuperscript{30} In the cases where victims are sold their “owner” usually require them to work off their “debt”, thus they are caught in a debt-servitude which can take years to work off. Debts are also known to be “invented” with skyrocketing interest rates. Threats are often made towards family members, passports and other official papers are held by the “employer” and psychological abuse is used to prevent escape or victims seeking outside help. These practices make victims modern time slaves.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{2.2.4 Gender Consideration in Trafficking Work}

Men migrate, women are trafficked – this is a common misconception of cross-border movements. These assumptions are now challenged by a broader definition. In studies dealing with trafficking the majority recognize the existence of male victims but point out that the majority of victims are women and children (also in this case there are mostly girls). Studies and reports thus focus mainly on the female side of the problem and fail to include men who

\textsuperscript{29}UN Trafficking Protocol 2000, article 3c, d 
\textsuperscript{30}Beesey, 2004; Gallagher, Holmes, 2008:319.; MoLSW/UNICEF, 2005 
\textsuperscript{31}Asia Regional Cooperation to Prevent People Trafficking , 2003 (2006); Beesey, 2004; Gallagher, Holmes, 2008; MoLSW/UNICEF, 2005
are exposed to trafficking and exploitation.\textsuperscript{32} This one sided approach provides the research of the subject with a skewed picture. In many cases reports call for a gendered analysis of trafficking and migration, however, men are still left out of the analysis that follows. This confusion between “gender” and “women” prevents the development of a nuanced, more inclusive analysis which considers the differences between male and female experiences. In effect, this has lead to a misconception of men as migrants and women as victims of trafficking. Policy implications, as a result, fail to provide protection for men suffering exploitation at the same time as they victimize women and children, sometimes disregarding their situation.\textsuperscript{33}

With this said, evidence reveal that women tend to suffer the worst kinds of exploitation and in much greater numbers. However, there is a risk that the domination in literature of women and children being trafficked into the sex trade overshadow other dimensions of the problem which remain unsolved, neglected and are regarded as secondary.

### 2.3 The Situation in Lao PDR

This section reviews previous studies about migration and trafficking trends conducted in Lao PDR. The reports and studies come from organizations and Government institutions and mainly focus on one or a few communities, particularly in the southern provinces.

#### 2.3.1 Reasons for Leaving Lao PDR

Money is often regarded as the main factor behind migration and job seeking outside of ones locality. Studies performed in Lao PDR suggest that the economic factor cannot be separated from the cultural one when analyzing migration. The development of consumerism and the increased desire for material goods has changed the cultural preferences and thus altered the need and desire for money.\textsuperscript{34} This notion is strengthened by an earlier study conducted in Laotian villages which states that “poverty is not a primary cause of cross-border labor

\textsuperscript{32}See for example: Beesey, 2004; Lee, 2005
\textsuperscript{33}Asia Regional Cooperation to Prevent People Trafficking, 2003 (2006):10f
\textsuperscript{34}Rigg, 2007:169
seeking in Thailand, though a search for wealth does emerge as a priority”.  

Making money, for oneself or ones family, is thus one important side of deciding to uproot, but economic remittances are also joined by social, knowledge and political remittances. According to Jonathan Rigg, professor in geography at Durham University, these other factors also contribute to local development and can act as catalysts for social change. New knowledge, technology and credit enter the village without people having to leave, thus the mobility has taken a non-human form and benefits people who otherwise might have decided to migrate. However, there are no evidence that this has taken place in Lao PDR.

All studies reviewed for this paper have presented a majority of female cases, both as migrants and as victims of trafficking. Women and girls in Laos traditionally bear a heavier burden than men and boys in looking after their parents. Women also have a lower status than men so families are more prone to educate their sons. On the demand side for migrant workers are employers requiring cheap, unskilled labor prepared to take any work despite any dangers attached. The so-called “dutiful daughter” is sent to find work so that the remittances can be used to improve the standard of living for the rest of the family and possibly allow siblings to go to school. The personal sacrifice of one brings positive developments for the family; however, on a larger scale it drains the local society of girls and young women and could in the long term shift traditional gender roles. Migration in these situations can be discussed as being voluntary or involuntary, need-based moves.

Agricultural cycles and traditional farming is also effected by the increasing movements in people. The norm has changed from seasonal work at a different place to more long-term stays away. The seasonal structure allowed migrant workers to return home for the harvest, the time when the village needs all hands available. With these patterns changing local societies fail to harvest the same amounts as before in exchange for increased remittances. Returns home today are more connected to recreation than with labor and the youth is moving away from the agricultural way of living.

35MoLSW/UNIAP, 2001:7
36Rigg, 2007:170
37Asia Regional Cooperation to Prevent People Trafficking, 2003 (2006):4
38Rigg, 2007:170
39Rigg, 2007:172
2.3.2 Trafficking in Lao PDR

It is estimated that one third of the world’s trafficking takes place in or from Asia with approximately 250,000 to 400,000 women and children affected each year in East Asia alone.\textsuperscript{40} Reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and The Lao Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare/UNICEF reveal that girls under the age of 18 represent a majority of the cases where illegal trafficking and exploitation has been discovered involving people from Lao PDR. In most cases the destination had been Thailand but there were a few exceptions when the destination had been China and Myanmar (Burma) for the purpose of buying and selling brides.\textsuperscript{41} Yet, the majority of migrants make their way back on their own, as is the case with those managing to escape a trafficking situation. Official numbers are said to represent only a fraction of the real figures.

