

# US AID TO EDUCATION IN LAOS, 1955-1975: A CONTRIBUTION TO HISTORICAL COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, EMBEDDED IN TIME AND SPACE

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**ABSTRACT:** *In 1951 the United States began providing economic assistance to the Associated States of Indochina, a region in which the US had previously shown little interest. This assistance grew, and in 1955 'US Operations Mission / Laos' was established in Vientiane. In 1961 both the Peace Corps and the Agency for International Development (AID) were established. The Peace Corps never operated in Laos, but the USAID programme grew rapidly after 1962, reached a peak in 1968, declined sharply, and ended in 1975. Despite the political turn of events, USAID left an enduring legacy of value, the most significant of which was probably its support for the 'Laoization' of education, supporting a system of education for all, breaking with the elitist French education culture. In January 2011, USAID returned to Laos after a 35 year absence, working mainly in the fields of health, environmental protection and conservation, and economic development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *history, Laos, foreign policy, revolution, USAID*

## Introduction

### *Aims and Scope*

This study is a contribution to historical comparative education. It is a story embedded in time and space – in Laos, 1955-1975. The aim is to: (i) Describe how and why the United States came to show an interest in education in Laos; (ii) Describe US support for education in Laos in the period 1955 to 1975; (iii) Show the alignment of the USAID programme with the existing Lao education systems under the Royal Lao Government and under the Pathet Lao in the Liberated Zone; (iv) Describe the political context leading to the termination of USAID support; and (v) Describe and assess some of the enduring outcomes of the American support.

Four main questions are posed:

- a) Why was the United States interested in this *small, quiet, sparsely populated, poor, remote, landlocked country* that most Americans would not have been able to locate on a world map?
- b) To what extent was American interest in Laos a reflection of humanitarian concern for the people of Laos, and to what extent was it part of a forbidden 'secret war'?
- c) What were the motivations, perceptions, understandings, and decisions of the Government of the United States?
- d) Why USAID? Why not Peace Corps?

This study represents an American perspective. There are three sources of documentation. First, the major source of documentation is the extensive AID Archives, which contains both 'public' documents from the period and documents that were classified 'Secret' or 'Top Secret' and are now declassified. Note that 'AID' refers to the Agency for International Development, with headquarters in Washington, D.C. 'USAID' refers to the field offices abroad, such as in Vientiane.

The second source is the extensive 'Pentagon Papers', a study secretly prepared in 1967 inside the Department of Defense as an 'encyclopedic history of the Vietnam War'. It was originally classified

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as ‘Top Secret – Sensitive’ and is now declassified.<sup>1</sup> Finally there are other documents including scholarly histories, biographies, and private archives.

The AID website contains a massive archive extending from 1954 to 1975 and beyond to the present. These documents can be freely accessed by country and chronologically.

### *Some notes on the references*

#### Statistics

Caution is warranted in interpreting statistics cited here. References to numbers of schools, teachers, and students cover only those areas controlled by the Royal Lao Government (RLG), the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU), or the Pathet Lao (PL) in the Liberated Zone at the time of data collection. The boundaries of the areas under the Government control and PL control were fluid.

#### Language and Values

Many writers use the term ‘Second Indochina War’ in preference to ‘Vietnam War’ (used in the United States) or ‘American War’ (used in Vietnam). That war, while fought mainly in Vietnam, also involved military action in Laos (‘the secret war’) and Cambodia. Moreover, although the demise of French Indochina rendered the term ‘Indochina’ a *political* anachronism, it is still in widespread current usage to refer to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This study is based to a large extent on USAID documents, other US Government documents, and other documents written from a ‘Western’ perspective, and the use of the corresponding terminology is most faithful to the understandings of the actors, even as every attempt is made to maintain an unbiased and objective perspective.

As Myrdal noted, ‘The only way in which we can strive for “objectivity” in theoretical analysis is to expose [our] valuations to full light, make them conscious, specific and explicit, and permit them to determine the theoretical research’ (Myrdal, 1969, pp. 55-56).

## **Laos and the World, in Time and Space**

### *Laos: The Land and the People*

#### Geography

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. It is bordered in the north and northwest by Myanmar (Burma) and Yunnan Province of China, in the east by Vietnam, in the west by Thailand, and in the south by Cambodia.

The Mekong River originates on the Tibetan Plateau, flows through the north-western tip of Yunnan Province, and passes over deep and unnavigable cataracts before leaving Yunnan for Myanmar and Laos. The massive Khone Falls just north of the border with Cambodia prevents access to the sea. The mountains and the river have thus served over the millennia both to protect and to isolate Laos from the world outside Southeast Asia.

In 1955 there were few all-weather airports and some airstrips accessible during the dry season, but much of the country was without roads, and most of the interior was accessible only by foot or horseback (USAID PNADX106, 1955, p. – [5]).

#### Demography

When US aid to Indochina began in the late 1950s, the population of Laos was about 2.0 million. In addition there were some thousands of Chinese and Vietnamese as well as a French colony of some 6,500, mostly government officials, technicians, teachers, business men, missionaries, and

their families. There were some 500 Americans, all but 70 of whom were employed by the US Government (USAID PNABI128, 1959, p.16-18 [21-23]).

### Economic and Social Development

More than ninety per cent of the population were engaged in self-subsistence agriculture. Laos was seen by the US as 'underdeveloped in nearly all respects. ... Practically the entire country is still in its unchanged natural state ... lacking most classes of even semi-skilled workers and entrepreneurial leadership. ... Despite all this, the Lao continue to live unaffected and unruffled – and undeveloped, quite removed from the 20<sup>th</sup> century ways of life' (USAID PNABI128, 1959, p.4 [9]).

A study conducted in 1965 reported, 'Laos is one of the world's most backward countries. Its institutions are amorphous and its modes of thought, even among many of the elite, are pre-modern. It is difficult even to discuss its problems in our customary terminology, because the words carry an air of substance and precision ill-suited to the shadows and ambiguities of Laos' (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p.13 [30]). On the basis of such perceptions and understandings, the decisions of the Government of the United States were made.

