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'Listening to the rice grow': the local–expat interface in Lao-based international NGOs

John R. Owen

Generally speaking, NGO studies have focused their attention on the organisational unit and its role in shaping development outcomes. With few exceptions, the analysis of development partnerships, in which NGOs play a crucial role, has largely been confined to examination of 'donors' and 'receivers' and not the dynamics within organisational settings. This article is concerned with the interface between local and international staff operating within Lao-based international NGOs. The research relied on interviews with local and international staff and sought to examine how staff themselves interpreted the process of 'localisation' in the context of their own professional experience.

'Écouter le riz pousser': l'interface entre les populations locale et expatriée dans les ONG internationales basées au Lao

De manière générale, les études sur les ONG se sont concentrées sur l'unité organisationnelle et son rôle dans la création de résultats de développement. Sauf quelques rares exceptions, l'analyse des partenariats de développement, dans lesquels les ONG jouent un rôle crucial, s'est principalement limitée à l'examen des 'bailleurs de fonds' et des 'récipiendaires' et non à la dynamique au sein même des contextes organisationnels. Cet article s'intéresse à l'interface entre les membres du personnel local et international qui travaillent au sein d'ONG internationales basées au Lao. Les recherches se sont basées sur des entretiens avec des membres du personnel local et international et ont cherché à examiner la manière dont le personnel lui-même interprétait le processus de « localisation » dans le contexte de sa propre expérience professionnelle.

'Escutando o cultivo do arroz': a interface local–expatriados em ONGs internacionais situadas em Lao

Em termos gerais, os estudos de ONG têm concentrado sua atenção na unidade organizacional e seu papel em influenciar os resultados de desenvolvimento. Com poucas exceções, a análise de parcerias de desenvolvimento, nas quais as ONGs desempenham um papel crucial, tem se limitado em grande parte ao exame de 'doadores' e 'receptores' e não às dinâmicas dentro do ambiente organizacional. Este artigo está voltado para a interface entre funcionários locais e internacionais operando dentro de ONGs internacionais situadas em Lao. A pesquisa baseou-se em entrevistas com funcionários locais e internacionais e buscou examinar como os próprios funcionários interpretavam o processo de 'localização' no contexto de sua própria experiência profissional.

‘Escuchando crecer el arroz’: las relaciones entre locales y extranjeros en las ONG internacionales en Laos

In general, los estudios realizados por las ONG se han centrado en la unidad organizacional y su aporte a objetivos de desarrollo. Con pocas excepciones, el análisis sobre las alianzas en el desarrollo, en las que las ONG juegan un papel muy importante, se ha enfocado mayormente hacia los ‘donantes’ y ‘beneficiarios’, obviando la dinámica interna de las organizaciones mismas. Este ensayo examina la interrelación entre el personal nacional e internacional en el contexto de las ONG internacionales en Laos. La investigación se basó en entrevistas al personal nacional e internacional sondeando sus opiniones en relación al proceso ‘local’ desde su propia experiencia profesional.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Globalisation; Governance and public policy; Social sector (health, education); East Asia

Introduction

In 1995 *Development in Practice* published a short article by Valerie Emblen under the evocative title ‘Who is the expert’? The article provided a first-hand account of Emblen’s experience as a ‘foreign expert’ while working as an adviser on pre-school services to the Ministry of Education in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR). Her account raises critical questions about the role of foreign advisers and expatriate staff in developing countries, in addition to the challenges of bringing local and international people together in an environment where stereotypes and misconceptions are rife (Emblen 1995).

Emblen draws our attention to a number of key issues associated with the presence of the international expert in developing countries. These include professional dynamics, cross-cultural communication, and recognising relevant and mutual skill sets in advisers and local staff. With greater emphasis placed on project sustainability, the recognition of local capacity in the development, management, and delivery of donor-sponsored activity has also received significant attention. As Crewe and Harrison (1998: 94) point out, this had led to some international agencies replacing their expatriate employees with local staff. In select cases, the push toward nationalisation has resulted in projects genuinely falling into local hands; however, in other cases critical decision-making processes are left to development consultants who come and go at various stages in the project-management cycle (*cf.* Wedel 2004: 13). Other examples have seen donors favouring home-grown NGOs as a strategy for longer-term sustainability.

