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**'The Wheel of Fire': Negotiating Feminist Ideals and Development Realities in  
Lao PDR**

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*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University*

*College of Medicine and Dentistry*

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*Statement of the Contribution of Others*

<b>Nature of Assistance</b>	<b>Contribution(s)</b>	<b>Co-Contribution</b>
Co-researchers	- Research design	Rural Development Agency
	- Data generation	
	- Data interpretation	
	- Research design	Chanthalangsy Sisouvanh
	- Planning the research	
	- Research action	
	- Data generation	
	- Data interpretation	
	- Cultural guidance	
	- Knowledge exchange	Development Actors Akha Women from the Akha Women's Project
	- Knowledge exchange	
	Supervisors	- Initial study design
- Methodology selection		
- Ethics application		
- Research design		
- Data analysis and interpretation		
- Editorial review		
- Methodology Selection		Professor Rosita Henry
- Research design		
- Data interpretation		
- Editorial review		
- Initial study design		Associate Professor Russell Bush
- Methodology Selection		
- Research design		
- Data interpretation		
- Editorial review		
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- Editorial review		
- Co-designing and delivering training workshops		
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- Initial study design		
- Methodology selection		
- Ethics application		

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### *Statement of the Use of Generative AI*

During the preparation of this thesis, I acknowledge the use of Claude (Anthropic's AI assistant) for editing assistance. Claude is a large language model designed to assist with text-based tasks including editing, proofreading, and providing feedback on academic writing. I chose to utilise Claude if I was struggling to articulate a key concept. In these instances, I used Claude for language editing and clarity improvements rather than content generation. The prompts used included: 'edit this sentence for clarity' or 'check this sentence for grammar'.

## Abstract

Global development agendas are increasingly prioritising gender inclusion as a development goal. In this study the term gender-targeted development is used to describe the multitude of gender development programs, including those characterised as women’s empowerment, gender-sensitive, and gender-aware. The emergence of gender-targeted development in the 1970s mirrors both the development and feminist theory of the time. While there is literature describing the relationship between development and feminism and the relationship between feminism and gender-targeted development, there is limited literature on the interconnectedness of development, feminism, and gender-targeted development. There is also limited literature that analyses the influence of development and feminist theories on the successful delivery of gender-targeted development.

Following global trends, gender-targeted development programs have increased significantly in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (referred to hereafter as Lao PDR or Laos). Laos’ development sector has been shaped by its history of colonialism and conflict, including French occupation, America’s ‘Secret War’, and the rise of the communist Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. This history of foreign intervention has directly influenced both how international development emerged in the country and how the Lao government responds to it. Gender-targeted development has become a priority in Laos due to significant barriers facing Lao women. Understanding the unique characteristics of Laos’ development sector and how Western development and feminist theories influence gender-targeted programming is therefore critical.

Building on broader research about development localisation in Laos, this study explores the factors influencing gender-targeted development in the country. To achieve this aim three core research questions were addressed: (1) *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?*; (2) *What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?*; and (3) *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?* To address these questions, a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach was applied to co-generate data with three co-researcher groups: (1) Lao and expatriate development actors; (2) the intended beneficiaries of development; and (3) a Lao Civil Society Organisation (CSO). The study

included three cycles of participatory action research, each with its own participatory method and subsequent action, with each cycle focusing on one of the three research questions. The participatory research was facilitated from November 2023 to March 2025.

In Cycle One, the PhD researcher, who was formerly a development practitioner and consultant in Laos, co-generated data with development actors including development practitioners, academics and development donors working in Laos. Narrative inquiry interviews with 25 co-researchers, 15 Lao and 10 expatriate development actors, were facilitated. An independent thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted by the PhD researcher, with initial themes then presented to co-researchers through five Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs). Twenty co-researchers, 14 Lao and 6 expatriate development actors, contributed to the IFGDs. During Cycle One, co-researchers described the development sector as a '*Wheel of Fire*' that prioritises reporting and box-ticking over transformative development. Gender was not identified by co-researchers as a central concern. When gender was discussed by co-researchers, it was viewed within the broader context of development, highlighting how challenges with gender-targeted development mirror the challenges of the development sector. Findings from Cycle One indicate that gender-targeted development initiatives are not currently a priority, in part because of the broader development challenges that the sector faces.

In Cycle Two, 30 intended beneficiaries of a gender-targeted development program in Northern Laos co-generated data via research methods of photovoice and IFGDs. Informed by findings from Cycle One, the PhD researcher and Lao development practitioners from a Lao CSO collaborated with two communities from the Akha ethnic group to explore how Akha women understood gender and gender-targeted development. In this cycle, co-researchers explored the complexity of traditional gender roles, describing both the importance of women's roles and the limitations that cultural law can place on women. Photovoice data included photos of male dominated traditional ceremonies and meetings, women-only farm roles and development challenges faced by the village. Cycle Two findings mirrored key findings from Cycle One as co-researchers reported development needs outside of gender-targeted development frameworks, including: food security, waste management and land rights.

In Cycle Three, the PhD researcher used first-person inquiry to critically examine the experience of collaborating with a Lao CSO to design and deliver a participatory gender-targeted development program. Following the application of first-person inquiry, the PhD researcher returned to, and reanalysed data from the previous two cycles through the lens of insights generated from their collaboration with a local CSO. The reflection and reanalysis revealed differences between Western and Lao conceptions of participation and feminism and their influence on gender-targeted development programming design and delivery. Gaps in knowledge about gender-targeted development were explored, including the in/effectiveness of current gender-targeted development models being enacted in Laos. A critical examination of FPAR methodologies was also included.

This study aimed to explore factors influencing gender-targeted development programming to improve knowledge and practice in Laos. The findings from this FPAR study are both theoretical and practical. Existing knowledge about gender relationships in Laos is extended through co-generated data exploring Lao and Akha perceptions of gender and gender-targeted development. The focus on Akha women is significant as there is limited literature on Akha gender roles in Laos. Additionally, the findings of this study reveal significant gaps exist between feminist and development ideologies, and the realities of implementation on the ground. The ideological frameworks guiding gender-targeted development programs often fail to account for local contexts, cultural dynamics, and community priorities. Based on the co-generated data presented in this study, it is recommended that gender-targeted development be grounded in lived experiences rather than imposed theoretical frameworks. Additionally, the findings evidence the need to decentre binary categories of 'men' and 'women' to enhance gender diversity and respond to local practices. This study also critically examined the application of FPAR methodologies in gender-targeted development, demonstrating that participatory methods likely need adapting to be useful in the contexts in which they are facilitated.

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## Glossary

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DLF	Department of Livestock and Fisheries
EoE	Ethos of Engagement
EU	European Union
FPAR	Feminist Participatory Action Research
F/PAR	The RDA and I's integration of FPAR and PAR methodologies
GAD	Gender and Development
GEDSI	Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
GTSEZ	Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone
IFGD	Interpretive Focus Group Discussion
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LDC	Least Developed Country
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other diverse sexual orientations, and gender identities
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LWU	Lao Women's Union
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSM	Men Who Have Sex with Men
NECHR	National Ethics Committee for Health Research
PAR	Participatory Action Research
RDA	Rural Development Agency
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expressions, and Sex Characteristics
SSEAC	Sydney Southeast Asian Centre
SUN CSA	Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USYD	The University of Sydney
WAD	Women and Development
WID	Women in Development

## Prologue

Sally\* is an expatriate development practitioner working on an agricultural development program in Lao PDR. The program Sally is working on is funded by an international Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) with the primary objective of enhancing the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Southern Laos. This initiative seeks to enhance food security, economic stability, and the overall wellbeing of smallholder farmers by substantially improving their agricultural productivity. As the project lead, Sally oversees a team of five Lao staff members. All the Lao team speak basic English and have a significant tenure at the INGO. Sally is new to both the INGO and working in Laos. However, she does have experience working on agricultural development programs in Cambodia and Indonesia. Sally does not speak any Lao and relies on her team to communicate with project partners and participants.

The first year of the program is focused on data collection. Sally and her team are trying to understand the gendered division of labour to gather information on who in the household is responsible for livestock nutrition. These findings will inform future training and resource design. The data collection involves gender-segregated interviews with men and women. However, Sally notices that during the interviews with women, their husbands usually stand nearby, occasionally interrupting or directing their wives on how to respond to the questions. Sally asks the project team if they can tell the men to stop interrupting, but she notices this request makes both her team and the women they are interviewing uncomfortable. Sally does not know what to do because she knows the project needs gender-segregated data to present at their upcoming project review.

\*Sally is not a real person, nor is the specific project she is working on, but this story is informed by real life events.

## *1. Chapter One – Introduction*

### *1.1 Chapter Outline*

In this chapter, I introduce the study aim, research questions and objectives. I define key terms and concepts to contextualise the thesis. The intersection between development, gender, and gender-targeted development is explored. I also provide an overview of relevant literature to situate this study in the broader context, including the history of development in Laos, the history of gender-targeted development, and the status of women in Laos. Finally, I position myself within this study via a narrative standpoint statement before concluding the chapter with an outline of the thesis.

### *1.2 Study Aim, Questions, and Objectives*

#### *1.2.1 Study Aim*

This study aims to investigate factors influencing gender-targeted development<sup>1</sup> in Laos. While there has been a global increase in gender-targeted development programs, few efforts have been made to address the colonial history that underpin gender and development practice. Without examining the factors that shape gender-targeted development programs, their implementation often results in programs that are neither culturally relevant nor appropriate. Additionally, geopolitical relations play a significant role in shaping how gender and development are understood and practiced.

To investigate the factors influencing gender-targeted development, I utilised a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach to co-generate data with co-researchers involved in development decision-making in Lao PDR. I worked with three co-researcher groups: (1) Lao and Expatriate development actors<sup>2</sup> working in Laos; (2) the intended beneficiaries<sup>3</sup> of the Akha Women's Project a gender-targeted development project operating

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<sup>1</sup> A development program focused on gender equity and inclusion.

<sup>2</sup> In this study development actors are considered to be anyone working in the development sector, including practitioners, academics, activists, social enterprise owners, policy makers and donors.

<sup>3</sup> Intended beneficiaries describes individuals a development project aims to target. The phrase is used in this thesis due to its common application in development literature; however, I acknowledge the colonial lens through which this phrase is often applied where 'beneficiaries' are considered as passive recipients of development. The inclusion of the phrase 'intended' seeks to address this bias by identifying beneficiaries as individuals the program aimed to benefit, rather than presuming an actual benefit was achieved.

in two Akha villages in Northern Laos; and (3) the Rural Development Agency (RDA), a Lao-run Civil Society Organisation (CSO).

Utilising a multi-methods qualitative research approach, I applied the methodological framework of FPAR to explore the complex factors influencing gender-targeted development programming in Lao PDR. I aimed to understand the perspectives held by both development actors and intended beneficiaries of gender-targeted development programs in Laos. The application of an FPAR methodology enabled collaborative co-generation of data with diverse stakeholders, ensuring that multiple perspectives and lived experiences informed the research process. This study aims to advance both theoretical understanding and practical approaches to development programming, with a focus on gender-targeted development initiatives, in Laos. By examining the intersection of Western development and feminist ideologies with the lived experience of development decision-makers in Laos, this study aims to contribute to more culturally responsive and effective development practice in the region.

### *1.2.2 Research Questions*

This study was guided by three core research questions:

1. How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?
2. What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?
3. How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?

### *1.2.3 Research Objectives*

The corresponding objectives of this FPAR study include:

1. Implement and evaluate culturally-sensitive research methods to generate data with Lao, Akha, and expatriate co-researchers.
2. Describe the experiences and perspectives of Lao development actors by co-generating, co-analysing and co-distributing the findings of this study.
3. Identify and describe Akha expressions of gender, development, and gender-targeted development by co-generating, co-analysing, and co-distributing the findings of this study.
4. Identify factors influencing development and gender-targeted development in Laos.

5. Provide recommendations to improve the design and delivery of gender-targeted development programming in Laos.

### *1.3 Key Definitions and Terminology*

#### *1.3.1 Gender-Targeted Development*

In this study the term ‘gender-targeted development’ is used to describe development programs with a focus on gender (Su & Yang, 2023; UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia). The term ‘gender-targeted development’ is not currently part of academic terminology however it appears in academic papers, policy documents, and development reports (Earp et al., 2025; Su & Yang, 2023). In this study, I utilise the term ‘gender-targeted development’ in place of phrases such as women’s empowerment, gender mainstreaming, gender aid, and gender equity. I apply this terminology to reflect how gender and development are discussed in Laos and to encompass the various terms related to gender-targeted development in one term.

#### *1.3.2 Gender*

In this study ‘gender’ is understood to be a social construct that shapes an individual’s experience of the world (Johnson, 2021; Lindqvist et al., 2021; Scott, 2007). Unlike ‘sex’ which refers to biological differences, gender is a socially constructed concept (Delphy, 1993; Scott, 2007; Torgrimson & Minson, 2005). In more recent years conceptualisations of gender have challenged the gender essentialism of gender theory that widely considered there to be only two genders; ‘men’ and ‘women’ (Anderson, 2023; Johnson, 2021). While this study recognises the shift to embrace gender diversity it also acknowledges that current gender-targeted development theory and practice primarily focus on the inclusion of women, largely excluding diversity beyond the gender binary (Chant, 2000; Momsen, 2004; Schwenke, 2022). Therefore, this thesis will mostly discuss gender-targeted development through a binary gender lens, consistent with current gender-targeted development theory and practice in Laos, and globally. Since the inclusion of gender diversity was not the primary focus of this thesis, I do not critically examine the issue further. However, I acknowledge the need for further studies, led by gender diverse academics, to expand definitions of gender in development theory and practice. I also provide some insight in the Discussion Chapter

(Chapter Six) about ways to expand the conceptions of gender in gender-targeted development.

### *1.3.3 Development*

There is no singular, universally agreed upon definition of development (Adeniyi, 2024; Beal et al., 1971; Oberle et al., 1974; Weaver, 1971). In this thesis, my definition of development is largely grounded in Chambers definition that considers development to mean a ‘good change’ (Chambers, 2004, 2013). Through this definition I consider the meaning of a ‘good change’ to be defined and redefined by individuals and communities based on socio-cultural factors and experiences (Chambers, 2004). Chamber’s (2004) definition aligns with the application of an FPAR methodology by recognising that individuals will have varying perceptions of development based on their lived realities, thus highlighting the importance of co-generating data with a diversity of co-researchers.

### *1.3.4 The Application of a ‘Western-Non-Western’ Binary*

Throughout this thesis, I often rely on a ‘Western-Non-Western’ binary. While I recognise that binary categorisations often oversimplify complex dynamics, I utilise this binary as a way of acknowledging the historical power relations in feminist and development discourse. Historically, the ‘West and the rest’ binary has been used in development and feminist discourse to centre the experiences and perspectives of Western theorists (Hall, 2007). Thus, I refer to ‘Western-centric’ or ‘Eurocentric’ frameworks throughout to reveal how Western discourse has been positioned as the ‘dominant’ way of thinking. In doing so I aim to encourage a process of critical reflection to better understand how historical power imbalances continue to influence contemporary development theory and practice.

### *1.3.5 Positioning the Researcher*

I position myself as the lead co-researcher throughout this thesis, using first-person language to demonstrate a reflexive approach. This positioning aligns with FPAR methodology, which recognises the researcher role as an integral part of the research process, rather than operating as a detached observer. As I will discuss in detail later in the thesis, this approach also aligns with my choice to utilise first-person inquiry as a method in Cycle Three, allowing

me to critically examine my own experiences and assumptions as a development practitioner working within the Lao context.

#### *1.4 The Intersection of Feminism, Development, and Gender-Targeted Development*

Gender-targeted development has become a crucial aspect of the global development agenda applied to development policy, theory, and practice (Grown et al., 2016; Rathgeber, 1990; Su & Yang, 2023). Gender-targeted development reflects an intersectional school of thought that intersects with both development and feminism (Miller & Razavi, 1995). To fully understand the evolution of gender-targeted development, it is essential to examine the overlap and intersection of gender-targeted development with both development and Western feminism. In this thesis I mostly focus on Western feminism because Asian feminist scholarship, especially from Laos, remains largely invisible within mainstream feminist literature (Faming, 2018; Karam, 2005; Sultana, 2014).

While a binary approach to Western-Non-Western feminism may be considered reductive, it reflects the reality that feminist scholarship and resources are unequally distributed and referenced (Bulbeck, 2002; Karam, 2005; Meuleman, 2005). As a Western feminist, I have engaged with the work of Non-Western scholars such as Azza Karam and Farhana Sultana, and with journals that aim to centre Asian feminist voices such as the *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. However, I also recognise that despite their important contributions, the works of Non-Western feminist scholars have largely been excluded from mainstream feminist scholarship (Bulbeck, 2002; Karam, 2013; Meuleman, 2005; Mohanty, 1997). Non-Western feminist scholarship typically gains entry into mainstream feminist conversations when academics employ Western theoretical approaches and frameworks (Earp, 2023; Karam, 2005). In her analysis of Muslim feminism, Azza Karam (2005) argues that non-Western feminists like herself must have their research 'approved' by Western academics before it can be legitimised. Consequently, Non-Western feminist scholars have had limited influence on mainstream feminist, development, and gender-targeted development theory.

Academics have connected aspects of gender-targeted development to histories of development and Western feminism (Bruno, 2006; Miller & Razavi, 1995; Mwije, 2014). For example, Miller and Razavi (1995) associated the emergence of 'Women in Development' -

the first ‘wave’<sup>4</sup> of gender-targeted development to the rise of modernisation theory, an early ‘rupture’<sup>5</sup> in development history. While there is a clear link between Western feminism, development, and gender-targeted development, few academics have linked the interrelatedness of all three perspectives. In this Introduction, I present a mirroring that has occurred between Western feminism, development, and gender-targeted development, resulting in the emergence of three pivotal ‘movements’<sup>6</sup> that not only intersect, but also reflect one another. In Western feminism, the three waves are: (1) first-wave; (2) second-wave; and (3) third-wave feminism. In development, the three dominant ruptures are: (1) modernisation; (2) dependency; and (3) post-development. While in gender-targeted development, the three waves are: (1) Women in Development; (2) Women and Development; and (3) Gender and Development. Figure 1 visualises the interrelated timelines of each of these ‘movements’. To better understand the interconnectedness of each of these movements, I present a brief history of each.

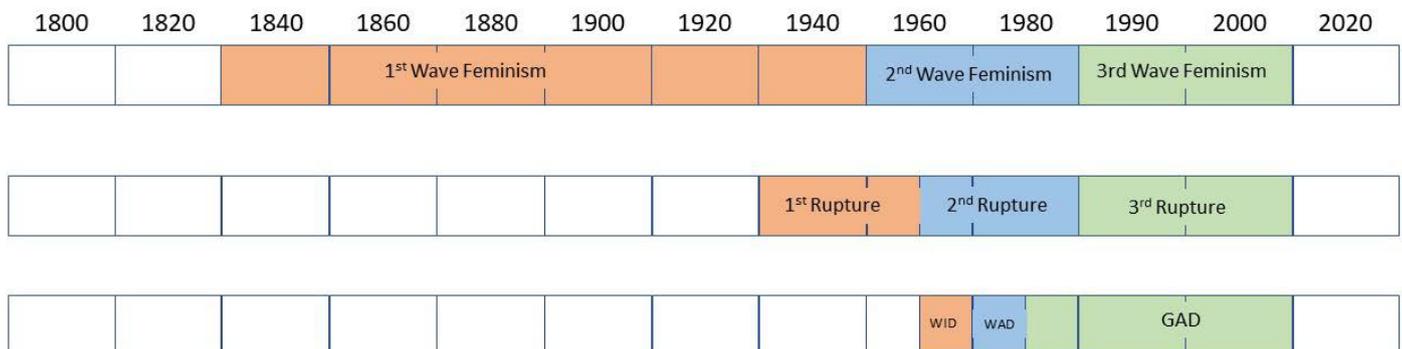


Figure 1 Intersection between Feminism, Development, and Gender-Targeted Development

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘wave’ is used to describe movements in Western feminism. I have chosen to use this language to describe periods of gender-targeted development in the same way.

Laughlin, K. A., Gallagher, J., Cobble, D. S., Boris, E., Nadasen, P., Gilmore, S., & Zarnow, L. (2010). Is it time to jump ship? Historians rethink the waves metaphor. *Feminist Formations*, 76-135.

<sup>5</sup> Bull and Bøås (2012) describe the history of development as being marked by ‘ruptures’ that facilitated transitions from one dominant theory to another.

Bull, B., & Bøås, M. (2012). Between ruptures and continuity: Modernisation, dependency and the evolution of development theory. *Forum for Development Studies*,

<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘movements’ to describe the significant paradigmatic shifts that fundamentally altered the theoretical and practical approaches to practice within feminism, development, and gender-targeted development.

Diani, M. (1992). The concept of social movement. *The sociological review*, 40(1), 1-25.

### *1.4.1 A Brief History of Western Feminism*

The Western feminist movement is often defined by the wave metaphor, a ubiquitous description that describes changes in feminist thinking as ‘waves’ of progress (Hewitt, 2012; Jo, 2017; Laughlin et al., 2010). Despite being commonly recognised as a distinctly Western account of feminism, the waves history is often characterised as ‘universal’ feminism (Kendall, 2020; Laughlin et al., 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Moreton-Robinson (2021) argues that ‘whiteness’ as it relates to feminism is often assumed to be the default, leading Western feminism to present as being representative of all women while only reflecting the experiences and perspectives of white women. While many Non-Western historical accounts of feminism exist, they are often ignored as they do not fit the lateral wave analogy of Western feminist history (Earp, 2023b; Wha, 2008; Yu, 2009). When addressed in Western literature, Asian feminist scholarship is often examined through reductive frameworks that either ‘other’ or homogenise diverse perspectives (Chen, 2007; Karam, 2005).

Western feminism is often referred to as the ‘dominant’ or ‘mainstream’ feminism, despite varying feminist histories (Dixon, 2011; Kendall, 2020; McEwan, 2003). However, even within Western feminist history, there are debates regarding the number of feminist waves (Gray & Boddy, 2010; Jo, 2017; Laughlin et al., 2010; Malinowska, 2020; Rampton, 2015; Snyder-Hall, 2010; Snyder, 2008). In current feminist literature, first, second and third wave feminism are well described and documented (Gray & Boddy, 2010; Malinowska, 2020; Rampton, 2015). Following the third wave there is ongoing debate about a fourth, fifth, and even potential sixth wave of feminism, with scholars disagreeing on which wave we are currently in and how these subsequent waves should be defined (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Malinowska, 2020; Munro, 2013; Peroni & Rodak, 2024). For this reason, this study explores the first three waves only.

The first wave of Western feminism, originating in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was characterised by its central aim of achieving improved opportunities for women, with a focus on women’s suffrage (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Malinowska, 2020). In this context suffrage meant granting political privileges to everyone, regardless of gender (Paxton, 2000). By the 1960s, the second wave of Western feminism shifted its focus to women’s social identity, advocating for equal pay, sexual liberation, and the right to self-determination over women’s bodies (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Malinowska, 2020; Rampton, 2015). Third wave feminism, beginning in the mid-1990s, promoted intersectionality and greater inclusivity in feminism

(Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Rampton, 2015). This wave is widely considered as the most difficult to define (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Malinowska, 2020).

While Western feminism has transformed the lives of many, it is impossible to ignore its problematic past (Kendall, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Critiques of Western feminism describe the movement's tendency to prioritise the rights and experiences of white women while marginalising the experiences of women who do not fit the Western feminist agenda (Jonsson, 2016; Kendall, 2020; Linder, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). For example, in Australia during the first wave of Western feminism, white Australian suffragettes prioritised their own voting rights over those of Aboriginal men, invoking claims of racial 'superiority' (Grimshaw & Ellinghaus, 1999; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Similarly, during the second wave of Western feminism, white American feminists applied eugenic theories in their call to legalise birth control by promoting it as a means to reduce the birth rates of Black Americans (Linder, 2011). Despite claims of 'universality', Western feminism has a long history of promoting the rights of white women above others (Kendall, 2020). While third wave adherents of feminism do acknowledge its 'problematic' past, it is impossible to ignore the impact this history has had on the feminist movement and its related initiatives. This study examines the relationship between Western feminism and gender-targeted development to determine how Western-centric knowledge, theories, and socio-cultural factors potentially influence development practice.

#### *1.4.2 A Brief History of Development*

Global development is a widely contested concept (Cooper, 2010; Horner, 2020; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017; Unger et al., 2022). While development is a popular pedagogy and practice, there is a co-existence of multiple definitions, theories, and views (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Oberle et al., 1974; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017; Weaver, 1971). Development, while theoretically intended to promote positive social change, has been criticised for falling short of its egalitarian ambitions (Chambers, 2013; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Instead, development is often

dictated by geo-political power dynamics which frequently adhere to an established 'North-South binary'<sup>7</sup> (Horner, 2020; Oglesby, 1969).

Conceptualising the history of development without mirroring an often harmful North-South binary is challenging (Unger et al., 2022). The colonial nature of academic research and the resulting 'domination' of scholars from the Global North results in a history that favours North-South polarity (Cooper, 2010; Unger et al., 2022). Additionally, the multiplicity of development theories means there is no single history (Unger et al., 2022). Instead of trying to fit development to a linear timeline, Bull and Bøås (2012) argue that most development literature focuses solely on the 'ruptures'<sup>5</sup> that transitioned development theory from one theory to another. Many scholars identify the shifts between: (1) modernisation theory; (2) dependency theory; and (3) post-development theory as three key 'ruptures' that impacted the history and timeline of development (Grugel & Hammett, 2016; Horner, 2020; Rist, 2019; Unger et al., 2022).

#### *Modernisation Theory*

The adoption of modernisation theory is widely recognised as a pivotal moment in the early history of development (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Hout, 2016; Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Unger et al., 2022). While the origins of development are often contested, it is widely regarded that development emerged as a distinct academic field following the Second World War (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Grant, 1979; Tarp, 2006). The post war context and the recent industrialisation of Europe meant early development was driven by the politics of power and economic growth (Brohman, 1995; Bull & Bøås, 2012; Horner, 2020; Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Tarp & Hjertholm, 2000). As a result, development theorists applied a North-South binary to suggest that development was the practice of the 'modern' Global North 'developing' the 'less developed' Global South (Grugel & Hammett, 2016; Horner, 2020; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Despite the

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<sup>7</sup> Coined by Carl Oglesby in 1969, the term the 'Global South' is a commonly used phrase synonymous with more controversial terms like the 'third world' and 'developing' and 'least developed' countries. The term is not a geographical definition and instead it is based purely on economic definitions of modernity. Development discourse has experienced shifts in the use of the term since it was coined. Most recently its usage has increased due to the global binary created between the 'Global North' and China. In this thesis I apply 'Global South' and 'Global North' terminology because it reflects the relevant literature and history, however I acknowledge the problematic nature of the phrase as it limits diversity, creates a sense of othering, and promotes a hierarchical ranking of countries across the globe.

Oglesby, C. (1969). Vietnamism has failed... The revolution can only be mauled, not defeated. *Commonweal*, 90(7).

colonialism and othering that this binary created it became the basis of most development programs (Hout, 2016).

Rostow's (1959) theory of the stages of growth, a central concept in modernisation theory, argues that the Global South must progress through predefined stages of modernisation to achieve development (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Hout, 2016; Rostow, 1959). The linear progression of development through Rostow's stages of growth theory is often recommended for countries to achieve economic growth and development (Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Rostow, 1959). However, by the late 1960s, the application of modernisation theory in development policy and practice came under significant attack (Hout, 2016). Key criticisms centred on the Eurocentric nature of modernisation theory and its failure to account for local cultural factors and contextual differences (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Hout, 2016). These critiques of modernisation theory led to the development of a new analytical framework that viewed previous development efforts as distorted and inherently colonial in nature (Horner, 2020; Hout, 2016). This critical reassessment gave rise to dependency theory as an alternative paradigm (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Hout, 2016).

#### *Dependency Theory*

While modernisation theory was rooted in the Eurocentric notions of economic modernity, dependency theory emerged from Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques of capitalism (Hout, 2016). Born out of analysis of Latin American economic progress, dependency theorists attributed the challenges of development progress in the Global South to colonialism and global hierarchies within the North-South binary (Chase-Dunn, 2007; Cooper, 2010). This approach emphasised the need for socio-economic understandings of development (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019; Bizberg, 2024). The shift from modernisation theory to dependency theory saw development move from a purely economic process to one that encompassed socio-political factors (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019; Bizberg, 2024).

The holistic approach of dependency theory gave rise to world systems thinking (Chase-Dunn, 2007; Friedmann & Wayne, 1977). While early development theory focused primarily on economic growth, dependency theory examined the complete intersocietal system encompassing trade, foreign knowledge, and alliances (Bizberg, 2024; Chase-Dunn, 2007; Hout, 2016; Unger et al., 2022). The more recent descriptions of world systems thinking considers global economic and political relationships as an interconnected system (Hout,

2016; Unger et al., 2022). World systems thinking was first developed by Immanuel Wallerstein who drew heavily on dependency theory, particularly its critique of global capitalism (Martínez-Vela, 2001). In this thesis I do not include world systems thinking as a separate rupture because, following Wallerstein's (2015) characterisation, I consider world systems thinking to represent an analytical approach rather than a cohesive theoretical framework. As Wallerstein (2015) describes it, world systems thinking is a tool for analysis rather than theory. For this reason, I use the theoretical frame of dependency theory throughout the thesis.

The popularity of dependency theory was limited due to its inability to define a consistent understanding of development (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019). The failure to define development beyond the economic framework of modernisation theory resulted in an overemphasis on economic growth, despite dependency theory's original aim to extend beyond this narrow focus (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019; Friedmann & Wayne, 1977). Regardless of ongoing academic criticism the core ideas of modernisation and dependency theory remain at the root of much contemporary development discourse (Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017; Unger et al., 2022). While I have chosen to describe the history of development through a series of ruptures, I recognise the fact that development discourse has undergone numerous shifts and changes, constantly swinging between modernisation and dependency theories (Unger et al., 2022).

#### *Post-Development Theory*

Originating in the late twentieth century, post-development theory aims to address the criticism of modernisation and dependency theory (Grugel & Hammett, 2016; McGregor, 2009; Munck, 2021). Post-development theory argues that development combines knowledge and power, beginning with the premise that people are labelled as 'underdeveloped' and therefore require intervention (Grugel & Hammett, 2016; Horner, 2020). As such, post-development focuses on critiquing the very concept of development itself (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Cooper, 2010; Horner, 2020; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017). Despite a rise in decolonial and post-colonial thinking, some development scholars argue development will always be colonial in nature due to the 'we' vs 'them' binary it promotes (Cooper, 2010; Horner, 2020; Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Ricker, 2022). Cooper (2010) argues that by its very nature development is foreign and imported and therefore can never be decolonised.

The history of development often ‘ends’ at post-development theory as the most current shift in development thinking (Munck, 2021; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017). The historical narrative of the development ‘ruptures’ overlooks significant developments within the discourse that occur outside Western-centric literature (Cooper, 2010; Scholte & Söderbaum, 2017). While recent years have seen a growing emphasis on wellbeing and empowerment as forms of development, we lack sufficient understanding of the mechanisms through which development occurs within these approaches (Camfield et al., 2009; Gamboa et al., 2020; Tarp & Hjertholm, 2000). Development theory and practice has overwhelmingly remained focused on alleviating poverty through capital wealth, a result of its foundational ties to modernisation (Brohman, 1995; Bull & Bøås, 2012; Peet & Hartwick, 2015).

### *1.4.3 A Brief History of Gender-Targeted Development*

Development has increasingly focused on gender inclusion and empowerment following four UN World Conferences on Women, spanning 1975 to 1995 (Chant, 2006; Su & Yang, 2023). Gender-targeted development has undergone multiple iterations, mirroring the ‘waves’ of Western feminism and the ‘ruptures’ of development with three distinct ‘phases’: (1) Women in Development (WID); (2) Women and Development (WAD); and (3) Gender and Development (GAD) (Lee et al., 2019; Mwije, 2014; Rathgeber, 1990). The intersection between prevailing feminist theory and development theory has driven transitions between ‘waves’ of gender-targeted development (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007; Mwije, 2014).

Despite the ubiquitous nature of gender-targeted development programming, many practitioners and funders lack confidence in the movement (Su & Yang, 2023). The lack of success of gender-targeted development across Asia has been explained as a failure to bridge theory with practice (Su & Yang, 2023). Sultana (2014) criticises the ‘add women and stir’ approach to development programming, which often fails to acknowledge the intersectionality of gender experiences beyond a Western feminist viewpoint. Other common critiques include the application of buzzwords and jargon that oversimplify and overlook the impact of cultural and social factors affecting the success of gender-targeted programs (Cornwall, 2007; Su & Yang, 2023).

### *Women in Development*

The emergence of Women in Development (WID) was the first time that the role of women in economic development was considered (Fischer-Kowalski et al., 2014; Jacoby, 1972). A landmark publication by Boserup (1970) on the role of women formed the basis of WID (Fischer-Kowalski et al., 2014; Jacoby, 1972). The shift towards considering women's roles was arguably driven by Western feminist and development ideologies of the time (Fischer-Kowalski et al., 2014). The primary goal of WID, rooted in liberal feminism, was to encourage development organisations to allocate more aid funding and resources to women (Bruno, 2006; Dale, 2020; Miller & Razavi, 1995). WID viewed traditional societal structures as repressive environments that perpetuated gendered inequality and the oppression of women (Boserup, 1970; Bruno, 2006; Dale, 2020; Porras & Steeves, 2009). Previously, the assumption was that development would benefit the whole family, however the WID movement focused on the ways that development affected men and women differently (Momsen, 2001).

Despite the emergence of dependency theory in the 1960s, much development thinking remained focused on modernisation (Bull & Bøås, 2012; Horner, 2020; Hout, 2016). This time lag is evident in the way that WID still mirrored a modernisation approach to development (Porras & Steeves, 2009; Ricker, 2022). As a result, WID is characterised by its roots in liberal feminism and modernisation theory (Porras & Steeves, 2009; Ricker, 2022). With a base of liberal feminism and modernisation, WID considered economic growth as the primary channel for the development of women (Bruno, 2006). This economic focus led to an emphasis on women's 'roles' within society which aimed to shift away from traditional, non-income-generating, caretaking roles that are predominately held by women (Bruno, 2006; Fischer-Kowalski et al., 2014). While this shift aligned with second wave Western feminist thinking at the time, it overlooked the cultural significance of these roles for many women and the importance of their cultural context.

### *Women and Development*

In 1975, Women and Development (WAD) built upon the concepts from WID and incorporated radical feminist theory and world systems thinking to develop a new 'wave' of gender-targeted development (Bruno, 2006; Ricker, 2022). Ricker (2022) described how world systems thinking, a late stage of dependency theory, focused attention on the relationship between development and women. This focus aligns with key ideas of dependency theory and world-

systems thinking, which suggests that the inherent mechanisms of capitalism led to the 'underdevelopment' of certain populations (Kasarda & Crenshaw, 1991). As a result of this influence, the purpose of WAD was to explore the relationship between women and development, rather than simply promoting their inclusion (Ricker, 2022). The WAD approach recognised that while women had always been central to development processes they had not previously benefitted from these systems (Vijayamohanan et al., 2009). This approach prompted an examination of the oppressive systems that had limited the benefits for women. Differing from WID, WAD argued that the issues in gender and development were not related to the lack of inclusion of women, but rather the limited recognition of their labour and the resulting benefit of women's participation (Anyidoho, 2021). This thinking represents a distinct mirroring of the dependency and world systems thinking of development at the time (Kasarda & Crenshaw, 1991).

Additionally, the basis of WAD required a more complex understanding of gender that was grounded in the emergence of radical feminist theories from second wave feminism (Ricker, 2022; Roces, 2010). A common criticism of WAD was its failure to look beyond Western feminist concepts of women's liberation, despite its claims to recognise intersectionality (Anyidoho, 2021). Significantly, while women's participation in the workforce was considered as progress in the Global North, in many non-Western countries' women had been working outside the home for a long time (Anyidoho, 2021; Ricker, 2022). In fact, more recent studies suggest that a focus on women's employment and participation in countries where women's participation is already culturally embedded could result in detrimental impacts for women including increased time poverty (Earp et al., 2025; Irani & Vemireddy, 2021).

### *Gender and Development*

Gender and Development (GAD) emerged in the 1980s as a continuation of the previous 'waves' of gender-targeted development (Anyidoho, 2021; Bruno, 2006; Ricker, 2022). The advent of GAD drew upon socialist feminist theories and focused on gender as a socially constructed concept rather than being defined by biological sex (Anyidoho, 2021; Bruno, 2006). The application of socialist feminism shifted the attention of gender-targeted development programming to gender relationships rather than considering women independently from their socio-cultural context (Anyidoho, 2021). A rising consideration of gender relationships in GAD resulted in the emergence of the concept of 'backlash'. Thus,

acknowledging that changes in household dynamics resulting from the WID and WAD approaches to gender-targeted development may negatively impact women if they dramatically disrupt existing gender relationships (Momsen, 2001).

Regardless of these changes in thinking, men remained excluded from GAD discourse, except when they were considered as the 'oppressors' of women (Cleaver, 2002; Cornwall, 2000). In an attempt to remove the gender binary inherent in WID and WAD, GAD implemented approaches such as 'gender mainstreaming', promoting gender inclusion in every aspect of development programming (Anyidoho, 2021; Brenner, 2009). Despite its intentions, GAD and its related application of gender mainstreaming have been criticised for simplifying gender relations and ignoring the significance of culture, society, and religion in gender programming (Anyidoho, 2021).

GAD mirrors the waves of feminism, consistent with previous waves of gender-targeted development (Porras & Steeves, 2009; Sharp et al., 2003). However, unlike WID and WAD, GAD's reflection of development theory is less clearly defined. This likely stems from the fact we can connect GAD to third-wave feminism because subsequent feminist waves may have emerged, providing historical context, whereas connecting it to post-development remains challenging since we are still operating within this developmental paradigm. While there is limited clarity on the connection between post-development thinking and GAD, Porras and Steeves (2009) have identified various gender values of post-development thinking. Examples of these identified values include that the roles of women are influenced by socio-cultural contexts, that intersectionality shapes women's experiences of development and that women's experiences need to be included in development discourse (Porras & Steeves, 2009). These values are at the forefront of GAD programming despite the lack of literature clearly linking GAD and post-development thinking.

Despite progress from WID to GAD, gender-targeted development is still critiqued for its simplification of gender and development (Moser, 2005; Ricker, 2022). A common failure of gender-targeted development is its replication of liberal feminist, modernisation thinking regardless of progress in development and feminist theories (Ricker, 2022). The emphasis on Western feminist theory in gender and development limits the ability of GAD to adopt decolonial post-development approaches, as it fails to fully recognise the intersectionality of gender. Western feminism often frames GAD as a binary struggle between women and men,

while non-Western feminisms rarely consider women’s struggles in direct competition with men (Bruno, 2006; Saunders, 2005).

Differences in feminist perspectives could influence the success of gender and development agendas. A consequence of following a gender and development approach that is shaped by Western feminism is that communities who consider gender and feminism differently may reject the movement entirely (Bruno, 2006; Earp, 2023a). This could ultimately result in a process of ‘othering’ which has been documented by various development scholars as a failure of gender-targeted development programming (Nourani Rinaldi, 2022; Saunders, 2005). Post-development calls for decolonisation of development theory and practice to improve dialogue between Global North and South perspectives (Anyidoho, 2021). However, true change cannot be achieved until the mirroring of Western feminist theories, development thinking, and gender-targeted development agendas are clearly understood and identified.

### 1.5 Country Overview – Laos



Figure 2 Map of Modern Day Laos  
(Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025)

The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Laos or Lao PDR) is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, boarded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. The country is divided into 16 Provinces (ແຂວງ or khueng) and has one capital city – Vientiane (ວຽງຈັນ). In 2023, the population of Laos was 7.6 million with a projected population increase of 27 percent by

2050 (World Health Organisation, 2024). The Lao economy is agrarian-dependent and is dominated by smallholder farming (Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Napasirth & Napasirth, 2018). Rural families often practice subsistence farming, focusing on household food security and income generation (Earp, 2023a; Napasirth & Napasirth, 2018). Smallholder farming practices in Laos typically result in longer livestock retention, diversified farm and off-farm production, and intensified husbandry activities (Napasirth & Napasirth, 2018).

Over the last two decades, Laos has experienced significant economic growth (Barney & Souksakoun, 2021). This economic growth has been influenced by a boom of resource-led development including hydropower, mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure (Barney & Souksakoun, 2021; Niwa & Nishimoto, 2025). Foreign direct investment in Laos has had a considerable impact on the country's growing economy (Niwa & Nishimoto, 2025; Sims, 2021a; Sythongbay, 2021). For several years the investment of foreign capital in Laos was celebrated as an important aspect of the country's development and modernisation (Creak, 2011). However, since 2022, Laos has experienced significant macroeconomic challenges including the influence of COVID-19, currency depreciation, inflation, mass worker migration and an acute debt crisis (Barney et al., 2025; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Niwa & Nishimoto, 2025; World Health Organisation, 2024). Despite these economic shocks, Laos continues to progress towards the United Nations' (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2024). The UN has noted substantial progress in Laos in the areas of poverty and hunger reduction, improved health and wellbeing, infrastructure and development and reducing inequalities (United Nations, 2024; United Nations Lao PDR, 2023).

To understand the landscape of Laos, this section examines three interconnected factors: (1) the modern history of Laos; (2) Laos' distinctive political culture; and (3) ethnic diversity in Laos. The following sections explore each of these factors and their influence on modern Laos.

### *1.5.1 Lao Modern History*

Western interference has been a defining force in shaping Laos' modern history, creating patterns of instability that continue to influence the country today (Croissant, 2022; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Stuart-Fox, 1995, 1997, 2005b). Key events in Lao's history include: (1) French occupation of Laos from 1893-1954 (with a short period of Japanese occupation); and (2) America's 'Secret War' in Laos from 1964 to 1973.

### *French Colonialism*

Historians consider French colonialism as one of the most significant periods of turbulence in Laos' modern history (Croissant, 2022; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998). During French occupation, Laos was included as part of French Indochina alongside neighbouring Vietnam and Cambodia (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Stuart-Fox, 1997). Historical records indicate that France considered Laos one of the least 'important' colonies within French Indochina due to the minimal economic benefits it provided (Stuart-Fox, 1995). Consequently, French rule in Laos was primarily motivated by strategic interests in Vietnam, reinforcing a longstanding perception that Laos was merely an extension of its larger neighbour (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Stuart-Fox, 1995). French colonialism also exacerbated ethnic tensions within Laos by isolating ethnic groups and destroying significant religious and spiritual sites (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Lacouture, 1970; Stuart-Fox, 1997). Following World War Two, Laos experienced a period of significant political upheaval as control of the country was contested between Japanese occupation, French colonial forces, and Vietnamese-backed communist movements, until France's defeat and withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, ultimately resulting in Lao independence (Baird, 2014; Croissant, 2022; Lacouture, 1970; Stuart-Fox, 1997).

### *America's Secret War*

Soon after independence, Laos was attacked by the United States of America (USA) (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Sayavong, 2022). The USA bombing of Laos between 1964 and 1973 is known as 'America's Secret War'. During this offensive, and as an extension of the Vietnam War, the USA attempted to counter the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009). Despite Laos' neutral status during the Vietnam War, Jerndal and Rigg (1998) contend that the USA viewed Laos as a risk for Vietnamese takeover. Laos was perceived as being 'nationless' as a result of the effects of French colonialism and a history of political instability (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998). Laos was bombed with over 2.1 million tons of ordnance, most of which remains unexploded (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Sayavong, 2022; UNDP Lao PDR, 2025). Despite limited global acknowledgement of America's Secret War, its ongoing effects (including widespread unexploded ordnance) continue to negatively impact the public health and environment sector and contribute to national trauma (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Sayavong, 2022; UNDP Lao PDR, 2025).

### *1.5.2 Lao Political Culture*

Prior to Lao nationalism, Lao was the Kingdom of Lan Xang (1353-1707) (Croissant, 2022; Townsend-Gault, 2014). During this period the traditional political structure of Laos was dominated by a District (ເມືອງ or meuang) structure (Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Scholars often apply the mandala concept to understand Laos' district structure, a political model that defines power structures through influence radiating outward from a central authority rather than through fixed territorial boundaries (Drouot, 2003; High & Petit, 2013; Stuart-Fox & Creak, 2023). Under this structure each District was ruled by a prince, a leading member of the aristocracy, who reported to the King of Lan Xang, the country's sovereign (Lawrence, 2022; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). The guiding principle of this political structure was personal loyalty, where Lao people were expected to devote themselves to their aristocratic leaders and the king (Lawrence, 2022; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). This structure was upheld until the French occupation of Laos in 1893. Stuart-Fox (2005b) argues that French colonial rule imposed European political institutions on top of existing Lao structures.

Laos was devastated by civil war from the late 1940s to 1975, a conflict fundamentally shaped by competing political ideologies between the Royal Lao Government and the Lao communist movement - the Pathet Lao (Pholsena, 2006). The legacy of this prolonged civil unrest continues to shape contemporary Laos, as the current regime aims to construct a unified sense of national identity (Baird, 2014; Pholsena, 2006; Stuart-Fox, 2006). The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) rose to power in 1975 following similar patterns in communist Vietnam and Cambodia (Croissant, 2022). Against the backdrop of civil war, Laos had not experienced the extensive social mobilisation typical of other communist revolutions, and consequently, communist ideology held limited meaning for the broader rural population (Pholsena, 2006). Initially it seemed that the LPRP would apply a modern form of politics. However, once in power, the party recruited members from the traditional aristocracy who ultimately redirected the party toward a more traditional Lao model (Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Thus, a new class of 'social elite' emerged which used the LPRP as a tool for growth (Pholsena, 2006; Stuart-Fox, 2005a, 2005b). Since communist takeover in Laos, the single-party regime has undergone significant transformation (Baird, 2025; Croissant, 2022; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Despite these changes, the LPRP faces little opposition and maintains its primary goal of staying in power (Bunce, 2017; Lutz, 2022; Stuart-Fox, 2005a).

The LPRP prioritises the ‘unification’ of Laos as a means of fostering nationalism (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Kanstrup-Jensen, 2007; Stuart-Fox, 2005a). Scholars such as Stuart-Fox (2005a) and Evans (1998) argue that as Marxism-Leninism became less significant, the Party increasingly prioritised nationalism as a way to legitimise itself. The unification of Laos followed two forms: (1) the re-Buddhification of the Lao state; and (2) a process of Lao-ization.

#### *The Re-Buddhification of the Lao State*

Laos is the only Marxist-Leninist state that promotes religion (Stuart-Fox, 2005a). Evans (1998) suggests a process of re-Buddhification occurred as the LPRP looked to Buddhism for new ideologies following the collapse of communism in Europe. Through this lens, Buddhism in Laos can be seen as a political tool used by the LPRP in their leadership of Laos (Pholsena, 2006). Initially, the LPRP used Buddhism to gain popular support, but more recently, the Party has transformed Buddhism into a vehicle for its political messaging by requiring monks to incorporate political material into their sermons (Bailey, 2013). Stuart-Fox (1983) describes missionary-like efforts being employed in an attempt to convert Lao highland ethnic groups to Buddhism. While Buddhism is not officially the national religion, it is considered to be Lao, while other religions such as Christianity are considered to be ‘international’ (Bailey, 2013; Stuart-Fox, 2005b).

#### *The Lao-ization of Laos*

Laos is characterised by its high rates of ethnic diversity, with 49 officially recognised ethnic groups and 160 sub-groups (Bouté, 2021). However, it is believed there are likely more ethnic groups in Laos that are not officially recognised by the LPRP (Bouté, 2021; Lutz, 2022). Ethnic groups in Laos are often categorised into three ethnolinguistic clusters: (1) lowland Laos also known as the Lao Loum (or Lao-Thai); (2) midland Laos or the Lao Soung; and (3) highland Laos or the Lao Theung (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Lutz, 2022). Academics have criticised this grouping for relying on limited ethnic logic, instead grouping individuals based on geo-environmental factors (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998). Despite LPRP attempts to unify Laos under these ethnic groupings, the Ethnic Lao (also known as the Lao Loum) are still considered as the ethnic ‘majority’<sup>8</sup> (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Jerndal & Rigg,

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<sup>8</sup> While no single ethnic group forms a majority in Laos, the Lao Loum are often considered and labelled as the ‘majority’ based on their ‘dominant’ socio-cultural status in Lao society. As a result, other ethnic groups are often referred to as the ‘minority’.

1998; Lutz, 2022). This is reinforced by the fact that there is minimal evidence of national or international development efforts with Lao Theung or Lao Soung groups (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Lutz, 2022; Ongaro, 2019; Singkhorn et al., 2023).

Country scholars describe the LPRP's unification mission as one that seeks to create a Lao cultural monolith prioritising a Lao Loum model of cultural practice, language, and religion (Bouté, 2021; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Kanstrup-Jensen, 2007; Lutz, 2022). The favouring of Lao Loum culture has caused significant knowledge gaps regarding the experiences, practices, and history of ethnic communities living in Laos (Bouté, 2021; Kanstrup-Jensen, 2007; Sychareun et al., 2011). Additionally, the creation of cultural hierarchies has resulted in ethnic tensions, prejudice, and increased inequality (Jerndal & Rigg, 1998; Lutz, 2022).

The political culture in Laos is distinctive, shaped by the complex interplay of historical influences, traditional governance structures, and contemporary Marxist-Leninist ideologies. The LPRP's use of re-Buddhification of Laos and the Lao-ization of Laos is a unique characteristic of the country reflecting the LPRP's approach to maintaining legitimacy and control.

### *1.5.3 Ethnic Diversity*

As described above, Laos is a multiethnic nation and the most ethnically diverse country in Southeast Asia (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; OpenDevelopmentLaos, 2018). In 2015, the ethnic Lao 'majority' (the Lao Loum) accounted for 50 percent of the country's total population, while the other 50 percent is divided among 48 ethnic sub-groups (Bouté, 2021). The ethnic diversity of Laos is a unique consideration shaping the country's cultural practices and the LPRP's political control. Since the rise of the LPRP, the Party has attempted to consolidate the numerous ethnic groups through a process of Lao-ization by limiting ethnic cultural practices (Bouté, 2021; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Lutz, 2022). Despite the LPRP's attempts to 'unify' Laos, ethnic groups have maintained separate cultures and languages (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Wilcox, 2023).

During this study, I co-generated data with Akha women from the Akha Women's Project. The Akha are a 'minority' ethnic group living across Thailand, Myanmar, China, Laos, and Vietnam (Morton, 2024). In Laos, the Akha are grouped with the Lao Theung (highland) ethnolinguistic cluster (Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Lutz, 2022). Although the Akha constitute only 2 percent of

Laos' total population, they are regarded as a majority group in Northern Laos due to their high population density in the region (Lutz, 2022). Akha communities are known for placing their traditional beliefs at the core of their social and cultural practices, despite the rapid changes occurring in Northern Laos (Agostini, 2018; Lutz, 2022; Sychareun et al., 2011). Traditional Akha beliefs are known as the Akhazang (also known as Akha Way) (Agostini, 2018). Being situated in the North of Laos means Akha communities have been directly impacted by Chinese investments (Cheng, 2022; Sychareun et al., 2011). These investments include the establishment of an international highway between China and Thailand, changes to agricultural production including an increased demand for rubber to be exported to China, the establishment of casinos, and the effects of the newly established Lao-China Railway (DiCarlo & Sims, 2023; Sims, 2024; Sychareun et al., 2011). Despite the impacts of Chinese investment, there is little record of Akha communities being actively engaged in national or international development programs (Sychareun et al., 2011).

In Laos, Akha dialects are part of the Southern Lolish sub-branch of the Lolo Burmese Language (Schliesinger, 2003). There is currently no written script for the Akha language. However, Akha oral histories reference a time when there was a writing system that has since been lost (Morton, 2023). While the Lao government has classified forty-nine ethnic languages in Laos across four language families, Lao language (ພາສາລາວ or pasa Lao) is the only language taught at schools across the country (Cincotta-Segi, 2014). The LPRP's restrictions on the teaching of ethnic languages is a Lao-ization practice (Cincotta-Segi, 2014; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Lutz, 2022). Cultural and ethnic exclusion prevents many Akha communities from sending their children to school, often due to the educational system's focus on Lao language instruction. Consequently, many Akha people do not speak or read Lao, perpetuating their marginalisation (Cincotta-Segi, 2014). While there are minimal records on the language and literacy levels among ethnic groups in Laos, studies show that in 2011 up to forty-five percent of Lao children spoke a first language other than Lao (Cincotta-Segi, 2014). The exclusion of ethnic communities via the prioritisation of the Lao language and culture has had detrimental effects on Akha culture and community (Cincotta-Segi, 2014; Cincotta-Segi, 2011; King & Van de Walle, 2010).

## *1.6 The History of Development in Laos*

Laos has been a target country for international development since the mid-20th century (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Jerndal & Rigg, 1998). Laos was classified as a Least Developed Country (LDC) by the United Nations (UN) until 2021, when the Committee for Development Policy determined that Laos was eligible for a five-year preparatory period prior to ‘graduating’<sup>9</sup> from this status (United Nations, 2021). In 2024, the UN held a triennial review which confirmed Laos was on track for its scheduled graduation on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2026 (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2024). Several factors have been identified as contributing to Lao’s expected ‘graduation’ from its LDC status, including increased land linked trade, Chinese investment in Laos and a rise in international development financing (Sobir & Malavong, 2023). While international development has positively impacted Laos’s LDC status, evidence shows that development initiatives have also generated negative consequences, including forced migration, displacement, and human trafficking (Haefner, 2025; Howe & Sims, 2011). Despite the UN’s application of the LDC mechanism, it is also important to examine the criticism these measures of development have received. Fialho (2012) argues that the LDC mechanism fails because it maintains a system of labelling countries as ‘developing’<sup>10</sup> without requiring commitment to transformational change. Furthermore, the LDC mechanism often fails to capture the true experience within countries, given its reliance on quantitative measures of development based on economic indicators (Elver, 2011). Based on these critiques, we must consider development needs that extend beyond the LDC classification.

