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**Post-project Sustainability  
of  
Funded Development Projects after Donors' Withdrawals.**

**Understanding the contribution of recipients and donors  
in relation to post-project sustainability institutionally and financially.**

A research report presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the  
degree of Master of International Development.

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## **Abstract**

At the present time, sustainable development activities seem to be the overarching goal of many development actors as the United Nations (UN) has, successively, introduced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal agenda to guide development related activities. The sustainability of effective outcomes from development projects has been of concern to the donor community for decades, which resulted in the introduction of sets of declarations in measuring aid effectiveness. This research assumes that the effectiveness of development assistance crucially links to the sustainability of the project activities or benefits after their ending points.

This research report explores the contribution of development actors (recipients and donors) in the light of two principles of country ownership and donor alignment from the Paris Declaration (2005). The two principles were used to identify the contributions of donors and recipients in development projects in relation to institutional and financial sustainability. In aiming to study the above-mentioned aspects, the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP) which was operating in Laos during 2006-2014 was chosen. The project was co-funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Lao Government. To ensure the rigour of this research, document analysis and semi-structured interviews from the qualitative methodology were used.

This research found that country ownership and donor alignment have been considered fully by the Lao government and donors, as national priority tasks included in national development plans had been used as blueprints for development projects operating in Laos. Furthermore, the country system has been strengthened by capacity-building activities provided by development partners. These actions together support countries to exercise their leadership roles over their national development. While aligning assistance to facilitate recipient countries' strategies, there was limited evidence showing that the country system had been used in implementing development activities. It is suggested that the sustainability of development activities does not only depend on the government or the donors. Also, different projects define their sustainability differently; for the ADB in particular, its primary purpose is to build government capacity in order to ensure that they can continue the activities piloted during a project's operating period. For financial sustainability, since Laos still lack in funding, the ADB ensures project sustainability by providing additional funding as it introduces new projects to expand the success of previous projects.

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## **Abbreviation**

ADB: Asian Development Bank

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BESDP: Basic Education Sector Development Programme

CMEA: Council for Mutual Economic Assistance

EFA: Education for All

ESDP: Education and Sports Sector Development Plan

GoL: the Government of Laos or the Lao government

GPEDC: the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation

HIPC: Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

IFIs: International Financial Institutions

IMF: International Monetary Fund

Lao PDR: Lao People's Democratic Republic

LDC: Least Developed Country

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

MOE: Ministry of Education

MOES: Ministry of Education and Sports

MOF: Ministry of Finance

MOFA: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MPI: Ministry of Planning and Investment

MTEF: Medium-term expenditure frameworks

NEM: New Economic Mechanisms

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations

NGPES: the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy

NSEDP: National Socio-Economic Development Plan

ODA: Official Development Assistance

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OECD-DAC: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development- Development Assistance Committee

PEFA: Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability

PFM: Public Financial Management

PRSP: Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers

RRP: Report and Recommendations of the President to the Board of Director

SAP: Structural Adjustment Programme

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SESDP: Secondary Education Sector Development Plan

SWAp: Sector wide approach

TAR: Technical Assistance Consultant's Report

UN: United Nations

WB: World Bank

WTO: World Trade Organisation

# Chapter One: Introduction

## I. Introduction

This chapter will introduce the theme of this research report regarding my personal interest. I will address how I became interested in post-project sustainability, background information about this research and finally I will present how this research report is structured and what will be the key information and take-aways in each chapter, chronologically.

## II. Personal interest in conducting the research

To begin with, I have had a personal interest in development projects since I was a child. It was because my family members used to work with development projects that introduced many activities to support the government in national development tasks. It was apparent that those activities were likely to disappear and be forgotten right after the projects ended. This observation is not limited only to what happened in Laos, my home country, because this was also pointed out by an Indian project implementer that "...we create parallel systems...but after the project ends it's the end of everything..." (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018, p. 721). In order to study and understand the discontinuity of the positive benefits after the end of the projects and donors' withdrawal, I came across the idea of post-project sustainability. In response to my curiosity towards the characteristics of development projects and factors affecting the continuation of the benefits they produced, this research report would like to study the contribution and responsibilities of the host governments and donors, involved parties from both ends, in relation to post-project sustainability (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018).

By going through numbers of academic papers relating to post-project sustainability, this research was able to frame the factors that contributing to sustainability as development effectiveness (Sabbil & Adam, 2015). This is why this research report will use the Paris Declaration (2005), a tool used to measure effectiveness of development assistance put in place by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). To form a clear picture of the contributions of the two involved parties, the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP), a co-funded education development programme by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Lao government was chosen (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2014). Country ownership and donor alignment principles from the Paris Declaration (2005) will be used to reflect the contributions and practices from the Lao government and ADB in the project because they provide direct and clear explanation of the commitments expected from both recipient and donor sides.

### III. Research aim and questions

Regarding my interest in understanding the factors that influence post-project sustainability, the *overarching aim* of this research report is to understand how the contribution of the Lao government and the donors throughout the project operating period affect the post-project sustainability in both the institutional and financial aspects.

In order to form these understandings, the *research questions* are drawn from two key themes from the Paris Declaration (2005) as follow:

1. How have the Lao government and donors considered country ownership and donor alignment in development projects?
2. How have consideration and application of country ownership and donor alignment helped sustain development activities, both institutionally and financially, after the donors' withdrawal?

### IV. Research report outline

There are six chapters in this research report, each chapter focuses on different aspects, but they altogether help in forming an understanding and answering research questions which then help fulfil the research aim.

- Chapter one: Introduction.  
This chapter will introduce personal interest and present research aim; questions and objectives of the research.
- Chapter two: Literature review  
This chapter will review literature in relation to the four key themes of this research report which are country ownership, donor alignment as introduced in the Paris Declaration (2005), and institutional and financial sustainability as two main types relevant to this report.
- Chapter three: Methodology  
This chapter will explain why and how this research report was carried out by using qualitative methodology. It will explain in detail the reasons that document analysis and semi-structured interviews were selected and further describe how those two methods were applied to answer and ensure the validation of this report. This chapter will also list the ethics concerns and the way this research addresses those concerns.
- Chapter four: Country context and the Basic Education Sector Development Programme

This chapter will present a brief history of Laos in relation to development assistance in order to frame a basic understanding of the government structure. Moreover, it will elaborate how national development plans have been formulated in Laos as well as presenting trends and characteristics of development assistance in Laos in facilitating national development priorities. This chapter will also provide brief introduction about the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP), that form the case study for this project.

- Chapter five: Findings

This chapter will present findings from collected data from project reports and semi-structured interviews in accordance to answer two research questions sequentially. This chapter builds on the previous chapter's brief history of Laos' political structure to explore how the national development plans shaped the contribution from the Lao government in the BESDP. It will also explore the ADB contributions in the light of donor alignment.

- Chapter six: Discussion and conclusion

This chapter will combine information presented in the findings, literature review and country context chapters in order to critically answer two research questions. In addition, it will also describe the outcomes and contribution of this research report to the existing body of knowledge.

## **Chapter two: Post-project sustainability and the Paris Declaration (2005)**

### **I. Introduction**

As presented in the introduction chapter, the core idea of this research report is about the sustainability of positive benefits generated by development assistance. In order to frame the research's aim and questions, this chapter will review literature on different definitions of project sustainability. In particular, it will cover international principles guiding sustainability of development projects within existing institutions. The focus of this chapter is how this concept of sustainability is defined and interpreted by different development-related actors, from discourse to implementation. It starts with a general understanding of the idea of sustainability before exploring how development actors conceive of sustainability in development assistance. Then, the chapter will provide a critical analysis of how aid donors and recipient countries ensure the effectiveness of development assistance towards the goal of sustainable benefits that will be carried over after the end of development projects. This literature review chapter explores the contemporary literature regarding questions relating to contributions of development actors and post-project sustainability: (i) how do development projects consider 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' in each project stage? (ii) to what extent do project activities that adhere to those two principles lead to post-project-sustainability? Finally, the concluding section will assess how the discourse on the international principles can lead to post-project sustainability, when applied to implementing development interventions.

This chapter will go through literature related to four main themes of the research:

- country ownership
- donor alignment
- institutional sustainability
- financial sustainability

For the first two concepts, the understandings will be drawn by exploring the policies and practices of the Paris Declaration (2005). For the latter two, the understanding will be drawn by exploring the causal relationships between contributions of donors and recipients in policies and practices towards project sustainability.

### **II. Development assistance, its effectiveness and sustainability**

Traditionally, development assistance is referred to as a set of practices including technical advice and financial support that developed countries offer to developing countries, also known as Global South

countries (Easterly, 2007). It is to help 'underdeveloped' countries to be developed along the same path that 'developed' countries had traversed. However, this assistance does not ensure it will bring developing countries towards the same development stage. Over the years, development assistance has had to demonstrate that its funding is effective and really help recipients to be better (Wenar, 2006). The effectiveness of the assistance was a concern for the groups of traditional donors from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and for recipient countries (Oino et al., 2015).

Since this research report has been shaped around sustainability resulting from development assistance, the key definition of sustainability that this report adheres to is what has been coined by the OECD–Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) (2002), which is “[t]he continuation of benefits from a development intervention after major development assistance has been completed. The probability of continued long-term benefits. The resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time” (p. 36). According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands (n.d., as cited in Hutaserani & Bayley, 2010), the effectiveness of development assistance leads to post-project sustainability. Along with many previous studies, this report assumes that the effectiveness of development assistance has a causal link to the sustainability of development projects after the ending point (Sabbil & Adam, 2015).

Regarding that, the next section will explore tools that international organisations have come up with to manage and measure the effectiveness of their assistance to ensure its sustainability.

### **III. The international community and development assistance management**

The concern towards results originated after mass development assistance found varied outcomes in the Post-WWII and Cold War periods (Ali et al., 2015; Bourguignon & Sundberg, 2007). The OECD-DAC, a group of traditional donor countries, was founded in 1961 to synergise ideas and pool funding from the Global North countries. The World Bank (WB) and United Nations (UN) were also offering aid to the developing world to combat universal issues such as poverty at that time (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.; OECD, n.d.). The OECD brings donors together to share and discuss the effectiveness of assistance they have been providing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.).

In the past there were not many development projects that considered studying and assessing the continuation of any benefits after their assistance (Heeks & Baark, 1998 as cited in Sabbil & Adam, 2015). That is why many projects simply left the decision to maintain or continue the project activities after the projects ended to the willingness of the host governments (Watson-Grant et al., 2016). There are both successes and failures in the implementation of international development (Wenar, 2006). There were doubts among the donor community whether their help really benefits their expected

beneficiaries or not (Ali et al., 2015; Easterly, 2007). Importantly, there is limited solid proof that following sets of development practices introduced by donor agencies will ultimately lead to sustained economic growth, a core metric that foreign aid often says it hopes to influence (Hansen & Tarp, 2000).

The institutional arrangements to coordinate global aid began with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and the financial agreement of the Monterrey Consensus in 2002, which culminated in the First High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Rome in 2003 (Bourguignon & Sundberg, 2007). The Rome Declaration on Harmonisation (OECD, 2003) was introduced under the theme of harmonisation among donor and recipient countries in terms of policy and implementations to increase aid effectiveness and fight against poverty. This declaration stressed the 'country-based' approach in order to achieve the MDGs. Influenced by the five-year review of the MDGs, the OECD-DAC came up with a unique set of principles and more tangible aid effectiveness measurement in 2005 as known as the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005).

The Paris Declaration (2005) was made in order to ensure the effectiveness and the sustainability of development assistance by establishing a set of principles that help measure and track the assistance which has been provided by donors (OECD, 2008b; Khang & Moe, 2008). Five principles were discussed and agreed among donors and recipients to measure whether or not aid is effective and is leading recipient countries to achieve development as had been promised (OECD, 2005). These principles are:

- the ownership of recipient countries;
- the alignment of aid to recipient countries' development plans;
- harmonisation among donors to avoid overlapping;
- collaboration between donors and recipient countries to manage and evaluate the results; and
- mutual accountability between donors and recipient countries.

The harmonisation principle mentioned in the Paris Declaration (2005) is specifically between donor groups unlike the one introduced in the declaration from Rome which considered harmonisation of both donor and recipients (OECD, 2003, 2005). The Paris Declaration (2005) aimed to operate for five years until 2010, with two phases of evaluation. The first and second evaluations were projected to be presented at the Third and the Fourth High-Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness in 2008 and 2011, respectively (OECD, 2008a, 2011).

The Accra Agenda for Action is the product of the Third Forum (OECD, 2008a) which was influenced heavily by the first phase of evaluation of the Paris Declaration (2005) (Wood et al., 2008). It pointed out that while development agencies and partner countries recognised the causal relationship between country ownership and aid effectiveness, the way they translate the supporting activities varies. In

order to align their assistance to their partner country's development priorities this forum urged donor countries to also support and emphasize the country ownership practices embedded in their national development plans.

At the Fourth Forum in 2011, the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, there was a paradigm shift from viewing development effectiveness as tracking the 'aid' of wealthy countries to looking at the overall 'development' performance of countries (OECD, 2011). In the short form, it is a shift from measuring 'aid' effectiveness to 'development' effectiveness. It means that the international community is now focusing on the effectiveness of development in developing countries overall not only what is related to assistance provided and guided by traditional donors. This was a paradigm shift to not only recognise non-traditional donors but also include their practices and contributions as part of international donor community (OECD, 2005, 2011; Wood et al., 2008). The Busan Declaration reshaped the Paris Declaration (2005) and introduced the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) (OECD, 2012, 2014). The new framework fits into a bigger and more ambitious global agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which open the floor for the contribution from a bigger pool of development agencies including those from South-South co-operation agencies, philanthropic organisations, and private organisations, to name a few (OECD, 2011; Booth, 2012). The Busan Declaration's new trend of development co-operation as 'global partnership', as defined in the GPEDC, now forms the 17th goal of the SDGs (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

The 'ownership' principle still remains the central focus of the international community alongside the 'alignment' principle characteristics in terms of building the capacity of host countries to exercise their ownership over their development activities (Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation [GPEDC], 2016; Khang & Moe, 2008). The connotation of 'partnership' seems to generate more symmetrical inclusiveness from donor and recipient countries as both of them are referred to as development partners (GPEDC, 2016).