In the Lao PDR it is clear that international non-government organisations (INGOs) have undertaken a process of employing higher proportions of ‘local’ staff, while limiting the number and range of positions undertaken by international staff. This trend, in the international context, represents a move away from decades of expensive and failed international development projects which have, in many cases, further excluded local people (including ‘beneficiaries’) as a consequence of not understanding, or not having engaged, the local community. It is presumed in the current era that nationalisation involves localising power in real terms, with local people taking more and more ownership and control over developmental initiatives in their communities (*cf.* King 1981). For INGOs operating in the Lao PDR, the shift towards greater localisation follows in the train of three major imperatives. The first of these relates to the recent stance taken by the central government on the recruitment of expatriates to INGO projects, where concerns have been raised over the high costs associated with employing international staff and the eventual impact that this has on supporting projects at the community

level. The second is a consequence of INGOs having to deliver projects within increasingly tight budgets. As with many developing countries, the difference between local and expatriate salaries can mean a cost-saving of between 30 per cent and 90 per cent for the organisations employing them. The third, as mentioned, is the perceived importance of transferring ownership in-country. In Lao this trend has resulted in the 'localising' of project and administrative staff in development teams still very much composed of 'foreign' managers and technical advisers, in a country where home-grown NGOs are prohibited by national decree. As such, no local NGOs exist in the Lao PDR (Mawer 1997: 244).

Generally speaking, NGO studies have focused their attention on the organisational unit and its role in shaping development outcomes (Tvedt 1998; Lewis 2001). With few exceptions (such as Baaz 2005; Crewe and Fernando 2006), the analysis of development partnerships, in which NGOs play a crucial role, has largely been confined to the examination of 'donors' and 'receivers' and not the dynamics within organisational settings (Chakravarti 2005; Jordon and Van Tuijl 2006; Opoku-Mensah *et al.* 2007). As a point of difference, the research for this article was concerned with the interface between local and international staff operating within Lao-based INGOs. The research relied on interviews with local and international staff and sought to examine how staff themselves interpreted the process of 'localisation' in the context of their own professional experience.¹

The article is structured in five sections. The first outlines the process of recruitment and interviewing of participants. The second explores perceptions and stereotypes about local and international development workers. The third section considers the variety of views held on work capacity and skill sets. The fourth identifies critical issues relating to management in the Lao context. The fifth explores expatriate acculturation and concerns raised about 'fitting in'.

Method and recruitment

The interview sample consisted of 30 individuals, comprising 15 local staff and 15 international staff from various INGOs. The participants were interviewed as 'qualified individuals' rather than as 'authorised representatives' of their organisations. An initial attempt was made to arrive at an even sample of women and men; however, this turned out to be quite difficult because most of the international staff were senior personnel, and almost all of these were men. The same uneven ratio appeared in the sampling of local participants (Table 1). No effort was made to derive an equal sample across age cohorts (Table 2).

Participants were recruited through an INGO network list obtained from an in-country contact. Despite the fact that people were to be interviewed as 'qualified individuals' rather than as 'representatives' of their organisations, the University Ethics Committee insisted on my approaching the national or regional head of each organisation to obtain 'gate-keeper'

Table 1: Local and international respondents by sex

| Local staff (n = 15) | | International staff (n = 15) | |
|----------------------|------|------------------------------|------|
| Female | Male | Female | Male |
| 4 | 11 | 4 | 11 |

Table 2: Local and international respondents by approximate age

| Approx. age | Local staff (n = 15) | | | | International staff (n = 15) | | |
|-------------|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 | 56-65 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 |
| | 4 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 6 |

permission. This proved useful, because several of the organisational representatives were uncomfortable with the idea of a Western academic snooping around in their organisation, especially when the research question was no doubt going to highlight ‘top–down’ or ‘culturally inappropriate’ practices or opinions. One organisation’s response to the initial letter of contact was: ‘I assume you will be investigating many more organisations than [this one]. Is this assumption correct?’