Due to the difficulties of finding an exact and trustworthy number of Laotians crossing the border to Thailand illegally estimates and small scale studies are the most commonly used data. Recent reports reveal the increasing institutionalization of migration to Thailand in the Laotian society. Studies undertaken in villages concluded that 12-20\% of the population in those villages had been or were at the time working in Thailand. Other studies reached similar results showing 3-12\% of village populations’ currently away working in Thailand.\textsuperscript{42}

Lao PDR breaks global migration patterns as studies reveal that, in contrast to other countries in the world and in the region, the majority of transnational migrants from Lao PDR are women. A study from the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) counter-trafficking initiative ILO-IPEC/TICW\textsuperscript{43} study of labor migration in three southern provinces in Lao PDR from 2003 concluded that 59.4\% of the cross-border migrants were women in comparison to the about 50\%\textsuperscript{44} global average, 25.8\% of them were under 18 years old. Children comprised 21.4\% of the total migrant number. Of the total sample population, 5.2\% had migrated abroad; the overwhelming majority (81.5\%) had gone to Thailand.\textsuperscript{45} These results point towards an increase in migrant numbers over the passed 20 years, a result of relaxed traveling policies and

\textsuperscript{40}MoLSW/UNICEF, 2005
\textsuperscript{41}MLSW/UNICEF, 2005
\textsuperscript{42}Rigg, 2007:165
\textsuperscript{43}International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour/The Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women
\textsuperscript{44}UNIFEM:2009-06-04
\textsuperscript{45}Referred to in Phatsiriseng, 2007:30f
border controls. Other important factors are contacts and links in the destination country, awareness of risks and opportunities as well as the evolving culture of mobility. These factors are argued to be more important than lack of land, employment opportunities and other local conditions.\textsuperscript{46}

Laotians further differ from their neighboring equivalents in their final destination once in Thailand. Along the border to Burma and Cambodia there are large migrant populations, this is not the case with the Lao border towns. It seems Laotians travel more inland in their search for work and that their similarities and knowledge of the Thai language helps them to blend in and makes them more mobile.\textsuperscript{47} There are different opinions regarding the vulnerability involved in this scattering as some claim Laotians are more protected as they are harder to identify as immigrants, while others hold that notion to make them more prone to trafficking, as the protective networks aren't as strong.

Studies reveal that in the case of Laotians crossing into Thailand the majority begins their journey voluntarily, and the majority crosses the border illegally without being caught by malevolent hands. About half of the migrants send money back to their families and women are more likely to send remittances.\textsuperscript{48} There are many positive stories telling of success and adventures making for strong incentives to take the chance of making the journey.

In the majority of the trafficking cases presented in NGO and IGO reports most victims are young women who have a low degree of education and often come from ethnic minorities and/or rural villages. The at risk group is thus identified as those from poorer conditions with bad means of communication. This sets them aside from the majority of migrants as they are most likely to be in more need of the extra income which migration can generate thus making them easier to exploit.

Official returnees are the only actual numbers available to work with when dealing with trafficking. These are the people who have in some way been found by Thai authorities and are being sent back through the official channels. Those being identified as victims of human trafficking are taken care of by shelters for assessments and then sent back, while those seen as illegal workers are so called “push-back migrants” and are returned to their country of

\textsuperscript{46}Rigg, 2007  
\textsuperscript{47}Pearson:2006  
\textsuperscript{48}Brown & Jimenez:2008
origin immediately. Table 3 shows the official returnee numbers from 2001 to 2008. The dramatic increase in numbers from 2004 to 2005 is explained by the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)\textsuperscript{49} which was signed between Lao PDR and Thailand in 2003 but did not come into force until two years later.

Table 3. Official returnees from Thailand 2001-2008\textsuperscript{50}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>All official returnees</th>
<th>Identified victims of trafficking</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Over 19 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>9750</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>11400</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>12150</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>9600</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>27677</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>37591</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>39905</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>27550</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175623</td>
<td>1312</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>73 (499)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relatively small percentage of identified victims can be noted, as well as the overwhelming number of girls under 18 in the victim classification.

\textsuperscript{49}An MoU is a multi- or bilateral agreement where the signing parties express a will for common action. International MoUs should be registered as treaties with the UN, however they are less formal than other legal instruments.

\textsuperscript{50}Returnee record MLSW 5/12/2009
3. Findings from the Interviews

From the interviews, project aims and underlying assumptions could be identified as well as three problems. These problems emerged as central in the interviews and returned in the majority of them. For these reasons they will act as a thematic framework for the result presentation. This chapter begins with a presentation of the types of projects in place, as well as their aims and underlying assumptions which were derived from the interviews. Secondly, the thematic problems will be discussed separately; however, they are highly interlinked and should be seen as cyclical and re-enforcing. The themes for discussion are: Working against Trafficking; Inter-sector Communication; Cross-sector Dialogue.

3.1 Aims and Assumptions in Projects

At the center of anti-trafficking work are the 4P’s: Policy, Prevention, Protection, and Prosecution. Organizations can work with one, some or all of these issues and projects are designed accordingly. Anti-trafficking can be the main issue of an organization or a project but it can also be a sub-component in a larger program. There is a general agreement of this four dimensional approach being an appropriate tool to fight the problem at hand. Throughout the interviews praise was made for other organizations and projects at the same time as stressing that the efforts are progressing despite being slow.

Policy focused projects are mainly based on dialogue with Government institutions and aims to ensure their commitment to agreements and push for improvements of laws. Capacity building of staff and officials are common approaches. Problems met in this area include the circular basis of staff employment which means that training need to be repeated.

Projects aiming at preventing trafficking can be split in groups of source and destination oriented focus. The first group of projects is often packaged in a “safe migration” kit with a variety of components; awareness raising, peer-education, capacity building of leaders, information kits etc. At-risk communities are identified and usually cover one, or a few districts. The latter group, destination focused projects, aim at preventing exploitation in the work places, in this case in Thailand. Efforts centered on labor exploitation and are
combined with employers, watch groups are set up, and knowledge of labor rights spread.

Protection programs focus on those returning from a trafficking situation, in Lao PDR this mostly entail repatriation and reintegration of victims. The majority of this group comes from the official returnees identified and sent back from Thailand (see Table 3 in Chapter 2). It is done through the five shelters which are in place in Vientiane, Savannakhet and Pakxe and through individual projects. Factors in all these projects are education, vocational training and business set-ups.

The last component, prosecution, might be the hardest one to tackle. The risk of re-victimizing a person who has been trafficked in this process is great and there is thus some controversy around it. The approaches to prosecution as adopted in Thailand as criticized on the basis that it keeps victims of trafficking in shelters during the investigations thus also keeping them from returning home. Moreover, many victims are scared to take the witness stand and face the accused. During the interviews different views emerged on the subject of prosecution. One interviewee placed heavy emphasis on the prosecution process and said it is important to uphold the law and implement the legal system which is in place in order to state society's dissociation from trafficking. The same process was, by another interviewee discarded in the rhetoric question: “Would prosecution of traffickers be effective? Would traffickers care? Most likely not”. In the same interview it emerged that there are sometimes clashes between different departments in cases of prosecution and victim protection. The discussion ended with the statement: “If it is not effective and it happens at the expense of the victim, then there is no use”. Adding to this, criticism toward the efforts of legal implementation in Thailand was expressed as stories of police abuse, rape at the border, money being confiscated have emerged to organizations. One interviewee said that in working with the Police in Thailand one had to make sure they had good knowledge of the issue since many police find prostitution “to be a social service acting to keep rape rates down”, implying a deficit between policy and on-the-ground implementation.