International investment in the development of Laos is mostly driven by geopolitical relationships, with leading donors spanning across the West and the Asian region (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). From the Asian region, Japan and South Korea are the most prominent development funders in Laos (Dayant et al., 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2009; United Nations Office for the Coordination of

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<sup>9</sup> The UN employs the term ‘graduation’ to describe a country’s transition from LDC status. While I recognise that this terminology reflects power dynamics inherent to development discourse, I have chosen to use this terminology as its UN’s official terminology.

<sup>10</sup> Prior to the emergence of the LDC classification the twofold classification system of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ was utilised.

Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). While China is not considered as a development partner, the recent rise in Chinese investment should not be overlooked (Devonshire-Ellis, 2022; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023). Significantly, the establishment of Chinese-funded roads and trainlines in Laos and the increased demand for Chinese agricultural export has changed lifestyle and farming practices across the country (Dwyer, 2022; Kusakabe & Chanthoumphone, 2021). Despite the growing financial and political engagement between China and Laos, Chinese investment is not commonly viewed as development because it carries the expectation of repayment (Devonshire-Ellis, 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that investment in Laos by countries other than China is also driven by geopolitical motivations that dictate development agendas.

Outside of the Asian region, most international development in Laos comes from Western countries, with top donors including Australia, European countries and until very recently, the USA (Dayant et al., 2024; Visapra, 2025). Significantly, Western diplomatic agendas and historical events have shaped the political nature of development 'relationships' between Laos and the West, including the USA's interest in stabilising Laos to prevent the further spread of communism and strengthen regional allies (Jarvis, 2023). While research on the correlation between historical events and long-term development investment in Laos is limited, research into American investment in development in Laos and its historical bombing of Laos suggest a strong correlation between the two (Jarvis, 2023; Lee, 2022; Lum, 2008; Yamada & Yamada, 2021). There is also growing focus on the motivations behind Chinese investment in Laos (Cheng, 2022; Lu & Schönweger, 2019). However, broader geopolitical factors influence all development relationships in the country. The underlying motivations behind development inevitably influence the design, delivery, and outcomes of any given program. Therefore, to evaluate the success of development efforts in Laos, it is essential to understand the geopolitical motivations driving them.

### *1.6.1 The Structure of the Development Sector in Laos*

A history of unwanted foreign influence in Laos has created mistrust of foreign investment throughout the Lao development sector (Belloni, 2014; Creak & Barney, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). While national and international government organisations play roles in Lao development, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and social enterprises drive much of the development work (Belloni,

2014; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Below follows a brief description of INGOs, CSOs, and social enterprises and their operation within the Lao development context.

### *International Non-Governmental Organisations*

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) established their presence in Laos during the 1980s, following decades of limited access due to war and restrictive government policies (Asian Development Bank, 2024). The LPRP's increased willingness to engage with INGOs has resulted in the Lao economy becoming dependent on international investment and foreign aid for a substantial proportion of the country's annual development expenditure (Creak & Barney, 2018). Despite the welcoming of foreign aid in Laos, there is still some scepticism surrounding the intentions of Western aid which creates a dynamic of tension and negotiation between INGOs and the LPRP (Dwyer, 2014; Lee, 2022).

INGOs face significant challenges when working with the Lao government, as evidenced by the complex registration process required to operate in the country. For an INGO to work in Laos there is a series of approvals that the organisations must receive (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Lao People's Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity, 2010). These approvals include: (1) approval to operate in Laos via an operation permit; (2) project approval to carry out a proposed project; (3) project office approval to set up a project office in Laos; (4) representative office approval to set up a representative office in Laos; (5) regional representative office approval to establish an office that will work in countries in the region including Laos; (6) approval of INGO representatives, project directors and foreign staff to work in Laos; and (7) approval of project activities (Lao People's Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity, 2010). Simply put, these approval processes can be difficult for national and international teams to navigate. To begin the approvals process, an INGO must receive an operating permit as well as a work and entry permit, then the INGO must develop and submit a proposal for review by all relevant ministries and authorities (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Once the proposal is approved a memorandum of understanding (MOU) must be signed between the INGO and each relevant government ministry (Asian Development Bank, 2024). The INGO must then renew their operating permit and MOU regularly (Asian Development Bank, 2024).

### *Civil Society Organisations*

Globally, civil society is defined as a network of organisations, associations, and groups that, while registered by the State, act independently of it (Stuart-Fox, 2005b). If applying this definition, Laos has no civil society due to an absence of an autonomous Civil Society Organisation (CSO) network (Belloni, 2014). However, there is ongoing academic debate about the existence of civil society in Laos, with most scholars describing Laos as having a distinct form of civil society that is more closely linked to the State (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Belloni, 2014; Jensen, 2016; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Rather than aligning with the global definition of civil society, Lao civil society primarily consists of associations that are either established or approved by the LPRP (Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Significantly, a core role of the LPRP in the management of CSOs is their legal authority to prohibit the establishment or operation of CSOs that oppose the laws or ‘values’ of Lao society<sup>11</sup> (Belloni, 2014; Stuart-Fox, 2005b).

In their modern form, CSOs were developed in Laos soon after World War Two, in response to the increased need for national stability and economic growth (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Belloni, 2014). During the early years of CSOs the government established several unions to act within the sector, including the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) (Belloni, 2014; Faming, 2018). Since their establishment, these government formed organisations and CSOs have been widely criticised for their role in implementing and promoting LPRP directives in local communities (Belloni, 2014; Creak & Barney, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Following the establishment of CSOs, there have been several decrees that dictate the operation and legality of CSO’s in the country (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Under these decrees the multi-stage registration process of CSOs is managed entirely by government authorities (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Belloni, 2014).

The INGOs often choose to partner with CSOs to achieve both national and international development agendas, despite international critique of Lao civil society (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Reports on CSO operations in Laos indicate the importance of Lao CSOs in development initiatives (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Belloni, 2014; Stuart-Fox, 2009). Specifically, reports indicate that Lao CSOs can successfully bridge relationships between local communities, INGOs and Government actors (Asian Development Bank, 2024; Belloni, 2014).

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<sup>11</sup> Under this definition the values of Lao society are defined by the LPRP.

While INGO partnership with CSOs is mostly encouraged it is impossible to ignore the inherent power dynamics that exist within these partnerships. The significant disparity in funding between INGOs and CSOs often creates an unequal power dynamic, where INGO funding dictates the programming of CSO initiatives (Belloni, 2014; Jensen, 2016). Foreign donor guidelines result in CSOs modifying their activities to align with Western-centric development paradigms promoted by the funding organisations (Belloni, 2014; Jensen, 2016).

In line with the shift to decolonise development, there has been increased focus on ‘building the capacity’<sup>12</sup> of CSOs in Laos. This shift has aimed to mitigate the direct influence of INGOs on CSO programming (Jensen, 2016). However, even when INGO-CSO relationships emphasise capacity building rather than prescriptive programming, Western-centric development agendas still prevail through the transfer of theories and tools rooted in Western development scholarship (Earp, 2023b; Jensen, 2016).

### *Social Enterprises*

Social enterprises are organisations designed to improve social or community problems under a business model (Hynes, 2009; Phanthavong & Thanitbenjasith, 2019). In Laos there is no legislation for social enterprises, so instead organisations often operate as a private company while maintaining a ‘non-profit objective’ (European Commission, 2024). Because many private organisations operate in this way, I will refer to them as social enterprises throughout this thesis. A review of social enterprise operations in Laos found that they are often small to medium sized businesses that rely on partners to conduct activities within the community (Phanthavong & Thanitbenjasith, 2019). Social enterprises are a relatively new form of development assistance in Laos and as a result they are not always considered as a main actor in the development sector. While social enterprises are not formally recognised as part of the development movement, they are often included in development working groups, development meetings and sectorial discussions, evidencing their influence on development progress in Laos. Significantly, in 2024 the United Nations Population Fund’s (UNFPA) aimed

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<sup>12</sup> Capacity building is a commonly used term in development literature, describing the process of enhancing or strengthening the skills, knowledge, resources, and systems of individuals and organisations. International development partners frequently use this term to describe training activities with in-country teams. While I have used the term in this study due to its prevalence in the literature, I acknowledge the inherent power dynamics it embodies by framing development partnerships in terms of coaching or mentoring. See Cornwall, A., & Eade, D. (2010). *Deconstructing Development Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*. In: London: Information Press.

to promote partnerships with social enterprises by selecting partnering with organisations from the private sector for the annual ‘16 days of activism against gender based violence’ campaign (United Nations Lao PDR, 2024). Despite the growing involvement of social enterprises in the development sector they still face ongoing challenges. A review of Digital Divide Data, a social enterprise operating in Laos, found that it was difficult to balance the competing goals of the enterprise to promote social welfare and development while also delivering a ‘successful’ business model (Gurstein et al., 2009).

Since the establishment of the New Economic Mechanism in Laos in 1988, the economy has progressively decentralised and opened to Western investment (Gurstein et al., 2009; Phanthavong & Thanitbenjasith, 2019; Stuart-Fox, 1989). Currently there is limited literature on the influence of a Party-controlled economy on the operations and successes of social enterprises in Laos. While this study does not specifically review these challenges, co-researchers from social enterprises highlighted unique challenges facing social enterprises in Laos.

### *1.7 The History of Gender-Targeted Development in Laos*

Since 1955, the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) has served as the primary national organisation responsible for the advancement and development of Lao women (Faming, 2018; Ireson, 2018; Kusakabe, 2005; Weeratunge et al., 2016). The Union is closely connected to the Party and is often criticised for mobilising women’s support for the Party rather than focusing on improving the lives of Laotian women (Ireson, 2018; Kusakabe, 2005; Thomson & Baden, 1993). The LWU is known for promoting the ‘*Three Good Deeds and Two Duties*’ which is a set of ideological principles for a ‘good’ Lao woman (Ireson, 1992; Takayama, 2024). The ‘*Three Good Deeds and Two Duties*’ have changed a little over time. However, in essence, the ‘*Three Good Deeds and Two Duties*’ have continued to require women to be a good citizen, a good mother, a good wife and to participate in activities for the freedom of women and for nation building (Faming, 2018; Ireson, 1992). The LWU is often utilised by the LPRP and international development organisations to organise programs and activities that target women (Faming, 2018; Ireson, 2018; Thomson & Baden, 1993). The promotion of gender-targeted development programs by the LWU aligns closely with the ideology of the ‘*Three Good Deeds and Two Duties*’ as women are called to participate in activities that aim to improve the status of women and the development of Laos.

In recent years, there has been growing interest from international development organisations on gender-targeted development in Laos, which has in part been led by feminist activists and academics (Faming, 2018; Khamphouvong, 2019; Lee & Park, 2011; Maxwell et al., 2016). Gender-targeted development initiatives primarily emerged in response to the gender inequality experienced by women (Boserup, 1970; Jacoby, 1972). Concepts like the ‘feminisation of poverty’, the idea that women are disproportionately affected by poverty compared to men, are often used to promote the need for gender-targeted development initiatives (Khamphouvong, 2019; Lingam, 2006). To counteract the feminisation of poverty in Laos, development programs often focus on gender-targeted means of development delivery including training, extension, and participation opportunities (Faming, 2018). Key objectives of gender-targeted programs in Laos include women’s decision-making power, the distribution of resources, women’s leadership, and economic empowerment (Weeratunge et al., 2016). Notably, these programs often apply gender frameworks defined by their Western donor organisations.

The importation of Western feminist values in Laos often creates tension between Lao and international development actors (Faming, 2018; Thilakoun et al., 2023). A key difference lies in Western organisations’ focus on women’s empowerment versus the Lao understanding of gender as a relationship between men and women. In Lao language, the word ‘gender’ literally translates to “the roles of men and women” (Faming, 2018). While Western definitions of gender also consider gender to be a social construct, like the Lao language literal definition, Western organisations usually focus on women in gender-targeted development programs (Rathgeber, 2003; Richardson, 2015). This focus gives rise to programs that regard terms like ‘women’ and ‘women’s empowerment’ to be synonymous with ‘gender’ and ‘gender-targeted development’ (Moser, 2005; Smyth, 2007).

There is no singular definition of empowerment, and the term is often co-opted to fit a variety of frameworks (Habibov et al., 2017; Shields, 1995). In Laos the concept of empowerment is often grounded in the communist political ideology of the country (Thilakoun et al., 2023). Gender equity aligns closely with communism, because for all people to be equal, women must be included (DeSilva, 1993). However, Poretzkova et al. (2024) claim that, in reality, communism only promotes empowerment theoretically, but not in practice. In Laos the empowerment of women is often considered to be the responsibility of the Party (Thilakoun

et al., 2023). This contrasts with international organisations who often apply the most recent Western feminist theories, and view empowerment as a process of redistributing power within traditionally patriarchal societal practices (Khamphouvong, 2019; Thilakoun et al., 2023). Importantly, these two definitions place the responsibility of women's empowerment on different actors.

For international organisations to work effectively within the one-Party system and with partners such as the LWU they must adhere to culturally sensitive practices and understandings of women's roles within society (Thilakoun et al., 2023). This is particularly important when engaging with the LWU, as the LWU consider empowerment as a practice that will assist the country in upholding "Lao tradition and culture, and building a harmonised family environment" (Thilakoun et al., 2023; Thomson & Baden, 1993). If an organisation differs too significantly from this definition, they risk a loss of trust from the LWU and therefore the government. The consequences of programs that are not culturally or contextually relevant could include failed development programs, deteriorating government-partner relations, and potential harm experienced to the target women for whom the program is supposed to support (Momsen, 2001).

### *1.7.1 The Status of Women in Laos*

Given that gender-targeted development often aims to 'improve' the status of women, this section will explore the status of women in Laos and the factors that influence this status. The status of women in Laos is considered relatively high compared to other countries in the Southeast Asian region (Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2021). This was reflected in the 2020 UNDP Human Development Index where Laos ranked 137<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries overall, but 113<sup>th</sup> out of 162 countries when adjusted for gender equality (UNDP, 2023). However, despite this relative equity, Laos still faces considerable barriers for gender equality and women's empowerment. Significantly, women living rurally or women from ethnic minority groups experience greater gendered disadvantage, which is likely not reflected in these indexes and reports (Faming, 2018; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024). Due to the high rates of ethnic diversity in Laos, no one depiction of gender roles and divisions will be representative of all gender relations, therefore, in this section I divide its focus between: (1) Lao Loum women, widely considered to be the ethnic 'majority' in Laos; and (2) Akha women, a target community in this study.

### *The Status of Lao Loum Women in Laos*

Lao Loum households follow either a matrilineal<sup>13</sup>, patrilineal<sup>14</sup> or bilateral<sup>15</sup> kinship system or a combination of all three approaches (Schenk-Sandbergen, 2012, 2024). The occurrence of matrilineal and bilateral family systems in Lao Loum households contrasts with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in the region, which predominantly favour a patrilineal family structure (Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024). As a result of the prevalence of matrilineal and bilateral systems, Lao Loum women generally enjoy a relatively higher status within their families and communities compared to women in neighbouring countries or other ethnic groups (Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024). Despite these family systems, Lao Loum women still experience disadvantage within the household including reduced decision-making opportunities, limited land ownership, economic disempowerment, and disproportionate household responsibilities (Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Earp, 2023a; Faming, 2018).

Traditionally, Lao Loum women are responsible for non-cash household tasks including livestock husbandry, family caretaking, small business management and domestic activities (Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Earp et al., 2025; Khouangvichit, 2010). Despite the heavy responsibility of agricultural and household management, the roles of women are often undervalued in Laos (Douangphachanh et al., 2021). This is likely due to an imported and often Western patriarchal perception of agricultural labour as well as the undervaluation of women's contributions in the workforce and household management (Khamphouvong, 2019). Significantly, disproportionate labour divisions in Lao Loum households mean women often experience time poverty due their significant farm and household responsibilities (Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Earp, 2023a).

While the participation of Lao Loum women in the labour force is often praised as a form of empowerment, it also presents challenges to achieving gender equity under typically Western definitions of empowerment (Faming, 2018; Khamphouvong, 2019; United Nations Development Programme, 2021). In 2021, over half of the women employed in Laos were

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<sup>13</sup> A kinship system in which lineage, inheritance, and family ties are traced through the mother's side of the family.

<sup>14</sup> A kinship system in which lineage, inheritance, and family ties are traced through the father's side of the family.

<sup>15</sup> A kinship system in which lineage, inheritance, and family ties are traced equally through the mother's and father's side of the family.

unpaid family workers (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). In addition to this unpaid labour, Lao women are often the primary caretaker for their children (Earp et al., 2025). This balance of unpaid labour and household responsibilities often results in women's time poverty (Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Earp, 2023a). Therefore, there is a risk that development programs promoting Lao Loum women's involvement in external paid labour will risk increasing women's time poverty (Khamphouvong, 2019).

#### *The Status of Akha Women in Laos*

Akha families in Laos follow a patrilineal system where the father is considered the most respected family member (Laurent Chazee, 2002; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2024). In patrilineal societies, power and authority are typically inherited through the male lineage (King & Stone, 2010). In Akha families this usually means the eldest son will inherit power, wealth, and leadership roles from his father (Laurent Chazee, 2002). Similar to Lao Loum families, the majority of family income is earned and managed by Akha men while Akha women engage in non-cash tasks (Laurent Chazee, 2002). In addition to kinship practices, the cultural script of Akha communities, the Akhazang, prescribes the roles of men and women (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007). An old Akha fable summarises the perceived spheres of men and women, stating *"women have problems, but they are located in the home. Men have problems but they are located in the world"* (Lewis, 2002).

Akha village authorities are responsible for imposing the Akhazang (traditional Akha beliefs), which typically governs how women can engage with their community and household (Agostini, 2018; Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Laurent Chazee, 2002; Lewis, 1984). The codes of the Akhazang vary between villages and communities as dictated by the village authorities (Laurent Chazee, 2002; Lewis, 1984). There are several leaders responsible for maintaining the 'good order' of Akha communities including: (1) the Village Headman; (2) Village Leader; (3) Blacksmith; (4) Priest; and (5) Shaman (Lewis, 1984; Ongaro, 2019). None of these roles can be held by women (Lewis, 1984; Ongaro, 2019). The Village Priest and Village Headman are two of the most important roles within the village, the Priest is in charge of specifying and maintaining the Akhazang for his community, whilst the Village Headman ensures the community is upholding the requirements of the Lao government (Lewis, 1984). Thus, in addition to the involvement of the Lao government and the LWU, any development program aiming to successfully deliver development programs in Akha communities must

actively engage with village authorities. However, there is limited evidence of development programs that actively engage Akha communities (Sychareun et al., 2011).

Akha women encounter significant barriers to participation and empowerment via national and international development programs (Sychareun et al., 2011). Specifically, the low rates of literacy and educational opportunities across Akha communities in Northern Laos have been proven to limit women's engagement in development programming (Evans, 2003; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Sychareun et al., 2011). Currently national policies and development agendas homogenise Laos by documenting only in Lao language (Evans, 2003; Ireson & Ireson, 1991). This ignores the diversity of language groups in Laos and fails to adequately engage Lao ethnic groups in national decision making. As a result, ethnic groups including Akha, Hmong, Khmu, and other ethnic groups in Laos are excluded from reading or participating in these documents (Evans, 2003; Ireson, 1996; Ireson & Ireson, 1991).

### *1.8 Positioning the Researcher*

Standpoint theory presents the notion of 'situated knowledge', a concept that suggests an individual's cultural and social standing impacts the ways in which they interpret information (Gurung, 2020; Wylie, 2013). Specifically, the theory focuses on the relationship between power, privilege, and knowledge (Wylie, 2013). Feminist standpoint theory extends standpoint theory by arguing that gender dynamics fundamentally shape both knowledge creation and interpretation (Gurung, 2020). In making this argument, feminist standpoint theory utilises two 'sister' concepts: (1) 'epistemic oppression'; and (2) 'epistemic privilege' (Fricker, 1999; Gurung, 2020; Intemann, 2016; Letherby, 2003). The concept of epistemic oppression refers to the way in which the 'powerful', often men in patriarchal societies, can negatively influence the experiences of the 'powerless', women in these societies (Fricker, 1999). Conversely, the concept of epistemic privilege claims that there is epistemic advantage afforded to marginalised groups, such as women, due to their unique experiences of systems of power (Fricker, 1999; Gurung, 2020; Intemann, 2016; Leclerc, 2021; Letherby, 2003; Toole, 2024). When considered together these 'sister' concepts suggest that while the 'powerful' can shape the experiences of the 'powerless', being 'powerless' grants an individual epistemic authority (Gurung, 2020).

Common criticism of feminist standpoint theory surrounds its de-politicisation of significant intersectional power relations (Collins, 2015; Dietz, 2003; Letherby, 2003). Specifically, critics argue that a focus on the gender binary between men and women in feminist standpoint theory, fails to acknowledge the intersectional power dynamics that exist within these binary categorisations (Collins, 2015; Dietz, 2003). Collins (2015) argues that feminist standpoint theory tends to overlook important racial power dynamics by viewing groups as collections of individuals instead of entities that are directly shaped by their own inherent social hierarchy. This assumption directly contributes to the problematic nature of epistemic privilege, as prioritising certain perspectives based on their supposed epistemic authority creates and reinforces power hierarchies that feminist standpoint theory fails to adequately acknowledge (Letherby, 2003). Not only does this privileging create unequal and unexamined power hierarchies it also exacerbates a binary between men and women, where instead of male supremacy the epistemic privileging of women favours a notion of female supremacy (Letherby, 2003). Toole (2024) proposes that while marginalisation grants an individual epistemic advantage, a process of consciousness-raising, including research and observation, can assist the non-marginalised to gain a privileged standpoint without needing to experience the oppression itself.

The grounding of feminist standpoint theory in the concepts of epistemic privilege and oppression, suggests research should centre on the lived experiences of the marginalised (Gurung, 2020). While this perspective emphasises the importance of the experiential realities of the marginalised, it fails to acknowledge the value of the outsider's perspective. Literature exploring insider-outsider relationships suggest that outsiders, despite their marginal status, have access to a unique perspective as they can see aspects of the insiders' world that the insider may not see due their familiarity (Ademolu, 2024). Rather than viewing epistemic privilege as a rigid dichotomy between insider and outsider perspectives, I argue that these positions are fluid and context-dependent. Since every individual's perspective is inherently limited and composed of fragmented viewpoints rather than complete truth, no single position, whether insider or outsider, can claim absolute epistemic authority (Bukamal, 2022; High & Reno, 2023). For this reason, one should critically reflect when considering standpoint theory and the dichotomy of insider-outsider relationships in relation to epistemic privilege. When applying feminist standpoint theory to my positionality, I used it as a tool to consider

the importance of my experiences both before and during the study, and to explore the impact standpoint theory had on the way I conducted, analysed, and understood the research.

While I draw heavily upon a feminist standpoint in this study, I also recognise that we cannot ignore the power and privilege that is built into the theory itself. The concept of epistemic oppression required me, the researcher, to recognise the ‘powerful’ and the ‘powerless’. In doing so I should also acknowledge that the role of the researcher is one of power as I categorise who holds the power and therefore the associated levels of epistemic privilege. While I do believe that an individual from a marginalised group will have more understanding about the experiences of that group, the notion of epistemic privilege still puts the onus on the researcher to grant that advantage (Leclerc, 2021). As such it is the researcher who chooses who has the most privilege (Leclerc, 2021; On, 2013). Not only does this allow the researcher to assign privilege in relation to knowledge, but it also applies a lens of universality, claiming that all women have privilege by nature of being women which in turn ignores aspects of intersectionality (Fricker, 1999; Kendall, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2021).

I maintain that researchers must remain aware of how their standpoint influences their research, despite the limitations of feminist standpoint theory. Importantly, given I collaborated with co-researchers of different nationalities and ethnicities in this study, it is vital that my standpoint as both an insider and an outsider to various co-researcher cohorts is considered (Knott, 2009). To uphold the core values of feminist standpoint theory, I have aimed to outline the relationships and experiences that shape my perspective. Consequently, I have chosen to utilise a first-person voice throughout this thesis and include a standpoint statement to provide both myself as the researcher and you as the reader with a framework for understanding how my position has both limited and enriched this scientific inquiry. Throughout this study, I use stories and pictures as tools to foster cross-cultural connection and understanding. To honour this approach, I present my standpoint statement as a personal narrative, incorporating supporting pictures.

### *1.8.1 Narrative Standpoint Statement*

As a British-born Australian academic the following standpoint statement outlines key aspects of my life that I believe have shaped me as a researcher, with particular attention to my work on gender in Laos.

### *Being the 'Outsider'*

At the age of four, my mother, father, brother, and I immigrated from England to Australia. Being six years younger than my brother, I quickly adopted an Australian accent while the rest of my family retained their English accents. This created confusion about my national identity, at home I felt Australian while my family seemed British, yet at school I felt British while my friends were Australian. Reflecting on this experience in later life, I recognise how privileged my encounter with 'othering' was. Unlike my peers from Asia or Africa, I was never truly considered an 'immigrant', which granted me a relatively 'easy' assimilation process. Despite this privilege, I distinctly remember the discomfort of feeling perpetually different.

During my first year working in Laos, in 2018, I held similar feelings of frustration and loneliness. I worked as the only expatriate in a Lao team and my key role was to liaise between the Lao and Australian project teams. This meant I never quite fit in with either team. I knew I would never be Lao, yet my position of being based in-country also meant I didn't align fully with the Australian team back in Sydney. I was also the only woman working within the Lao project team, which contributed to a sense of otherness as I navigated the challenges of balancing gender and cultural differences. My colleagues regularly corrected my *pasa Lao* (Lao language) or the way I wore my *Sin* (a traditional Lao skirt). With each correction it felt like the team was emphasising our differences.



*Figure 3 The Lao Project Team in Xieng Khouang, 2019*

After months of frustration, I eventually learnt to interpret my Lao colleagues' corrections about the way I spoke and dressed as attempts at assisting integration, rather than criticism. This realisation came once I understood that despite my best efforts, years of colonisation meant I inherited a sense of difference and related privilege that I could and never would shake. My whiteness and education had blurred together so that as an expatriate I was considered as the most knowledgeable person in the room, regardless of the fact my colleagues had more experience and knowledge than me. Rather than taking offence at the clear differences between myself and the team, I needed to embrace cultural humility and be receptive to learning about our cultural distinctions. In doing so, I recognised the similarities between my experience of otherness in Laos to my experience growing up in Australia. In both instances my feelings of isolation were a direct product of my privilege.



*Figure 4 Training session in Vientiane, I am wearing a Sin, 2019*

### *Working in Development*

I started working in Laos during my Honours project as part of my Bachelor of Animal and Veterinary Bioscience at The University of Sydney (USYD). Since then, I have conducted several research projects in Laos, including my honours thesis and Master of Philosophy in Veterinary Science from USYD and the PhD thesis you are currently reading. Additionally, I worked as an in-country implementation officer for two Australian Centre of International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) funded agricultural development programs conducted by USYD and the Department of Livestock and Fisheries (DLF) in Laos. I have also worked as a gender consultant on several projects in the country.

My first few years in Laos were filled with frustration. When I started in 2018, I had no formal development or international relations training. The nature of my work meant I regularly travelled to remote districts in Northern and Central Laos. During these trips I had to navigate the challenges of cross-language communication as the team spoke limited English and I spoke even less Lao. It took me a long time to make friends and I struggled to place myself within my community and my team. Over this period, I made a lot of mistakes. I held expectations of my Lao colleagues that were riddled with colonialism and privilege. To achieve project milestones, I was required to maintain tight deadlines and assumed any delay was a form of soft resistance or personal retaliation. Most significantly for this study, I pushed for gender-targeted agricultural development initiatives while failing to question the communities' interest in these programs.

Throughout my time in Laos, I gradually began to examine the barriers that had shaped my interactions with the Lao project team. Much of my growth was driven by the friendships I formed with Lao colleagues and a deepening understanding of the local context. Through project activities I began working closely with the Rural Development Agency (RDA), a Lao CSO based in Vientiane. While collaborating with Chathalangsy Sisouanh, the Executive Director of the RDA, I developed a strong interest in gender and development programming in Laos. This experience underscored the importance of collaboration, localisation, and local leadership, which ultimately led to this PhD study. As I began to focus on the importance of collaboration and partnership, I became increasingly aware of the pressure to design and deliver gender-targeted development programs rooted in Western feminist frameworks.

During my time working in Laos, I have observed both international and national development programs grow increasingly frustrated with the box-ticking and tokenistic nature of gender programming. Further, I have seen a disconnect between development funders' perceptions of gender, empowerment and development compared to the in-country team and, more importantly, the target communities. Amongst these growing frustrations I have noticed an increasing divide between actors in the development process. Development practitioners seem to accuse development donors and academics of having limited contextual understanding, while academics blame practitioners and donors for their lack of theoretical knowledge. Meanwhile, donors suggest that practitioners do not understand timelines and resources. In short, there appears to be limited knowledge or acceptance of the multi-disciplinary nature of development practice and as such there is a growing divide in the understanding of collaborative practice.

### 1.9 Outline of this Thesis

This PhD thesis is structured in the following way.

*Table 1 Outline of the Thesis*

<b>Chapter Number</b>	<b>Chapter Title</b>	<b>Chapter Description</b>
-	Prologue	The Story of Sally, an expatriate development practitioner working in Laos.
1	Introduction	Study introduction, background on the intersection of feminism, development, and gender-targeted development, overview of gender-targeted development in Laos, and contextual background on Laos.
2	Methodology and Methods	An overview of the three-cycle FPAR methodology and the corresponding qualitative methods utilised in this study.
3	Cycle One	An overview of the 'Look, Think, Act' phases in Cycle One of this three-cycle study.
4	Cycle Two	An overview of the 'Look, Think, Act' phases in Cycle Two of this three-cycle study.
5	Cycle Three	An overview of the 'Look, Think, Act' phases in Cycle Three of this three-cycle study.
6	Discussion	Summary of research findings focusing on the gap between ideology and reality, examination of findings in relation to wider literature, and analysis of impacts on the wheel of fire.
-	Epilogue	A personal reflection on my positionality and how it has been shaped by this study.

### *1.10 Chapter Summary*

In this chapter, I introduced the study by outlining its aims and objectives. I then reviewed the literature on the intersection between Western feminism, development, and gender-targeted development. The findings of this review revealed the influence Western-centric feminist and development ideologies have had on conceptions of gender-targeted development. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that gender-targeted development is constructed around Western frameworks rather than adapting to the local contexts where it operates. I then reviewed the context of the study, focusing on the history of development, specifically gender-targeted development in Laos, identifying the gaps between Western and Lao conceptions of gender and empowerment. Finally, I concluded this chapter by positioning myself in relation to the study through the application of a feminist standpoint framework. I used a narrative standpoint statement to identify significant life periods - including my experience as an immigrant, my early work in Laos, and the journey to this study - to highlight how my perspective has been shaped by these experiences.

## *2. Chapter Two – Methodology and Methods*

### *2.1 Chapter Outline*

In Chapter Two, I identify my research foundations including my axiology, ontology, and epistemology. I also outline the methodology selection process before presenting Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) as the selected methodology. I detail the process of co-researcher selection, and the role of co-researchers in this study. Finally, I outline the research methods used in each of the three cycles of FPAR.

### *2.2 Research Foundations: Axiology, Ontology, and Epistemology*

A researcher’s worldview is a critical factor that cannot be disentangled from their research (Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 2006). As outlined in Chapter One, I apply feminist standpoint theory to my understanding of researcher positionality, recognising that an individual’s social position influences how they interpret information (Gurung, 2020; Intemann, 2016; Wylie, 2013). A researcher’s positionality influences their work because their foundational experiences act as the lens through which they view the central values of their research (axiology), their perception of reality (ontology) and their beliefs regarding the generation of new and existing knowledge (epistemology) (Pretorius, 2024; Redman-MaLaren & Mills, 2015). These foundations shape every aspect of how the researcher views their research, much like how the foundations of a building shape its overall structure. For this reason, it is important to identify the foundations of a researcher’s positionality as they are also the foundations of the research itself (Redman-MaLaren & Mills, 2015). Table 2 characterises my axiology, ontology and epistemology which are then expanded in the sections below.

*Table 2 Summary of Research Foundations*

<b><i>Research Foundation</i></b>	<b><i>Characteristic</i></b>
Axiology	Community, Collaboration, and Friendship
Ontology	Critical Realism
Epistemology	Knowledge is informed by cultural and historical contexts, shaping, and being shaped by the specific social, political, and cultural factors from which it emerges and evolves.

### *2.2.1 Axiology*

A researcher's axiology shapes the ethical and moral dimensions of their research which in turn guide the design, delivery, and interpretation of their study (Mertens, 2008; Pretorius, 2024). Due to the central role of axiology, a researcher must critically examine their fundamental values to understand how they guide and shape their research. This is especially true when a researcher plans to conduct cross-cultural research, that engages with a variety of cultural perspectives (Mertens, 2017; Nurmatovich, 2023). Cultural humility is a process of reflexivity where the researcher considers the diversity of cultural perspectives and experiences included in their study (Toraman Turk et al., 2024; Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). To be culturally 'humble', a researcher must engage with cultural diversity on multiple levels, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic (Toraman Turk et al., 2024). A process of cultural humility is required for a researcher to recognise both the cultural lens through which they view their research and the lens through which they are viewed by their research collaborators (Mertens, 2017; Symonette, 2008; Toraman Turk et al., 2024). However, even when a researcher is culturally aware, they may still struggle to recognise the role of privilege in their research processes (Toraman Turk et al., 2024).

My axiology is rooted in the values of community, collaboration, and friendship. These values align with an emancipatory axiology, an ethical framework that prioritises the empowerment and inclusion of marginalised groups (Buchanan et al., 2023). While this axiology supports decolonial ways of thinking, I am conscious that my lived experience has at times perpetuated colonialism, so I am cautious not to claim I work completely within a decolonial paradigm (Collins, 2015; Jaworsky, 2019). Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of this study has limited my ability to engage deeply with decolonial scholarship, so I am cautious not to claim I work within a wholly decolonial axiology. Instead, my axiology centralises the key values of decolonisation through the principles of collaboration, anti-colonialism, and unity. I resonate with the community basis of Indigenous epistemologies that promote respect, reciprocity, and cooperation with indigenous communities (Jaworsky, 2019). Specifically, my axiology centralises gender to promote justice and equality for all people regardless of socially constructed hierarchies. This approach emphasises the importance of relationships in both the research process and its outcomes by prioritising the co-production of knowledge with community (Manning & Denker, 2015).

### 2.2.2 *Ontology*

A researcher's ontology explains how they interpret the nature of reality (Pretorius, 2024; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). Different ontologies describe the various ways reality is shaped and constructed (Pretorius, 2024). For example, a realist ontology views reality as a fixed experience, while a relativist ontology describes multiple versions of reality based on individual and collective experiences (Mertens, 2017; Pretorius, 2024). Critical realism pairs the notion that reality exists independently of human constructions with the idea that reality can only be understood through human interpretations, which are influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Fletcher, 2020). Feminist research often applies critical realism to unpack gendered experiences of reality (Fletcher, 2020; New, 1998). Additionally, post-structuralism is also regularly used in feminist research to challenge 'universal' truths by emphasising how social structures and gender binaries are influenced by power relations (Fletcher, 2020; New, 1998).

Although both critical realist and post-structuralist ontologies are frequently applied in feminist research, my ontology more closely aligns with a critical realist perspective. I acknowledge the existence of socially constructed hierarchies that influence gender roles while recognising that individuals perceive and experience these hierarchies differently. Importantly, I argue that, despite existing in a 'fixed' reality, individuals have the agency to challenge and change social hierarchies, which is a principal foundation of this study. Critics of post-structuralism argue that the ontology overlooks individual agency because it fails to acknowledge that gendered experiences are shaped by structures that can be identified and changed (Clegg, 2006; Fletcher, 2020; Rae, 2020). Instead, these critics argue that post-structuralism tends to focus on epistemic questions around what we know about reality, rather than addressing ontological questions about the nature of reality itself, leading to an epistemic fallacy, which reduces ontological questions to epistemological ones (Clegg, 2006; Fletcher, 2020; Westra, 2019). By adopting a critical realist ontology, I can examine the importance of individual agency by recognising that while we are shaped by social structures, we also possess the power to act within and potentially transform these structures (Clegg, 2006). Therefore, I resonate with critical realism as it offers a framework consistent with my feminist principles.

### *2.2.3 Epistemology*

Epistemology describes the process of gaining knowledge, including a critical examination of who can gain knowledge and under what circumstances (Pretorius, 2024; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015; Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2006). While feminist epistemologies differ, they mostly focus on the universality of feminism and the male-centeredness of historical knowledge production (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). The focus on the gender binary of knowledge production, while important, has ignored the complexities of intersectional gender experiences which often simplifies gender experiences to those held by white women (Collins, 2015; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). While more recent feminist debates have acknowledged the need to 'de-universalise' the feminist 'we' to eradicate the 'whitewashing' of feminism, this shift has not resulted in the dismantling of the core assumptions of dominant feminist theories (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). As a result, feminist epistemologies continue to treat the gender binary in knowledge production as the primary reason for gender inequity and fail to acknowledge other intersecting causes of inequality, including the 'dominance' of Western feminism (Collins, 1997; Dietz, 2003; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024).

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist academic, suggests that instead of trying to find and use a universal feminist epistemology we should focus our attention on recentering the voices of those who have been marginalised (Collins, 2015). This argument is based on the founding arguments of black feminism that suggest a singular, all-encompassing epistemology may not adequately reflect the varied experiences and realities of non-white women. The root of Collins' argument is that rather than creating new labels for epistemologies, which are predominantly shaped by Western-centric academia, we should instead focus on decolonising our epistemic principles (Collins, 2015). Thus, a decolonial episteme acknowledges ways of knowing and doing beyond colonial structures of knowledge. In order to apply a decolonial episteme a researcher must understand how coloniality, modernity, and decoloniality interconnect (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Put simply, decoloniality exists only as a response to coloniality, which itself emerges from modernity (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Therefore, a decolonial episteme cannot be achieved while upholding the principles of modernity. Developing a truly decolonial episteme requires a process of personal discovery where the researcher must actively unlearn the colonial frameworks embedded within most academic pathways (Green & Bennett, 2018; Muller, 2023). Once a researcher moves beyond the

colonial power matrix to recognise multiple ways of knowing and doing, they can reject the notion of a singular feminist theory (Collins, 2015; Dietz, 2003 (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Given that my axiology aligns with the values of a decolonial axiology, I chose to review decolonial feminist epistemologies to develop my personal epistemology. I am conscious that in recent years there has been a rise in academics claiming to undertake decolonial work without engaging in the processes that make such work genuinely decolonial (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Muller, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Muller (2022) highlights the complexity of decolonial practice, describing the six stages of decolonisation that involve processes of unlearning and relearning. Critically, Muller (2022) emphasises that Western academics will experience a different decolonisation process due to their insider status within colonial academia. While the scope of this study limits my ability to consider the vast literature surrounding decolonial feminist scholarship, I believe its inclusion is important due to the way it has shaped my epistemological lens and its relation to my community axiology.

The crux of decolonial feminism lies in its acknowledgment of the hegemonic assumptions of feminist theory which result in the 'dominance' of Western feminism (Lugones, 2016). In this context, the term 'dominance' is used to describe the well-documented overrepresentation of middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, white women in Western feminist discourse and as such the underrepresentation of non-Western, disabled, LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other diverse sexual orientations, and gender identities), minority voices in feminist discourse (Barrett & McIntosh, 2005; Duncan, 2010; Ogletree et al., 2019). While my critical realist ontology does not commit me to a singular epistemology; I align with decolonial epistemologies because of my community axiology. A core principle of my epistemology is that I accept there is no singular universal feminism (Spelman, 1990). Hence, I acknowledge the need to dismantle colonial structures and address inherent power imbalances in my epistemic framework (Curiel, 2022; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024; Manning, 2021a; Thomas, 2020).

Criticisms of decolonial epistemologies focus on the platforming of epistemic frameworks that centre on the lives and experiences of white women as the experiences of women in general (Thomas, 2020). Despite claiming to decolonialise knowledge production, critics argue that decolonial epistemes can fail to truly acknowledge the colonialism of Western feminist knowledge. Even when notions of intersectionality are applied to decolonial epistemes, some

scholars argue that intersectionality itself is an oppressive categorisation (Lugones, 2014; Thomas, 2020). While intersectionality aims to de-universalise feminism through the recognition of the diversity of women's experiences, its application under colonial discourse is sometimes accused of categorising women based on race or ethnicity alone (Thomas, 2020). Instead of challenging the homogenisation of women's experiences this oversimplified act of categorisation can reinforce colonial power dynamics by reducing non-Western women's experiences to predetermined racial or ethnic labels shaped by colonial histories (Lugones, 2014; Memmi, 2013; Thomas, 2020; Tomlinson, 2013).

In addition to these criticisms, a disconnect I experience with decolonial feminist epistemologies is the tendency to 'over-theorise' knowledge production. In my view, decolonial feminist epistemologies are often positioned solely as a discussion about knowledge production. Of course, by their very nature, epistemic frameworks must consider the production of knowledge. However, as Lugones (2014) states, "*oppression cannot be erased conceptually*". For this reason, I believe that decolonial epistemologies should focus on challenging current approaches to knowledge production rather than purely debating previous configurations of knowledge itself. To confront oppressive epistemologies, one needs to action change rather than retrofitting previously oppressive forms of knowledge and labelling them as decolonial (Collins, 1997; Lugones, 2014).

Drawing from my review of decolonial feminist epistemologies, I have constructed my own epistemological approach. My episteme is characterised by my belief that knowledge is both conceptual and an everyday practice and as such my epistemology depicts theory and action as an integrated framework. Based on these foundations my epistemology is characterised by the notion that knowledge is tied to cultural and historical contexts, and as such, our understanding of gender is shaped by colonialism and sexism. Paradies (2018) explains this connection, noting that colonial and racist thinking can be reproduced unconsciously through an individual's socialisation within colonial systems. This insight is significant because it reveals that even deliberate attempts at decolonisation may reproduce colonialism, either through unconscious reproduction of internalised frameworks or through conscious resistance to transformative change that undermines systems of privilege (Muller, 2023; Paradies, 2018). By recognising the influence social, political, and cultural factors have on knowledge I can

begin to undergo the important stages of rediscovery that are central to decolonisation (Muller, 2023).

## *2.3 Feminist Participatory Action Research*

### *2.3.1 Participatory Action Research Methodologies*

Participatory research is a methodological approach that involves collaborating with the community members the research aims to investigate (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Dawson et al., 2017; Sparke et al., 2022). The central values of participatory research originate from Participatory Action Research (PAR), a social research methodology aimed at promoting community action (Chakma et al., 2023). PAR draws extensively from the pedagogies of influential development scholars like Paulo Freire and Kurt Lewin who both raised critical questions about who holds the authority to design and analyse research and development practice (Freire, 1996; Lewin, 1946; Linabary et al., 2020; Mao, 2018). While Lewin and Freire's research differed, both concluded that research and development 'participants' should have an active role in all stages of the research process (Chakma et al., 2023; Freire, 1996; Greenwood et al., 2004; Lewin, 1946; Linabary et al., 2020; Mao, 2018). When a 'participant' is actively engaged in each stage of the research they become 'co-researchers' (Pope, 2020).

While participatory methodologies vary, they typically share the common goal of fostering community and promoting research equity (Dawson et al., 2017). Due to these aims, participatory methodologies promote the role of the co-researcher and the power-sharing that occurs between the primary researcher and co-researchers (Bradbury, 2015; Chakma et al., 2023; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The principles of participatory research align closely with my community axiology, by recognising that the co-researcher has an important role in the generation of knowledge beyond the traditional participant-researcher binary (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Critically, participatory approaches to research acknowledge the need for collaboration and equal partnership between researchers and co-researchers, particularly when working with marginalised communities (Chakma et al., 2023; Vidima et al., 2022).

A key concept of PAR is the application of participatory, reflective 'cycles' that facilitate an iterative process of reflection and action (Chakma et al., 2023; Crupi & Godden, 2024; Reid & Frisby, 2008). These cycles allow for contextualised and flexible research attuned to the needs and perspectives of the co-researchers in their cultural context (Chakma et al., 2023; Crupi &

Godden, 2024). These cycles include phases of planning, implementation, and action (Crupi & Godden, 2024; Koch et al., 2005; Stringer, 2007; Williams & Lykes, 2003). Commonly, these phases are referred to as 'Look, Think, Act' (see Figure 5 Cycle of 'Look, Think, Act'.) (Koch et al., 2005; Stringer, 2007). Via this categorisation, the 'Looking' phase involves gathering information and planning the research, the 'thinking' phase encompasses collecting data and interpreting information, and the 'acting' phase involves making changes based on this information (Koch et al., 2005; Stringer, 2007). The cyclic process of 'Look, Think, Act' encourages the researcher to learn from the findings of the previous cycle and then build on these learnings into the next cycle as well as acting on the findings. The focus on action in PAR methodologies is consistent with my epistemology, as it combines theory and action into an integrated framework. The cycles of PAR progressively expand, enabling the research to evolve continuously and respond to emerging challenges (Palmieri & MacLean, 2022)

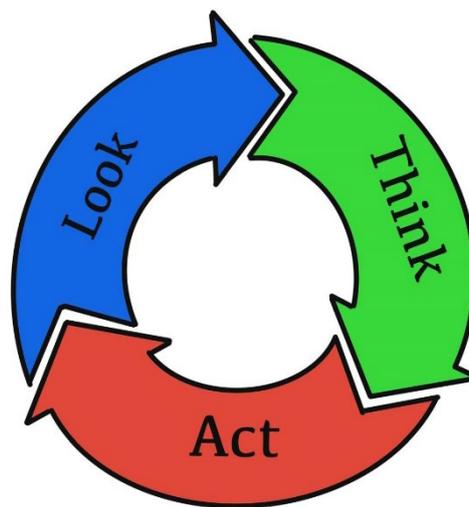


Figure 5 Cycle of 'Look, Think, Act'.

### 2.3.2 Feminist Participatory Action Research

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) is a participatory research approach that focuses on centring the voices and perspectives of marginalised women (Chakma, 2016; Chakma et al., 2023). FPAR, like most participatory approaches, is a practical methodology that promotes inclusion of co-researchers in methodological decisions. FPAR does not prescribe specific methods; instead, it encourages reflexive and adaptable research approaches. The lack of prescriptivism in FPAR is consistent with the notion that participatory research should be conducted 'with' a community rather than 'on' or 'for' them (Vidima et al.,

2022). Thus, FPAR encourages a model of collective and community feminist research (Chakma et al., 2023).

FPAR also follows a cyclic structure, like PAR (See Figure 6 Iterative Cycles of FPAR). In addition to the benefits of a cyclic structure listed above, it also upholds the feminist research principle of 'Do No Harm' (McDiarmid et al., 2021). This established ethical practice aims to safeguard marginalised groups from potential risks introduced by research practices (International Women's Development Agency, 2017; McDiarmid et al., 2021; Reid & Frisby, 2008). The absence of prescriptivism in FPAR adheres closely to this principle as it encourages the primary researcher and co-researchers to collaboratively design research based on the co-researchers' needs and expectations.

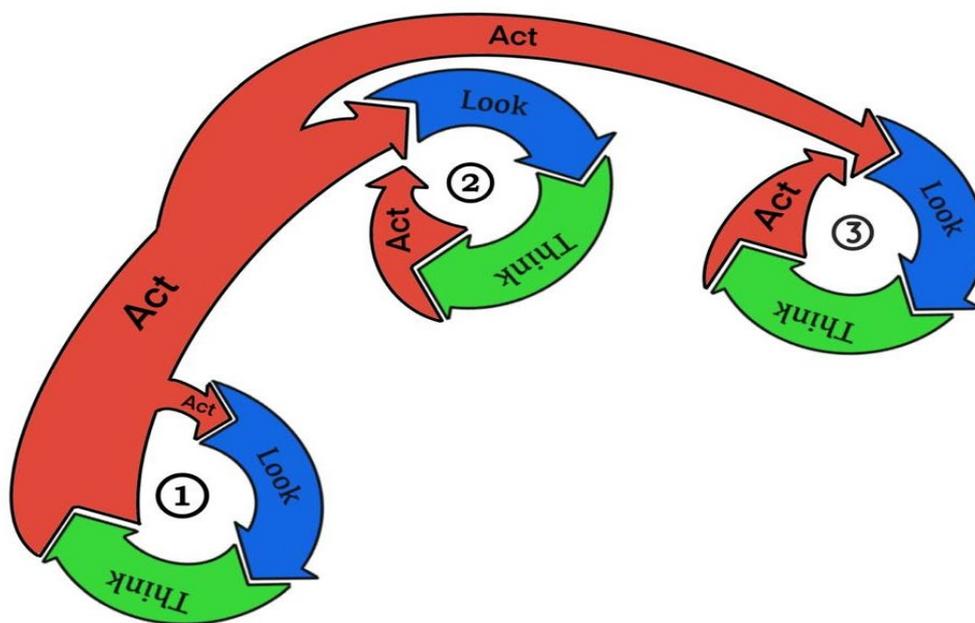


Figure 6 Iterative Cycles of FPAR

### 2.3.3 Choosing an FPAR Methodology

As outlined in Chapter One, my history working as a development practitioner, research student, and consultant in Laos means I hold an insider-outsider status within this study. I am an insider because of my experiences working and living in Laos, along with my established relationships and language skills, but I am an outsider because I am an expatriate and therefore, I will never be an insider in Laos. I can also be considered an insider to the development sector in Laos. It is this status that meant I experienced a growing pressure to

design and deliver gender-targeted development programs. Despite this pressure, I observed both international and national development programs grow increasingly frustrated by the superficial and prescriptive nature of gender-targeted development programming, reporting, and funding. Amongst these growing frustrations, I saw an increasing divide between development actors and the intended beneficiaries of development programs. Given my positionality and the shared nature of the research, stemming from conversations with colleagues, FPAR felt like an appropriate methodological fit.

To address the research questions of this study, I required an in-depth understanding of development programming in Laos including the economic, socio-cultural, religious, and political factors that influence development programming. Despite my experience working in Laos, there are factors I do not have insight into due to my positionality as an outsider. Therefore, the application of FPAR to co-generate knowledge with development practitioners as well as the intended beneficiaries of development programming was vital as it allowed perspectives and experiences beyond my own to be examined and platformed. FPAR is promoted as a robust theoretical framework to address these inquiries, due to its commitment to platforming frequently marginalised voices (Curiel, 2022; Mack & Na'Puti, 2019; Manning, 2021b). Additionally, I needed a methodology that recognised the power dynamics inherent among the study's co-researchers. Throughout this study I collaborated with Lao and expatriate development practitioners, as well as the intended beneficiaries of a gender-targeted development program, each of these cohorts of co-researchers have different relationships and I required a methodology that collaborated with each co-researcher cohort equally.

#### *2.3.4 Applying an FPAR Methodology*

This FPAR study consisted of three distinct but interrelated cycles. Each cycle employed specific methods that addressed one of the three research questions, allowing the study to explore each question in depth. As discussed above, the iterative processes of FPAR meant that the findings from one cycle aided the design and delivery of the next. Finally, when all three cycles were considered together, they provided comprehensive response to the research questions from multiple perspectives, ensuring a thorough and nuanced understanding. Table 3 identifies the methods, cohort of co-researchers, and target research questions of each cycle while Figure 7 maps out the expanding nature of these cycles. More

detail on the selected methods and their application to this study are provided in Chapter Two.

Table 3 Summary of FPAR Cycles

Cycle	Method(s)	Co-Researcher Cohort(s)	Research Question
1	Narrative Inquiry Interviews & Interpretive Focus Groups	Development Actors	How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?
2	Photovoice & Interpretive Focus Groups	Intended Beneficiaries	What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?
3	First-person Inquiry & Data from the previous two Cycles	RDA, Intended Beneficiaries & Development Actors	How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?