Contacting the head of the organisation provided an opportunity to discuss the aims of the research and to work through any initial issues that they might have had. In the case mentioned above, this involved assuring the country director that the research would involve several organisations, and that the primary objective was not to spy on their operations.

Once approval had been gained from senior organisational representatives, a bilingual information package was circulated to interested staff, with a request for individuals to contact the principal researcher via email to discuss the research further and potentially to organise an interview. This stage of the recruitment was conducted in English via email.

Both local and international staff were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting 45–60 minutes. The interview questions for local and international staff were identical, allowing for minor differences in expression due to translation. A Lao research assistant was hired in April 2008 to translate the information package and again in July to conduct interviews with local staff. This was considered crucial in terms of overcoming linguistic or cultural barriers to the sharing of ideas and experiences about the local development scene. In terms of assuring respondents that their interviews would be kept in strict confidence, it was also important that the Lao researcher was not a current or recent employee of an NGO or government organisation. It was assumed that recruiting a Lao person to conduct local interviews would mitigate cultural bias during the interview phase. This assumption turned out to be over-optimistic.

Several Lao respondents turned out to be disappointed when they discovered that they would be interviewed by another Lao. Some people expressed a desire to practise their English; others expressed interest in wanting to discuss the development situation in Lao with an international academic. In at least three cases, this resulted in respondents contacting the principal researcher to reschedule the interview. After they were told that that all local interviews were being conducted in Lao, issues of this kind were easily resolved. In one other case, a local development worker went to considerable lengths to avoid taking the research assistant’s phone calls, making it impossible to arrange the interview.

Perceptions and stereotypes of local and international staff

Misunderstandings and cultural and professional stereotypes are all common fare in the international development scene. Perceptions of local and international workers are often prone to exaggeration and are, on occasion, perpetuated by stumbling across incidental (and sometimes uncomfortable) truths.

The observations in this section are drawn from participant responses to the following questions:

- How do you think people perceive local workers in this field – and do you think these perceptions are accurate?
- How do you think people perceive international workers in this field – and do you think these perceptions are accurate?

The first question was posed in a series of three sub-questions specifically related to local workers. The second was posed in a series of four sub-questions relating to international

workers. As expected, a diverse range of ideas and concerns were expressed across the interviews. Individuals were of different age groups, held different positions within their organisations, and were of different ethnic backgrounds. It is not surprising, then, to see significant variations in the way people perceive the development context in the Lao PDR. What is surprising, however, is that despite these key differences many respondents held quite similar views and opinions on the topics raised.

Below is a sample of quotes from local and international staff about themselves, each other, and the development scene overall.

Of local staff

Several respondents, including local INGO staff, spoke about a general perception of Lao people as lacking motivation, as lacking innovation, as being considerably less skilled than their regional counterparts (the Thai, the Khmer, the Vietnamese), and as having less 'technical' ability than their international team-mates. This was captured by one respondent who said '*[t]here are some stereotypes that everyone seems to buy into ... that Lao staff tend to be slower than Vietnamese and Cambodians. That is always the comparison; how the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao staff work*' [E3]. The same respondent went on to cite what he described as a 'famous adage': '*While the Vietnamese are growing rice, the Cambodians are learning how to grow rice from the Vietnamese, while at the same time, the Lao are listening to the rice grow*'. [E3]

The question 'How do you think people perceive local workers?' provided respondents with space to explore a variety of viewpoints. The above response is characteristic of how members of INGO staff perceive local capacity. There were variations of the theme, including affirmative statements concerning the capacity of local staff to negotiate with local systems and personalities. One respondent described Lao staff as '*bridges between the two [government and non-government] sectors*' that allow INGOs '*to reach the goals set out in their projects*' [L11]. This was reinforced by a local worker who pointed out that '*international staff have to spend time learning from us in order to understand how to work with our government counterparts and the communities. So really local workers have to hold three groups of people together*' [L9]. Another worker described this perceived 'bridge' in more suspect terms: '*when we were working in [one of the provinces], the government did not think well of us. They were actually very suspicious. They thought we were trying to dig up some political information for our organisation*' [L2].

