Sixty years of Lao-German diplomatic relations:

An appraisal

Bachelor's Thesis

Siegfried Hadatsch

University of Education Karlsruhe

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1. Lao-German diplomatic relations: An unlikely connection

On 31 January 2018, Germany and the Southeast Asian nation of Laos celebrated 60 years of diplomatic relations, and only two months later, Prime Minister of Laos Thongloun Sisoulith visited Germany. While Sisoulith was the highest-ranking visitor from Laos to ever visit Germany officially, the event received little attention in the German media. After all, on the surface, few people would assume that there is more to the relations between Laos and Germany than mere diplomatic obligation. The nations of Laos and Germany are located nowhere near each other – in fact, they are roughly 8400 kilometres apart, and no direct flights connect the two countries. Laos, to put it simply, is not well known in Germany. Unbeknownst to a majority of Germans, however, Laos does not quite share the same view. Germany, on the contrary, is held in high regard by many Laotians and the Laotian government in general. If one looks further into the relations between the two countries, more and more questions emerge: Why is it that many high-ranking Laotian politicians can fluently speak German – with Saxon or Thuringian accents at that – and the most renown vocational school of the small communist nation bears the name Lao-*German* Technical College? Is there, especially from a German perspective, more to the connection between Laos and Germany than one would initially assume?

In the following, diplomatic relations between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic will be reviewed and appraised, although it should be noted that the very nature of diplomatic relations, and by extension development cooperation, does not always allow for an exact and complete situation. As such, the developments and findings presented in the following do not claim to be complete; they rather aim to provide a general overview. First, an overview will be provided over the respective historical developments in both countries, as well as their current socio-economic situations and their role within the larger context of international (aid) politics. Attention will also be paid to the specific history of diplomatic relations between the two countries over the course of the last six decades. Afterwards, the current scope of relations will be thoroughly explored regarding economic, political and cultural relations, with a major focus on the bilateral development cooperation efforts both countries maintain between each other. Several projects will be introduced and their effects (or lack thereof) presented. In a final step, both historical development of Lao-German diplomatic relations as well as their current state will be assessed within the context of recently announced changes in German foreign policy.

2. Laos and Germany: An overview

There is more to the diplomatic relations between Germany and Laos than meets the eye. The two countries are way more different than they are alike, and it is this difference that so heavily determines the nature of their diplomatic relations. Opposite to what their geographic (and by extension cultural) distance suggest, Germany and Laos maintain bilateral cooperation and development projects that are remarkably extensive. To understand how all components of modern-day diplomatic relations between Laos and Germany came to be, one simply needs to take a look at their respective histories and socio-economic circumstances.

2.1 Lao People's Democratic Republic

2.1.1 Historical overview

Roughly around the start of the first millennium CE (common era), a people commonly referred to as *Tai-Lao* began migrating from southern China into mainland Southeast Asia before eventually settling across the entire peninsula. It was from this ethnic group that the present-day Thai and Lao, majority ethnicities in Thailand and Laos respectively, emerged. For the first few centuries after their arrival in Southeast Asia, however, the Tai-Lao people did not show any pronounced ambitions to either establish new realms for themselves or conquer those of ethnic groups that predated their arrival (cf. Evans 2002, 2-8). Over the following centuries, settlements emerged primarily along the Mekong river around present-day Laos. Further migrations greatly increased during the 12th and 13th century CE and soon made them the dominating ethnic group in the western, northern, and central regions of the peninsula (cf. Schultze 2013, 27-34).

A predecessor to modern Laos finally emerged in 1353 under King Fa Ngum who proclaimed the Kingdom of *Lan Xang Hom Khao*, the "Kingdom of a million elephants under the white parasol" (cf. Evans 2002, 9-10). The kingdom would, over the course of the next century, rise to its height in terms of culture, territory, and power. After a long series of succession crisis, Lan Xang split into several smaller kingdoms, and with the loss of a unified government also came the loss of relevance. For the next seventy years, the three kingdoms mainly concerned themselves with internal affairs. Their weakened state allowed their neighbours to subjugate them, and by 1779, all three kingdoms had become vassals of the Kingdom of Siam (cf. Schultze 2013, 78-88). Power dynamics in the region completely

changed with the arrival of the French. After establishing themselves in Vietnam in 1887, France acquired the splintered Laotian kingdoms in 1893 and integrated them into their colony of "French Indochina". The three kingdoms were eventually combined into one administrative unit with Vientiane as its capital. Laos had been reunified as a kingdom, although the power now resided with the French colonial administration (ibid, 110-121).