Assumptions underlying organizations' approaches and project aims were relatively unanimous and consistent with the research available. The main assumption and one of the returning issues, emerging from the interviews was migration as a positive and/or unstoppable process in society. Projects are thus based on migration as a constant factor and trafficking as
main problem. As part of this assumption many stated that people who have migrated once are likely to go again.

From the interviews, the greatest dissonance which can be noted is that of the perceived scale of trafficking in Lao PDR. With no accurate data available the problem is seen in different lights depending on their projects and thus their points of departure. From a regional level, from projects working with all of the GMS area, Lao PDR was described as a country with low prevalence of trafficking. Reference was made to the numbers of victims origin from Burma and Cambodia where the scale was said to be much higher. Furthermore, the similarities in culture between Lao PDR and Thailand were used as an argument that Laotians can assimilate more easily and thus avoid malevolent hands.

Those arguing for the opposite, that trafficking is a relatively big problem in Lao PDR, also pointed to the different status Laotian migrants have in Thailand in relation to those coming from neighboring countries as well as to the much smaller population of Lao PDR. Similarities and assimilation were, from this point of view, described as risk factors as they allow Laotians to go further into Thailand thus scattering them at the same time as it makes victims harder to identify. The interviewees often pointed to the lack of reliable information, thus nullifying all statements of any kind.

Having outlined the basics of the anti-trafficking work, project and assumptions, in Lao PDR the next 3 parts identify the main issues which emerged as problems during the interviews.

### 3.2 Problem 1: Working against Trafficking

In recent years, tools have been developed to cope with and tackle human trafficking. In Lao PDR and in Lao's relation to Thailand MoUs has been signed, laws developed and a platform for communication has been set up (COMMIT). Together with the trafficking Protocol and the signed definition of what is to be regarded as human trafficking these developments make for a broad theoretical coherence crossing through Government institutions, UN organizations, INGOs and NGOs reaching down to the project implementation.

Reference to this working framework was made in all of the interviews with
organizations working directly with trafficking and the majority agreed that there was a mutual understanding between the actors involved in the issue. Organizations and Government actors were described as working towards the same goal, sharing the same understanding and a common picture of the problem. However, throughout the interviews the conceptual problems of trafficking was made evident, not only as distinguishing between migration, smuggling and trafficking but also pin-pointing degrees of labor exploitation, child rights and individual protection.

This is the largest problem area and contains a series of conceptual dissonances which are bestowed in four sections; Views of migration; Factors behind cross-border moves; Learning curves and trends; Project implementation.

3.2.1 Views of Migration

Labor migration in Asia has been on a steady increase since the 1970's and the need for skilled and non-skilled workers appears to be bottomless. Thai industries are described as highly dependent on the migrants, legal and illegal, coming from neighboring countries. Choosing ones livelihood and workplace is a basic human right as is the choice of where to live. Flows of internal and international migrants prove that people make use of these options and trafficking or labor exploitation are negative outcomes of these moves.

Working within this framework of migration with a focus on trafficking, the majority of the organizations included in this study make it very clear that the organization has no intention to undermine, suppress or stifle migration flows. Throughout the interviews migration was discussed in positive terms as a way for individuals, families and communities to improve their conditions. Projects are thus designed to tackle trafficking, not to prevent cross-border movements. Safe migration has therefore become the standard package of interventions. Awareness raising, capacity building and peer-education are the main approaches used in the projects, all of which aim to equip people with the knowledge needed to do the move as safe as possible.

A large part of the awareness raising is informing about the dangers of illegal migration and the options available for finding work legally. The legal channels between Lao
PDR and Thailand are part of the MoU signed in 2003 which came into effect 2005\textsuperscript{51} and consist of a system of formal labor requests from Thailand, 9 recruiting agencies in Lao PDR and pre-departure training centers. Securing a job through an official agency means that the migrant will have all the legal documents as well as a contract with the employer. Migrants can stay for up to 2 years and the stay is “locked” to one employer. When the limited time or employment is up the migrant has to return to Lao PDR. This process can be costly for the migrant as payments for permits, passport and travels to the agency accumulate and the administration can take up to 6 months.

The development of legal channels for labor migration is a major step forward for the migrant relations between Lao PDR and Thailand and are important tools to regulate the flows and make them safer. However, the current system is highly criticized as it is costly, time consuming and does not, in fact, guarantee safety. Furthermore, the official channels do not include work offered in the domestic sphere, such as maids, which is the area most women and girls go into.

Aspects of legal migration, as addressed by the organizations in the interviews, vary a great deal. By some, the legal channels were described as the best and only option for migration – thus making the illegality of the majority of the cross-border flows a problem.

Many interviewees explicitly said people can't be forced to stay in their villages but that they have to make an informed decision based on reality instead of rumors from friends or dreams from glamorous TV shows. Furthermore, both interviews and previous research (see Chapter 2) suggests that migration is seen, by the community, as a legitimate way to make money and might even be used as a pass-over ceremony to adulthood. The relative conditions have also been adopted by the organizations and migration is viewed as a normal part of certain communities livelihood. One interviewee expressed their situation as: “We can’t say: 'You should illegally migrate to Thailand' but we can say: 'If you are considering migration you should think about this'”

When asked about the effects of migration or if there are any negative aspects of the cross-border flows the majority of the interviewees faced with the question gave trafficking as the only negative outcome. Many seemed confused by the question and clarified by stating the

\textsuperscript{51}For more detailed information see MoU 2003, Phatsiriseng:2007
individual gains and profits of migration. Thus pin pointing that the problem lies in that people are being exploited in the migration process. Migration in this sense becomes a constant which individuals, communities, and organizations adhere and adapt to.