Some perceptions were driven by more economic factors. Local positions are considered very well paid by local standards and are therefore highly sought after. There is a perception held outside the development sector that local INGO staff must be highly skilled and qualified. As one respondent stated, '*people assume that a person must be very skilful and smart to be selected to work with an INGO*' [L4]. Other workers took the opportunity to discuss how villagers responded to local staff. This generally resulted in depicting local staff in a positive light. One local staff member believed that '*[villagers] think of us as working with integrity and sincerity and providing them free assistance. They are happy with us*' [L10].

Of international staff

One expat interviewed late in the schedule talked about constantly being referred to as an 'expert'. Although he had worked in the development sector for more than ten years, he was astounded by how often the 'expert' tag came up. To illustrate how indiscriminate the 'expert' label was, he told the story of how his toddler's passport had been stamped with the

words ‘temporary expert’, and how she had asked him on many occasions what that actually meant.

This ‘expert’ label appeared in almost every interview, either by reinforcing the idea that international development workers truly are experts, or by highlighting some of the consequences of subscribing too closely to this view. This tension is reflected in the following two quotations, one by a local, and the other by an expatriate.

‘They are experts. They can help with funding. They work according to rules and regulation and principles, they have a system to work with. They are interested to help. They are willing to help us.’ [L4]

‘There is a tendency to think that we from the west or the north know best. When that is certainly not the case. A perception that the methods and techniques that we develop, or have received through our education, are the right ones – certainly might not be the case – as many instances have proven.’ [E6]

Another issue raised was the idea that development work is something of a scam. The sector has a high ‘burn-out’ rate, or ‘check-out’ rate as one respondent called it. It is often challenging work, and many international workers are required to spend prolonged periods of time away from family and friends. In this research, when people referred to ‘scamming’, unethical or less than admirable practices, they were not simply letting off steam – or giving voice to personal disillusion.

‘Most common perception is that they are overpaid, and many of us are I think. The perception that we are maybe not lazy . . . but it’s a bit of a scam. I’m sure [the Lao staff] look at what they think we are being paid and the work that we do – it’s a bit unbelievable.’ [E4]

‘There are some other advantages [of hiring Lao staff] in terms of our face to the outside world. Especially to donors these days that they want to make sure that there aren’t just a bunch of white guys out there doing development work and that you really are investing in leadership in local people.’ [E5]

Transparency was a major topic of discussion, as was the view that much of the work was simply a façade. When I asked one international worker what image came to mind when she heard the words ‘international development worker’, she had this to say:

‘. . . a lot of what I see with international development workers is their high stress levels, messed up relationships, frustration, heavy drinking – a lot of internal conflict. Stuff like . . . What am I doing here? Am I doing the right thing? Lots of insecurities – that’s a development worker . . . A lot of the time people don’t know what they are doing. There is an expectation – you must know what you are doing. . . you are the expert!’ [E1]

Another international person, quite senior in status, reinforced the above perception by adding that ‘Lao workers in this field tend to view international staff in this field as overpaid and often not adding value to the extent that they are paid. I actually agree with them in most cases’ [E3].

Comparing views on ‘capacity’

In the main, respondents avoided making direct comparisons about the ‘capacity’ of individuals within their own organisations. During the interview, participants were asked to comment on the relative advantages and disadvantages of working with both local and international development workers. Rather than asking people to comment directly about their team-mates, the

questions were phrased to include the sector more broadly. This section of the article is divided into two parts, the first presenting respondent views about the work or skills 'capacity' of local staff, the second considering issues of expatriate 'capacity'.

Local workers

Views on the capacity of local workers varied considerably, this depending largely on how respondents interpreted the strategic function of Lao staff in projects. Three quotes are provided below to illustrate some of this diversity.