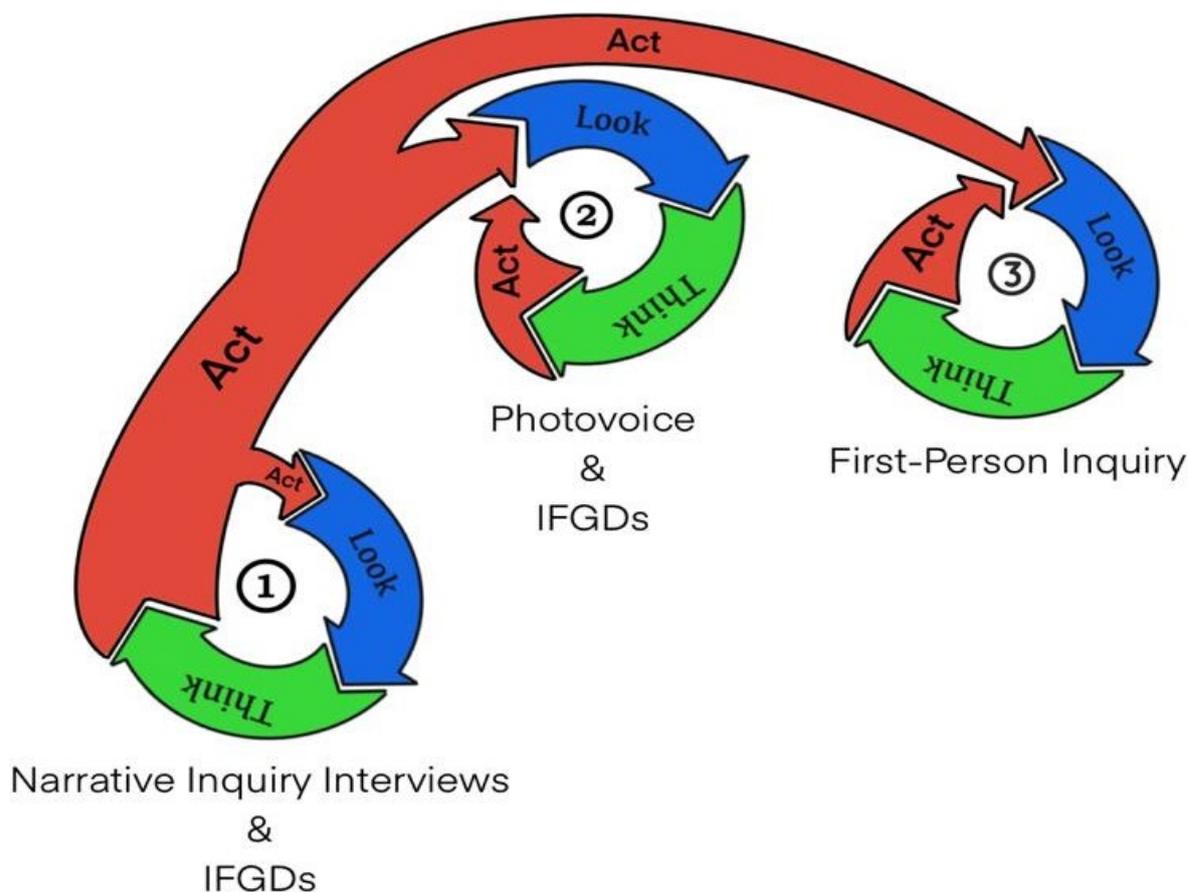


Figure 7 FPAR Cycle Map

### *2.3.5 Co-Researcher Selection*

To ensure the study upheld the feminist principle of ‘Do No Harm’, co-researcher selection considered the availability of co-researchers and their willingness to engage in an ongoing participatory research approach. There were three distinct cohorts of co-researchers involved in this study: (1) development actors including: Lao and expatriate development practitioners; policymakers; funders; and social enterprise owners; who work to deliver development programming in Laos; (2) the intended beneficiaries of a gender-targeted development program, women from two Akha villages in Northern Laos who were participating in a gender-targeted program; and (3) the Rural Development Agency (RDA), a Lao CSO who I collaborated with directly during this study.

While compensating co-researchers for their participation is becoming more common in feminist research, I chose not to pay co-researchers to ensure that the information shared by co-researchers was not influenced by financial incentives (Salmon et al., 2010; Warnock et al., 2022). This decision was made during the ethics application process and was informed by my professional experience working in Laos, where I observed that payment can sometimes affect the nature of co-researcher participation. Additionally, this decision was made in consultation with Lao colleagues and my supervisory team. I discuss this decision in more depth in Chapter Six, Section 6.10.2 ‘Misconceptions of Participation’. While I did not pay co-researchers, I covered coffee or snacks for co-researchers in the interviews in Cycle One and I provided food during IFGDs in Cycle One and Two.

Below I introduce each of the co-researcher cohorts and the selection criteria and process applied to the selection of these cohorts.

#### *Development Actor Selection*

The selection of co-researchers in the development actor cohort followed a snowball recruitment method. This approach was based on my understanding that development in Laos is a small sector, with many organisations working collaboratively or being aware of each other’s work. The first round of recruitment took place at the Vientiane Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Fair in November 2023. Given my previous experience working in Laos and my strong connections with international organisations and expatriate development practitioners, I aimed to prioritise Laotian perspectives by recruiting co-researchers from Lao-

run organisations and CSOs first. At the Vientiane CSO fair in November 2023, several co-researchers were identified and invited to participate in the study. The second round of recruitment occurred at the Luang Prabang CSO Fair in December 2023. The identified co-researchers from the two rounds of recruitment then helped to identify other co-researchers via a snowballing method.

#### *Intended Beneficiaries Selection*

Political and socio-cultural factors influenced the selection of co-researchers in the intended beneficiaries of development cohort. In Laos there are many politically-governed restrictions that limit research and travel in villages. This often means research in villages is regulated by the government, or their proxy, such as the LWU or provincial departments. Given the nature of this research and the application of an FPAR methodology that was committed to doing no harm, I was conscious to select a co-researcher cohort who would not be negatively impacted by their involvement in this study. It was important to me that engagement in this study would not significantly compromise the co-researchers time availability, freedom, or safety.

During the early planning phases of this study, it became evident that the intended beneficiary cohort should already be engaged with a Lao-based development program. Not only would this provide insight into an active gender-targeted development program being enacted, but it would also ensure the safety of co-researchers as considerations and approvals had already been made regarding research in the target villages. Chanthalangsy Sisouvanh, the Executive Director of the Rural Development Agency (RDA) and a long-time colleague, suggested I collaborate with the RDA on a gender-targeted program enacted by the RDA based in Luang Namtha, a province in Northern Laos. To uphold the privacy and safety of co-researchers, this project is not named in this study instead I refer to it as the Akha Women's Project. The Akha Women's Project is a gender-targeted development program that collaborated with Akha Women Savings Groups in two villages in Northern Laos. The project aimed to improve women's empowerment and climate resilience. Selection of co-researchers within the village was led by the RDA due to their familiarity and pre-existing work with the target community.

#### Who Shapes the Study? Understanding Roles and Influences

This study aimed to platform the voices of co-researchers, consistent with FPAR methodology. However, consideration must also be given to my role as the lead researcher and the active

role of translators and interpreters. Given that the influence of the primary researcher and translator cannot be ignored it is important that their roles are made explicit.

#### *The Primary Researcher and My Relationship with the RDA*

In this study, I enacted the role of 'primary researcher' (Koch & Kralik, 2005). This meant I led the focus of the study, the design of the research questions, developed many of the study resources, and managed the timeline of the research itself - in consultation with all parties, of course. It is important to acknowledge that while this study employed a participatory approach, I still had a level of control over the study in a way that co-researchers did not. Additionally, the RDA and I worked collaboratively as 'facilitators', which meant we shaped the group dynamics, communicated the research questions and findings, and created the research environment that other development actors and beneficiaries participated within.

While my collaboration with the RDA was initially formed out of necessity to adapt to the development landscape in Laos, it also became an important part of the research. By collaborating closely with a CSO, I gained insight into local perceptions of development and was able to closely observe how the RDA navigated the delivery of the Akha Women's Project. Although my collaboration with the RDA meant that I worked closely with one CSO, this study is not a case study, nor does it focus exclusively on the RDA or the Akha Women's Project. Instead, this information can be used in consultation with the findings of Cycle One to understand the development sector in Laos more broadly. The Role of Interpreters and Translators

Language helps co-researchers represent their sense of self, and define and explain issues (Squires, 2008). Thus, interpreters and translators played a central role in all aspects of this cross-cultural, cross-language study. The Australian Translation services defines an interpreter as an individual who translates spoken communications while a translator translates written communication. In Laos the distinction between interpreters and translators is not well defined, despite there being two separate words for interpreter (ນັກແປພາສາບາກເບື້) and translator (ນັກແປພາສາ). Given the cross-language and cross-cultural nature of the study, interpreters were utilised during data co-generation, while translators were used to translate relevant documents including consent forms, information sheets, and transcripts. While

translators may have had some impact on the generation of data in this study, interpreters were a major part of the co-generation of data, and therefore I will unpack their role below.

A team of ten interpreters worked on this study, including: six Lao-English interpreters: three Akha-Lao interpreters; and one Akha-Lao-English interpreter. While I speak conversational Lao, I chose to work with interpreters to ensure that co-researchers were as comfortable as possible and that they had the option to choose how they expressed themselves during the co-generation of knowledge. I was also aware that the study would cover complex topics and I did not want my Lao language skills to impact the activities, data collection or ultimately, the findings. During Cycle One, I utilised interpreters during the *'Think'* phase of the cycle. Lao co-researchers were offered the option to utilise a Lao-English interpreter during the narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs. One co-researcher and one IFGD chose to utilise an interpreter. During data generation and collaboration activities, interpreters used the *'whispering'* (also known as *chuchotage*) technique – meaning interpreters simultaneously interpreted conversations directly to me instead of translating to the whole group. While only one IFGD utilised an interpreter all the Lao IFGDs spoke in Lao during sections of the group discussion. In these instances, I was able to use my conversational Lao to interpret these conversations without requiring formal interpretation.

During Cycle Two, I utilised interpreters during the *'Think'* and *'Act'* phases of the cycle. During the *'Think'* phase I utilised a Lao-English interpreter who facilitated my communication with the photovoice facilitation team. Additionally, the RDA and I worked with Lao-Akha interpreters during the photovoice and IFGDs co-generation activities. Neither the RDA team nor I spoke Akha and only a few women in the Akha villages spoke Lao. As well working with in-person interpreters I worked with an interpreter who provided what I refer to as interpretive transcription, where they listened to the audio recordings of the photovoice interviews and IFGDs from Cycle Two and simultaneously transcribed the interviews in English. This interpreter spoke English, Lao and Akha and produced an English transcript. This process is sometimes referred to as translation transcription. I, however, consider this to be interpretation rather than translation because, with three languages being spoken simultaneously, the interpreter was always actively interpreting at least one language while creating the written transcript. Additionally, I utilised an interpreter for the training workshops as part of the *'Act'* phase of this cycle. While I did not utilise a formal interpreter during Cycle

Three, Chathalangsy from the RDA, interpreted conversations for me. Given that I utilised a first-person method during this Cycle the focus was on my role working with the RDA rather than co-generating data with the Akha women.

Interpreters and translators are not 'neutral conveyors' of meaning in research (Caretta, 2015; Gough, 2019; Varzande & Jadidi, 2015). Instead, interpreters and translators actively shape data creation by incorporating their own beliefs and perceptions into a translated message (Caretta, 2015). During this study, all interpreters were asked to provide a word-for-word interpretation. Additionally, I required interpreters and translators to complete an agreement form which, along with a commitment to confidentiality, included a requirement to provide accurate representation of the information and data. Despite requesting word-for-word interpretations and transcripts, it is likely that the interpreters and translators had a direct influence on the co-generated data in this cross-language study.

## *2.4 Methods*

The flexible and non-prescriptive nature of FPAR methodologies allows for the use of a variety of research methods. In this study, I utilised a multi-method qualitative research approach that included three cycles, each with their own data method of co-generation<sup>16</sup>. Methods included: Cycle One - narrative inquiry interviews (22 interviews) and Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs) (five IFGDs with a total of 20 co-researchers); Cycle Two - photovoice (15 interviews with 30 co-researchers) and IFGDs (two IFGDs with a total of 30 co-researchers); and Cycle Three - First Person Inquiry. Approval of this FPAR study was granted by James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (H9177). Unlike other countries in the region, Laos does not have a national research ethics committee, apart from the National Ethics Committee for Health Research (NECHR), which focuses exclusively on medical research. In the absence of a national ethics committee to review this research, I consulted with colleagues across multiple government departments and organisations to assess my research plan and provide guidance to help ensure the study aligned with safety and ethical standards. Due to the cyclic nature of FPAR, I amended my original ethics application prior to the start of Cycle Two in response to changes in my method that resulted from Cycle One. Once data co-

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<sup>16</sup> Consistent with the participatory methodology of this study, data collection is referred to as co-generation to acknowledge the active role of co-researchers in the study.

generation was completed, I submitted my final ethics report to the Human Research Ethics Committee at James Cook University.

A narrative-based approach was central to many of the methods in this FPAR study. Narrative approaches are frequently used in feminist research to honour and value the stories of women while challenging the marginalisation of women’s perspectives in traditional research (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). The following sections provide a detailed description of each of the three FPAR cycles including the selected methods and how they were incorporated during the ‘*Look, Think, Act*’ phases of the cycles.

## 2.5 Cycle One

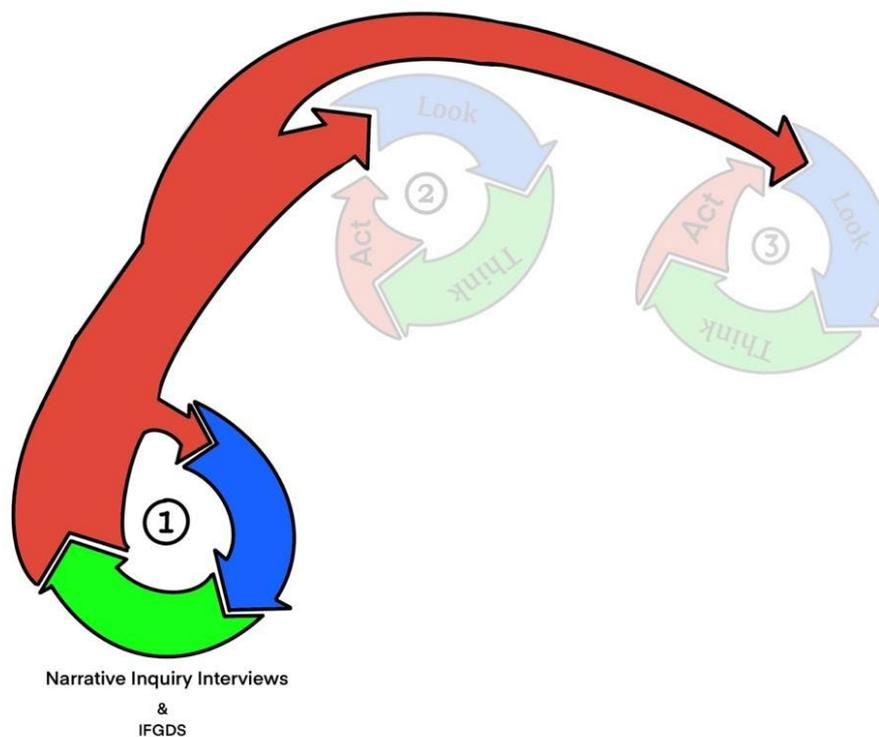


Figure 8 Cycle One Map

### 2.5.1 Phase One - Looking

During Cycle One’s ‘*Looking*’ phase, I used my prior experience working as a practitioner in Laos to design the subsequent thinking phase. I selected narrative inquiry interviews and Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs) as methods to co-generate data that would best assist to answer research question One. The rationale for selecting these methods is detailed below.

### *Narrative Inquiry Interviews*

The suitability of narrative inquiry interviews to co-researchers was a key factor influencing my choice to select this method. Given the broadness of Cycle One's co-researcher cohort, I wanted to select a method that was relevant to all the co-researchers, with a focus on the inclusion of Lao co-researchers. As discussed in Chapter One, despite Laos' ethnic diversity, the 'Lao-ization' policies of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party have changed the country's national identity (Lutz, 2022; Stuart-Fox, 1993). The prioritisation of the Lao Loum ethnic group has created tensions between the state of Laos and other 'minority' ethnic groups living in Laos (Stuart-Fox, 1993). For this reason, it was crucial that the selected method for Cycle One was relevant to multiple ethnic groups as well as expatriate development actors. The benefit of narrative inquiry interviews is that story has been proven as a successful tool for meaning making across a variety of ethnicities and nationalities (Hay et al., 2022; Karpa, 2021; Mafile'o et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a long history of storytelling in Lao Loum communities as well as other ethnic groups living in Laos (Cha & Livo, 1991; Kislenko, 2009; Morton, 2023). While the 'unification' of Lao history has led to significant research gaps regarding the histories of many ethnic groups, there is evidence of the use of story and significance of oral histories amongst Akha and Hmong communities living in Laos (Cha & Livo, 1991; Lewis, 2002).

In many cultures storytelling is a powerful tool for passing down advice, historical narratives, and cultural values (Hay et al., 2022; Mafile'o et al., 2022). Narrative inquiry interviews utilise the power of storytelling to create a sense of cultural connectivity that empowers co-researchers (Hay et al., 2022; Hyvärinen et al., 2008; Karpa, 2021; Sandelowski, 1994). Additionally, the use of story helps co-researchers to discuss difficult or complex subjects (Hay et al., 2022; Karpa, 2021; Mafile'o et al., 2022). Narrative inquiry interviews are especially useful in cross-cultural contexts, where the researcher is from a different cultural background than the studies co-researchers as the use of story can help create a sense of shared community (Hay et al., 2022; Mafile'o et al., 2022).

Once I selected narrative inquiry interviews as the method for Cycle One, I began designing the cycle in August 2023. During this preparatory phase, I chose to apply two distinct narrative approaches to my interviews. I termed these stages as: (1) 'narrative telling'; and (2) 'narrative knowing'. The narrative telling portion of the interview focused on positioning the co-

researcher as the narrator. In this section the co-researchers were asked questions that encouraged them to share stories in response to open ended questions (Appendix I). The questions in this section focused on the co-researchers' relationship with development, including their definitions of development, how they began working in the sector, and their aspirations for development programming in Laos. The narrative telling element of narrative inquiry interviews is one of the more popular techniques used in narrative inquiry interviews. Critically, narrative telling is considered as a participatory process as it encourages co-researchers to become narrators, choosing the narratives they wish to create (Karpa, 2021).

While narrative telling aims to share power between the primary researcher and co-researcher, the primary researcher still retains power through their questions, which shape co-researchers' narratives (Bell, 2002; Gudmundsdottir, 1996). To address these challenges, the narrative knowing section aimed to remove the focus away from researcher-designed questions. In the narrative knowing section, co-researchers were asked to respond to a story told to them. Two distinct stories were created, one for Lao co-researchers and another for expatriate co-researchers. While the basis of the stories was the same, I chose to write two versions so that each co-researcher cohort could more closely relate to details in the story including the names of characters and their backstories (Appendix II and III). I wrote the stories based on my experiences and research about development in Laos. The Story of Sally presented in the prologue of this thesis was adapted from the expatriate story told in the narrative knowing portion of the interview. The narrative knowing approach was grounded in the idea that understanding a story involves making multiple assumptions (Gudmundsdottir, 1996). In this method, the hope was that the co-researcher's assumptions would provide deeper insight into their thinking. Therefore, the aim of the narrative knowing section was to gather narrative information through the co-researchers' interpretations of the stories told to them. The questions in this section focused on the co-researchers' responses to the story, including what they thought would happen next, what they identified as key tensions in the narrative, and what they would do differently if they were the protagonist.

#### *Interpretive Focus Group Discussions*

Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs) are a participatory method commonly applied in participatory, community-based research (Redman-MacLaren, Mills, et al., 2014). The aim of IFGDs is for co-researchers to have an opportunity to discuss and interpret data generated

in the study. While the researcher typically leads the group discussion, active participation and reflection from co-researchers is encouraged (Redman-MacLaren, Mills, et al., 2014; Wilkinson, 1999). As with most participatory methods, the shifting of traditional research power dynamics helps to decolonise research processes, which aligns with my axiology, ontology, and epistemology as well as the aims of the study and this cycle (Wilkinson, 1999). Additionally, the group setting of the sessions provides a social context that allows for meaning-making and community validation for co-researchers (Billson, 1989; Wilkinson, 1999). The decision to facilitate IFGDs meant that, in addition to co-generating data, co-researchers also had the opportunity to interpret previously co-generated data. Not only does this foster the co-generation of additional data, but also provided data driven recommendations vital to my epistemology given that I am passionate about action-oriented knowledge generation.

The IFGDs were designed to be open-ended discussions reflecting on the data co-generated in Cycle One and Cycle Two. The initial findings of the narrative inquiry interviews (Cycle One) and the photovoice activity (Cycle Two) were presented to the co-researchers. It is important to note that the cycles were not temporally isolated, as is characteristic of FPAR, therefore Cycle Two had already begun before Cycle One had concluded. In the IFGDs, co-researchers were invited to openly reflect on and discuss the data presented to them, including whether the findings surprised them and the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the emerging themes.

### *2.5.2 Phase Two – Thinking Together*

The thinking together phase involved two stages of knowledge co-generation: (1) narrative inquiry interviews; and (2) IFGDs. A summary of each stage is provided below, and the findings of this Cycle are presented in Chapter Three.

#### *Narrative Inquiry Interviews*

From November 2023 until March 2024, I conducted 22 narrative inquiry interviews with a total of 25 co-researchers. This included 12 Lao interviews with 15 Lao co-researchers and 10 expatriate interviews with 10 co-researchers. I began with Lao co-researchers as I wanted to platform the voices of Lao nationals in my inquiry, consistent with my community-centred axiology and epistemology. When I noticed a reoccurrence of interview responses and

themes, I determined that I had reached data saturation with the Lao interviews (Fusch Ph D & Ness, 2015). I then proceeded to interview expatriate co-researchers, using the same measure to determine when I had reached data saturation (Fusch Ph D & Ness, 2015). Occasionally I interviewed Lao co-researchers after I had started expatriate interviews based on the co-researcher's availability to interview.

As mentioned in Section 2.3.5 Co-Researcher Selection, co-researchers were identified at the Lao CSO fair or by other co-researchers. Co-researchers were invited to join Cycle One via email, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, or face to face communication depending on the nature of my relationship with the co-researcher. If a co-researcher responded to an interview invitation, they were asked to nominate a time and place to meet. Interviews were mostly conducted in the co-researcher's workplace, a selected café, online, or in a co-working space. All co-researchers were given the option to use an interpreter, and this was arranged prior to the interview.

One co-researcher was invited per interview. However, on three occasions Lao co-researchers brought one or two additional co-researchers to their interviews. Two of the three Lao interviews with additional co-researchers were conducted as group interviews. The third was held as two separate interviews because the additional co-researcher requested an interpreter, which had not been pre-arranged as I was not aware they were joining the session. This interview was the only interview where an interpreter was requested and thus a separate interview was rescheduled to accommodate the request.

While I had initially planned for individual interviews, I had ethics approval to conduct group interviews in case they occurred. In the instances where co-researchers brought other co-researchers to the interview, I decided to proceed with the whole group. My decision to conduct group interviews in these instances was influenced by my application of a participatory methodology. I wanted the co-researchers to feel a sense of autonomy over the research process, thus I ensured co-researchers had the power to decide who else participated in the interview with them. Due to my epistemological underpinnings, it was important to me that co-researchers found ways of creating knowledge that were empowering and decolonial. During the data co-generation process it became evident that some of the Lao co-researchers found a sense of safety in group interview settings. This finding aligns with research on group interviews, which suggests that having additional people

present fosters a sense of community validation (Billson, 1989; Redman-MacLaren, Api, et al., 2014). In the narrative inquiry interviews, I believe community validation was likely driven by a sense of reassurance that co-researchers shared similar experiences and responses that could be validated by a group response.

When I met with co-researchers, I spent the beginning of the session briefing them on the interview process, the ethics approval, the use of the co-generated data and their participatory role in the research. Co-researchers were then given the opportunity to ask questions. Following the question period, co-researchers received either an English or Lao copy of the information sheet (Appendix IV and V) and an English or Lao copy of the consent form (Appendix VI and VII). Lao co-researchers could choose between either Lao or English copies. The consent forms were explained in detail, referencing the early conversation. When completing the consent form co-researchers had the option of multiple levels of consent: (1) not to conduct the interview; (2) to conduct the interview without audio recording; or (3) to conduct the interview with audio recording. All the co-researcher's chose to conduct the interview, with all but one conducting the interview with audio recording.

The narrative inquiry interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, with 40 minutes dedicated to the narrative telling stage and 20 minutes to narrative knowing. I prepared a 'master' question guide (Appendix VIII), however I adopted a conversational tone and often asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses rather than asking pre-prepared questions. The narrative stories told in the narrative knowing section remained the same for each interview, however I switched between the Lao or expatriate version depending on the nationality of the co-researcher(s).

Following each interview, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in English. One co-researcher asked for a Lao interpreter for the interview. Subsequently, a different translator transcribed the interview (which contained both Lao and English) and then translated the Lao portions into English. Where an interview was not recorded (n=1; because the co-researcher chose not to have the interview recorded when signing the consent form), the interview notes were typed and, in the interview, where an interpreter was utilised (n=1), the recording was transcribed and translated. Additionally, I wrote interview observation notes following each interview. Interview data including observation notes and transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 14, a data analysis software commonly used in qualitative research (Hilal & Alabri, 2013;

Welsh, 2002). My data analysis technique was guided by reflexive thematic analysis, where I examined how patterns in the data connected to the broader social context (Braun et al., 2023). As part of my reflexive thematic approach, I was inspired by the six stages of reflexive thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation; (2) coding; (3) initial theme generation; (4) developing themes; (5) defining themes; and (6) presenting the findings (Braun et al., 2023). Stages two to five were particularly important to the data analysis process and have been described in detail below.

Coding was an important stage in the analysis of Cycle One. This stage involved labelling important segments of data (Braun et al., 2023). When possible, I used in vivo coding, a coding technique that uses the exact words or phrases that the co-researcher used in the interview, as the code that labelled the selected segments of data (Dantzer, 2024). In vivo coding is often used when coding participatory data due to the way it centres the co-researcher's voice in the analysis (Khamung et al., 2022). Despite these benefits, some scholars criticise in vivo coding for limiting the range of codes that can be generated from the data (Dantzer, 2024; Saldaña, 2018). Given the multiplicity of co-researchers from different backgrounds included in this study the in vivo codes spanned beyond a single perspective. Therefore, the criticism does not apply to this study's use of in vivo coding, which avoided two-dimensional characterisation of the data due to the diversity of co-researchers engaged in the study.

After completing the initial coding process, I proceeded to the next stage of the reflexive thematic analysis - initial theme generation (Braun et al., 2023). At this stage, the initial codes were grouped into potential themes. Similarly, to the coding phase I chose to label the emerging themes with in vivo labels, which aligned with my aim to centre the voices of the co-researchers in this step of the analysis. Despite my best efforts to centralise the voices of the co-researchers, I was also aware of my role within the analysis process.

The next stage of analysis involved reviewing and developing my themes (Braun et al., 2023). In the literature about reflexive thematic analysis there is no prescriptive way to review themes. Instead, a researcher should consider how the initial themes link to the data set (Braun et al., 2023). To visualise my themes, I chose to produce a thematic map, to assist me to understand connections and relationships between initial themes. During this process I realised the in vivo code '*The Wheel of Fire*', a code referring to the cyclic nature of

development programming in Laos, was a central theme, with other themes intersecting with it. See Figure 9 for my thematic map.

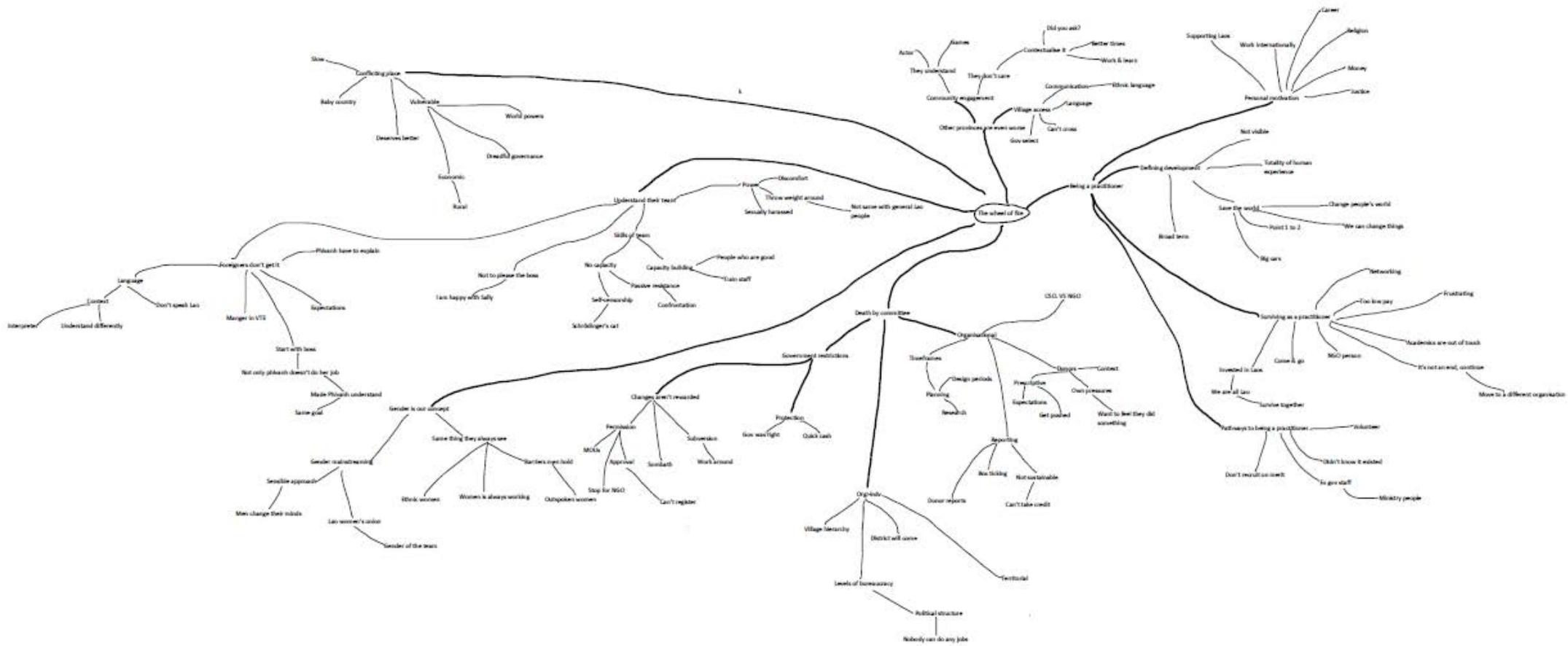


Figure 9 Cycle One Thematic Map

I then moved on to theme refinement and finalisation, where I generated my final themes to help answer the research question of Cycle One - *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?* This stage involved finalising theme names. In keeping with the participatory methodology, I chose to use in vivo thematic names wherever possible, while also ensuring that each theme name captured the central concept and conveyed it clearly. The four final themes included: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Politics of Development*; (3) *Global Environment*; and (4) *Relational Structures in Development*. These themes will be presented in depth in Chapter Three.

#### *Interpretive Focus Group Discussions*

The IFGDs were conducted in November 2024. Five group sessions were held with 20 co-researchers (14 Lao and 6 Expatriate). I led the sessions and was accompanied by my primary supervisor, Michelle Redman-MacLaren (observer role). Prior to each session co-researchers were provided with an information sheet (Appendix IX and X) and a consent form (Appendix XI and XII). Lao co-researchers could choose between Lao or English copies of consent forms and information sheets, while expatriate co-researchers received English copies. Co-researchers were given the option to select a session from a variety of dates, with Lao co-researchers asked to select a Lao only session and expatriates an expatriate only session. The sessions were conducted in English, apart from one Lao session where a Lao interpreter interpreted the session. In some of the other Lao IFGDs, co-researchers spoke in Lao at points, but I was able to use my conversational Lao language skills to understand and/or confirm these conversations.

Most co-researchers included in this Cycle had participated in Cycle One. In instances where the co-researcher from Cycle One was not available, I invited a co-researcher from the same organisation to attend the session in their place. Additionally, I held a separate IFGD for members of the photovoice facilitation team including members from RDA and the organisation that funded the Akha Women's Project. This session was held independently of other sessions given that co-researchers from RDA and the funding INGO collaborated in all phases of Cycle Two, and therefore would have different interpretations of the data.

Following an introduction to the IFGD sessions, consent forms and information sheets were provided to co-researchers. The session then followed a format where co-researchers were

presented with the themes from Cycle One and Two and some anonymised examples of raw data coded in that theme. This included interview quotes from Cycle One and Two and photos from Cycle Two. The themes presented in this session will be explored in detail in Chapters Three.

All IFGD sessions were voice recorded. However, given the sensitive nature of the discussions, I explained to co-researchers that they could request to stop recording at any point. During two IFGDs, co-researchers asked to pause the recording during political conversations. To protect the safety of the co-researchers, conversations had during the paused recording are not reflected in this study. Transcriptions of the recorded audio were analysed following the same process as the narrative inquiry interviews.

### *2.5.3 Phase Three - Acting Together*

During the narrative inquiry interviews, co-researchers asked whether I would present the findings of the study as a training program. Co-researchers explained that they felt there were significant gaps in understandings of gender-targeted development in Laos and that they wanted to improve their own development practice. Rather than requesting project-specific training, co-researchers wanted to understand how to balance the requirements of gender-targeted programs with the needs of the target community. This request came from both Lao and expatriate co-researchers across various organisations. While I had not originally planned to conduct a training program, I recognised that co-researchers had co-generated the findings of this study, so I wanted to ensure the findings were accessible. My aim to ensure co-researchers had access to the findings of this study inspired Cycle One's action phase.

During Cycle One, Chathalangsy Sisouvanh, the Executive Director of the Rural Development Agency (RDA), told me about the Akha Women's Project, a participatory action research (PAR) project focusing on women's empowerment and climate resilience in Northern Laos. The RDA along with two other Lao CSOs were contracted to work on different activities within the project, and the project was funded by an INGO. Chanthalangsy asked if I could use the findings of this study to provide insight into the successful design and implementation of the Akha Women's Project. Following these conversations, Chanthalangsy and I co-designed a training program that aimed to enhance gender practice for both the Akha Women's Project

and the future work of the RDA. I was conscious not to position this program as a 'capacity building' exercise since I recognised the RDA team's existing capabilities.

During planning meetings, Chathalangsy and I saw an opportunity for ongoing collaboration. We realised that we could work together on Cycle One of the Akha Women's Project to co-generate data that could address Cycle Two of this study. Following discussions with the INGO that funded the Akha Women's Project, the RDA and I began our collaboration. The decision to collaborate with the RDA not only facilitated my access to target communities, but the collaboration also became the action element of this FPAR study. My primary reason for selecting a feminist action research approach was because I wanted this study to make a direct contribution to the development sector in Laos, as well as co-generating theoretical knowledge. This was based on my own frustrations with the sector as a practitioner working in Laos as well as my belief that improvements to the development sector required a bridging of theoretical knowledge and practice. Therefore, my collaboration with the RDA provided a platform to work closely with a CSO to co-generate new knowledge, use this knowledge to influence new practice and platform a local CSO to help share this knowledge across the CSO network.

## 2.6 Cycle Two

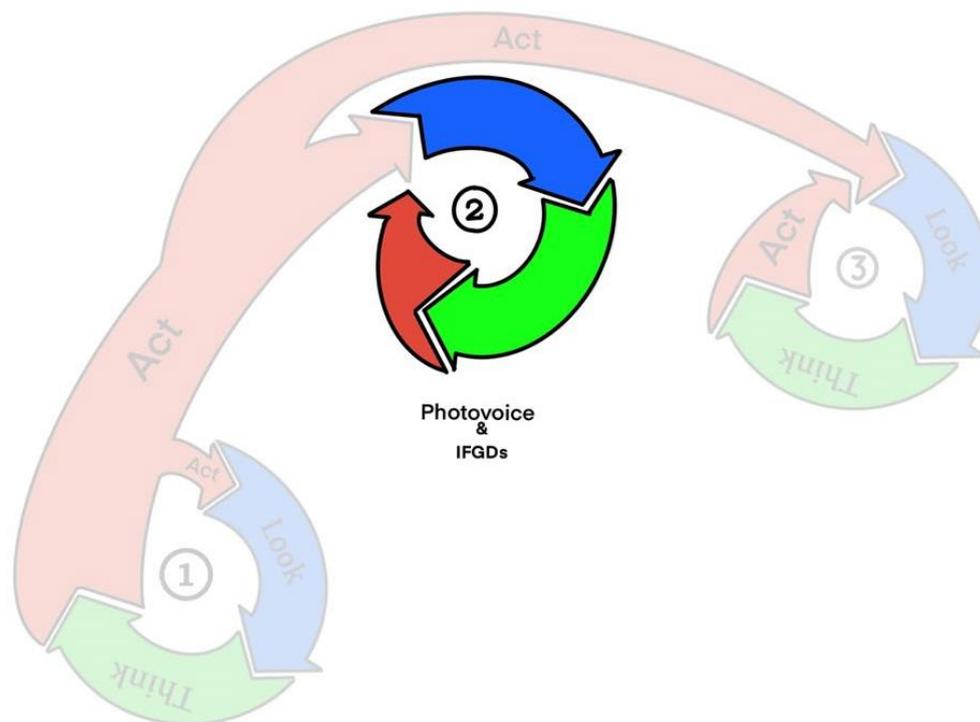


Figure 10 Cycle Two Map

### 2.6.1 Phase One – Looking Together

Based on findings from Cycle One, Cycle Two included the selection of two methods for the thinking together phase: (1) photovoice; and (2) IFGDs.

#### *Photovoice*

In the original study design, I planned to use observational cinema as the method for Cycle Two. However, after conversations with co-researchers from Cycle One and the RDA, I understood that this method was not suitable due to political, linguistic, and cultural factors. This included Cycle One co-researcher's concerns that the Cycle Two co-researchers from a village setting may feel uncomfortable speaking on camera. Based on this feedback, I reviewed other arts-based methods that might be suitable, while also considering the needs of the RDA. As previously mentioned, the Akha Women's Project applied a PAR methodology, while I maintained an FPAR methodology throughout all three cycles of this study. Despite the fact the RDA applied a PAR methodology, I will refer to our collaborative methodology for the PhD component of the study as an FPAR methodology. This is because this thesis reports my PhD

study. Additionally, as I will reveal in Chapter Five and Six, through our collaboration, the RDA and I co-designed a collaborative methodological approach which was responsive to the needs of this study, the Akha Women's Project, and the Akha women.

In February 2024, the RDA and I decided that photovoice would be a suitable method for both the Akha Women's Project and this study. Based on our review of photovoice literature, we recognised that the method had the potential to centralise the lived experiences of minority groups, as guided by the central values of feminism (Sitter, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 1999). Since its conception, photovoice has been a popular method for community-based and action research (Sitter, 2017; Sparke et al., 2016; Sparke, 2022; Wang, 1999). Photovoice aligned with the selected methodologies of this study and the Akha Women's Project. While there is limited literature documenting the use of photovoice in Laos especially, in Akha communities, we believed the method would allow for active and empowering co-researcher engagement.

Photovoice methods have been applied to a diverse range of projects including public health, education, and development (McIntyre, 2003; Sitter, 2017; Sparke, 2022). In addition to actively engaging co-researchers in the research process, photovoice methods have been found to provide socially and emotionally supportive spaces for co-researchers (McIntyre, 2003). By enacting photovoice, this study aimed to facilitate a process where Akha women could share their experiences and express their desires regarding development programs in their community. I collaborated with the RDA and the funding INGO to design a method that might effectively co-generate knowledge with the women engaged in the Akha Women's Project to address research question two of this study as well as serving the aims of the Akha Women's Project.

Photovoice methods often involve two distinct but interrelated phases: (1) taking photos; and (2) discussing the photos in an interview format (Sparke, 2022; Wang & Burris, 1997). Akha co-researchers were asked to respond to two photovoice questions in Phase One: (1) What are the opportunities for Akha women to engage with community development? (2) What are the challenges for Akha women to engage with community development? In Phase Two the co-researchers were asked to select four photos and asked questions about what opportunity or challenge each photo represented. The principal concept of the method is that co-researchers use photography as a means of representing and expressing their experiences

in their own 'voice' (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 1999). The use of photography as a visual medium encourages co-researcher engagement without the limitations of literacy, language proficiencies or other factors that may hinder participation (Sparke, 2022). The additional research method of interviews provides co-researchers with the opportunity to discuss important concepts such as power or privilege that may be hard to understand through viewing the photos alone (Riley & Manias, 2003; Sparke, 2022). Photovoice engages all co-researchers in self-reflection and the examination of collective experiences (Robinson-Keilig et al., 2014).

Before beginning Phase Two of Cycle Two, I conducted a series of training sessions for the RDA and funding INGO team to ensure both teams were comfortable with the photovoice method. These training sessions were funded by the Queensland Committee of The Crawford Fund (Grant number QLD-1145-2024; Project Title 'Capturing Change: Utilising Photovoice for Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation'). Training sessions focused on participatory research approaches, the application of photovoice as a method, research and photovoice ethics and women's empowerment. In addition to the training sessions, the RDA and I conducted a pilot session as part of RDA's youth climate empowerment program in Vientiane, Laos. This pilot session was important as it gave us an opportunity to practice photovoice as a participatory method.

#### *Interpretive Focus Group Discussions*

The IFGDs in Cycle Two followed the same structure as the IFGDs in Cycle One. However, these sessions were shorter so that the study did not have a significant impact on the Akha co-researcher's existing commitments, including time availability. During the Development Actor IFGDs, I observed co-researchers were more interested in discussing the cycles that they had been actively engaged in. This is likely because the development actor co-researchers felt more comfortable with Cycle One's themes as they related to their experiences and roles within the development sector in Laos. As a result, the RDA and I decided that for the Intended Beneficiaries co-researcher group we would only present the data from Cycle Two. With this observation, coupled with time constraints of the women and the challenge of cross-language work (from English to Laos to Akha and back), the IFGDs for the Intended Beneficiaries co-researcher group were planned as short sessions consisting of a pre-translated script

explaining each of Cycle Two's themes and two follow up questions posed at the group following each theme (See Appendix XIII).

### *2.6.2 Phase Two – Thinking Together*

The thinking together phase of Cycle Two involved two phases of co-generation of data: (1) photovoice; and (2) IFGDs. A summary of each phase is provided below with additional detail presented in Chapter Four.

#### *Photovoice*

In June 2024, photovoice data was co-generated with 30 women from 2 villages in Luang Namtha. Data co-generation was led by the photovoice facilitation team consisting of myself, four RDA representatives, one Lao interpreter, two Akha interpreters, one representative from the funding INGO and two Lao Women's Union representatives (one provincial and one district representative). On our first day in Luang Namtha we held a data co-generation briefing and training session with members of the Akha Women's Project funding INGO team, district and provincial staff and members of the photovoice facilitation team who were not present during Phase One. The session was co-led by me, and two senior members of the RDA. Since I only have conversational Lao language skills, the session was translated into English by a Lao interpreter or into Lao when I spoke. We then spent two days in each village, day one consisted of a background session and the photovoice activity and day two involved the photovoice interviews.

During the background session the distinction between my PhD study and the Akha Women's Project was explained. Co-researchers were given a brief introduction to this study as well as an explanation on how the data would be used in this study compared to the Akha Women's Project. It was explained to co-researchers that they could opt out of this study and still be involved in the Akha Women's Project. Given the lack of an Akha writing system, the information sheet (Appendix XIV and Appendix XV) and consent forms (Appendix XVI and XVII) were written in English and translated into Lao. As most women in the village did not speak or read Lao language, the information sheet and consent form were explained in detail verbally. Activities did not continue until all co-researchers had agreed to the content in the consent form and information sheet. Since most co-researchers did not speak or write Lao, they chose to use thumbprints on the consent forms instead of written signatures, an option

provided in agreed ethical guidelines (Australian Council for International Development, 2015). All co-researchers consented to being included in this study as well as the Akha Women's Project.



*Figure 11 Co-Researcher Uniforms*

To promote the values of participatory research, the RDA and I designed 'research uniforms' (See Figure 11 Co-Researcher Uniforms). We were conscious that we did not want the co-researchers' participation to feel superficial. After consultation, we decided a uniform would be a way to foster a sense of power-sharing and teamwork. This decision was based on our anecdotal experience that communities place significant emphasis and importance on project uniforms or t-shirts. Additionally, clothing can play an important role in shaping identity in Laos. In their research about the role of the Sin, a traditional Lao skirt, Takayama (2024) found that Lao Loum women felt empowered wearing an item that identified them as a collective. We hoped the co-researcher uniform would similarly empower the Akha co-researchers. We therefore designed the uniform with reference to humanitarian relief vests commonly worn by UN agencies in Laos. The vests were subsidised by my QLD Student Award funded by the Crawford Fund. When handing out the uniforms we explained to each co-researcher that they were part of the research team and that we valued their experiences and insights. The RDA

team talked about the 'superpower' of research and explained that when each of the co-researchers put on their vest, they became the researcher. Due to the limited engagement of Akha communities in research projects, and the social hierarchy of ethnic communities in Laos, the vests were an important object that promoted the value of co-researchers in the research process.

Once the co-researchers had their uniforms, they were given the two photovoice questions. The questions changed between the two villages based on team reflections following the first village. These reflections and changes are detailed in Chapter Four. Co-researchers worked in pairs to take their photos; this was based on findings from Cycle One that found that co-researchers liked working together as well as logistics, including the number of available tablets and/or phones. Each pair of co-researchers were asked to take ten photos, 5 photos per question.

In photovoice literature there are variations to application, including the length of time co-researchers are given to take the photos (Chappell et al., 2024; Molloy, 2007; Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Sparke, 2022). Many projects give the co-researchers the cameras, phones, or tablets for an extended period to ensure they have time to take the photos without disrupting daily activities (Chappell et al., 2024; Sparke et al., 2016; Sparke, 2022). While this application of the method is compelling, we were aware that the remoteness and socio-cultural context of the target villages meant this would be the first time many of the co-researchers had access to a tablet or phone, and we didn't want to disrupt the village or leave the co-researchers in an uncomfortable situation by leaving the tablets overnight. Instead, we decided to give co-researchers approximately two hours to take their photos. While this is much shorter than most records of the method, it was suitable for the research context given the need for the women to go work on their farms which were away from the village centre where the data was being co-generated. The co-researchers were invited to take their photos over this period and once they returned the tablets, they went back to their usual duties for the rest of the day.

The following day, co-researchers were asked to select four photos to talk about in an interview. Interviews took place in the village hall, with breakout interviews occurring while the Lao Women's Union staff spoke with the larger group. Interviews were conducted by two separate teams; an RDA intern and I led one interview while two senior members of the RDA

led another. Given that neither myself or the RDA team spoke Akha the interviews were interpreted either from Lao to Akha and back again or from English to Lao to Akha depending on who was leading the interview. As I speak conversational Lao, when possible, I spoke in Lao to remove a layer of translation. As with the Cycle One the interview recordings were transcribed, by an interpreter who spoke Lao, English and Akha.

The analysis of the photovoice interviews followed the same process as the narrative inquiry interviews. I conducted this analysis independently. After I completed my independent reflexive thematic analysis of the data, I provided the RDA with training on thematic analysis. As part of this training, I co-analysed the data again with the RDA. While the RDA's analysis was not used in this study, I used it as a tool to validate my coding process and check if I had missed any important codes that the RDA picked up on.

#### *Interpretive Focus Group Discussions*

The IFGDs for the Intended Beneficiaries cohort followed a similar process to the IFGDs in Cycle One. In March 2025, I accompanied the RDA for the final activity of the Akha Women's Project. At the end of the project activities, a senior member of the RDA read a pre-written script about the four themes from Cycle Two (Appendix XIII). Following each theme description co-researchers were asked two questions: (1) What do you agree with about this theme? and (2) What do you disagree with about this theme? This was repeated for all four themes. At the end of the session co-researchers were asked how they felt about being the co-researcher in this study. The IFGDs were audio recorded and the responses to the thematic reflection questions as well as co-researcher reflection question were translated and transcribed. Additionally, during the IFGDs a member of the RDA scribed the co-researcher responses on flipcharts. The transcripts and flipcharts were analysed following the same process as the narrative inquiry interviews.

#### *2.6.3 Phase Three – Acting Together*

The action phase of Cycle Two was incorporated throughout the Cycle via two stages: (1) ongoing training; and (2) methodology and method adaptation. I will describe each below.

My collaboration with the RDA encouraged a process of ongoing training and learning as we collaborated to plan, co-generate, and analyse photovoice data. Part of this ongoing learning involved a series of formal training sessions (see Table 4).

Table 4 RDA Training Sessions in Cycle Two

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Training Activity</b>
Using photovoice as a participatory method	Introduction to Photovoice Session Photovoice Data Co-Generation Participatory Action Planning Sessions Photovoice Pilot Activity
Photovoice Analysis	Introduction to Thematic Analysis Thematic Analysis Workshop
M&E Foundations	Train the Trainers Workshop M&E Workshop M&E Discussion Session

Since learning is a key aspect of the action phase of this study, I recognise the ongoing opportunities this activity created for the RDA and the CSO network as part of this cycle's action phase. In August 2024, the RDA were invited to present our Photovoice methodology at a CSO network meeting. I collaborated with two senior members of the RDA to prepare the presentation and joined the meeting virtually, while two RDA members presented the methodology at the meeting. Additionally, in September 2025, I travelled back to Laos to co-present a multi-day Photovoice workshop and conference with the RDA. At this workshop we presented the Photovoice methodology and provided hands-on training sessions to other CSOs. Following these presentations, the RDA has been approached by several CSOs and INGOs regarding their use of photovoice as a participatory research method including requests for further training and future work to apply Photovoice to other projects. In November 2025 the RDA will be presenting our Photovoice work at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Gender and Climate meeting in Vientiane and in December 2025 Chanthalangsy will travel to Australia to co-present a session with me at the Australasian Aid Conference. The reach of our work and presentations is a significant outcome of this cycle, as it demonstrates the impact of the collaboration with the RDA in both Laos and Australia, as well as within the broader aid and development sector.

Additionally, this action phase incorporated a process of method and methodology adaption. Including changes to method based on the needs and expectations of co-researchers. This resulted in changing the photovoice question from Village One to Village Two. This change was made due to a process of collaboration and learning during the method application in the first village. Key factors influencing the change included limited availability of Akha interpreters, co-researcher project expectations and applicability of the method. In addition

to modifications to the method, this cycle also incorporated modifications to the FPAR methodology. This change was in response to feedback from the RDA and the photovoice facilitation team that the methodology was not suitable to a Lao context. Critically, feedback included the application of Western concepts of feminism and participation and how these did not align with the Lao context including the experiences and expectations of the facilitation team and the Akha co-researchers. These changes will be explored in more depth in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

## 2.7 Cycle Three

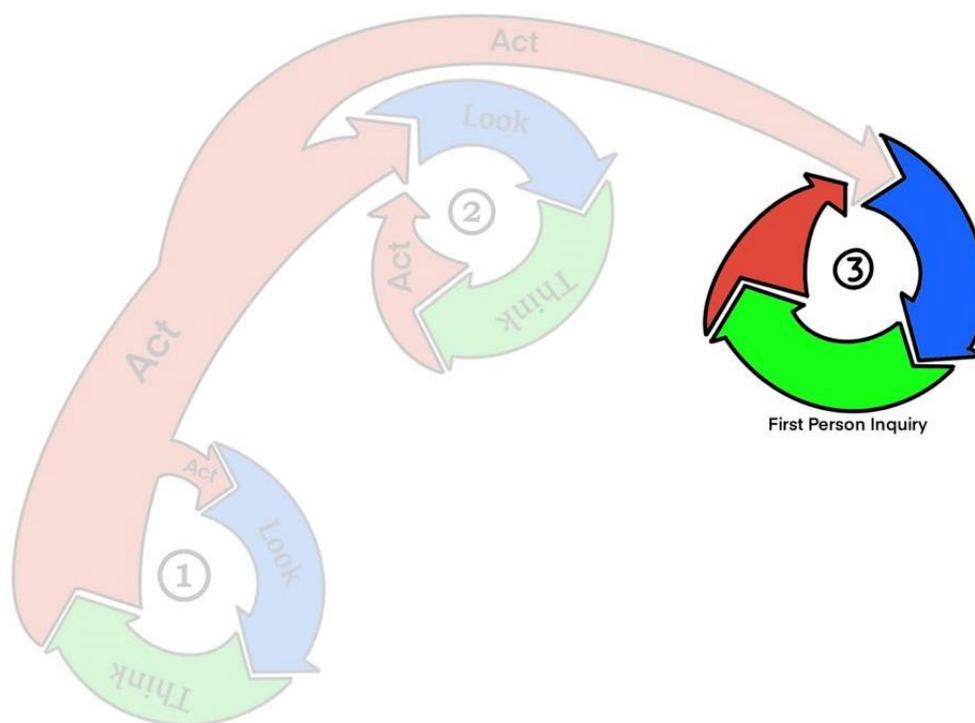


Figure 12 Cycle Three Map

### 2.7.1 Phase One – Looking Together

By the time I began the ‘Looking’ phase of Cycle Three, I realised that the cycle had already begun organically, emerging from my ongoing engagement with the RDA and their delivery of a gender-targeted development program. The way Cycle Three began highlighted the participatory approach of the research given that the RDA and I were collaboratively responding to the findings of Cycle Two without realising we had begun a new cycle. Through critical self-reflection, I recognised that the RDA and I were already addressing research question three – *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted*

*in Laos?* I selected first-person inquiry as the primary method in Cycle Three, alongside my review of co-generated findings from the previous two cycles. These decisions are discussed below.

#### *First-Person Inquiry*

First-, second-, and third-person inquiry are all forms of action research (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005; Hynes, 2013). First-person inquiry refers to the primary researcher's internal processes of self-inquiry, while second-person inquiry involves collaborative exploration with others, and third-person inquiry extends outward to create broader impact through networks and connections (Hynes, 2013). While my approach in this Cycle incorporated some elements of second- and third-person inquiry, I primarily utilised a first-person inquiry approach as I reflected on my own experiences working with the RDA and analysed the ways in which we collectively enacted FPAR and gender-targeted development approaches. Thus, my choice to utilise first-person inquiry was a process of unlearning and relearning through self-reflection and systemic thinking (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005).