Exploitation levels at the destination are a constant issue in migration and the main issue when it comes to trafficking. Answering how trafficking can be identified in labor cases most of the answers pointed to levels of exploitation but at the same time stating that the line between labor exploitation and trafficking could be a fine one. The majority of trafficking cases in Lao PDR are identified in Thailand and the focus has so far been on women and girls forced into the sex industry. Labor exploitation is harder to find and identify but also to measure. For some people, working under exploitative conditions in Thailand could be a “good” option in relation to what is otherwise available. It is thus the most serious cases of exploitation which fall under the trafficking label.

3.2.2 Factors Behind Cross-Border Moves

The first study focusing on trafficking in Laos was done in Savannakhet province, in the south. Savannakhet is the largest province and it is found as a connector between the Thai and Vietnamese border. The majority of the identified, official returnees (victims of trafficking and push-back migrants) come from this province, or provinces around it and it is therefore at the center of the current anti-trafficking efforts and research.

Consistently throughout the interviews the south in general and Savannakhet in particular were given as the most likely source areas. The area has a high density in population and is relatively wealthier than the more mountainous north. The low-lands are used for plantations, there is a stable coffee industry and the higher income can be noted in better quality houses and more vehicles along the main roads.

Relations and networks are lifted as important factors in the decision to migrate. The southern provinces have a long history of ties with the nearby provinces in Thailand and family bonds often stretch regardless of the border. Acting as both incentives and safety-nets these relations were described in many interviews as making the reality of migration safer. Trafficking in this context is identified as affecting those without access to these networks or
family bonds. This group, those at risk of being trafficked, was consistently described as youth (mostly women) having lower levels of education, coming from more rural areas and relatively poorer families.

Reasons behind cross-border moves were described differently depending on which approach and target group the organization's projects have and where they are located. Although certain factors were consistent throughout the interviews as being elements of those being most at risk for trafficking; ethnic minorities, low levels of education, money and youth, the main reasons discussed were varied slightly.

Answers for the question “Why do people go to Thailand?” had distinct differences depending on project focus. Organizations working mainly with prevention or policy implementation, point to the accumulation of material things and improvements, adventures and youth restlessness. Organizations working mainly in the Vientiane area highlight the lack of local opportunities as the main reason for migrating, while survival, gender relations and pressure from the family were presented as incentives from interviewees working with victim protection. Prevention work in migrant communities thus appears to focus mostly on the “regular” migrant and the outcome thus becomes increased safety for that migrant. The projects working on “the other side” of trafficking, protection and repatriation are instead describing those having been identified as victims of trafficking.

Involvement of brokers or traffickers in the decision to migrate appears to be rare according to the available reports and research. However, reference to brokers, recruiters and traffickers as a persuading force coming to villages was still made in a few interviews, either as major reason behind trafficking or as an important requirement for a case to be labeled “trafficking”. The role of the trafficker differed in between the interviewees some describing them as a highly organized force while others named them mostly as relatives or friends to the victim. In one interview it was stated: “It is very rare that a trafficker or broker is involved in the move, it is mostly starting as voluntary migration and is therefore not trafficking as such” thus implying that a third person needs to be present from the start in order for a case to be classified as trafficking. Moreover, traffickers were described as “changing tactics”. As awareness and safety nets spread the traffickers need to find new “supply” and thus move on to other communities. Ways of prostitution also alters, shifting from brothels to a more
individual, and thus more discrete, approach using mobile phones as point of contact and hotel rooms as meeting place. Meanwhile, the girls are kept in private homes or dormitories making it harder for the police to raid. These are important notes, only brought up by two interviewees.

This dissonance suggests that it is still hard to conceptualize trafficking and the closeness to migration makes it hard to distinguish from case to case. The involvement of a malevolent third person makes a clear cut between a voluntary and a deceived decision. However, agents can be involved in labor migration and does not necessarily entail exploitation. Furthermore, it describes a real difference between the “normal” migrant and the reality of those who return from Thailand identified as victims of trafficking. The “migrant” is described as wanting more material goods and don't necessarily cross the border for survival reasons. Those who have been victims of trafficking, on the other hand, are identified as coming from very poor families indebted or in need of money for survival, the move has thus been more need-based and could be categorized under “unwilling migration” as showed in Figure 1, Chapter 2.

Difficult to distinguish due to their interlinked relation, projects need to balance between voluntary labor migration and trafficking. Reasons behind migration are often divided into Push and Pull factors. In a sense these factors can be seen in light of the transnational movements of Figure 1 as the pull factors are mostly want driven (material improvements, TV influenced, adventure seeking) and the push factors are need based (lack of local opportunities, domestic conditions, debts etc).

During the interviews there appeared to be a focus on the pull factors in project descriptions. Accurate information and awareness of risks were the main issues worked with in prevention programs. Factors identified as pushing people across borders were described as having a weaker impact on decisions and targeting them would not be effective. Examples of this were given by three interviewees who for example said that education, micro-credits and alternative crops all were futile measures in combating trafficking.

Recognition of pull factors as the strongest motivators for migration are strengthened by the assumption of migration as being unavoidable and positive. Anti-trafficking efforts are thus based on the premise that people will migrate.
3.2.3 Project Developments

Since the beginning of the trafficking interventions in Lao PDR there has been a change in approach based on studies undertaken and lessons learned. This development has induced a shift of focus in the projects from awareness, education and alternative income (micro-credits, alternative crops, etc) to safe migration, empowerment and repatriation.

Identifying “Best-practice” or proved interventions seems to be a challenge in the human trafficking efforts. Development of project approaches is constant and based on experience. When working against trafficking organizations expressed how these developments are expressed through trends. Starting to work with trafficking in Lao PDR projects mainly aimed at spreading information and awareness. The second phase was more inclusive and integrated, focusing on community empowerment as well as providing tools for safe-migration. Today, the trend seems to be moving towards a third phase of reintegration and repatriation of victims of trafficking.

Protection of returning victims of trafficking was described by four interviewees as an area lacking focus and funding. They expressed how victims often are forgotten about after returning to Lao PDR and thus fail to get appropriate help and counseling. Moreover, the main problem was identified as the gap between figures of the official returnees and real numbers of migrants which is thought to be vast. Lack of resources also prevents efficient follow-ups of those returning through official channels and full assessment interviews of push-back migrants are not done. On the other hand, one interviewee described this problem area as the one receiving the most amount of funding and attention.