'Generally speaking for the disadvantages, it is the way we look at issues. This is not, I think, a racial factor, but rather a cultural one. Local staff have limitations in skills and in how we look at issues. It is rather a weakness or a lack of skill.' [L2]

'They [Lao staff] understand language, culture, the dynamics between the government and the community. They understand the struggles of everyday life in terms of planting and harvesting calendars. I think it would take a lifetime for an outsider to really learn.' [E5]

'We know the culture of Laos well, we speak the language and we can liaise with all level of government staff. Our NGO can't do without us. There is some disadvantage for employing us in that we lack skills in English and therefore can't do proposal writing.' [L6]

The first quote is from a Lao worker, pointing out the lack of analytical ability on the part of Lao staff. As the respondent states, this is not an inherent quality, but rather something stimulated (or not) through social conditions. According to James Chamberlain (2005: 330), poor indicators relating to literacy, reading culture, and the availability of reading materials have all contributed to a state of 'intellectual poverty' in the Lao PDR. Another respondent expressed similar concerns, referring to the gap between local and international staff in tertiary education and training. He argued that observations of this kind were not discriminatory but based on a 'brutal reality'. He continued by adding the following:

'Working in Laos, one of the poorest countries in the world, and in Asia, and without a particularly well-developed education system, it is very rare to find local staff who have MBAs, forget PhDs, and so local capacity to implement high-quality programmes is comparatively low compared to say Thailand. The challenge here is that the country has huge needs. We need high-capacity staff.' [E3]

The second and third statements take a more 'appreciative' view, highlighting the importance of 'insiders' when navigating local systems with which 'outsiders' may be only partially familiar. In the third quote, the respondent states another familiar 'reality': that the international aid system often requires international English-speaking personnel to make sense of it (Ebrahim 2007: 152).

International workers

Respondents' views on the capacity of international staff were also subject to a degree of variation. While all respondents identified areas where international staff could add value to projects, many were quick to point out that the appointment of expatriate staff did not automatically guarantee, or result in, added value. In some cases respondents described instances of expatriate staff contributing a net negative effect to projects, due to their lack of qualifications and experience, or as a consequence of taking too long to familiarise themselves with the local context. Many respondents argued that this problem was compounded by high turnover rates:

expatriate staff were commonly cycled in and out of projects on short-term contracts. The following four quotes are indicative of some of the main sentiments expressed by practitioners when asked about international capacity.

'I think the need to employ expats is very real. We need to attract funding and reporting system or technique. This is vital. If Lao staff can do this, we will have no problem.' [L1]

'From an administrative perspective, their [international staff] capacity is that much higher that it makes my job simpler. I can tell my programme director to just go and tweak something to suit the donor, I don't have Lao staff that I can give that kind of instruction to.' [E2]

'Mismanaging projects, not particularly adding value in terms of the topical field in which they [international staff] are working. All sorts of examples of international staff being put in charge of projects without the requisite qualifications. I am not sure how that happens but it seems to be across the board.' [E3]

'It is a big cover up because they are supposed to provide the technical assistance, they are supposed to be building the capacity of the Lao staff, but if you really look at the people's work experiences they are not trainers [and] they are not teachers. They don't have the background in that. They have backgrounds in irrigation systems or livestock or animal husbandry.' [E1]

There is clearly a range of views here. The first two refer again to the complexity of the international funding system, and the intricate and specialised nature of accountability and reporting. The first quote reveals that the local respondent is aware of the necessity to engage international personnel, but sees this as tied to the cultural system from which the funding has been drawn, echoing an earlier response by [L6] on 'Lao capacity'. The second respondent, by contrast, appears to hold this administrative capacity in much higher esteem. Responses by [E3] and [E1] reiterate the need to question the soliciting of overseas expertise on the basis of impact and relevance (Cannon 1991: 454).

Managing difference

What emerged from the interviews was a combination of gross insensitivity and cultural inappropriateness, set against a positive view of expatriates as being more approachable and more democratic in their management style. The key concern was expat managers' failure to communicate effectively with colleagues, as a result of language barriers and lack of 'applied' cultural awareness. The term 'applied' cultural awareness assumes that most people would have had or sought out some kind of informal induction into 'what to avoid doing around here'; failing which, it should be possible to glean the basic rules and taboos from popular traveller's guides, such as the *Lonely Planet* series. In more direct terms, 'arrogance' rather than 'ignorance' is a more plausible explanation for the shortcomings of people employed at senior and advisory levels.