Researchers employ first-person inquiry for various purposes, including gaining insight into their own worldview and understanding their fundamental purpose as researchers (Marshall, 2016; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Due to this emphasis on self-reflection, first-person inquiry is sometimes criticised as an act of narcissism (Sparkes, 2002). When I initially considered applying first-person inquiry methods, I shared similar concerns about the potential impacts a focus on myself as the research could have on the study. However, I ultimately concluded that my decision to utilise this approach constituted an act of deep self-reflection rather than narcissism. Through Cycles One and Two, I had realised my preconceived perceptions about FPAR were not always applicable within the Lao context. When designing Cycle Three, I used these reflections to remind myself that research question three sought to understand *how* participatory approaches to gender-targeted development are enacted in Laos, rather than *how I assumed* they should be enacted based on my prior experience. Consequently, I decided to utilise first-person inquiry as a deliberate methodology to both unlearn my preconceived Western-centric perspectives and genuinely learn from the RDA through a process of self-reflection.

### *Review of Data from Previous Cycles*

A researcher not only determines how research is enacted, they also influence how research is analysed and presented (Mehra, 2002). Whether intentional or not, researchers may ignore or censure data, or at the very least analyse findings based on their own biases, perceptions, and experiences. While it is impossible to completely remove the biases of the researcher the processes of unlearning and relearning that accompany first-person inquiry may assist the researcher to see a new perspective (Kroeger, 2023). Given that the data from the previous two cycles was collected prior to applying first-person inquiry, it seemed important that I revisit data from the previous two cycles. This process reinforced the iterative nature of the FPAR approach, as insights gained in Cycle Three informed my re-examination of previously unreported findings from Cycles One and Two.

### *2.7.2 Phase Two – Thinking Together*

The thinking together phase involved two phases: (1) first-person inquiry of my collaborative work with the RDA; and (2) review of co-generated data from Cycles One and Two. A summary of each phase is provided below with findings presented in Chapter Five.

#### *First-Person Inquiry*

In February 2025, the RDA and I conducted Cycle Three of this study and the Akha Women's Project. As with the previous cycle, my PhD cycle applied an FPAR methodology, while the Akha Women's Project applied a PAR approach, however as discussed previously I will refer to our collaborative approach as an FPAR methodology. Cycle Three of the Akha Women's Project utilised photovoice to co-generate data with the Akha Women to evaluate the success of the project and its application of the PAR methodology. Co-researchers were asked three photovoice questions including: (1) What change did you see in your village? (2) What change did you see in your household? and (3) What change will you make next?

The RDA and I spent one day in each of the two Akha Women's Project villages, during which we conducted the following activities:

- Community briefing and consent session.
- Information session about the Akha Women's Project.
- Information session on community development.
- Refresher on Photovoice as a method.

- Photovoice activity for the Akha Women’s Project.
- Photovoice interviews.
- Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs) for Cycle Two of this study.

Through my application of first-person inquiry, I applied Vallack’s (2010) approach which involves stages of: (1) describing the experience; (2) reflecting on the experience; (3) creating connections and insights about the experience; and (4) representing the experience through writing. I began by writing diary entries and recording my experiences of the Akha Women’s Project activity in March 2025. I then reflected on my experience of these activities and my working relationship with the RDA. Following this reflective activity, I compared and considered the differences between my experience working with the RDA during Cycle Two compared to Cycle Three. Finally, I documented these experiences through my writing of Chapter Five which includes the findings of this Cycle.

#### *Review of Data from Previous Cycles*

In April 2025, following my application of first-person inquiry and subsequent unlearning and relearning, I revisited the data collected during Cycle One and Two. This involved a thorough review of my NVivo coding from Cycles One and Two, as well as re-listening to several interviews and IFGD recordings. Through this process, I identified specific elements from Cycle One that had been previously overlooked. Additionally, I noted that certain themes initially coded in Cycles One were not closely aligned with the research question applied to Cycle One. I realised these themes were more appropriately situated within the scope of this cycle, Cycle Three. This realignment not only informed the development of Cycle Three but also prompted a reassessment of the thematic presentation from the earlier cycles. This process aligns closely with the FPAR methodology of this study as it ensures that I applied the findings from my collaborative experience with the RDA to my analysis and presentation of all three Cycles.

#### *2.7.3 Phase Three – Acting Together*

The action phase of Cycle Three is directly connected with the implementation of the Akha Women’s Project. Given the scope and duration of the Akha Women’s Project it is likely that the full implications of this Cycle may only become evident over time. During the ‘Look’ and ‘Think’ phases of Cycle Three the RDA and I identified further areas for training that would

help the RDA and their collaborators in the continuation of the Akha Women’s Project. See Table 5 RDA Training Sessions in Cycle Three for a list of these activities.

*Table 5 RDA Training Sessions in Cycle Three*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Training Activity</b>
Designing an M&E Framework	RDA Planning Session
	EoE Planning Session
	EOE M&E Training Session
	Reviewing the RDA’s M&E Framework

The RDA and I recognised the need for further training surrounding monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This became evident during the ‘*Thinking Together*’ phase of Cycle Three as the primary aim of the Akha Women’s Project cycle was to monitor and evaluate the success of the project. The RDA and I identified areas where we could strengthen the RDA’s M&E framework. We then engaged with Ethos of Engagement (EoE) a Queensland based network of consultants, academics, and practitioners who aim to provide decolonial, rights-based training services through a systemic lens. Drawing on their expertise in training services, the team at EoE and I co-designed a short training program focusing on the relationship between program logics and M&E frameworks. We designed the session to be an informal conversation that was responsive to the RDA’s needs.

In addition to providing training, the action phase of this cycle was realised through direct collaboration with the Akha Women’s Project. Throughout this cycle, the RDA and I implemented modifications to both the design and delivery of the Akha Women’s Project to ensure its responsiveness to the findings emerging from the study, with specific attention to the findings that emerged from co-generation of knowledge with the Akha co-researchers. I am continuing to work in partnership with the RDA and the other organisations involved in the Akha Women’s Project to incorporate insights from this study into the ongoing and future development of the Akha Women’s Project. In September 2025 I returned to Laos to co-lead a workshop about the Akha Women’s Project. Key activities in this workshop included a photovoice gallery, a session on using photovoice as a participatory method in Laos, and a discussion forum with CSOs, INGOs, target communities, and government. Additionally, in December 2025, Chanthalangsy will travel to Australia to co-present our collaborative work at the Australasian Aid Conference, as well as at other institutions across the country.

Our collaborative presentations and workshops constitute a direct form of action, while also contributing to indirect action, as the findings inform related projects through the Akha Women's Project's wider network of partners. Furthermore, the RDA and I intend to disseminate these findings through academic publications which is a form of action as it will assist the widespread dissemination of these findings and the influence they may have on broader discourse and practice within the field.

## *2.8 Chapter Summary*

In this chapter, I established my research foundations - including axiology, ontology, and epistemology. I then demonstrated how my research foundations connect to my chosen methodology and methods. Specifically, my community axiology and critical realist ontology led me to a participatory methodology because I wanted to centre the experiences and knowledge of co-researchers to understand their reality. While my epistemology aligned with the action phase of an FPAR methodology. I then presented the methods for the three FPAR cycles of this study, following the 'Look, Think, Act' phases of each cycle. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five I will expand on the findings of each cycle and reflect on the application of the methodology and method. In Chapter Five and Six, I will detail the challenges the RDA and I had in enacting an FPAR methodology in Laos due to the Western frameworks of feminism and participation embedded within the methodology.

### 3. Chapter Three – Cycle One

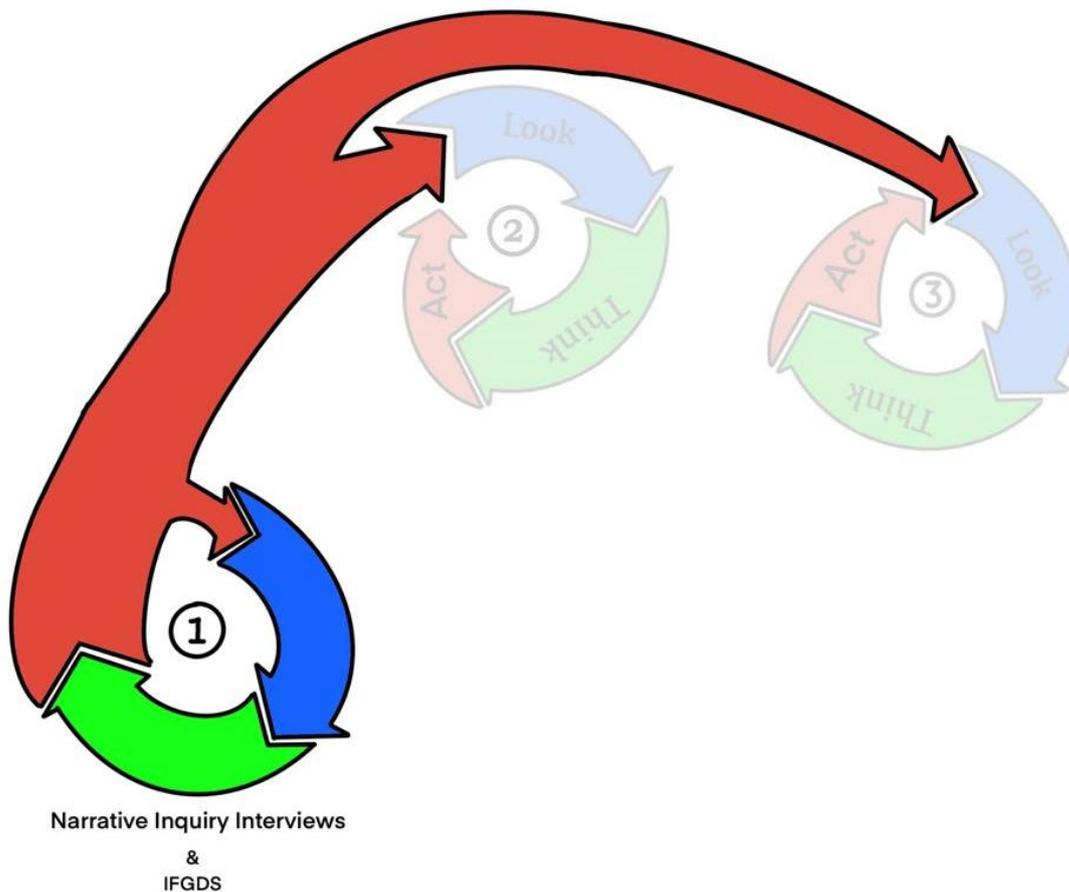


Figure 13 Cycle One Map

#### 3.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter presents the findings from Cycle One of this three cycle Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) study. The purpose of this chapter is to present co-researcher co-generated data for this reason I do not cite literature in this chapter. This aligns with FPAR methodologies, which prioritise the voices of co-researchers in the research findings. The findings of all three Cycles will be discussed in relation to the broader literature in the discussion chapter (Chapter Six). Cycle One aimed to answer research question one: *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?* This chapter is presented, following the three phases of 'Look, Think, Act'. The chapter begins by presenting the 'Looking' phase that initiated the research process. This is followed by the 'Thinking Together' phase, this section presents thematic analysis of co-generated data including quotes from narrative inquiry interviews and Interpretive Focus Group Discussions (IFGDs). The four themes presented include: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Politics of Development*; (3) *Global Environment*;

and (4) *Relational Structures in Development*. I then provide reflections on the *'Thinking Together'* phase, which I call *'Reflecting Together'* where I present both personal and co-researcher reflections. I then present the *'Acting Together'* phase, describing the actions that derived from *'Thinking Together'*. Finally, the chapter concludes with a chapter summary, summarising the key findings of the cycle.

### *3.2 Looking*

To reflect the FPAR approach applied to this study, this thesis follows a cyclical structure. This means the results are split into three chapters, one per cycle. Each results chapter has a section on *'Look, Think, Act'*, followed by reflections. To emphasise the participatory nature of these phases each is titled *'Looking Together'*, *'Thinking Together'*, *'Acting Together'*. However, the *'Look'* phase of cycle one was not participatory in nature, which is reflected in the title of this section being *'Looking'* instead of *'Looking Together'*. This phase was not participatory because it was the initial research phase before co-researchers were engaged in this study.

The *'Looking'* phase of Cycle One aimed to gather information to identify challenges facing the development and gender-targeted development sector in Laos. During the *'Looking'* phase, I reflected on my personal experiences working in the development sector in Laos as well as conducting a literature review. Even though this phase was not formally identified as a participatory phase, I still discussed my reflections and findings with Lao and expatriate colleagues. During the *'Looking'* phase I identified several challenges that affected the development sector in Laos including:

1. The influence of Western feminism on the design and delivery of gender-targeted development programs
2. The tension between Lao and international perceptions of gender and women's empowerment

My colleagues and friends who work in development in Laos and the region echoed these findings, confirming through their own experiences that similar challenges and insights had emerged in their practice. The insights from this *'Look'* phase informed my methodological choices, leading to the selection of narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs as the primary methods for data co-generation in Cycle One (see Chapter Two – Methodology and Methods for a detailed explanation of this selection process).

### 3.3 *Thinking Together*

The '*Thinking Together*' phase followed a three-step process to collectively generate and analyse data that answered research question one: *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?* This process involved the following three steps:

1. Co-researchers generating narrative inquiry interview data.
2. Independent thematic analysis of interview data.
3. Co-researcher review of analysis in IFGDs.

Step One and Three involved the co-generation of data with co-researchers from the development actor cohort. Data co-generation in Step One, involved participating in narrative inquiry interviews, as described in detail in Chapter Two. Once the interviews were conducted, I thematically analysed the interview data independently. From this analysis four initial themes emerged: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Defining Development*; (3) *Death by Committee*; and (4) *Intercultural Collaboration*. I then presented these initial themes to co-researchers via a series of IFGDs. Collaborative analysis of the initial themes with co-researchers during the IFGDs led to the revision of the initial themes. The revised themes that emerged from the IFGDs were: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Politics of Development*; (3) *Global Environment*; and (4) *Relational Structures in Development*. The following section presents the integrated findings of Cycle One by presenting each of the revised themes.

To uphold the anonymity of the co-researchers, the co-researchers involved in the narrative inquiry interviews (Step One) have been randomly assigned a numerical code from 1-25. An alphabetical code has also been applied to note if the co-researcher is Laotian (L) or an expatriate (E). For example, an expatriate co-researcher was given the label 1-E while a Lao co-researcher was given the label 3-L. Data from the IFGDs (Step Three) was co-generated as a group, therefore IFGDs are labelled from 1-5. As with the narrative inquiry interviews an alphabetical code is applied to distinguish between Lao (L) and expatriate (E) IFGDs.

Below is a presentation of the integrated themes identified in the IFGDs: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Politics of Development*; (3) *Global Environment*; and (4) *Relational Structures in Development*.

### 3.3.1 *The Wheel of Fire*

The in-vivo theme title '*The Wheel of Fire*' was identified during the narrative inquiry interviews. The theme title was derived from the following quote - "*Development is like a wheel of fire, it just goes around and around and at some point, countries, people, organisations are supposed to get off this wheel of fire, but nobody ever does get off this wheel*" (Co-Researcher 1-E). The theme concerns the way development has become an industry that, instead of fostering progression towards transformative change, ends up hindering it. Co-researchers consistently identified with and affirmed this theme throughout the narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs. During the IFGDs co-researchers suggested that the '*Wheel of Fire*' is a global challenge rather than being specific to Laos. "*This has been examined on such a global scale, you know, not to say like, it's too big for you. I just mean like it's such a massive problem in development in general. This is a system that basically just feeds the system*" (IFGD-2E). Despite the global nature of the '*Wheel of Fire*', co-generated data indicates that there are several factors in Laos that influence the continuation of '*The Wheel of Fire*'. These factors include: (1) the professionalisation of development; (2) box ticking; and (3) cross-organisational repetition.

#### *The Professionalisation of Development*

During the narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs co-researchers often referenced individual career ambitions as a factor that perpetuates the '*Wheel of Fire*'. "*[Development is] an industry, people make their careers out of working in it. I mean, do they have a vested interest in keeping this industry going? Yes, they do. Do they keep the industry going? Yeah sure, they do*" (Co-researcher 1-E). Co-researchers described the tension that exists in development between the altruistic ambitions of development programs against the practitioners' personal need and desire for financial stability and professional advancement. "*People make careers in development and in order to progress and get off the wheel of fire, people have to give up their jobs. You have to localise positions and that's an unattractive prospect for lots of people*" (IFGD 3-E).

The frequent movement of practitioners between organisations and countries' was identified as a challenge affecting continuity and institutional knowledge in the development sector. "*It's chronic, everybody is just moving around making cash*" (IFGD 3-E). Co-researchers explained that expatriate development practitioners move to different countries, while Lao practitioners

move between organisations. A Lao co-researcher described how this constant movement impacts institutional knowledge - *“we train them [practitioners] on everything, they move, we train them again, then we start from zero, or even minus”* (Co-researcher 4-L). Co-researchers recognised that expatriate practitioners rarely stay in Laos for more than three years, noting that Laos is considered as either a *“jumping off point for senior leadership roles in different organisations”* (IFGD 3-E) or a *“retirement ground”* (IFGD 3-E). Regardless of their reason for being in Laos, co-researchers acknowledged that expatriate practitioners are just following the career progression available to them - *“These people are just jumping on opportunities that someone’s going to take. I don’t think the majority of them have bad intentions. It’s just that they’re not in it. They’re not committed to seeing change. And they’re also only here for three years, max four years”* (IFGD 3-E). As a result of this movement, Lao co-researchers warned that *“the foreigners don’t really get it”* (Co-researcher 4-L) when describing expatriate understandings of place-based factors that impact development practice in Laos.

Despite acknowledging the tension between career aspirations and the broader goals of development, co-researchers frequently described their motivations for working in the sector as being rooted in altruism. Expatriate co-researchers often described the personal fulfillment they found in the work - *“I love my job. I love to feel that I’m contributing to something”* (Co-researcher 11-E). While Lao co-researchers talked about a commitment to their country – *“we feel like we cannot just leave this program behind we need to continue whatever we can because we already have the knowledge”* (Co-researcher 10-L). Notably, expatriate co-researchers often explained that they wanted to work in development because of their passion for travel - *“I have always wanted to work more internationally”* (Co-researcher 6-E). This finding aligns closely with the pattern of expatriates frequently moving between countries. However, it contrasts with the Lao perception of ambitions for national development - *“We are all Lao. We will continue”* (Co-researcher 8-L).

While co-researchers often described expatriates’ experiences in Laos as *“come and go”* (Co-researcher 8-E). There was a cohort of expatriate co-researchers who described themselves as being *“invested in Laos”* (Co-researcher 1-E). These co-researchers’ reasons for committing to Laos were dependent on several factors. Some examples of these factors include marriage,

children, setting up a business or partnership, or a significant amount of time working in Laos<sup>17</sup> (Co-researcher 1, 2, 5, 8, 9-E). One expatriate co-researcher described feeling so settled in Laos that they joked *“I think in my past life I was Asian”* (Co-researcher 5-E).

### *Box-Ticking*

In this study, box-ticking refers to activities that are designed to demonstrate project compliance and accountability instead of achieving meaningful project outcomes. Co-researchers often described their frustration with box-ticking activities, citing it as a significant influence on the functioning of the *‘Wheel of Fire’*. One co-researcher described box-ticking as a *“trap”* that forces development staff to think *“I need to deliver 1,2,3 to get my salary, rather than how can I improve the quality?”* (Co-researcher 3-L). Another described the problem as being so widespread that they considered development to be *“a box ticking industry”* (Co-researcher 1-E). Box-ticking was seen by co-researchers as particularly prevalent in two key areas of development practice: (1) research; and (2) reporting.

The need for preliminary research prior to program implementation was often described as a box-ticking activity. *“There seems to be a lot of repetition, a new project comes in with a new person, and the first thing they do is go to gather information”* (Co-researcher 2 -E). Despite recognising the need for contextualised data, co-researchers noted that a focus on preliminary data collection often created a cycle of project revision that failed to expand beyond previous projects. *“I still don’t 100% understand the UN or INGOs, they work in so many countries including Laos, one of the least developed countries in the world, they already understand these kinds of things but why when the projects begin, do they only review things”* (Co-researcher 4-L). Co-researchers also observed that target communities were *“tired of interviews, tired of studies and assessments because they want something tangible, concrete”* (Co-researcher 11-E).

Ironically, while the purpose of preliminary research is usually to understand community needs, development practitioners explained they had often already collected this information to submit their project proposal. This meant co-researchers were frequently required to repeat research they already knew the answer to. *“It’s already the third phase for us, even*

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<sup>17</sup> Direct quotes about personal connections to Laos are not included to retain the privacy and confidentiality of co-researchers.

*though for the donors, it's always the first"* (Co-researcher 5-E). During a Lao IFGD co-researchers confirmed the repetition of preliminary research and the unreasonable expectations set by international donors to present these findings. *"INGOs would just like to get some information. Always collect information, but the funds are very little. They invest very little money to them, but they wish to get very big impact... [donors ask] can you share a success story with me, even though you provide me funding to conduct only 3 trainings so how can I follow up with them? But they have to do this because there is no choice because they hope for more funding in the future, so they have to do it"* (IFGD 1-L).

Reporting was similarly identified by co-researchers as a box-ticking exercise, often perceived as fulfilling procedural requirements rather than contributing to meaningful change. *"We tick boxes not in delivery, but in reporting"* (Co-researcher 1-E). In the IFGDs co-researchers expanded on this point by suggesting that the focus of most international donors is on transparency and visibility over success. *"I think donor visibility is the donor's main priority"* (IFGD 3-E). To explain the emphasis on visibility a co-researcher told a story about a donor who replicated a whole activity just to have their logo attached to it – *"they created a new one just because of problems with branding. All the donors are the same"* (IFGD 3-E).

Expense reports were often cited as a major limitation to developmental change. Co-researchers noted that the extensive documentation required for financial accountability delayed project timelines and reduced the time available for meaningful engagement with beneficiaries. *"It's kind of ironic I haven't really thought about it. How much box ticking we do, but now we're just box ticking on the things that are supposed to make people more accountable"* (Co-researcher 1-E). Co-researchers cited several factors that impact program alignment with the policies and expectations of expense reporting. Firstly, funders often failed to account for delays in project roll out, meaning they had unrealistic expectations about when money should be spent – *"the money needs to be spent in a certain amount of time. So sometimes it's very rushed. when it's budget time there's a deadline to get the money out"* (IFGD 4-L). Secondly, the narrowness of expenditure policies can limit the flexibility of program delivery. One co-researcher told a story about how they weren't allowed to buy new project computers for their staff when the old ones broke because their donor *"only allows procurement in the first year of project implementation"* (IFGD 3-E). Finally, co-researchers identified the absence of project overheads in project funding. This meant there were

limitations surrounding ongoing administrative and operational costs – *“Just only provide fund for the activity, but no budget for the staff to support”* (IFGD 1-L). All these factors influence program efficiency and success as co-researchers in an expatriate IFGD explained – *“if you make it so difficult for organisations to function and you underfund them, then you get all these problems and it's so inefficient and it's just ridiculous”* (IFGD 3-E).

#### *Cross-Organisational Repetition*

Co-researchers described repetition not only within development programs but also between organisations. *“The sector is not designed to evolve in a meaningful and coherent way, so we're always sort of repeating, there's no cohesiveness across the line”* (IFGD 3-E). One co-researcher accused INGOs of *“reinventing the wheel”* (Co-researcher 2-E) while another suggested INGOs have a *“me first mentality”* (Co-researcher 9-E). Co-researcher 2-E explained there is an expectation that practitioners will repeat work conducted by other organisations or programs – *“I'm not going to spend my time and effort and resources proving what other people have proven.”* As well as resulting in repetition expatriate co-researchers described a sense of *“territorialism”* (Co-researcher 2-E) between INGOs which restricts organisational collaboration. During an expatriate IFGD co-researchers explained that funders perpetuated this competition. *“The donors themselves are pitching us up against each other. And then they expect us to collaborate inside that space after having competed for the same resources”* (IFGD 3-E). Additionally, because of this competition, practitioners are required to work without pay to secure future funding or maintain project continuity. *“Everybody will be probably living unpaid for a long time”* (IFGD 3-E).

While expatriate co-researchers only described the challenges associated with cross-organisational repetition, Lao co-researchers saw some benefits. Specifically, the benefits identified by Lao co-researchers aligned with their personal motivations to apply their knowledge to help the development of Laos. When discussing the closure of a program a Lao co-researcher had worked on for several years, they explained that the closure was not an end to their work - *“it's not an end, we continue... I continue with the work, I just move to a different organisation”* (Co-researcher 4-L).

### 3.3.2 Politics of Development

This theme was originally labelled '*Death by Committee*' during my initial thematic analysis of narrative inquiry interview data. '*Death by Committee*', was identified from an in vivo code based on the following quote – "*If you're working for a government agency or an INGO, that decision is like death by committee*" (Co-researcher 2-E). As indicated '*Death by Committee*' described the inefficiencies of decision-making that influenced development practice in Laos. In this theme competing timelines and bureaucratic delays emerged as the primary causes of development ineffectiveness. During the narrative inquiry interviews there was an emphasis on the Lao government and INGOs as the main actors causing these delays. When '*Death by Committee*' was presented to co-researchers during the IFGDs, co-researchers expanded on these findings, emphasising that the situation was not as black and white as it had been presented in the narrative inquiry interviews. Instead, co-researchers cited political differences as a key factor influencing the progression of development in Laos, building on narrative inquiry interview data the IFGDs provided a more nuanced understanding of the delays. Three aspects of the influence of political agendas on development emerged: (1) importing Western ideas; (2) national agendas; and (3) the role of the individual.

#### *Importing Western Ideas*

During the IFGDs, co-researchers explained that the importation of Western concepts of development can hinder development progress if they don't align with Lao values. "*I think what we think of as development from the West is not what Lao people think of as development progress*" (IFGD 3-E). Co-researchers emphasised the need for INGOs to reconsider and adjust their conceptions of development to align more closely with locally held values. "*If you bring in something really big and a really different idea, it immediately gets shut down. And so, I think that's one of the biggest disconnects that I see between what donors want and what people want or maybe what the government wants, or maybe what the communities want in terms of like how big of a change do we think is achievable?*" (IFGD 3-E). As well as aligning with government and community needs, Lao co-researchers described the need for INGOs to align with the CSOs they partnered with - "*for me I think the donor of the INGO should understand the needs or requirement of CSO very carefully and they have to compromise between their own objective and the CSO objective*" (IFGD 1-L).

Meaningful compromise requires INGOs to let go of their own predefined notions of what development should look like. A Lao co-researcher explained that in Laos deeply rooted patriarchal structures were opposed to Western notions of gender-targeted development. *“Before independence Lao was a kingdom. A king is always a man, so a man is at the top”* (Co-researcher 17-L). Co-researchers criticised Western-centric gender-targeted programs for not considering Lao development agendas - *“I think there's a little bit of a disconnect between what donors want and think of as a gender inclusive space... [they] don't have any vision of what a somewhat more inclusive space in Laos would look like”* (IFGD 3-E). Additionally, co-researchers explained the differences between Western conceptions of women’s empowerment and traditional gender roles. *“There is this tendency, I think, in projects to overwhelm women”* (Co-researcher 11-E). *“They come in thinking that they're going to do stuff for gender, and it ends up putting more work on women to begin with and their workload is already so high”* (Co-researcher 8-E). Co-researchers noted that if an international program applies adapted conceptions of women’s empowerment to align with Lao culture, the program no longer aligns with the organisation’s perceptions of gender. *“Is it the change that an international donor would want to see? Women's roles are changing, and things are changing, but is it the way we want it to be?”* (IFGD 3-E).

Despite this study’s focus on gender-targeted development and the supposed rise of gendered mainstreaming in development programming in Laos, gender was rarely mentioned by co-researchers during the narrative inquiry interviews. When gender was mentioned, co-researchers often referenced the Westernisation of gender-targeted development. An expatriate co-researcher explained *“it's not easy to discuss gender like this [in terms of development] because gender is our concept”* (Co-researcher 11-E). During the IFGDs co-researchers expanded on this point noting that *“the agenda for the donor is very different than for the government”* (IFGD 1-L). Competing perceptions of gender-targeted development between expatriate and Lao development partners were identified as a key factor influencing program success. Co-researchers explained that differing expectations and goals shaped how the program was delivered.

Co-researchers observed that if they wanted to achieve success in gender-targeted development they had to apply a *“balanced”* (Co-researcher 17-L) or *“sensible”* (Co-researcher 2-E) approach. Interestingly, this finding aligns with broader suggestions about the

need to compromise development agendas. An expatriate co-researcher reflected on the ineffectiveness of pushing a Western agenda on Lao practitioners - *“And it doesn't matter how much we talk about it with them [Lao development partners], they're never going to see this. They have different interests. So, that's hugely problematic”* (Co-researcher 1-E). Equally, a Lao practitioner described the challenge they faced when trying to communicate INGOs project aims to their Lao field team. This Lao co-researcher told the story of an INGO who wanted equal representation of women at training sessions, but the field team failed to achieve this, because they couldn't understand why women should attend the meetings. *“It is not a new thing [women not attending meetings], to them it is the same thing that they always see”* (Co-researcher 16-L). During an IFGD, a co-researcher neatly summarised this point by noting *“if we assume that our motivation is their motivation then we have fundamentally misunderstood the whole game that we're playing here”* (IFGD 3-E).

#### *The Ethnic Divide*

Intersectionality emerged as a central theme influencing the experiences of gender and gender-targeted development. Co-researchers identified the impacts of ethnicity on the gender roles of women in Laos. One co-researcher reflected that ethnic minority women in Laos experience different gender roles compared to Lao Loum women - *“especially with ethnic groups ... women still don't have the same rights as the men”* (Co-researcher 5-E). In particular, the experiences of Akha and Hmong ethnic women were raised by co-researchers, with attention to the patriarchal structures embedded in these cultural systems.

Co-researchers also identified how ethnicity impacted how ethnic women accessed development programming. A Lao co-researcher discussed the challenges of cross-language programming, reflecting on the fact that many ethnic communities in Laos are unable to speak or read Lao. *“Maybe women cannot speak Lao, but if the team can speak the ethnic language, it will be good time. But in the short term, they do not trust you, so they don't want to say”* (Co-researcher 19-L). In addition to impacting the practical application of development programming, language barriers can affect relationships between development actors and intended beneficiaries, as those unable to understand may feel more hesitant to participate or voice their concerns.

Finally, co-researchers believed that the concepts of gender-targeted development may differ from the perspectives of ethnic minorities in Laos. One expatriate co-researcher reflected on

the implementation of their gender-targeted development program noting it was much harder to enact gender-targeted development in ethnic communities because of the complexities of gender expressions in these communities - *“especially in ethnic minorities and remote ethnic villages. Speaking about gender is a big topic”* (Co-researcher 11-E).

#### *National Agendas*

Development outcomes are shaped by the national agendas of both funder and recipient countries. In this case co-researchers described the impact of Lao government and funding countries political agendas. Lao co-researcher 4-L described national agendas in Laos as *“the communist way”* claiming that this can lead to inefficiencies - *“We have our system, the laws, all our government staff and everything, but it's not really functioning”* (Co-researcher 4-L). Expatriate co-researchers compared levels of bureaucracy in Laos to those in countries they had previously worked in, explaining their experiences in Laos were more restrictive. *“I would say that Lao is probably one of the most restrictive environments I've ever worked in in terms of development work. Within that cradle of safety and security and peacefulness, it's an extremely tightly controlled government. You can't do almost anything that you could do in development work in other countries. And everything has to go through the lens of the government. Everything has to be approved. You can't do anything without government approval. So, in that way it's extremely restrictive”* (Co-researcher 8-E).

Co-researchers also acknowledged the influence of international agendas both at an organisational and government level. The levels of control held by INGOs were outlined by Co-researcher 4-L, *“we blame the government for example they have all the politics and things, but INGOs also have a country director who talks to the head of the program, the program manager, the coordinator”* (Co-researcher 4-L). Beyond the national agendas of the Lao government, co-researchers also noted the national agendas of the donor country. When describing Australian aid in Laos, expatriate co-researchers cited the influence of Australian agendas – *“This is coming from government, it's coming from, Penny Wong's [Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs] office... it's like this disconnect between what seems politically advantageous in Australia and what they think are really important priorities”* (IFGD 3-E).

Co-researchers described government approval processes as a tool employed by the Lao government to assert their development agenda. Specifically, the requirement for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between development partners was heavily cited by

both Lao and expatriate co-researchers as a factor impacting project success. *“I think the biggest problem is to get the MOU. You know that is really challenging for us”* (Co-researcher 7-L). Notably, MOUs can be used by the government to screen what activities or topics are delivered in Laos. *“We chose our topic on women’s land rights and then we had to get all approval from the government before we could train them. We had to postpone the training because the government said no you cannot train about this topic, we don’t have this problem. We don’t have a problem on gender, or you know even on women’s rights. So, we have to postpone the training and change the training topic and you know that is so difficult”* (Co-researcher 7-L). During IFGDs co-researchers suggested that MOUs are used as tool to prioritise certain development programs over others - *“The MOU is a big deal for the Lao Government for the projects we want to support”* (IFGD 1-L). Co-researchers suggested that if a project doesn’t align with government agendas it will be much harder to get government support. *“Some of the government like NGOs, but 70% don’t”* (IFGD 4-L).

In addition to MOUs, co-researchers also described how the government use CSO registrations to restrict certain development agendas. *“We cannot register as the LGBT<sup>18</sup>[Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender] community organisation. In Lao it’s illegal.”* (Co-researcher 13-L). Co-researchers explained that if you want to register as a CSO in Laos, the government will *“do a due diligence check”* (Co-researcher 4-L). As part of this check *“the police will come to your house and come to your village and ask for information from the local authority and they will check you”* (Co-researcher 13-L). Specifically, co-researchers described the challenges with promoting LGBT inclusion in development agendas. *“I feel like working on LGBT is impossible in Laos because I don’t know the way to go”* (Co-researcher 13-L). Government policies and restrictions were highlighted as a key challenge preventing LGBT inclusion. However, during the IFGDs, co-researchers explained that they could hide ‘controversial’ development agendas within less political development aims.

During the IFGDs, co-researchers regularly described health projects as being *“less controversial”* (IFGD 3-E). There were several reasons why co-researchers identified health as

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<sup>18</sup> During data generation, the acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) was the primary acronym used by both Lao and expatriate co-researchers. While I recognise LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual, and other sexually or gender diverse) is the more commonly used acronym, I have presented the quotes as they were said by co-researchers to maintain authenticity.

being *'less controversial'*. The first was due to its alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) – *"I think for healthcare and public health for example, because they are a signatory to the UN SDGs and that's why I think the INGOs just working on these aspects are stronger"* (IFGD 2-E). Alternatively, co-researchers believed it was because health was often delivered as a tangible program that resulted in measurable change. *"Health is probably less political, but then also you can just equip a whole bunch of people to provide vaccines or something or just make sure that we have a certain number of medicines. It's like it's a little bit more of do this and then you get this result. Whereas, you know, with gender, or economic empowerment or women's empowerment it is do these seventeen things and it may or may not help"* (IFGD 2-E). During a Lao IFGD one co-researcher remarked to another *"healthcare is easier, I think, because you guys are helping people a lot"* (IFGD 4-L). Additionally, co-researchers explained how LGBT inclusion agendas can be incorporated within health programs. *"We work closely with the ministry of health they accept MSM (Men Who Have Sex with Men), so we don't need to say we work for LGBT, but we say we work for high-risk group or the key population or something like this"* (IFGD 1-L).

#### *The Role of the Individual*

The political agendas and perceptions of identity held by individual development practitioners were identified as being just as influential as those of development organisations or governments. Specifically, co-researchers considered the philosophies of development practitioners as a factor influencing both their definitions of development and the way they were delivered in practice. The influence of the *"communist way"* (Co-researcher 4-L) was considered to directly impact Lao development practitioners. *"Political national identity is very strong. There is literally a ministry designated to make sure everybody in Laos is homogenous and they are all Lao together. So, the Lao story is that we're all Lao"* (IFGD 3-E). Specifically, political identities were considered to impact intercultural collaboration between Lao and expatriate practitioners.

During the narrative inquiry interviews, co-researchers emphasised the challenges of differing cultural expectations in the workplace. *"Compared with other countries, you know, Lao we have a past communist system. So, the people are conservative"* (Co-researcher 19-L). Expatriate co-researchers inferred that the communist system meant Lao practitioners were conflict averse – *"there is no opening, there is no initiative to change, there is no capacity to*

*do it differently*” (Co-researcher 1-E). Although Lao co-researchers also characterised themselves as conflict-averse – *“Lao we are very shy”* (Co-researcher 17-L)- they suggested that expatriate practitioners would benefit from adopting a Lao approach. A Lao co-researcher explained that they wanted their colleagues to *“challenge”* practices in a *“respectful and suitable way for Laos”* (Co-researcher 4-L). Comparatively, expatriate co-researchers argued that while it would be easier to adopt a *‘communist approach’* to working in Laos it would *“require unlearning the whole way that you grew up, your whole personality and that's not something that I think a lot of foreigners would want to do”* (IFGD 3-E).

In addition to political identity, religion was identified as an important influence on how development was understood and practiced. When discussing how to define development during an IFGD, Lao co-researchers agreed that they should view development through a Buddhist lens. *“We need to go back to the Buddhist teaching method and only try to change and improve yourself”* (IFGD 5-L). In another Lao IFGD discussing the same topic, a co-researcher reflected on their experience of becoming a monk, describing this process as development in action. *“I became a monk and tried to learn by myself. I learnt English. I continued my education at school. This is the way of development”* (IFGD 4-L). An expatriate co-researcher explained that Buddhism in Laos is not only a religion but also a sense of identity explaining the challenge their Lao Christian colleagues face. *“I noticed that there was this real anxiety about being Christian, you know, being a Lao Christian... after a while, somebody said to me, well, Lao people are Buddhists. And I know ethnically that's very diverse. But Lao Loum people and these were all ethnically Lao Thai people, they're all Buddhist. So Lao people, we're just Buddhist. That just is who we are. It's inside of us. This is who we are. These Lao Thai people being Christian is totally weird. You have to remove a part of you to become Christian”* (IFGD 3-E). Some expatriate co-researchers also referenced how religion informed their development practice. One co-researcher said that their religious upbringing encouraged them to work in development – *“We were a part of the church when I was young and that was really impactful to me”* (Co-researcher 20-E).

### 3.3.3 Global Environment

This theme was originally titled *‘Defining Development’* after thematic analysis of the narrative inquiry interviews. When this initial theme was presented to co-researchers during the IFGDs, co-researchers provided additional information. During the IFGDs the themes *‘Politics of*

*Development*' (formerly *'Death by Committee'* prior to IFGD review) and *'Global Environment*' (formerly *'Defining Development'* prior to IFGD review) were reconfigured as co-researchers made sense of and examined the initial themes. The theme *'Global Environment'* emerged from the IFGDs to describe the global and national factors that influence development programming in Laos. Key factors identified include: (1) the history of Sombath Somphone; (2) geo-political relationships; and (3) global economic trends.

#### *The History of Sombath Somphone*

Sombath Somphone, a Lao development practitioner and prominent member of Lao civil society, was abducted in 2012 (Sims, 2021b). The global development sectors has criticised the government's failure to investigate Somphone's disappearance (Creak, 2014; Sims, 2021). As a result of the limited details surrounding Somphone's abduction, the reasoning behind his disappearance have never been confirmed. It is believed that Somphone's disappearance was in response to his involvement in the 2012 Asia Europe People's Forum (Sims, 2021b). As a co-convenor at the forum, Somphone engaged in discussions about hardship and poverty in Laos (Sims, 2021b). Somphone's legacy was referenced by both Lao and Expatriate co-researchers as a factor that influenced their approach to development in Laos. During the narrative inquiry interviews the references were subtle, with co-researchers simply referencing Somphone and the impact of his disappearance. *"It was a bad year, bad month for us when Sombath Somphone disappeared"* (Co-researcher 10-L). One co-researcher requested their narrative inquiry interview was not recorded due to concerns for their safety, referencing Somphone, while an expatriate co-researcher described the period surrounding Somphone's disappearance as being *"too dangerous"* to introduce new development agendas.

During the IFGDs, references to Somphone were more frequent. Co-researchers confirmed that the history of Somphone had impacted development agendas noting practitioners had to be *"very careful"* (IFGD 4-L). A Lao co-researcher explained how the history of Somphone had changed the way they managed relationships with government staff. *"It made me so sad you know, the history of Sombath. My mum said how come you cry, and you change a lot... We are so scared"* (IFGD 4-L).

#### *Geo-Political Relationships*

Geo-political relationships were seen as having a significant impact on international development partnerships. Specifically, relationships with China and America, were

referenced as directly influencing development agendas in Laos. *“You have America competing for Lao and, you have China competing for Lao. So, you have two world powers that are both really competing for the hearts and minds of this nation”* (Co-researcher 8-E). Co-researchers explained how Lao’s relationship with both China and America shaped how the other engaged with it. *“That’s a very interesting dynamic. And now that, you know, Laos is defaulting on a lot of their loans, it’s interesting to see how China is responding to that. And I think the dynamic between the US and Lao is part of the reason why they’re responding in a more generous way than I think they should or that they normally would”* (Co-researcher 8-E).

Co-researchers described a sense of distrust between the Lao government and INGOs. *“The government find it hard to understand why we have a budget from another country”* (IFGD 3-L). Specifically, co-researchers noted that the government does not trust US funding because of America’s ‘Secret war’ (See Chapter One). *“The budget from USA is more difficult than [organisation name redacted for privacy] from Japan because they [the Lao government] are like okay, we are on Asian side, but a long, long time ago we have issues with the story of Lao and America, talking about the bombs. It is hard for the US organisations to fund development in Laos. Different country. Different connection”* (IFGD 3-L). Comparatively, an expatriate co-researcher believed America should fund more development in Laos as a means of *“atoning for the bombs”* (Co-researcher 8-E).

In addition to Lao government scepticism toward ‘Western’ development, co-researchers believed donor countries were also reducing their aid expenditures, signalling a shift in geo-political relationships. One co-researcher described the *“decline of the international NGO sector”* explaining that the *“decline is a Western decline. I think you know, NGOs in Korea and Japan and things, I think they’re booming. You know, Korea is putting a lot of money into the NGO sector now and into Laos”* (Co-researcher 18-E). When Co-researcher 18-E was asked about the causes of this *“Western decline”* they indicated that it was due to *“disillusionment”* and an insular outlook on geo-political relationships from Western governments.

#### *Global Economic Trends*

Co-researchers often referenced the Lao economy and the ways in which it influenced development processes in Laos. When describing the factors shaping development agendas in Laos expatriate co-researchers noted that *“some of it has to do with the macro-economic*

*issues of the country*” (IFGD 2-E). During the narrative inquiry interviews, which were held from November 2023 until March 2024, co-researchers stated that the *“Lao economy is not good”* (Co-researcher 13-L). Co-researchers believed that the economy was *“precarious”* (Co-researcher 20-E) and that it would continue to worsen. *“Laos is and will be more and more vulnerable”* (Co-researcher 4-L). During the IFGDs, held in November 2024, co-researchers described a continued economic decline. *“The circumstances are changing so rapidly at the moment”* (IFGD 2-E).

Youth migration was characterised by co-researchers as one of the most significant consequences of economic instability in Laos. During the narrative inquiry interviews, co-researchers explained that Lao youth were *“leaving Laos and going to Thailand”* (Co-researcher 18-E). A year later, during the IFGDs co-researchers described the continued impacts of youth migration – *“For the Lao country right now we don’t have any young people who want to stay at home. They just want money. They aren’t thinking about working hard. They just think I have to move”* (IFGD 4-L). As well as the continued migration to Thailand, co-researchers explained there was a growing trend of youth migrating to the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) in Northern Laos. While co-researchers believed that youth migrating to Thailand were working in factories, they mentioned that in the GTSEZ youth were working as *“sex workers”* or at *“call centres”* which co-researchers believed to be ‘scam operations’ (IFGD 1-L). Additionally, co-researchers explained that the GTSEZ was a hotspot for *“human trafficking”* (IFGD 1-L). Despite the dangers of the GTSEZ co-researchers explained that the government cannot do anything to help – *“The area belongs to the Chinese investors, because it is a special economic zone, they have their own policies to manage”* (IFGD 1-L).

### ***3.3.4 Relational Structures in Development***

*‘Relational Structures in Development’* is a new theme that emerged from the IFGDs replacing the initial theme *‘Intercultural Collaboration’*. The theme *‘Intercultural Collaboration’* focused solely on cross-cultural relationships and their impact on development practice. Despite emerging as a central theme during my thematic analysis of the narrative inquiry interviews *‘Intercultural Collaboration’* received minimal reaction from co-researchers during the IFGDs. While all co-researchers agreed that cross-cultural relationships impacted development practice, they spent more time describing more nuanced relational structures and how they impacted development in Laos. This led to the emergence of the revised theme *‘Relational*

*Structures in Development*. This theme describes: (1) cross-cultural relationships; and (2) the relationship between CSOs and INGOs.

#### *Cross-Cultural Relationships*

The influence of culture on the working relationships between Lao and expatriate development practitioners revealed important insights into intercultural collaboration. Lao co-researchers reflected on the challenges they experienced working with expatriate practitioners with limited understanding of Lao culture. These co-researchers acknowledged that *“the Lao culture is something not easy to understand”* (Co-researcher 13-L). During the narrative-knowing portion of the narrative inquiry interviews, co-researchers were told a story about the working relationship between an expatriate practitioner named Sally, and a Lao practitioner named Phaivanh. When reflecting on this story Lao co-researcher regularly blamed Sally for the project failure. *“If you are the researcher and you don’t understand the context of the community... It means that you’re going to get your work done but you are not supporting the community”* (Co-researcher 14-L).

Comparatively, expatriate co-researchers described the feeling that they *“will never be Lao”* (IFGD 3-E). During an expatriate IFGD, co-researchers had a lengthy discussion about the *“othering”* they experienced in Laos and how this impacted their work in Laos and their relationship with their colleagues. *“I think that’s just Lao, you can’t be Lao unless you’re in Lao and you grew up in that context”* (IFGD 3-E). After a long discussion the co-researchers agreed that the difference stemmed from political identity. As discussed in section 1.5 *“communism is part of cultural identity”* co-researchers went on to explain *“you cannot own cultural identity. You cannot. It’s a decision do you want to own it? I come from a democracy. I don’t want to own it. If you decide to do that maybe you can become Lao, but I think most people from Western society cannot”* (IFGD 3-E). In relation to relationships with their colleague’s, expatriate co-researchers in IFGD 3-E also concluded that they shouldn’t ignore the cultural differences present in workplace settings. *“Never work with Lao people in a Lao way. Like that is what I fundamentally think. As a foreigner, you can never, ever work with them in the way that they work. You always going to be outside”* (IFGD 3-E).

#### *The Relationship between CSOs and INGOs*

Recent years have seen a rise in partnerships between CSOs and INGOs in Laos. Co-researchers explained that recent trends in Laos result in multi-national organisations partnering with

INGOs who then partner with Lao CSOs. This trend is due to multi-national organisations *“specifically requiring applications to include Lao civil society or to be open to Lao Civil Society. What they've done, in my opinion, is they've created a Lao civil society that is reliant upon [multi-national organisation name redacted] and Western donor funding that's somewhat removed from Laos”* (Co-researcher 18-E). This chain of command means multi-national organisations can set the development agenda via *“prescriptive”* funding (Co-researcher 18-E). During the IFGDs co-researchers reflected on this challenge and noted the need for *“untethered funding”* - *“untethered funding is very problematic for donors. But you would be better off with untethered funding in the sense that you can then work through and with the ministry to identify priorities or with the communities that you're working with to identify priorities and then address those themes. And then, yeah, maybe you would actually make some progress”* (IFGD 3-E).

There is also a power dynamic between the INGO and the partner CSO. *“Most of the time when we work, we work to support in the international organisation, and we are not aware, in terms of the image or logos, of what we have developed”* (Co-researcher 10-L). Here the co-researcher explains that when CSOs collaborate with INGOs they are often required to support the INGO without being briefed fully in how they are contributing to the project. Co-researchers suggested that INGOs have a focus on their brand identity and the visibility of their work as described in earlier themes. This strengthens the story quoted in the theme the *‘Wheel of Fire’* where an INGO rebranded a CSOs documents to ensure they had the INGOs logos on them. Despite CSOs being described as partner organisations, co-researcher 10-L reflected that *“I don't feel that I'm partner”*. Another Lao co-researcher resonated with these feeling and expressed their desire for CSOs to be viewed as equal partners with INGOS. *“We are Lao whatever we are, but we have some quality of INGO”* (Co-researcher 4-L).

### *3.4 Reflecting Together*

This section presents reflections from the *‘Thinking Together’* phase of Cycle One. Below I present reflections from: (1) co-researchers; and (2) myself.

#### *Co-Researcher Reflections*

Given that this study applied an FPAR methodology, I wanted to understand how co-researchers experienced the participatory process of Cycle One. At the end of each narrative

inquiry interview and IFGD I asked co-researchers to reflect on their experience. Co-researchers generally described the research process positively. This was particularly evident in their reflections on the narrative inquiry interviews, which they characterised as ‘friendly’ and relaxed. *“This interview with you is so fun. It’s not like an interview just like friends talking together”* (Co-researcher 3-L). Another Lao co-researcher described the experience as a *“coping mechanism”*, explaining how cathartic it was to *“release many things”* (Co-researcher 4-L).

During the narrative inquiry interviews co-researchers discussed the importance of networking with other development practitioners. This feedback prompted my decision to incorporate IFGDs into this cycle. Acting on this insight, I revised my methodology to include group discussions and submitted an ethics amendment to incorporate this change into the approved study design. The excerpt below from my ethics amendment in April 2024 reflects this methodological adaptation:

*“Co-researchers also shared an interest in joining group discussions given that networking opportunities across development organisations are limited in Laos. Based on this feedback IFGDs and as required, semi-structured interviews align better with the political and social climate in Laos”*

Following the IFGDs I asked co-researchers to reflect on their experiences. Similarly, to the narrative inquiry interviews most co-researchers described the experience positively. Co-researchers reflected on the importance of networking with other practitioners in a safe space. I am aware that since the IFGDs several co-researchers have stayed in touch and continued a personal and professional relationship. When asked the benefit of the IFGDs co-researchers shared how helpful it was to hear about other organisations and experiences in Laos. When describing the importance of this networking opportunity a co-researcher suggested development organisations need *“a budget for networking”* (IFGD 3-E) to maintain a continued relationship with other development organisations and practitioners.

Despite the positive feedback, Lao practitioners expressed a desire to have been more prepared for the interviews and IFGDs. Prior to the narrative inquiry interviews Lao co-researchers regularly asked me to provide them with a list of interview questions so they could prepare. I chose not to provide them with these questions as I wanted to get their raw

response to the interviews, especially to the narrative-knowing portion of the interview. Similarly, Lao co-researchers asked for the questions prior to the IFGDs, which I also chose not to do given the participatory nature of a group discussion. Regardless, during a IFGD debrief a Lao co-researcher explained how challenging this had been. *“If possible, we can have more information before we came here. It’s quite short for us to think”* (IFGD 1-L). The Lao co-researchers desire to have more information about the research processes is a crucial finding about the assumptions embedded in participatory research approaches. Just because my perception of participation meant co-researchers shouldn’t have to prepare beforehand didn’t mean this aligned with how the Lao co-researchers understood and preferred to engage in the research process. This realisation encouraged me to question whose definitions of ‘participation’ I was privileging and adapt my methods accordingly. I will continue to unpack these thoughts in Chapter Five (Cycle Three) and Chapter Six (the discussion chapter).

#### *My Reflections*

I was surprised about the relationships I formed with co-researchers during the narrative inquiry interviews. Coming from a quantitative science background I had always been taught that a relationship with ‘participants’ could result in bias. However, I quickly realised that the collaborative nature of participatory research meant my relationships with co-researchers evolved to reflect the kind of professional and personal relationships that often form between colleagues. An excerpt from my observation notes written in November 2023 after my first narrative inquiry interview demonstrates this shift in thinking:

*“At the end of the interview [name redacted for privacy] hugged me. I had not expected this and had not realised she was going to hug me until she did. She seemed very happy to be part of the research.”*

Similarly, I felt uncomfortable about how to publicly acknowledge the role of the co-researcher in the study. I was very careful to maintain confidentiality and never referred to the study when other people were present in case co-researchers wanted to keep their involvement private. However, to my surprise co-researchers wanted to be very open about their involvement. Below is an excerpt of an observation note from January 2025 where I explore the potential implications of this:

*“I am happy with this response because I think a big part of co-production is letting the participant choose how they would like to include themselves in the narrative and promote the research online... I think I am learning that the most important thing is to follow the lead of the co-researcher, that way I think it is much harder to do anything that would make them feel uncomfortable.”*

My relationship with co-researchers became central to this study and is explored further in Chapter Five (Cycle Three) and Chapter Six (the discussion chapter).