### Laos in French Indochina, 1893 - 1954

#### French Colonial Interests

Why was France interested in Laos? This was the Age of Imperialism: Britain and Portugal had achieved significant concessions in China, and France was not to be outdone. There were four main motivations:

- a) Exploration of the Mekong River as a backdoor to riches of China (*mission scientifique*): exploration ended in failure because the Mekong was not navigable to China;
- b) 'Civilization Mission' (*mission civilisatrice*) i.e., spreading French language and culture: French culture thrived among the governing elite in Laos until the Revolution, 1975.
- c) Revenue for France (*mise en valeur*): colonial administration of Laos operated at a loss, covered by revenue from Vietnam and Cambodia.
- d) Buffer zone between Thailand and French interests in Vietnam: buffer zone functioned until the Franco-Thai War, 1940-1941;

#### Post World War II French Colonial Policy and US Policy

After World War II France fully expected to restore their pre-war colonial empires, and they requested US support. US President Roosevelt, however, believed that France maintained a 'dangerously outmoded colonial outlook', and that colonial empires in the nineteenth century sense were rapidly becoming a thing of the past (PP, 2011, Part I, p. A-4 [11]; see also PP, 2011, Part V-B-2a, p. 98 [132]). After the war the US had granted independence to its own colony, the Philippines, and encouraged the European imperial powers to withdraw from their colonies.

France, seriously weakened by the war and facing growing independence movements, remained determined to re-build their colonial empire. France initially struggled alone to re-establish and maintain control of its colonies in Southeast Asia, but that was soon to change.

#### War and Peace and War Again

During World War II, following the principle 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend', the Soviet Union and the United States, with such profound differences in their history, culture, and political and economic institutions, became uneasy allies in the 'Grand Alliance'. Once the common enemies that united them were defeated, however, the differences that had separated them before the war became divisive once again and came to dominate both American and Soviet foreign policy.

Until almost the end of the decade of the 1940s, American and Soviet foreign policy focused mainly on Europe and the Middle East. America's position in the emergent Cold War was stated by President Truman early in 1947 (Truman, 1947):

- a) The United States must support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures;
- b) It must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way; and
- c) Help from the United States should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.

This came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, and it was soon put to test as developments in Asia suddenly proved more fateful than those in Europe and the Middle East.

#### **Timeline of a Fateful Year**

*August 1949:* Soviet Union successfully tests an atomic bomb.

*October 1949:* People's Republic of China (PRC) is proclaimed.

*January 1950:* China and the Soviet Union recognise the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, with capital in Hanoi).

*January 1950:* French Assembly ratifies the Élysée Agreement, establishing Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as autonomous states within the French Union.

*February 1950:* France and United States recognise State of Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam, RVN, with capital in Saigon).

*June 1950:* North Korean divisions cross 38th Parallel, President Truman orders US ground troops into Korea, and the Korean War begins.

### *The Colonial War becomes the Cold War*

#### *The Korean War, 1950 - 1953*

Since US foreign policy had focused mainly on Europe and the Middle East, the North Korean invasion of South Korea caught the US by surprise. The fateful events of 1949-1950 led to a major re-orientation of US foreign policy, and Southeast Asia suddenly acquired new and vital significance. France was no longer seen as fighting a colonial war but a war against communism, supporting a struggle by a free people resisting subjugation by an armed minority and outside pressure. Under the Truman Doctrine, therefore, the US was committed to providing aid, but 'primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes'.

#### *The First Indochina War, 1946 - 1954*

Determined to restore their colonial empire, the French pressed on in Indochina, with substantial economic support but no direct military support from the US. The establishment of the People's Republic of China and the recognition by both China and the Soviet Union of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam gave strength to the Viet Minh in their struggle against the French. In May 1954 the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, under siege for 57 days, was compelled to surrender to the Viet Minh. The Geneva Conference on Indochina led to a peace agreement with Vietnam partitioned at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Replacing the French in Indochina had never been the intention of the US in the years after the Second World War, but with a few pen strokes partitioning Vietnam, the colonial war was thus transformed into a battle field of the Cold War, and the US rose to the challenge.

By 1954, the 'single battlefield' concept shown by the Viet Minh incursions into Laos and the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu had sent a clear signal to the American administration (then under President Eisenhower) that the Truman Doctrine, originally applied in Europe and then in the Middle

East, must also apply to Southeast Asia. Under Eisenhower's 'domino theory', Laos, previously an insignificant backwater in French Indochina, thus became strategically important to the US and in need of assistance. In January 1955 the first US military assistance arrived in Saigon to support the independence of the State of Vietnam, later the Republic of Vietnam.

#### **Timeline of Another Fateful Year**

*May 1954:* French surrender at Dien Bien Phu.

*May – July, 1954:* Geneva Conference on Indochina leads to peace agreement, with Vietnam partitioned at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

*August 1954:* French troops withdraw from Laos (but leaving military advisers), granting Laos independence (within the French Union).

*January 1955:* First US military aid to Saigon arrives.

### *The Pathet Lao*

In the early 1950s, the Lao revolutionary movement that came to be known as the Pathet Lao was formed.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the terms of the Geneva Accord, which restored peace in 1954, the Pathet Lao forces regrouped in the provinces of Phongsaly, Sam Neua (now part of Huaphanh province), and Xiengkhuang (location of the Plain of Jars). Over the years of revolutionary struggle, the Pathet Lao zone or the 'Liberated Zone' steadily expanded. By the early 1960s the Liberated Zone covered about two-thirds of the national territory, and by 1974 it covered three quarters of the national territory, inhabited by one third of the population (Stuart-Fox, 1992, pp. 81-82). In this zone the Pathet Lao established the institutions and instruments for effective public administration, including a ministry of education, schools, and a teachers college.