After the French conquest, Laos was never more than a buffer state for the French colonial administration and thus held no real importance for France (cf. Burke & Cummings 2005, 23-25). Attempts were made to build up industry and modern infrastructure, but as Evans puts it, "the economic development of French Laos was a failure" (Evans 2002, 49). In addition, Laos never had a substantial influx of white settlers. A 1907 census counts 189 French in Laos, and during the entirety of colonial rule, this number would never rise above a few hundred. Instead, the colonial bureaucracy beneath French officials was mainly staffed by educated Vietnamese. Only in 1928 a school was opened to train Lao administrators, and it would take until the 1940s that funds became freely available for education in Laos (cf. Evans 2002, 47-49; 59). The formation of a Lao national identity had been, to an extent, encouraged by the colonial administration since the early 20th century, when Laos was more of a geographic term than a social one, but only now did it take concrete form in order to counter Thai expansionist ambitions. Between 1940 and 1945, more schools had been built than in the last four decades (ibid, 70-78).

During the Second World War, the region found itself under occupation by the Empire of Japan. Under Japanese pressure, King Sisavangvong declared Laotian independence in April 1945 (cf. Schultze 2013, 155-159), although by the time Japan surrendered in August, he had already renegotiated with France to retract his declaration (cf. Evans 2002, 83). The situation mid- to late 1945 in the region, however, was, as Schultze puts it, "nothing but chaotic" (Schultze 2013, 161), which allowed new factions to rise. One of these factions was the nationalistic *Lao Issara* (Free Laos) movement, which formed within the power vacuum that existed in Southeast Asia at the time. Lao Issara took control of the government and (unsuccessfully) reaffirmed Laotian independence on 12 October. Upon their return to Laos, the French found that things had changed: Even the usually pro-French Laotian elite viewed their return only as a temporary step to full independence. On 27 August 1946, Laos emerged as a unified, constitutional monarchy within the reformed French Union (cf. Evans 2002, 80-89). Full independence from France was attained in October 1953, and with the end of the

First Indochina War in 1954, the French renounced all their colonial claims to Southeast Asia (cf. Schultze 2013, 188-191).

Even before Laos' complete independence from France, new conflicts within the country became apparent. The *Pathet Lao* (People's Laos), a communist movement sponsored by their ideological ally North Vietnam, faced off against the Royal Lao Government backed by the United States of America. Attempts to reconcile the different factions failed, and civil war first broke out in 1959. While a conference in Geneva produced both a coalition government and a Laotian declaration of neutrality supported by both the U.S. and Soviet Union, this declaration was of little practical value. Fighting resumed, and the Laotian Civil War, now in full motion, soon became another front of the already ongoing Vietnam War (cf. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum). In what would later be called the "Secret War" the USA conducted a military campaign in Laos aimed at fighting the communist Pathet Lao and disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of supply lines used by communist troops. Between 1964 and 1973, the U.S. "dropped more than two million tons of ordnance on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions – equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years – making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history – a legacy from which the country still has not recovered six decades later (cf. Legacies of War). In early 1973, the US announced plans to end their involvement in Southeast Asia, which brought an end to the bombing campaign. Another coalition government came into existence between royal forces and the Pathet Lao, although over the next two years, the balance of power started to shift in favour of the communists. On 2 December 1975, communist forces asserted control over affairs of state, abolished the monarchy and declared the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. After thirty years of ideological conflict, the Pathet Lao had established itself as the sole government of a unified Laos (cf. Schultze 2013, 260-266).

The Pathet Lao, by now styling themselves the "Lao People's Revolutionary Party" (LPRP), brought sweeping political and economic reforms with their ascent to power. Evans states that "Many individuals quickly found life under communism intolerable, and the scale of the ensuing exodus after 1975 was unprecedented." (Evans 2002, 178). By 1980, a staggering 10 percent of the population had fled the country, among them most Laotian intellectuals (ibid, 178). Additionally, while the Kingdom of Laos had received enormous subsides from the USA, which accounted for some 90 percent of the state budget, these subsidies where now completely missing from the local economy. The collectivisation of the country's

agrarian sector and closure of most private businesses did little to resolve economic issues (cf. Schultze 2013 266-276). By the end of the decade, the leadership of the LPRP had announced a change in economic and social policy, change that manifested in the first five-year-plan set to start in 1981. Collectivisation efforts were completely reversed, economic taxes remodelled and some restrictions on the private sector lifted. Large funds were allocated for the expansion of education and health care systems, although this expansion still suffered from the lack of trained personnel (cf. Schultze, 2013, 281-283). Further social and economic liberalisation followed, and in 1986, major reform came under the name of the "New Economic Mechanism", which provided incentives for private enterprise and opened Laos to the world market (cf. Oraboune 2011, 267-271). The 1990s saw rapid economic growth for Laos, and in 1997, the country became a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Laos found its economic growth increasingly accelerated after the turn of the millennium, with a wide variety of countries investing directly into natural resource- and industry sectors. The country strengthened ties to its ideological neighbours China and Vietnam, who remain among the most influential outsiders in the Laotian economic landscape, and to both Japan and the West. Further international integration came with the country's full ascendance to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2013 (cf. Schultze 2013, 301-333).