A flipside to this is the belief that expatriates make more approachable bosses. On more than one occasion Lao staff indicated a preference for working within an 'international' hierarchy instead of a Lao management structure. One Lao participant described it as follows: *'Lao staff have to do things that they disagree with their Lao boss on. Negotiation is difficult if the boss does not like your opinion. That's what I have heard and that's what I have experienced'* [L1]. This was a curious sort of response, given that negotiations with international 'bosses' were also characterised by various kinds of barrier.

Of the 15 expatriates interviewed, ten held positions at the level of either Country Representative or Country Director. Of the remaining five, three were advisers, one was a project worker, and one a programme manager. This meant that 11 of the expatriates interviewed were in a

position to provide first-hand commentary on management structures and their operations in the Lao PDR. While respondents were asked to comment on how they saw the division of labour in the development sector, no specific information was sought about individual organisations. What is clear from the interviews is that the management of country programmes is ultimately a responsibility for expatriates. Every interviewee, both local and international, pointed to a division of responsibility which saw expatriates as leading NGOs and Lao staff as undertaking the project work, reflecting a common division of roles between 'managers' and 'implementers' (Lewis 2001: 69; Ahmad 2006). In several cases this division was blurred by having local staff in project-management positions. It was extremely rare, however, to hear about a Lao national managing or directing an organisation. One respondent referred to this as a 'glass ceiling', another described it as a 'bamboo ceiling'.

A common concern raised among expatriates was the inability of local staff to manage human and financial resources in line with the organisation's accountability standards. Expatriates often referred to the close connection between host culture and organisational culture, citing the Lao government's poor record on effectiveness and accountability as a justification for appointing an expatriate at the helm (see also World Bank 2003: 28). For project staff this results in having to negotiate two layers of management: an immediate Lao structure, possibly headed by a local, and an overarching international structure, almost always headed by an expatriate. Being able to negotiate with an international boss rather than a Lao boss may in fact be limited to those few staff members in direct contact with the organisational head, such as a team leader, project manager, or operations manager.

In smaller organisations, contact with the head of the organisation is obviously easier to orchestrate, although in Lao many such organisations are small on account of having several mobile satellite offices in the provinces, staffed primarily by locals. Lao PDR is also host to numerous larger INGOs with complex global-management and human-resource structures, some employing several hundred staff internationally. In both contexts, one might consider it exceptionally difficult for local staff to navigate their way around the cultural and institutional obstacles to 'negotiation' with their boss. The extended quote below provides an insight into the nature of this challenge.

'I am the only full-time long-term expatriate staff, so there is a[n] understandable desire on the part of the Lao staff, who don't have a job at the manager level, to have a connection with the country director. That is difficult, if only because of the language and the numbers of people involved. It is difficult to maintain that tie, but if you don't, and you don't see the captain of the ship, it's easy to ask where the ship is going . . . I don't speak Lao, and 80 per cent of my staff don't speak English to the extent where we could have a regular conversation. It is difficult to maintain that common language about what we are doing and why we do it, especially in a situation like now, where it is a new director and obviously I want to make changes to how we do things. People who are below the level of manager don't necessarily have a front-row seat to some of those changes . . . It is something we are trying to deal with.' [E3]

Although this manager described going to considerable lengths to devolve decision-making powers to local staff, the respondent is, as the quotation makes clear, still very much the 'captain of the ship'.

Acculturation

There is little published research on how well or badly INGO expatriate staff are able to integrate into host societies. This is especially relevant in terms of establishing connectedness and

understanding in settings where cultural, political, and economic processes are distinct from those to which the expatriate staff might be accustomed (cf. Harris 1989; Shay and Baack 2004). There are practical implications for the understanding of burn-out and internal or external turnover rates (Naumann 1992). Recent findings on expatriate communities in key commercial hubs such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Arab Gulf countries suggest that the integration process is largely confined to an emergent international community within these cities, with only limited social interaction taking place between expatriates and locals outside the work sphere (Atiyah 1996; Findlay *et al.* 1996; Wan *et al.* 2003).