### *The Second Indochina War, 1955-1975*

The Cold War evolved, and in Southeast Asia the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) for Indochina was reorganised into country-specific units. MAAG/Vietnam was created in November 1955, signalling the opening moves of the Second Indochina War. American foreign policy was re-formulated by President Eisenhower in his State of the Union Address in January 1957 (Eisenhower, 1957):

- a) The United States, together with other free nations, should vigorously promote mutual strength, prosperity and welfare in the free world; and
- b) Strength is a product of economic health and social well-being. 'Consequently, even as we continue our programmes of military assistance, we must emphasise aid to our friends in building more productive economies and in better satisfying the natural demands of their people for progress.'

This came to be known as the Eisenhower Doctrine. It represented a major shift in priorities, from the primacy of economic aid to the primacy of military assistance *supported by* economic aid.

## **Origins of the USAID Programme in Indochina**

### *US Aid to Europe*

After the Second World War the US established two major aid programmes: the Marshall Plan for European Recovery, 1948-1952, and the Point Four Programme, 1950. These programmes had both humanitarian and security aims, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Marshall Plan and Point Four Programme, Stated and Unstated Aims**

	<b>Humanitarian Aims (publicly stated)</b>	<b>Security Aims (not publicly stated)</b>
Marshall Plan, 1948-1952	Counter hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos	Block the extension of Soviet power and Communist economic and political organisation and alignment
Point Four Programme, 1950	Create markets for the United States by reducing poverty and increasing production in developing countries	Diminish the threat of communism by helping countries prosper under capitalism

Source: Acheson (1969)

### *US Aid to the Associated States of the French Union*

Beginning in 1950, the US provided equipment, supplies, and budget support to the French Government for prosecution of the war in Indochina. Under the Mutual Security Act of 1951, the United States established the US Operations Mission (USOM) to the Associated States (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) in Saigon. In August, 1955, the United States elevated its diplomatic mission in Laos from a Legation to an Embassy and established the United States Operations Mission in Laos (USOM/L).

### *Peace Corps and USAID*

In March 1961 the Peace Corps was established with three stated goals: (i) Provide technical assistance; (ii) Help people outside the US understand American culture; and (iii) Help Americans understand the cultures of other countries.

In November 1961, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was established with a single goal of providing economic, development, and humanitarian assistance around the world *in support of US foreign policy*.

## **Before American Aid**

### *Traditional Education in Laos*

The traditional cultural centre of Lao society was the Buddhist temple (*wat*). There was no 'mass education', but the monks were respected sources of learning. A rich oral tradition was the bearer of morals and culture. Most ethnic Lao boys spent several months or years as temple novices. Temple education was free and served all males, rich and poor. Literacy was highest among the aristocracy, a small corps of administrators, and urban merchants, many of whom were Chinese or Vietnamese.

### *French Education in Laos*

The French colonial administration never invested much in education in Laos. The school system they established was intended to serve the small local elite, not the broad population. Instruction was in the French language, not Lao. Teachers were usually either low-level French colonial administrators assigned part-time to teach school or French-speaking Vietnamese teachers brought to Laos for the purpose. Most Lao children never went to school and never learned to read. Children of the elite who graduated from the *Lycée* could continue their studies either in Saigon or in France.

In 1951 a law was passed by the Royal Lao Government instituting compulsory, free, three-year primary education all children within a radius of one kilometre from a public school. In 1952 a complementary law was passed requiring the establishment of a primary school (provided sufficient funds were available) in any locality where the number of children was deemed adequate. Primary

schooling comprised six grades. The language of instruction was either Lao or French, depending on the availability of instructional materials and competence of teachers. In 1954, at the time of independence, there were 679 primary schools, but most operated only three grades. There were some 33,000 primary school students (Khamphao, 1996, p. 62). This probably represented a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of approximately 3 percent.

In 1959 only some 10 percent of the adult population of Laos were literate. There were some non-government schools, including 16 Catholic, 7 French, 3 Chinese, and 4 private schools. Only six of the twelve provinces had public secondary schools to 10<sup>th</sup> grade level (*collège*). Only Vientiane had a school up to grade 13 (*lycée*). There were also public secondary-level professional schools in Vientiane, for teacher training, medicine, and public administration. Two provinces had vocational schools with instruction in drafting, wood-working, metal-working, and auto mechanics (USAID PNABI128, 1959, p. 29 [34]).

### US Aid to Indochina, 1951 - 1954

Total US aid to the Associated States of Indochina, Fiscal Years (FY) 1950/51-1953/54, is shown in Table 2. Programme aid represented about one-fourth of total aid. Commercial aid (mainly import support) made up nearly half of the total. Together, they represented more than three-quarters of the total aid package. This distribution reflects an application of the Truman Doctrine. The amount allocated to Laos was approximately 7 percent, which was roughly proportional to its share in the population of Indochina.

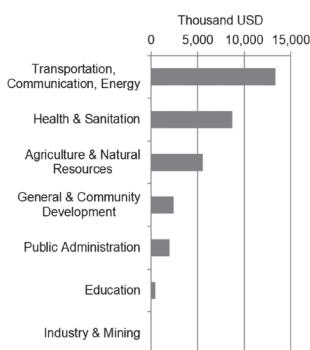
The bulk of the programme aid was allocated to transportation, communication, transportation, energy, sanitation, and health, as shown in Table 3. Education received less than 2 percent of programme aid, or less than 0.4 percent of total US aid.

**Table 2: Total Aid, Associated States, FY 1950/51 – 1953/54 (Million US Dollars, USD)**

Category	\$ Million	%	Country	\$ Million	%
Military Aid	30.1	24.2	Cambodia	7.1	21.9
Commercial Aid	62.1	49.8	Laos	2.2	6.8
Programme Aid	32.4	26.0	Vietnam	23.1	71.3
Total	124.6	100.0	Total	32.4	100.0

Source: PDACP819, 1955, p. 68 [80].