2.1.2 Current situation

Laos, officially the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is a landlocked one-party state in Southeast Asia, roughly equalling the United Kingdom in size with a population of an estimated 7.28 million as of 2020 (cf. World Population Review). It is neighboured by Vietnam to the east, China to the north, by Thailand and Myanmar across the Mekong river to the west and southwest and Cambodia to the south. With 80 percent of its landmass being rugged mountains, inaccessible rainforests and shrublands, most population centres lie on the banks of the Mekong (Cooper 2008, 18-19). The country's population consists of a wide variety of ethnicities: Officially, the Lao government recognizes 49 ethnic groups within the borders of the country, but the total number is estimated to be well over 200. The biggest of these ethnic groups, the lowland Lao (Lao Lum), or Lao for short, makes up around 53 percent of the country's population (Central Intelligence Agency 2020a). Two thirds of the population adhere to Theradava Buddhism, followed by a range of often animistic religious

practices that are mainly found among ethnic minorities. It is not unusual, however, that Buddhist practice is interwoven with some form of animist tradition, making a strict distinction difficult. Muslims and Christians on the other hand are confined to major cities and only make up 2 percent of religious groups (cf. Cooper 2014, 97-106; Schultze 2013, 42-43). Presiding over this wide collection of beliefs, religions and ethnicities, the communist government of Laos strives to balance needs and demands of these groups, all the while attempting to unify them under one shared national identity. These attempts are not always peaceful, and concerns have been raised about the continued persecution of the Hmong, a minor ethnic group living in the North of Laos, by Lao and Vietnamese armed forces (cf. Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization).

Half of the country's population is younger than 25 years, making it one of the youngest countries in the world with a median age of 24 years, although population growth is already significantly slowing down compared to the early 2000s[1]. With an infant mortality rate of 45.6 deaths per 1000 live births – often used as an indicator of a country's health level – Laos ranks 29th for the highest death rate; the maternal death rate is at 185 deaths per 100.000 live births (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020a). With only one physician for every 2000 citizens, the country falls beneath the World Health Organization estimated threshold of 2.3 health workers per 1000 population necessary to achieve sufficient coverage of a country's primary medical needs (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020b). 87.1 percent of the country's population has access to electricity, 75.7 percent to an improved water source and 70.9 percent to sanitation facilities. As is with other countries in similar socio-economic situations, the population groups most affected by a lack of either of these commodities are living in rural areas, while the cities are more aptly supplied (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020a).

The general socio-economic situation of Laos is also reflected in its low rank on the Human Development Index scale. Out of 189 countries listed in the United Nations Development Report 2019, Laos places 140th (cf. United Nations Development Programme). Furthermore, as per classification by the United Nations, Laos is considered a "Least Developed Country" (LDC). For a country to be designated "LDC", it needs to fall below the graduation thresholds of Gross National Income per Capita, Human Assets Index and Economic vulnerability Index, all of which need to be crossed in order to graduate from LDC status. Laos first crossed two of these thresholds in 2018 (United Nations Department of Economic

[1] In 2008, for example, the median age of the population was 19 years (Cooper 2014, 47).

and Social Affairs) and the Lao government has formulated plans to graduate from LDC status by 2025 (cf. Lao People's Republic National Round Table Process). While Laos' economic growth is one of the fastest in Southeast Asia, averaging more than 7 percent over the last decade as of 2020, it is still happening on the foundations of a fairly underdeveloped (economic) infrastructure, especially in rural areas of the country (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020c). Roughly three quarters of the labour force work in agriculture, and the Gross National Income per capita (GNI) stands at 2.450 USD as of 2018 – Germany's GNI the same year, for comparison, at 47.090 USD (cf. World Bank 2020a). Along foreign aid, the Laotian economy is "heavily dependent on [the] capital-intensive natural resource exports" (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020c) and thus the exploitation of these resources, thereby increasing pressure on the environment. Recognizing the limitations of such a model of growth has prompted Lao PDR to consider alternate, "green" growth models in recent years. Almost three quarters of the Lao population still depend on natural waterways and forests for sustenance and income – many living in rural poverty – making them the most vulnerable to the effects of deforestation, pollution and climate risks. The shift to a greener economic agenda aims to negate these potential risk factors by diversifying local income sources and offering incentives to the private sector, for example in the areas of sustainable forest management and nature-based tourism. As these are still relatively recent developments as of 2020, long-term effects of this shift in agenda are yet to be determined[2] (cf. World Bank 2020b).