### ***3.5 Acting Together***

The action phase of this cycle involved my collaboration with the RDA. As described in Chapter Two, it was during the narrative inquiry interviews, that Chanthalangsy and I decided to collaborate to work on the Akha Women’s Project as well as this study. This partnership became the cornerstone of this study. As demonstrated in the mapping of the cycles, this foundational action directly influenced the development of Cycle Two and Cycle Three. This is because the partnership with the RDA influenced Cycle Two as the RDA and I became collaborators for Cycle Two data co-generation. Additionally, this collaboration with RDA provided the foundation for Cycle Three, which analyses my working relationship with the RDA during the implementation of a gender-targeted development initiative through the Akha Women’s Project.

### ***3.6 Chapter Summary***

This chapter presents the ‘*Look, Think, Act*’ phases of Cycle One, focusing on the ‘*Thinking Together*’ phase. The findings of this Cycle highlight the systematic factors that limit the success of development programming in Lao PDR. Co-researchers frequently identified barriers to successful development design and delivery in general terms, rather than focusing specifically on gender-targeted development approaches. These findings suggest there are systemic problems throughout the broader development system, with gender-targeted development mirroring the challenges that impact the development system more broadly.

Cycle One aimed to address research question one - *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?* Firstly, this cycle centred development practitioners, describing how the professionalisation of development impacts how development practitioners view

their role in development systems and how this can directly impact the trajectory of the *'Wheel of Fire'*. Additionally, the findings of this cycle demonstrate the impact development donors and governments have on development processes in Laos. Co-researchers characterise donors and governments as the ultimate 'decision-makers' in development. This finding is significant as it acknowledges the influence of international and Lao agencies on development programming. I will continue to reflect on these findings in Chapter Six, where I will also consider them in relation to the subsequent cycles and the broader literature.

#### 4. Chapter Four – Cycle Two

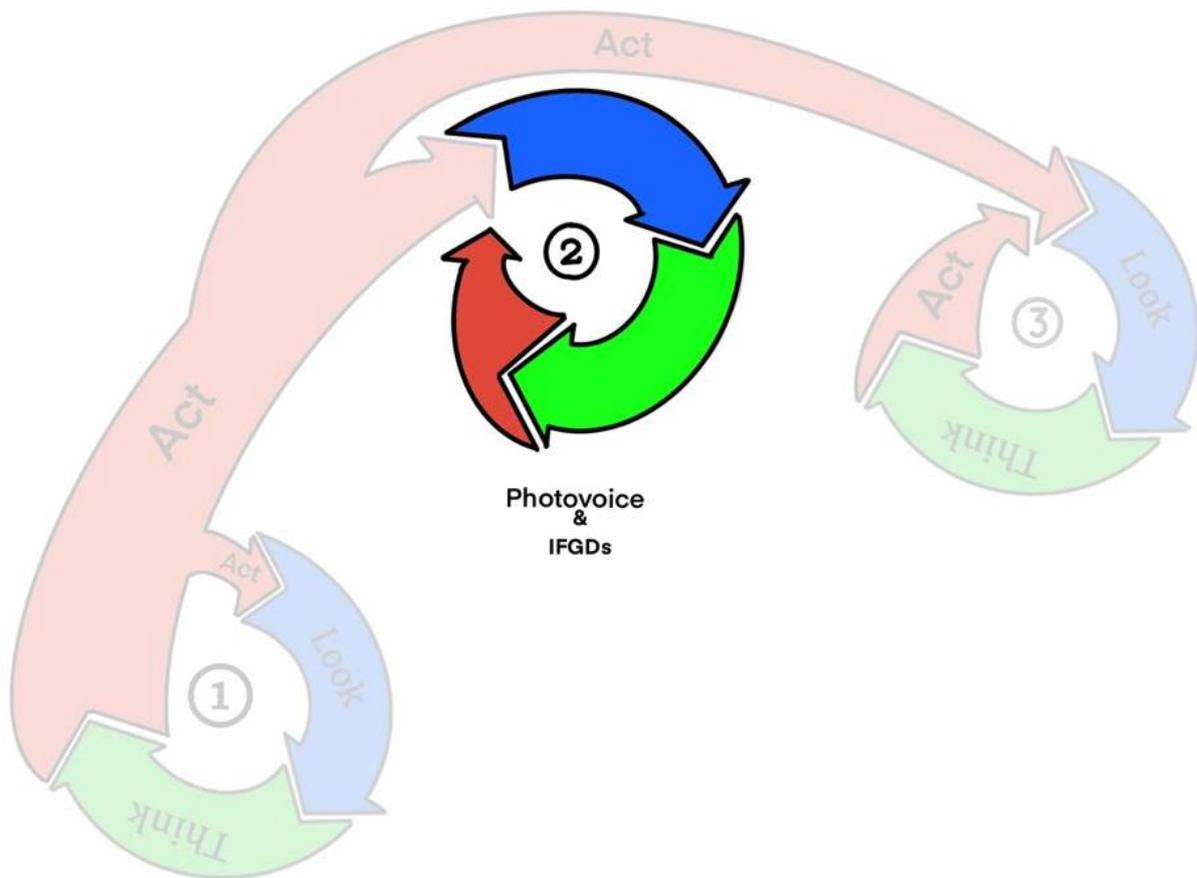


Figure 14 Cycle Two Map

#### 4.1 Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I present the findings from Cycle Two of this three cycle FPAR study. As with Chapter Three, I do not discuss literature in this chapter because the focus is co-researcher co-generated data. This is consistent with FPAR. In the discussion chapter (Chapter Six), the results of all three Cycles will be examined in relation to broader literature. This Cycle aimed to answer research question two: *What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?* In this chapter I answer this research question through the iterative phases of the ‘Look, Think, Act’, with particular emphasis on the ‘Think’ phase and the findings of the integrated thematic analysis. This chapter focuses on how each phase was carried out collectively with co-researchers from the RDA. I begin the chapter by providing a brief description of ‘Looking Together’ explaining how the RDA and I defined and understood the aims of this Cycle. I then present the four themes that emerged from ‘Thinking Together’. This section presents co-generated data including photovoice data

(photos and interview quotes) and IFGD data (quotes) to illustrate each of the four themes: (1) *Cultural Law*; (2) *The Value of Women*; (3) *External Pressures*; and (4) *Priorities for Change*. I then present the *'Reflecting Together'* section and provide reflections from co-researchers, the RDA, and myself. I summarise the *'Acting Together'* phase presenting the action that resulted from this cycle. The chapter concludes by summarising the key findings and insights from Cycle Two.

## 4.2 *Looking Together*

Together, during planning and design sessions, the RDA and I discussed Cycle Two and its aims in reference to the findings from Cycle One. Specifically, we reflected on the intersection between the aims of this study and the Akha Women's Project. During this *'Looking Together'* phase the RDA and I considered the Akha villages and selected appropriate and inclusive methods and methodologies to co-generate knowledge in the *'Thinking Together'* phase. While *'Looking Together'* it became apparent that the RDA were not comfortable applying an FPAR methodology to the Akha Women's Project. The below statement comes from a diary entry I wrote in June 2024:

*"I was told in no unclear terms that feminism didn't mean the same thing to the RDA as it meant to me. It was explained that feminism was Western and colonial. So, we settled on applying plain old PAR [Participatory Action Research] instead."*

Until I collaborated with the RDA, I had not appreciated the impact of the inclusion of feminism within a PAR methodology and its incompatibility with the Lao context. The RDA explained that the political nature of a Western-centric feminist ideology may impact the project relationships with government staff and village authorities who are integral to planning and implementing the Akha Women's Project activities. For this reason, the RDA and I designed the *'Thinking Together'* phase of Cycle Two without making specific mention of the feminist intensions of FPAR methodologies.

Following these discussions, we had to design our photovoice questions and the relevant interview questions. We were conscious to ensure the questions were relevant to both the Akha Women's Project and this study. During a planning session in May 2024, we identified four potential photovoice questions:

1. What are the challenges and opportunities for development in your community?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities for women to create change in their communities?
3. How can women create change in their community?
4. Can women make changes in their communities?

In subsequent planning meetings we refined these questions until we settled on two photovoice questions, co-researchers were asked to take five photos to answer each question: (1) What are the opportunities for women to engage with community development? And (2) What are the challenges for women to engage with community development?

### *4.3 Thinking Together*

The '*Thinking Together*' phase followed a three-step process to collectively generate and analyse data that answered research question two: *What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?* Specifically, the steps were:

1. Co-researchers generating photovoice data (photos and interviews)
2. Independent thematic analysis of photovoice data
3. Co-researcher review of analysis in IFGDs

Data generation was the first step which involved co-researchers generating photovoice data, as described in detail in Chapter Two. This was followed by my independent thematic analysis of photovoice data. From this analysis four initial themes emerged: (1) *Unchangeable Culture*; (2) *The Value of Women*; (3) *External Pressures*; and (4) *Priorities for Change*. Finally, co-researchers reviewed this analysis in IFGDs. During the IFGDs themes were re-examined and refined, and the theme '*Unchangeable Culture*' was refined to '*Cultural Law*'.

The following section presents the integrated findings from the Cycle Two phase '*Thinking Together*'. These four themes evidence the nature of gender roles within the target Akha communities and highlight the influence of culture and tradition on gender-targeted development. Additionally, the findings explore the connection between socio-cultural gender roles and concepts of gender enacted through gender-targeted development.

To protect anonymity of co-researchers, this chapter uses a coding system. There are two types of data presented in this chapter: (1) photovoice data (photos and quotes); and (2) IFGD data (quotes). The photovoice data was generated by 15 pairs of co-researchers from two villages (30 co-researchers in total). Each pair was assigned a numerical code from 1-15, with an alphabetical code, Village X and Village Y. Therefore, photovoice data generated by a pair of co-researchers from Village X was labelled as Co-Researcher Pair 1-X. Correspondingly, IFGD data was co-generated at the village level, so contributions from co-researchers in Village X are referred to collectively as insights from Village X.

Below is a presentation of the integrated themes identified in the IFGDs: (1) *Customary Law*; (2) *The Value of Women*; (3) *External Pressures*; and (4) *Priorities for Change*.

### 4.3.1 Customary Law

The theme '*Customary Law*' highlights the influence of cultural practices on gender relations. Prior to the IFGDs this theme was titled '*Unchangeable Culture*', a theme introduced by co-researcher pair 2-X during the photovoice interviews - "*I think beliefs [of Akha communities] are unchangeable. But if the beliefs could be changed, women would like to be treated and participate equally.*" When '*Unchangeable Culture*' was presented in the IFGDs, co-researchers explained that it is not culture that is '*unchangeable*', rather it is customary laws and traditions that cannot be changed. In Village X co-researchers shared that "*cultural change is difficult. While attending meetings and sharing women's ideas in those meetings is becoming common, changing our cultural norms is still very difficult.*" Similarly, during the IFGD in Village Y co-researchers shared - "*What cannot be changed are customary laws. These are unchangeable because we must follow the traditions of our ancestors.*"

Examples of customary laws discussed by co-researchers include: (1) ceremonial practices; (2) marriage traditions; (3) childcare responsibilities; and (4) restrictions on women's mobility.

#### *Ceremonial Practices*

Ceremonial practices were often referenced by co-researchers as an example of the impacts of customary law on women's engagement in community activities. Co-researchers referenced the division of gender roles in ceremonial practices. "*Women collect vegetables and wash them, and most of the [ceremonial] food offerings are provided by women*" (Co-researcher pair 2-X). Specifically, the role of women in pig raising, was described as a

significant aspect of ceremonial preparation (Figure 16, Figure 15, and Figure 17). *“To Akha people raising pigs is essential because they are important to our traditional customs”* (Co-researcher pair 4-X).



*Figure 16 (Co-researcher Pair 4-X)*



*Figure 15 (Co-researcher Pair 5-X)*



Figure 17 (Co-researcher Pair 5-X)

Despite describing the important role of women in ceremonial preparations, co-researchers also acknowledged the exclusion of women from ceremonial practices. *“It can be difficult for women to participate in customary events...traditionally, only men are allowed to do certain customary activities and women are not permitted to take part”* (Co-researcher pair 4-X). Co-researchers in Village Y took photos of traditional Akha ceremonial baskets (See Figure 18, Figure 19, and Figure 20). Co-researchers referenced women’s exclusion through these baskets noting that *“women cannot make these baskets, only men can”* (Co-researcher pair 3-X). During photovoice interviews, co-researchers expressed a desire to participate in ceremonial practices. *“Women are not happy with this unequal practice. In fact, all genders have the same capacity, but customary law does not allow women to participate”* (Co-researcher pair 2-X)



*Figure 18 (Co-researcher Pair 1-X)*



*Figure 19 (Co-researcher Pair 4-X)*



Figure 20 (Co-researcher Pair 3-X)

While most co-researcher pairs expressed a strong desire to be included in ceremonial activities, others acknowledged the distinction between men's and women's roles. *"In our tradition, there is a clear division of roles. While women are responsible for preparing for certain customs, only men are allowed to perform the rituals themselves"* (Co-researcher pair 1-X). Co-researcher pairs who identified the cultural importance of gender roles tended to accept the time-intensive nature of women's involvement in ceremonial preparations more than those who expressed a desire to be included. A co-researcher pair who acknowledged the division of gender roles noted *"these ceremonies often require a significant investment of time and animals. While these practices can make life demanding, our strong beliefs are an important part of our cultural identity"* (Co-researcher pair 1-X). While a pair wanting to be involved in the ceremonies themselves reflected on the burden ceremonial preparations have on women - *"There are many customary events that women are not allowed to participate in, but women are often busy preparing for these events. This limits their opportunities to be involved in development work"* (Co-researcher pair 4-X).

#### *Marriage Traditions*

Co-researchers described the cultural expectation that women should marry young and become the caretaker for their family. *"In some places they allow marriage as young as 15 and in rare cases even 13"* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). Co-researchers suggested that once

women are married, they become the primary caretaker of their husband and children. Some co-researchers described this as an opportunity for women to be involved in community development as it meant women were the custodian of their family's health and safety. During photovoice data co-generation, co-researchers took photos of their smallholder farms and identified women's role in household food production and income generation (See Figure 21 and Figure 22). When asked about the significance of smallholder farms co-researchers advised that *"raising animals is beneficial because they can be a source of food, income or for traditional events"* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). Co-researchers also explained the importance of stable financial income as a means for community development (See Figure 23). *"With money we can invest in business, open shops, and afford health care. It gives us more options and opportunities"* (Co-researcher pair 5-X).



Figure 21 (Co-researcher Pair 11-Y)



Figure 22 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X)



Figure 23 (Co-researcher Pair 5-X)

Despite the important role of women in family and farm management, marriage was highlighted by co-researchers as a barrier to women’s community engagement. Co-researchers explained that there is a cultural expectation that women should ‘follow’ their husbands. *“After women are married, they have to live with their husband's family or follow their husband's lead”* (Co-researcher pair 2-X). Early marriage was also considered as a factor that limits women’s attendance at school. *“Women don't need to attend school because after marriage they must follow their husbands or move to their husbands' families”* (Co-researcher pair 7-X). Co-researchers in Village Y expressed their desire to attend school through photos of the village school (See Figure 24). Co-researcher pair 6-X explained they didn’t get a higher education because *“by the time we left school, we were around the age to get married, so that's what we did. We never really considered getting a higher education. Our focus was on helping our parents with the farm and getting married”*.



Figure 24 (Co-researcher Pair 15-Y)

Co-researchers also raised cultural law around divorce as a factor that led to the exclusion of women. *“Divorced women are not allowed to be buried in the same cemetery as others, while divorced men can. If possible, divorced women would also like to be treated equally”* (Co-researcher pair 2-X). The ‘unchangeable’ nature of these practices was mentioned again in the

IFGDs. Co-researchers in Village Y reflected *“what cannot be changed are customary laws... such as those related to the village gate, the water source area, cemetery traditions, funerals, and spirit beliefs. These are unchangeable.”*

#### *Childcare Responsibilities*

As mentioned above women are the primary caretakers of their children. While co-researchers recognised the opportunity this gave them to care for and raise their families, they also considered childcare responsibilities as one of the most significant limitations on their inclusion in community development. *“There are several reasons why women face barriers to involvement in development work. Firstly, many women have a large number of children and are heavily burdened with childcare responsibilities”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). Co-researchers described the cycle of childcare that is influenced by cultural expectations – *“tradition dictates, Akha women are expected to have children soon after marriage, and then continue having more. This cycle of childcare responsibilities makes it difficult for us to participate as much as the men”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X) (See Figure 25). Despite recognising the challenges of childcare responsibilities, co-researcher pair 6-X advised *“we don’t think this is a problem, because we always enjoy childcaring”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X).

Childcare was also considered as the primary reason women could not attend meetings. *“Akha tradition goes, if you have an infant baby, you cannot leave the little baby to attend the meeting. You have to take care of the baby until they grow up or until they are two years old. By then you have another baby, and the cycle continues. This makes it difficult to participate in community activities”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). Despite this traditional practice other co-researchers noted women could attend meetings if they brought their children with them. Figure 26 (Co-researcher Pair 2-X), pictures a co-researcher with her child during the photovoice activity. Despite being able to attend women-only activities with their children co-researchers noted that men do not like women to come to meetings with children. *“Most men say children disrupt meetings”* (Co-researcher pair 7-X).



Figure 25 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X)



Figure 26 (Co-researcher Pair 2-X)

While childcare was widely regarded as the responsibility of women some co-researchers expressed their desire for men to help with these responsibilities. *“If men helped with this [childcare], we would also have more time and be healthier”* (Co-researcher 2-X). Alternatively, other co-researchers thought that instead of helping with childcare men should attend meetings on behalf of their wives - *“Ideally, men could help women by attending meetings as their representatives”* (Co-researcher pair 7-X) (See Figure 27 titled ‘*Males Going to the Meeting*’). However, this was not a widely held belief as most co-researchers explained they wanted to attend community meetings or activities. During the IFGD in Village Y co-researchers shared that some of these practices are now changing and *“the burden of work between men and women is now more equal”*.



Figure 27 (Co-researcher Pair 7-X)

### *Restrictions on Women's Mobility*

Co-researchers identified the restriction of women leaving the village as a factor of customary law that limited their involvement in community development. Notably, road access and women's ability to drive were the two most frequently referenced factors. Interestingly, both driving, and the development of roads are not part of traditional Akha customary law and instead they represent imported ideas.

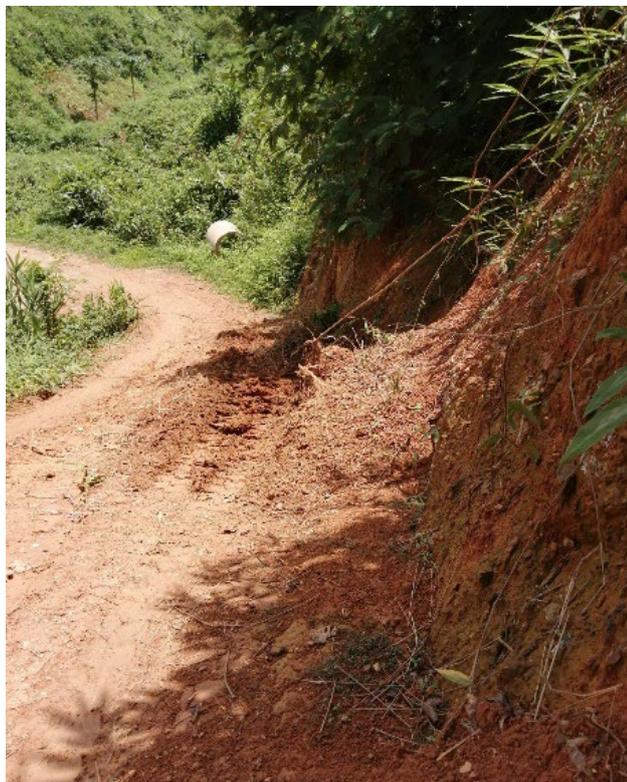
In Village X co-researcher pair 3-X explained that women are not supposed to drive motorbikes (see Figure 28). *"Women in our village cannot drive motorbikes. Only men can, so women have to carry heavy things on their bodies, even water, because they cannot drive"* (Co-researcher pair 3-X). Comparatively, women in Village Y use motorbikes, but they identify 'bad roads' as a limitation on women's mobility. *"Poor road conditions, particularly during slippery weather, pose significant challenges for pregnant women. Access to healthcare and essential food supplies is severely limited"* (Co-researcher pair 12-Y). See Figure 29 and Figure 30 for images of the road conditions in Village Y. *"Nowadays, we don't walk to the field, we use motorbikes and vehicles, but we can see landslides caused by poor road conditions are a significant challenge for our community, making transportation difficult and time-consuming"* (Co-researcher pair 11-Y). In addition to the dangers posed by poor road conditions, limited road access also restricts women's ability to generate income for their families. *"If we lived in town and produced a lot, we could also sell it at the market. In the village, there's no market"* (Co-researcher pair 2-X).



*Figure 28 (Co-researcher Pair 3-X)*



*Figure 29 (Co-researcher Pair 10-Y)*



*Figure 30 (Co-researcher Pair 11-Y)*

### 4.3.2 *The Value of Women*

'*The Value of Women*' is a generated theme referring to the cultural belief that "men are seen as more valuable than women" (Co-researcher pair 2-X). This belief was introduced during the photovoice activity and confirmed during IFGDs. In photovoice interviews, co-researchers explained that men are seen as valuable assets to society: "If a family only has girls, they might continue having children hoping for a boy" (Co-researcher pair 6-X). Despite describing the value of men, co-researchers did not explain why they thought men were considered to be more valuable than women. During the IFGD in Village Y co-researchers explained that women should "defend" themselves if they want to be perceived to have equal value to men. Co-researchers identified several factors that influenced their sense of value in their community, including: (1) women as leaders; (2) women as decision makers; and (3) equal access to education. Each of these factors is described in detail below.

#### *Women as Leaders*

Co-researchers explained that women are not allowed to hold leadership positions in their communities. "There is also a belief that women cannot be village heads, and that a female leader would hinder the development and progress of the village" (Co-researcher pair 4-X). This statement was made in reference to Figure 16 (a photo of a ceremonial basket), while referencing the exclusion of women in certain customary practices. When this theme was presented in the IFGDs co-researchers in Village X stated - "We agree that both women and men in the village can be village leaders based on their capabilities, but they do not give us an opportunity to apply for it, and still do not trust women's abilities yet." This statement suggests that while there are currently not opportunities for women there is still a possibility for progression and change. This supports co-researcher pair 1-X who felt there maybe opportunities for gradual change. "Complete change may not be possible immediately, but there might be ways to gradually integrate women into these practices while still respecting our cultural heritage" (Co-Researcher pair 1-X).

Co-researchers noted that, in addition to limiting women's opportunities for formal leadership positions, the community often overlooks suggestions made by women. "We believe that if women announce it [a community project], no one will listen to us. So, we need to talk with the village head" (Co-researcher pair 2-X). Despite acknowledging that women needed to speak to the Village Head, co-researchers felt women may not have the capacity to ask. "As

women we cannot go to the village head directly, we have to talk with our husband first and our husband will inform the village head. This could be done by men because women are shy to talk with the village head and the village head may not listen to women but if men tell them, they might have more respect” (Co-researcher pair 14-Y). During the IFGD in Village Y, co-researchers stated that women need to stand up for themselves to change this culture - “some women are brave enough to speak up in meetings, even though their views are not always accepted”. Which aligns with their earlier comments surrounding the need for women to ‘defend’ themselves.

#### *Women as Decision Makers*

During the photovoice activity co-researchers referenced the gender division of household decision making. Some co-researchers described sharing decision-making responsibilities with their husband. “Every family manages money differently. In my family, since we don't have parents, we manage money together. We discuss and decide on spending or keep each other informed” (Co-researcher pair 5-X). However, it became clear that this was not the typical decision-making dynamic with the majority of co-researchers suggesting men are the primary decision makers. Another co-researcher pair acknowledged that while their husband listened to them, they knew others who didn't. “My husband listens to me.... However, I know some women whose husbands don't listen to them” (Co-researcher pair 7-X). While other co-researcher pairs suggested they had to follow their husbands' decisions. “If my husband doesn't agree, I must follow him.... I just follow his decision” (Co-researcher pair 2-X). Co-researchers in Village Y affirmed this finding in the IFGD noting “most household decisions are still made by men”.

#### *Equal Access to Education*

Co-researchers recognised that limited educational opportunities for Akha women have resulted in higher rates of illiteracy and limited knowledge of Lao language. “Most women cannot read or write” (Co-researcher pair 7-X). See Figure 31 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X) titled ‘No Literacy’. Co-researchers described women's illiteracy and lack of Lao language skills as a “communication problem” (Co-researcher pair 7-X) that hinders women's access to resources and opportunities for personal and economic growth. “If we studied, we could communicate in Lao. It would be easier for us to go places when needed. Right now, it's very difficult for us when we go to the market. We always need someone to translate because we can't

*communicate*” (Co-researcher pair 7-X). Additionally, women’s *‘communication problem’* limits their attendance at community meetings and development activities. *“Without an education, attending meetings or trainings can be difficult if you don't speak Lao. Since you wouldn't understand the discussions, it would be challenging to participate effectively”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). While co-researchers did acknowledge that in more recent years their communities *“support for both genders”* (Co-researcher pair 7-X) to attend school, co-researchers recognised that women still have less opportunities for equal access to education than men.

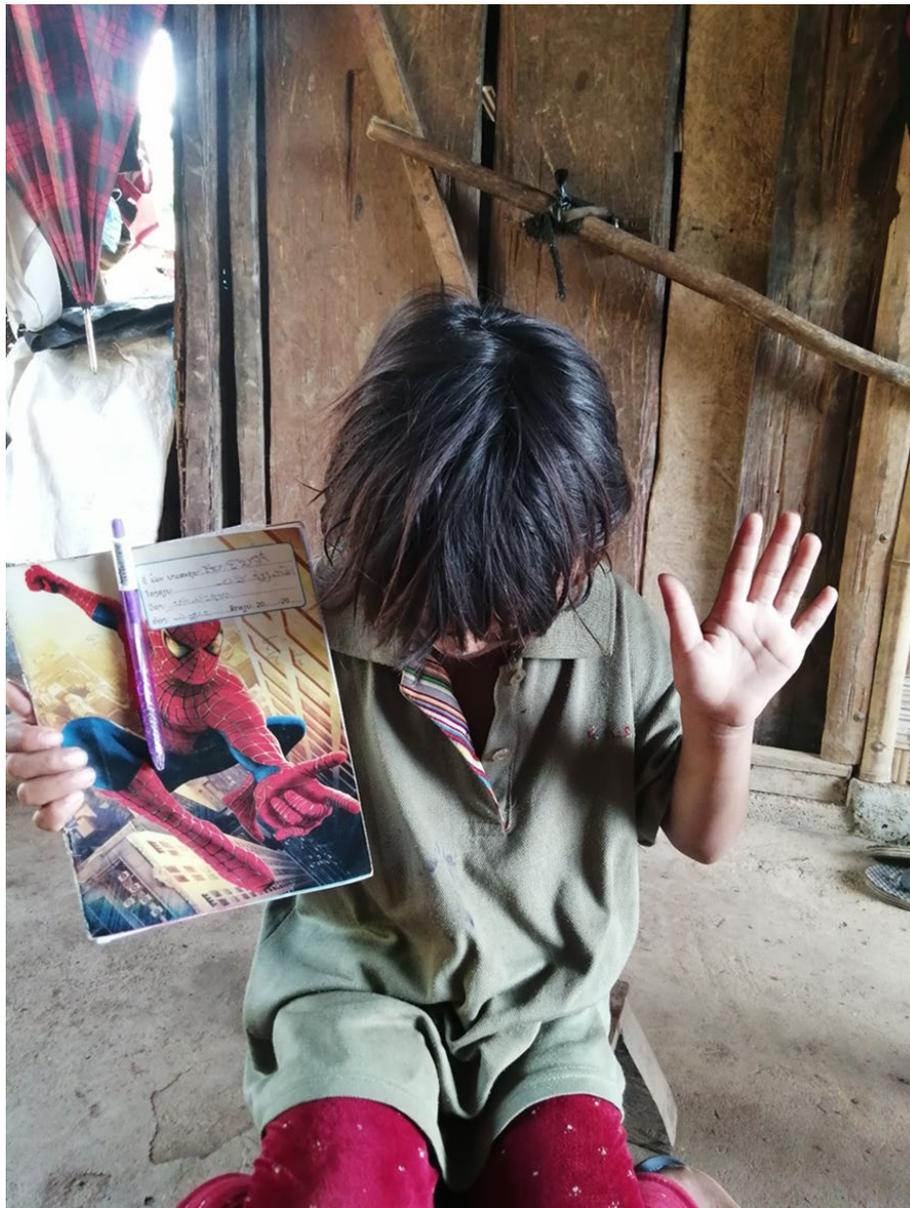


Figure 31 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X)

### 4.3.3 External Pressures

'External Pressures' is a theme I generated during thematic analysis to reflect the factors impacting co-researcher experiences of development. During the IFGDs, co-researchers supported this analysis. This theme focuses on three factors influencing women's experiences of development: (1) outside perspectives; (2) Chinese investment in Northern Laos; and (3) communicating project goals. Each is described in detail below.

#### *Outside Perspectives*

During the photovoice activity, co-researchers in Village Y overwhelmingly characterised themselves as '*lazy*'. Specifically, co-researchers referenced issues with waste management in their village (see Figure 32, Figure 33, and Figure 34). In photovoice interviews co-researchers explained waste management was an issue because women were "*too lazy to clean*" (Co-researcher pair 10-Y). Co-researchers suggested "*a clean house reflects diligence and responsibility*" (Co-researcher pair 12-Y) and therefore issues with waste management depicted a failure of women's responsibilities



Figure 32 (Co-researcher Pair 13-Y)



*Figure 33 (Co-researcher Pair 9-Y)*



*Figure 34 (Co-researcher Pair 12-Y)*

The photovoice facilitation team and I were surprised by the number of co-researchers in Village Y who took photos that referenced waste management. During a debrief session with the facilitation team it became apparent that the Akha interpreters had suggested co-researchers focus on waste management while interpreting the photovoice instructions. The impact of this interpretation error was confirmed during the photovoice interviews the following day when co-researcher pair 14-Y explained their focus on waste management was in response to comments made in the photovoice session. *“After yesterday's discussion about cleaning our homes, it's clear that we need to maintain cleanliness. This includes regular cleaning to keep our living spaces tidy”*. This situation showed a miscommunication between the research team and the co-researcher. The situation also showed how easily misunderstandings between a development provider and the intended beneficiary could occur – this type of misunderstanding can dramatically change the purpose of the activity. Additionally, these miscommunications can also influence how the community perceives itself and its challenges. Even during the IFGD, the co-researchers in Village Y maintained that they had issues with waste management that the project had *‘fixed’*. At the end of the IFGD co-researchers thanked the project stating - *“We are happy that we have the chance to participate in project activities and have learned a lot about development, including knowledge about hygiene, and now we are cleaner”* (IFGD-Y).

The photovoice facilitation team used the day between Village Y and X to adapt to the challenges presented in Village Y. In response, the RDA and I sat down with the interpreters and discussed our intentions for this research. Additionally, the RDA and I made changes to the structure of the information session on the first day in the village. Previously we had discussed the photovoice questions and brainstormed potential examples with the co-researchers. It was during this brainstorming session that the interpreters had suggested the co-researchers should focus on waste management. To mitigate this in Village Y we did not collaboratively brainstorm photo ideas with the co-researchers during the information session. As a result, there was more diversity in the photos taken by co-researchers in Village X.

#### *Chinese Investment in Northern Laos*

Co-researchers referenced the influence of Chinese investment in Northern Laos on their farm production and time availability. During the photovoice activity multiple co-researchers

expressed a desire to diversify their farms' crop production. When speaking about Figure 35, co-researchers reflected that if they had more crop diversity their children could eat more fruit and be healthier. However, co-researchers explained they could not diversify their farms as they had limited land due to Chinese companies renting and subsequently taking over their farms. *"This is my land, but it's rented by a Chinese company. In the beginning, we agreed to share half for the villagers and half for the company. But they only let us harvest for a few years, then the company took over and now it belongs to them"* (Co-researcher pair 3-X).



Figure 35 (Co-researcher Pair 9-Y)

In addition to the challenge of limited land availability, co-researchers highlighted the pressure to produce crops for export to China. *“It seems like we are always busy with field work. For example, when we finish harvesting the cassava, we have to move on to sugarcane, rubber, and rice. We only take breaks for village events, or maybe one or two days off per month...that's a barrier for us. We have to go to the fields regardless of the weather, rain, or shine”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X). During the IFGDs co-researchers reinforced the impact of Chinese involvement in their farms by describing how farm responsibilities limited women's attendance to development sessions. *“For example, today we missed the time to take sugarcane to the truck, and we have to pay a penalty for our absence to the sugarcane cooperative”*. In addition to highlighting the pressures farm activities have on women's engagement in development, this also outlines the potential harm of development programs that fail to account for women's existing responsibilities.

Although co-researchers acknowledged the financial cost of missing work to participate in the project, they also actively acknowledge that they considered missing work on farm as a positive. Later in the IFGD co-researchers in Village Y thanked the facilitation team stating - *“Participating in research and similar activities has helped reduce women's workload. Today, I am very happy because I don't need to go to the farm and work hard, which I would otherwise have to do every day. This has helped reduce my hard work, and I am also happy to see you all come to our village.”* It is difficult to understand the sentiment behind the comments of co-researchers in Village Y. This statement may have been influenced by a range of factors, including a desire to support the aims of the project or to avoid making the facilitation team feel responsible for the financial impact of their participation. Alternatively, co-researchers might honestly see the project as an opportunity to reduce their workload. It is significant that co-researchers viewed development initiatives as an opportunity to step away from their farm responsibilities when considered alongside their comments that women are expected to work on the farm shortly after childbirth. *“Women have to return to the field just thirteen days after giving birth”* (Co-researcher pair 6-X).

#### *Communicating Project Goals*

Findings from the photovoice activity suggested the scope of the Akha Women's Project and this study did not align with the expectations of the Akha co-researchers. During the photovoice interviews co-researchers would regularly ask the facilitation team for resources

outside of the projects scope. *“We want the project to support for making a good road in the future”* (Co-researcher pair 12-Y). During the IFGDs we aimed to reclarify the scope of the project. In doing so we explained to co-researchers that this project had a focus on community-led climate responses. During the IFGDs co-researchers continued to ask the project for resources outside of the projects scope. *“We would like the project to support the repair of the village meeting hall, including tables and chairs, and the repair of the school. We also need support for student uniforms and a water filter”* (IFGD-X). This finding suggests that we need to improve the way we communicate the goals and scope of a project to community, especially if the project is intended to be led by the community. Conversely co-researchers suggested that development projects are unaware of the challenges the community face. When asked why co-researcher pairs took their photovoice photos many explained they wanted to show their challenges to the facilitation team. *“We would like you to see the challenges we face”* (Co-researcher pair 15-X).

The need to communicate project goals clearly suggests that there is a disconnect between the needs of the community and the agendas of the project funders. This challenge appears to be widespread as co-researchers described similar confusion about a Chinese funded water project operating in Village Y. Despite explaining that there was an active water project - *“a Chinese’s company is helping us on this”* co-researcher pair 13-Y asked the Akha Women’s Project to build a water system in their village. This finding suggests a divide between co-researchers in Village Y and the Chinese funded water project.

#### *4.3.4 Priorities for Change*

*‘Priorities for Change’* describes the ongoing challenges co-researchers face in meeting their basic needs. Co-researcher pair 9-Y summarised some of these challenges when referencing Figure 35 *“the photo shows the disparity in living conditions within the community. While some individuals have access to sufficient food, others face food insecurity. This emphasises the need for targeted support to address these inequalities.”* Co-researchers explained that food scarcity also impacted their ability to feed their livestock, which worsened their access to food. *“We can’t produce enough rice to feed the pigs, so we have to find food in the jungle or forest”* (Co-researcher pair 3-X). In addition to food insecurity other challenges presented by co-researchers are presented in Table 6.

*Table 6 Challenges in the Village*

<b><i>Challenges in the Village</i></b>	<b><i>Co-generated Data</i></b>
Water Access	Figure 36 (Co-researcher Pair 13-Y) Figure 37 (Co-researcher Pair 14-Y) “Life becomes incredibly difficult without a reliable water source... Our village desperately needs a water supply system to be built as soon as possible” (Co-researcher pair 1-X).
Disease	“The pigs poo around the village, making it smelly and dirty. People can get sick from this as well” (Co-researcher pair 3-X).
Poverty	Figure 38 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X)



*Figure 36 (Co-researcher Pair 13-Y)*



*Figure 37 (Co-researcher Pair 14-Y)*



*Figure 38 (Co-researcher Pair 6-X)*

During the photovoice activity co-researchers often described these challenges as collective issues that affected the whole village. Even when co-researchers acknowledged the challenges had a greater impact on women, they still saw them as community problems. For example, when discussing water scarcity co-researcher pair 15-X remarked *“If there's no water, it's difficult to live. We have no water to shower, cook, or drink... both genders can collect water and food, but women are more responsible for it.”* Despite the focus on women in this activity, co-researchers mostly discussed the community when describing these challenges. This finding suggests that there is a priority to focus on these daily needs before focusing on gender inclusion.

However, when this analysis was presented in the IFGDs the two villages had differing perspectives. Village Y agreed that basic needs should be the primary priority. *“While we want you to support us with everything, we'd like to emphasise that we need support with water supply and electricity first”*. Interestingly, electricity was not an issue that had been identified in the photovoice activity eight months prior. There may be several reasons as to why the needs communicated by co-researchers changed over this period including: evolving priorities, introduction of new technologies, environmental factors, or community initiatives. Regardless of the reasons this finding indicates that community needs will change as a reflection of several factors. As a result, co-researchers in Village Y agreed with the thematic analysis that there is a priority of needs in the community. *“We think it's better to prioritise support, rather than trying to do everything at once.”*

Co-researchers in Village X did not agree with Village Y's conclusion that basic needs need to be prioritised over gender-targeted approaches. Instead, co-researchers in Village X noted they think gender should be included in all aspects of development. *“We believe that promoting gender equality and fostering good relationships between couples is more important”*. Co-researchers felt that without gender equality these challenges are exacerbated. *“Without equality, problems arise, potentially leading to separation and further issues.”* Notably, Village X had comparatively more resources and access to development than Village Y, and as a result the village did not experience some of the fundamental challenges observed in Village Y.

## 4.4 Reflecting Together

FPAR is promoted as an inclusive, community-led research methodology (Goessling, 2025; Gouin et al., 2011; Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2022). While compelling in theory, in practice its application can be problematic. During Cycle Two reflections from: (1) co-researchers; (2) the RDA; and (3) myself demonstrated some of the challenges of an FPAR methodology. Each is described below:

### 4.4.1 Co-Researcher Reflections

During the IFGDs co-researchers were asked how they felt about being researchers in this study. Co-researchers in both villages were positive about their role as co-researchers. In Village X co-researchers said that being asked to be a researcher meant that they felt *“stronger and braver”*. Co-researchers in Village X described a sense of *‘pride’* that they had in the project. Based on my observations of co-researchers during the photovoice activity and IFGDs they appeared to be engaged in the project as demonstrated by their level of care. Co-researchers were very attentive during the sessions and activities. During the IFGDs they all arrived with their co-researcher uniforms (the blue vests) and several women also brought the information sheet they had been provided during the photovoice session eight months prior. In Village Y, co-researchers shared similar sentiments with co-researchers noting that the project had increased women’s opportunities for participation in the community. *“We feel, and we are proud and happy with the project’s support. It’s really good that the project came to our village and shared knowledge.”*

When we returned to Village X for the IFGDs, co-researchers chose to wear Akha traditional dress, including a headdress known as a *‘u-coe’*. See Figure 39 and Figure 40 for photos taken of the co-researchers in Village X during the IFGDs. In some Akha villages women wear their u-coe every day, however in Village X co-researchers explained they only wear them for special occasions. Co-researchers in Village X noted they wanted to wear their u-coe’s for their headshots, that will later be used in a photovoice exhibition. After the headshots many of the younger co-researchers went home to take off their u-coes before participating in the IFGD. Before the headshots were taken co-researchers performed a song for the facilitation team and then asked for a song in return. Additionally, co-researchers gave each of the members of the facilitation team a boiled, coloured egg, that was strung around our necks (see Figure 41).

While the meaning behind coloured eggs differs between Akha villages based on Akhazah (See Chapter One) they are often used to mark collaboration or new beginnings (Sujachaya & Sitisarn, 2005; Wang, 2023). Co-researcher’s choice to wear cultural dress and engage in cultural exchange may indicate a level of engagement and a sense of respect between the facilitation team and the co-researchers.



*Figure 38 Akha Women’s Project Co-researchers wearing U-Coe’s*



*Figure 39 Akha Women's Project Co-researchers during photovoice activities*



Figure 40 Photovoice Facilitation Team in Akha Women's Project Villages

#### 4.4.2 RDA Reflections

The RDA team found the application of the FPAR methodology confusing. Notably, during our first day in Village Y a member of the RDA team called me a *'playboy'* because they felt that I wasn't sticking to one method or plan. While I had felt this was an appropriate application of an FPAR methodology in that we were responding to the co-researchers, the RDA explained that they found it unclear. The lack of direction meant that members of the team became worried that we were not doing the work correctly. In a diary entry from June 2024, I described a conversation with a concerned team member who *"told me they were worried they had done the wrong thing and the data was wrong."*

On the journey home from the RDA team members continued to reflect that the photovoice activity may have been a failure. When I asked what aspects of the activity the team thought hadn't worked, they reflected on the fact that we changed the method from Village Y to Village X. These adjustments involved revising the information session to prevent misinterpretation of activities, improving the translation of the questions, and removing an additional activity - which had been trialled in Village Y as a component of the Akha Women's Project data collection. One RDA team member explained that they thought the methodology didn't work because of the emphasis on participation. This team member explained that the intended beneficiaries of development have been trained to always assume that development practitioners and researchers are the experts. The team member suggested that this meant that co-researchers were confused why we were asking for their opinions. This reflection supports the findings of this cycle, specifically the theme *'External Pressures'* and the influence these pressures may have on co-researchers' perception of self.

#### 4.4.3 My Reflections

I also struggled with the enactment of 'participation' throughout this cycle. In a diary entry during the photovoice activity in June 2024 I reflected that I was not sure of my role within the team. *"I feel a bit like I did back in the old days when I felt I had no control or understanding of what is going on."* During this period, I felt very lost about what participatory research should look like. Additionally, I could recognise that both myself and the RDA team, did not feel comfortable with the participatory methodology.

As well as feeling uncertain about how to carry out participatory action research, I also began to reflect on the dynamics within the team. During the photovoice activity it became clear that I was expected to hold a leadership role that I had not envisioned for myself. Different team members were asking me for project details such as travel arrangements that I was unaware of because I held a role outside of the project team. Interestingly, at the same time as being expected to hold a leadership role I also noticed that the facilitation team appeared to have a sense of responsibility for my wellbeing. While this care was well-intentioned, it left me feeling uncomfortable, and furthered my uncertainty about my role within the team. After conducting the photovoice activity in Village Y I explained my uncertainty to the facilitation team, and I asked them what role they expected from me. Here the team explained that they saw my role as ‘training’ them about the methodology, while they considered themselves as facilitator for the activities. While I agreed that this was a clear division of roles, I was also concerned that this dynamic might undermine the principles of participation and reinforce hierarchies rather than challenging them. This is something I continued to reflect on, and these reflections can be found in Cycle Three.

#### *4.5 Acting Together*

As described in Chapter Two, two streams of action resulted from this Cycle. The first included training that aimed to fill knowledge gaps that were identified during the phases of ‘*Looking Together*’ and ‘*Thinking Together*’. While the second included active adaptations to the FPAR methodology and the design of the Akha Women’s Project based on reflections from the ‘*Looking Together*’ phase and observations of its incompatibility when ‘*Thinking Together*’.

#### *4.6 Chapter Summary*

Cycle Two utilised photovoice and IFGDs as participatory methods to co-generate data with the intended beneficiaries of the Akha Women’s Project. The findings of this cycle highlight the role of socio-cultural expressions of gender in shaping how communities perceive and accept gender-targeted development programs. These findings reveal that there is no ‘universal’ expression of gender, demonstrating that gender-targeted development programs need to consider the complexity of gender in relation to culture. When considered in relation to Cycle One, these findings represent the specific challenges that impact gender-targeted

development programming in Laos, with a focus on program delivery in Akha communities in Northern Laos.

Cycle Two aimed to address research question two - *What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?* The findings of this Cycle concern the complexity of gender roles in Akha communities, specifically exploring the impact this has on women's involvement in the Akha Women's Project. Additionally, this Cycle demonstrated the lived realities of the intended beneficiaries of development, noting that communities often have competing interests when engaging with development programs. Finally, the relationship between development practitioners and the intended beneficiaries was explored, focusing on how these relationships can impact people's views of themselves and their agency. I will present these findings within the context of the three cycles of this FPAR study in Chapter Six.

## 5. Chapter Five – Cycle Three

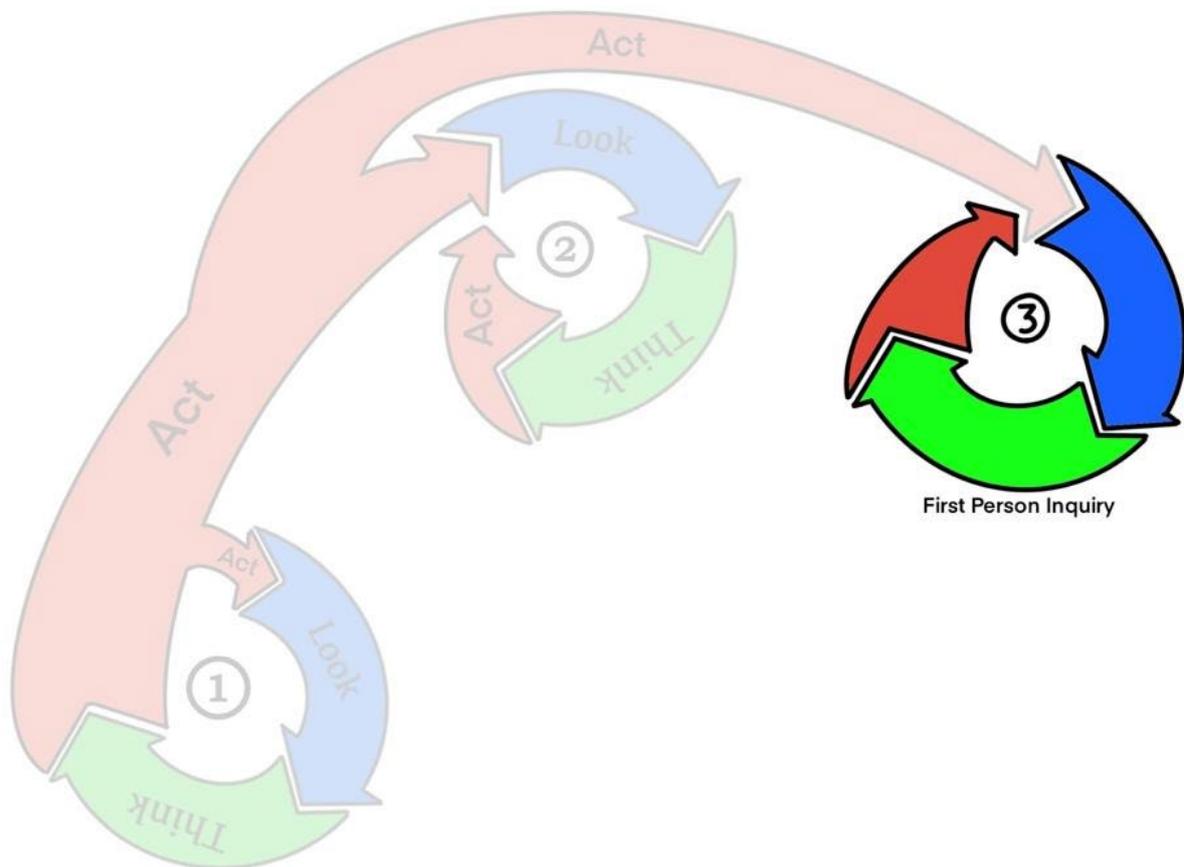


Figure 41 Cycle Three Map

### 5.1 Chapter Outline

In this chapter I present the findings from the third and final cycle of this three cycle FPAR study. As mentioned in the previous two chapters, this chapter will only present the co-researcher-generated findings, in line with FPAR methodology. In Chapter Six, I will then discuss the findings from all three chapters in relation to relevant literature. Cycle Three aims to answer research question three: How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos? Following the pattern of the previous two chapters, this chapter presents the iterative phases of 'Look, Think, Act' that make up this cycle. I begin this chapter with a summary of the 'Looking Together' phase, explaining how and why this Cycle came to be. This is followed by a presentation of the '*Thinking Together*' phase, which integrates my first-person inquiry findings from my collaboration with RDA on the Akha Women's Project. I also present insights from the previous two cycles that relate to my first-person inquiry findings. The four themes that emerged from the integrated analysis of my

first-person inquiry findings and the previous two cycles include: (1) The Gap Between Theory and Practice; (2) Western Models of Feminism; (3) Community Participation; and (4) Defining the Action in FPAR. I then provide a reflection on the '*Thinking Together*' process, presenting personal reflections. Finally, I summarise the '*Acting Together*' phase before presenting a chapter summary.

## 5.2 *Looking Together*

The '*Looking Together*' phase of Cycle Three spanned over several months and was conducted in collaboration with the Rural Development Agency (RDA). While reflecting on Cycle Two the RDA and I shared concerns surrounding the compatibility of our FPAR approach to co-generation with co-researchers from the Akha Women's Project. The RDA reflected that the results of the Akha Women's Project did not align with the donor's expectations. While I reflected on the challenges, I had experienced navigating perceptions of FPAR across the RDA team, the women in the community, and my own expectations of the methodology and associated methods. While we were all working on the same project, we had different perspectives about what FPAR should look like in practice. This was accentuated given that the RDA were applying a PAR methodology, while this study still employed an FPAR approach.

During the '*Looking Together*' phase of Cycle Three, the RDA and I asked a series of questions which became the basis of this third and final cycle. These questions included:

1. How does Western feminism influence the appropriateness of FPAR approaches to gender-targeted development initiatives in Laos?
2. Do Western models of participation apply to a Lao research context?
3. How do gaps between feminist theory and development practice influence the suitability and effectiveness of gender-targeted development initiatives in Laos?

Based on these questions, I considered several methods to generate knowledge for the '*Thinking Together*' phase for this cycle. I initially considered conducting a systematic literature review, however after some consideration and an initial search of the literature, I realised that this approach to '*Thinking Together*' removed the collective approach central to the FPAR methodology. Eventually, I realised the RDA and I were already co-generating new knowledge. As part of my ongoing collaboration with the RDA, I had agreed to continue contributing to the Akha Women's Project. Together, the RDA and I developed a three-cycle PAR approach for

the Akha Women's Project. While this study had progressed to Cycle Three, we had concurrently begun Cycle Three of the Akha Women's Project. I soon realised that the decisions the RDA and I were making regarding the planning and delivery of Akha Women's Project, was the basis of Cycle Three of this study.

I decided to employ first-person inquiry as the central method in Cycle Three because it allowed me to reflect on my engagement with the RDA on the Akha Women's Project. As Trullen and Torbert (2016) explain, first-person research encourages the researcher to be reflexive while acting. The application of first-person inquiry in Cycle Three, enabled me to critically examine my own embedded experiences working with the RDA on the Akha Women's Project. First-person inquiry served as a bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application of the knowledge generated in previous cycles. For this reason, I included co-generated data from the previous two cycles to help contextualise my first-person inquiry findings.

### *5.3 Thinking Together*

The '*Thinking Together*' phase of this Cycle followed a two-step process to collectively generate and analyse data that answered research question three: *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?* This process involved the following two steps:

1. First-person Inquiry from Cycle Three of the Akha Women's Project; and
2. Analysis and review of Cycle One and Two co-generated data.

The first step involved my collaboration with the RDA on Cycle Three of the three cycle PAR approach to the Akha Women's Project. During this cycle the RDA and I aimed to address the challenges that emerged when applying FPAR in Cycle Two of this study (which was Cycle One of the Akha Women's Project). The second step involved my review and analysis of previously co-generated data from Cycle One and Two of this study, including narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs. During this second step, I independently reviewed and re-examined co-generated data through the lens of my enhanced understanding gained from first-person inquiry, allowing me to identify previously unrecognised themes. While much of the data included in Cycle Three was co-generated for Cycles One and Two, it was not relevant to earlier research questions, and was therefore not reported earlier. In Cycle Three, there is limited data

included from Akha co-researchers, as this Cycle's research question focuses on how practitioners enact development programming in Laos.

The thematic analysis for Cycle Three includes four themes: (1) The Gap Between Theory and Practice; (2) Western Models of Feminism; (3) Community Participation; and (4) Defining the Action in FPAR. I have applied the same numerical/alphabetical codes as previously reported. Narrative inquiry interview data is labelled 1-25, with an alphabetical code to symbolise if the co-researcher is Laotian (L) or Expatriate (E). IFGDs with the development actor's cohort are labelled 1-5 with the same alphabetical codes symbolising Lao (L) or Expatriate (E) cohorts, and the intended beneficiary IFGDs are labelled alphabetically X or Y depending on which village they were conducted in.

### *5.3.1 The Gap Between Theory and Practice*

A gap exists between development theory and practice in relation to participatory approaches to gender-targeted development programming in Laos. Several factors influence this gap including: (1) conceptions of development; and (2) the accessibility of community.