**Table 3: Programme Aid, Associated States, FY 1950/51 – 1953/54 (Million USD)**



Programme	Thousand USD	%
Transportation, Communication, Energy	13,350	41.2
Health & Sanitation	8,700	26.9
Agriculture & Natural Resources	5,520	17.1
General & Community Development	2,389	7.4
Public Administration	1,968	6.1
Education	440	1.4
Industry & Mining	8	0.0
Total Programme Funds	32,374	100.0

Source: PDACP819, 1955, p. 69 [81].

The Education Programme in the three Associated States comprised six sub-programmes:

- a) Vocational education;
- b) Technical education;
- c) Professional education (*e.g.* teacher training, training for public works, and telecommunications);
- d) Adult education (Community Rural Education Centres);
- e) Construction of community schools, printing of textbooks; and
- f) School construction, repair, and reconstruction of schools damaged or destroyed by the war.

The economy of Indochina was mainly agricultural, and these countries needed to rapidly acquire the machinery and technologies to fight a mechanised war. Technical and vocational education projects included auto-mechanics, auto-electrical systems, and other technical fields of particular value for industrialisation. The programme included expanding and equipping existing facilities and construction of new facilities, including two in Laos. Professional education projects focused on teacher training, training for public works, and telecommunications (USAID PDACP819, 1955, p. 54-56 [65-67]).

The adult education programme was conducted only in Laos. By the end of FY 1954/55 plans were under way for opening 105 Community Rural Education Centres (CRECs), which villages would construct on a 'self-help' basis. Some 30 'basic education teachers' were trained and deployed in rural villages. Some 75 persons were trained as community education leaders. The CRECs later became the core of the basic education, health, and extension services to the rural population. For schools in the urban areas, science laboratory equipment, visual aids, and other instructional materials were provided. Thousands of books were provided for primary school children (USAID PDACP819, 1954, p. 57 [68]).

## US Aid to Laos, 1955 – 1975

### Timeline of Two Fateful Decades

*November 1955:* The Military Assistance Advisory Group for Vietnam (MAAG / Vietnam) is established, and the Vietnam War (called the American War by the Vietnamese) begins quietly.

*February 1968, Vietnam:* Vietnamese People's Army and the Viet Cong (National Liberation Front) launch the 'Tet Offensive'.

*February 1968, USA:* Student revolts and the anti-war movement intensify and spread loudly in the US and Europe.

*January 1973:* Paris Peace Accords are signed by all parties.

*March 1973:* Last US troops leave Vietnam, but fighting continues.

*April 1975:* Phnom Penh falls, Saigon falls, and the Vietnam War ends.

*December 1975:* Pathet Lao proclaim victory in Laos.

### *The Slow Start-up*

The United States had a dual interest in stimulating long-term economic development in Laos (USAID PDACR504, 1965, 119 [134]):

- a) Resisting the communists and improving Lao institutions required a long-term perspective of progress; people needed to feel that their efforts would gradually result in a more modern nation and a better way of life;
- b) Supporting long-term development reflected credit on the United States. 'It shows the durability and seriousness of the U.S. commitment to Laos, and it shows that we have a more constructive purpose than merely fighting the enemy'; and
- c) The objectives were political and military in character, not economic. Accordingly, the effectiveness of the programmes was to be measured in terms of what was accomplished in the political and military areas, not in terms of the rate at which Laos approached economic self-sufficiency.



Laos was economically dependent on the United States and other international donors and was expected by the United States to remain so for an indefinite future. The aid dependence of Laos was not seen as a problem for the United States; on the contrary (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p. 120 [135], emphasis added):

Although there are idealistic Lao officials who would feel less anxious if they could see an early end to dependence on external aid, *continued Lao economic dependence gives the United States leverage it would otherwise not possess*. Economic progress in Laos is desirable to satisfy Lao aspirations and meet Lao needs for self-respect, and to demonstrate to others the positive side of our involvement in Laos. *However, this is not the time to sacrifice other objectives in favour of Lao self-sufficiency*.

Which other objectives? Whose objectives? The answer is clear. This was not about inter-cultural learning: it was not a job for the Peace Corps. This was about supporting American foreign policy goals, in particular the Cold War policy goals: it was a job for USAID. Thus while the Peace Corps operated in neighbouring Thailand beginning in 1962, it never operated in Laos.

The United States and the Viet Minh had a common understanding on one point, namely the 'single battlefield' concept: the conflicts in Laos and Vietnam were part of the same struggle, and the USAID programme was playing 'a particularly active role in resisting communist pressure'. It did things as a matter of course in Laos that would be impossible in most other countries (PDACR504, 1965, 180 [193]).

The ideal programme would maximise both political-military strength and economic growth simultaneously, but in the real world it is difficult to maximise two different things at the same time. Therefore preference was often given to programmes that gave large benefits in terms of domestic stability in Laos or impressions of US strength of purpose in the area, rather than to programmes that maximised growth rates. 'In no case should economic effectiveness be the sole criterion against which programmes are judged' (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p.120 [135]). This prioritisation was a clear application of the Eisenhower Doctrine.

From the beginning, military budget support was by far the largest post in the aid programme. Of the USD 56.8 million committed in FY 1957/58 and 1958/59 combined, 55 percent went to military budget support, while only 12 percent went to project assistance (USAID PNABI128, 1959, p. 69 [74]). Project assistance covered education, agriculture, industry and mining, transportation, health and sanitation, civil police administration, public administration, and community development. Education accounted for less than 12 percent of project assistance and less than 2 percent of total assistance. Transportation was by far the largest, accounting for nearly half of project assistance and almost 6 percent of the total aid programme (USAID PNABI128, 1959, p.69 [74]).

The US was not the only source of development assistance to Laos, but it was by far the largest. In 1958 while the US contributed USD 31.4 million, of which 63 percent was for military budget support, the next-largest contributor, France, provided USD 5.8 million, of which 41 percent was for military advisors and instructors. In 1958 Japan was preparing a multi-year infrastructure project for USD 2.8 million. The United Nations specialised agencies provided approximately USD 200,000, and the Colombo Plan provided assistance for approximately USD 50,000. Various non-governmental organisations also provided assistance, mainly for schools and hospitals or scholarships.