On the international stage, the People's Republic of China emerged as Laos' biggest foreign investor within the "Belt and Road Initiative", a project conceived by the Chinese government in 2013 to promote and improve transcontinental connectivity and cooperation between countries (cf. World Bank 2018; The Diplomat 2019). The most notable example of this aid – and by extension, the growing Chinese influence in Laos – is the construction of a 6 billion USD highspeed railway linking the Chinese city Kunming to the Laotian capital Vientiane, of which China finances over 70 percent, with Laos covering the rest of the financing, which is largely provided by loans from Chinese banks. While the economic significance of further connecting Laos to international rail traffic and transforming it "from a landlocked country into one that is land-linked" (The Laotian Times, 2017) cannot be understated, it has been warned that the economically weaker country may become entangled

[2] In light of worldwide economic downturn reactions to COVID-19 during the early months of 2020, it remains to be seen how such recent agenda changes will impact the Laotian economy, and in what way.

in what some dub the Chinese "debt diplomacy" – thus becoming overly financially dependent on the People's Republic of China. Still, China is not the only country of importance to Laos: Thailand remains the country's biggest trade partner, and the Laotian government naturally gravitates towards Vietnam as their ideological and historical ally. Both countries, in turn, maintain their influence in Laos, albeit on a smaller scale than the Chinese (cf. The Diplomat, 2019).

2.2 Federal Republic of Germany

2.2.1 Historical overview

It is thought that between the 5th and 1st century BCE, the so-called *Germanic peoples* originated in Scandinavia and migrated into most of modern-day Germany over the following centuries (cf. Kristinsson 2010, 147). Germanic tribes had moved to settle along the Rhine and Danube rivers by 100 CE; some of these tribes were subsequently conquered by the Roman Empire while most of them remained outside the Imperial frontier (Ozment 2005, 2-21). Contrary to what the term *Germanic* suggests, these tribes neither shared a defined common cultural identity nor are they to be considered the direct origins of a German nation. It still would take until the 8th century CE for the earliest written evidence of both an early German language and culture to surface within the Frankish kingdom which spanned much of modern-day France and Germany (cf. Fahrmeir 2017a, 10-12; Fahrmeir 2017b, 16-21). This Frankish kingdom would rise to the rank of Empire under King Charlemagne from the *Carolingian* dynasty in 800 CE. His various descendants would fight each other for control over the parts of his empire for decades to come. Only in the 880s would these conflicts (mostly) come to an end and a somewhat stable East-West border emerge. In the West, the Kingdom of France came to be. Out of the eastern half, the so-called "Holy Roman Empire" emerged over the following centuries (cf. Fahrmeir 2017a, 12-13), the official date of foundation – or rather "revival" – of the Empire is placed in 962 under Otto I. (cf. Cantor 1993, 212-215).

While the Kingdom of France managed to unify and centralize itself, the Holy Roman Empire never managed to achieve proper political unification. Instead, it remained an elective monarchy with a politically weak Emperor at its head, a rather loose collection of feudal states covering much of Central Europe (cf. Johnson 1996, 22-23). What little unity these states still shared diminished after the Protestant Reformation that started in 1517 and

divided the Empire along religious lines between Catholics and Protestants. Religious division would eventually devolve into a series of conflicts known as the *Thirty Year's War* (1618-1648) during which much of the Empire was devasted by multiple war factions. After the *Peace of Westphalia* in 1648, member states of the Empire gained considerable independence. Coupled with the burdens that 30 years of war had caused, Imperial Authority was to never recover from this development (cf. Johnson 1996, 70-71; 89-90). The Holy Roman Empire ultimately found its end in 1806 in the wake of French stateman Napoleon Bonaparte's expansionist ambitions towards the empire. Even though the notion of "real" Imperial power and authority had become but a mere political fiction as time went on, Imperial titles and accompanying claims were still significant in Central European politics until their abolition in 1806. The continued idea of Imperial rule situated in the German region however would play a significant role in the eventual unification of Germany seven decades later (cf. Johnson 1996, 22-23).

In 1834, Prussia formed the German Customs Union (*Deutscher Zollverein*) with 18 other German states to adapt to the changing economic landscape. Austria remained the dominant political force within the Confederation, whilst Prussian economic influence considerably grew (cf. Fulbrook 1991, 112-115). In 1848, advocates of liberal reform and a unified Germany took to the streets in several German states with varying degrees of success. In the city of Frankfurt, a self-proclaimed national congress, the "Frankfurt Parliament", convened to promulgate a liberal constitution for a unified German state, yet their apparent lack of power and influence among the driving political powers soon forced them into irrelevance. Other liberal uprisings were put down with assistance from the Prussian military. Still, even though the idea of unification remained just that in 1848, it left behind a legacy that would soon be picked up again (ibid, 117-123).