#### *Conceptions of Development*

A gap exists between development practitioners' conceptions of development and those of donors and/or academics. This gap was evident in the differing definitions of development offered by development actors and donors during the narrative inquiry interviews. A donor described development as being about the "*totality of human existence*" (Co-researcher 18-E). While development practitioners considered development to be about the practicalities of working with communities. For example, a Lao co-researcher described development as "*wanting to make something better*" (Co-researcher 14-L). Co-researchers noted that this gap in conceptions of development often meant donors held unrealistic expectations of what development programs should look like. "*When the donor sees it, it is not their expectation*" (Co-researcher 16-L). Similarly, when explaining the disconnect between practitioner experiences of development compared to the academic perception of development a co-researcher described academics as being "*deeply out of touch*" suggesting that academics held a "*utopian vision of development*" (Co-researcher 1-E). "*Some of these academics should go and try and do development in my opinion. Not just write books about development*" (Co-researcher 1-E).

In addition to the disconnect between donor and development actor conceptions of development, co-researchers also reported a gap between their theoretical understanding of development and the tasks they are asked to carry out. Reflecting on this gap, one co-researcher remarked that they sometimes questioned whether they were doing development at all - *“As far as my agency goes there is not a lot I can do”* (Co-researcher 20-E). While another reflected that they didn't like describing their work as development because of this gap - *“development work inherently is like not a name I love”* (Co-researcher 6-E).

Co-researchers described the need to create emotional distance between themselves and their work. This distancing served as a self-protective strategy when confronted with the gap between theoretical aspirations of how what they believed development could achieve and against the practicalities of the work. A co-researcher explained, *“it's easy to be negative when you see problems and try to take on the world and fix everything, but it is helpful when I take a step back”* (Co-researcher 22-E). Additionally, during an IFGD co-researchers described how challenging it can be working on development in Laos. They explained how their own conceptions of gender and empowerment did not align with their work, including gender-inequality in their workplaces. When explaining the gender-inequality in the workplace one co-researcher described the drinking culture and its impact on team dynamics *“For me I don't see myself in the role to educate someone when we go out and we are drinking beer I just give them strong comments back... They make sexual jokes. For me it's just a joke and it's not attacking me. However, for the Lao women they have to get up and serve beer and they are maybe embarrassed. So, I tell the younger man to serve the beer”*. (IFGD 3-E).

In the same IFGD another co-researcher had a different response explaining how they needed to compartmentalise the gender-inequality they witness in their workplace. *“I actually don't mentally go there very often because it's not nice and I can't do very much about it at a personal level, except in my immediate family environment”* (IFGD 3-E). Lao co-researchers shared similar stories of compartmentalisation, with one co-researcher explaining that they have to centralise the community and just continue working with them in mind. *“If we think about the community we will be motivated to work more. But if we think about policy, we will feel helpless”* (IFGD 1-L).

### *The Accessibility of Community*

There are also significant variations in how target communities are selected to be the intended beneficiaries of development. These differences appear to be influenced by donor priorities that rarely consider community accessibility. Tension is experienced between where development practitioners can actively provide development and what external actors perceive as appropriate or feasible. Co-researchers explained that development donors only expect development programs to target the most “*vulnerable*” communities (Co-researcher 4-L). However, co-researchers shared that this is often an unrealistic perspective that fails to account for the factors influencing community accessibility. “*The most vulnerable people, we could not reach them*” (Co-researcher 4-L). “*Sometimes we plan everything from the table very nicely but when we reach to the place it does not work*” (IFGD 5-L). There were several factors that co-researchers believed impacted their access to ‘vulnerable’ communities. Table 7 includes some of these examples.

*Table 7 Factors Limiting Program Access to Vulnerable Communities in Laos*

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
Road Access	“The roads to get there is quite difficult” (Co-researcher 3-L) “It’s quite hard, especially the road to go to the remote area” (Co-researcher 14-L)
Community Availability	“They go to the mountains, and they forgot our plans” (Co-researcher 3-L) “Sometimes when we go to the community, we went but the community went to the farm, went to find some food or something so then we have to wait until they finish” (Co-researcher 16-L)
Community Engagement	“When you do interviews, you should give something in exchange because people are giving you time. You cannot pretend that this is for free. So, you need to think about the compensation” (Co-researcher 11-E) “To access to the information is quite hard because they’re illiterate” (Co-researcher 19-L)
Program Inflexibility	“I mean, you’ve got to sleep out there because you have to know when the girls are coming back and Falang (foreigners) usually aren’t allowed to do that” (Co-researcher 8-E)
Communication with the Community	“Because they’re internet is not working. Or they don’t have a smart phone or something like that we cannot send them a letter or plan” (Co-researcher 3-L)
Government Restrictions	“Many times, we can reach them but we’re not strong enough to discuss with the government to select them” (Co-researcher 4-L)

During Cycle Two, the RDA and I experienced challenges when trying to engage with co-researchers in Village Y. As discussed in Chapter Four, Village Y would be considered more ‘vulnerable’ than Village X from a Western development perspective, due to literacy skills,

poor road access, lack of electricity, and fewer available resources. It was challenging to engage with the co-researchers in Village Y due to our access to Akha interpreters, time availability and the complexity of the designed task. During subsequent reflection sessions, the RDA and I realised that we had not been adequately prepared for our collaboration with co-researchers in Village Y and this led to the challenges regarding the miscommunication of project activities in this Village.

When the RDA and I returned to Village Y during this cycle, I noticed that the RDA applied a more flexible approach to activities. When co-researchers had difficulty understanding project activities, the RDA chose to adjust activities during the session, even if this meant the co-generated data did not align with data collected in Village X. Traditional research methods often emphasise uniformity in data collection to ensure the trustworthiness and consistency of the findings. However, the RDA chose to prioritise the co-researchers and tailored the activities and data generation to the needs and resources available. During my observation of the RDA, I noticed that they were more conscious of the co-researchers needs than the expectations of the donors. Rather than setting unrealistic goals, the RDA made practical and achievable decisions that were grounded in the local context.

### *5.3.2 Western Feminism*

This third cycle highlighted the influence of Western feminism on the application of FPAR and gender-targeted development. Both the methodology and the development initiatives draw heavily on Western notions of empowerment and equality, which do not always align with non-Western conceptions of feminism. Co-researchers specifically pointed to ideas of gender, power, and equality shaped by a Western framework. Several factors were identified including: (1) the in/exclusion of men; and (2) Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) frameworks.

#### *The In/Exclusion of Men*

During Cycle Two I was very conscious to uphold feminist practices whenever possible. I chose to work with an all-woman team and chose not to use men in any part of the research process, including translation. Conversely when the RDA and I returned to the Akha villages in Cycle Three, I noticed they regularly invited men to join or observe the Akha Women's Project activities. The RDA utilised male interpreters and in Village X, they invited the male Village

Chief to observe the activities. I was surprised by the presence of men in the sessions, as it contradicted my perception of gender-targeted development which had been shaped by Western feminist literature and the lessons taught during my Masters of Global Development. I had a preconceived perception that gender-targeted development meant gender-segregated so that women could speak freely without men present. However, I noticed no difference in the engagement or behaviour of co-researchers when men were present. In fact, in some instances, I noticed that co-researchers would refer to the men in the room and ask them to validate their opinions. This finding aligns with the advice given by Lao co-researchers during the IFGDs. One co-researcher advised *“we need men to join. We need to engage men and talk to them to understand the purpose of the project”* (IFGD 1-L). During this IFGD Lao co-researchers described men as *“contributors”* to gender-targeted development programs.

Co-researchers from Village X and Y did not consider gender-targeted development needed to solely focus on women. During the IFGDs co-researchers described the ambitions of gender-targeted development as *“fostering good relationships between couples”* (IFGD - X). This differs from Western notions of gender-targeted development that often centralise women as the ‘target’ group. Instead, co-researchers considered gender inequity to be a community wide problem rather than a women specific problem. As a result, co-researchers believed that engaging men as both allies and subjects of change in gender-targeted programs would result in more meaningful and transformational change. When describing the need for gender-targeted development programs co-researchers in Village X explained that *“when couples help and care for each other, family life is smoother and happier”*.

#### *GEDSI Frameworks – Gender and Disability*

GEDSI frameworks to gender-targeted development were often criticised by co-researchers. During the IFGDs, co-researchers expressed concern about the merging of gender and disability in development programming. They explained that this reduces the effectiveness of projects to appropriately target the intended beneficiaries. *“Now disability is gender. Before gender was women”* (IFGD 3-E). Co-researchers noted that even though both gender and disability are important ambitions for a development program, they should not be grouped together. Co-researchers reported this as particularly important in Laos because disability inclusion is very difficult given socio-cultural practices that have led to the exclusion of disabled people. While it is important to promote the inclusion of persons with a disability,

this needs to be done in an effective and transformative manner. A co-researcher explained that the current framework considered disability inclusion to simply relate to the percentage of disabled people present in training sessions which fails to account for the barriers to inclusion of disabled people that fall outside the scope of the project. *“Disability means we have to have 10% disabled people in the training. Okay well we train government officials. I’ve never seen a disabled government official. We’ve been saying how do you want us to do that? They say you have to work to change it, but I am not working on that. It is not my program”* (IFGD 3-E).

Co-researchers believed that donors are so focused on upholding GEDSI principles that they fail to understand the complexities of true social inclusion. One co-researcher shared that when they tried to explain the complexities of disability inclusion in Laos with their donor, they were told that they were not trying hard enough to create meaningful inclusion. *“You’ve just been here too long, and you’re jaded”* (IFGD 3-E). This means donors are more focused on delivering what is considered to be GEDSI development rather than applying it in a practical manner. *“I think donor visibility is the donor’s main priority... [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] DFAT love it, [United States Agency for International Development] USAID loves it...they just want to talk about visibility”* (IFGD 3-E). A Lao co-researcher shared that when dealing with donors in regard to gender-targeted development programs they *“try to convince or prove the reality”* (IFGD 5-L) to the donor. However, they noted that they would rather work on a different development program than work with a donor who made them compromise on their culturally-contextual perception of gender-targeted development. *“If they don’t change their mind, it is better not to move on because it undermines our ideology”* (IFGD 3-L). Another co-researcher described this issue as a *“chicken and egg problem”* (IFGD 3-E). With donors and academics holding an expectation that gender and disability can be addressed collaboratively within the same framework. However, grouping gender and disability fundamentally misunderstands the distinct nature of gender and disability experiences, ultimately failing to address gender or disability effectively. Which eventually results in interventions that lack appropriate contextual sensitivity and targeted support.

### **5.3.3 Community Participation**

Socio-cultural factors influence the perception of participation and its application to a participatory approach to gender-targeted development. Typically, Western frameworks of

participation promote equality in agency, voice, and decision-making. However, in Laos participation is often considered as a collective process, embedded in community relationships, and shared responsibilities. Co-generated data found that participatory approaches to gender-targeted development in Laos should consider the following factors: (1) community decision-making; and (2) the role of the facilitator.

### *Community Decision-Making*

Lao co-researchers conceptualise participation through a collective lens instead of focusing on Western models that prioritise the individual. When applying a participatory approach to gender-targeted development a Lao conception of participation needs to be applied for the project to be successful. I observed the RDA prioritise and centralise a collective process of participation during Cycle Two of this study. An example of this was when the RDA and I visited Village X to ask the co-researchers which activities they wanted to lead in their community.

To understand communities' priorities for the Akha Women's Project, the RDA and I asked each co-researcher to suggest an activity. Although the initial plan was to ask each co-researcher to contribute a suggestion, the RDA did not force co-researchers to provide a suggestion. This was in response to a cohort of younger co-researchers who said they didn't know, or they were too shy to speak. I felt uneasy about not encouraging these women to provide a suggestion, as I was concerned that their decision to withhold a suggestion was due to the social hierarchy of the group, rather than a genuine lack of ideas. However, the RDA was careful not to disrupt the natural flow of the group. Co-researchers were then asked to vote on the list of co-researcher suggestions that was displayed at the front of the room. Early into this process the wife of the Village Chief, the most prominent member of the group, began to encourage co-researchers to vote for her suggestion. Soon after co-researchers started changing each other's votes. I felt uncomfortable watching this as this did not fit my Western conception of participation. However, as I observed the RDA, I noticed that they did not try to control the situation or discourage co-researchers from changing each other's answers. Instead, the RDA engaged the group in a group discussion to identify why some co-researchers believed their activity was the priority. The RDA never discouraged co-researchers from working collectively, even if that meant individuals would not be participating equally.

The notion that decision-making in Laos is "*done by consensus, not by majority*" (IFGD 3-E) was raised by co-researchers in the IFGDs. This finding aligned with co-generated data from

Cycle One, where development actor co-researchers had also explained that participation in Laos is a community-driven activity. An expatriate co-researcher told a story about trying to design a participatory gender-targeted development program in Laos. Despite efforts to plan gender-segregated activities and encourage individual participation, the community actively employed their own methods to maintain a collective decision-making process.

*“We went to the village, and we had a separate women's group in one house and a men's group in another house. I was interviewing the men's group with the Village Chief and my female colleague was discussing with the women in the other house, but the village had organised a runner. So, there was somebody who was running between the two groups, making sure that we were getting a consistent story from both sides. And you know what? What can you do when that happens?...It's not my place to say to them they can't communicate between the two groups. I mean if they feel strongly enough that it's worth doing can I legitimately deny that?”* (Co-researcher 18-E).

#### *The Role of the Facilitator*

FPAR frameworks promote collaboration between the primary researcher and co-researchers. This focus on collaboration is the basis of FPAR and the reason co-researchers are distinguished from participants. Despite the popularity of the FPAR approach, co-researchers explained that the primary researcher and/or practitioner needs to hold a different level of responsibility than the co-researchers. *“We play a facilitation role. We do not have an authoritarian role. We should show them who we are and how we work”* (IFGD 5-L). Co-researchers explained that being a facilitator means there is a difference between the roles and expectations of the facilitator compared to co-researchers. *“We should differentiate. We are not one of them, but we are able to support them. If we pretend to be one of them or if we are one of them, I don't think they have hopes because to make decisions they need someone to at least give them options. Before they are able to get some options by themselves”* (IFGD 5-L).

Western models of participation, often assume that co-researchers should have full autonomy in the research process. However, this assumption fails to recognise that co-researchers are not the primary researcher/practitioner and therefore do not have the same understanding or investment in the program. While collaborating with the RDA on the Akha Women's Project, I noted that they were mindful the co-researchers had not designed the FPAR study nor were

co-researchers aware of the requirements of the gender-targeted development program. This meant that co-researchers were not expected to hold the same position in the project as the RDA and I. Co-generated data indicated that this experience was not unique to the Akha Women's Project. During IFGDs, co-researchers expressed frustration with participatory approaches, noting that sometimes the intended beneficiaries of a participatory program are unable to articulate their needs or expectations. *"They [the community] always go for the easiest, most obvious answers. And it's a real struggle to push through that into anything... they just can't quite get into the meat of anything"* (IFGD 3-E). Co-researchers explained that to counter this challenge we must provide the intended beneficiaries with suggestions, even if this does not align with the participatory framework of an FPAR approach.

Donors are not always aware of the differences between Western and Lao conceptions of participation. Co-researchers explained that this widens the gap between theory and practice because co-researchers are criticised for trying to adapt to a Lao framework of participation.

*"You can get a lot of flak for that. It's not their voice and it's 100% true, it would be great if Lao people had stronger voices and had more ideas and contributed ideas and came up with their own solutions to problems. But they just don't do it for political reasons, education reasons, social and cultural reasons, it's just a huge barrier. So, you throw out ideas, somebody picks up this one, that's interesting. Let's talk about that"* (IFGD 3-E).

#### *5.3.4 Defining the Action in FPAR*

Action is obviously an important phase of any FPAR approach to gender-targeted development. Based on the iterative phases of *'Look, Think, Act'*, the act phase is intended to be informed by insights and findings generated during *'Look'* and *'Think'* phases. Co-generated data in this study found that, despite the FPAR framework, the action of gender-targeted development programs does not always emerge in this way. Instead, several factors appear to influence the selection and prioritisation of the action in FPAR. These factors include: (1) power hierarchies; and (2) adaptive sovereignty.

##### *Power Hierarchies*

Socio-cultural norms significantly influence cross-cultural collaboration by shaping how individuals interact and collaborate across political and social divides. During Cycle One, co-

researchers regularly referenced the challenges of cross-cultural collaboration between Lao and expatriate practitioners. During the narrative inquiry, interviews the notion of 'passive resistance' was introduced. Co-researchers explained that sometimes development practitioners or the intended beneficiaries of development will agree to development activities but not actually commit to them. *"They just say I understand, but they don't accept"* (Co-researcher 3-L). During the IFGDs 'passive resistance' was also referred to as *"playing the game"* (IFGD 3-E). Lao co-researchers reported 'passive resistance' in Laos was influenced by socio-political factors. *"Compared with other countries, we have a passed communist system. So, the people here are conservative, and we have the culture and ethnic driver"* (Co-researcher 19-L). An expatriate co-researcher stated that the Lao practice of 'passive resistance' is considered to be an honourable trait – *"they see it as a very honourable good thing"* (Co-researcher 20-E). *"They might spin things a certain way to dampen bad news or bad outcomes and things like that. And so, it is like, okay, what's a constant force that we have to work against. And often go around"* (Co-researcher 20-E).

Notably, 'passive resistance' was only attributed to Lao practitioners, even though expatriates were also described as navigating development structures in subtle, but strategic ways. The language of 'passive resistance' appears to reflect the perception of development as being driven by Western agendas. It suggests that Lao practitioners are only able to 'resist' models of development, rather than set the agenda themselves. In doing so the agency of Lao practitioners and community to design the action and outcomes of development programs is under-estimated. However, the fact that multiple co-researchers recognised the 'passive resistance', and the impact this has on development programming, implies that Lao development actors hold a significant amount of power. This suggests that while it may not be obvious that Lao development actors are rejecting a particular outcome or action, they are, in fact, subtly setting the agenda and influencing the direction of the project. An expatriate co-researcher noted that it is difficult to identify the effects of 'passive resistance' on intention-setting, noting that a Western development program might be unaware that the proposed actions are not being accepted or implemented. *"You will never achieve anything but in a very polite way. For years you can travel around, and you won't even recognise that no one is working with you"* (IFGD 3-E).

### *Adaptive Sovereignty*

'Adaptive Sovereignty' is a term I have coined to describe the dynamic process through which stakeholders exercise their authority over development interventions. The concept originated from my experience working with the RDA and the Akha women and observing how they navigate complex development structures to balance their own needs with the needs of the project. Based on these observations I read further about 'adaptive governance' a form of environmental governance that relies on dynamic interactions between actors, networks, and organisations (Chaffin et al., 2014). Based on my reading and through ongoing discussions with the RDA I developed the concept of 'adaptive sovereignty'. Throughout this study, I observed both development actors and the intended beneficiaries utilise adaptive sovereignty to navigate complex power relations with actors in positions of greater 'power'. The intended beneficiaries often exercise adaptive sovereignty in their interactions with development actors, while development actors, in turn, assert their sovereignty when engaging with donors.

The concept of adaptive sovereignty first emerged during Cycle One, however co-researchers initially described it as a process of '*subversion*'. "*Subversion is kind of normal. Can we just use that? You know, do we really have to get permission for this thing can't we just do it?*" (Co-researcher 1-E). When co-researchers used the terminology of '*subversion*' they often implied it had a negative connotation, suggesting what the community is doing is wrong or undermining the system. Instead, I have chosen the terminology of 'adaptive sovereignty' to demonstrate the power the community has in decision-making. The community can leverage their own wants and needs as bargaining tool when negotiating with a project.

During the Akha Women's Project, I observed Akha co-researchers exercising adaptive sovereignty in their engagement with development programs. As described in Cycle Two, Akha co-researchers requested new roads, children's play equipment and school infrastructure improvement as part of the Akha Women's Project activities. Due to the pre-determined project outcomes the donor did not approve the use of the Akha Women's Project funds for the requests made by the co-researchers. Despite this when the RDA and I returned to the Akha Women's Project villages I noticed they had brand-new play equipment in the village centre as well as new tables and chairs in the school. When I asked about the source of these

resources, the co-researchers explained that they had been provided by a Chinese-funded water project, demonstrating the adaptive sovereignty of the community.

Additionally, during Cycle Two of the Akha Women's Project both the RDA and the Akha women demonstrated their adaptive sovereignty. When the Akha co-researchers requested activities outside the scope of the Akha Women's Project the RDA would often make accommodations in attempt to fulfil these requests. However, the RDA's accommodations often also assisted the RDA in other projects. For example, during Cycle Three of this study the RDA were also conducting another project and they needed to recruit rural youth for a training program. During the Akha Women's Project, members of the RDA were also recruiting youth for their other project. This dynamic is consistent with themes presented in Cycle One, where Lao co-researchers considered their role as development practitioners to extend beyond the scope of their role within a project. Instead viewing their role in development as a deeper commitment to social change and community empowerment regardless of their connection to specific projects. One example of negotiation between the community and the RDA was the Akha women's request to host evening classes in the village to teach women Lao. The RDA were aware that this request fell outside of the scope of the Akha Women's Project, so the RDA engaged government partners and asked them to facilitate Lao language lessons in the village.

In participatory work, a project needs to address the needs of the community to be successful, even if these needs are outside the scope of the project. This is due to the priority placed by the community on their needs for change. This means the practitioner's role is more about facilitating the change requested by community than fulfilling the aims or ambitions of the project itself. One co-researcher explained the decision-making process that expatriates go through when determining whether they can extend the scope of a project.

*"If we go to a community and they're like, we want electricity, it's tough for my organisation to even want to step into that space because it's like a whole different ministry, whole different technical staff. There are instances where if it's a really easy problem and we can build goodwill with the community by purchasing X numbers of meters of electrical cable for them then that has happened. But anything that gets out of our sector is not something that we're even interested in thinking about or letting anyone know that this is an issue" (IFGD 3-E).*

## 5.4 *Reflecting*

Unlike the previous two Cycles, Cycle Three does not include a '*Reflecting Together*' section. Given this cycle is ongoing, I have not hosted formal reflection sessions with the RDA and other co-researchers. While I have had informal conversations and reflections with co-researcher, I do not assume to understand the reflections and considerations of co-researchers. For this reason, I have only included my personal reflections in this chapter.

### 5.4.1 *My Reflections*

Two core reflections emerged during Cycle Three: (1) the agency of the intended beneficiaries of development; and (2) the challenges of FPAR as a methodology. Each is presented below.

#### *The Agency of the Intended Beneficiaries of Development*

The findings from the '*Thinking Together*' phase of Cycle Three encouraged me to reflect on my work as a practitioner, as well as a researcher. As described earlier in this thesis, during my role as a practitioner I often felt frustrated with gender-targeted development programming. Early into this PhD study, while working as a gender consultant, I worked on an agricultural gender-targeted development program in Northern Laos. As part of my role, I was asked to review the gender-targeted activities and assess the impact these had on women's empowerment. During my assessment, I realised that the activities had not been adopted by the community because they did not have the resources to lead the activities. Instead, the community requested that the project built new roads and infrastructure so they would be able to adopt the projects activities. When I passed this information on to the project, they decided to move the project to a different community. I felt conflicted because I worried that this meant a community was being punished for not having the resources and therefore being excluded from the project.

I had wrongly assumed that a power hierarchy existed between the community and the project, and that the community was positioned at the bottom of that hierarchy. I had believed the community was being disadvantaged because they were deemed unsuitable for the project. However, based on the findings of the '*Thinking Together*' phase I realise that the community had power in that project that I had not previously acknowledged. By asking the project to assist with other infrastructure needs, the community was in fact setting the agenda. They were strategically using the project to request other activities that the project

could conduct. Interestingly, this is more of a participatory process than the original program planning. I had felt guilty that the project had been removed based on information that it was not suitable to the village. Instead, I now recognise that the community neither had the resources to support the project nor had they requested the project in the first place.

#### *The Challenges of an FPAR Methodology*

I selected FPAR as the methodology for this study because my development theory background suggested that participatory approaches foster more equal partnerships, both between researchers and co-researchers, and between practitioners and communities. However, when applied in practice, I encountered challenges surrounding the implementation of a participatory approach to gender-targeted development. It was only during the thematic analysis of this cycle that I realised my preconceived perceptions of FPAR were shaping my experience of the methodology. Prior to this cycle I had not realised that participation does not have to mean equal participation. I was so focused on applying my perception of a participatory approach that I ignored Lao conceptions of participation that called for collective and community decision-making. Ironically, by failing to understand the local perceptions of participation my approach was no longer participatory.

During the *'Thinking Together'* phase of Cycle Three I realised that I have failed to appropriately recognise my ownership of this study. I tried so hard to push a collective and participatory approach that I convinced myself this study was co-owned. However, this perception fails to recognise my autonomy in this study. As the primary researcher I designed the study, the research questions, the methodology and the methods. I also independently analysed data and wrote this thesis. By trying to imagine that this study was a wholly participatory process I am incorrectly claiming that co-researchers were involved in all processes of the study which is not correct. Not only does this undermine the amount of work and ownership that I have of this research, but it also fails to acknowledge that co-researchers may not agree with all aspects of this study.

#### *5.5 Acting Together*

As described in Chapter Two, the action of this cycle is ongoing given its connection to the Akha Women's Project. During this cycle the RDA and I recognised the need to strengthen the RDA's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to assist them in their enactment of the

Akha Women’s Project as well as future projects. This resulted in training that targeted the current gaps in the RDA’s M&E framework. Additionally, the RDA and I intend to continue to share the findings of this cycle. As part of this process, I travelled to Laos in September 2025 to co-lead a workshop with the RDA. During this two-day workshop, we held a photo gallery that thematically displayed photos and related objects from the Photovoice activity (See Figure 43 Akha Representatives viewing the Photovoice Gallery). Additionally, the first day included an interactive workshop on how to use Photovoice as a participatory method. On the second day, we began with a conference-style morning session where the Akha Women’s Project and other CSOs working in the region shared their recent research results. This was followed by a panel discussion featuring myself, a senior member from the RDA, and four Akha representatives (two from each village) who discussed the methodology and findings. We concluded by presenting a community development manifesto that the RDA and I had written in response to the study’s findings. A panel of government and CSO members then responded to the manifesto and reflected on how they would incorporate these findings into future activities. The workshop was attended by over 150 participants from INGOs and CSOs across Laos and was covered by local media.



*Figure 42 Akha Representatives viewing the Photovoice Gallery*

Additionally, in December 2025, Chanthalangsy will travel to Australia to co-present the study's findings with me at the Australasian Aid Conference hosted by the Australian National University. During her trip, we will also co-present our research findings at The University of Sydney and meet with members of the Sydney Southeast Asian Centre (SSEAC).

## *5.6 Chapter Summary*

In Cycle Three, I employed first-person inquiry and a process of re-analysis of the findings of the previous two Cycles. The findings of Cycle Three demonstrated the difference between Western and Lao perceptions of FPAR and gender-targeted development. Notably, the differences between Western and Lao understandings of FPAR methodology reflect broader tensions evident in gender-targeted development. This parallel emerges because FPAR represents both a widely used methodology within gender-targeted development in Laos and a tangible expression of the Western theories of feminism and participation that underpin gender-targeted development.

Cycle Three aimed to address research question three - *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?* Through a process of self-reflection and observation I realised that my perceptions of gender-targeted development and FPAR were grounded in Western-centric concepts of feminism and participation that were not consistent with the Lao context. As well as promoting Western conceptions of gender, feminism, and participation my view was also rooted in an ideological perception of development that was both unattainable and unrealistic.

Through my observations of the RDA and my re-analysis of the findings of Cycle One and Two I identified a process of negotiation that occurs between development practitioners and the intended beneficiaries of development. This finding highlights the role of the intended beneficiaries in development design and delivery, which also strengthens the findings of Cycle One. In Cycle Three, I observed the working relationship between development practitioners and the intended beneficiaries as they balance and negotiate the priorities of the development program with the needs of the community. It became clear that the reality of development programs is different from how they are conceptualised by the 'development decision-makers' identified in Cycle One.

## *6. Chapter Six – Discussion*

### *6.1 Chapter Outline*

I begin this chapter by reiterating the research aims and questions of this study. I then assess the quality of the findings by utilising an established criterion for participatory action research methodologies. Following this assessment, I summarise key findings and discuss the gap between feminist and development ideologies and the lived experiences of delivering gender-targeted development in Laos. These findings contribute to our understanding of development systems in Laos and provide insight into the challenges impacting both development and gender-targeted development programming in the country. In closing this chapter, I discuss the significance and innovation of this study. I also discuss its limitations and call for future research and action.

### *6.2 Study Aim, Research Questions, and Objectives*

#### *6.2.1 Study Aim*

Through my application of a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology, I aimed to identify and analyse the factors influencing the design, delivery, and success of gender-targeted development programming in Laos. My hope is that the findings of this study inform future gender-targeted initiatives and improve development systems in Laos.

#### *6.2.2 Research Questions*

This study was systematically structured, addressing one research question in each of the three FPAR cycles. Each question was addressed in its corresponding Cycle.

- 1. Cycle One – How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?*
- 2. Cycle Two – What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?*
- 3. Cycle Three – How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?*

#### *6.2.3 Objectives*

The corresponding objectives of this FPAR study included:

1. Implement and evaluate culturally-sensitive research methods to generate data with Lao, Akha, and expatriate co-researchers.
2. Describe the experiences and perspectives of Lao development actors by co-generating, co-analysing and co-distributing the findings of this study.
3. Identify and describe Akha expressions of gender, development, and gender-targeted development by co-generating, co-analysing and co-distributing the findings of this study.
4. Identify factors influencing development and gender-targeted development in Laos.
5. Provide recommendations to improve the design and delivery of gender-targeted development programming in Laos.

Each of these objectives is discussed in Section 6.12 – The Significance and Innovation of this Study.

### *6.3 What We Did and What We Found*

This study applied an FPAR methodology to facilitate the co-generation of data with a variety of co-researchers. Using three iterative FPAR cycles, I collaborated and co-generated data with a diverse range of stakeholders involved in development decision-making and action in Laos. Across the three FPAR cycles I utilised a mixed-methods approach including narrative inquiry interviews, interpretive focus group discussions (IFGDs), photovoice, and first-person inquiry. Throughout the study, I aimed to centralise the voices and perspectives of Akha and Lao co-researchers due to the historical marginalisation of these perspectives in traditional research methods.

The collective findings of the three FPAR cycles demonstrate that effective delivery of gender-targeted development in Laos is intrinsically connected to the broader success of the development sector. As a result, the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that influence development have a direct effect on the design, delivery, and adoption of gender-targeted development programs. When gender becomes a central focus of development programming, it can intensify existing challenges within the development sector. These challenges may include the tensions between Western and Lao perceptions of gender-targeted development, the systemic failures of development programming, and the risk of reinforcing reductive or essentialist understandings of gender. Rather than achieving the goal

of women's empowerment and gender equity, gender-targeted development programs have been shown to complicate development efforts by overlooking the intersecting realities of gender and development.

### 6.3.1 Summary of the Findings

#### *Cycle One*

Cycle One (Chapter Three) utilised narrative inquiry interviews and IFGDs to address research question one - *How do development actors influence development practice in Laos?* This Cycle collaborated with both Lao and Expatriate development actors from various sectors, organisations, and backgrounds. The identified themes from this Cycle included: (1) *The Wheel of Fire*; (2) *Politics of Development*; (3) *Global Environment*; and (4) *Relational Structures in Development*. Cycle One identified various systematic, cultural, political, and historical factors that influence both development and gender-targeted development in Laos. Notably, co-researchers identified the role of development actors, the Lao government, and international governments in shaping development practice in Laos.

'*The Wheel of Fire*', a central theme, identified the professionalisation of development as a significant factor impacting the success of development, including gender-targeted development in Laos. Specifically, box-ticking, personal career progression and donor agendas were all considered to override the philanthropic principles of development. Despite the study's focus on gender-targeted development, there was limited attention from co-researchers on gender in Cycle One. This finding suggests that the systemic factors influencing development are so deeply embedded that they must be considered as a starting point before we can consider gender-targeted development specifically.

#### *Cycle Two*

Cycle Two (Chapter Four) involved collaboration with the intended beneficiaries of the Akha Women's Project to address research question two - *What is the relationship between expressions of development in Laos and gender-targeted development?* In this cycle knowledge was co-generated with co-researchers via photovoice and IFGDs. The identified themes from Cycle Two were: (1) *Cultural Law*; (2) *The Value of Women*; (3) *External Pressures*; and (4) *Priorities for Change*. The data co-generated during Cycle Two provides insight into Akha expressions of gender and how these expressions interact with gender-targeted

development programming. The findings revealed complex and established relationships between gender identity and socio-cultural norms, and the influence these relationships have on community adoption of gender-targeted development programs.

The socio-cultural expectations shaping Akha gender relations emerged as a central finding of this Cycle, revealing the influence of Cultural Law on the roles and responsibilities of Akha men and women. The findings of this Cycle demonstrated that Akha expressions of gender are related to Akha cultural identity and community cohesion rather than Western feminist frameworks. Based on this finding, I posit that cultural expressions of gender and gender-targeted development can coexist when development programs centralise a strong and respectful recognition of the cultural contexts in which they operate.

### *Cycle Three*

Cycle Three (Chapter Five) utilised first-person inquiry as the primary method of data generation. Co-generated data from the previous two cycles was also drawn upon to address research question three - *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?* The first-person inquiry presented in Cycle Three includes a critical examination of my experiences collaborating with the Rural Development Agency (RDA) during the Akha Women's Project. Four themes emerged in Cycle Three: (1) *The Gap Between Theory and Practice*; (2) *Western Models of Feminism*; (3) *Community Participation*; and (4) *Defining the Action in FPAR*. These themes demonstrated the current gap between Western and Lao frameworks of participatory approaches to gender-targeted development.

The theme '*Defining the Action in FPAR*' emerged as a central finding. I coined the term 'adaptive sovereignty' to describe the dynamic processes through which communities and development actors assert and exercise their authority over development programming. Specifically, the concept of 'adaptive sovereignty' acknowledges the way communities and development actors pragmatically navigate the institutional constraints of development programs to address complex power relations with external actors. Employing this concept allows us to broaden our conceptions of development relationships beyond binary understandings of power.

## *6.4 Ensuring the Quality of the Findings*

Before situating the findings of this study within the broader literature, it is essential to assess their quality. The founding principles of FPAR are collaboration and participation (Chakma, 2016; Chakma et al., 2023; Ewan, 2019). To determine if these principles were upheld, we must assess if this study aligned with the participatory principles that define FPAR (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018; Springett et al., 2023). I adopted the PAR validity criterion developed by Springett et al. (2023) and adapted it to conduct a review of the quality of my FPAR findings. While validity tools are not traditionally employed in qualitative research, I have decided to apply this criterion to hold myself accountable to the central principles of FPAR. This approach is particularly appropriate given that objective one of this study was to ‘Implement and evaluate culturally-sensitive research methods to generate data with Lao, Akha, and expatriate co-researchers’. To meaningfully assess if I achieved this objective, I have applied Springett et al. (2023) criterion to measure whether my collaborative approach effectively redistributed traditional power hierarchies. By employing this assessment tool, I have shifted my evaluation of the validity of these findings from a theoretical assumption about FPAR’s participatory nature to a structured process of critical reflexivity.

The adapted criteria I have applied include: (1) participatory validity; (2) intersubjective validity; (3) contextual validity; (4) catalytic validity; and (5) reflexive validity (Cook, 2021; Springett et al., 2023). Below, I assess the quality of this research by applying these five criteria.

### *6.4.1 Participatory Validity*

Participatory validity refers to the extent to which co-researchers actively engage in the research process (Springett et al., 2023). Throughout this study, I intentionally enacted core principles of participation, however my understanding of what constitutes participation evolved significantly. Initially, I applied a Western-centric approach that emphasised ‘mutual involvement’ and defined participation as “*to have a part or share in something*” (Kidd & Kral, 2005). While I maintained that co-researchers should be actively involved in the research process, I came to understand that expecting ‘equal’ engagement between co-researchers and the primary researcher oversimplifies complex dynamics of participation and research (Ozkul, 2020).

My collaboration with the RDA and Akha Women's Project co-researchers revealed that participatory processes are inherently uneven, a finding that challenged my theoretical understanding of FPAR. During Cycles One and Two, co-researcher engagement varied significantly. For example, during a Lao IFGD in Cycle One, I observed a younger co-researcher participate less than the other co-researchers engaged in the discussion. Based on my understanding of relational hierarchies in Laos, I assumed that this co-researcher's silence was in part due to their age and position. I also observed how my attempts to encourage 'equal' participation based on Western-centric conceptions of participation made this co-researcher uncomfortable. After working closely with the RDA, I was able to identify Lao-centric conceptions of participation and tailor my processes accordingly. This experience taught me that practical realities of FPAR often differ from theoretical ideals.

#### *6.4.2 Intersubjective Validity*

Intersubjective validity describes the extent to which stakeholders consider the findings to be trustworthy and meaningful (Springett et al., 2023). This concept of validity moves away from a measure of research as being 'true' and instead focuses on the relationality of the research to the co-researchers (Li & Ross, 2021). During this study, I employed IFGDs, a participatory and decolonising method for working across cultures, to facilitate co-researcher interpretation and validation of the study's findings (Elbardan et al., 2017; Redman-MacLaren, Mills, et al., 2014). All co-researchers were invited to attend an IFGD where I presented the findings of my independent thematic analysis of co-generated data from Cycle One and/or Two. Co-researchers were given the opportunity to validate or challenge these findings. As described in Chapter Three and Four, I then integrated co-researcher responses to the IFGDs into the findings of each Cycle. Notably the integrated themes that emerged from the IFGDs often presented a more nuanced and complex finding than that which emerged during my initial thematic analysis as the primary researcher lead.

An example of this nuance emerged in Cycle Two. My initial thematic analysis of photovoice data identified '*Unchangeable Culture*' as a theme describing the influence of culture on women's engagement with development programs. While I adhered to qualitative processes, such as in vivo coding, to generate this theme, it differed significantly from how co-researchers reviewed the data during the IFGDs. Instead, during the IFGDs, co-researchers provided crucial context, explaining that socio-cultural gender norms were complex and could not be reduced

to mere oppression. Co-researcher analysis aligns with established critiques of Western feminism's tendency to evaluate women's empowerment through Western-centric conceptions of gender roles (Hukula, 2015; Strathern, 1984). This example demonstrates how my application of IFGDs established intersubjective validity as co-researchers critiqued initial findings to ensure they accurately reflected their lived experiences.

#### *6.4.3 Contextual Validity*

Contextual Validity refers to the relevance and usefulness of the research to the stakeholders and their communities (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Springett et al., 2023). The contextual validity of this study is reflected in its implications for professional practice and its overall research contribution. The action phases across the study's three FPAR cycles led to immediate changes in practice for the Akha Women's Project as well as ongoing training activities for the RDA and their partners. Additionally, the findings that emerged from this study will contribute to future practice through its contribution to the research. Currently the findings of this study have been disseminated through Akha Women's Project planning meetings, IFGDs, photovoice galleries, conference presentations, training workshops and blog posts. I also plan to continue disseminating the findings of this thesis through academic publications and my continued collaboration with the RDA to strengthen the contextual validity of this study.

#### *6.4.4 Catalytic Validity*

The assessment of catalytic validity considers the emergence of new opportunities for social action (Springett et al., 2023). Specifically, the action phase of FPAR methodologies is one of the most important outputs of the research method (Pain et al., 2019). Action in this study took several forms including the development and delivery of a training program for the RDA and the real-time adaption and delivery of the Akha Women's Project. The iterative nature of transitioning between cycles meant that the actions that emerged from each cycle of this study were embedded within the findings. In Chapter Two, I described the action phase of each cycle in depth.

#### *6.4.5 Reflexive Validity*

The concept of reflexive validity relates to the primary researcher's awareness of their role in the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Springett et al., 2023). Throughout this study, I maintained self-awareness through my application of feminist standpoint theory to position myself within the research. I purposefully considered the implications of my Western feminist positionality and my familiarity with working in Laos. My 'insider-outsider' position provided a unique perspective on Lao development that fostered trusting relationships with co-researchers. Specifically, it was due to my previous professional experience in Laos that I was able to collaborate with the RDA. By acknowledging my positionality and its influence, I demonstrated the reflexivity integral to this study's validity.

I also maintained accurate records of my decision-making and thinking throughout this study. Through written memos, diary entries, voice recordings and blog posts I kept a record of my evolving positionality, methodological adaptations, and developing relationships with co-researchers (Maulingin-Gumbaketi, 2021). I then referenced this 'audit trail' during my analysis and write up stages of this study. By keeping an accurate record of key moments, decisions, and methodological choices I aimed to encourage myself to be reflexive throughout this research process. Although I know complete reflexivity is difficult to achieve, I created spaces for myself to be as reflexive as possible.

#### *6.5 The Space Between Ideology and Reality*

The findings of this study reveal the complex and dynamic relationship between development ideologies and reality. In Laos development appears to operate across three distinct yet interconnected levels: (1) the macro level – where development is conceptualised, and policies and frameworks are formulated; (2) the meso level – where development programs are designed; and (3) the micro level – where development is enacted with communities. Different stakeholders operate across each of these levels; the macro level is dominated by development 'decision-makers' including donors, academics, and governments. The meso level is led by 'development-programmers' including INGOs and CSOs. Development 'enactors' work at the micro level including development practitioners and the intended beneficiaries of development. Significantly, the relative influence of ideology and reality shifts across these levels, with ideology exerting its strongest influence at the macro level, while the realities of

community development become increasingly influential at the micro level. Figure 44 The Ideology-Reality Gap illustrates the interconnection of these levels and the tensions between ideology and reality. Below, I examine each of these levels and their specific impacts on gender-targeted development practice in Laos, before analysing what these findings reveal about the broader dynamics of the 'Wheel of Fire'.

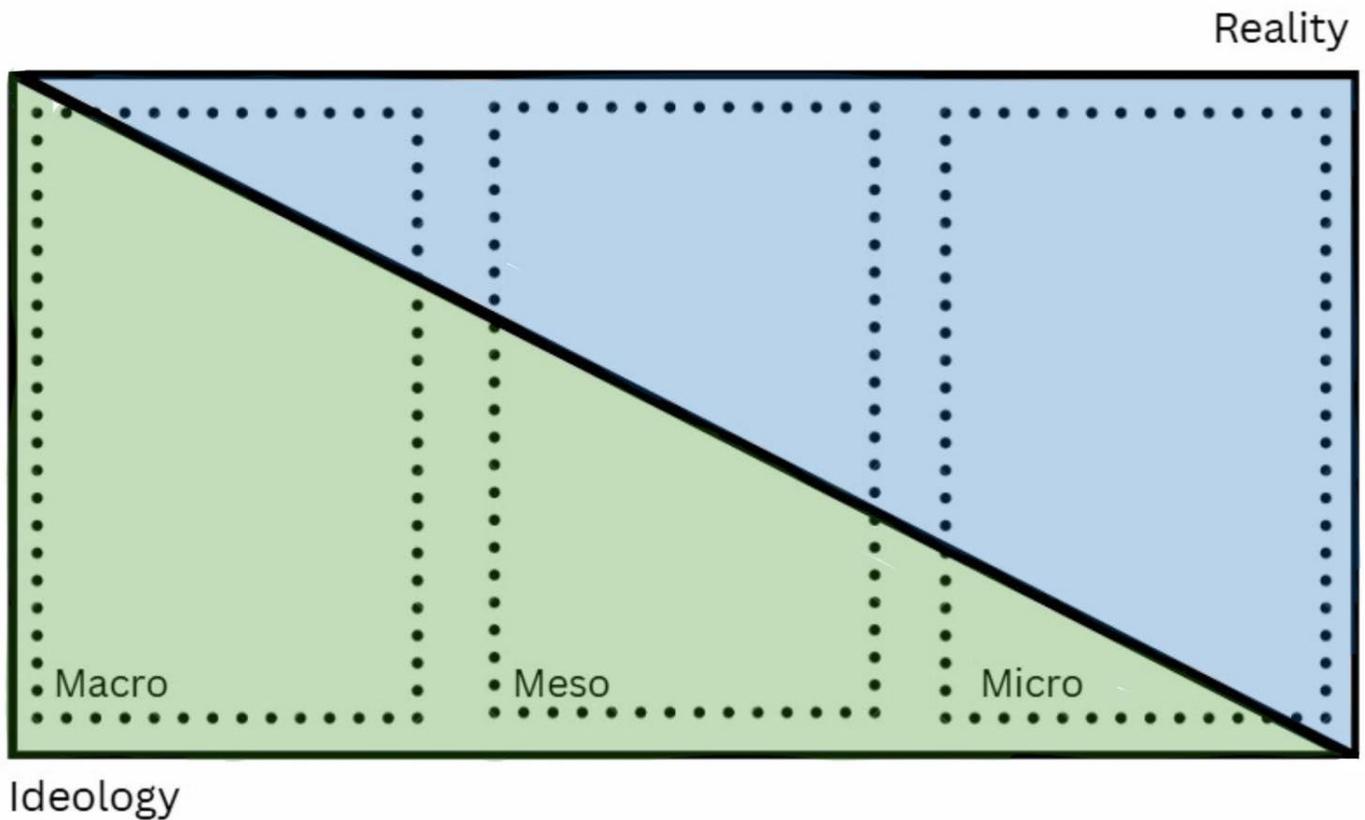


Figure 43 The Ideology-Reality Gap

### 6.6 The Macro– Conceptualising Gender-Targeted Development

The findings of this study reveal that ideology fundamentally shapes how development is conceptualised and implemented at the macro level. This ideological influence determines conceptions of development as well as the design of policies and frameworks. Development ‘decision-makers’ are the stakeholder group that operates at this macro level. The actors involved in this group include: (1) governments; (2) donors; and (3) academics. These groups of actors are intertwined with each other and often simultaneously shape and reflect the other’s ideologies. In this study, co-researchers evidenced that both practitioners and intended beneficiaries are often unaware of which specific actor influences ideologies, instead

they were simply aware that influence at the macro level was present. For the purposes of this thesis, I break down the role of each stakeholder, but I acknowledge that they are not independent of one another. Below I explore the role of each of these actors within development decision-making processes. I then discuss the impact the dominance of ideology has on conceptions of gender-targeted development.

### *6.6.1 Stakeholders at the Macro Level*

#### *Lao Government*

Throughout this study, co-researchers examined how governments shape the conceptualisation of development. Both Lao and expatriate co-researchers regularly discussed the role of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in defining national conceptions of development. Specifically, there was much discussion about the impact of the communist agenda and how this influenced understandings and enactments of development in Laos. Whether directly or indirectly, co-researchers suggested that the communist state made Laos a "*restrictive*" (Co-researcher 8-E) environment for development. Discussions about the role of political ideologies in shaping development in Laos was such a prominent idea that it emerged as a theme in Cycle One - '*Politics of Development*'.

During the narrative inquiry interviews co-researchers mostly focused on the influence of the LPRP on conceptions of development in Laos. However, when I presented these findings to co-researchers during the IFGDs, more co-researchers began to acknowledge the role of international governments. Co-researchers' initial focus on the role of the LPRP raised a key question during my interpretation of this co-generated data - *Are the political challenges that the development sector faces in Laos uniquely Lao?* This section explores this question by examining the role of various government stakeholders on conceptualisations of development in Laos.

A focus on the LPRP is common in Laos, with High and Petit (2013) warning against 'State fever', which they define as a preoccupation with, and overemphasis of the role of the State in Laos. Despite this warning, development scholars have spent a long time debating the influence of the LPRP and their political agendas on development practice in Laos (High & Petit, 2013; Sims, 2021b; Stuart-Fox, 2005b). Sims (2021b), a development scholar, characterises Laos as a 'politically repressive' society, arguing that the political climate in Laos

creates hostile ground for international development. Sims (2021b) views appear similar to those held by expatriate co-researchers in this study, theorising that the Government of Laos utilises operational permits and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) as tools to hinder development progress in Laos that does not align with their political agenda.

Co-researchers focused primarily on the LPRP's bureaucratic role in development decision-making in Laos. Notably, there was limited discussion about the influence of Buddhism in the LPRP's development ideology, despite the government's re-Buddhification of the Lao state (described in detail in Chapter One). While substantial literature exists on the role of religion in development programming globally, including extensive documentation of government partnerships with faith-based organisations, Western conceptions of development typically aim to separate church and state (Lipsky, 2011; Selinger, 2004). The dominance of modernisation and secularisation paradigms has led to the exclusion of religion from development discourse (Selinger, 2004). This oversight likely originates from a fear of imposing, or appearing to impose, a different faith or ideology, a concern heightened by the growing push for decolonisation in development practice (Muller, 2023; Ver Beek, 2000). Instead of excluding all religion from development discourse, Western frameworks disproportionately ignore non-Western religious traditions (Oba, 2019). While Christianity and other 'dominant' Western religions may not be explicitly incorporated into development discourse, Christian organisations routinely partner with Western and Non-Western governments through INGOs and CSOs, a legitimacy rarely extended to typically Non-Western religions (Deneulin, 2013).

Despite the broader failure to recognise Buddhism's influence on development practice, Theravada Buddhism has likely shaped the LPRP's development decision-making and its underlying gender ideologies. There is significant literature to suggest the introduction of Buddhism in Laos is connected to the rise in patriarchal practices (Ireson, 1992; Schenk-Sandbergen, 2012; Takayama, 2024). Specifically, Baird and Soukhaphon (2025) and Takayama (2024) argue that the introduction of Buddhism in Laos has diminished the status of women. Prior to Buddhism women in Laos held many of the spiritual and cultural roles, however following the spread of Theravada Buddhism into Laos men have gained more prominent social roles (Baird, 2024; Baird & Soukhaphon, 2025)

Development discourse predominantly frames religion as a challenge to the advancement of development, disproportionately characterising Non-Western religions as the barriers to progress (Ver Beek, 2000). This suggests that whether explicitly acknowledged or not, the influence of Buddhism is likely viewed as limiting factor shaping development ideology in Laos. However, Akha co-researchers in this study also highlighted how Akha customary law limit women's participation in community development. Rather than seeking a simplistic assessment of whether religion benefits or harms gender equality and development, we should instead recognise the fundamental role of religion in shaping ideologies.

#### *International Governments*

While the influence of the LPRP on development conceptions was evident, this study also demonstrated the role of international governments in shaping conceptualisations of development and gender in Laos. The influence of political ideologies on development systems has been the subject of extensive debate and reinterpretation (Gisselquist et al., 2021; Gourevitch, 2008; Leftwich, 1994; Liodakis, 2010). These debates date back to the Truman Doctrine, where development was used as a tool to push the Truman administration's anti-communist agenda (Merrill, 2006). During this study, co-researchers revealed how international agencies translate government priorities into development agendas. Specifically, co-researchers outlined the impact of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the European Union (EU) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on development in Laos. They criticised these government conceptions of development, claiming that they prioritised diplomatic agendas over transformative change.

Co-researchers in this study primarily described relationships between international government agencies and INGOs, CSOs, and development agencies, rather than direct engagement with the Lao government. This intermediary approach is common in development, yet it has been widely criticised for promoting simplified, idealistic models of political participation that ignore power structures and overlook local political realities (Arizona et al., 2019; Hickey, 2009; Holmes et al., 2019). These relationships often result in apolitical development programming that fails to address the root causes of inequality including systemic issues such as gendered inequality (Arizona et al., 2019). Development ideology typically reflects the institutional interests and priorities of its funders. Consequently,

development programs funded or influenced by international governments are shaped by their beliefs about development, gender, and the underlying causes of inequality.

The Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) framework was cited by co-researchers as an example of how international government agencies impose ideologies of gender. Co-researchers expressed concern about application of a GEDSI framework, acknowledging that while the aims of a GEDSI framework appear to be inclusive, the framework often results in programs that ignore the unique experiences, needs, and perspectives of people with disabilities and women. DFAT describes GEDSI frameworks as a foundational value (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025). In DFAT's 'Good Practice Note' (2025) they explain that the agency focuses on "women, girls, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities because these groups experience systemic discrimination". My review of the 'Good Practice Note' revealed the primary focus as the application of the GEDSI framework, rather than changing the socio-cultural factors influencing communities. I also noted the inclusion of a checklist to "assess attention to gender equality in monitoring and evaluation and reporting" (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025). While there may be merits to checklists in policy, this runs the risk of being perceived as '*box-ticking*' (see Section 3.3.1 – box-ticking).

The unexpected shutdown of USAID by the Trump administration during the final stages of this study also demonstrates the role of international governments in shaping development in Laos. The shutdown of USAID has had global significance as well as a direct impact on the development sector in Laos (Auwal et al., 2025; Freeman, 2025; Visapra, 2025). The shutdown of USAID operations in Laos is particularly significant because the agency was responsible for critical demining and unexploded ordnance clearance projects following America's Secret War in Laos (Ohno, 2025; Visapra, 2025). The Lowy Institute (2025) identified China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States as Laos' biggest development partners from 2015 to 2023. The USAID shutdown therefore represented the loss of a major development partner. Anticipating future implications of the USAID shutdown, Auwal et al. (2025) believes the effectiveness of global governance structures will be directly impacted. Mbah et al. (2025) also warn that the Trump administration's withdrawal will impact the United States' ability to engage in diplomacy and advance its strategic interests. Given the evidence generated in this study, I posit that the withdrawal of USAID is a clear example of how international governments

influence development and gender ideologies. The Trump administration aims to limit programs that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion measures (DEI), resulting in a focus on 'gender inclusion' programs (Kassam, 2025). This recent event demonstrates how easily the United States can shift ideological conceptions of development and gender. It further demonstrates the fragility of ideological conceptions given that federal agencies, contractors, and private companies, informed by the position of Western governments, have weakened or abandoned their DEI programs following the USAID shutdown (Matteo Winkler, 2025). The shutdown of USAID revealed how powerfully Western governments influence ideological paradigms in diverse settings globally, reflecting the principle that ideology is continuously created and recreated by those in 'power' (Sayer, 2008).