Total US economic assistance to Laos rose from under USD 40 million in 1955 to over USD 60 million in 1968. Total project assistance rose from 1.4 million (education USD 27 thousand) to just under USD 40 million (education USD 1.5 million), as shown in Figure 1. The big build-up began in 1962, following the establishment of USAID in November 1961. The big let-down began in 1968, following the *Tet* Offensive in Vietnam. Although education assistance was only a small part of the total it amounted to nearly USD 20 million, or approximately USD 1.0 million per year (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, pp. 332-333 [333-334]).

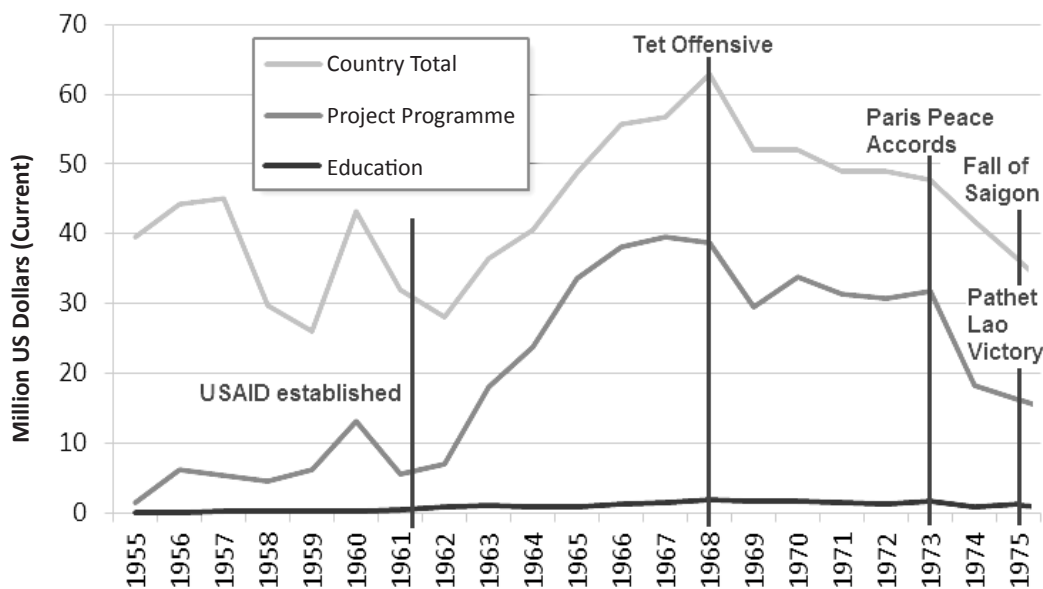


Figure 1: US Aid to Laos, 1955 – 1975 (Million USD)

### *The Big Build-up*

The big build-up of education sector assistance began with the USOM Education Programme 1956-1961, the major part of which was for teacher training. Programme implementation in Laos began in 1956 with the building and equipping of a training facility at Dong Dok, some ten kilometres north of Vientiane, for teacher training and other training. This was part of a long-term development project for the construction and establishment of the National Education Centre and as a step toward creating opportunities for higher education in Laos. The education programme at this time was staffed to a large extent by International Voluntary Services (IVS), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 1953 by Christian pacifist churches in the US, although it operated on a non-sectarian basis and accepted volunteers regardless of religious beliefs. It placed American volunteers in development projects in developing countries, including Laos. In 1959 IVS personnel began serving mainly in the English Section of the Teacher Training College at Dong Dok and the Teacher Training School in Vientiane.

The USOM Education Programme 1956-1961 also included technician training and assistance for renovation of two technical schools, one in Vientiane and one in Savannakhet in the south. It also included development of Rural Education Centres. On a self-help basis, 155 Rural Education Centres were built, and USOM supported the cost of both teacher salaries and instructional materials.

Direct assistance to the Ministry of Education included improving school buildings, supplying instructional materials, revising and re-translating textbooks from French into Lao ('Laoization'), and training of teachers and school inspectors in the United States.

The Education Reform of 1962 stipulated the following: (i) Primary school should de-emphasise purely academic knowledge and stress what the child should know to live better and work for a better output in his community; (ii) Measures should be taken to promote establishment of rural schools built by villagers ('self-help'), with a teacher chosen or suggested by them; and (iii) Failure in the French language would not hinder admission to secondary school. Students lacking proficiency in French would be sent to a preparatory class to get intensive and practical training in the French language.

By 1965 the adult literacy rate was around 15 percent (up from 10 percent in 1959), and one-third of the school age population was enrolled in school (GER approximately 30 percent, up from

15 percent in 1959). An increasing number of children were enrolling in school, and the number of facilities was increasingly inadequate. Most schools were overcrowded and operated on two shifts. By 1965 Lao secondary schools were staffed by more than 200 French teachers and a handful of Lao teachers. It was unlikely that even the medium term goals of the 1962 Education Reform could be met with additional French teachers, but the RLG did not expect to complete the ‘Laoization’ process before the end of the 1970s (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p.209 [220]).

US support for primary education was creating a solid base for further advances, but the post-primary part of the education system was narrow and under French control. The narrowness of the school enrolment pyramid is shown in Figure 2 (USAID PDACP677, 1970, p.12 [12]).