German unity would finally be achieved after a series of Wars that Prussia fought under the guidance of its Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. First, Prussia fought and defeated the Austrian Empire in 1866, effectively dismantling the German Confederation and emerging as the dominant German state. In 1871, it defeated France with the assistance of various other German states under the umbrella of the Prussian-lead "North German Federation". 18 January 1871, the German Empire was officially declared, led by Kaiser Wilhelm I and his trusted Chancellor Bismarck (ibid, 128-129). It was largely Bismarck who would oversee affairs of state and the initial rapid industrial expansion of the now united Germany. Ultimately, he found himself at odds with the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, who came to power

in 1888, and submitted his resignation two years later. Under Wilhelm II, Germany came into the possession of various African and Pacific colonies, saw yet again rapid growth in population, economy and industry and large expansions of the military in an increasingly tense political climate (ibid, 1991, 138-147). The assassination of the Austrian crown prince in 1914 set in motion a chain-reaction of events that would soon lead to the First World War, pulling Germany, as well as most other global Powers of the time, into an all-encompassing conflict that would see two million German soldiers die between 1914 and 1918 (cf. Spiegel Internationl 2008; Janz 2013, 61-69). Following German defeat, a parliamentary republic was declared in late 1918 to succeed the Empire (cf. Fulbrook, 1991, 155).

In 1919, the new German leadership signed both the Treaty of Versailles, conceding all of its colonial possessions in Africa and the Pacific, as well as 13 percent of its landmass and a tenth of its population (cf. United States Holocaust Museum 2020a), and the Weimar constitution, ushering in the short-lived *Weimar* Republic (cf. Fulbrook 1991, 156-160). Amidst escalating violent power struggles between political enemies and mass-unemployment, the fascist National Socialist Party under Adolf Hitler seized control of the state in 1933. Over the following years, the Nazi government transformed the Republic into a centralised totalitarian state, sharply increased rearmament and started with the gradually increasing persecution of minorities (ibid, 180-187). On 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany started the Second World War with their attack on Poland, which soon developed into a war with France and Britain. In 1940, German troops successfully occupied France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, only to invade Yugoslavia, Greece, and the Soviet Union the next year. While initially successful, controlling most of continental Europe by 1942, Germany was soon pushed back by Allied forces, among them the USA. As Soviet forces pushed towards Berlin in early 1945, Hitler committed suicide on 30 April 1945. By now completely beaten on all fronts, Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered on 7 May 1945, ending World War II in Europe (ibid, 190-203).

In what would later be known as the *Holocaust*, the government of Nazi Germany systematically murdered up to an estimated 17 million people in internment and death camps across Europe. Casualties include 6 million Jews, 275 000 people with disabilities, 130 000 Romani, as well as thousands of homosexuals, political opponents and Jehova's Witnesses (cf. Nywiek & Nicosia 2000, 45-52). Another 5 million people died as a result of Nazi policies in occupied eastern European countries (cf. Piotrowski 1998; United States Holocaust Museum, 2020b), and 3.5 million as war prisoners (cf. Berenbaum & Kramer

2006, 25). Remaining Nazi officials were tried for crimes against humanity during the Nuremberg trials in 1946 (cf. Kershaw 1997, 150), and a distinct culture of remembrance and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (literally "struggle to come to term with the past") is both encouraged in modern-day Germany's cultural landscape and an important aspect of its curriculum in high school (cf. Large 2001, 303; Kulturministerkonferenz 2014).

In the aftermath of its defeat and Allied occupation, Germany was split between the two major ideological blocs of the Cold War. In 1949, two rival German states emerged from what was left of the old German Empire: In the West, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), a parliamentary democracy aligned towards the Western political sphere and the USA, later a member of the NATO; in the East, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a totalitarian socialist one-party state and politically tied to the Soviet Union. The division of Germany became a symbol of the Cold War between USSR and USA, even more so with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (cf. Biesinger 2006, 270; Fulbrook 1991, 207-227). Under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, West Germany experienced a prolonged economic boom that started in the early 1950s, and by the 1960s, the FRG had elevated to a level of prosperity similar to that of other Western countries (ibid, 228-230). The GDR meanwhile was bound to a Soviet-style, tightly planned economy. Although in later years East Germany would become one of the most advanced states within the Soviet bloc, severe economic problems are counted among the factors that lead to its eventual decline. During the 1960s and 1970s, both German states would go on to form their own cultural identities based on their political and economic circumstances while still connected by a shared cultural history. During the summer of 1989, rapid political and social change swept through the GDR, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall in October the same year and official German reunification a year later, on 3 October 1990 (ibid, 240-246).

Ever since its reunification, Germany took on a more active role within the European Union, among other things co-founding the Eurozone for a shared currency throughout the EU (cf. CNN, 2020). In 2005, Angela Merkel became Germany's first female chancellor. Since the turn of the millennium, the country has increasingly advocated for further European integration, a transition to sustainable energy, and strategies for the high-tech modernisation of its industrial sector. Germany was also one of the countries most affected by the 2015 "European Migrant Crisis[3]", taking in over 1 million migrants (cf. BBC 2016).

[3] Despite frequent use, the term "crisis" has since come under criticism for carrying negative implications.