There are continuous and ongoing changes in the way the international community views and measures their assistance due to the endless changing world. However, the core theme of the development assistance is still to support and strengthen ownership and leadership of the recipients over their national development in using their own systems by the support from donors in terms of financial and technical assistance in respectful manners (OECD, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2011). That is the reason why this research report will mainly study two principles from the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), which has been considered a 'ground-breaking' tool to measure and increase aid effectiveness. The literature that will be used therefore refers back to the Paris Declaration (2005) itself not the GPEDC. These two principles of 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' will then be used in this

research to understand the sustainability of project activities of the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP) after the project has ended in relation to financial and institutional features.

#### **IV. Country ownership and donor alignment as in the Paris Declaration (2005)**

This section will provide brief definitions of ‘country ownership’ and ‘donor alignment’ as defined in the Paris Declaration (2005) and clarified in the Accra forum (2008) and how those two principles related to post-project sustainability, financially and institutionally. The Paris Declaration (2005) is a measurement to measure the effectiveness of development assistance provided by various development actors, from international organisations, multilateral and bilateral actors to small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (OECD, 2008b). The declaration was a result of consultations among these various actors, including donor and recipient communities, the findings of which became the principles introduced in 2005. This section will examine criticisms towards donor intention to support country ownership of their national development plans as suggested in the Paris Declaration (2005).

##### **i. Country ownership**

Country ownership in the lay language of the development field, as described by Savedoff (2019), would be when countries own their development activities. It happens when countries know their priorities for development, and which activities should be in place chronologically to facilitate and support their national development. Those priorities then allow the government to be more selective in choosing development projects and programmes that will operate in the countries. In a nutshell, when countries own and set priorities in their national development plans (NDPs) by themselves, it would follow that they take more ownership of development programmes and projects as well. By the meaning of the owner in this, it means they “take a lead in designing and implementing program[me]s” (Savedoff, 2019, p. 2). This is similar to what has been elaborated in the Paris Declaration (2005) that country ownership is the leadership that recipient countries take in setting their development priorities in their NDPs (OECD, 2005). Okun (2009) notes that the degree of country ownership decreased when donors introduced and imposed their policies and procedures, and this leads to the discontinuity of the project benefits. This subsection will explore the usage of NDPs and the contribution of development partners over project planning, implementing and sustaining development activities in relation to country ownership.

The Paris Declaration (2005) presents the NDP as an indicator of success that an implementing country has taken ownership because the NDP demonstrates that “countries put in place national development

strategies with clear strategic priorities” (OECD, 2005, p. 2). As suggested by Khennavong (2014), in order to receive aid, it is a requirement that aid recipients have their poverty reduction strategies, including an NDP, in hand for donors to follow. Watson-Grant et al. (2016) shows that a number of donors proposed their development projects according to the NDPs of their partner countries.

There are many arguments around the ownership over the NDPs from developing countries. Even though the NDPs have been used, questions regarding country ownership are still being posed (Bissio, 2013). That is mostly because development plans in many developing countries are influenced heavily by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), “a kind of national plan” advocated by “the UN, World Bank, and [International Monetary Fund] IMF” as the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) (Easterly, 2006, p. 10). As presented in Temple (2014), the NDPs which have roots in the PRSPs seem to be a “ventriloquism” as it is noticeable that the areas that recipient countries set as their priorities are those in line or influenced by donor priorities. Moreover, those PRSPs must be approved and read through by the IMF or World Bank (IMF/WB) before they would be finalised by the government (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2004). The strong claim about country ownership over PRSPs and its approval procedures has been made by Chimhowu et al. (2019) “that the IFIs had a concrete mechanism to shape (critics would say ‘control’) plans in aid recipient countries” (p. 85). This all implicitly illustrate that those NDPs written by developing countries are more likely to follow criteria set by the international organisations which are funded by the donor community. The controversy here is whether the priorities set by the governments in their national development strategies were really owned by the government or the country (Brown, 2017; Khennavong, 2014). This can make the Paris Declaration (2005)’s use of NDPs to indicate country ownership seems like a tokenism. Still, the NDP has been used to mean that countries have a say over their development activities (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018).

There is a further debate how to indicate whether development plans are genuinely from the voice of the country itself as a government or its citizens (Temple, 2014). Evidence gathered by Bartlett (2011) on IMF/WB influence over developing countries’ PRSPs found significant similarities in policies to overcome their poverty regardless of their different backgrounds or situations. Bartlett (2011) goes on to suggest that countries may use previously approved PRSPs from other countries as their blueprint to write their PRSPs in order to be approved by the IMF/WB just to complete the requirement. Moreover, while NDPs outline priority development tasks for recipient countries, the donor community also has their own priorities and sectors that they are willing to support (Brown, 2016; Sjöstedt, 2013). This contrasting but seemingly causal relationship can imply the possibility of donors’ imposition in the way they provide technical assistance in prioritised areas which may create dependency and make ‘ownership’ a token (Brown, 2016; Knack, 2014).

This principle also highlights ownership as the leadership of the host countries over their development, and suggests donors to encourage “[p]artner countries [to] exercise effective leadership over their development policies, and strategies and co-ordinate development actions” (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018 as cited in Martinez-Alvarez, 2018; OECD, 2005, 2019, p. 4). However, this seems to make room for donors’ intervention. As Wood et al. (2008) finds, this partnership commitment mentioned under the ownership principle “open[s] the door to outside interference” (p. 8). In addition, Martinez-Alvarez (2018) explains that country ownership has been viewed as the most important principle in the Paris Declaration (2005). Arguably, this makes the country ownership principle more complicated to understand and to translate into practice (Wood et al., 2008). Different development actors from bilateral, multilateral or international, and different levels of government, from central to local, also translate and interpret ‘country ownership’ into their plans and practices differently (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018).

For development projects, the ownership of the government is expressed when the governments can be selective and have decision making power over development activities and projects (Savedoff, 2019). According to Martinez-Alvarez (2018), to ensure country ownership over development projects is to include the government “at all stages of programme planning and development” (p. 1054). It is important to notice that the extent that donor and recipient countries agree to exercise country ownership is different in different countries (Wood et al., 2008). The extent that donors allow host countries to exercise their leadership and ownership depends on the donor’s perception of the capacity of host countries to perform. For capacity related issues affecting how partner country exercise their ownership over their development activities via NDPs, it is explicitly stated that many recipient countries have insufficient capability in planning and implementing their national development related tasks (Eade, 2010; Wood et al., 2008). Capacity building practices will be further described in the next section.

## **ii. Donor alignment**

Donor alignment has been described in the Paris Declaration (2005) as the principle that “donors base their overall support on partner countries’ national development strategies, institutions and procedures” (OECD, 2005, 2019, p. 4). There are seven indicators under this particular principle: “building reliable country systems; aligning aid flows with national priorities; coordinating support to strengthen capacity; using country systems; avoiding parallel implementation structures; providing more predictable aid; and untying aid” (Wood et al., 2008, pp. 12-13). The main elements depicting good practices of the donor alignment principle are when donors use country systems, especially for

Public Financial Management (PFM) in implementing the project activities, meanwhile providing support to strengthen the country's systems.

In order to support recipients to fully exercise their leadership roles, donors are responsible for building capacity among personnel in recipient countries. It is noted by Wood et al. (2008) that the capacity of the recipient countries crucially affects the way they set, plan and implement their national development strategies as well as how they manage and monitor their development progress. In response to that, the main activities introduced here are related to building capacity for both personnel and institutions in recipient countries like skill training and providing scholarships in areas that are mentioned as lacking by host governments.

The Paris Declaration (2005) states that donors have to align their assistance to support and strengthen the systems in recipient countries. Arguably, this can mean that development plans and strategies are likely influenced by concern about whether their activities will be funded or not (Qiu, 2020a). Sjöstedt (2013) further elaborates on the possibility that donors have a say over areas that they want to support when development projects have to be evaluated and reported back to the donors using their format and achievement criteria, with less regard for what is stated in a country's NDPs. Those measurable indicators may distort the initial intentions of development activities since they mostly focus on activities that are measurable which conflicts with many benefits of development activities that require long-term observation and are mostly intangible (Chandy, 2011).

According to Okun (2009), one of the main reasons why a project is not sustained after the project lifecycle is that people do not see any benefit in keeping doing it or in expanding what had happened during the project period. If their projects are not effective and less useful for the community then the expected beneficiaries will not be willing to continue and maintain those development activities (Komalawati, 2008; Pollnac & Pomeroy, 2005).

Stierman et al. (2013) suggests that alignment is insufficient if the activities regarding 'using and building country systems' are not heavily considered. It has been reaffirmed in the first phase evaluation of the Paris Declaration that "[p]rogress is more visible in aligning aid flows with national priorities, less so in using and building country systems, reducing...support to strengthen capacity" (Wood et al., 2008, p. 13). The declaration keeps repeating words that seem to encourage donor countries to use recipient country systems, however it is also stated that the donors should use the country's system only if they feel that the country's system is 'reliable' (OECD, 2005). This is asserted by Knack (2014) that "[d]onors' incentives to use country systems (or alternatively to micro-manage aid using their own parallel systems) depend in part on their perceived quality" (p. 839). What is 'reliable' in this case will then be drawn from the donor's perspective.

In practice, different countries have different approaches and cultures. What donor countries think is appropriate and effective might not be the same as what recipient countries' think (Silvius et al., 2012). For this reason, it is likely that donor countries will see another country's systems as 'weak' or lacking transparency. This implies that there is a possibility that donors will point out gaps or flaws within the country systems to claim that they are not reliable, so they probably keep providing trainings and assistance drawing from their own 'developed' systems and introduce what they see as 'best' and count that as the way they strengthen recipient countries' systems (Eade, 2010; Wood et al., 2008). The Accra Agenda for Action underlines these issues of the alignment principle developed in the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005, 2008b). The indicators from the Paris Declaration (2005) leave room for donors to identify what is needed for recipients while the declaration from Accra developed a definition and stated clearly that donors will provide trainings in the areas that the host countries themselves have pointed out as lacking (OECD, 2005; Wood et al., 2008).

There is a major barrier in getting donors to trust and use country systems (Brown, 2016). It is important that donors have respect for host countries' systems and development strategies in order to provide sound and supportive guidance (Easterly, 2007). The three-year evaluation of the Paris Declaration (2005) requires donors to show their trust in recipient countries systems by using and improving on existing operating procedures and relying less on foreign systems (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018; Wood et al., 2008). The country system that the declaration heavily refers to for donors to strengthen and use is Public Financial Management (PFM) (OECD, 2005, 2008a). Accordingly, the OECD introduced Public Expenditures and Financial Accountability (PEFA) to monitor and guide how governments can balance and forecast their revenues and expenditures effectively and independently (Mustapha et al., 2019). This is to support recipient countries to gain control over their own expenditures and budget in line with their development related strategies. In response to the above concern regarding the 'reliability' of country systems, PEFA assesses the accountability of the country's system, and donors can use the report to support and strengthen country systems in line with country ownership and donor alignment (OECD, 2005; Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability Secretariat [PEFA Secretariat], 2005).

So along with the introduction of aid measurement principles in the Paris Declaration (2005), there were regulations and policies launched to support the implementation of that declaration especially the financial aspect, and now PEFA is considered crucial in determining how donors can effectively build capacity among host governments to manage their development funds (Hawke, 2017). PEFA is therefore in line with strengthening public systems to create reliable country ownership, an indicator of donor alignment principle. PEFA "emphasizes country-led reform, donor harmonization and alignment around the country strategy, and a focus on monitoring and results" (PEFA Secretariat, 2005, p. iii). PEFA asserts that it supports country leadership and ownership in their own reform agenda

meanwhile providing guidance, technical and financial support in strengthening government personnel capabilities to exercise their leadership and ownership (De Renzio, 2009). One indicator of PEFA is to track the predictability of direct budget support, including aid money (PEFA Secretariat, 2005). Donors promise to provide predictable funding to support host countries by using the in-country systems to channel those funds to their priority sectors as a way of promoting financial sustainability (Knack, 2014).

One crucial aspect that helps mastering their PEFA score is the medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEF) (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank [IBRD & WB], 2013). According to the report from the World Bank (IBRD & WB, 2013), MTEFs have been promoted to support countries in predicting their expenditures in advance. This helps to ensure preparation, the cost effectiveness of public budgeting as well as creating budget reliability (Hadley & Miller, 2016; WB, 2017). Recently, many development projects promote MTEF training to ensure the accountability of Public Financial Management (PFM) (Hadley & Miller, 2016; WB, 2017). The MTEFs then relate to how development activities would be sustained after development projects ended financially.

Now we know how this research report understands, depicts and frames country ownership and donor alignment, the next section will link how those two principles contribute to institutional and financial sustainability in order to answer the second research question.

## **V. Institutional and financial sustainability in development assistance**

Sustainability in this context refers to the longer period that project activities are carried on by institutions or organisations in the recipient countries beyond the project period (Mahonge, 2013). The activities that lead to the sustainability of the projects are varied. Johnson, & Scholes (2007) present three main types of the sustainability: institutional, financial and human resource (as cited in Chelangat & Sang, 2018). The human resource aspects are broad and as the concept of capacity building suggests are embedded in the two former types (Eade, 2010). So, this research will explore the sustainability of development activities in their institutional and financial aspects. This section will explore the sustainability of development projects first by understanding institutional and financial sustainability and then understanding ways projects create ownership in the host country by aligning assistance to national-owned priorities and strategies.

### **i. Institutional sustainability**

Institutions that this research will focus on include people, policies and systems (Pfahl, 2005; Santoro, 2019). According to Buitter (2010), institutions, leadership and policies are core aspects affecting the effectiveness of development projects. As institutions play a crucial role in implementing development-

related activities, donors must work with them to support partner countries taking a lead in own their development strategies and activities. Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD, 2000) affirms that development agencies share a same agenda in their desire to build the capacity of institutions in partner countries to be able to implement their national development activities in the long-term. That reflects institutional sustainability. Institutional sustainability is understood as the capability of the host government to continue the benefits of the project after it has ended (Khan and Hare, 2005 as cited in Okun, 2009; Pfahl, 2005; Santoro, 2019). Institutional capacity was described as “good standard of governance, management knowledge and skills” leading to institutional sustainability (Ganesh, Swami and Shaik, 2015 as cited in Chelangat, & Sang, 2018, p. 29; Santoro, 2019).

As suggested in a handbook by NORAD (2000), capacity building could be referred to as institutional development. The capacity of the involved organisations should be strengthened to be able to maintain projects benefits, particularly if a project is initially led and guided by external personnel (Myers et al., 2014). NORAD (2000) further explains that sustainability in institutions should be and could be assessed at every project stage. This report will explore institutional sustainability related activities happening after the funding termination. This sustainability is the result of effective trainings provided during the project operation period with the purpose to support host governments to exercise their ownership and leadership fruitfully and productively on their own after project has ended (Okun, 2009).