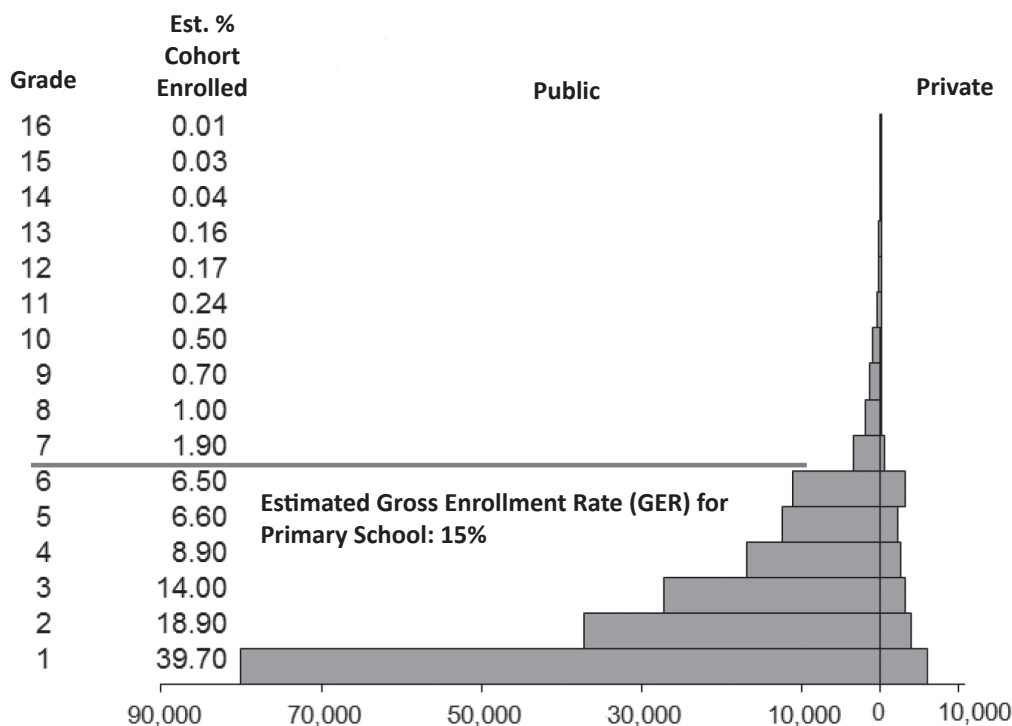


Figure 2: Enrolment Pyramid, School Year 1968/69

‘Laoization’ was an important part of the USAID Programme. Resistance to ‘Laoization’ came from several sources: (i) Lack of confidence among many Lao leaders in the possibility of developing an indigenous education system; (ii) Scepticism about relying on US educational methods, academic standards, and philosophy; (iii) The prominent role played by French advisers at all levels in the Lao education system; and (iv) French policy, which consciously oriented Laos toward France.

Finally, however, ‘Laoization’ won, and the US began to contribute to the development of secondary education. In 1964, US educational assistance was reorganized and expanded, and the secondary education project began in 1967 and continued until the end in 1975 (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, p.98 [90]).

### Community Education

The community education programme aimed at reducing illiteracy, providing practical education for those who did not continue in school, and preparing students for further education. By 1973 the community education programme had constructed some 4,700 classrooms, mainly through self-help

schemes. This represented about 78 percent of the total. Curricula had been revised, and some 2.5 million textbooks had been printed and distributed. The national and provincial administrative structure had been developed, and teachers and administrators had been trained. Primary school enrolments doubled between 1962/63 and 1971/72 (USAID PNABI555, 1973, p.80-81 [86-87]). This corresponds to an average annual growth rate of 8.0 percent.

### Secondary Education

The US was under pressure to provide the physical facilities in which French-style secondary education could continue, but the US could not support the elitist French system. In 1965 a solution was found: USAID could make a major contribution to US objectives by helping to make Lao educational institutions 'conform more closely to the country's economic and social needs. A bold program on the part of the United States could dramatically affect the manpower situation in Laos and have a profound impact on the social, economic, and political structure of the country' (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p.210 [221]). Without a modern secondary school system, Laos would fall further behind its neighbours and find it difficult to participate in any future regional development effort. The US, however, should not try to reproduce the American high school, which could be inappropriate in the Lao context (*ibid*). Thus was born the 'Fa Ngum High School', named after the putative founder of the Kingdom of Laos in the fourteenth century.

'The high schools we wish to develop in Laos should not be American counterparts of a *lycée*, but upward extensions of the primary school system that the US educational program has been successfully developing' (USAID PDACR504, 1965, p.210 [221]). These schools should be geared to the broader needs of the country rather than to those of a small, wealthy elite. To be fully effective these schools should be developed in the provincial centres throughout the country rather than in a single city or two.

Eight Fa Ngum high schools were to be built (five were completed by the termination of the USAID programme in 1975). The project would be completed in three years. Teaching in these schools was in the Lao language. Courses covered academic, agriculture, commercial, home economics, and industrial arts. Teachers received pre-service training at the USAID-supported College of Education at Dong Dok. In-service training in specialised fields was provided in Thailand, and training in teaching of English and school administration was provided in the US.

### Teacher Education

The aim of the teacher education programme was to provide qualified teachers to staff Lao primary and secondary schools. At independence in 1954, there was one teacher training institution in Laos, with an enrolment of 106 students. Beginning in 1962, USAID assistance was broadened to include construction of teacher training institutions in provincial centres. By 1973, there were nine teacher training institutions around the country with a total enrolment of 4,076 students. In 1973 the College of Education granted B.A. degrees to the first teachers to complete university-level studies in Laos. By 1973 eight Teacher Training Schools provide two- and four-year training programmes for primary school teachers. Between 1958/59 and 1972/73, enrolment in teacher training institutions increased from 434 to 4,076 (USAID PNABI555, 1973, p.85 [91]). This corresponds to an average annual growth rate of over 14 percent.

Teacher training was an important target for 'Laoization'. Between 1962/63 and 1971/72, the proportion of Lao faculty at teacher training institutions increased from 17 percent to 77 percent, as seen in Figure 3 below (USAID PNABI555, 1973, p. 87 [93]).