Recently there have been new initiatives and projects aiming to fill these gaps. In the interviews these new projects were described as the first or only in its kind and the organization was very pleased to have such a progressive program in place. Protection efforts were almost exclusivity focusing on women under the age of 18. As seen in Table 3, the majority of victims identified in Thailand and thus officially returned to Lao PDR are female and according to the interviews the most common type of exploitation is sexual. This implies a discord between theory, research, laws and project realities. Understanding of trafficking as well as laws has moved from solely focusing on sexually exploited women and children to include all exploitation of any person. However, this development does not appear to have
reached down to implementation levels.

In Lao PDR there are no facilities to care for male victims. Victim identification takes place in Thailand, and lists of names are referred to the Lao officials. There is a notable conflict between sending and destination country in this question, as it is a costly process to identify, assess and return migrants and victims. One explanation provided for the over representation of children in the official statistics was that children, particularly in prostitution, are easy to identify as the Protocol classifies them as victims of trafficking disregarding any voluntary decision taken. The majority of Thai police raids are targeting brothels thus further explaining the high numbers of women. These reasons, in combination with the money issue, undermine an effective implementation of the full coverage of the laws. Moreover, it suggests a rift between theory and practice.

Overall, new projects seem to be developed from the learning curve within the own organization, being based on evaluations and research. Organizations thus have different knowledge and opinions about what is effective countermeasures to trafficking and not. There seems to be a move towards a more individual approach of keeping potential migrants safer as they move across the border but also in victims protection programs. Returning victims are helped on many different levels, with personal assessments and action plans including education, vocational training, business set-up etc.

3.2.4 Internal Criticism

Project cycles and new initiatives tend, as showed in the previous section, to be bound to the own organization. Implications of these developments together with project time frames and plans are that organizations change approaches at different times. Hence, doubt and criticism were used during the interviews to describe other organizations' approaches.

In some interviews reference was made to previous projects or projects implemented by other actors. One interviewee's reflection on the own organization's project development was: “We first started with education and awareness raising, but most of the efforts were small scale and worked more inside a bubble than holistically. It was probably not very efficient”. In another interview the general approach of anti-trafficking projects and its development was
described as: “Prevention activities used to focus on awareness raising and alternative incomes. They are fairly elementary activities that accomplish little. Today there is more focus on community empowerment by the establishment of committees at community level who can monitor and report suspected traffickers”. Experiences made from early projects were mostly described in individual terms, as a learning curve for the own organization.

Criticism of other organizations' approaches and projects were also present in the interviews. Direct statements of inefficient or even counterproductive projects were made by 5 interviewees. For example: “There are quite a few questionable projects working with trafficking”, and: “There are many projects that focus on alternative crops, etc. but these are mostly dead ends”. Individual organizations were referred to as “halfhearted”, and one report on human trafficking was described as “ridiculous”. Moreover, awareness raising campaigns were discarded as insufficient on their own as “people can not eat information”. In responds to this, however, vocational training approaches which are currently in place were not all seen as good initiatives. In fact, some were described as reinforcing gender roles and, in the cases of training victims returning to Lao PR, placing girls in an uncomfortable position of servitude to people again, risking to traumatize them further.

In two interviews concern was raised to highlight the problems of project coverage of small geographical areas. As awareness grows in one community brokers move on and target new areas. The most vulnerable are the more remote communities and the re-model villages\(^52\) in the north. Witnesses say that brokers approach the villages which have just been moved and gained road access and push them into leaving instead of waiting for potential victims at the border (further suggesting a changing strategy from traffickers). Migration and trafficking is therefore a part of a much greater equation and can not be separated from other forms of societal developments. The local focus of areas identified as “at-risk” can thus expose other communities to the clandestine side of migration. Bringing this question to other interviews two said this problem was one they has not considered before. Another interviewee said that such a shift of the trafficking problem is unlikely as sustainability is a factor built into all project work, and thus will provide protection without necessarily talking about trafficking or migration in direct terms.

This dissonance, between the idea of a unified effort within the sector and the differences in

\(^{52}\)Villages which have been moved to better access roads and other services.
project implementation, indicate a lack of communication. Development and understanding for the problem thus seem to occur within organizations and not between them.

3.3 Problem 2: Inter-Sector Communication:

In the initial interviews a positive picture of understanding and mutual communication between organizations was presented. However, as the interviews preceded this picture became soiled with negative and critical remarks. Exploring this dissonance the question of inter-sector dialogue was brought up in all of the later interviews. As more precise questions were asked the answers became more critical towards the own sector.

The effects of the conceptual confusion of trafficking and its inherent difficulty to clearly pin-point have been showed above. Adding further complexity to these difficulties is the perceived coherent understanding many of the organizations claimed to have within the sector. This section presents the second problem identified during the interviews; inter-sector communication. It has been divided into four parts; Vertical Communication; The Role of UNIAP; Official Responses to Trafficking and Donor Fashion.

3.3.1 Vertical Communication

Project implementation through Government partners is a requirement for organizations working in Lao PDR. This relationship has two sides to it. On the one hand it can act as a legitimizing force at local levels and a guarantee for the people that the project can be trusted. On the other hand, the close ties to the Government can put the N in NGO in question and make organizations more like state actors, thus undermining their legitimacy. These ties can also act as separating organizations and undermining dialogue.

Questions about cooperation and partners were spontaneously answered with reference to state actors such as the Lao Women's Union, the Lao Youth Union or different Ministries. Other NGOs were rarely described as partners. When asked further questions on this relationship many said communications were limited to sector meetings.

When asked about the relationship between organizations within the sector two different types of answers emerged. The first responds was overwhelmingly positive and
described the relationship as lined by mutual understanding, harmony and shared knowledge. The second type of reply was almost the exact opposite of the prior and painted the internal relation as one based on protectionism, suspicion and a sense of organizations “*doing their own thing*”. Reasons for communicating with other organizations were often referred to as prevention of overlaps and information replication which mostly took place through the sector meetings.

Organizations working in the outskirts of the traditional approaches (trafficking as main issue, awareness raising, victim protection) presented the most negative view of the communication within the sector. Three organizations were especially critical of the present dialogue. Examples of this discord are: “*There is no regular basis for sharing information unless someone in an organization is very open to dialogue*” or “*There is a sense of competitiveness among the organizations […] this leads to very little sharing between agencies of reports, kits and training material, and manuals*”.