### *Donors*

Co-researchers highlighted differences between development realities and donor ideologies throughout this study. During an IFGD, co-researchers reported this gap to be the "*biggest disconnect*" (IFGD 3-E) impacting development programming in Laos. This study joins broader scholarship in recognising the role of international development donors in shaping development ideologies. Literature documents a history of Western donors imposing their conceptions of development onto non-Western 'recipient' countries (Bradley, 2008; Chambers, 1995; Makuwira, 2018). The conceptions of development applied by donor organisations are usually grounded in Western-centric models of development guided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Arguably, the UN metrics of development success are driven by elements of a Western ideal of development, which prioritises 'universality' rather than contextually-specific definitions of development (Beitz, 2011; Easterly, 2007; Freeman, 2022). Chambers (1995) asked the vital question "whose reality counts?" when considering who sets the development agenda. In this study, co-researchers consistently found that development and gender-targeted development agendas were shaped by the prescriptive approaches of development donors. Notably, during the Akha women's Project, the RDA and I could not approve project activities suggested by the co-researcher's without first confirming them with the donor organisation. This often meant the donor organisation could decide if the suggested activities aligned with the aims and objectives, they had for the project. The need for the donor organisation to approve activities was required even though the Akha Women's Project was a PAR project. This example is not unique to the Akha Women's Project,

nor do I mean to criticise any donor organisation, however I do believe it is important to acknowledge the role development donors have in shaping development.

### *Academics*

Co-researchers in this study characterised development academics as development ‘decision-makers’. While academics may not directly influence policy decisions or funding allocations, they do play a crucial role in shaping development discourse. Specifically, academics generate the ideological frameworks that are used to conceptualise development and guide development practice. There has been growing attention towards the role and positionality of academics in development, anthropology, and human geography (Holden, 2022; Ríos & Patel, 2023; Woods, 2010). This focus stems from recognition that researchers’ positionality shapes not only the knowledge they produce, but also research outcomes, including participatory engagement with communities and development impacts (Moseley, 2007; Woods, 2010). Heightened scrutiny towards academics in development has coincided with an increasing trend of researchers working directly with INGOs and CSOs on hybrid research-development projects, blurring the traditional boundaries between research and practice (Moseley, 2007; Woods, 2010). Historically academics have failed to consider their research in relation to the needs and wants of the target communities they are working with (Woods, 2010). This tension arises from a fundamental conflict in priorities as academics prioritise knowledge generation, while target communities prioritise their personal or community development (Cottrell & Parpart, 2006; Sørbo, 2001). Despite these tensions there is evidence of development programs that adopt an interdisciplinary approach resulting in effective collaboration between INGOs and academic knowledge production (Stevens et al., 2013).

Just as decolonial theory cannot be simply acknowledged and then set aside, the same is true for positionality (Cottrell & Parpart, 2006; Muller, 2023). Rather than including a perfunctory positionality statement and moving on, we must require academics to meaningfully unpack their influence on development ideologies and to centre the needs of programs and target communities in ways they are not currently doing (Ríos & Patel, 2023; Woods, 2010). In this thesis, I have described the process of adaptive sovereignty that communities and CSOs undergo as they navigate their needs within development programs. Literature on the role of academics suggest that academics are not currently encouraged to undergo a similar process of negotiation (Sørbo, 2001; Woods, 2010). Instead, academics appear to prioritise their

research needs rather than balancing them against community priorities. While we should work towards narrowing the gap between academic ideology and lived reality of development, complete closure of this gap is impossible (Cottrell & Parpart, 2006).

In this study, co-researchers criticised development academics for holding a “*utopian vision of development*” (Co-researcher 1-E). In development discourse there are a multitude of development ‘utopias’, each defined by the value system of the academics who construct them (Harlow et al., 2013; Hedrén & Linnér, 2009). Importantly, development agendas often mirror these ‘utopian’ visions of development, regardless of the fact that they are often disconnected from the realities of development practice (Harlow et al., 2013). Harlow et al. (2013) recommend that development discourse focus on the practical implementations of development interventions. Conversely, Hedrén and Linnér (2009) suggest development academia should emphasise ideological conceptions of development rather than practical solutions. Based on findings in this study, I agree with Harlow et al. (2013) that development academics should present theory informed by the lived realities of development, instead of theorising about unrealistic approaches to it. This is because without being grounded in reality, academics ‘utopian’ visions for development will remain solely theoretical.

Co-researchers described a tension that exists between development academics and practitioners. Based on co-generated data, I understand that this tension is a result of the disconnect between academics and the practitioners they are theorising about. As a result of this tension, co-researchers described academics as being “*deeply out of touch*” (Co-researcher 1-E). I posit that academics remain disconnected from their research contexts by failing to recognise their own role in shaping the development contexts they examine. While there is a growing focus on researcher reflexivity and positionality, researchers typically only consider their role in basic terms of ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ (Bilgen et al., 2021; Holmes, 2020; Le Bourdon, 2022; Moseley, 2007). Instead of being reflexive about the power and privilege academics hold in shaping development discourse, they often subscribe to the “*myth of objective knowledge production*” (Bilgen et al., 2021). As a result of this disconnect, academics can theorise about the positionality of practitioners without reflecting at the same level about themselves. I believe that rather than not having the same role in development practice, it is development academics’ inability to view their role in development that creates tensions with practitioners.

Beyond shaping conceptions of development, academics also influence development agendas. The disconnect between academics and the realities of development often mean academics prioritise research over practice. This creates tensions in agenda-setting because researchers favour knowledge production while development enactors focus on development progress. In Bradley's (2008) review of North-South research partnerships, they advise research organisations to compromise with local partners, acknowledging these partners may have external pressures that influence research activities. In this study, co-researchers criticised academics for privileging data validity over transformational change, resulting in repetitive research practices. Like the criticism aimed at government agencies, co-researchers claimed that academics care more about ticking boxes than effecting development progress. In Section 3.3.1 'box-ticking' was defined as activities that prioritise compliance instead of development progress. Specifically, both Lao and expatriate co-researchers explained that they often had to repeat research activities for the purposes of research even if the practitioner and community were already aware of the situation. I recognise the irony of this finding, considering that this thesis itself focuses on academic knowledge production.

### *6.6.2 Conceptions of Gender-Targeted Development*

The findings of this study demonstrate how development 'decision-makers' impose their ideologies onto development systems through their conceptions and frameworks of development. This is significant because ideologies typically represent and serve the interests of those who create them. Consequently, through the influence of these actors, conceptions of gender and development primarily reflect the worldviews, priorities, and assumptions of the development 'decision-makers' who design them. In Chapter One, I presented a brief history of gender-targeted development, positing that the evolution from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD) was influenced by the Western feminist and development movements of the time. Co-generated data subsequently confirmed this initial assumption and co-researchers identified the gaps between conceptions and realities of gender-targeted development. To illustrate this finding, I will present an example concerning gender diversity inclusion in gender-targeted programs, showing how development 'decision-makers' shape the dominant paradigms embedded within our conceptions of gender.

As discussed, gender-targeted development is founded on the gender binary, placing women at the centre of gender frameworks (see section Gender1.3.2) (Connell, 2014; Faming, 2018; Smyth, 2007). However, during this study, both Lao and expatriate co-researchers identified the need to incorporate gender diversity into the gender framework applied to gender-targeted development. While most co-researchers expressed a desire for gender programs to incorporate gender diversity, many of them noted that it felt impossible to do in Lao. Some co-researchers identified challenges with the Lao government, noting that the government is opposed to gender inclusive development and that they often limit these activities. Other co-researchers noted that it was difficult to employ a gender diverse approach while trying to adhere to rigid frameworks. I suggest both examples present the influence of development 'decision-makers' and how their ideologies have shaped development practice.

While co-researchers acknowledged difficulties in integrating gender diversity into development programs, they reported that health-based programs offered more viable opportunities for gender inclusion. Notably, instead of being referred to as gender-targeted or gender-inclusive programs, co-researchers explained these programs were instead understood as health delivery mechanisms. For example, these programs would target Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) instead of the LGBTQIA+ community more broadly. In the Australian Volunteers (2023) 'Pride Guide', the agency acknowledges that the primary focus on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expressions, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) in development programming in Laos has almost exclusively focused on sexual health services. Interestingly, the 'Pride Guide' indicates that the Lao government is a primary actor limiting international development programming that targets LGBTQIA+ communities (Australian Volunteers, 2023). Building on my earlier discussion about a focus on the LPRP, this viewpoint assumes that government restrictions are the main barrier to progress in this area. This explanation overlooks how Western feminism itself reinforces the gender binary in its conceptions of gender and development.

We must consider that the well-documented criticisms of Western feminism for excluding queer feminist theory may influence how gender-targeted development conceptualises and frames gender relations beyond the gender binary (Da Costa, 2021). I argue that while the Lao government may have some influence over gender-targeted development programming, development donors, international governments and academics also shape the dominant

conceptions of development. Therefore, another reason that gender diversity is only enacted in health programs may relate to the prioritisation of health within Western ideologies of development (Buse & Hawkes, 2015). Co-researchers suggested that health interventions were often viewed as politically neutral or “*less controversial*”. Drawing on the examination of how development ‘decision-makers’ formulate their ideologies, this finding may suggest that Western conceptions of gender promote interventions that appear to align with the ‘universality’ of feminism and development, while benefiting the development ‘decision-makers’. Instead of promoting ‘empowerment’ and ‘equality’ like the programs that follow a gender binary framework, the health programs incorporate gender diversity under the guise of medical necessity, which Cheong et al. (2023) and Jolly (2023) warn may alienate the LGBTQIA+ communities these initiatives aim to address.

The above example demonstrates the effect development ‘decision-makers’ have on the way development programs are framed and enacted. The current framing of gender in Laos is not influenced by queer feminist theory and instead it promotes the dominant binary gender model. Therefore, while development ‘decision-makers’ sit at the macro level, they also influence the meso and micro levels of the system. Importantly, while the Lao government is one development ‘decision-maker’ that has this influence we must also consider the influence of international governments, development donors, and academics on how the conceptions of gender and gender-targeted development are shaped.

### *6.7 The Meso– Programming Gender-Targeted Development*

At the meso level, ‘development programmers’ are influenced by development conceptualisations from the macro level as they design programs that operationalise these conceptions. In this study the ‘development programmers’ are: (1) INGOs; and (2) CSOs. I consider development ‘programs’ to encompass the frameworks, toolkits, and techniques that shape how development is delivered. I acknowledge the blurring between development ‘decision-makers’ and ‘programmers’, particularly as INGOs often function as development donors, meaning they can hold the role of development ‘decision-makers’ and ‘development programmers’. While the model of the macro, meso and micro utilised in this study aims to illustrate the roles of development actors at the various levels of development, the reality is that the boundaries are blurred and the interface between levels is dynamic, complex, and

interactive. Below I describe the role of INGOs and CSOs in shaping how gender-targeted development is programmed in Laos.

### *6.7.1 Stakeholders at the Meso Level*

#### *International Non-Governmental Organisations*

INGOs are important stakeholders in development ‘programming’ due to the esteem they are held in by development ‘decision-makers’ including governments and development donors (Megersa, 2022). The high levels of trust that communities, governments, and CSOs have in INGOs often enables the INGOs to advance their ideological agenda (Davis et al., 2020; Megersa, 2022). Whether functioning as development donors themselves or as close partners with funding organisations, INGOs often become mouthpieces for donor conceptions of development. In this study, Lao co-researchers criticised INGOs for imposing Western conceptions of development in Laos. Notably, a Lao co-researcher likened the bureaucratic nature of INGOs in Laos to the government, suggesting that organisational politics within INGOs also influenced development decision-making. This demonstrates the fluidity of INGOs between the macro and meso level of development. Significantly, INGOs have also been demonstrated to influence global governance and conceptions of development meaning that INGOs are not only influenced by Western-centric conceptions of development, but that they can also influence them (Megersa, 2022).

As well as working with development donors, INGOs often work closely with CSOs. A review of INGOs in Laos reveals that most organisations have policies for partnering with CSOs or list CSO partners on their projects, including: CARE International (2019); Helvetas Laos (2025); Save the Children (2025); and Oxfam (2025). The relationship between INGOs, development donors, and CSOs often results in a hierarchical decision-making chain. Co-researchers described the tendency for development donors to fund INGOs, with INGOs then selecting partner CSOs to deliver development. This means that CSOs are often considered to be development ‘enactors’ regardless of the role they play in development ‘programming’. This chain of command is common in Laos and was evident in this study, where the Akha Women’s Project was funded by a development donor, led by an INGO, and then enacted by a CSO – the RDA. Importantly this means INGOs often act as project lead, rather than a partner with CSOs, which creates space for INGOs to dictate the programming of the project.

### *Civil Society Organisations*

While INGOs hold significant power in INGO-CSO relationships, CSOs also exert considerable influence on development practice. Lao co-researchers described the influence of CSOs when they suggested that INGOs need to “*compromise*” (IFGD 1-L) their objectives to better align with CSOs. This comment suggests that CSOs possess sufficient leverage to modify INGO frameworks of development, challenging assumptions about unidirectional power flows in development partnerships. In Laos, CSOs have a particularly important role as they liaise between INGOs, Lao government and the intended beneficiaries (Owen, 2010). Co-researchers suggested that CSOs were important actors because they understood the aims and objectives of INGOs while understanding the Lao cultural context - “*We are Lao whatever we are, but we have some quality of INGO*” (Co-researcher 4-L).

In response to the agency of CSOs, INGOs and development agencies have begun generating and implementing frameworks and briefings that formalise the relationship between INGOs and CSOs. For example, the ‘*Lao Civil Society Strengthening Framework*’ generated by CARE International (2019) or the ‘*Civil Society Brief*’ produced by the Asian Development Bank (2024). These frameworks claim to support community development by strengthening “*the interface between marginalised communities and local and national government*” (CARE International 2019). I, however, argue that instead of strengthening these relationships, these frameworks remove the context-based knowledge of CSOs and instead privilege INGO knowledge, which can be infiltrated by ideology rather than grounded in reality.

#### ***6.7.2 Programming Gender-Targeted Development***

Gender-targeted development programs typically impose a singular conceptual framework of gender, despite gender roles being neither fixed nor globally consistent (Momsen, 2009). This is a problematic approach to gender programming, as it overlooks the fact that local gender norms constitute a critical component of community livelihoods, as well as national practices, markets, and policies (Badstue et al., 2020). In recent years there has been a growing focus on examining gender norms more contextually. This focus is largely due to the growing recognition of the role of local communities as development actors (Badstue et al., 2020; Rola-Rubzen et al., 2020). A greater understanding about individual and household gender roles has been proven to influence the design and delivery of development policies, programs, and interventions (Johnson et al., 2016).

Despite the growing focus on gender roles, frameworks applied to gender-targeted development programming are often based on conceptions of Western feminism and development. At this meso level 'development programmers' push the ideologies of development 'decision-makers' on to the development 'enactors'. Above I have outlined the various 'development programmers', and the influence development 'decision-makers' have on the way they program gender-targeted development. In this section, I aim to evidence how the conceptions of gender and development held by development 'decision-makers' have permeated the development system through 'development programmers'. I develop this argument through examples of how development 'enactors' perceive Lao Loum women and ethnic women, and the ways they believe gender-targeted development should 'empower' these women.

Throughout this study co-researchers, who were development 'enactors', often characterised Lao women as needing salvation. Notably, this perception aligns with Western feminist conceptions of gender-targeted development. Western feminism often positions non-Western women as requiring liberation from their oppressive social structures (Khoja-Moolji, 2020). In Laos, women are characterised as 'poor' or 'oppressed' (Faming, 2018). In this study both Lao and expatriate co-researchers characterised Lao women in this way. It is particularly significant that Lao co-researchers appeared to view Lao women through a Western feminist lens, indicating the extent to which Western feminist ideologies have influenced their perspectives on gender relations within their own cultural context. It is possible co-researchers' adoption of the Western ideologies is similar to dynamics described in Fanon's seminal text 'Black Skin, White Masks'. Fanon's work, which was originally published in 1952 but cited here from the 1986 translation, proposed that 'colonised' individuals internalise the values of their 'oppressor' in order to survive (Fanon, 1986; Riyal, 2019). Western development 'decision-makers' have normalised the Western feminist agenda within gender-targeted programs. Correspondingly, Lao development 'enactors' have embodied the Western ideological frameworks that underpin the development system, fed to them through 'development programmers'.

Similarly, co-researchers in this study often described ethnic women as being 'oppressed', comparing the experiences of Lao Loum women with ethnic women, and positioning ethnic women as being the most oppressed. Conversely, while Akha co-researchers recognised

certain cultural practices as barriers to their engagement with community development, they highlighted how their cultural roles led to opportunities for empowerment. The data co-generated with the Akha women demonstrates the complexity of gender relations and the influence of social structures in shaping gendered power dynamics. To properly understand why ethnic practices and gender relations are labelled as 'oppressive', we must examine not only the practices themselves but also those who characterise them as such. It is likely the perceived oppression of ethnic women in Laos is a direct result of the ideological lens through which gender-targeted development is programmed. Individual actors' worldview and cultural positioning is influenced by the ideology of development 'decision-makers' and their influence on development programming.

### *6.8 The Micro– Enacting Gender-Targeted Development*

At the micro level where development is enacted, the realities of development dominate. While concepts and frameworks of development trickle down from macro and meso levels, pragmatism is required for development programming, fundamentally impacting how development is enacted on the ground. At this operational level, ideological frameworks encounter practical constraints resulting in adaptation or compromise. The development 'enactors' operating at this level include: (1) individual development practitioners; and (2) the intended beneficiaries of development. Below I describe the role of these groups of actors in enacting development. I then describe how gender-targeted development is currently enacted, including in Laos, based on these influences.

#### *6.8.1 Stakeholders at the Micro Level*

##### *Individual Development Practitioners*

In section 6.6.1, I described the influence development academics have on conceptualising development, noting that their theorisation of development often creates tension with practitioners enacting development in Laos. Just as that section examined why and how development academics theorise development and gender-targeted development, this section examines how practitioners influence development enactment. When co-researchers criticised the theorisation of development academics, they mocked academics for not having on-the-ground experience. This highlights how experience on the ground changes how an individual considers development and its role. Sayer (2008) posits that the reality of

development contexts impacts development enactment because practitioners are faced with the realities of inequality and are often required to respond immediately, which means they do not have time to theorise what constitutes 'good' development. In High's (2010) ethnographic account of her work in Laos she describes the discomfort of being asked how her work would help the community. High (2010) describes the expectations that communities hold of development practitioners, assuming that practitioners will provide help because this is their designated role. Such expectations can pressure practitioners to deliver immediate and tangible results.

Data co-generated with development practitioners in this study, revealed the pressures placed on development practitioners. For example, Akha women asked the photovoice facilitation team to provide resources outside of the scope of the project. In this instance, it appeared that the Akha women assumed the project would be able to assist with these additional activities. This assumption proved correct, because a water project did provide the women with the new children's play equipment they requested, despite the fact it was outside the scope of the project. While I will discuss the role of the community in this exchange relationship in the section below, it is also important to consider the role of the practitioner and how this impacts the way they deliver development.

In addition to demonstrating the pressures on development practitioners, co-researchers highlighted how individual development practitioners influence development implementation in Laos. This study has demonstrated that the career motivations of practitioners determine a practitioners' choice of work location and their understanding of their role. Co-researchers often criticised the 'professionalisation' of development, claiming that development practitioners had a vested interest in perpetuating the '*Wheel of Fire*' to ensure they had job stability. Notably, the 'come-and-go' nature of expatriate's practitioners working in Laos was emphasised as a challenge affecting development progress. Some Lao co-researchers suggested that the unfamiliarity of expatriate staff with Lao cultural contexts meant that development practitioners were not always aware of best practice in Laos. This aligns with Owen's (2010) review of expatriate and Lao practitioner relationships in Lao which found that international staff may have a negative impact on development progress if they did not adapt to the Lao context.

While co-researchers criticised expatriate practitioners for the professionalisation of development, Lao practitioners did not receive the same criticism despite Lao co-researchers, openly naming job and financial security as a primary reason for working in development. Lao development practitioners are not expected to hold the same altruistic values as expatriate practitioners, meaning they are not required to view themselves as heroic saviours in the way the ‘white saviour’ complex demands expatriates to perceive themselves (Willuweit, 2020). The perceived capacity and agency of Lao development practitioners influences this dynamic. This understanding is rooted in my assumption that the agency of Lao practitioners is often undervalued, an assumption supported by this study and the comments on the ‘capacity’ of Lao practitioners. If this assessment is correct, then I argue Lao development practitioners are ‘allowed’ to consider development as a form of employment instead of a ‘heroic’ calling because the influence of their role in development practice is not properly understood. In contrast, expatriate development practitioners are expected to place importance on their ability to ‘save’ ‘vulnerable’ communities rather than to serve themselves (Fechter, 2014; Willuweit, 2020).

In addition to impacting development progress, this study found that development practitioners had a direct impact on working relationships within development organisations. Particularly, the measures of ‘capacity’ that development practitioners held directly influenced how they related to Lao development actors. Both Lao and expatriate development practitioners discussed their different perceptions of capacity with one expatriate co-researcher concluding that they believed there was “*no capacity to do it [development programming] differently*” (Co-researcher 1-E) in Lao organisations. The varying perspectives on capacity appear in wider development literature, thus demonstrating the fact that definitions of capacity are vague and influenced by socio-cultural factors (Eade, 1997). When examining cross-cultural relationships between Lao and expatriate development practitioners, Emblen (1995) asks the vital question – who is the expert? – comparing Western concepts of capacity with local knowledge.

#### *The Intended Beneficiaries of Development*

The intended beneficiaries of development programs have an important role in shaping how development is enacted. Based on the co-generated findings of this study I coined the term ‘adaptive sovereignty’ referring to the agency the intended beneficiaries have in negotiating

how development is enacted. In Chapter Five of this thesis, I presented the ways the Akha women performed their adaptive sovereignty by asking the Akha Women's Project for new play equipment and resources for the school. While this request was outside the Akha Women's Project scope, I believe the women used it as a negotiation strategy. Instead of assuming the Akha women did not understand the scope of the project, I posit that the women recognised that the project needed their engagement and began bargaining to ensure both the community and development practitioners would benefit from the project.

Historically, development has been perceived as a top-down process where the 'powerful' deliver development to the 'powerless' (Brett, 2003; Grugel & Hammett, 2016; Horner, 2020; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Conversely, the concept of adaptive sovereignty suggests that the community have agency in shaping how development is enacted and they use the agency to negotiate for development activities that they see to be necessary in their communities. This concept aligns with the growing discourse on the localisation of development programming that promotes community participation and empowerment (Brett, 2003). Despite growing focus on community participation, the community's agency to effect change is often overlooked (Moseley, 2007). Unlike the typical participation models that encourage communities to engage with pre-designed project activities they had no role in conceptualising, I argue that adaptive sovereignty refers to the ways communities advance their own agendas and actively shape development implementation. This approach moves beyond tokenistic participation. Instead, adaptive sovereignty views the community members as agents who can strategically influence and redirect development processes to better serve their actual needs and priorities.

Through the lens of adaptive sovereignty, development implementation becomes a series of strategic exchanges between different actors rather than a unidirectional top-down process. Giri and van Ufford (2003) argue that development should be viewed as a shared responsibility between development 'providers' and 'recipients'. This means we must acknowledge both what development provides to the intended beneficiaries and what the intended beneficiaries provide to development. Put simply, development would not be possible without community engagement, meaning development processes need communities to survive. If we fail to acknowledge these exchange relationships, we cannot accurately portray development. If the intended beneficiaries are seen as having agency in the development process, then they

should also be involved in the ways development is conceptualised and understood (Long, 2003).

### 6.8.2 *Enacting Gender-Targeted Development*

This study reveals the gap between the ideologies and realities of development. While ideology dictates the decisions made at the macro and meso levels of programming, it is at the micro level where the realities of development practice take precedence. At this level, development is not just a theoretical conception but a program, project, or research study involving individuals and communities. While co-researchers in this study often identified the influence development ‘decision-makers’ and ‘programmers’ have on development they also identified their own role within development processes. Based on co-generated data with development actors and intended beneficiaries, I presented the notion of ‘adaptive sovereignty’ describing the sovereignty and authority development enactors have in negotiating how development is implemented. Interestingly, the concept of sovereignty is often weaponised as being opposed to feminist or gender and development movements (de Almagro Iniesta & Benson, 2025; Edström et al., 2024). This argument is grounded on the notion that ‘anti-genderists’ resist progressive social change to preserve national sovereignty and the ‘natural’ social structures of power (Edström et al., 2024). Some scholars suggest that local governments and/or communities adopt a decolonial agenda to push against gender rights as a colonial agenda (de Almagro Iniesta & Benson, 2025). Based on my critical readings of these accounts of sovereignty, I posit that these arguments fail to acknowledge the universalism of feminist and gender conceptions. Perhaps the governments and communities that adopt decolonial criticism of gender-targeted development can legitimately claim colonialism, because the feminist approaches applied to these contexts may indeed be colonial in nature.

This study evidenced ways that both development practitioners and the intended beneficiaries of development utilise their agency to adapt development programs to their target communities. Critically, co-researchers demonstrated the practical need to adapt programs in Laos to achieve program delivery, but they also indicated the need to adapt programs to ensure they did not cause harm through program implementation. Co-researchers described their sovereignty as “*subversive*” (Co-researcher 1-E) acknowledging the fact that development ‘enactors’ applied their agency to challenge the gender and

development ideologies and frameworks imposed on them. Dyer (2017) described a similar process of 'subversion' enacted by women in the Solomon Islands. However, in this instance Dyer explains that women 'subvert' their traditional gender roles to empower themselves while collaborating with the men in power (Dyer, 2017). Both examples show how gender relations do more than enforce social rules, they shape who people are, what they value, and how much power they hold (Alta & Mukhtarov, 2022). Thus, through enacting their 'adaptive sovereignty', individuals can 'subvert' powerful systems including patriarchal structures and government ideologies in a safe manner.

Top-down gender-targeted development programs run the risk of harming women by disrupting the 'social order' of target communities (Momsen, 2001). Regardless of the initial success of donor-driven development programs, they may result in 'backlash' if they are not tailored to the gender structures of the communities they are enacted within (Momsen, 2001). However, relationality must extend beyond gender dynamics alone, it must also shape how development agencies and actors collaborate with one another (Robinson, 2024). Achieving successful gender-responsive development requires a shift away from a 'Western-Non-Western' framework toward a genuinely relational approach that recognises actors and their relationships with one another are constantly evolving (Robinson, 2024). Without addressing the gender structures within the target community 'backlash' can result in women experiencing negative outcomes as the community tries to restore the social dynamic that the program failed to address (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). These outcomes may include increased violence against women or economic reprisals (Hukula, 2012; Momsen, 2001; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). While Flood et al. (2021) acknowledge that backlash is an inevitable response to gender-targeted programs, they suggest that it is a necessary side-effect of creating change. I argue that this is a dangerous approach to gender-targeted development, because at best the program will be unsuccessful and at worst it may cause more harm.

The relationship between sovereignty and gender-targeted development is more nuanced than critics suggest. While sovereignty may certainly be used to undermine gender and development initiatives, it is problematic to dismiss it entirely. Instead, we must acknowledge the role of individual and community development 'enactors' in shaping the enactment of development. Instead of rejecting gender-targeted development, co-researchers in this study utilised their 'adaptive sovereignty' to improve the delivery of these programs.

## *6.9 The Wheel of Fire*

'*The Wheel of Fire*' emerged as a central theme in this study after being used by an expatriate co-researcher to describe development programming in Laos. I interpreted the powerful image of a wheel of fire to represent the cyclical and potentially destructive nature of development systems. In Greek Mythology, the wheel of fire was a form of punishment, where Ixion, the King of the Lapiths, was chained to an ever-spinning fiery wheel to punish him for his sins (Brewster, 2013). Just as the mythological wheel of fire represents endless punishment and suffering, I apply this metaphor to the failures of development systems, suggesting that when improperly implemented, development is not only repetitive and cyclical, but also dangerous.

Data co-generated with development actors and intended beneficiaries in Laos, evidenced a significant gap between development ideologies and realities. In Laos, this gap separates the conceptions and framing of development and gender-targeted development from their enactment. While current development discourse identifies the theoretical and practical challenges of development programming, this study points to a deeper ideological contradiction within the dominant conceptions of development and how they are applied in Laos. Gender-targeted development programming in Laos is negatively impacted by the failure of broader development systems to navigate the multiple layers of ideological assumptions that obscure the lived realities of development practice.

To bridge the ideology-reality gap, we must prioritise contextual realities of development over ideological frameworks. In doing so we must recognise the agency of the local actors at the micro level and platform their perspectives at the macro and meso level. This shift is essential because current conceptions and frameworks of development and gender-targeted development are shaped by Western viewpoints that lack contextual relevance. This reality-based approach offers the potential to break the wheel of fire, replacing destructive cycles with sustainable, locally-driven development.

## *6.10 Challenges of FPAR as a Methodology*

Examining the challenges of applying a FPAR methodology during this study reveals significant insights. The difficulties I encountered while implementing an FPAR methodology directly mirror those faced in gender-targeted development programming in Laos. This parallel

directly addresses research question three - *How are participatory approaches to gender-targeted development enacted in Laos?* Since development organisations and practitioners regularly use FPAR as the methodological framework for gender-targeted development research and practice, analysing its challenges provides more than methodological reflection. Two significant challenges identified in this study include: (1) the incompatibility of Western feminism; and (2) misconceptions of participation.

### *6.10.1 The Incompatibility of Western Feminism*

The addition of feminism in FPAR is often heralded as a significant contribution to PAR (Corbett et al., 2007; Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). The crux of this argument is that PAR fails to adequately consider the intersectionality of gender and the marginalisation of women (Gamage, 2023; Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). Thus, the inclusion of a feminist approach to PAR aims to integrate feminist theory with participatory methodologies (Ponic et al., 2010). Specifically, the foundations of FPAR are built on the understanding that women face various forms of oppression and that feminist movements are committed to dismantling these systems of oppression (Corbett et al., 2007; Reid & Frisby, 2008). When considered theoretically, the principles of FPAR appear to strengthen a PAR framework (Gamage, 2023). However, I argue that when put into practice, the inclusion of feminism in PAR processes introduces Western-centric conceptions of feminism and in doing so it risks failing to uphold the principles of both FPAR and PAR more broadly.

A tension between feminism and masculinity is central to both radical feminism and Western feminism more broadly (Cottais & Feldner, 2021; Gardiner, 2002). This tension is frequently mischaracterised as a simple opposition between men and women. Although recent feminist scholarship has shifted toward an intersectional and decolonial understanding of gender, 'dominant' discourse continues to position feminism and masculinity as opposing forces (Cleaver, 2002; Cornwall, 2000; Gardiner, 2002; Ogletree et al., 2019). This feminist framework emerged during second-wave feminism in the West as part of the radical feminist movement, which fundamentally understood women's oppression to be a result of patriarchal systems maintained by men (Cottais & Feldner, 2021). The role of men in the oppression of women is at the core of Second wave feminism, however feminists are often reluctant to address how women's patriarchal behaviours can also oppress women (Dery, 2020). The failure to recognise women's role in oppressing other women has resulted in a failure to understand the

intersectionality of gender. Including how Western feminism can oppress Non-Western women.

The binary opposition between women and men continues to shape gender-targeted development programming, perpetuating the notion that feminism is about women rather than relational gender transformation. Consequently, development initiatives have focused predominantly on women-only programs such as women's empowerment interventions, which isolate women from broader gender dynamics (Dery, 2020; Dover, 2014). Over time, the aims and intentions of the Western feminist movement have been distorted as different branches of feminist theory have reshaped them to fit their own ideological frameworks (Shaw, 2023; Willis, 1984). This distortion provides another argument against the universality of feminism as the push for a singular feminism has ignored the movement's relational nature. This has resulted in Western feminist movements often being considered in relation to an anti-man or anti-trans approach to feminism (Shaw, 2023; Willis, 1984). Consequently, whether it aligns with the core ideals of feminism or not, Western feminist approaches often focus on women in isolation to men and gender-diverse people. This is significant because it suggests that feminist-informed PAR may reproduce the oppositional women-versus-men framework rather than embracing relational approaches to gender. During this study I was committed to my application of an FPAR methodology. While I was able to apply an FPAR methodology to Cycle One, the independently-led cycle of this study, the RDA chose not to apply FPAR to the Akha Women's Project. This meant that I quickly had to adopt a F/PAR approach to my thinking - meaning that while I considered this study to employ an FPAR methodology, the Akha Women's Project employed a PAR methodology. However, as previously stated, my thinking remained largely unchanged, and I continued to consider our collaborative approach as an FPAR approach given the similarity of our approaches. The RDA's choice not to employ FPAR was due to their discomfort with applying a Western feminist lens to the research method. Which resulted from concerns about government and community concerns adopting a feminist research approach. This decision mirrors literature about FPAR that considers the feminism in FPAR to be driven by critical and often Western feminist theory (Gamage, 2023). While many scholars view FPAR as a practical approach focused on the liberation and empowerment of marginalised women, others argue that feminism is a perspective rather than a practical research method (Bäcktorp, 2007; Fine, 1994; Gamage, 2023; Reinharz &

Davidman, 1992). In fact, some scholars argue that feminism can be used as a tool for colonisation (Fine, 1994; Grande, 2003; Riyal, 2019). Given the ties of Western feminism to colonisation, I appreciate the RDA's discomfort with the application of feminism. If the RDA were to apply an FPAR approach they had to align with a methodology that actively challenged the prevailing societal norms of their society. Thus, it raises the question I asked during myself during this study – *'If a process is truly participatory, do we need to add a Western model of feminism?'* (Earp, 2024).

The origins of FPAR, aimed to address the claims of gender-blindness in PAR (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Rather than addressing why PAR was considered gender-blind, concepts of Western feminism were introduced. Instead of reconsidering the inclusion of gender (and other considerations such as ability and ethnicity) within a model of PAR, the complexities of FPAR expanded to the point that the methodology evolved into a school of thought in its own right (Gamage, 2023; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Perceived limitations of PAR were not necessarily due to failures of the methodology. Instead, Western conceptions of research imported by PAR may have resulted in non-inclusive research processes. If this assumption is correct, then the issue with PAR is not that it is not feminist, but rather that it was not truly participatory. If PAR is inclusive by nature, shouldn't it therefore already be feminist? Notably I saw no difference between the ways the RDA enacted their PAR, and I enacted my FPAR, apart from the obvious removal of the word feminism and the connotations that came with it.

### *6.10.2 Misconceptions of Participation*

As well as the incompatibility of feminism in FPAR, this study identified the apparent misconception of what constitutes participation in FPAR approaches. Participation in FPAR can be tokenistic rather than genuinely transformative (Gamage, 2023). It is difficult to remove the inherent power dynamics that exist within development research and practice, even when adopting a participatory approach (Ozkul, 2020). I argue that while participatory approaches strive to balance power between primary researchers and co-researchers, this rarely achieves the ideal of participation described as 'mutual involvement' where all parties have equal shares in the process (Kidd & Kral, 2005). This argument is evidenced by the findings of this study and wider literature on participation in participatory approaches to development and research.

I consider the early cycles of this thesis as a cautionary tale of the challenges that occur when we overstate the ambitions of FPAR. During Cycles One and Two, I was so determined to enact research that was both feminist and participatory that I failed to consider the cultural and contextual factors of the community in which the study was enacted. Ironically, in doing so, I unintentionally abstracted the study from the core principles of FPAR. I want to state at this point that I do not in any way think that this study was harmful or exclusionary. The study was participatory, as indicated in my assessment of the participatory validity of the study (Section 6.4.1). In fact, I believe that it was because the study was participatory that I was able to understand the challenges of the FPAR framework I was applying. Friendship was central to this study, and it was through my friendships and collaboration with the RDA that I was able to identify the incompatibility of my preconceived concepts of participation. This argument is based on Freire's (1996) conception of love as a fundamental principle of participation.

Development literature includes various 'ladders' of participation, which describe the types of participation that can be applied to FPAR approaches (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). Arnstein (1969) described three major types of participation: (1) citizen control; (2) tokenism; and (3) non-participation. Arnstein (1969) suggested that to achieve citizen control there must be a delegation of power and a 'true' sense of partnership. While citizen control is considered to be the most successful form of participation, development programs and research often only achieve tokenism (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). Gamage (2023) argues that development programs that claim to be fully participatory assume that participatory approaches are participatory simply by virtue of applying a participatory approach.

Upon reflection, the only relationship within this study that achieved what Arnstein (1969) would describe as citizen control was my collaboration with the RDA. This is because the RDA was employed to work on the Akha Women's Project and our collaboration was part of that work. Thus, the RDA was actively engaged in the Akha Women's Project, and we collaborated to achieve its implementation. High (2006) considers participation as a form of labour that requires 'participants' to volunteer their time. Thus, I believe we should only consider co-researchers as 'equal' participants when their involvement is compensated in a way that extends beyond the project's intended benefits to them. Based on this argument I contend that the RDA and I were equal partners in this research because we were both paid to do it – the RDA through the Akha Women's Project and myself through my Australian Government

Research Training Program Stipend. Based on this logic, co-researchers should receive financial compensation that adequately reflects the labour required of them to participate. The use of stipends to compensate research participants remains a subject of ongoing debate (Head, 2009; Różyńska, 2022; Warnock et al., 2022). The principal arguments against financial compensation of research participants in this literature are coercion and corruption (Head, 2009; Różyńska, 2022). However, if we claim a research process is participatory then we must address these challenges collaboratively with the co-researchers. Moreover, genuine participation requires reciprocity: just as we ‘expect’ co-researchers to collaborate, they should ‘expect’ us to safeguard the collaborative process (Warnock et al., 2022). Participation is time-consuming and we risk worsening co-researchers experiences if we expect that they will be active participants without compensation (High, 2006).

Models of participation should also be built on mutual respect and genuine relationships (Freire, 1996; MacLaren, 2007). My relationships with the members of the RDA and the co-researchers of this study were inclusive and participatory because of the respect we had for one another. I deeply care for and value the opinions, perspectives, and experiences of the co-researchers of this study. I am also aware of the respect and trust the co-researchers have for me. This mutual respect fosters ongoing participatory relationships because the co-researchers and I share a foundation of trust and open dialogue. I am aware that trust and respect is not always at the root of relationships between researchers and practitioners with community and co-researchers. I know this to be true because of my experience as an ‘insider-outsider’ working in Laos. I have observed working relationships in research and development practice where the primary researcher(s) do not consider co-researchers and community to be equal to them. The inherent power dynamics that dominate development and research relationships tend to reinforce a system that supports the power of practitioners over the intended beneficiaries (Tchida & Stout, 2024). As a result of these existing power dynamics, participatory efforts rarely embody the principles of FPAR because the development actors are still in control of the research and/or development processes (Tchida & Stout, 2024).

As I reflect on this study, I realise there was a shift in my thinking regarding participation. When I first started working in Laos, I sometimes fell into the trap of viewing myself as an important figure by virtue of my role in delivering development activities, training and extension workshops, and conducting research. While I like to think I never fully embodied this belief or

power dynamic, I do recall perceiving my work as inherently significant. However, it was during this study, that I recognised that what I viewed as altruism could also be interpreted as self-interest. At some point during my time in Laos, through my friendships and relationships, I became disillusioned with this view of development and in turn I was able to value the experiences and knowledge of Lao colleagues and communities more. This meant that through my application of an FPAR methodology I had a deep respect for the co-researchers, which in turn meant when co-researchers advised that my theoretical perception of FPAR was not appropriate or applicable I pivoted.

## *6.11 Limitations of this Study*

### *6.11.1 Overlooking the Significance of Ethnicity*

Ethnicity is an intersectional factor that impacts an individual's experience of gender, access to development resources and perception of development programs (Williams & Deutsch, 2016). Despite focusing on Akha women during Cycles Two and Three, this study shifts between discussions of gender experiences among Lao Loum and Akha women without adequately addressing the differences between these groups. In Cycle One I did not appropriately address ethnicity or ask questions relating to different development programming experiences in ethnic communities. Despite my failure to focus on this factor, co-researchers often commented on the impact of ethnicity on the experiences of women in Laos. Both Lao and expatriate co-researchers characterised 'ethnic minorities' as being more vulnerable to the effects of inequality than Lao Loum women. This finding aligns with existing literature on gender-targeted development, which shows that while such initiatives may have positive effects for Lao Loum women, they often fail to address the needs of ethnic minority women (Faming, 2018; Ireson, 1992).

### *6.11.2 The use of Interpreters and Translators*

The use of interpreters and translators had a direct impact on the participatory nature of this study. Gamage (2023) argues that a study can never be considered participatory if it is not conducted in the language of the participants. While I challenge the idea that a study can never be participatory, I acknowledge that the use of interpreters and translators significantly limits its participatory nature. As outlined in Chapter Two, I believe the interpreters shaped this study more than the translators due to the active role interpreters had in knowledge co-

generation. The use of interpreters in this study presents several challenges, including their influence on the meaning of co-researcher responses, their impact on co-researchers' understanding, and the powerful potential they have to shape project activities according to their own personal agendas (Godden, 2017).

During this study I utilised interpreters in all three cycles (formally in Cycles One and Two and informally in Cycle Three). While I speak conversational Lao, I relied on Lao co-researchers from Cycle One to either speak in English or to use a Lao-English interpreter. Additionally, I utilised Akha-Lao interpreters, Lao-English interpreters, and Akha-English interpreters in Cycle Two. While Chanthalangsy provided informal Lao-English interpretation for me during Cycle Three. I am aware of the influence interpreters had on this study. While no significant limitations were apparent in Cycle One, they became evident in Cycle Two. The Lao-English interpreter who accompanied the photovoice facilitation team in Cycle Two had a noticeable impact on this study. They frequently altered the meaning intended to be conveyed, often because they disagreed with the original message and attempted to insert their own ideas. In addition to affecting the findings, the interpreter also influenced my ability to build relationships with the RDA, as their approach to engagement created tension.

Following Cycle Two, the RDA and I discussed the challenges presented by the interpreter. In response to these challenges, we utilised different interpreters for the 'Act' phases of Cycle Two and Three and we chose not to employ an interpreter during the 'Think' phase of Cycle Three. While I chose to utilise Lao-English interpreters in this study, I also chose to continue my Lao language lessons over the course of data co-generation. This meant that at times I was able to identify gaps in interpretation and speak directly with the RDA team and/or co-researchers if needed.

### *6.11.3 Limitations of an FPAR Methodology*

This discussion chapter has clearly outlined the challenges I faced in applying an FPAR methodology in this study. However, I do not consider this to be a major limitation of this study. Instead, these challenges resulted in an unexpected finding as the RDA and I worked collaboratively to reimagine contextually sensitive frameworks of FPAR in Laos.

#### *6.11.4 Selection of Co-Researchers*

The selection of co-researchers for this study was shaped by political factors, the scope of the study, and time constraints. Development actor selection occurred at the CSO fairs in Vientiane and Luang Prabang and was followed by a snowball selection process. During the snowball process some co-researchers recommended I co-generate knowledge with co-researchers outside the scope of this study including government officials or practitioners who did not work on gender-targeted development initiatives. Given the scope of this study I was not able to connect with these suggested co-researchers. Additionally, time constraints meant that I could not co-generate data with all the co-researchers recommended to me.

The selection of the Akha co-researchers from the Akha Women's Project was influenced by political factors. In Laos it can be difficult to travel and research in rural communities without government approval. Therefore, I realised I needed to collaborate with a pre-existing development program. This influenced my engagement with the Akha Women's Project. While co-generating knowledge with Akha co-researchers presented certain challenges, such as the use of interpreters, the rare opportunity to co-generate knowledge with Akha co-researchers is an important contribution of this study.

#### *6.11.5 The Application of a Binary Approach to Gender*

As outlined in the Introduction (Chapter One) of this thesis, this study applied a binary lens to gender. Although I do not view gender through a binary lens, I adopted this lens to align with the prevailing gender-targeted development discourse and practice in Laos. Additionally, I applied a binary lens to protect the co-researchers in this study, given that gender diversity can be a sensitive topic in Laos. While some co-researchers were members of the LGBTQIA+ community, by applying a binary approach to the research I was able to protect their anonymity. Despite my application of a gender binary, most co-researchers discussed LGBTQIA+ rights in the context of gender-targeted development in Laos. While I believe my limited attention to gender diversity is a limitation of this study, I was still able to provide some of these findings in a safe and ethical way.

### *6.12 The Significance and Innovation of this Study*

The significance and innovation of this study lies in my collaboration with a variety of co-researchers. Typically, research about development focuses on the experiences of development practitioners, the theorisations of development academics, or quantitative metrics of success. Instead, this study applied a variety of qualitative research methods to co-generate data with co-researchers involved in all stages of development programming in Laos. Lao and Akha co-researchers were prioritised, and careful attention was given to representing their perspectives as accurately as possible. The collaboration with Akha co-researchers is particularly noteworthy as the experiences of Akha communities in Laos remain underrepresented in the research literature. Additionally, my collaboration with the RDA was a novel approach which provided insights into the operations of gender-targeted development programming in Laos. This study makes significant theoretical, empirical, practical, and methodological contributions to the fields of development and feminism. Each of these contributions are described in detail below.

#### *Theoretical Contributions*

This study reveals new insights that extend existing knowledge on expressions of gender in Laos. Currently, there is limited theoretical understanding of gender roles in Laos and their influence on the design and delivery of gender-targeted development interventions. Specifically, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding gender roles in ethnic communities in Laos. This study contributes to filling this gap by providing co-generated data about gender expressions in Akha communities in Northern Laos. Much of the scholarship about Akha communities relies on observational data collected by external researchers. This study addresses this limitation by co-generating data with Akha co-researchers. This theoretical advancement challenges previous assumptions about Akha gender roles in Laos.

Additionally, the findings of this study contribute to understandings of gender-targeted development. In Chapter One of this study, I identified the intersection between Western feminism, development, and gender-targeted development, an area which has received minimal academic attention. The findings of this study evidenced the influence of Western feminist and development theories on gender-targeted development, revealing insights about development systems that could challenge existing approaches and encourage critical reinterpretation of current theories of development and gender-targeted development. Such

insights advance theoretical discourse by suggesting new ways to reinterpret development framework by challenging the macro, meso, and micro level approaches to development frameworks.

#### *Empirical Contributions*

In this thesis, I document the diverse experiences and roles of development actors and intended beneficiaries of development programs in Lao PDR. While the findings of this study will likely not be 'new' to most development enactors, the significance lies in the fact that this thesis documents these experiences. Through an evidence-based approach, this study enhances our knowledge of development actors, including how actors shape and are shaped by development systems. This is a significant contribution as it begins to bridge the gap between ideology and reality described in this study. Additionally, while development practitioners may already be anecdotally aware of their roles within development systems, this study offers a diversity of perspectives. As a result of this insight, an expatriate practitioner may learn from the voices of Lao practitioners and Akha women included in this study. Conversely, Lao practitioners may learn about the experiences of expatriate practitioners and Akha women. I have also been conscious to engage in a range of dissemination activities so that co-researchers engaged in this study have access to its findings without having to read this thesis. This is an important empirical contribution because without documenting the experiences of those engaged in development systems, we are unable to begin conceptualising ways to change these systems.

#### *Practical Contributions*

The application of an FPAR methodology resulted in practical contributions through the action phase of each cycle. Across the three 'Act' phases of this study I collaborated with the RDA. As documented in Chapter Two, Three, Four and Five, this collaboration included: (1) training workshops; and (2) modifications to the Akha Women's Project. The significance of the training workshops was that I worked with the RDA to design and deliver training workshops that targeted the needs of the CSO. Additionally, the RDA engaged other CSOs both directly in training workshops and through informal conversations about the workshops. This means the study's contributions have extended beyond the RDA to other CSOs in Laos. Drawing on insights from the training program and data co-generated throughout this study, the RDA and I applied these learnings to the Akha Women's Project.

As well as directly contributing to the RDA and the Akha Women's Project, I hope that the findings of this study can be used to improve the design and delivery of development programs in Northern Laos. This contribution is particularly important in the current context of the Trump administration shutdown of USAID and the rise of Chinese investment in Laos. A greater understanding of the 'adaptive sovereignty' of development enactors and Akha and Lao expectations of gender-targeted development programs can be used to improve the design and delivery of future development programs.

### *Methodological Contributions*

While the focus of this study was not methodological, this thesis provides important insights into the challenges of applying an FPAR methodology in Lao PDR. My collaboration with the RDA raised and explored the challenges of incorporating Western feminism in participatory action research. Additionally, the RDA and I investigated the differences between Western and Lao conceptions of participation and the influence this has on FPAR methodologies in Laos. In response to these challenges, we reimagined our application of FPAR methodologies by incorporating my FPAR and the RDA's PAR frameworks. This study also revealed the effectiveness of the qualitative methods used across the three cycles. The inclusion of my reflections and the reflections of the co-researchers presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five provide insight into the strengths and limitations of each method.

### *6.13 Ways Forward*

In this thesis I evidence the influence of Western conceptions of gender and development on gender-targeted development in Laos. The study findings present us with two ways forward: (1) reconceptualising gender-targeted development; and (2) reconceptualising FPAR methodologies.

#### *6.13.1 Reconceptualising Gender-Targeted Development*

The application of buzzwords in gender-targeted development is an ongoing failure of the sector. Terms such as 'gender equality', 'women's empowerment', 'gender aware' and 'gender inclusive' are often used loosely and interchangeably (Smyth, 2007). Throughout this study, I found my own use of language surrounding gender and gender-targeted development to be an ongoing challenge. I chose to apply the terminology of 'gender-targeted development' to encompass as many types of gender and development as possible. However, during this study

I came to realise that the term ‘gender-targeted development’ may not have been the most appropriate choice. Instead, I realised that gender considerations should inform how development programs are designed and delivered, rather than designing programs that aim to target gender issues. A focus on the relationality of gender ensures development programs are translatable across different actors, allowing each to apply them within their own systems and language (Alta & Mukhtarov, 2022; Assche et al., 2022). Rather than prescribing a single approach to gender, relationality allows for gender policy and programming to inform and adapt. Based on these findings I was prompted to distinguish between ‘gender-informed development’ and ‘gender-targeted’ development.

A gender-informed approach to development responds to the experiences, needs and perspectives of communities, with reference to socio-cultural factors that influence expressions of gender. In contrast, a gender-targeted approach applies a pre-defined conception of gender as a framework for ‘developing’ or ‘empowering’ communities. Put simply, one approach is informed by the reality of the situation, while the other aims to address the perceived conception of a problem. Beyond removing preconceived perceptions of gender, a gender-informed approach would enable development programs to respond effectively to gender diversity. When a program is gender-targeted, it typically focuses on specific gender groups, most commonly women, which can inadvertently reinforce binary gender categories and exclude men from gender and development initiatives.

Another benefit of a gender-informed approach is that it creates opportunities for the intended beneficiaries to be meaningfully involved in development processes. This study found that gender-targeted programs often impose external frameworks through the design and delivery of the development programs. This predetermined framework often mirrors the conceptions of development ‘decision-makers’ rather than emerging from the community. In contrast, a gender-informed approach to development encourages programs to engage intended beneficiaries in the planning process.

### *6.13.2 Culturally Relevant Framework of FPAR*

The findings of this study offer a brief example of a culturally and contextually relevant framework of FPAR. Through my collaboration with the RDA, we reflected on our FPAR and PAR frameworks and jointly developed a framework that was culturally and contextually

relevant to the Akha Women's Project. The central finding of this study is not that FPAR approaches are not applicable in Laos, nor is it the design and delivery of a new FPAR framework. Rather the central finding is that the over-theorisation of FPAR has led to its incompatibility to development research and practice.

To strengthen future FPAR applications in development practice and research, we must redesign our methodological approach. I recommend collaborating with local partners and focusing on the collaborative aims of these partnerships rather than rigid adherence to an FPAR framework. In other words, strict methodological compliance should not be the primary focus of any research or development program. Instead, the approach should emerge organically from the partnership and community context. Additionally, co-researchers should be engaged from the earliest conceptual stages and their participation should be formalised. This means that the co-researchers understand their role within the program, and they are given autonomy to make changes to the program design. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge the role of the primary researcher. This reflexivity will allow us to recognise the ideological gap between participation and the reality of participatory relationships. By embracing this methodological 'honesty', we create space for authentic collaboration that respects different forms of knowledge contribution while remaining transparent about the inherent power hierarchies and systemic failures of academia.

#### *6.14 A Call to Action*

This thesis was written during unprecedented times of global uncertainty and change. Globally, governments have reduced development funding, with many choosing to downgrade gender equality as a priority or remove it from their international agenda entirely (Gender Action for Peace and Security, 2025; International Women's Development Agency, 2025; UN Women, 2025). In part these cuts are a result of the Trump administration's shutdown of USAID (Kassam, 2025). However, they also follow a rising anti-gender movement and widespread cuts to development funding (Gender Action for Peace and Security, 2025; Obrecht, 2025). Despite the drastic effects of these changes on gender-targeted development and development more broadly, this thesis offers some insights into opportunities for change.