Development partners can help strengthen country systems by providing capacity building, supporting policy actions and applying in-country systems. They can also employ local personnel in implementing development activities of their projects to support country’s development in sustainable way (NORAD, 2000; Wickremasinghe et al., 2018). This is in line with what has been suggested under the donor alignment principle in the Paris Declaration (2005), strengthening and using country systems, especially, for public financial management (PFM). Donors provide support to equip government officers “within country-led strategies for capacity development” (OECD, 2019, p. 4). This is to prepare and ensure institutional sustainability. When institutions are equipped with capable personnel, sound policies and reasonable systems, the institutions will be able to lead and manage their development activities (Pfahl, 2005). As suggested by Santoro (2019), a vital aspect facilitating institutional sustainability is ‘financial capability’. The next subsection will explore sustainable financial management resulting from development projects with collaborative manners from the host governments and development partners.

## **ii. Financial sustainability**

According to Karanja and Karuti (2014), developing countries depend heavily on external funding in implementing their development activities. Those activities are often initiated and implemented in

target areas as pilots to test their effectiveness and intentionally aim to hand over to partner countries to apply lessons learnt and implement them nationwide after projects end (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018). To continue development activities initiating during project operation period as supported by development partners, financial sustainability is of concern (Bowman, 2011).

Financial sustainability is referred to as the ability of the organisations, or the host governments in this case, in using available resources effectively to budget and retain government allocations and other funding resources to continue the project activities beyond donor support (Chelangat & Sang, 2018). It is a stimulator influencing the continuation of development benefits because project activities could not take place without money, in terms of hiring staff, buying equipment, and so on. Bowman (2011) suggests that financial capability, creating budget plans for instance, and predictable sources of funding are two main aspects leading to the financial sustainability of development projects.

A country's Public Financial Management (PFM) system is a core aspect that development agencies evaluate to determine how 'reliable' an in-country system is in order to provide assistance and to foresee the possibility of the sustainability of their project activities (PEFA Secretariat, 2005). As mentioned earlier, PEFA is a measurement tool in assessing the PFM of developing countries and influences the volume of external assistance (PEFA Secretariat, 2005). Similar to the PRSPs, there is an argument around how countries' PFM systems are reformed in order to influence the score ranking in PEFA. This suggests that PEFA is a tool where donors have looked for 'best practice' rather than 'best fit' (Hadley & Miller, 2016). They stress that "improvements in PEFA scores do not necessarily represent improvements in the functioning of the PFM systems as a whole" (Hadley & Miller, 2016, p. 12) they also notice the similarities in PFM reforms "regardless of country context" which bring into question the country ownership characteristic (Hadley & Miller, 2016, p. 16).

Regarding financial capability, training for budget preparation, preparing MTEF in most cases, has been introduced as a pack with development projects as a precondition for sustainability (WB, 2017). When host governments are able to prepare MTEF by themselves, we could say they have taken on more ownership of development activities. If this is complemented by predictable sources of funding under commitments towards donor alignment principle as suggested in the Paris Declaration (2005), the hand over period after donor withdrawals seems to be smooth and well taking care of. While committing to funding in the longer term, a sector wide approach (SWAp) has been introduced to help donors better align their assistance into specific areas (Stierman et al., 2013). MTEFs and SWAps help countries predict advance budget for specific areas while predictable sources of funding ensure that the activities will be able to carry over as planned. Predictable sources towards financial sustainability, can also come from the host governments who allocate their national budget to cover the amount that is needed to

carry on project activities (Sabbil & Adam, 2015) or they can request additional funding from development agencies (Okun, 2009). Development projects' activities can be therefore sustained after the project termination either by additional funding from donors or by host governments allocating their own public budget to continue them (Bowman, 2011).

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the country ownership and donor alignment principles from the Paris Declaration (2005) intend to complement each other to build capacity of host countries to develop sound national development strategies while strengthening their country systems to be more effective in managing and measuring their own development activities. These long-term visions and overarching goals hope to promote post-project sustainability of development projects.

When the country has a strong sense of ownership, they are involved in planning and implementing the project activities and it is more likely that project benefits will be sustained and maintained by the host countries (Sabbil & Adam, 2015; Yates et al., 2019). That is referred to as 'genuine ownership' (Yates et al., 2019, p. 86). That is why country ownership has been claimed as one of the most important aspects leading to sustainability (Booth, 2012). If the development projects are designed and led by outsiders, and donors in particular, it is more likely that project activities will remain dependent on outside personnel and create an on-going dependency on external assistance (Yates et al., 2019). The alignment of donors with their intention to strengthen the country systems expresses how donors hope to empower as well as build capacity in recipient countries to be independent and operating their development activities the way that will benefit their countries and citizens in the long-term (Booth, 2012; Stierman et al., 2013). Donors align their assistance to promote the use of country systems by channelling financial assistance through public pools as general budget support or sectoral budget support, as outlined in SWAps (Brown, 2016). It is mentioned clearly in OECD (2009) that "[d]onors can help build capacity and trust by using country systems to the fullest extent possible, while accepting and managing the risks involved" (p. 27).

By going through literature around country ownership and donor alignment in relation to institutional and financial sustainability, the research questions can be answered as follows. A host country demonstrates country ownership by defining their own NDPs, channelling public budget and employing their own personnel to implement development project activities, this generates practical skills that help strengthen institutions to be more resilient which is a foundation of institutional sustainability (OECD, 2005; Pfahl, 2005; Wickremasinghe et al., 2018). For contributions from development partners regarding donor alignment, they should be guided by the host's NDPs, building capacity for host

countries' personnel, strengthening the country's PFM system as well as providing predictable funding to support and lead to financial sustainability after the ending point of development projects (Bowman, 2011; OECD, 2005, 2008b; Stierman et al., 2013).

In the next chapter these two principles from the Paris Declaration will be examined in relation to post-project sustainability through the case study of a funded development project in Laos.

## Chapter three: Methodology

### I. Introduction

Since the main theme of this research is to understand and look for the supporting and other affecting factors influencing the sustainability of development projects, it will be carried out under the scope of a qualitative methodology (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014). Based on the characteristics of qualitative research explained by Minichiello and Kottler (2009), this report grew from the interest and curiosity of the researcher after noticing the discontinuity of development projects which started, ended and seemed to be forgotten and left behind even though the results of the project were positive and could potentially be carried on (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018). In order to answer the research questions thoroughly and build a valid understanding of the relationship between the contribution of involved parties in development projects, two methods from qualitative methodology have been chosen, namely document analysis and semi-structured interview.

This chapter will present in detail why the two research methods have been chosen and how they have been applied in building understanding and answering two research questions. Equally as important, this chapter will also present ethical issues related to the use of the selected methods in conducting this research and the limitations faced while undertaking this research report.

### II. Data collection methods

The objective of this research is to study how the Lao Government contributed in the design, planning and implementation of development projects and how those contributions influenced post-project sustainability. This research uses a case study of the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP); a co-funded development project by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Lao government. The programme was established on December 20, 2006, with the cooperation of the Lao Government, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) as the executive agency, and the ADB, and ended in 2014 (ADB, 2014).

There are two methods that were used to collect information for this research in order to triangulate the discussion regarding research questions. Details and approaches of applying these two methods are as follows.

#### i. Document analysis

Document analysis is used in this research to analyse and understand the project implementation in relation to country ownership and donor alignment principles of the Paris Declaration (2005) as these

two principles have been claimed to lead to post-project sustainability (Dijkstra, 2015). To investigate this claim, this research discusses the published reports from ADB that assess the 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' aspects which are considered to be the factors that can lead to sustainability (Dijkstra, 2015; OECD, 2005).

For the document analysis, this research consults the project reports in conjunction with the Paris Declaration (2005) principles as the theoretical framework that has been agreed by the international community for use in measuring aid effectiveness (OECD, 2005; Bowen, 2009). The BESDP reports that were used accounted from the technical assistance consultant's report (TAR) from the preparing stage, the report and recommendations of the president to the board of director (RRP) from the starting point, to the completion report of the BESDP. These reports are available for the public on the ADB official website. This research aims to theorise the possibility of sustainable activities initiated during the project period and successfully handed to the host government to be continued and maintained in the long run extracting from the contribution of involved parties within project operating period. The process involves analysing documents critically, drawing on many academic papers and consulting selected papers which have a more universal framework.

The project reports are the appropriate information to use since they include how the project was first planned, how the implementation activities were devised, and the completion report which concludes with the results of the project and the future recommendations. The BESDP's reports which have been used in this research cover the whole project operating period from the planning to the completion of the project. From what is mentioned in international declarations and the project reports, it is possible to learn whether policies are aligned and consistent with practices or not.

While it has been said that using document analysis alone is sufficient to study the practices of development projects, there are also many academic papers that prove that there will always be a conflicting issue between policy and practice (Dabelstein & Patton, 2013; Dijkstra, 2015). So, to complement the document analysis, and make this research more valid, the semi-structured interviews are utilised to understand the practice of key informants (Bowen, 2009).

## **ii. Semi-structured interview**

The document analysis helps in extracting how MOES and ADB considered BESDP activities in relation to country ownership and donor alignment in their reports. To ensure rigour in the analysis of project reports in explaining how the project was designed, planned, and implemented until the end point, interviews with the project staff from both donor and recipient sides were added to the research design. This helped explore inside information regarding activities that actually happened in the field

and those that happened after the completion period which depict the sustainability of development projects.

Due to the high cost and time-consuming nature of travel, the interviews were designed to be carried out online via Zoom, as the researcher is based in New Zealand (Oltmann, 2016; Salmons, 2012). The Zoom programme's video allows researchers to have the opportunity to see the reaction and response of interviewees. Apart from the transcript and verbal response, the gestures and facial expressions of interviewees can be used to interpret the feelings and opinions of the interviewees towards interview questions. In undertaking the interview, I created a Zoom meeting room and set a time limit for 30 minutes. To prevent technical issues, before running the interview I did a trial with my research assistant by using Zoom and prepared questions.

The target participants or the primary source of this research were those who used to work with the BESDP (Hammersley, 2010). They are the ones who witnessed, were involved in and contributed to the project activities from the beginning and have in-depth knowledge regarding the project activities and sustainability. The selected participants are those considered as key informants. They were selected and recruited from MOES and ADB differently. For ADB, I contacted the administration office via the official website and got response within a week with a contact of the interviewee. Then I contacted the interviewee directly to explain about this research and set a meeting time with her. For MOES, key informants were recruited informally by an existing connection of my research assistants, who are based in Laos, then go through the official procedure by handing an official letter to inform their office about their participation in this research. The important procedure before conducting interviews in the Lao setting is handing an official request document. Both offices required an official letter together with a research proposal before proceeding to the interview. The expected number of interviewees was at least two participants from each party.

This research was designed to recruit four project officers as research participants, since the nature of development projects in Laos is that they are most likely to be small scale, and there are not many administrative staff on development projects. The number of interviewees will not affect the validity of the study of the project. The interviews were firstly planned to interview the interviewees one by one in order to see the reaction and response in real time, just like an interview conducted in person. In reality, only two interviews happened. One ADB staff, who is responsible for most development projects in education field supported by ADB, was interviewed. She mentioned that project reports included sufficient information for a research that I am undertaking, and to explore BESDP implementation as I am willing to, MOES will be a good source. There were two senior officers from MOES joined the

interview at once. Both of them took turns and complemented each other in answering questions and building a picture of what BESDP implementation was like.

The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner, in which the questions are open-ended. The questions related to BESDP from the beginning to the end and whether the activities that happened after the ending of BESDP were similar to what was projected in reports. On top of that, the interviewees were asked to express their opinions on project activities which they think related to 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment', and to what extent those activities contributed to post-project sustainability institutionally and financially.

Before starting the interview, I asked for interviewees' consent verbally to confirm their willingness even though the consent forms were sent and by joining the Zoom meeting meant they already agreed to participate in this research. Apart from that, the interviewees were asked whether they wanted to be recorded or not. Then the aim, and brief detail of this research report were presented to interviewees before proceeding to interview stage. The interview questions were formed after I went through project reports and had some understandings about BESDP and contributions from MOES and ADB in relation to 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment'. The questions were discussed with a research assistant who works in the education field and were then reviewed by my supervisor, Dr Gerard Prinsen, to check whether they covered all necessary and important aspects of the topic. These questions were then tested with my research assistant to practice how to guide and frame the answers and to test how the questions would be utilised to gain as much information as possible (Lupton, 2020).

These interviews provided project staff from both sides the opportunity to express their opinions, which will be used by me, an outsider, to see what the project was like. The interview transcript was used as data for this report (Hammersley, 2010). The answers from the interviews are used to compare what had been included in project reports and what happened in practice to see whether they are coherent or not. The interviews allowed me to obtain unforeseen information that may have been overlooked or omitted by the project reports as their nature is precise, concise and focused on key features (ADB senior staff, 2020). Furthermore, information from project staff was used in complementing and supporting the critical analysis of project activities, and to perceive factors in relation to post-project sustainability (Elmendorf & Luloff, 2006).

This research is different from sustainability assessment reports by ADB or MOES because it was undertaken by an outsider (Kerstetter, 2012). If project staff are interviewed for such a report by the organisations that they are working with, they are likely to answer and give their opinion based on the practices or regulations that they know their organisation is supposed to adhere to and wants to hear. In contrast, this research, conducted independently by an outsider, project staff do not have to 'toe the

line' on their organisation's policy and practices and seem to have more freedom over the scope of their participation. There is a high possibility that they will be more open and suggest freely what should be done and to what extent it will lead to post-project sustainability. This will benefit other organisations as well in a constructive manner. Furthermore, it may be possible to theorise what are the supportive and hindering factors for post-project sustainability in the bigger picture since it does not include only what the organisation wants to hear.

### **III. Ethical consideration**

This research used project reports and information from interviews to form understandings of the tendency of project sustainability influencing by the contribution of involved parties. The idea for this research was drawn from my interest and was carried out within the academic context where universal norms and principles are active. Apart from the general ethical issues, it is required for any research conducted by Massey University students to follow the ethics code of conduct of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees (MUHEC). This research went through in-house and university ethics consideration by a panel from the Institute of Development Studies at Massey and MUHEC, respectively, before undertaking interviews which is a people related method. Even though this report is categorised as low-risk research, there are still a number of ethical concerns that have to be reviewed (Massey University Human Ethics Committees [MUHEC], 2017).