Communication streams can thus mainly be seen as vertical, moving from project and organization level to ministerial and Governmental levels. The horizontal communication, the one in between organizations, doesn't appear to be viewed with the same importance. There is an awareness of what issues and which areas other organizations cover. Small organizations, especially, have knowledge of larger agencies' efforts, they were also more positive towards the sector meetings and described them as “*very informative*”, a “*good place for sharing information*” and “*learning from others*”. Large organizations or those with a long history of working with trafficking did not seem to place as much importance in the meetings.

### 3.3.2 The role of UNIAP

The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) was set up to facilitate and coordinate the anti-trafficking efforts in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Acting like the spider at the center of a web, UNIAP oversees the counter-trafficking efforts undertaken in GMS.

UNIAP calls for a sector meeting every three months where the organizations are invited to discuss progress and share experiences. The meetings can be used as a platform to
form cooperation and develop joint projects. When discussing these meetings in the interviews many seemed to be confused as to when and how often they take place and they were not presented as being of great importance.

Project overlaps and report/manual replication were a commonly returning theme in the interviews perceived as a major challenge by most. Being an important part of UNIAP's work, prevention of overlaps and covering holes in coverage and information, the Inter-agency is responsible for coordinating the anti-trafficking efforts. This requires all organizations to share their work with UNIAP and keep a constant dialogue. When this fails it has, for example, led to material being replicated, often due to organizations' reluctance to let others use their materials.

Organizations expressing a negative view of the inter-sector communications also pointed criticism towards UNIAP. Efforts to coordinate the sector were seen as insufficient and described as “halfhearted” or “ineffective”. The difficulties of coordinating projects and actors were made evident from examples given of inflexible projects, different administrative systems and donor requirements. Build-in problems of this kind undermine any coordination efforts and also act to uphold the vertical communication line.

### 3.3.3 Official Responses to Trafficking
The sensitivity which human trafficking entails was made clear when Government efforts were discussed in the interviews. Many were under the impression that there was a lot of talking while efforts were only put in to keep an appearance of action up. However, there was doubt that much was being done in reality. Two categories of answers came from this; the first placing emphasis on lack of funds and capacity as the main reasons behind the lack of results. Other views plainly stated there was a lack of interest and that the illusion of action is due to international pressure and a want to keep a good “face” up. Changes are thus driven by outside forces and not a perceived need to act. Interviewees expressed a need for better laws with stricter implementation. However, all said the process is, although slow, moving in the right direction.

Appearance in general and “face” in particular were returning aspects discussed. Admitting
that trafficking is a problem is connected to loosing face as it entails that Laotians seek low-skilled work outside of Lao PDR. In the same way, the existence of prostitution is said to be minimum levels and brothels claimed to not exist. This identification of pride can also be noted in the Government's reluctance to recognize domestic work as a job (this is also the case in Thailand) which should be covered by labor laws, as well as in their wish to keep legal migration within skilled-work only.

Critiques of the legal channels which are currently in place were plentiful; one interviewee even described them as “exploitation even before the migrant has crossed the border”. Moreover, it is not unheard of that village chiefs sign “official” papers allowing a cross-border move for cash compensation. These papers are far from legal but the migrant is unaware of this situation. Provincial taxes on remittances sent back from family members in Thailand are also known to be drawn by local officials.

Inquiring why migrants decide to go across the border into Thailand and becoming illegal immigrants instead of moving internally in Lao PDR interviewees replied that is is often easier for migrants to access Thailand than it is to go to cities within the own country. To move internally special permits are required from both origin and destination. Domestic communications were also named as preventing internal moves as it can be cheaper to go to Thailand than to Vientiane in search of a job. Moreover, for many of the migrant communities along the border, Thai media is predominantly used as a source of information. Knowledge of conditions and options in Thailand are therefore likely to exceed knowledge about the own capital.

Criticism of this kind was presented differently depending on the actor asked. Many discussed the Government in quiet and careful words while explaining deficits pointing to lack of money and a heavy work load. Interviewees who more directly criticized Government efforts also added that they shouldn't be saying things of that kind.

3.3.4 Donor Fashion
Using terms as protectionism, five interviewees described the unwillingness to share and take part of others' information amongst the organizations. Questioning why this is the case and
communication is at lack within the trafficking sector the answer was mostly uniform: donor requirements and project money. Donors and project funding was never explicitly asked about in the interview questions but these were subjects which were brought up by the respondent. Reference to “sexy topics”, “attractive projects” and “donor trends” were made in a majority of the interviews. Or as one interviewee described the relation: “Focusing on eleven year old virgins in the sex industry is sexy to donors”. Moreover, fashion, or trend sensitive aid were often given as reasons behind project approaches, proposals and changes in organizations' directions; “NGOs tend to write proposals which will get them the money”. One interviewee described the relationship to donors as a balance act between being true to the organization values and conforming to donor requirements to raise money.

The amounts of money involved were often given as reason behind this protectionism; organizations keep to themselves in order to safe-guard further project support. This has further been enhanced by the decreasing funds available for counter-trafficking projects. As the donor society's eye finds other topics to focus on when the fashion moves on, it leaves a fully developed sector behind, which is now forced to down-size despite the still existing problem. Donors were also described as indirectly acting to hinder internal cooperation through their requirements of proven results and differences in systems. All these aspects risk shifting accountability away from local society towards the donors.

### 3.4 Problem 3: Cross-Sector Dialogue

Viewing the complexity of trafficking, and acknowledging its position as a small component in a greater process of migration, questions start to reproduce as no societal process stands alone. During the interview process organizations outside of the trafficking sector were approached to create a broader picture of how migration and trafficking is perceived by other actors involved in development projects in Lao PDR. The aim was to place the issue in a greater context. This section explores the relationship between organizations within the trafficking sector and those working in other areas.

Reasons behind this broader picture are three problems derived from the notions gathered from previous studies, and facts about Lao PDR, as well as answers from
interviewees. The first problem comes from the identified group of people most likely to migrate. This group is described as being better off than the absolute poor thus leading to the question of what happens when very poor communities are targeted by livelihood projects (or the like) by organizations perceiving themselves as outside of the trafficking sector? The second problem is connected to children's rights as the majority of victims returning to Lao PDR are children. Thirdly, HIV/AIDS prevalence in Lao PDR is low, but, half of those infected have been to Thailand. These figures indicate that cooperation between the two sectors could act to keep HIV/AIDS numbers at its current low.