2.2.2 Current situation

The Federal Republic of Germany, or simply called Germany, is a country in Central Europe, bordered by the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France to the West, Switzerland and Austria to the South, the Czech Republic and Poland to the East and Denmark to the North. The country is an integral member of many European institutions, most notably the European Union (EU), of which it is also a founding member (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020d). Due to its very high standard of living, social security and universal healthcare system, as well as a developed education and university system (among other factors), Germany ranks fourth on the Human Development Index scale (cf. United Nations Development Programme). Additionally, the country is also considered a "great power" based on its economic strength and involvement in a plethora of multinational organisations, which in turn grant it considerable influence on the international stage.

Demographically speaking, Germany exhibits the same population structure as many other "Western" industrialised nations: The median age of the average German is 47.8 years and rising, and 39 percent of the population is older than 54 years with an average life expectancy of 81 years, making the country the fourth oldest in the world (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020e). At the same time, the German population shrinks at a rate of -0,19 percent per year due to a low average birth rate, one of the lowest in the world. This trend of negative population growth is slowly receding, though, partly due to the influx of well-educated migrants – Germany is a popular destination for immigration, and as of 2018, roughly a quarter of people living in Germany was of migrant or partial migrant descent (cf. Statistisches Bundesamt 2019). Christianity is the largest religious denomination in the country due to the religion being interwoven with over a thousand years of German cultural history. Around 55 percent of people living in Germany adhere to some form of the Christian faith, although religiousness in the country is generally on the decline since the last few decades: 38 percent of all Germans identify themselves as not being affiliated with any kind of religious movement. Another 5 percent identify themselves as Muslim (cf. Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland; Internations). The country exhibits a high degree of urbanisation with 77,5 percent of all people living in urban centres and their peripheries, with a lack of access to clean water or electricity practically unheard of. While those urban centres are mostly spread evenly over Germany, a particularly high

concentration of them can be found in the far western part of the country, the industry-heavy northern Rhineland (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020f).

Operating under the principles of a social market economy, Germany is the largest European economy, as well as both the third largest importer and exporter of goods (especially machinery, vehicles and technical equipment) worldwide and a global leader in several technological and industrial sectors with a highly skilled labour force. The German Gross National Income per capita stands at 47.090 USD as of 2018 (cf. World Bank), and its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at 3.863 USD trillion, making it the country with the fourth-highest GDP worldwide (cf. International Monetary Fund). Only 1.4 percent of the labour force works in the primary sector of agriculture; 24.2 percent in the industrial sector and 74.3 percent in the service sector. Germany experiences economic growth averaging between 1.5 and 2.5 percent per year[4], supported by an expansive and highly advanced communication and transportation infrastructure that augments its further economic development (cf. Central Intelligence Agency 2020g).

Germany is involved extensively in international aid cooperation and programmes: In 2016, the country became "the world's second-largest aid donor by volume" (Devex 2019) behind the USA. German development policy is specifically separated from its general foreign policy, coordinated by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and put into motion through "implementation organisations" subordinate to, or in cooperation with, the BMZ (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020a). Since the 1970s, the BMZ is responsible for the financial and technical coordination of development projects of the German government; in 1998 it was put in charge of conceptualisation and coordination of EU development policies. After the end of the Cold War, the BMZ made a change of direction in its conduct: the policy of non-interventionism was replaced with an explicit focus on the promotion of value-based development cooperation. In September 2000, Germany signed the United Nations Millennium Declaration, a declaration by all 191 UN members stating their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs aimed "to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women", were set to be fulfilled by 2015 (cf. World Health Organization) and served as the framework in which the GMZ now conducted its work. With the continued promotion of MDGs, the notion of

[4] It remains again to be seen how the German economy will react to the COVID-19 situation long-term.

sustainable development became an important part of German development policy as well (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020a). Sustainability became even more prominent in German policy with Germany's declared commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a UN development agenda succeeding the MDG – "to make global development sustainable on a social, ecological and economic level and in doing so considerably drive forward the long overdue transformation of global economies towards a more sustainable and inclusive development." (Bundesministerium für, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit 2018). German commitment to these goals stems from the conviction that "wealth carries obligation", and that for an industrial nation that benefitted and still benefits so tremendously from the processes and mechanisms of globalisation, a duty exists to assist those in need of help. The very nature of globalisation brings with it global challenges and problems, and in turn, the need for them to be resolved on a global level, for "global justice" to be promoted and aimed for. As the German government is resolute to tackle these challenges, development cooperation with other countries becomes an essential tool (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020a).