The current state of development and gender-targeted development continues to reinforce dominant power structures and systemic inequalities. To reimagine development systems, it

is crucial we critically examine and address the persistent structures that perpetuate these inequalities. We cannot continue to give the power of development conceptions and agenda setting to development 'decision-makers' without acknowledging the role they hold in shaping outcomes. The Trump administration's decision to shut down USAID is a clear reflection of the power 'decision-makers' have in creating and recreating development ideologies. The recent events are not just the decisions of one President's administration; rather, it is a reminder of how those in power can change ideology to suit their needs. As a sector we cannot rely on funding for gender-targeted development. Instead, we should incorporate gender in all development decisions. However, this should be done more thoughtfully than gender mainstreaming, where we simply apply the frameworks of these 'decision-makers' to all contexts. Instead, our decisions and programs should be informed by the experiences of development 'enactors'.

This study identified gaps for future research, including research on the proper inclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities in gender and development programming and gender-informed approaches to development programming in Laos and the region. Collaborative approaches to this future research will be essential. My hope is that research in these spaces continues, undertaken by other researchers and in my subsequent studies. This thesis demonstrates that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to development programming, and that both research and practice must be co-generated with communities. The findings of this study are not intended to design a new blanket approach to gender-targeted development instead I aim to encourage active collaboration with all actors within development systems.

I hope that readers of this thesis recognise the hope that these findings reveal. Change cannot be created until we identify the failures of the system, and this study attempts to contribute to that critical examination. Additionally, this study identifies the sovereignty of development enactors and the often-overlooked role they have in shaping development agendas. These findings tell us that development does not have to be a perpetual wheel of fire. Instead, we can work within the spaces between ideology and frameworks to enact real and meaningful change.

## *Epilogue*

In the final months of this study, I found myself confronted with the same question – *Are you still a feminist?* It was a question asked by supervisors, colleagues, friends, and co-researchers. This question did not surprise me; I understood that spending three years critically examining the impact of Western feminist ideologies on gender-targeted development left me open to questions about my continued alignment with the ideology. However, while not surprised by the question, I did not have an answer to it. My feminist journey has been a complicated evolution, shifting from rejecting the feminist label entirely, to embracing it as a core part of my identity, to finding myself profoundly uncertain about my relationship with feminism.

Before I started working in Laos, I did not consider myself to be a feminist. In one of the early blog posts I wrote during my first role in Laos, I concluded that my previous aversion to the feminist label was because *“I was lucky to attend an all-girls’ school, have a fair and understanding family and be brought up in a society that saw both men and women as equals”* (Earp, 2019). I claimed that my time working in Laos was my ‘feminist awakening’, leading me to see the inequality I had previously been protected from (Earp, 2019). This change in thinking marked a profound shift in how I saw myself and my role as a development practitioner in Laos. However, I noticed that the more I identified as a feminist the more isolated I felt from the agricultural sector I worked within. While gender is an important topic in agriculture and rural sciences, I found it difficult to bridge the feminist theory I was consuming with the technocratic nature of agricultural development. I now understand that the disconnect I was experiencing was a result of the ideology-reality gap described in this thesis. At an ideological level I was immersing myself in Western feminism, reading about the ‘universality’ of the feminist movement. Conversely, I was faced with the reality of delivering agricultural development programs in Laos and the culturally sensitive nature of gender-targeted development.

This gap between the ideology of Western feminism and the reality of my work in Laos left me feeling like I was failing at feminism. I resonated with Roxane Gay’s (2014) self-description as a bad feminist, fearing that the problem was that I was not committed enough to the feminist cause. I wondered if the disconnect between my ideology and practice stemmed from my lack of formal training in development. Perhaps there was a gap in my conception of development

that proper training might fill. Eager to improve my practice, I enrolled in a Masters of Global Development at James Cook University (2020-2021). The content I learnt during my master's seemed to support the feminist ideology I was consuming. I felt content that the challenges I had faced in Laos were due to my lack of understanding of development ideologies. This was a comforting thought because if the problem was simply a matter of insufficient knowledge, then it was something I could address by furthering my education. However, in the second year of my master's, I conducted a research study on racism in Western feminist academia, which left me feeling uncomfortable with the feminist label I had so proudly worn. For the first time, I began to consider whether the feminist ideology I was trying to apply to a Lao context was Western and colonial. Since then, I have been methodically unpicking an ideology that had formed the foundation of both my sense of self and my academic positioning.

In 2022, I presented my research on racism in Western feminism at my first feminist conference. This experience left me wondering whether I aligned with the feminist scholars inhabiting the discipline – a familiar feeling of isolation which was reminiscent of my concerns regarding my position within agriculture. This experience was particularly disorienting because I had been confident that my feminist ideology would position me well within this cohort. Instead, at that conference, I witnessed how some academics received my critique of feminism as a personal attack. I was told that feminism was for everyone and that by identifying racism within the movement, I undermined its effectiveness. While I do not agree with these arguments, I can understand the reaction of those who took the findings of my presentation personally. The strength of Western feminism is its ability to intertwine with our sense of self. Feminists are told the 'personal is political', and therein lies the power of the movement (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). This blurring of the reality of our lived experiences with Western feminist ideologies makes it impossible to question the ideology without also questioning our sense of self. I argue this focus on the individual undermines the movement's aims for 'universality', thus making it blind to intersectionality. To extend the wave metaphor commonly used in Western feminism, I believe that feminists often become swept up in a feminist tide from which they cannot free themselves without experiencing an ideological 'wipe out'. However, it is only when we emerge from the wave that we can perceive the strong currents that were carrying us – a process which I experienced during this study.

During the first year of my PhD, I continued to consume feminist literature. While I tried to ensure I was consuming a diversity of feminist voices, I was aware that the structures surrounding feminist academia were inherently racist – a lesson I had learned during my investigation of racism in feminism (Earp, 2023b). It was not until I began collaborating with the Rural Development Agency (RDA) that I was able to recognise the reasons why Western feminist ideologies did not work in Laos. Chanthalangsy and the team at the RDA explained the colonialism embedded within the feminist ideology I was trying to apply to this study. They described how these Western-centric frameworks created scepticism from the Lao government and community uneasiness. While I had anticipated that this study may offer some critique of the ‘universality’ of Western feminism, I had still assumed it would ultimately reinforce the importance of feminism in gender-targeted development. Now, at the end of this study, I have realised the danger of development programs that blindly apply Western ideologies of gender and development. In fact, I now realise the impact these ideologies have on the perpetuation of the *‘Wheel of Fire’*.

I also began to examine my understanding of men’s role within feminism and gender-targeted development. One of the most enduring criticisms levelled against feminism is its perceived ‘anti-men’ rhetoric (Hoskin et al., 2017; Ogletree et al., 2019). Feminists are often described as cold, man-hating, angry women - all labels I have been given (Fowler & Van de Riet, 1972; Hoskin et al., 2017). While I reject the notion that feminism is ‘anti-men’, I do believe that dominant feminist ideologies often exclude men from meaningful participation. Which in turn means that we are taught that gender-targeted development is about targeting women. I do not mean to suggest that development agendas should not target women. The feminisation of poverty, the rising rates of violence against women, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions are all well documented threats against women (Cepeda et al., 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). However, throughout this study I have learnt that we must critically examine the ideologies that underpin our conceptions of gender and who these programs should target.

During data co-generation activities for this study, I so cautiously created what I considered to be ‘safe spaces’ for women, which involved the exclusion of men. I then observed the RDA actively engage men and I watched as the Akha women connected with the men to validate and confirm the stories they were telling. Through these observations I began to realise that

when we exclude men from gender-targeted development programs we ignore the aims of gender and development. As I defined it in the opening pages of this thesis (Section 1.5), gender is not about 'sex' and the biological differences between men and women. Instead, gender is socio-culturally constructed and therefore relational, meaning gender-targeted development should focus on addressing relationships within the social structures that define them (Crook et al., 2021).

Additionally, during this study co-researchers demonstrated the need to incorporate LGBTQIA+ communities into future gender-targeted development programming in Laos. Before this study I had always been told that LGBTQIA+ inclusion was too difficult in gender-targeted programming. In fact, whenever I gave conference presentations or lectures, I would always preface my research by explaining that I applied a gender binary to my considerations of gender-targeted development in Laos to align with current literature– the same thing that I did in Section 1.3 of this thesis. I now realise that the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities in gender-targeted development is a product of the 'universal' claims of Western feminism. Even though I was aware of the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities, I followed the common narrative that gender-targeted development had to focus on women's empowerment first, before we could address gender diversity. However, if we are to acknowledge that gender is relational then we must understand that we will never achieve gender equality until we include everyone.

During the process of writing this thesis, significant global events occurred which have disturbed the gender-targeted development movement. There appears to be a shift in the feminist tide, and we are witnessing a resurgence in the silencing of women (Persson & Hostler, 2021). The Trump administration's recent move to limit Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and the recent results of the '*Ten to Men*' report describing the rise in intimate partner violence among Australian men, all demonstrate the challenges feminism faces (Kassam, 2025; Matteo Winkler, 2025; O'Donnell et al., 2025). While the recent 'anti-feminist', and sometimes 'anti-woman', agenda has been disturbing, I hope it is also a catalyst for meaningful change. In these times we need to fundamentally reconsider how gender is positioned within development discourse and practice. I intend for this thesis to serve as a call to action to begin making this change. In the discussion chapter of this thesis, the section that examines the gap between ideology and reality is titled 'the space between'. I chose this

terminology instead of the usual 'knowledge gap' because a gap seems to represent a chasm we cannot fill, while the space between represents the possibilities in the spaces that development 'enactors' inhabit.

When reflecting on the findings of this study with my supervisor, Associate Professor Michelle Redman-MacLaren, I admitted that I think the version of me that started this PhD would be disappointed with its findings. While the findings of this study have demonstrated the 'messiness' of gender and the distance between ideology and reality, I still feel some sadness for my former 'feminist' self. She had believed that this study would provide answers to her questions about gender-targeted development. While this thesis does provide answers to these questions, it has also come at the cost of a complete revision of my sense of self and my role within development. I am extremely grateful for the way this study has changed the way I view development and my role within it, however with that comes a profound sense of responsibility to continue unpacking the 'messy' feelings I felt during my first year working as a practitioner in Laos. Instead of providing 'neat' answers to the big questions, this study has revealed how many more questions there are that we need to ask.

While this study has made me question my feminist 'label', I don't want to be pushed into a purely theoretical space where I become stuck on the ideological side of the ideology-reality divide. When I first 'became' a feminist I became entangled in the messiness of defining what 'good' feminism looks like. I was so preoccupied with theorising what type of feminist I was and which feminist ideology I aligned with that I lost sight of the lived reality of gender inequality that feminism aims to address, just like Sally<sup>19</sup>. I hope I can now hold a more 'realistic' conception of feminism, one that forces me to consistently collaborate with others. So, to answer the question of my alignment with feminism: I believe I am a feminist, but that my definition of feminism has changed.

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<sup>19</sup> Referring to the story of Sally, the fictional expatriate development practitioner introduced in the prologue of this thesis.

## Appendices

### *Appendix I – Narrative Telling Interview Questions*

<i>Question</i>	<i>Lao National Interview</i>	<i>International Interview</i>	<i>Potential follow up questions</i>
1	Can you tell me about yourself and how you started working at your job?	Can you please share an introduction about yourself and how you ended up working in your role in Laos?	a) What did you do before your current job? Study/work? b) Did you always want a job in the sector you work in? Why/why not? c) How would you describe your work? What sector would you say you work in? d) Have you ever heard someone describe your work as development? How did this make you feel? e) Do you consider yourself as working in development?
2	Can you tell me a little bit about your organisation? What are the main activities and who are the primary participants?		a) How long have you been at this organisation? b) What is it that attracted you to working in this organisation?
3	If you could change one thing to improve the livelihoods of your project participants what would that be and why?		a) Do you think your organisation is working to improve this issue?

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4	How does your work impact your connections with your community in Laos?	How does your work impact your connections with your community in Laos and your community back home?	a) Why do you think your work has this impact? b) How does your work impact your family? c) How does your work impact your friendships?
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## *Appendix II – Expatriate Narrative Knowing Story*

She has been employed to lead a new 5-year project titled ‘Enhancing Farmer Livelihoods Through Livestock Health and Nutrition’.

The primary objective of the project is to enhance the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Southern Laos by improving livestock health and nutrition. This initiative seeks to enhance food security, economic stability, and the overall wellbeing of smallholder farmers by substantially improving their agricultural productivity.

Project activities include:

- Farmer training on nutrition and livestock husbandry
- Provision of feed supplements
- Resources and training to make Silage on farm
- Research into feed quality and cultural livestock feeding practices

This project will collaborate with Provincial and District veterinary staff and other relevant local institutions.

As the project lead, Sally oversees a team of five Lao staff members. All of team speak basic English and have a significant tenure at the NGO. While Sally is new to both the NGO and working in Laos, her background includes valuable agricultural development experience gained from previous roles in Cambodia and Indonesia. Sally does not speak any Lao and relies on her team to communicate with project partners and participants.

The first year of the activity is focused on data collection. The team are trying to understand the daily on farm activities of male and female farmers to gather information on who in the household is responsible for livestock nutrition and other husbandry activities. These findings will help target training and resources in the following years.

The data collection involves individual interviews. Sally notices that despite inviting everyone in the village to the interview sessions only male farmers were attending.

When Sally asks her team why she is told that the female farmers were too busy and that they did not feel comfortable being interviewed.

Sally tells the team they must involve female farmers in the interviews and instructs the team to arrange interviews with ten women from the village. During the female farmer interviews, Sally observes the female participants discomfort, noticing that their husbands stand nearby, occasionally interrupting or directing their wives on how to respond to the questions.

Sally can see that this process is putting the women and her team in an uncomfortable position, but her boss has told her she has to have gender targeted research data to present at their upcoming project review.

### *Appendix III – Lao Narrative Knowing Story*

Phaivanh is employed by an international NGO working on agricultural development within Laos. Herself and four of her Lao colleagues have been put on a new 5-year project titled 'Enhancing Farmer Livelihoods Through Livestock Health and Nutrition'.

The primary objective of the project is to enhance the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Southern Laos by improving livestock health and nutrition. This initiative seeks to enhance food security, economic stability, and the overall wellbeing of smallholder farmers by substantially improving their agricultural productivity.

Project activities include:

- Farmer training on nutrition and livestock husbandry
- Provision of feed supplements
- Resources and training to make Silage on farm
- Research into feed quality and cultural livestock feeding practices

This project will collaborate with Provincial and District veterinary staff and other relevant local institutions.

The lead of the project is an Australian woman named Sally. Sally has never worked for the NGO or in Laos. She speaks no Lao and so Phaivanh and her colleagues must speak in English when speaking with Sally.

The first year of the activity is focused on data collection. The team are trying to understand the daily on farm activities of male and female farmers to gather information on who in the household is responsible for livestock nutrition and other husbandry activities. These findings will help target training and resources in the following years.

The data collection involves individual interviews. Phaivanh and her team are conducting interviews while Sally oversees the process. Even though the team asked for a wide variety of participants only male farmers are attending the interviews.

After some time, Sally asks the team why they are not interviewing female farmers. Phaivanh explains that the female farmers are busy and they do not feel they are responsible for the farm so they do not want to be interviewed.

Sally tells the team they must involve female farmers in the interviews and instructs the team to arrange interviews with ten women from the village. Phaivanh and the team struggle to find women to interview. Phaivanh feels guilty as she knows the women have other jobs to do and they are too busy to be interviewed.

During the interviews Phaivanh doesn't know what to do because the husbands of the women keep interrupting. Phaivanh does not feel comfortable asking the husbands to stop interrupting, but she can see Sally is not happy.

## *Appendix IV – Narrative Inquiry Interview Information Sheet (English)*



### Information Sheet - Agency Co-researchers

PROJECT TITLE: Beyond the Feminist Lens: Culture, Female Empowerment, and Development

You are invited to participate in a research project about Laotian perceptions of gender programming. This project aims to contribute knowledge to improve the design and implementation of projects related to gender in Laos. The study is being conducted by Francesca Earp and will contribute to her Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.

If you agree to be involved in this project, you may be invited to be interviewed and/ or to participate in a focus group discussion. The interview, with your consent, will be audio-taped and should take approximately an hour, or similar of your time. Depending on location and availability, the interview will be conducted at a venue of your choice or online via Microsoft Teams.

You may also be invited to be involved in a focus group discussion session that will involve you engaging with data generated during this study, including film. This focus group discussion may be filmed and/or audio recorded. It will take approximately one hour and 30 minutes and you will be advised of the location closer to the date.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time without explanation or prejudice.

The potential risks of this study include any discomfort you may feel while being interviewed or filmed. The primary researcher has been trained in interview and documentary film techniques and will attempt to help you feel as comfortable as possible. Additionally, the primary researcher will provide you opportunities to give feedback and direction during the research and filming to ensure you feel comfortable with the final product.

If you think you know of others that might be interested in being involved in this study, please pass on Francesca Earp's contact email or WhatsApp number so they can contact her and gain further information about the study. Alternatively, you can provide their name to Francesca, and she can contact them.

Your contact details will be kept strictly confidential. However, focus group discussions are group discussions and may be filmed, and therefore confidentiality cannot be provided. The use of film in this study utilises a research-based methodology called observational cinema. This method uses film to generate observations and insights into culture that go beyond traditional interviews.

The data from the study will be used in research publications, reports, the PhD thesis, and conference presentations. As well as these publications there will be an opportunity for public film screenings. You will be given access to the final films that you are involved in before screenings and given the opportunity to provide feedback. You will also be given access to research publications, reports, the PhD thesis and any related blog posts or scientific communication after publication.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact – Francesca Earp

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*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:  
Human Ethics, Research Office  
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811  
Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)*

## Appendix V – Narrative Inquiry Interview Information Sheet (Lao)



### Information Sheet - Agency Co-researchers

PROJECT TITLE: Beyond the Feminist Lens: Culture, Female Empowerment, and Development

ຂໍເຊີນທ່ານເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໂຄງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າກ່ຽວກັບຄວາມຮັບຮູ້ຂອງຄົນລາວກ່ຽວກັບໂຄງການເລື່ອງບົດບາດຍິງຊາຍ ໂຄງການນີ້ມີຈຸດປະສົງເພື່ອແນໃສ່ປະກອບສ່ວນສົ່ງເສີມຄວາມຮູ້ໃນການບັບບຸງການອອກແບບ ແລະ ການປະຕິບັດໂຄງການກ່ຽວກັບເລື່ອງບົດບາດຍິງຊາຍ ຢູ່ລາວ. ການສຶກສາແມ່ນຈະໄດ້ຖືກດຳເນີນໂດຍ ທ່ານນາງ *Francesca Earp* ແລະຈະເປັນຂໍ້ມູນປະກອບເຂົ້າໃນບົດປະລິນຍາເອກຂອງລາວ ທີ່ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ *James Cook*, ເມືອງ *Cairns*, ປະເທດອົດສະຕາລີ.

ຖ້າທ່ານຕົກລົງທີ່ຈະມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການນີ້, ທ່ານອາດຈະຖືກເຊື່ອເຊີນໃຫ້ເຮົາພາດແລະ / ຫຼືເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໃນການສົນທະນາກຸ່ມປຶກສາຫາລື. ການສຳພາດຈະໄດ້ຮັບການບັນທຶກສຽງ ແລະ ຈະໃຊ້ເວລາປະມານໜຶ່ງຊົ່ວໂມງ ໂດຍຕ້ອງໄດ້ຮັບການຍິນຍອມເຫັນດີຈາກທ່ານເສຍກ່ອນ. ການສຳພາດຈະໄດ້ຮັບການດຳເນີນການໃນສະຖານທີ່ທີ່ທ່ານເລືອກ ຫຼືທາງອອນລາຍ ໂດຍຜ່ານ *Microsoft Teams* ໂດຍຂຶ້ນກັບສະຖານທີ່ ແລະເວລາທີ່ເໝາະສົມ.

ທ່ານອາດຈະໄດ້ຮັບການເຊື່ອເຊີນໃຫ້ມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນກອງປະຊຸມ ກຸ່ມສົນທະນາປຶກສາຫາລື ເພື່ອທີ່ຈະໃຫ້ທ່ານມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມກັບຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ສ້າງຂຶ້ນໃນລະຫວ່າງການສຶກສາວິໄຈນີ້, ລວມທັງພາບ ວິດີໂອ. ການສົນທະນາກຸ່ມປຶກສາຫາລື ນີ້ອາດຈະຖືກຖ່າຍວິດີໂອ ແລະ/ຫຼື ບັນທຶກສຽງ. ຈະໃຊ້ເວລາປະມານໜຶ່ງຊົ່ວໂມງ ແລະ 30 ນາທີ ແລະທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຮັບການແນະນຳເພີ່ມຕື່ມກ່ຽວກັບສະຖານທີ່ເມື່ອໃກ້ຮອດວັນຈິງ

ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນການສຶກສາວິໄຈນີ້ແມ່ນດ້ວຍຄວາມສະໝັກໃຈ, ແລະທ່ານສາມາດຢຸດການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໄດ້ທຸກເວລາໂດຍບໍ່ມີການອະທິບາຍ ຫຼື ອະຄະຕິໃດໆ.

ຜົນກະທົບຂອງການສຶກສາວິໄຈໃນຄັ້ງນີ້ ລວມທັງຈະເຮັດໃຫ້ເຈົ້າ ອາດຈະຮູ້ສຶກ ມີຄວາມບໍ່ສະບາຍໃຈ ໃນຂະນະທີ່ຖືກສຳພາດຫຼືຖ່າຍພາບ ວິດີໂອ. ນັກຄົ້ນຄວ້າວິໄຈແມ່ນໄດ້ຮັບການຝຶກອົບຮົມໃນເຕັກນິກການສຳພາດແລະຖ່າຍທຳ ວິດີໂອສະລະຄະດີ ແລະຈະເລະຍາຍາມຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ທ່ານຮູ້ສຶກສະດວກສະບາຍເທົ່າທີ່ເປັນໄປໄດ້. ນອກຈາກນັ້ນ, ນັກຄົ້ນຄວ້າວິໄຈຈະໃຫ້ໂອກາດແກ່ເຈົ້າໃນການປະກອບໃຫ້ຄຳຄິດເຫັນແລະທິດທາງໃນລະຫວ່າງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າແລະການຖ່າຍທຳ ເພື່ອຮັບປະກັນວ່າເຈົ້າຮູ້ສຶກສະດວກສະບາຍກັບຜົນງານທີ່ອອກມາທີ່ສຸດ.

ຖ້າທ່ານຄິດວ່າທ່ານຮູ້ຈັກກັບຄົນອື່ນທີ່ອາດຈະມີຄວາມສົນໃຈໃນການສຶກສາວິໄຈນີ້, ກະລຸນາສົ່ງຕໍ່ອີເມວຕິດຕໍ່ຂອງ ທ່ານນາງ *Francesca Earp* ຫຼືເບີໂທລະສັບ *WhatsApp* ເພື່ອໃຫ້ພວກເຂົາສາມາດຕິດຕໍ່ກັບນາງ ແລະໄດ້ຮັບຂໍ້ມູນເພີ່ມຕື່ມກ່ຽວກັບການສຶກສາວິໄຈ. ອີກທາງເລືອກ, ທ່ານສາມາດໃຫ້ຊື່ຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າກັບ *Francesca*, ແລະນາງສາມາດຕິດຕໍ່ເຂົາເຈົ້າ.

ລາຍລະອຽດການຕິດຕໍ່ຂອງທ່ານຈະຖືກເກັບໄວ້ເປັນຄວາມລັບຢ່າງດີ. ຢ່າງໃດກໍ່ຕາມ, ກຸ່ມສົນທະນາປຶກສາຫາລື ອາດຈະຖືກຖ່າຍພາບ ວິດີໂອ ດັ່ງນັ້ນຄວາມລັບຕົວຕົນແມ່ນບໍ່ສາມາດເກັບໄດ້. ການນຳໃຊ້ຮູບພາບ ວິດີໂອໃນການສຶກສາວິໄຈນີ້

ໃຊ້ວິທີການທີ່ອີງໃສ່ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າທີ່ເອີ້ນວ່າ ການສັງເກດການ ພາບຖ່າຍ ວິດີໂອ. ວິທີການນີ້ໃຊ້ຮູບພາບ ວິດີໂອເພື່ອສ້າງການສັງເກດແລະຄວາມເຂົ້າໃຈກ່ຽວກັບວັດທະນະທຳທີ່ເກີນກວ່າການສຳພາດແບບດັ້ງເດີມ.

ຂໍ້ມູນຈາກການສຶກສາວິໄຈຈະໄດ້ຮັບການນຳໃຊ້ໃນການເພີ່ມເຕີຍແຜ່ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າວິໄຈ, ບົດລາຍງານ, ບົດລາຍ  
ງານປະລິນຍາເອກ , ແລະການນຳສະເໜີກອງປະຊຸມ.

ເຈົ້າໜ້າທີ່ຈະມີໂອກາດສຳລັບການສາຍຮູບພາບ ວິດີໂອຕໍ່ສາທາລະນະ.  
ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຮັບການເຂົ້າເຖິງຮູບພາບ ວິດີໂອ ສຸດທ້າຍກ່ອນ ທີ່ເຈົ້າໜ້າທີ່ໄດ້ມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມ ກ່ອນການສາຍຈິງ  
ແລະໃຫ້ໂອກາດໃນການໃຫ້ປະກອບຄຳຄິດເຫັນ. ທ່ານຍັງຈະໄດ້ຮັບການເຂົ້າເຖິງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າສິ່ງເພີ່ມຕ່າງໆ, ບົດລາຍງານ, ບົດ  
ລາຍງານປະລິນຍາເອກແລະບົດຄວາມ *blog* ທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງຫຼືການສື່ສານທາງວິທະຍາສາດຫຼັງຈາກການເພີ່ມເຕີຍແຜ່.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact – **Francesca Earp**

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*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:*  
*Human Ethics, Research Office*  
*James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811*  
*Phone: (07) 4781 5011 ([ethics@jcu.edu.au](mailto:ethics@jcu.edu.au))*

*Appendix VI – Narrative Inquiry Interview Consent Form (English)*

This administrative form  
has been removed

*Appendix VII – Narrative Inquiry Interview Consent Form (Lao)*

This administrative form  
has been removed

## Appendix VIII – Narrative Inquiry Interview Question Guide

### Introduction Notes

- Today I want to understand your experiences working in Laos.
- We are going to utilise stories to discuss your experiences.
- Firstly, I will ask you some questions and invite you to tell me some stories about yourself.
- Following this, I will share a story with you. After I tell you this story, I will ask you some questions to reflect on your thoughts about the story.
- During the session you are welcome to use any of the resources on the table to help you draw pictures or illustrate your ideas.

### Narrative Telling

<b>Question</b>	<b>Lao Interview</b>	<b>International Interview</b>	<b>Potential follow up questions</b>
1	Can you tell me about yourself and how you started working at your job?	Can you please share an introduction about yourself and how you ended up working in your role in Laos?	f) What did you do before your current job? Study/work? g) Did you always want a job in the sector you work in? Why/why not? h) How would you describe your work? What sector would you say you work in? i) Have you ever heard someone describe your work as development? How did this make you feel? j) Do you consider yourself as working in development?
2	Can you tell me a little bit about your organisation? What are the main activities and who are the primary participants?		c) How long have you been at this organisation? d) What is it that attracted you to working in this organisation?
3	If you could change one thing to improve the livelihoods of your project participants what would that be and why?		b) Do you think your organisation is working to improve this issue?
4	How does your work impact your connections with your community in Laos?	How does your work impact your connections with your community in Laos and your community back home?	d) Why do you think your work has this impact? e) How does your work impact your family? f) How does your work impact your friendships?

*Narrative Knowing*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Lao Interview</b>	<b>International Interview</b>	<b>Potential follow up questions</b>
5	Does this story sound familiar to you? Why or why not?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Can you imagine this situation happening in Laos?</li> <li>b) Are the roles of the Lao and international workers in this story common?</li> <li>c) Is it believable that Sally would be the lead of the project without working in Laos before? Why do you think that is?</li> </ul>
6	What are the main tensions you can see in these stories?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Do you think there are tensions between Sally and Phaivanh? Why or why not?</li> <li>b) Do you think there are tensions between Sally and the funders? Why or why not?</li> <li>c) Do you think there are tensions between the female and male farmers? Why or why not?</li> </ul>
6	Do you have similar examples of your own or those told to you by friends or colleagues?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) <b>If yes</b> - What do you think caused these experiences?</li> <li>b) <b>If no</b> – Do you think other organisations in Laos may have similar experiences? Why or why not?</li> </ul>
7	How do you think this story might end based on your understanding of these situations in Laos?		
8	If you were Phaivanh in this situation, what would you do next and why?	If you were Sally in this situation, what would you do next and why?	

## *Appendix IX – Cycle One IFGD Information Sheet (English)*



### Information Sheet - Agency Co-researchers

PROJECT TITLE: Beyond the Feminist Lens: Culture, Female Empowerment, and Development

You are invited to participate in a research project about gender-targeted development programming in Laos. This project aims to contribute knowledge to improve the design and implementation of projects related to gender in Laos. The study is being conducted by Francesca Earp and will contribute to her Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.

If you agree to be involved in this project, you may be invited to be interviewed and/ or to participate in an interpretive focus group discussion. If you choose to participate in an interpretive focus group discussion you will be invited to choose one of two available session times based on your availability. You will be advised of the times and location closer to the date. The group discussion sessions will have a maximum of ten participants and will be held in a meeting room. Interpretive focus group discussions, with the consent of all participants may be audio recorded. The group discussion sessions will take approximately 90 minutes, or similar of your time.

During the interpretive focus group discussion sessions you will be invited to engage with data generated during this study, including photos.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time without explanation or prejudice.

The potential risks of this study include any discomfort you may feel while being interviewed or participating in group sessions. The primary researcher has been trained in interview and group discussion facilitation techniques and will attempt to help you feel as comfortable as possible. Additionally, the primary researcher will provide you opportunities to give feedback and direction during the research to ensure you feel comfortable.

Your contact details will be kept strictly confidential. However, interpretive focus group discussions are group discussions and therefore confidentiality cannot be provided. Your data will be reported anonymously.

The data from the study will be used in research publications, reports, the PhD thesis, conference presentations and other potential research outputs. You will be given access to any research publications, reports, the PhD thesis and any related blog posts or scientific communication you request access to.

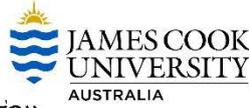
If you have any questions about the study, please contact – **Francesca Earp**

**Principal Investigator:**  
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# Appendix X – Cycle One IFGD Information Sheet (Lao)



## ເຂົ້າສູ່ສາມະໄນ - ອົງການນັກຄົ້ນຄວ້າຮ່ວມ

Beyond the Feminist Lens: Culture, Female Empowerment, and Development  
ທ່ານຖືກເລືອກໃຫ້ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າກ່ຽວກັບ ໂຄງການພັດທະນາທີ່ສຸມໃສ່ວຽກງານດ້ານເພດໃນ ສປປ ລາວ.  
ໂຄງການນີ້ມີຈຸດປະສົງໃນການປະກອບສ່ວນທາງດ້ານຄວາມຮູ້ເພື່ອນຳໄປປັບປຸງການອອກແບບ ແລະ  
ການຈັດຕັ້ງປະຕິບັດຂອງໂຄງການທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງກັບເພດສະພາບຢູ່ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ. ການສຶກສານີ້ແມ່ນດຳເນີນຂຶ້ນໂດຍ Francesca Earp ແລະ  
ຈະປະກອບໃສ່ວິຊາຊີບຂອງລາວ ປະລິນຍາເຂກດ້ານບັດລະຍາ ຢູ່ທີ່ ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ເຈມສ ຄຸກ (James Cook University), ເມືອງ ແຄນນີ, ປະເທດ  
ອົດສະຕາລີ.

ຖ້າທ່ານເຫັນດີທີ່ຈະມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການນີ້, ທ່ານອາດຈະຖືກເລືອກໃຫ້ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການສຳພາດ ແລະ/ຫຼື ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມແບບວົງເລີກ.  
ຖ້າທ່ານເລືອກທີ່ຈະເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມແບບວົງເລີກ, ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ເລືອກພາກການສົນທະນາ 1 ໃນ 2 ທີ່ດຳລົງກັບເວລາວ່າງຂອງທ່ານ.  
ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຮັບຂໍ້ມູນກ່ຽວກັບເວລາ ແລະ ສະຖານທີ່ເພີ່ມເຕີມໃນມື້ທີ່ໃກ້ຈະຮອດ. ພາກການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມຈະມີຜູ້ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມສູງສຸດ 10 ທ່ານ ແລະ  
ຈະຈັດຂຶ້ນໃນໜ້ອຍປະມານ 2 ມື້. ໃນການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມແບບວົງເລີກ, ພ້ອມທັງການອົບອຸ່ມຂອງຜູ້ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມທຸກທ່ານອາດມີການບັນທຶກສຽງ.  
ພາກການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມຈະໃຊ້ເວລາປະມານ 90 ນາທີ, ຫຼື ໃກ້ຄຽງກັບເວລາຂອງທ່ານ.

ໃນລະຫວ່າງພາກການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມແບບວົງເລີກ ທ່ານຈະຖືກເລືອກໃຫ້ມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມກັບ ຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ໄດ້ມາຈາກການຄົ້ນຄວ້າ, ລວມທັງຮູບພາບ.

ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນການສຶກສານີ້ແມ່ນຄວາມສະໝັກໃຈທັງໝົດ, ແລະ ທ່ານສາມາດຢຸດການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໄດ້ທຸກເມື່ອໂດຍບາງສະຖານທີ່ບາຍ ຫຼື  
ບໍ່ມີອັກຄະຕິຫຍັງ.

ຄວາມສູງທີ່ເປັນໄປໄດ້ຂອງການສຶກສານີ້ລວມມີ ຄວາມອຶດອັດໃຈທີ່ທ່ານອາດຈະຮູ້ສຶກໃນຂະນະທີ່ສຳພາດ ຫຼື ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມພາກສ່ວນການເຮັດວຽກເປັນກຸ່ມ.  
ນັກຄົ້ນຄວ້າຫຼືກໍາລັງຮັບການຝຶກອົບຮົມໃນເຕັກນິກການສຳພາດ ແລະ ອ່ານວ່າຄວາມສະດວກໃນການເຮັດວຽກກຸ່ມ ແລະ  
ຈະພະຍາຍາມຊ່ວຍເຮັດໃຫ້ທ່ານຮູ້ສຶກສະບາຍໃຈຫຼາຍຂຶ້ນເທົ່າທີ່ຈະເຮັດໄດ້. ນອກຈາກນັ້ນ, ນັກຄົ້ນຄວ້າຫຼືກໍາລັງຮັບການສຳພາດຈະໃຫ້ໂອກາດທ່ານໃນການໃຫ້ຄຳຄິດເຫັນ ແລະ  
ແນະນຳແນວທາງລະຫວ່າງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າເພື່ອໃຫ້ທ່ານມີຄວາມສູງສຶກສາສະບາຍໃຈແທ້.

ລາຍລະອຽດຂໍ້ມູນຕິດຕໍ່ຂອງທ່ານຈະຖືກເກັບເປັນຄວາມລັບຢ່າງແທ້ຈິງ. ເຖິງຢ່າງໃດກໍຕາມການສົນທະນາເປັນກຸ່ມແບບວົງເລີກ  
ແມ່ນການປຶກສາຫາລືເປັນກຸ່ມ ແລະ ດັ່ງນັ້ນ, ການເກັບຄວາມລັບໃນສ່ວນນີ້ອາດຈະບໍ່ສາມາດເຮັດໄດ້. ຂໍ້ມູນຂອງທ່ານຈະຖືກລາຍງານແບບບໍ່ລະບຸຕົວຕົນ

ຂໍ້ມູນຈາກການສຶກສາຈະຖືກນຳໄປໃຊ້ເພື່ອເພີ່ມໃນບົດຄົ້ນຄວ້າ, ບົດລາຍງານ, ບົດວິທະຍາສາດພິມລະດັບປະລິນຍາເຂກ, ບົດນຳສະເໜີໃນກອງປະຊຸມ ແລະ  
ຊ່ອງທາງອື່ນໆໃນການປ້ອນຂໍ້ມູນທາງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າ. ທ່ານກໍຈະໄດ້ຮັບການເຂົ້າເຖິງການຕີເພີ່ມບົດຄົ້ນຄວ້າຕ່າງໆ, ບົດລາຍງານ, ບົດວິທະຍາສາດພິມ  
ປະລິນຍາເຂກ ແລະ ການລົງບົດຄວາມອື່ນໆຂອນລາຍທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງ ຫຼື ສື່ທາງວິທະຍາສາດທີ່ທ່ານຮ້ອງຂໍໃນການເຂົ້າເຖິງ

ຖ້າທ່ານມີຄຳຖາມໃດໆກ່ຽວກັບການສຶກສາຄົ້ນຄວ້າ, ກະລຸນາຕິດຕໍ່ – Francesca Earp

**ຜູ້ດຳເນີນສືບສວນຫຼັກ:**  
**ນາງ Francesca Earp**  
ວິທະຍາໄລ ເພສັດ ແລະ ທັນຕາະແພດ  
ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ເຈມສ ຄຸກ  
ເປີໄທວະສັບ (WhatsApp):  
ອີເມວ: [Francesca.earp@my.jcu.edu.au](mailto:Francesca.earp@my.jcu.edu.au)

**ອາຈານ ທີ່ປຶກສາ:**  
**ສາດສະດາອາຈານ ອາຈານ Michelle Redman-MacLaren**  
ວິທະຍາໄລ ເພສັດ ແລະ ທັນຕາະແພດ  
ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ເຈມສ ຄຸກ  
ອີເມວ: [michelle.maclaren@jcu.edu.au](mailto:michelle.maclaren@jcu.edu.au)

ຖ້າທ່ານພົບບັນຫາໃດໆກ່ຽວກັບຂໍ້ມູນທ່ານສຶກສາ, ກະລຸນາຕິດຕໍ່:  
ພະແນກ ຈົບສາບັນມະນຸດ, ຜູ້ອຸກການຄົ້ນຄວ້າ  
ມາຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ເຈມສ ຄຸກ, **Townsville, Qld, 4811**  
ເບີໂທ: (07) 4781 5011 ([ethics@jcu.edu.au](mailto:ethics@jcu.edu.au))

*Appendix XI – Cycle One IFGD Consent Form (English)*

This administrative form  
has been removed

*Appendix XII – Cycle One IFGD Consent Form (Lao)*

This administrative form  
has been removed

*Appendix XIII – English Script for Intended Beneficiary IFGDs*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Script</b>
Intro	<p>This activity is for Champa’s research project. You will watch a video that presents the findings of the photovoice data you collected last year. This video includes your data as well as data collected in another Akha village. All the data presented was collected by Akha women. Because you are the researchers Champa wants to know what you think about this data. This video will present the key findings from the photovoice data and gives you an opportunity to share your ideas about this data.</p> <p>After you watch the video Champa will ask you some questions to see which ideas you agree with and which ideas you disagree with as well as reflections on your involvement in this activity.</p>
1	<p>Culture is difficult to change. This means it is difficult to change gender roles, especially gender roles that are influenced by culture. Sometimes it feels impossible to change the roles of women in the community. This includes women’s roles on farm and in the household and women’s engagement in meetings and cultural activities. If change does occur, it is very slow. Women want to have more opportunities to do activities outside of their gender roles, but it is difficult. The traditional roles of women in the household and farm are very important and they help ensure the health and safety of the family and village.</p>
2	<p>Women do not always feel valued in the village because they are not involved in leadership and decision-making. Women know that their roles in the household are very important but sometimes this is not understood by their village. Women do not get opportunities to be leaders in their community.</p>
3	<p>External factors influence the development of the community. The way that development programs operate in communities influences the community. This impact can be positive or negative.</p>
4	<p>There are important issues that need to change in the village before gender can be a focus of development programs. Big issues for the village include food security, clean water access, land access and education.</p>

## *Appendix XIV – Photovoice and IFGD Information Sheet (English)*



### Information Sheet - Community Co-researchers

**PROJECT TITLE:** Beyond the Feminist Lens: Culture, Female Empowerment, and Development

You are invited to participate in a research project about Laotian perceptions of gender programming. This project aims to contribute knowledge to improve the design and implementation of projects related to gender in Laos. The study is being conducted by Francesca Earp and will contribute to her Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.

If you agree to be involved in this project, you may be invited to participate in workshops, photovoice activities and/or semi-structured small group interviews. Photovoice workshops will be held at community locations, location and timing will be based on village availability. Photos may be taken during the workshops, and you have the option to choose whether to consent to being included in photos used in publications and/or research outputs. The workshops will take approximately 30 minutes or similar of your time.

If you choose to participate in the photovoice activities, you will be asked to find a partner or small group (of up to 3 people) to work with. You will then take 10 photos relating to a statement given to you in the workshop. Following this you and your partner or small group members will select the 3 best photos that respond to the statement provided. You will then be invited to an interview with your partner or group to discuss your photos and why you took them.

The interview, with your consent, will be audio-taped and should take approximately an hour, or similar of your time. Depending on location and availability, the interview will be conducted at a venue of your choice or at a community location.

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time without explanation or prejudice. Participation in this project does not have any relation to your participation in other community development projects.

The potential risks of this study include any discomfort you may feel while being interviewed or participating in photovoice activities or workshop sessions. The primary researcher has been trained in interview and group discussion facilitation techniques and will attempt to help you feel as comfortable as possible. Additionally, the primary researcher will provide you opportunities to give feedback and direction during the research to ensure you feel comfortable.

Your contact details will be kept strictly confidential. However, workshop sessions and partner or small group interviews are group discussions and therefore confidentiality cannot be provided. Your data will be reported anonymously.

If you consent to the use of photographs in the research that include yourself or any other person, confidentiality cannot be assured. This includes photos either taken by you, by the research team or by other co-researchers.

The data from the study will be used in research publications, reports, the PhD thesis, conference presentations and other potential research outputs. You will be given access to the photos you take and any research outputs you request access to.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact – **Francesca Earp**

**Principal Investigator:**  
**Ms Francesca Earp**  
**College of Medicine and Dentistry**  
**James Cook University**  
**Mobile (WhatsApp):**  
**Email: Francesca.earp@my.jcu.edu.au**

**Supervisor:**  
**Associate Professor Michelle Redman-MacLaren**  
**College of Medicine and Dentistry**  
**James Cook University**  
**Email: michelle.maclaren@jcu.edu.au**

*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:*  
*Human Ethics, Research Office*  
*James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811*  
*Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)*

## Appendix XV – Photovoice and IFGD Information Sheet (Lao)



### ຄຳແນະນຳສຳລັບການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການວິໄຈ

**ຫົວຂໍ້ຂອງບົດວິໄຈ:** ເໝືອກວ່າການຍົກສູງບົດບາດແມ່ຍິງ: ວັດທະນະທຳ, ການສ້າງຄວາມອາດສາມາດໃຫ້ແກ່ແມ່ຍິງ, ແລະ ການພັດທະນາ

ທ່ານໄດ້ຮັບການເຊື່ອຖືເພື່ອເປັນສ່ວນໜຶ່ງຂອງໂຄງການວິໄຈກ່ຽວກັບທັດສະນະຂອງສັງຄົມລາວຕໍ່ກັບແຜນງານການສ້າງຄວາມສະເໝີພາບລະຫວ່າງຍິງ-ຊາຍ. ຈຸດປະສົງຂອງການວິໄຈແມ່ນເພື່ອປະກອບສ່ວນຄວາມຮູ້ເຂົ້າໃນການພັດທະນາແຜນງານທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງກັບຄວາມສະເໝີພາບລະຫວ່າງຍິງ-ຊາຍຢູ່ໃນປະເທດລາວ. ການວິໄຈດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ແມ່ນດຳເນີນໂດຍ ນາງ ຝານເລສກາ ເອີບ, ເຊິ່ງເປັນສ່ວນໜຶ່ງຂອງການສຶກສາປະລິນຍາເອກສາຂາປັດຊະຍາ ທີ່ ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລເຈມສຸກ ແຫ່ງ ເມືອງ ແຄນສ, ປະເທດອົດສະຕາລີ.

ຖ້າຫາກທ່ານຕົກລົງທີ່ຈະມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການວິໄຈໃນຄັ້ງນີ້, ທ່ານອາດຈະໄດ້ຖືກເຊັນເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການເຝິກອົບຮົມ, ຮ່ວມຕອບຄຳຖາມ ແລະ ນຳໃຊ້ຮູບພາບຂອງທ່ານເພື່ອປະກອບຂໍ້ມູນ ແລະ/ຫຼື ຖືກສຳພາດໃນກຸ່ມນ້ອຍ. ກິດຈະກຳດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ ຈະໄດ້ຈັດຂຶ້ນທີ່ສະຖານທີ່ໃດໜຶ່ງໃນລຸມຊົນ ເຊິ່ງຈະແຈ້ງຂໍ້ມູນຂອງ ສະຖານທີ່ ແລະ ເວລາ ຂອງກິດຈະກຳຕົວຈິງໃຫ້ຮູບພາບເຫຼັ້ງ. ໃນລະຫວ່າງການເຝິກອົບຮົມ ອາດຈະມີການຖ່າຍພາບ ເຊິ່ງທ່ານສາມາດເລືອກໄດ້ວ່າທ່ານຍິນຍອມວ່າຈະໃຫ້ທ່ານຢູ່ໃນພາບຖ່າຍເຫຼົ່ານັ້ນ ຫຼື ບໍ່, ເຊິ່ງຮູບພາບຈະຖືກນຳໃຊ້ເຂົ້າໃນການຈັດພິມ ຫຼື ປະກອບການອະທິບາຍຜົນໄດ້ຮັບຂອງການວິໄຈ. ການເຝິກອົບຮົມຈະໃຊ້ເວລາຂອງທ່ານປະມານ 30 ນາທີ.

ຖ້າທ່ານເລືອກທີ່ຈະເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໃນກິດຈະກຳການຖ່າຍພາບເພື່ອປະກອບຂໍ້ມູນໃນຄັ້ງນີ້, ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ເຮັດວຽກເປັນຄູ່ ຫຼື ເປັນກຸ່ມ (ບໍ່ກາຍ 3 ຄົນ). ຈາກນັ້ນ, ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຖ່າຍ 10 ຮູບພາບທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງກັບປະໂຫຍກໃດໜຶ່ງ ທີ່ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຮັບຢູ່ໃນການເຝິກອົບຮົມ. ຕໍ່ມາ, ທ່ານ ແລະ ຄູ່ ຫຼື ກຸ່ມຂອງທ່ານ ຕ້ອງເລືອກ 3 ຮູບພາບທີ່ຄິດວ່າເໝາະສົມກັບ ປະໂຫຍກນັ້ນໆທີ່ທ່ານໄດ້ຮັບຫຼາຍທີ່ສຸດ. ຫຼັງຈາກນັ້ນ, ທ່ານຈະຖືກເຊັນເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການສຳພາດ ເພື່ອຕອບຄຳຖາມ ແລະ ສົນທະນາກ່ຽວກັບບັນດາຮູບພາບຂອງທ່ານ ແລະ ເຫດຜົນຂອງການຖ່າຍຮູບພາບເຫຼົ່ານັ້ນ.

ໃນຂະນະການສຳພາດ, ຖ້າທ່ານຍິນຍອມ, ຈະມີການບັນທຶກສຽງເພື່ອເກັບກຳຂໍ້ມູນ ເຊິ່ງຈະໃຊ້ເວລາປະມານ 1 ຊົ່ວໂມງ. ສ່ວນເວລາ ແລະ ສະຖານທີ່ຂອງການສຳພາດ ແມ່ນທ່ານສາມາດກຳນົດເອງໄດ້ ເຊິ່ງອາດຈະເປັນສະຖານທີ່ໃດໜຶ່ງໃນລຸມຊົນຂອງທ່ານ.

ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມໃນໂຄງການວິໄຈດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ ແມ່ນອີງຕາມຄວາມສະໝັກໃຈ, ແລະ ທ່ານສາມາດຖອນໂຕໄດ້ຕະຫຼອດເວລາ ໂດຍທີ່ທ່ານບໍ່ຈຳເປັນຕ້ອງອະທິບາຍເຫດຜົນໃດໆ. ການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມຂອງທ່ານໃນໂຄງການວິໄຈນີ້ ແມ່ນບໍ່ມີຄວາມກ່ຽວຂ້ອງກັບການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມຂອງທ່ານໃນໂຄງການພັດທະນາສັງຄົມອື່ນໆແຕ່ຢ່າງໃດ.

ໃນລະຫວ່າງການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມການວິໄຈຄັ້ງນີ້ ທ່ານອາດພົບກັບຄວາມຮູ້ສຶກບໍ່ສະບາຍໃຈໃນຂະນະທີ່ກຳລັງຖືກສຳພາດ ຫຼື ຖືກຖ່າຍຮູບ ຫຼື ໃນລະຫວ່າງການເຝິກອົບຮົມ. ນັກວິໄຈຫຼັກ ແມ່ນໄດ້ຮັບການເຝິກອົບຮົມທັກສະການສຳພາດ ແລະ ວິທີການສຳພາດແບບເປັນກຸ່ມ ເຊິ່ງມີຈຸດປະສົງເພື່ອຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ທ່ານຮູ້ສຶກສະບາຍໃຈໄດ້ຫຼາຍທີ່ສຸດ. ພ້ອມນັ້ນ, ນັກວິໄຈຫຼັກຈະໃຫ້ໂອກາດໃຫ້ທ່ານສາມາດໃຫ້ຄຳສ່ອງແສງ ແລະ ແນວທາງຕ່າງໆ ເພື່ອໃຫ້ຮັບປະກັນວ່າທ່ານຮູ້ສຶກສະບາຍໃຈ.



ຂໍ້ມູນການຕິດຕໍ່ຂອງທ່ານຈະຖືກເກັບໄວ້ເປັນຄວາມລັບ. ແຕ່ໃນຂະນະດຽວກັນ, ເມື່ອທ່ານຕ້ອງໄດ້ຜ່ານການເຜີຍກອບຮິມ ແລະ ການສຳພາດ ເຊິ່ງຈະໄດ້ດຳເນີນເປັນຄູ່ ຫຼື ເປັນກຸ່ມ ຈຶ່ງບໍ່ສາມາດເກັບຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ສາມາດລະບຸຕົວຕົນຂອງທ່ານໄວ້ເປັນຄວາມລັບໄດ້. ຂໍ້ມູນຂອງທ່ານຈະຖືກວາຍງານໂດຍທີ່ບໍ່ນຳໃຊ້ຊື່ ຫຼື ຂໍ້ມູນສ່ວນຕົວຂອງທ່ານ.

ຖ້າຫາກທ່ານອະນຸຍາດທີ່ຈະໃຫ້ນຳໃຊ້ຮູບພາບທີ່ມີທ່ານ ຫຼື ຜູ້ອື່ນ ປະກອບເຂົ້າໃນບົດວິໄຈ, ການລະບຸຕົວຕົນຂອງທ່ານອາດບໍ່ສາມາດເກັບເປັນຄວາມລັບໄດ້. ກໍລະນີນີ້ອາດລວມທັງຮູບພາບທີ່ທ່ານຖ່າຍເອງ, ຮູບພາບທີ່ທີມງານນັກວິໄຈ ຫຼື ຜູ້ຮ່ວມວິໄຈ ເປັນຜູ້ຖ່າຍ.

ຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ເກັບກຳຈາກການວິໄຈນີ້ ຈະຖືກນຳໃຊ້ເຂົ້າໃນການເຜີຍແຜ່ບົດວິໄຈ, ບົດລາຍງານ, ບົດວິທະຍານິເພີນປະລິນຍາເອກ, ການບັນຍາຍໃນກອງປະຊຸມຕ່າງໆ ລວມທັງອາດປະກອບສ່ວນໃນບົດຄົ້ນຄວ້າອື່ນໆທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງ. ທ່ານຈະໄດ້ຮັບສິດໃນການເຂົ້າເຖິງຮູບພາບທີ່ທ່ານຖ່າຍ ແລະ ຜົນຂອງການວິໄຈໃນຂໍ້ຕ່າງໆທີ່ທ່ານຕ້ອງການ.

ຖ້າທ່ານມີຄຳຖາມກ່ຽວກັບໂຄງການວິໄຈດັ່ງກ່າວ, ກະລຸນາຕິດຕໍ່ - ນາງ ຟານເຊສກາ ເອີບ

**ນັກວິໄຈຫຼັກ:**  
**ນາງ ຟານເຊສກາ ເອີບ**  
**ພາກວິຊາການຢາ ແລະ ທັນຕະກຳ**  
**ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລເຈມສຄຸກ**  
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**ຮອງສາສະດາຈານ ມິເຊລ ເຣດແມນ-ແມກລາເລັນ**  
**ພາກວິຊາການຢາ ແລະ ທັນຕະກຳ**  
**ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລເຈມສຄຸກ**  
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*ຖ້າທ່ານມີຄວາມກັງວົນກ່ຽວກັບຈັນຍາບັນຂອງການດຳເນີນການວິໄຈ, ກະລຸນາຕິດຕໍ່:  
 ພະແນກຮັບຜິດຊອບວຽກງານຈັນຍາບັນ ຂອງໜ່ວຍງານວິໄຈ  
 ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລເຈມສຄຸກ, ທາວສອີລ, Qld, 4811  
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*Appendix XVI – Photovoice and IFGD Consent Form (English)*

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*Appendix XVII – Photovoice and IFGD Consent Form (Lao)*

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