Three organizations without direct projects focused on human trafficking are included in this study. However, the interest from the majority of those approached was wanting, some did not respond to the initiated contact and others kindly explained that they do not work with trafficking and would therefore not be of help; “[We are] currently not supporting any NGO working in the field of human trafficking so I'm not sure [I] can be of any value for inputs in your research”. Through the interviews which were held, certain patterns can be derived pointing to sector isolation.

When asking about relations with organizations outside of the trafficking sector many interviewees seemed surprised, and there appeared to be no direct cooperation or dialogue in place. Reference to working groups and networks were made but no link between the different subjects seemed to be in place. One interviewee noted this in the own organization's involvement in both trafficking and land issues, but said further that cooperation is hard enough within one sector, that trying to make it work across sector-borders was asking too much.

Personality and personal interest also emerged as effecting project directions. The personal touch of an employee or country director seemed to affect an organization or a project and push it in a different direction. In the interviews reference to certain people within the own organization or in the anti-trafficking sector was made stating their importance for the work or various cooperation.
4. Bringing it Together

The previous chapter presented three problem areas in working with human trafficking in Lao PDR which were identified through the interviews. This chapter aims to bring these problems together and discuss them in relation to the each other and the research presented in Chapter 2.

The interview results suggest that there is a general theoretical coherence between actors in the trafficking sector where the difficulties and complexity of the challenge are acknowledged. The interviewees agreed that the measures in place are appropriate and currently developing in a positive direction. However, dissonances, problems and internal criticism also emerged from the interviews. And these have been the focal point for the result discussion.

Clear difficulties in working with trafficking are showed in the interview results, but all of the problems are not derived from the issue as such. Definitional confusion of conceptual frames is enhanced by the different realities which meet the projects on the ground. These realities shape assumptions and thus lead to actors perceiving the issue at hand with slight variations. In turn, this dissonance is upheld by a perceived communication between the actors which in reality is lacking of commitment. This cyclical relationship acts as self-sustaining the static where there is little interest in talking to others as the communication is already perceived as being sufficient.

*Figure 2. The reinforcing relationship of the trafficking sector communication line.*
A result derived from these relations is frustration which is expressed in the internal criticism towards “bad” or “old” approaches, and as organizations develop new projects, the dissonance is noted. However, channels for expressing this criticism in a constructive way are blocked by the misconception of communication as well as the project division based on the avoidance of program overlaps. As organizational learning curves appear to be based mostly on the own organization's experience instead of a shared pool of knowledge, thus it runs the risk of mistakes and problems to be repeated. Based on individual learning-curves, projects and organizational understanding develop at different speed, at the same time as reaching different conclusions. By placing the organization, and thus also the projects, in a separate bubble the benefits will be restricted, in this case it means mostly having focus at individual levels before greater social improvements of conditions based on underlying reasons of the problem.

In explaining these relations of isolation within a sector aiming towards the same goal, dependency on donors emerge as a strong factor. Trafficking was a “hot” topic a few years ago and the sector expanded as more money was being made available. As new issues arise and donors shift focus, funds for anti-trafficking projects have decreased but the sector, and societal need, remains the same. Competition for project money can thus be a reason behind the organizational isolation and unwillingness to share information. Budget restraints also mean project adaptation to the new economic realities. Moreover, different donors will have different requirements. Hence, if the statement “NGOs tend to write proposals which will get them the money” is true, criticism towards projects are not only founded on different assumptions but also the assumptions made by donors outside of the country and maybe even the trafficking sector. Counter-trafficking work thus risk being inefficient in order to continue being funded. This is further enhanced by donor requirements for result based approaches which in this context is pushing efforts to focus on individuals and personal development.

The project development which can be identified through the interviews, moving from information to safe migration and victim protection suggest that the understanding for the problem is developing. It also points to a drive of constantly needing to present new project plans and creative approaches in order to keep donor interest. The learning curve can thus be seen as both progressive and experimental.

Although there is a coherence at top levels of legal measures which should be taken
and the general goal targeted, the further down towards implementation it gets, the more coherence seem to be upheld by perception, restrictions and outside influences. The isolation of projects and organizations undermine the four dimensional approach, something which is enhanced by donor interest and requirements. The prevalence of “sexiness” in projects to attract donors risk shifting the focus away from the problem at hand, undermine dialogue and thus also greater social impact. With these considerations the rift between legal reforms and project approaches is made evident, as trafficking for child prostitution stirs up more emotions and therefore gets more funding than trafficking for labor exploitation in, for example, factories.

If “sexy” is an aspect guiding funding the approaches adopted runs a risk of only capturing a small part of the problem. Eleven year old virgins represent the worst case of trafficking, but they are small in numbers. Exploitation levels are hard to measure but it appears there is selectiveness in exposed suffering based on the traditional assumptions. As this focus is also true for research in the field, there is little, if any information about exploitation of men and boys creating large blind numbers.

Another side of the same problem is the conflicting approach to migration in relation to trafficking. Migration is not perceived as a problem thus placing trafficking as the core problem at hand. Two aspects can be derived from this notion. The first is donor based, human trafficking is fashionable topic. The second aspect is more complicated as labor migration is a universal human right and can thus not be criticized. Organizations' statements of not wanting to prevent migration clearly show the taboo surrounding any questioning of the positive impact of migration. These restraints keep anti-trafficking efforts at scratching the surface of the problem while the demand for slave labor and forced prostitutes are fed with a constant supply.

A conceptual confusion arises from this, as awareness raising projects target migrant communities in the aim of making migration safer and thus preventing trafficking. Considering Figure 1 in Chapter 2, those most at risk of trafficking are those found in the “involuntary” box of need-based moves. Hence, this group migrates due to lack of opportunities. In the trafficking, sector there are divided opinions on the effectiveness of income generating approaches as people are considered to migrate anyway. Focus has thus
been on the pull factors, as push factors are seen as constants.

The avoidance of overlaps together with the individual approaches of organizations are to be bridged by UNIAP's efforts to coordinate the counter-trafficking efforts. The interviewees stressed the importance of cooperation, criticism which was aimed at UNIAP mainly focused on their coordinative role. However, in the light shed on the inter-sector communication streams in general, it appears that organizations want to benefit from coordination, but are less interested in putting in the effort it requires. Hence, UNIAP stands before a challenge of coordinating a group which does not want to be coordinated.