2.3 Contrasting Laos and Germany – A foundation for cooperation?

By reviewing, and in a next step comparing, Lao PDR with Germany in terms of both historical development and current-day socio-economic circumstance, it becomes apparent that the two countries are far apart not only in a geographical sense, but also in an economic, social and political one. Laos, on the one hand, is classified as a least developed country, struggling with providing commodities such as clean water, electricity or healthcare to a considerable, albeit relatively small part of its population. While experiencing economic growth and by extension a rise in living standards, the country still is restricted by its lack of infrastructure and dependence on foreign investment and aid. Throughout Laotian history, the country and its predecessors often found themselves subjugated by their neighbours and later on by colonial powers. The formation of a Lao national identity itself took place rather recently, making Laos a country of many ethnicities and cultures under the umbrella of a (declared) communist one-party state that seeks to unify them under one nation – not always in a peaceful way.

Germany, on the other hand, exhibits one of the world's strongest economies, a highly advanced social security system and a very high standard of living in general. Its overall integration in international institutions and organisations such as NATO and the EU, as well as its economic and technological prowess makes the country a "global power", one of the most influential actors on the stage of world politics. Not unlike Laos, the Federal Republic of Germany can be considered a relatively young nation politically. Curiously, whereas "Germany" formed as a cultural identity long before receiving its current borders, the borders of present-day Laos predate a distinct sense of Laotian nationalism by a few decades.

In review, it seems that there is not much that connects Lao PDR and Germany. Indeed, their respective histories and current circumstance prompt the assumption that there are only few points of contact. One could quickly assume that this apparent lack of contact points and shared history continues into the present, with official interaction limited. Only on a second glance similarities and potential points of contact start to emerge and become apparent. Especially the German Democratic Republic is of note: It dedicated itself to the same ideological school of thought that Laos largely follows, that of socialism and communism; in fact, both countries maintained fairly extensive bilateral relations and cooperation the German reunification put an unplanned stop to. The GDR's development efforts in Laos left behind a legacy that the unified Germany partially picked up and continued well into the present with several German governmental institutions actively supporting development efforts in Laos as of 2020. While the historical relationship between GDR and Laos without doubt played a part in the continued cooperation with Laos the FRG persued after 1990, further reasons for cooperation have since then transcended from the notion of a mere historical obligation. Laos is one of 79 countries that the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development maintains direct bilateral cooperation with (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2014) – although the future of this direct partnership is anything but set in stone. It remains to be seen how Lao-German bilateral cooperation will be affected by the structural changes to the BMZ's agenda announced by German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development Dr Gerd Müller in April 2020. Chief among those structural changes is the planned exit from a third of all countries the GMZ currently cooperates with in form of bilateral development efforts. Lao PDR is reportedly included on the list of "exit countries" (cf. Finanznachrichten 2020). The eventual outcome of this restructuring however should not undermine the fact that there is a unique and diverse history between Lao PDR and

Germany, a history that reaches back all the way to the late 1950s, when there were not one but two German states and Laos, a newly independent kingdom, oriented towards the West instead of a communist people's republic.

3. History of Lao-German diplomatic relations

As per definition by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, diplomacy is "the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation and other measures short of war or violence" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In addition, modern diplomatic practices and relations cover "international activities of supranational and subnational entities, unofficial diplomacy by nongovernmental elements and the work of international civil servants" (ibid). Importantly, diplomacy is not synonymous with the foreign policy of a nation but instead considered its most effective tool. To maintain diplomatic relations with countries thus means to also wield (degrees of) international influence – often with a notably uneven distribution of power – and to further a countries own political agenda. Yet diplomatic relations can also be of more cooperative nature, as nations often find that positive, or in other words, friendly diplomatic relations with other nations benefit mutual prosperity and growth. Furthermore, it has become understood that in the field of foreign policy, a lack of diplomatic ties can seriously handicap the relationship between nations, something countries wish to avoid in a globalising world. When the modern Kingdom of Laos first became independent in 1954, both West and East Germany soon sought to establish diplomatic ties to this newcomer on the international stage.

3.1 Lao Independence until 1975

On 21 July 1954, France officially recognised the independence of its former colonies in French Indochina during the 1954 Geneva Conference after the decade of warfare and armed insurrection that was the First Indochina War. Among those nations who at last received their freedom from colonial oppression was the Kingdom of Laos, the landlocked kingdom that had neither received much interest nor care during its existence as a client-state under the French colonial empire. With its newly found independence, the young Laotian kingdom

stepped onto the stage of modern international politics for the first time, and it would not take long for other countries to notice.

The first ever modern-era contact between Laos and Germany was officially established on 31 January 1958 between the Kingdom of Laos and the Federal Republic of Germany, a development mainly motivated by the West German intention of trying to prevent any kind of relations between the GDR with Laos. This motive however meant little to the Laotian side. When the second Laotian coalition government came to power in June of 1962, a decision was made within the government to also pursue official ties with countries of the communist bloc. Relations were established with various nations that subscribed to the ideals of communism and socialism: Alongside China, North Vietnam, Czechoslovakia and Poland the German Democratic Republic found itself included on the list of countries that Laos wanted to pursue official relations with, eagerly looking for international recognition. Although the GDR sent a government representative to Laos in hopes of aiding in speeding up the establishment of diplomatic ties, the second coalition government did not last long enough to make their plans reality – for now, the GDR would be denied official relations with the Laotian nation (cf. Schultze 2013 320-321).