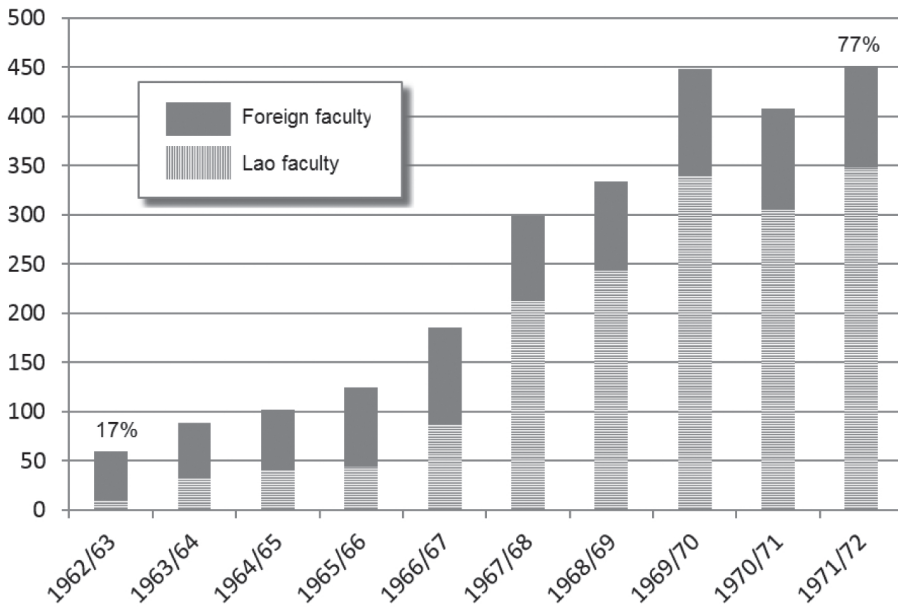


Figure 3: Lao Teacher Training Faculty, 1962/63 to 1971/72

### In the Liberated Zone: A Lao Vision of Education for All

When Laos gained independence from France, there were only a few Lao teachers, there were virtually no printed instructional materials in the Lao language, and the illiteracy rate was estimated at 95 percent – the highest rate in all of Southeast Asia (Langer, 1971, p. 4 [6]; USAID PNABI556, 1971, p.84 [92]). The area controlled by the Pathet Lao under the terms of the Geneva Accord, widely referred to as the ‘Liberated Zone’, was even more educationally deprived than the rest of Laos. The upland and mountainous areas controlled by the Pathet Lao were also much less developed than the Mekong lowlands, which were controlled by the RLG.

Pathet Lao leadership placed high priority on education. Already in 1950 the Free Laos Front (*Neo Lao Issara*, a predecessor of the Pathet Lao) had established a resistance government in Huaphanh province, including a Ministry of Education, which focussed especially on primary education and adult literacy. The aim was the universal spread of at least basic literacy. Primary school comprised four grades – lower primary grades 1-3 and upper primary grade 4 (Whitaker et al., 1972, p.99). Village primary schools were built where possible, and short-term teacher training programmes were organised. In the late 1950s several schools with dormitories for secondary school students were built with a total capacity of some 1,000. Primary school textbooks were edited (Oudom, 1996, p.90-94).

Until 1968 the only prerequisite for teaching the first three grades was knowledge of written Lao, but later a four-month training course was instituted. Teachers of grade 4 were required to complete a one-year course. Teachers at secondary school had to complete a course of several years at Sam Neua city (Whitaker et al., 1972, p. 99). Most of the instruction of teachers was delivered as in-service training.

The Lao script and spelling were simplified as part of a language reform led by Phoumi Vongvichit with his *Lao Grammar* published in Sam Neua in 1967. Phoumi later became the first Minister of Education, Sports, and Religious Affairs of the newly established Lao PDR. The language reform reflected a strict interpretation of the 1949 Royal Ordinance establishing Lao pronunciation,

not etymology, as the basis for correct spelling (Enfield, 1999, p. 269; Enfield, 2007). Only Arabic numerals were used (Whitaker et al., 1972, p. 100). This became the basis of the grammar and script used in Laos today.

In Xiengkhuang province in the early 1970s three-grade primary schools could be found in almost every village, but a primary school with grade 4 could only be found near Xiengkhuang city. Students began schooling at age 6 or 7. They studied four hours per day. Because of the US bombing, school began in the early morning and finished at 9:00 o'clock. Primary school textbooks were distributed free, but notebooks and pencils had to be purchased. Graduation from grade 4 usually took more than four years, but it qualified the student for enrolment in secondary school (Whitaker et al., 1972, p. 99).<sup>3</sup>

All textbooks beyond grade 3 were direct translation of Vietnamese schoolbooks after 1966/67 when they replace the RLG textbooks. Textbooks in Hmong script were also used after 1967, but the Hmong students were required to learn Lao first. There were four secondary boarding schools providing a two-year programme. A two-year provincial college established in 1968 served students from all over the Liberated Zone (Whitaker et al., 1972, p. 99).

Education had a dual mission, namely to convey knowledge and skills and to foment a revolutionary spirit. According to one observer, however, there was no doubt about the revolutionary objectives and its adherence to Marxist-Leninist theory, but it appeared that 'for the moment [in 1971] the emphasis was on modernising rather than revolutionising Lao society, on uniting the ethnically diverse population in their sector rather than on distilling (*sic*) the purest revolutionary spirit' (Langer, 1971, p.10).

In the Liberated Zone a new image of education and society emerged. Because of the US bombing, 'To hide during the day, and to work at night was the only possibility of surviving. ... A woman was simultaneously a worker, a member of the militia, a vegetable farmer, and a student or teacher attending classes, in conformity with the motto, 'study well and teach well' (Mayoury, 1995, p.99). In the Pathet Lao education system the schedule was divided between attending courses in the morning, doing productive work (*e.g.*, fetching water and wood, construction, repair and maintenance of the school) in the afternoon, and political meeting in the evenings. 'The results were evident in the spectacular breakthroughs in the cultural, ideological and professional fields. Old men and women and all children went to school. Books were free' (*ibid*).