With all of the above in mind, the third problem identified can be added to complete the picture. By moving the central focus from trafficking and onto migration a broader work arena is presented where other considerations need to be done. Although there is a common understanding of why people decide to migrate within the trafficking sector, this is not spread to organizations working outside of it. As migration is not seen as a developmental problem it is not integrated into development projects. The claim of holistic approaches in project work only stretches as far as the problem area identified thus preventing a greater impact.

Most projects which tackle trafficking are centered in only a few provinces, mainly Savannakhet in the south and Vientiane where the out-migration is at its highest. However, in these areas the contact networks or migrants and potential migrants mirrors the high numbers which would act to reduce vulnerability. Considering the point that it is not the poorest households, but rather the ones with spare money and time that migrate, the societal development in the rest of the country should be considered. As households gain better access to markets, education and other services which improve their livelihoods the incentive, or possibility, to migrate also increases. On the same note, greater societal impacts need to be considered in the migration context. If youth are using migration as a survival strategy due to lack of access to education, activities and opportunities in Lao PDR this could be used as an incentive to not invest in further improvements. School access is already poor in Lao PDR and as it is, in the short term, more profitable to go to work in Thailand the youth do not or can not (due to distances and costs) obtain higher education than primary or secondary grades. The statistics at hand show how migrants from Lao PDR have generally low levels of education thus suggesting that higher education provides options to stay. If this is the case it could mean
that migration actually acts to keep rural communities poor and dependent on remittances and individual strategies for survival whilst withholding greater development thus creating a poverty-trap. Keeping a multidimensional approach, across sector-borders, is therefore important to ensure that one societal problem is not replaced by another.

Returning to the interviews, cross-sector dialogue does not appear to be a priority as issues outside the own focal point is not perceived as being connected to the own work. Furthermore, the vertical communication lines in place in Lao PDR tempt the observer to assume that the Government brings it all together. In a country which suffers from serious financial deficits these assumptions are far from realistic or justified. In the light of the criticism of Government efforts as focusing more on “face” and upholding of international status, such assumptions can be further questioned.

Challenges facing the counter-trafficking sector are thus not solely confined to the problem itself, but it has many aspects which need to be considered. The environment in which these projects are working is lined with bureaucracy, protectionism, and perceived communication. Managing trafficking and the individual harm it causes have, in the protection of labor migration, overshadowed the greater impact of societal development. Along with the organizational isolation and dependency on donors, counter-trafficking efforts are forced to be inefficient in order to be in place at all. Essentially, organizations working with this open-border phenomenon are, ironically enough, closed to one and other.
5. Future Challenges

The most striking problem presented in this study has been that of donor dependency leading to isolation and lack of communication. These relations shift the focus from the whole problem to only working with issues which are measurable and attract funding. These could be problems found in other areas of development as well, thus indicating a greater, structural flaw of the aid community as a whole. However, let us not speed too quickly ahead, but discuss the more tangible dissonances first, and tackle the over reaching challenges later.

The complexity surrounding counter-trafficking work mainly originates in its relation to migration. This tight, yet conflicting relationship, in which migration is viewed as something good which is to be encouraged, and trafficking is illegal and needs to be prevented, gives the trafficking sector its many aspects. The present hesitation to criticize migration restricts the tools used in counter-trafficking projects, and thus also their impact. Moreover, the requirement of projects to be “sexy” in order to attract money puts further limits to them. A broader point of departure would provide for a more flexible approach, while also including, and recognizing the differences of society at large. However, as many issues, especially one as complicated as human trafficking, require specific and specialist measures, efforts need to be combined, coordinated and integrated in order to make for a greater impact.

Efforts to coordinate the counter-trafficking sector in Lao PDR have been undermined by the perceived levels of communication and unwillingness to share information. A common knowledge base with a learning curve developed together would, undoubtedly, make the efforts to stifle trafficking more efficient. Fearing that others will benefit more from cooperation than oneself is a common conception, which, in this case, risks occurring at the expense of local society. Following the same line, internal criticism and questionable projects could be avoided if dialog was more dynamic. Moreover, in the efforts to avoid project overlaps, repetition of mistakes can be an unintended outcome. A resource center of available reports, project evaluations, manuals, and training kits would make for easy access of information for everybody. Creating a virtual library, where organizations can upload their own material, could prevent overlaps, at the same time as it would act as a catalyst for project learning-curves. Success of such collaboration is, obviously, dependent on organizations willingness for real cooperation.
Alarming reports on the changing tactics of “traffickers” cause concern for communities outside of the traditional areas of migration. In combination with the sector isolation resulting from the lack of cross-sector dialogue, as well as result based projects, this phenomena movement leaves counter-trafficking efforts constantly a few steps behind the development. An effective way of regaining the lead for organizations would be to mainstream trafficking into all relevant projects in the Lao society. As gender equality and democratization have been included as essential components in all development interventions, a similar integration of trafficking, or safe-migration, could help prevent an unnecessary escalation of victims of trafficking in Lao PDR and the entire GMS region. Realizing the immediate problems of this, everyone can not be experts on everything and important issues are made futile unless incorporated properly, project coalitions could be an alternative. Cross-sector working groups for the development of efficient tools, and shared knowledge to prevent unintended outcomes could act as a starting point.

Returning to the main problem, which can be found in the background of the three discussed above, the relationship between projects and donors, is part of something greater, and more static. The global aid community is made up of different and independent actors, and therefore also a variety of ideologies, agendas, and goals. This study clearly shows the complications which occur on the ground when all these considerations are interacted with those of the own organization, the reality of the task at hand, and the obligations to the state in which the project is set. Considering the problems discussed above, these effects prevent projects from reaching their full capacity, and thus also withholds larger societal development.

Calling for a change of the structures behind the aid community would probably be futile. Yet, if the isolation and protectionism found on the ground in Lao PDR is also present at higher levels, it would indicate that the whole system is based on a cynical competition. This is not a pleasant picture. Assuming reality is not as grim, donors could enable internal and cross-sector cooperation through relaxing the fashion sense and seeing to actual needs. Such relaxation, combined with a wider capture of “holistic” which includes a working dialogue across sector borders for a broader understanding, could be a small step in the right direction to decrease the sense of competition. As state borders are deteriorating with an increasingly globalized world, the building of new ones seems unnecessary.
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