For the first method, document analysis, the fundamental ethical concerns are to acknowledge the sources that are used in the research and to have a prudent interpretation so as not to distort the original meaning (McLennan & Prinsen, 2014). For the document consultation section, the research carefully and critically uses academic papers in support of robust conclusions (Hammersley, 2010). The ethical consideration related to document analysis is critical analysis, and this research uses academic papers to support its arguments in order to avoid bias. For the semi-structured interview, interviewees were recruited in a considerate manner and aware of their autonomy, dignity and rights over their participation. This research is conducted with an awareness of issues related to sense of autonomy, gatekeepers and safe data collection.

Most of the ethical principles reviewed are applied to the second method, semi-structured interview, which was conducted via Zoom with the aim of having a conversation with at least two staff from each side of the project. The ethics-related issues discussed in this research are viewed mainly within the scope determined by Massey University and addresses three related principles from MUHEC which are: 'autonomy', 'avoidance of harm', and 'special relationships' (MUHEC, 2017). The ethical considerations regarding this effected the manner of approaching interviewees, preparing interview questions, how

interviews were conducted, how information gained from the interviews was used and how data was stored.

There are many ways to approach interviewees (Hubbell, 2003; Sharon, 2018). This research used two ways to recruit interviewees: via their administration office; and approaching interviewees directly. For ADB, I contacted ADB office via its official website and the administration office linked me to staff who was involved with BESDP. The recruitment through the official ADB website was slightly in line with what MUHEC (2017) explained as it may be a forced participation and there is a high possibility that a gate keeper may interfere in this stage (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014). There are many cases in which the administration offices act as gatekeepers (Wanat, 2008). For MOES, the interviewees were contacted informally by research assistants before informing their administration office formally by handing an official request letter. In Laos, culturally, it is inappropriate to ask for consent from people who are working for any organisations for their participation without informing their authority before undertaking any research. It is obligatory to write an official request document to the administrative office to ask for permission from the director of the department that our expected interviewees are under. At this stage of the research, another point to consider is the relationships and trust that are built via the research assistants' connection. I am well aware that my research assistants have a good relationship with interviewees which allowed interviewees to be more open and provide insightful information and this meant I needed to be more selective in analysing appropriate information in this research to avoid any unexpected harm (MUHEC, 2017). Fortunately, this report did not experience any obstacles by any gate keepers. An ADB staff member who was assigned to participate in this report is a senior officer who holds a high position in ADB, and she definitely has a say over her rights and information related to this report. So did the two MOES senior staff.

For autonomy related concerns, this research is aware of interviewees' rights over their participation in this research. To further create a sense of autonomy and dignity, I attached a consent form together with interview link to interviewees before proceeding with interviews (MUHEC, 2017). The consent was also confirmed verbally before an interview took place. Participants can refuse to answer questions and decide which questions they want to answer or whether they want to be recorded or not. The interviews were more likely in a conversation manner asking what interviewees think about the practices of BESDP activities by MOES and ADB in consideration of 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' which influenced sustainability after the project's termination. That is why interviewees were free to express their opinions towards BESDP. To avoid unforeseen harm, the prepared questions were critically reviewed by research assistants and my supervisor. Before asking questions, I briefly introduced the research aim, objective and contributions of this research to the participants in order to get related information and to avoid future conflicts of interest.

The potential harm of this research may be in the findings chapter. For semi-structured interviews, to avoid harm and inaccuracy, I sent separate word documents listing key information that I would include in this research to the participants from both sides as soon as possible after the interviews had been undertaken. Interviewees were given the opportunity to edit their answers or add-on anything they had thought of after the interview ended, points that they thought will be useful or the points that they missed during the interviews. In order for a clear agreement between me and participants, they were given two weeks to review including correcting, deleting or adding what they see fit with the key information before it was able to be used in the next process (Hammersley, 2010). There is no difference in either acknowledging or not acknowledging interviewees' names in this research. To be neutral and prevent future harm, participants are anonymous. They will be identified based on their offices. Participants from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) are tagged as 'MOES staff' and 'ADB staff' is the tag used for a representative from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Regarding data storage, as suggested by Massey University (MU, 2015), the aim is to make sure that the information will not be used for any purpose other than that consented to, and also to protect the confidentiality and safety of the participants. For this research, all data including recordings and transcripts are stored on my password protected computer and devices in both offline and online sources for the duration of the project which can be accessed solely by me.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This chapter explained the two main research methods from qualitative methodology that have been selected to complement each other in answering research questions regarding the contribution of involved parties, MOES and ADB, in light of country ownership and donor alignment and the sustainability of BESDP's benefits institutionally and financially after its ending.

The document analysis used project reports ranging from the planning stage before the project started to the completion reports which predicted the sustainability of the project activities to explore the 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' principles, two main principles that have been claimed to affect post-project sustainability in the international agreement on aid effectiveness measurement (Dijkstra, 2015). By using this method, it was examined how international policy has been interpreted in the Lao context. To increase validity, project staff from both donor (ADB) and the government (MOES) sides were recruited for interviewing. The interviewees were people who used to work with and have in-depth knowledge about the project activities. The scope of the interviews was to explore their professional experiences and opinions toward the practice and policy of the BESDP. Using this method, I was able to gain knowledge to critically explore the policy and practice. In terms of ethical

considerations, this research was conducted under the principles drawn up by Massey University: the code of ethical conduct (MUHEC, 2017) and the code of responsible research conduct (MU, 2015).

The interview method in this research was designed to be conducted online before the COVID-19 pandemic. The delay of the interviews was due to the changes occurring in the working system of Laos according to the unexpected pandemic. The contribution of this research seemed not to be prioritised, so the interview schedule was a little bit behind the previous plan. The challenge in conducting this research report was that by using project reports by the operating organisation itself that are publicly available, those reports may only include information that ADB wants to promote. Another obstacle experienced in doing this research is the internet connection while conducting the interviews. The reception was unstable while interviewing MOES staff, it took us ten minutes to set up everything and the interviewees had to move around their office to find a good spot. Apart from that, there are not many previous studies regarding the usage of the aid effectiveness measurement in tracking the effectiveness of development assistance in Laos.

I am well aware that this research is undertaken on a small scale, and due to the limited time and size this report could not cover as many aspects as I expected. In conclusion, this research has been carefully undertaken under the main principles that it will do no harm to anyone and it will critically analyse the data which will benefit development activities in Laos in finding way to be more sustainable.

## Chapter four: The country context and the Basic Education Sector Development Programme

### I. Introduction

This chapter will provide background information about Laos as well as an introduction to development assistance into the country. It will start with a brief history of the country, how foreign aid entered the country, the politics behind it and how the trends and character of development assistance have changed in the course of time to present day. More important, it will explore how the Lao government has written their national development plans (NDPs) and guidelines for development-related actors. Additionally, it will present how the Lao government has viewed and interpreted the two principles of ownership and alignment that are at the centre of this research report in their development sphere. Then, it will narrow down to explore development assistance within the education sector and follow with the short introduction of a funded development project which has been chosen as a case study to explain the relationship between ‘country ownership’ and ‘donor alignment’ in the contribution to the post-project sustainability.

### II. Background and brief history of Laos

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao P.D.R) or Laos is a small landlocked country with a total area of 236,800 km<sup>2</sup>, locates in Southeast Asia, in the middle of the Indochina peninsula. Even though Laos is a small country with a total population of 7,309,125 (<http://www.worldometers.info> as of October 31, 2020), its Growth Domestic Product (GDP) rate, at 6.5-8% over decades, is one of the highest comparing to its neighbouring countries: Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and China (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2019a).



<https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos>

To understand the state's role in Laos and form perspective towards the government's contribution to national development activities, it is helpful to trace back to some important points in Lao history. Laos was first formed as the Kingdom of a Million Elephants in 1353 and practiced monarchy system in parallel with the governing system imposed by the colonisers, in protectorate area in Northern Lao, until gaining independence in 1975 (Stuart-Fox, 1993). Laos was a former colony of: Siam (Thailand now) on and off for hundred years from the 1770s - 1893; France for from 1893-1945 and 1945- 1953; Japan in 1945; and the United States of America (USA) from 1955-1975 (Creak & Barney, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 1993). In 1975, when the Lao PDR gained its independence from the USA, Laos passed from a monarchy to its own governing system influenced by communist ideology (Creak & Barney, 2018; Punya, 2019). Laos is a single party led country influenced by the neighbouring countries undertaking same political ideology, China and Vietnam. Decision-making powers rest with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) (National Institute for Economic Research [NIER], 2013). Throughout history, Laos has had a period of strong sovereignty and independence but also it has been dominated by a series of external powers during its colonial period.

### **III. Development assistance and national development plans in Laos**

As mentioned earlier, Laos used to be a former colony of many countries. Development assistance was introduced to the Lao PDR before it gained its independence basically from its former colonisers like France and the USA (Khennavong, 2014) in terms of financial assistance to support military tasks with a tiny focus on country development (Phraxayavong, 2009 as cited in Schippers, 2011). Following the alignment to the socialist ideology, the main donors during the first ten years of rebuilding a nation-state after its sovereignty recognition were from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) countries or the 'communist bloc' (Khennavong, 2014). According to Souriya et al. (2014), Laos received loans and grants from foreign countries for around 2.5 billion USD during that time.

In the development sphere, the state plays a crucial role in terms of planning the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) (Noonan & Phommalangsy, 2020). The NSEDP of Laos included sectors and activities that are in need of foreign assistance as well as a budget plan. Similar to other ex-Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), Laos' five-year NSEDPs have been influenced and inspired by mainstream development frameworks and their implementations (Chimhowu et al., 2019). The first five-year NSEDP was launched and operated between 1981-1985 (NIER, 2013).

Laos' socialist ideology meant all economic activities were centrally decided and controlled by the government (NIER, 2013), and by the end of the first plan the country confronted economic growth alongside crises. There was high inflation and the country ran trade deficits, for instance. This led to

economic reform in the year 1986 as known as the New Economic Mechanisms (NEMs) (Khennavong, 2014). The reform was introduced to shift economic operations in Laos to become 'market-oriented' (Phimphanthavong, 2012). When the country was opened wider to the world after the NEM, the major donors became the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, and multilateral agencies such as World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Souriya et al., 2014). That shift influenced how Laos plans its development path since the country was opened and it needed to attract more assistance and investment from foreign countries and development actors apart from its political allies (Creak & Barney, 2018; Khennavong, 2014). The national development plans and strategies in the NEM era changed how the Lao government viewed foreign aid.

According to Noonan and Phommalangsy (2020), "[f]rom 1990, the World Bank and IMF imposed the Structural Adjustment Program[me] [SAP] on Laos, requiring certain reforms and financial discipline before loans were allocated" (p. 20). Following the SAP, the core objectives of the Lao NSEDP since 1996 continue to be: to graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) by 2020 (which is now deferred to 2024) and to achieve global development agendas (the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] and the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) (The Lao People's Democratic Republic [The Lao Government], 2001). Besides, there was the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) as known as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) which have been a 'central' to the national development agendas, and policy framework since 2004 (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005). The Lao national development plans stem from the Fifth Plan, which was influenced heavily by the PRSP (IMF, 2004). The PRSP was merged into the national development plans in 2006 and launched as the Sixth NSEDP for the year 2006-2010 (IMF, 2008).

Alongside the PRSPs, the membership of various international associations; the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2008, for example; also affects the way Laos has written and prioritised its urgent tasks in developing the nation (Ministry of Planning and Investment [MPI], 2016; Phimphanthavong, 2012). The most significant one is when Laos, a member state of the United Nations (UN), aligned its national development plans to support and facilitate the achievement of MDGs and SDGs. Apart from aligning the national priority tasks to the global agenda, agenda 2030, the Lao government also includes the graduation of the LDC status, which has been its overarching goal, in the five-year NSEDPs since the year 2000 (MPI, 2016). It is stated clearly in national development plans and strategies that the "national commitment" is "to meet the twin goals of (i) exiting the Least Developed Country Status by 2020 and (ii) achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015" which in the present time has carried into the SDGs (EFA 2015 Review Group and Secretariat Group [EFA], 2014, p. Foreword; MPI, 2016).

It was frequently pointed out for decades in the NSEDPs that Laos' lack of technical and financial capability to be self-sufficiently implement their development activities as suggested (IMF, 2008). It is further explained in the report by the Government of Japan (GoJ, 2006) that "although development plan and strategies exist, Laos has no choice but to rely on foreign assistance... Without such aid the implementation of development program[me]s would not be possible" (p. 7). With this in mind, the Lao government introduces its budget plan in accordance with the NSEDPs with the amounts that are required from their development partners. This is supported by the Sixth NSEDP (2006-2010), which noted that the evidence showed that the Official Development Assistance (ODA) was successful in helping the Lao government in developing their country. The percentage of budgeted grants and loans keeps decreasing since Laos is preparing for its LDC graduation which will change the criteria and reduce the amount of their receivable grants and loans. Comparing the Seventh NSEDP where projected for foreign aid is 24-26% of the total budget (MPI, 2011) to the 12-16% in the Eight NSEDP out of around US\$ 24 billion that will be activated from 2016-2020 (MPI, 2016).

#### **IV. Laos and aid effectiveness measurement**

By relying heavily on foreign assistance to implement its national development plans for decades and is still categorised under the LDC status, the effectiveness of the assistance in Laos is in doubt (IMF, 2008; St John, 2006). Laos, as with other LDCs, considers the Paris Declaration (2005) in tracking their development assistance and named the declaration after the capital city, the Vientiane Declaration (IMF, 2008; Noonan & Phommalangsy, 2020; The Lao Government, 2006). The Vientiane Declaration was introduced in 2006 a year after the Paris Declaration was launched. To complement the declaration, the Lao government had also launched a Country Action Plan (CAP) in 2007 (IMF, 2008). Written in parallel with the Paris Declaration (2005), the Vientiane Declaration has five principles: ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability (The Lao Government, 2006).

The Vientiane Declaration was agreed upon by the Lao government and 24 development partners who were conducting development activities in Laos at that time (IMF, 2008). When there was a shift of focus from the Paris theme of 'international donor community' to 'development co-operation' with the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation's first high-level meeting in 2014, the Lao government also came up with the new version of Vientiane Declaration titled the 'Vientiane Declaration on Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation' in 2015. Even though Laos has localised the Paris Declaration into the Vientiane Declaration, the core objectives lack any difference to and still follow the Paris Declaration (2005) (OECD, 2005; The Lao Government, 2006; 2015).