The international assistance that the Pathet Lao was able to receive for development of the education system (mainly Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and China) was minute compared with the support the RLG received. American bombing of the Liberated Zone began in 1964, and the air raids, especially in the late 1960s, severely disrupted all normal activity in the Liberated Zone. Because of these air raids schooling and many other normal daily activities took place in caves or were suspended. Reference to 'schools' in the Liberated Zone should therefore not be associated with the idea of solid school buildings, blackboards, and instructional materials (Langer, 1971, p.4-5[6-7]).

## The Big Letdown

### Timeline of Two Fateful Years

*September 1973:* In the Third Coalition Government the Communists have equal representation with the Right.

*April 1974:* The Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) is established.

*August 1974:* The Lao Patriotic Front (*Neo Lao Hak Sat*) formally declares that all of Laos has been 'liberated'.

*April 1975:* Fall of Phnom Penh (April 12), fall of Saigon (April 30), and the Vietnam War ends; King Savang Vatthana is pressured into dissolving the National Assembly.

*May 1975:* Anti-American demonstrations break out throughout the country, and USAID headquarters are occupied.

*December 2, 1975:* The Pathet Lao announce abolition of the monarchy, and King Savang Vatthana abdicates.

*December 3, 1975:* People's Republic is proclaimed.

### *Facing the New Reality*

In June and early July 1974, the US Ambassador and the USAID Director asked the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) Foreign Minister and the LPF Minister of Economy and Planning of the new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) if they desired changes in the content or administration of the USAID programme. The response was that the new government needed time to organise itself, establish its own mode of operation, and set its priorities. Until then the PGNU wished the USAID Mission to continue its current programmes and operations (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, p.7 [8]).

During the late summer and fall of 1974 the PGNU stated that it wished to assume more leadership and management responsibilities for programmes assisted by international donors. The Embassy and USAID Mission viewed the statement as entirely reasonable and, indeed, desirable for a new government whose task was to unify the country and move it forward in peaceful social and economic development. In the last days of the PGNU, it was announced that the USAID Mission was too large, too influential throughout the countryside, and operated too independently of the government (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, p.7-8 [8-9]).

Public protests added to these criticism the charge that the USAID Mission was an umbrella for all US Government activities in Laos, including intelligence gathering. Anti-American demonstrations broke out across the country. In May 1975, demonstrators occupied the USAID headquarters in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, demanded an end to the USAID activities, and placed American staff under house arrest. An agreement was signed between the PGNU and the American *Chargé d’Affaires* that the USAID Mission would be terminated by June 30, 1975. American personnel began leaving immediately (Stuart-Fox 1997, p.161; Evans, 2002, p.173), and termination was completed on June 26 when the Acting USAID Director departed Vientiane (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, p.10 [11]).

### *Looking Back: The Politics of USAID to Laos, 1955-1975*

The ‘Termination Report’ clarified the US position from the beginning (USAID PNAAX021, 1976, p.10-11 [11-12]):

US economic assistance to Laos, from its inception in 1954, was provided and justified for political purposes. It was not designed as a programme to assist Laos in long-range social and economic development. It did, nevertheless, provide basic economic assets that could in the future be exploited through planned development. ... [It] was successful in meeting the major tasks it was given in support of US policy toward Laos: maintenance of reasonable economic stability, humanitarian succour for the refugees created by the war, and maintenance of minimum governmental services within the RLG controlled portion of Laos.

## **A Final Audit, Embedded in Time and Space**

### *An Enduring Legacy of Value*

Despite the turn of political events, USAID engagement in the education sector in Laos, over more than twenty years, left an enduring legacy of value. Perhaps the most significant contribution was support for the ‘Laoization’ of education, supporting a system of education for all, and breaking with the French elitist education culture. Ironically the American contribution in that respect was better aligned with the education policy of the Pathet Lao in the Liberated Zone than with that of the Royal Lao Government.

This ‘Laoization’ showed itself throughout the education system: (i) Community education; (ii) Primary education; (iii) Fa Ngum high schools; (iv) Teacher education; (v) Technical and vocational education and training; and (vi) The National Education Centre, which evolved into the National University of Laos (NUOL) in 1996.

## Epilogue

The United States never interrupted diplomatic relations with Laos, as it did with Cambodia and Vietnam. The United States maintained an embassy, run by a *Chargé d’Affaires* and a small staff from August 1975 until August 1992 when the *Chargé d’Affaires ad interim* was upgraded to Ambassador, and full diplomatic relations were restored. Indeed the Ambassador appointed in 1996 had served as a teacher in the USAID education programme. In 1990 the United States financed a six-year, 8.7 million USD development project (linked to an accord on anti-drug cooperation), which included road construction, irrigation dams, communication links, and extending agricultural, public health, and educational services. In January 2011, USAID returned to Laos after a 35 year absence. Today it is working mainly in the field of health, environmental protection and conservation, and economic development, the latter in support of World Trade Organization accession.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The ‘Pentagon Papers’, officially titled *United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, and classified ‘Top Secret – Sensitive’, comprised some 3,000 pages of historical analysis and 4,000 pages of original government documents in 47 volumes. Parts were leaked and published in the *New York Times* beginning in June 13, 1971. On June 29, 1971 Senator Mike Gravel inserted 4,100 pages into the Congressional Record, and the five-volume ‘Gravel Edition’ was published in 1971. The full report was declassified and released to the public in June 2011. All Pentagon Paper files were accessed March 10, 2012. The complete unredacted report can be accessed from the US National Archives at: <http://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/>

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Pathet Lao’ means literally ‘Land of the Lao [people]’. Since the early 1950s it has been widely used in Western literature to denote the Lao revolutionary movement as a whole, including the military forces (Lao People’s Liberation Army, LPLA), the mass organisation (Lao Patriotic Front, LPF), and the political organisation (Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, LPRP). For convenience we use the term in this broad, widespread meaning even though some would argue that in a strict sense such usage is incorrect.

<sup>3</sup> For the experiences and reactions of one of the IVS volunteer to the bombing, see Haney (1997).

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