A similar pattern of integration was presented by expatriates when describing their experience of ‘community’ in Lao PDR. Some minor differences emerged among the respondents, which can be explained largely by reference to the impact of time spent in the country (see Table 3).

The majority of expatriates surveyed had spent less than 36 months in the country. All (but one) of these individuals described themselves as not fitting into the local community, but fitting into the INGO community (Table 4). One third of the expatriates had spent more than 60 months in the country. Four of the five regarded themselves as fitting into both the local community and the INGO community.

In the second category, there was only one individual who described himself in this way without indicating a ‘fit’ with the INGO community. He recalled having a number of friends in the expatriate community, stating that he made good use of the local bars and restaurants catering for international staff. In many respects this individual was inseparable from the third category, except that, in his view, the NGO community was both disconnected from his previous experience of feeling ‘at home’ and too far removed from the lives of local people. For this particular individual, not fitting in locally was the sole measure by which to judge integration. Only one person reported not fitting into either the local or international community, but this was largely for personal reasons.

Finding a place: parallel existence

Most expatriates described themselves as not fitting in locally but having a place in the NGO community – which is something of a parallel society which only occasionally connects with the local community. One long-term international worker expressed concern about both the size and disconnectedness of the expatriate community in Vientiane (VTE). In his

Table 3: Expat respondent length of time in country (months)

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Median recorded | 24 |
| Average recorded | 44.5 |
| Highest recorded | 120 |
| Lowest recorded | 1.5 |
| Less than 36 months | 9 |
| More than 60 months | 5 |

Table 4: Categories of acculturation

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 Fitting into the local community | 2 Not fitting into the local community |
| 3 Fitting into the INGO community | 4 Not fitting into the INGO community |

opinion, *'there is, for such a small place, a big community of development workers. There is already a place for people to fit in, not in the Lao culture, but in the development community'* [E5]. This was not the uniform experience, as *'there are certain people who never spend anytime in VTE'*, and who elect to base themselves *'in the provinces where they work'*. These individuals *'speak the language really well, and they fit in'*. These are usually volunteers, or *'the people who have been around awhile and who plan to stay around for years to come. Those are relatively few.'* The majority of expatriates, he argues, *'fit very well into the development community, but not into Lao society'* [E5].

The majority of international respondents talked about shopping at outlets aimed at expatriates, socialising almost exclusively within the network of NGO workers and their families, and eating out at cafés, restaurants, and bars that cater explicitly for the NGO community. These venues are not a modern example of political segregation that sets out to exclude local people, but the price of food and drinks makes them exclusive and far beyond the reach of those on local salaries.

Although local eateries and drinking holes are easily affordable for international staff, and while it is common to see foreigners enjoying local food and shopping at local markets, this should not be taken as an indication of integration, since this kind of 'dipping' and 'touching' of the local community is entirely optional for international staff, who are under no obligation either by force of will or economic circumstances to do so. Outside work, some expatriates describe their lives as something of a 'parallel existence', which only *'dips and touches the community'*, and where the lives of expats and locals *'remain quite separate'* [E2]. This approach to 'fitting in', which might be described as 'strangers passing in the day', was viewed as sustainable by the above-quoted respondent, who stated: *'you can do it without rustling any feathers for years. I don't think there is an expectation in the community for people to immerse themselves. Learning a few phrases, being able to say hello on the street, that's all that is expected'* [E2].

The idea, however, of expatriates opting out of the local context is only one side of the story. As one of the international respondents argued, expatriates are marked out as 'temporary experts' from their very arrival and face considerable social, legal, and bureaucratic obstacles in terms of becoming more fully integrated into the community. Again a regional comparison was made:

'In Cambodia there wasn't that disconnect – people were happy to have expats there – over-paid or not. Every second person you meet is an NGO worker. There is a lot more integration. You really feel like a part of the community. In Lao it's the opposite. Getting a visa is difficult, the visa says you are a temporary expert, you can't have relations with locals.' [E4]

Despite feeling separated from the local community, this particular respondent sees real long-term benefits in limiting the scope for international staff to integrate. The respondent argues that this strategy, intentionally or otherwise, will prevent Lao from becoming over-dependent on foreigners, and that such independence is good for the country. *'It means'*, he continues, *'that we are supposed to be working towards sustainability'* and that always *'having expats here'* will be detrimental to the *'Lao being able to develop themselves'*. While he recognised that the lack of integration was *'limiting the effectiveness of expatriates in the short term'*, he believed this would serve the country's development interests *'in the long term'* [E4].