The principles of country ownership and donor alignment have been particularly stressed, focused on and gained more attention from the Lao government as it was explained clearly in the PRSPs that “[a]mong others, the [Government of Laos] GoL will improve the overall development planning system ... to strengthen the ownership and better align donors’ support with the national policies, programmes, regulations and procedures” (IMF, 2008, p. 28). By using the characteristics of the two main principles in this research report, country ownership and donor alignment, to view Lao national development plans and foreign aid in Laos overall, it can be explained as follows. The main characteristic demonstrating country ownership in the Paris Declaration (2005) is whether a country has their own national development plan. For Laos, as presented earlier, its national development plans since 2000 were rooted in the PRSPs which is “a precondition for low-income countries applying for debt relief under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative” (Committee for Planning and Investment [CPI], 2006; IMF, 2004; Khennavong, 2014, p. 85). The extent of country ownership over the NSEDPs is still questionable. For donor alignment, according to the declaration, it is achieved when donors align their assistance to strengthen the country’s systems in areas of need as identified by host countries. In the case of Laos, many development projects have been introduced to support Laos’ ‘twin goals’ of graduating from LDC status and achieving global agendas (MDGs and SDGs), while also supporting capacity and infrastructure building.

## **V. Education sector development in Laos**

The NSEDP covers all areas in Laos from health to education for the period of five years. For each specific area, there is a specific plan proposed by the involved parties in order to provide deeper and clearer action plans regarding the specific context which for the purpose of this research is the education field. It is the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESDP) which lasts for 5 years paralleling with the NSEDP period (Ministry of Education and Sports [MOES], 2015). The Lao government has seen the importance of education in supporting the country’s development since the earliest stages (Noonan & Phommalangsy, 2020). Right after gaining independence, like other areas, the education sector received support from CMEA in reforming the education system to socialist construction and promoting primary education. Recently, the important actions in education development in Laos have been heavily influenced by the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 2005) and the global agendas (MDGs and SDGs). Laos, as an LDC country, requires technical assistance from external parties to achieve the targets set by the international community in developing the education system in a supportive way to facilitate national development (MOES, 2015; MPI, 2016). Within the education field the Lao government has launched many development plans since the year 2000 including: Education Strategic Vision up to the Year 2020; Education Strategic Planning (2001–

2020); the EFA National Plan of Action (EFA-NPA); the National Education System Reform Strategy (NESRS), 2006–2015; and the Education Sector Development Plan, 2011–2015 (ESDP), for instance.

Additionally, it has been acknowledged in the Education Strategic Vision up to the year 2020 by the Ministry of Education that “[t]he overall financial situation of the Lao government is that it alone cannot envisage major expansion of education system in the short term, even in the medium term... the government could reduce the financial potential gap but will not be in position to cover all the gap in funding the development of education and training over the next 10 years” (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2000, p. 59).

According to one OECD report (2018), the area that the Lao government has prioritised is education. Currently, UNCTAD (2019b) announced Laos is on track to graduate from LDC status, and one of the thresholds in graduating from the LDC in relation to education is the Human Asset Index (HAI). To increase this particular index, the Lao government is focusing on improving its education system, and this opens the floor for development agencies to provide assistance to the Lao government to improve education-related tasks since 2000. That assistance has ranged from revisiting school curriculum and building proper school infrastructure to building teachers’ capacity (MOES, 2015). According to Khennavong (2014), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been ranked as the top multilateral and international donor in Laos for a long time. This research report chooses the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP), a co-funded development programme by the ADB, as a case study. The next section will provide further details regarding this project.

## **VI. The Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP)**

In order to have a clear picture of how country ownership and donor alignment have been viewed by donors and recipients, this research chooses one particular funded project in Laos. The Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP), established on December 20, 2006 in cooperation with the Lao government, The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (ADB, 2006) has been chosen as a case study.

BESDP has two elements, the project grant and programme loan. It was to support the “expanding equitable access to and improving the quality of school education, particularly lower secondary education (LSE)” (ADB, 2006, p. i). The project operated in Laos for eight years and ended in 2014. This project has been claimed as “the first intervention in the Lao PDR aimed at LSE” and “the first program[me] to provide much needed support to the Government in policy areas crucial to moving the education sector forward to more holistic development” (ADB, 2006, p. 9). Its main objectives are detailed in the loan budget, while the budget under grants is for complementing the main activities.

BESDP is to support education development tasks as suggested in the EFA-NPA 2003-2015 that “[t]he quality of the [LSE] learning environment is generally low, ... [there is a] shortage of trained teachers and ... basic teaching and learning materials”, also the “[c]ontinuity and consistency between primary and secondary education curriculum is weak or non-existent” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 29). Moreover, “[e]ducation management systems at all levels (central, provincial, district, school) are inadequate to implement the education de-concentration strategy effectively.” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 29). BESDP stemmed from previous ADB support for basic education development in Laos (ADB, 2015). “BESDP supported the basic education subsector and this complemented the earlier and ongoing support provided to primary and pre-primary education sectors by other development partner organisations (DPOs) working in the Lao PDR” (ADB, 2015, p. 4). BESDP had a number of activities: to develop education-related regulations and policy; to improve education quality and equity; to write new curriculum including printing and distributing textbooks and teacher guides; to train teachers to be familiar with the new curriculum; and to ensure the continuation of education sector development by training government officers how to plan and manage their budget (ADB, 2014).

## **VII. Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to Laos, a small Southeast Asian country, along with its development history in relation to foreign assistance. Before Laos’ independence foreign assistance had been provided to primarily to support the military and political ideology of the colonisers. To develop the country effectively as a sovereignty country, Laos launched its first five-year national development plan in 1981. The trend in foreign aid shifted to the right after the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) was introduced in 1986 when the government opened the country to trade and various types of donors: bilateral, multilateral and international organisations, and not only receiving aid from the countries with same political system. That openness provided more opportunities for Laos to be recognised and gain the attention of the international community.

Laos’ national development plans were influenced by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and were merged in 2006 and introduced as the Sixth National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006-2010). Priority sectors in Laos, including education, have their own specific development strategies and plans, in line with the sector wide approach (SWAp). Those plans guided Laos’ development path and the predicted budget needed from the government and development partners. Laos has adopted and localised the Paris Declaration (2005), the international measurement to track development performance of foreign assistance provided to support the national priorities as included in development plans. The declaration was introduced as the Vientiane Declaration in 2006 with five

same principles from the Paris Declaration (2005): ownership, alignment, harmonisation, managing for results, and mutual accountability.

By exploring the history of national development plans and development assistance in Laos, the country ownership and donor alignment principles can be studied. The NSEDP, as the main indicator of country ownership over development activities, has been influenced by the PRSP and international agendas including LDC graduation criteria and Agenda 2030. For donor alignment, the evidence in the NSEDP summarised the success of the previous NSEDP in that the donors in Laos aligned their support to capacity building to facilitate sustainable development in Laos. As mentioned earlier, education is one of the prioritised sectors that the Lao government has been focusing on as it will support the national development tasks in the long term. This research report selected the BESDP, a development project in education field, supported by ADB, one of the main donors in Laos, as a case study to explore the contributions of the involved parties and study how their contributions led to post-project sustainability. Further discussion on Lao national development plans and development assistance in the light of the contribution of donors and the government towards post-project sustainability will be presented in the discussion chapter.

## Chapter five: Findings

### I. Introduction

This chapter will present findings that have been collected via document analysis and semi-structured interviews as introduced earlier in the methodology chapter. It will explore the contribution of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Lao government, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in particular, in each project stage of the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP) throughout its operating period. It will present information from project reports and interviews as they relate to post-project sustainability. This chapter will synthesise research findings to answer two research questions: (1) how have the Lao government and donors considered 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' in development projects? and (2) how have consideration and application of 'country ownership' and 'donor alignment' helped sustain development activities both institutionally and financially after donors' withdrawal? Finally, it will conclude by summarising how involved parties considered and implemented project activities regarding country ownership and donor alignment and how those practices influenced post-project sustainability.

### II. How the Lao government and ADB considered country ownership and donor alignment in BESDP?

This section will explore how project activities related to country ownership and donor alignment have been interpreted in project reports and translated into project implementations in planning, implementing as well as monitoring and evaluation. It will also highlight the contribution of the parties involved in different stages. In order to be clear and precise, the project stages that will be used to present the findings on the contribution of both parties within the BESDP are inspired by Khang and Moe (2008). There are four stages: conceptualising and planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation; and completion.

#### i. Conceptualising and planning stage

Before presenting how the project was planned, this section will provide a brief background of the project. The Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP) is a development project funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support the education sector which was "identified as a national priority in country poverty analysis" and "partnership agreement" (ADB, 2006, p. 62). Since ADB has supported the development of the education sector in Laos for almost three decades, this project was built "directly on achievements made under previous ADB support for basic education in Lao PDR" and "[i]ts design aligns closely with the government's National Education Sector Development

Plan, 2006–2010,..., the National Plan of Action for EFA, 2003–2015” (ADB, 2010, p. 1). It also “supports national priorities laid out in the government’s Sixth Socio-Economic Development Plan, Education Strategic Vision to 2020, and National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy, as well as progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goals 2 (universal completion of primary education) and 3 (gender parity at all levels of school education) by 2015” (ADB, 2010, p. 1). In addition to aligning with the country development-related tasks, BESDP also aligned with “the country strategy and program[me] of the Asian Development Bank (ADB)” (ADB, 2006, p. 38).

As mentioned earlier, the project activities were drawn from the positive outcomes of previous ADB projects, they were complemented by in-depth consultation between ADB and MOES<sup>1</sup> staff. Interviews with both parties support the idea that BESDP was a result of a thoroughly planned and collaborative relationship between donor, ADB and recipient, the Lao government. According to an ADB senior staff member,

“ທຸກໂຄງການຂອງເອດີບີທີ່ສະໜັບສະໜູນໃນແຕ່ລະຂະແໜງການ ແມ່ນ ທາງ ເອດີບີກັບລັດຖະບານ ວາງແຜນ 5 ປີ ຮ່ວມກັນ ເຊິ່ງແຜນການພັດທະນາ 5 ປີ ຂອງເອດີບີແມ່ນ ຜັນຂະຫຍາຍຈາກແຜນພັດທະນາ 5 ປີຂອງລັດຖະບານ ເພື່ອຈະໄດ້ຮູ້ວ່າ ຂະແໜງການຕ່າງໆຂອງລັດຖະບານຕ້ອງການພັດທະນາຂົງເຂດໃດແດ່, ແລ້ວມາສ້າງແຜນ 5 ປີ ຂອງ ເອດີບີ, ເຊິ່ງແຜນດັ່ງກ່າວຈະຖືກນຳເອົາມາຜັນຂະຫຍາຍຈັດຕັ້ງປະຕິບັດໃນທຸກປີ. ແຜນ 5 ປີ ຈະໄດ້ຖືກນຳມາແລ່ໃສ່ກັບງົບປະມານທີ່ທາງເອດີບີມີ ວ່າແຕ່ລະໂຄງການຈະໃຊ້ງົບປະມານເທົ່າໃດ ເຊິ່ງກ່ອນທີ່ຈະວາງແຜນທາງ ເອດີບີ ຈະມີການປຶກສາກັບທາງລັດຖະບານ ວ່າ ທາງລັດຖະບານຕ້ອງການໂຄງການໃດແດ່ ແລ້ວ ເກົ້າເຂົ້າໃນແຜນ ຫຼືເອົາເຂົ້າໄປປ່ຽນລາຍ ເມື່ອລັດຖະບານເລືອກໂຄງການ ແລ້ວ ທາງເອດີບີແລະລັດຖະບານຈະໄດ້ອອກແບບຮ່ວມກັນໃຊ້ເວລາ 8-12 ເດືອນ”<sup>2</sup> (ADB senior staff, 2020).

This has been supported by MOES senior staff (2020) that

“ທຸກໆໂຄງການພັດທະນາ ຈະຕ້ອງວາງກິດຈະກຳໃຫ້ສອດຄ່ອງກັບແຜນພັດທະນາການສຶກສາ 5 ປີ ຈະຈັບເອົາຕົວຊີ້ວັດໃນແຜນ 5 ປີມາຕັ້ງເປັນເປົ້າໝາຍຂອງໂຄງການ ແລ້ວ ອອກແບບກິດຈະກຳເພື່ອໃຫ້ບັນລຸຕາມເປົ້າໝາຍທີ່ຕັ້ງໄວ້ໃນແຜນ

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<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Education has been merged and unmerged with the sports office twice, so this research will use both MOES and MOE to refer to the Ministry of Education and Sports (a current term) Noonan, R., & Phommalangsy, P. (2020). Major education policy thrusts. In R. Noonan (Ed.), *Education in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic: On track for the twenty-first century* (pp. 31-62). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3319-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3319-8_2)

<sup>2</sup> before launching any development projects ADB and the Lao government worked coordinatively to plan for five-year activities drawing from the Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) which was issued by the Lao government. The ADB proposed activities/projects within available budget ‘pipelines’ which supported the government in implementing their national development strategies. Then the planned projects were introduced to the government to determine which activities or projects they would like to implement and focus on accordingly. After the proposed projects were chosen, ADB and the Lao government (including involved parties: Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education and Sports, local authorities- for BESDP) collaboratively planned and designed project outcomes, outputs, activities, also how those activities would be implemented and by whom. This process took at least 8-12 months to be thoroughly and thoughtfully planned.

ພັດທະນາການສຶກສາ”<sup>3</sup>. Supported by another MOES senior staff that “ເອດີບີມີສ່ວນໃນການອອກແບບໂຄງການ, ຈ້າງຊ່ວຍຊານມາກຽມໂຄງການ, ຫຼັງຈາກກຽມໂຄງການແລ້ວ ຂຽນຄູ່ມືບໍລິຫານໂຄງການ (ປາມ) ທີ່ໂຄງການຈະຕ້ອງຈັດຕັ້ງປະຕິບັດໂຄງການຕາມຄູ່ມື ທຸກກິດຈະກຳ, ວັນທີ່, ຫຼືນະໂຍບາຍຕ່າງໆ ແມ່ນຂຽນໃນຄູ່ມືບໍລິຫານໂຄງການ”<sup>4</sup> (MOES, 2020).

For BESDP, “ມີຕົວແທນຈາກແຂວງກັບເມືອງທີ່ຢູ່ໃນພື້ນທີ່ເປົ້າໝາຍຂອງໂຄງການຮ່ວມອອກແບບຕຶກໂຮງຮຽນນຳ”<sup>5</sup> (ADB, 2020).

According to MOES senior staff, ADB and MOES created the Project Administration Memorandum (PAM) as a tool to guide BESDP overall including what, how, and when the activities should be implemented and by whom under the proposed budget which was timebound. For the responsibility of involved parties, MOES had been recognised as “the executing agency” and was “responsible for the implementation of the policy measures” (ADB, 2006, p. 11). In addition to representatives from the MOES, the committee was also represented by the Lao “Ministry of Finance, Committee for Planning and Investment, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister’s Office and line agencies concerned with MOE[S]” (ADB, 2006, p. ii). This depicts how representatives from the government, the recipient country, had been recognised and handed project tasks in order to ensure the contribution from host country personnel in planning and implementing project activities.

## ii. Implementing stage

As mention earlier, before the project started there was a PAM which planned and assigned what tasks and who would implement them clearly. This recognition of responsibilities in implementing process of the representatives from the Lao government in project reports was emphasised when ADB senior staff referred to MOES staff as implementing personnel in her interview. ADB staff added that once project details were finalised, ADB would pass implementation activities to its counterparts and facilitate them with guidance and technical support by hiring experts from related fields to work closely with the

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<sup>3</sup> Every five years, the MOES will introduce the five-year Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESDP) to guide development-related activities within education and sports sector. The plans will be used as a guideline for development agencies to step in and align their assistance to activities that they think fit and will help the government to achieve national development tasks.

<sup>4</sup> Before any education projects were launched, development agencies were responsible for hiring experts to work collaboratively with MOES officers in designing thorough project frameworks, activities, budget plans and workplans. So did BESDP, ADB hired expert consultants to work closely with MOES staff to plan project activities and implementation plans as well as the Project Administration Memorandum (PAM).

<sup>5</sup> The local authorities of the target areas where the project will take place also had a say in planning their contribution to project activities and design how the school buildings will be constructed.

ministry and provided financial support throughout the project operating period. Additionally, she underlined that she is ADB staff not project staff and to get in-depth information towards project implementation it would be better to ask MOES officials who were referred to as 'project staff'. This idea became much clearer when it was backed up by MOES staff, who also mentioned that they were responsible for allocating and assigning their provincial and district personnel and budgets to implement project activities. While ownership was showed in implementation stage, a contradiction seem to appear when an MOES senior officer mentioned that they reported project performance to ADB in a mid-term review meeting with the report "in a format acceptable to ADB" (ADB, 2008, p. 7).

ADB staff and MOES representatives agreed that BESDP was designed as a pilot project to be implemented in targeted areas and then the lessons learnt would be used to improve nationwide implementation by MOES and its officers at the provincial, district, and community levels. Additionally, as stated in PAM (2008), "MOE[S] will be the Executing Agency and will have overall responsibility for project coordination and implementation. An inter-ministerial steering committee will be established to oversee the BESDP and will provide overall guidance to the Project and monitor its activities and outputs" (p. 5). It was documented that the country's systems, especially the public financial management (PFM) system, will be used in accordance with ADB guidelines which are ADB's Guidelines on the Use of Consultants, ADB's guidelines for recruitment of individual consultants, and ADB's Procurement Guidelines. This suggested that the country's systems were used following the guidelines by the ADB. Moreover, the decree about expenditure detail, which refers to how PFM is carried out by government organisations, issued by the Ministry of Finance (MOF) that I could find by tracing documents back was issued in 2015, after this project had ended. It is difficult to identify any usage of country systems before the introduction of this decree (Ministry of Finance [MOF], 2015).

### **iii. Monitoring and evaluation**

For a monitoring and evaluation process, it was cited clearly in PAM (2008) that

"the Government and ADB will conduct regular periodic reviews of BESDP. In the third year of implementation, the Government and ADB will jointly undertake a midterm review of the Project. The review will assess implementation performance against project performance indicators, review and establish compliance with loan covenants, identify problems and constraints, and propose changes to the Project, if necessary" (p. 7).

An ADB representative has asserted this that ADB was responsible for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the activities to inform future planning through positive and negative lessons learnt using the achievements and challenges faced throughout the project's lifespan. In addition, it has also

been supported by the interviews with MOES senior officers that ADB contributed to the project as a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) unit by assigning expert consultants to work closely with MOES in tracking M&E during project implementation. This suggested limited country ownership over monitoring and evaluation and suggests the opposite possibility of ADB imposition in terms of guiding project activities to align with ADB's measurable criteria.

In terms of practices, MOES representatives further explained that for BESDP, ADB provided close monitoring 'missions' twice a year and used these missions to set up the agreed actions for the next step of project implementation. The executive agency, MOES, was able to communicate with ADB officers to seek comments and guidance to ensure the project activities were going smoothly and effectively. After implementing project activities, there was a mid-term review mission between ADB and MOES in collaborative manners to discuss the achievements and challenges being faced in the field as well as revisiting proposed project indicators. The discussion was used to adapt and adjust the PAM as well as project indicators to the current situation and unforeseen events being experienced in the field to create achievable and realistic targets within the timeframe and available budget. MOES staff raised an example of an objective that needed adjustment in the mid-term review meeting. It was an indicator relating to net enrolment ratios (NERs) which had been set at the beginning of the project. It was so ambitiously high, after implementing the project for some time it became apparent that it would not be met, so the expected rate was lowered because MOES proposed to adjust the rate.

#### **iv. Country ownership and donor alignment at each project stage**

By exploring project reports and analysing interviews of project staff regarding project operating stages from planning through monitoring and evaluation stage, this section will draw conclusions as to how the Lao government and ADB considered country ownership and donor alignment at each stage of BESDP.

From the findings related to the planning stage, we can notice that information mentioned in project documents aligned with information collected from interviews of the ADB senior staff and the MOES senior staff about how the project was planned. This evidence shows that national development priorities and strategies were recognised and considered heavily by the donor and recipient as concluded in the completion report that

“BESDP's design was well aligned with government priorities, strategies, and policies outlined in the Sixth Socioeconomic Development Plan, Education Sector Development Plan 2006-2010, Education Strategic Vision to 2020, National Plan of Action for Education for All, and National Strategic Plan for Education Reform 2006–2015” (ADB, 2014, p. 1).

This has been described further by representatives from both sides that it is compulsory for every development project, including BESDP, to plan their objectives and implementations by drawing from national development priorities, discussing with involved parties from the government (host and related ministries) and aligning project activities to strengthen the country's systems for the long-run. The recognition of prioritised areas in national development plans and the contributions of the involved representatives from the recipient, the Lao government, ranging from central offices to local authorities, as coincided in project reports and interviews showed that country ownership and donor alignment principles had been considered and were evident in the planning stage.

Country ownership was also evident since the project planning stage which outlined the roles of the steering committee to cooperate through the draft implementation plan (ADB, 2006). It was then carried through the completion stage when they planned their exit strategies with the introduction of the new project, the Secondary Education Sector Development Programme (SESDP). For donor alignment related activities, the implementation plans, and outcomes of this project were guided by the national development strategies, especially in the education sector plan. Its activities were to develop the education system in terms of curriculum as well as managerial personnel and teachers. This programme was designed to allow the government to implement project activities with technical and financial support from ADB. It also supported the government to build capacity among its officers who were needed to implement and manage their sector development activities. The programme trained officers to develop their medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEFs) and strengthen their PFM system to run education development tasks effectively and efficiently using available budgets either from the government or development partners and given time frames even after donor withdrawals.

It is worth noting that project activities had to be implemented in the way that they were described in PAM (2008), as drafted by MOES and ADB, and the country's system was used but to the extent that it was consistent with ADB's guidelines and reporting systems. The government and its representatives were recognised in both papers and interviews as an implementation unit. However, it seems to reflect a box-ticking approach when the project activities had to be implemented by the Lao government under the monitoring and evaluation of ADB experts. Besides, BESDP had to follow ADB's guidelines and criteria to hire project consultants, to buy project supported equipment and to report project performance to ADB using a reporting system that was acceptable to ADB. While MOES was the one who reported and requested adjustments during the mid-term review, ADB seemed to hold more decision power in allowing BESDP to adjust the indicators and implementation plans in its roles as a creditor and expert.

### **III. To what extent did the BESDP demonstrate institutional and financial sustainability after the project ended?**

This section will begin by exploring the understanding of the nature of sustainability from the perspective of ADB. Sustainability for ADB projects in Laos, seems to build upon the precedent and previous successes of projects, expanding and utilising lessons to come up with more resilient project activities than in the past (ADB, 2006, 2014). It was demonstrated clearly in project reports that BESDP was “building on the achievements of the Basic Education (Girls) Project and the Education Quality Improvement Project 2” (ADB, 2006, p. i) also SESDP, which “will build on, consolidate, and carry forward key [Secondary Education Subsector] SES reforms catalysed with support under BESDP” (ADB, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, the sustainability plan from these projects appears to dovetail with future projects “seamless[ly]” (ADB, 2014, p. 13). The next section will explore how country ownership and donor alignment principles that BESDP practiced influence their sustainability both institutionally and financially.

#### **i. Institutional sustainability**

As ADB views sustainability as the expansion and continuation of its previous development projects, institutional sustainability for ADB was the accumulated results in building and strengthening the country’s systems. This is supported by the ADB staff when she referred to previous benefits from the Basic Education (Girls) Project (BEGP) which had ended for more than a decade as an example of institutional post-project sustainability. School buildings that were built during the BEGP period are still in use and teachers trained from the programme continued their teaching profession until they retire. She articulated that, still, it is important to point out that the continuation and sustainability of the project activities and benefits after the project has ended were not only based upon donors or the central government but the local authorities and the direct beneficiaries as well – it is beyond the control of either ADB or MOES. Regarding human resource development, MOES senior staff also supported the idea that government personnel training in how to calculate and draft budget plans is applicable for future tasks and the skills used in this project were also gained from previous projects.

Similar to other development projects, BESDP aims to equip government officers by proposing activities in relation to capacity building. According to MOES staff, the project trained teachers to be familiar with the use of new curriculum textbooks (initiated student-centred practices) and to be capable of conducting training for other teachers. The majority of BESDP budget was used for trainings and building school facilities which were viewed as important instruments to generate long-term benefits

and lead to institutional sustainability. In PAM (2008) the budget allocated for trainings was \$3,220,000 USD – the highest share among activities from the grant.

Number	Category	Amount Allocated (\$million)		Actual Spending (\$million)	
		ADB	Lao govt.	ADB	Lao govt.
1	Works	2.62	0.81	3.85	1.01
2	Equipment, Furniture	1.95	0.00	1.16	0.00
3	Materials	0.83	0.02	1.03	0.00
4	Training	3.22	0.00	3.81	0.00
5	School Development Fund	0.8	0.00	0.82	0.00
6	Studies (Impact Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation)	0.2	0.00	0.05	0.00
7	Project Management	0.23	1.99	0.39	2.01
8	Consulting Services	1.69	0.00	1.52	0.21
9	Unallocated	1.12	0.35	-	-
Total (in \$million)		12.66	3.17	12.64	3.22
Total (in %)		79.97	20.03	79.69	20.31
Total Grants budget:		15.83		15.86	

(Source: PAM, 2008, p. 5; ADB, 2014, p. 25)

The trained personnel helped MOES to carry on project activities in a wider scope as government activities and school facilities are long-lasting. In terms of donor alignment, there was the project preparatory technical assistance (PPTA) which aimed to “identify priority incremental reforms and gaps in capacities of the executing agency, provinces, and partner institutions” and it was to “ensur[e] that approaches introduced and benefits are sustainable beyond the Program[me]” (ADB, 2010, p. 5). This aimed to support sector development in a wide scope, which can be applicable nationwide in a sustainable manner, and the regulations will benefit MOES’ works in long-term. As stated by a project report, “[t]o enhance the impact and sustainability of reforms, as well as overall system efficiency, the program[me] also provides a policy and strategic framework for capacity building in reform-related areas including decentralised education management, basic education policy analysis and strategic planning, and teacher recruitment and deployment” (ADB, 2011, p. 2).

Alongside developing human resources, country systems were strengthened by the donor’s increased trust in trained personnel. “The delivery of these policy actions, with support from the program[me], has also helped strengthen the capacities of MOE[S] and local education authorities in areas ranging from decentralised planning, to budgeting and financial reporting, human resource management, monitoring, and overall education sector governance” (ADB, 2011, p. 7).

According to PAM (2008),

“BESDP will make substantial contributions to long-term sustainability of education reforms by improving efficiency as well as quality of education through significant policy and institutional interventions, mainly (i) an improved [education management information system] EMIS, and

[teacher management information system] TMIS and [financial management information system] FMIS subsets; (ii) a framework for recruitment and deployment of teachers; and (iii) assistance to establish systems for effective planning and budget preparation” (p. 3).

As a result of trained teachers, reformed and improved curriculum, new school buildings, and other ongoing benefits from BESDP, MOES will be able to implement what used to be project activities in a broader scale in a sustainable manner (ADB and MOES senior staff, 2020).

## **ii. Financial sustainability**

As stated by MOES officers and ADB staff, in addition to providing training for educational personnel, BESDP also trained financial officers to plan budgets in order for the government to carry the project activities on after donors’ withdrawal either by using public or external sources of funding. One subcomponent of BESDP was to support “the MOES Department of Finance in developing an outcome-oriented budgeting process”, MTEF in this instance, which included “capacity building on financial management techniques (accounting, reporting, and monitoring) aligned with new bottom-up budgeting tools” (ADB, 2014, p. 6). It was included in a tranche release condition that “[t]he government is making efforts to develop a government-wide MTEF to guide 3-year planning and budgeting and support delivery of longer-term targets” (ADB, 2011, p. 6). “MTEF development is being guided by [Ministry of Finance] MOF and the Ministry of Planning and Investment, in dialogue with development partners, including under the following ADB technical assistance: ADB. 2008. Technical Assistance to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic for Strengthening Public Financial Management. Manila (TA 7077-LAO)” (ADB, 2011, footnote, 17, p. 6). As a result, the MTEF “provided a pioneering example for multiyear planning and MTEF development in other sectors, feeding into broader ADB-supported public finance reforms” (ADB, 2014, p. 6).