Fitting in: local criteria

What constitutes 'fitting in' will always be contentious. For some individuals, integration may need to take place only on a superficial level, while for others, 'fitting in' could mean having a

sense of belonging and acceptance equivalent to that experienced by a local person. From the perspective of several local staff interviewed, the impression given was that the benchmark for 'fitting in' was at the less demanding end of this spectrum. One international respondent suggested in an off-hand comment that expectations were in fact so low that expatriates 'only had to avoid tripping over them'.

The criteria for fitting in varied from one respondent to another, but remained undemanding on the whole. One respondent described East Asian colleagues as fitting in on account of their appearance, similarities in diet, and their willingness to learn the Lao language: '*They eat the same food, look like us Lao people. They can go anywhere without being singled out as foreigner like white people. They do try to learn to speak Lao language*' [L7].

The following two observations are also characteristic of the level of expectation placed on foreigners. In these two quotes, the indicators are a willingness to learn Lao, to sample, but necessarily enjoy or appreciate, local food, and to buy and occasionally wear local fabrics:

'Yes, they do fit in. They learn to speak our language, try our food and buy Lao textile to send home as gifts' [L4] ... 'I think they fit in here. I have seen female international staff buying Lao textiles when they go home and they also wear it. They respect our tradition of age [deference] for example.' [L5]

Lao respondents also often pointed to the willingness of Lao society to accept foreigners, in many cases suggesting that 'fitting in' is possible because of the low expectations of local people, rather than the result of pronounced efforts by expatriates. One respondent stated that '*foreigners can fit in because Lao society is already friendly*', and that with a little language they '*can fit well with us here in the city [Vientiane]*'. The same respondent also remarked on a lack of preparedness on the part of many foreigners to actually live like a 'local', and their limited ability to 'mix' in the field (Heaton-Shrestha 2006: 203). Despite fitting into the Vientiane scene, this respondent suggested that it is '*more difficult in the remote areas, because of the hygiene, and because there is no toilet*'. Expatriates, he says, '*would not be able to stay long*' [L9].

Conclusion

The perceptions of managers and implementing staff within Lao-based INGOs presented in this article demonstrate some curious variations on issues such as acculturation, 'capacity', and performance. There was widespread acknowledgement by respondents, even if underpinned by deep scepticism, that both local and international staff had domains of particular expertise, or what Hilhorst (2003: 218-19) has termed 'interface expertise', giving the appearance of indispensability.

Critical issues were raised about the authenticity of the localising process and about the quality of the partnerships being built between local and expatriate INGO staff. Every indication suggests that local staff are increasingly involved in projects, but the involvement does not equate to increased control or ownership of their substantive policy. A continued division of labour between outside 'managers' and inside 'implementers' represents a core challenge to the 'nationalisation' agenda. INGOs are clearly engaging with this challenge, with respondents noting significant changes over the previous five years, in terms of scaling up the responsibilities of local staff. Deep consideration is required, however, as to whether a more complete handover of project administration should happen sooner rather than later, and how this would affect the progress of development movements in the Lao PDR.

As often happens, the academic literature in this field has fallen behind practice. Many of the problems and perceptions presented here may therefore be very familiar to INGO-based

practitioners. While these issues may be well known in practice, they are largely undocumented and hence not readily accessible to practitioners, academics, or students. The INGO is often the site of first engagement for development practitioners and is the vehicle through which the vast majority of projects are delivered. The quality of relationships between expatriate and locally based practitioners within these settings is therefore clearly significant and hence in need of closer examination.

Note

1. The fieldwork for the research was conducted in July 2008, with follow-up visits in November and December 2008. The results presented are therefore of a preliminary nature and are confined to depicting respondent views on questions specifically related to the challenges posed by the presence of 'foreign experts' in 'localising' settings.

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