The financial knowledge that built capacity of government officials to make and predict budget plans does not ensure that the government will be able to afford and be self-sufficient but it does help the government to foresee their expected expenditures and know how much money they can channel to support this and how much they want external parties to contribute. For ways forward, BESDP reports stated clearly that the Lao government has to contribute to BESDP budget, which is 20.05% of the project’s total grant (ADB, 2008). The rest will still be funded by ADB via the new project. This is supported by MOES staff and the completion report that BESDP was successful and “effectively dovetail[ed] with follow-up ADB support through the Secondary Education Sector Development Program[me] (SESDP), approved in 2012” (ADB, 2014, p. 2).

By going through the reports, this research has found that the Lao government still lacks funding to carry out BESDP activities on its own and there was a hole in project budget that was created by the ending of the project. Still, the project activities were carried over after the project ended by using additional funding from ADB via a new project. That is how this project has been sustained financially. This shows that the project activities were sustained with additional funding from both donor and the government.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings from BESDP reports and interviews of project-related staff from both sides. The information from documents and interviews seem to support and complement each other. It is noticeable that the project had been considering post-project sustainability since the planning stage and the project has been categorised as highly sustainable in its completion report (ADB, 2014). From the findings, it can be interpreted that BESDP considered both national development plans and serious consultation from the Lao government to write their project implementation plans. According to an ADB staff member, BESDP activities were mainly initiated and collaboratively planned as a foundation and pilot to support Lao national development strategies. After the project ended, its activities would turn into regular government tasks, MOES in particular, using funding from the Lao government and ADB. Alongside helping MOES to develop their education system, BESDP also trained government officers to measure project performance and manage their budgets to ensure the continuity of the project activities by MOES financially.

For country ownership, BESDP used national development plans and consultation with the Lao government representatives to plan how and when they would implement project activities, who would be responsible for implementing them and how those activities would be monitored and evaluated and overall who would benefit from those activities. For donor alignment, ADB and the Lao government analysed where and what the involved parties (teachers and education managerial personnel, in this case) lacked. They then provided technical and financial assistance in these areas to facilitate project activities which will help the government achieve their national development plans, especially in education field according to the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP). The BESDP helped in developing education-related policy actions, training teachers, updating and printing textbooks, constructing school buildings, as well as training financial government officers to plan and predict their budgets after donor withdrawals.

In terms of institutional sustainability, ADB staff asserted that the trained teachers continue to teach, the school buildings are still in use, and the government keeps improving school curriculum using skills

gained from the project while providing teachers up-to-date trainings in accordance with the changing environment. This claim by the ADB staff was supported by MOES senior officers, noting that BESDP was viewed and designed as a pilot project implemented in targeted areas which then its lessons learnt would be utilised to improve implementation nationwide by MOES and its offices at the provincial, district, and community level.

The agreement between information from both donor and recipient sides show how they shared their intention towards fulfilling BESDP's sustainability aims. ADB staff also mentioned two other projects that were funded by ADB which demonstrate sustainability in parallel with BESDP. These are 'the Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project' and 'the Strengthening Higher Education Project'. She further highlighted that it is impossible to achieve every aspect of the education sector development plans within a project timeframe and limited budget, which is the nature of development projects. That is why, similarly, to a previous ADB support, the success and sustainability of this project is through additional funding from ADB in launching a new continuation project, SESDP, which covers the cost supported by ADB during the BESDP. She concluded the interview by saying that a single project from a sole development agency could not fulfil the government development activities even for one subsector, and altogether many development projects would have to work collaboratively to cover and help the government to achieve their development plans. In terms of institutional sustainability of BESDP, teachers and government officers were trained during project operating period and carried over project activities by using gained skills to implement them beyond project period.

For financial sustainability, BESDP trained government officers to manage and draft MTEFs, and calculate budgets so that the government knows how much money they need to implement and carry over project activities in their day-to-day work. Importantly, the government will be able to know in advance how to plan their budget, how much they can channel and how much they would like a contribution from their development partners to support the education field in order to implement activities that were initiated during the project period. This precondition for financial sustainability will help the government to sustain and expand project benefits effectively. In line with that, the completion report identified BESDP as 'highly sustainable' for offering personnel from host government to contribute in planning and implementing project activities as well as building capacity among government personnel to manage project activities by providing training and using their systems (ADB, 2014). For the budget, the Lao government still relies on additional funding from external partners.

ADB and the Lao government through BESDP did not consider contributions from the host country lightly as they have explicitly required participation from the Lao government at every stage of the project ranging from planning to sustaining the project activities after the project life span. It can be

demonstrated from both project reports and project staff interviews that MOES, the representatives from the recipient side, did have a say and contributed clearly to their own sector development tasks. However, the extent of the contribution is controversial when all implementing approaches had to follow PAM and ADB's guidelines and report to ADB with reporting systems that were acceptable to ADB.

In short, the BESDP considered country ownership by using Lao national development plans as well as offering space for the Lao government to contribute in planning, implementing and evaluating their development tasks under the guidance of ADB hired experts and ADB's guidelines. For donor alignment, ADB supported country systems by allowing MOES to plan their implementation and request adjustments as needed when they had mid-term reviews. BESDP was a result of the previous success of previous ADB projects and it dovetails with another ADB funded project in the education sector going forward. This chapter would like to conclude that the consideration of country ownership and donor alignment of ADB and the Lao government influenced how BESDP benefits were institutionally and financially utilised, sustained and expanded after its ending.

## Chapter six: Discussion and Conclusion

### I. Introduction

This research report aims to build an understanding of activities influencing institutional and financial sustainability of development by comparing the policies and practices of a development programme co-funded by international donors and the government in Laos. The project activities are analysed through the lens of two aid effectiveness principles: country ownership and donor alignment. These two have been chosen as they are assumed to be the main aspects leading to sustainability. This chapter will discuss the findings and the literature on aid effectiveness to answer two research questions: (1) how have the Lao government and donors considered country ownership and donor alignment in development projects?; and (2) how have consideration and application of country ownership and donor alignment helped sustain development activities, both institutionally and financially, after the donors' withdrawal? Finally, it will draw some conclusions about how this research can be used to theorise the effective contribution from donor and recipient countries to ensure the sustainability of positive project outcomes.

### II. How have the Lao government and donors considered country ownership and donor alignment in development projects?

#### i. Country ownership

This subsection will discuss three main aspects in regard to the practices and its consideration and implementation of country ownership within a particular development project in Laos.

##### *a. National development plans as an indicator of country ownership over development practices*

As suggested in the Paris Declaration (2005), country ownership is when recipient countries have developed their own development priorities and strategies based on their own needs, in areas that they want to improve to ultimately develop their countries. It means countries propose their development objectives including strategies and end points within set timeframes and budgets in their national development plans. In this regard, a crucial aspect indicating country ownership as suggested in the Paris Declaration (2005) is the existence of the national development plans (NDPs) (OECD, 2019). The findings of this research showed that the National Socio-Economic Development Plans (NSEDPs) drafted by the Lao Government were used by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in drafting project activities and targets to propose to the Lao government, and specifically to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) for the Basic Education Sector Development Programme (BESDP). According to this indicator

suggested in the Declaration, this research finds that this project achieved the 'country ownership' principle. The discussion centres around the observation that even though the NDPs were used, there are still arguments whether those plans adequately demonstrate country ownership.

Being included in the indicators of country ownership, donors may assume that NDPs are homegrown but this seems to overlook the dynamics of the planning process (World Development Movement [WDM], 2005). As Martinez-Alvarez (2018) said, it seems overoptimistic when NDPs have been used to identify that countries have sovereignty over their own development when they have their development priorities and strategies in place. Donors may assume that recipient countries are fully equipped and capable of taking the driver's seat to write their 'credible' NDPs (Chimhowu et al., 2019). At the same time, donors seem to ignore the initial agenda behind national development plans which were originally used as a precondition to request for donors' assistance (Khennavong, 2014; WDM, 2005).

For the case study from Laos, this research explored the policy process from drafting to the finalising of NDPs. According to information presented in the country context, the NSEDPs in Laos were influenced by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), indicators to achieve the global agendas (the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] and the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) as well as the Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation criteria (IMF, 2004; The Lao Government, 2001; UNESCO, 2005). The agendas and indicators measuring the achievements of those three assignments are written and evaluated mostly by the donor agencies of the international community (WDM, 2005; Bissio, 2013).

For concerns regarding the PRSPs, as Buiter (2010) notes, they were the root of NDPs in many developing countries, including Laos (IMF, 2004; UNESCO, 2005). Originally, the PRSPs were for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) as evidence to show the international community that countries had valid strategies and plans to increase economic growth. Most PRSPs were bits and pieces of previously approved PRSPs to make sure that they would be approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), and by getting that approval they would be able to access donor assistance (Bartlett, 2011; Dijkstra, 2015). A huge number of them shared similarities in terms of proposed policies and solutions even though they were from different countries facing different issues. For the global agendas, MDGs and SDGs and LDC graduation (Lao People's Democratic Republic national round table process [Lao RTP], n.d.) indicators have been introduced as a pack, standardised to measure targets set by the United Nations (UN). Likewise, those agendas are influenced by the donor community and most donors are likely to support countries who have these agendas at the core of their NDPs (World Customs Organisation [WCO], 2019). It is more likely that countries will get development

assistance when they include those agendas in their NDPs. We can therefore see how the NDPs of countries were influenced by indicators and targets suggested by the UN agendas. The purpose of these national plans is prone to attract donors rather than to be tailored to countries' context in a way that can address countries' unique challenges (Dijkstra, 2015).

The above paragraph showed that there is a high tendency for the national priorities in NDPs to be distorted to either please the IFIs or to attract external funding from donor agencies (Bartlett, 2011). On the other hand, it is necessary to have plans in place to guide countries' development paths and to allow donors to know where to go, where to support and what to do to help (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018). It is therefore rather complicated, but it cannot simply be claimed that the NDPs represent country ownership.

***b. Contribution from the host governments at every project stage signifying country ownership of over the development project***

According to Savedoff (2019), the ownership of host countries over development projects is most clearly expressed when representatives from government contributed to all phases of project life cycle. Regarding the findings, the very first stage of BESDP was when ADB used the NSEDP to guide and map out the project activities. At this stage the contribution from the Lao government was through the NSEDP. The MOES then chose activities and projects that were prioritised in the sector development plan, after which both parties worked collaboratively in designing and finalising the project objectives, targets and implementation plans by matching available resources from both parties efficiently and effectively according to the Mid-Term Expenditure Frameworks (MTEFs). Once the project had been successfully designed and put in place, both parties then discussed and worked on creating the Project Administration Manual (PAM). For the implementation phase, MOES staff at central level through community level had responsibilities in their own scope of implementation with guidance from ADB experts. It is noticeable here that contributions from the Lao government had been included at every stage of BESDP.

By comparing the findings to the literature review, it can be seen that the contribution of the Lao government in each project stage fits the requirements and indicators mentioned in the country ownership principle (OECD, 2005, 2019). As presented in the findings chapter, the objectives and implementation plan of BESDP were drawn from the NSEDP and sector development plan together with the consultation between the Lao government representatives, the recipient/borrower, and the experts from the ADB, the donor/loaner (ADB, 2014). Even though the Lao government's contribution was recognised, the degree of its influence is debatable. The extent to which both parties made their

contributions appears to be in line with what Eade (2010) describes as the imbalance of power between donor and recipient countries over development projects.

The findings showed the Lao government was involved and included in every BESDP project stage. First, the Lao government chose the project which was proposed by ADB drawing from five-year development plans from both parties. It also finds that the project was chosen because it matched with national development strategies in NSEDP. Nevertheless, it is also possible to question whether the government might 'accept' the proposed project and its conditions as a trade-off for the assistance that they would like to receive (WDM, 2005). The strong sense of ownership comes into question when it is probable that countries sometimes go with the flow and are prone to accept whatever donors propose. This is supported by Savedoff (2019) that "aid agencies represent program[me]s as being country owned when, in fact, program[me]s are drafted by external consultants or are accepted by governments under financial duress" (p. 2).

Second, the findings illustrated that discussions between ADB, MOES and in-line ministries happened throughout the project operating period, ranging from designing and finalising project action plans to implementation and evaluation phases. The contribution from the Lao government as a recipient was acknowledged here, but the degree of this participation was of concern. The constant involvement of ADB makes it difficult to conclude that the Lao government had a final say or absolute decision power over their own development. In fact, it seems like ADB experts have a louder voice over when they are the ones with the 'assistance' and when they put in place their guidelines and reporting systems (Eade, 2010; Paksi, 2019). It is understandable that donors may have a say over what and how they want to spend their resources on and expect to see the positive changes that they have brought to the countries (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018; Qiu, 2020b). It looks like voices from the recipient side are recognised and heard but not yet powerful enough to prove that they are able to influence or reform the decision-making power structures. This was expressed when MOES proposed refinements of the project targets and approaches after experiencing fieldwork in a midterm review mission, ADB seemed to hold a power in approving those refinements.

The relationship between donors and recipient countries working together to implement development projects is also important to explore (Itimi, 2018; Sundberg, 2019). Recently, this relationship has been improving with the voice of recipients becoming more recognised and respected, the international community is trying to introduce the use of the terms 'development partners' to replacement the terms 'donor' and 'recipient' (Savedoff, 2019). Moreover, donors have been providing more space for recipients to contribute to project design, compromising and negotiating to meet the requirements and realities from both sides (Buiter, 2010). This research report also adds to understanding the complexity

of the donor-recipient relationship, as it also shows the ways in which the relationship between former colonisers and colonies also affects power relations (Kothari, 2006), however it is beyond the scope of this research to explore this in further detail. It is difficult to say that the recipient countries have any power over donors when they want assistance from donors (Eade, 2010). Therefore, it is optimistic to interpret that by using NDPs and including representatives from recipient countries to design, plan and implement project activities that countries would experience genuine ownership and leadership (Dijkstra, 2015). Importantly, these observations seem to build a good foundation that could lead to an improved understanding of ownership in the future.

### *c. Country ownership over development activities*

Country ownership was heavily used in the branding of the international development agenda since the early 2000s to attract recipient countries. This was based on strong evidence that it is more likely that a country would not succeed in development if they did not have ownership over their development activities (Buiter, 2010).

In order to promote and facilitate countries to exercise their leadership and ownership of national development activities, it may be better when both donors and recipients have a shared perception and understanding of 'country ownership'. From the findings, both ADB and MOES claimed that they were heavily concerned with practicing country ownership as described in the previous sections. But when analysing their practices in comparison with related literature as an outsider, it became apparent that the country ownership of the Lao government over BESDP happened within a limited scope (Dijkstra, 2015). By going through the findings, it can be inferred that the introduction of the ADB's guidelines and reporting system together with ADB guidance affected how the Lao government exercised their possession over project activities. It urges scepticism and question how countries will fully own their development when the donor community has put in place the international standards that seem to introduce same sets of quick-fix activities to different countries while overlooking their different conditions and backgrounds (Khang & Moe, 2008). Furthermore, project performance had to be reported to ADB in the reporting system that was accepted by ADB. According to this, we might ask the question: does this country really have freedom or ownership over their development activities? (Sjöstedt, 2013).

However, the contributions from the recipient Lao government did demonstrate country ownership practices in BESDP, from consideration of NDPs to consultations of involved offices in designing and planning project activities as well as labelling MOES as an implementation unit, all still happened under the monitoring and evaluation of ADB. This level of contributions is similar to what Cornwall (2000, as cited in Cornwall, 2008), described as 'invited participation' of beneficiaries within development

projects. It achieved all the criteria or 'check-boxes' for activities to measure the existence of country ownership. These claims and implementation methods should be revisited and reconsidered.

There is also information to be gleaned from reading between the lines of the project reports and interviews to explain the ownership of the government and donor over BESDP. How representatives from both sides responded, coordinated and participated in this research report can also be used to interpret perspectives of involved parties towards ownership. The representatives from MOES seemed to show more willingness to participate in this research compared to an ADB representative. ADB staff directed the researcher to project reports that were said to include all and thorough information about BESDP, and to MOES staff for project implementation in detail. As promised and presented in the methodology chapter, key information that would be in the research report was sent to the participants to check, edit, and get back to me within two weeks if there was anything they wanted to add or do not want me to include in the research. The ADB staff did not get back to me, while the MOES senior staff edited and sent the file back to me within a day. Moreover, the ADB staff did not allow me to record her interview when MOES were willing to. This allows me to infer that MOES seems to take the research on their project implementation more seriously.

In parallel with the commitment of countries to own their development activities, the commitment from donors to support and facilitate those activities is crucial (Savedoff, 2019). The next subsection will explore donor practices in aligning their assistance to recipients' development plans.

## **ii. Donor alignment**

As stated in the Paris Declaration (2005), crucial aspects of donor alignment are donors using NDPs and using country systems and personnel to implement project activities. The findings showed that BESDP was drafted using Laos' NSEDP and sector development plan. There is an argument that not only recipient countries have their own development strategies, but donors too have their own approaches and interests when assisting countries to achieve development (Dijkstra, 2015). This argument is in accordance with NDPs as presented in the country ownership part.

The Paris Declaration (2005) suggested that donor alignment will not be achieved only by aligning assistance to support a country's priorities and tasks within the development plan, but it should aim to strengthen in-country systems as well. A key country system that this Declaration is emphasising is that of the Public Financial Management (PFM) (Knack, 2014; Stierman et al., 2013). This section will discuss how BESDP strengthened the Lao PFM system by providing capacity building and using the system.

### ***a. Donors strengthen country systems by capacity building***

As presented in the literature review chapter, most development projects aim to provide supporting activities to ensure that recipient countries are able to exercise their leadership over their own development fruitfully and sustainably in the long run (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018). In response to that, the majority of a project's budget share is devoted to build capacity for recipient countries (Eade, 2010). So does BESDP: the findings show that around 24% of total USD 15.86 million was used for training, the most spent category of all (ADB, 2014).

According to findings, BESDP provided training supporting financial activities to ensure the quality of PFM ranging from budget planning, accounting and monitoring of expenditures (ADB, 2014). It can be assumed that provided training was what ADB and MOES think as best fit for Lao context. By the end of the project, the quality of MTEF, a key aspect to facilitate PFM effectiveness (Mustapha et al., 2019), was improved and included in the national budget plan. However, it is also arguable that training was formed around the 'best practice' (Kothari, 2006) which donors drew from the experience of other countries in different contexts.

### ***b. Donors use 'strengthened' country system***

As presented in the literature review chapter, besides building capacity for government personnel, another way to strengthen a country's institutional systems is to use them (Knack, 2014). From collected data, MOES was labelled as an implementation unit, still all activities were implemented under the guidance of outside experts, strictly following the PAM, and reported back to the donor using the donor's preferred format. It is reasonable that the guidance and guidelines were in place to track and monitor project activities and progression, but the use of external consultants and donors' guidelines seemed to undermine the country systems instead of strengthening them (Dijkstra, 2015). Even though training was provided within BESDP operating period aiming to strengthen PFM, the disbursement guidelines either for project equipment or external consultant were in place. It seems that the country systems had not been fully used. How could Laos' own PFM can be improved when all procurement and expenditures occurred in accordance with donors' guidelines? (Paksi, 2019). The Declaration leaves room for donors to decide whether the quality of PFM meets their standard and will be used (Knack, 2014). In this case study, country systems were strengthened by capacity building but there was limited evidence showing that country systems were used since the earliest expenditures guidelines in detail by the Laos' Ministry of Finance that I could find online were issued in 2015, after the completion of this project. These guidelines detailed all the expenditures that guide how much development projects in Laos should spend according to various criteria, expected per-diem, for example. This

showed that the Lao government had proved that the country systems were strengthened and used after this development project ended (MOF, 2015).

### **iii. Country ownership and donor alignment as in BESDP**

The findings chapter showed that country ownership and donor alignment were considered in both policies and practices of BESDP. The NDPs were used, consultation and contribution from involved parties as suggested in the Paris Declaration (2005) to promote country ownership were in place. Even though there are concerns around the genuine ownership over NDPs, it is helpful for both donors and recipients when countries have their national strategies and priorities to form their development path. On the other hand, this research also reveals that the practices relating to donor alignment happened within the frame that ADB had set, and they were expressed when implementation of project activities had to follow the PAM, consult with ADB experts, in accordance with ABD guidelines and report to ADB with the format that ADB accepted.

The BESDP followed the NSEDP and the specified sector development plan for the education field. Furthermore, project activities were in accordance with the ADB regional development plan. By comparing findings with the Declaration, we can see that the project did follow the Paris Declaration (2005) on country ownership and donor alignment principles but not in the fullest extent. Drawing from those principles and indicators, findings show that the two principles were in place but not fully functional and could come across as tokenism. They were considered and included in both project papers and activities but the extent and intention of how they were practiced is not equal to what has been promised. According to Dijkstra (2015), donors only claim the using NDPs and including or inviting the host governments to plan and implement project activities as their practices in supporting country ownership. However, those practices do not mean that a country will have full control over their development, and to align assistance to what recipient countries defined as 'priority' tasks might not exactly mean that it will support the country to implement their development activities by themselves (Santoro, 2019).

### **III. How have consideration and application of country ownership and donor alignment helped sustain development activities, both institutionally and financially, after the donors' withdrawal?**

This subsection will discuss how BESDP considered country ownership and donor alignment in its operations in order to build institutional and financial sustainability after the donor's withdrawal.

As strongly claimed by the donor community, country ownership and donor alignment complement each other in generating development activities which aim for host countries to learn from and carry on the best practices after the development projects ended (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018). As suggested in the literature review chapter, this research on sustainability focuses on the way institutional and financial management of the activities that were initiated during project period are then turned into the host government's tasks to maintain after the ending of the donor supported project (Mahonge, 2013). When country systems are strengthened and used as suggested in donor alignment to facilitate country development tasks and country ownership (OECD, 2005), it follows that the development practices will be sustained and create more self-reliance for recipient countries (Knack, 2014; Stierman et al., 2013). According to Santos (2014), self-reliance in this case does not mean countries will no longer need supports from external parties but to have more responsibility in terms of managing and channelling available resources from a funding pool that is contributed to by both public and development partners as appropriate. The sustainability of institutions and financial management generating during BESDP will be discussed respectively as follow.

#### **i. Institutional sustainability**

As Martinez-Alvarez (2018) clarifies, most development projects aim to build capacity within recipient countries to ensure long-term benefits or sustainable development. Institutional sustainability is to ensure that countries have capable personnel and sound policies in place to facilitate and implement development activities (Pfahl, 2005; Santoro, 2019).

As suggested in Wickremasinghe et al. (2018), country ownership over development projects during a project period is an indispensable factor for the sustainability of development activities beyond the project period. According to the recommendation provided by Sabbil and Adam (2015), development activities initiated during the project period will be sustained when involved parties from host countries are included in every project stage. This is in line with the country ownership aspects which have been discussed above. When project activities are implemented by host governments during a project period as pilot programme, the personnel will learn from practices by hands-on activities under guidance of the experts then they will be able to adapt their experience to future development activities that are run either by the government themselves or by other development partners (Martinez-Alvarez, 2018; Sabbil & Adam, 2015). The findings showed that MOES staff learnt from BESDP implementation and applied the lessons they learnt to implement project activities nationwide after the project has ended. In relation to donor alignment, the findings showed that BESDP helped strengthen Lao government institutions by providing training for MOES managerial personnel from central office to head of schools as requested in the NSEDP.

The BESDP included MOES staff in reforming curriculum process, providing training to support teachers to use new textbooks, and allowing local authorities to be involved in designing school facilities. This inclusion helped in building the capacity of MOES staff to implement development activities initiated in the project period and they learnt from the positive and negative results which will be applicable in the future, carrying them on after the project ended. Apart from assigning MOES staff to implement project activities and providing related trainings, BESDP also facilitated policy action, one of the key aspects depicting institution effectiveness (Pfahl, 2005). This illustrated that BESDP helped prepare government personnel to be resilient and be able to adapt the skills they gained from both hands-on implementation and training in applying to the future project activities or to carry on project activities as ministry tasks after the pilot period (Wickremasinghe et al., 2018).

The next subsection will explore project activities related to country ownership and donor alignment which create financial sustainability after the end of the project operating period.

## **ii. Financial sustainability**

According to Bowman (2011) in order to be financially sustainable, a country needs to development its financial capability as well as have predictable funding sources.

For financial capability, in line with donor alignment, BESDP provided financial training to finance-related officials to increase the quality of PFM and this included MTEF training. The MTEF is used to calculate the budget for implementing project activities and is a country system that will be used by the government after the project has ended. This is to draft how much they need to continue project activities and plan ahead how much the government can contribute and how much development partners can support in order to carry over those activities that were initiated during the project period.

In relation to country ownership, the contribution from the host country through allocating budget and creating a sound MTEF will facilitate development activities and prepare smooth hand over to either government or new donors in the future. According to Stierman et al. (2013), the project activities of BESDP were drafted according to the education sector development plan, which in line with the SWAps. SWAp and MTEF, two aspects supporting financial sustainability, had been considered in BESDP (Stierman et al., 2013).

This research showed that BESDP was sustained financially after the project ended. The MTEF was in place, the contribution from government in terms of budget allocation was met and the funding required from external parties was further injected by ADB through the new project. The decree issued by Ministry of Finance in 2015 regarding the expenditure of government budgets suggests that the PFM of Laos was strengthened and used and has a progression in preparing the Lao government to act

effectively as a leader over their development activities (MOF, 2015). While we cannot conclude that that document is the result of BESDP, it can be seen as the accumulated results of many development projects operating in Laos that have helped the Lao government to have more sovereignty over their expenditure and using its country systems to operate its development activities. This showed the long-term benefit generated by synergising the results of development projects in Laos.

#### **IV. Contribution of this research to the existing body of knowledge**

By going through the findings of a funded development project from a developing country, we can expand our understanding and see that the contributions from both donors and recipient countries play a crucial part in post-project sustainability and their contribution at all levels will ultimately contribute to institutional and financial sustainability. Institutionally, involved parties learnt and applied skills they gained to development-related activities. Financially, even though funding is not fully predictable, the financial capability gained during the project period remains applicable and has equipped related parties to create a reliable and realistic budget plan.

This research report may incentivise donors and recipient countries to rethink their contributions to development projects. It is highly appreciated that donors are considerate in boosting country ownership and strengthening country systems but at the same time good intentions do not always translate to what they plan to achieve in terms of helping a country to develop sustainably and self-reliantly and can indirectly shape and affect the country either positively or negatively (Blunt et al., 2011; Bowman, 2011; Santoro, 2019). Both donors and recipients should not just copy and paste or always use the same model and procedures which used to be successful in the past or in other countries to shape their development projects (Eade, 2010). They have to be more careful and thoughtful in their approach and put more effort into creating and tailoring development activities every time before starting any projects. This will create more work for both parties, but it will be worth that effort at the end.

For example, from the case study, ADB wanted to strengthen country systems, especially PFM, but the expenditure can only be spent on materials by using the ADB's guidelines. Those guidelines have been generalised to be applicable across countries. How can a country manage their own expenditure and create strengthened PFM when all the expenditures have to adhere to the ADB's guidelines? This research did not conclude that there should not be any guidelines in place. This is just to generate questions and be sceptical about whether the donors' intentions and claims to strengthen a country's systems will be achieved by imposing or 'introducing' and 'including' best practices from the donors' view to a reform recipients country's systems (Bowman, 2011).

This research report studied a particular project which has ended and the trend of the contribution of both donors and recipients, the Lao government in particular, over the development activities either those introduced by development partners or the government itself has evolved. The NSEDP has been critically analysed and continues to be updated involving wider population groups. The introduction of the assessment of development assistance alongside the NSEDP seems to have been taken more seriously since ‘the Development Finance for the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals in Lao PDR: A development finance and aid assessment’ was launched (Sevic et al., 2016).

Sustainability is important, countries will become more self-reliant and less dependent on external parties, especially for countries that are expecting to graduate from the LDC status. There will be less support technically and financially, to be well prepared by strengthening the country systems and institutions while getting support is prudent (Karanja & Karuti, 2014).

## **V. Concluding remarks**

It is impressive to see how the international community has invented tools to measure how effective their assistance has been by introducing aid effectiveness declarations (OECD, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2011). However, those declarations which include principles and targets would be useless if they have been used as decorations to advertise good intentions but have not been applied to actual development assistance practice (Blunt et al., 2011; Dijkstra, 2015). This equally applies to country ownership and donor alignment, two principles from the Paris Declaration (2005) that have been promoted widely through development projects by the donor community. The concern towards shifting to a ‘better’ practice for a ‘better’ development results as stated in the declarations is apparent but “not taken seriously” (Dijkstra, 2015, p. 21). This research shows that BESDP considered country ownership and donor alignment related activities at every project stage, and this supported and led to post-project sustainability institutionally and financially.

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