During the early 1960s, it was first the export of German cars to the Kingdom of Laos that defined relations between West Germany and Laos – the Royal Lao government drove Mercedes; Opel and Volkswagen cars dominated the streets – before the FRG started to provide development aid to Laos starting in 1963. The West German government provided some 20 million DM (42 million EUR with inflation accounted for in 2020) for the construction of water- and electricity supply infrastructure, as well as the establishment of a vocational school in the capital city of Vientiane – a school still operating today under the fitting name "Lao-German Technical College" (cf. Schultze & Leppert 2018, 328-329; Schultze 2013, 321). Cooperation between FRG and the Kingdom of Laos on side largely continued until 1975. The political climate in Laos, however, was anything but stable, with the country itself continuously slipping in and out of phases of armed conflicts, signs of civil war, coups and government crises. While the Royal government cooperated with the FRG on side, the GDR provided aid to the Pathet Lao; it was during this time that the long history of education cooperation between Laos and GDR started. Curiously enough, even after the Pathet Lao had gathered most of the political influence in Laos within their grasp – a development that led the USA to abandon their development projects in Laos altogether – the FRG supported projects in what would soon become Lao PDR. After the end to USA

development aid, the Federal Republic of Germany actually substituted US funds for the construction of a hydropower plant in Nam Ngum and provided a 5 million DM loan, a move that would both earn them great respect with Laos and also be one of the last West German projects in Laos for the next three decades. The political situation in Laos drastically changed in 1975 with the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and in accordance, the relations between Laos and both Germanies did as well (cf. Schultze 2013, 320-321).

3.2 Changing allegiances: Lao-German relations within the Communist bloc

Just as the Federal Republic of Germany had established ties to the Royal Lao government at the end of the 1950s, the German Democratic Republic looked to connect with their ideological allies, the Pathet Lao. Aside from material aid during the Vietnam War, the GDR also began with the training of Lao specialists – a move that would develop into one of the pillars of Lao-GDR cooperation. After the Paris ceasefire of January 1973 mostly brought an end to warfare and the withdrawal of US-American forces from Indochina, the provisional coalition government between Royalists and Pathet Lao started establishing "proper" diplomatic relations with socialist countries, among them the GDR on 27 May 1974. On 30 December 1974, Dietrich Jarck became the first GDR ambassador accredited to the Kingdom of Laos. The FRG closely followed suit on 11 August 1975 (cf. Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht; Schultze 2013, 261; 320-321).

After the Pathet Lao assumed control over Laos and proclaimed the Lao People's Democratic Republic in December 1975, especially the GDR wished to strengthen their diplomatic connection to Lao PDR due to their close ideological alignment, and more concrete plans of bilateral cooperation were formulated. Relations with West Germany on the other side mostly came to a standstill. Laos, in line with other socialist and communist states, shared the GDR view that West Berlin was not a part of the Federal Republic of Germany, and was thus denied any kind of bilateral support from the FRG until the late 1980s. Only then several talks between FRG and Laos tried to adjust the situation regarding the Laotian view on West Berlin as Lao PDR looked to new sources of support after the opening of their economy. An agreement was reached in 1989, the same year Germany reunified, doing away with the situation altogether (cf. Schultze 2013, 322).

Relations and bilateral cooperation between Lao PDR and GDR meanwhile intensified and became concrete reality. The long-term goal of emerging Lao-GDR cooperation was to utilise the exciting resources of both respective countries according to their possibilities and situation. However, due to the large-scale destruction in Laos caused by the Vietnam War, the focus of this cooperation first laid on GDR assistance in rebuilding the country. One of the most significant developments during this first phase of cooperation was the visit of Lao Prime Minister and General Secretary of the LRPR Kaysone Phomvihane to the GDR in May 1977 and the subsequent establishment of a joint economic committee. This committee, headed by the deputy prime ministers of both countries, outlined three main objectives. These objectives included the continued training of Lao specialists in several fields of expertise in the GDR, outlining ways of furthering and promoting bilateral beneficial economic cooperation, and supervision of already established bilateral agreements in several areas such as scientific and technological advancement, international trade, basic and academic education, food industry, finance, healthcare, agriculture and many more (cf. Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht). By the early 1980s, the beginnings of GDR aid in Laos took concrete shape in the forms of assistance in education and sheep breeding, as well as the establishment of shoe making and bicycle repair shops in several provinces (cf. Phraxayavong 2009, 144). During Phomvihane's second visit to the GDR in 1982, these first measures were evaluated and determined a success, forming a base for a more ambitious friendship- and cooperation treaty between the two countries. This treaty in turn provided the foundation for more extensive talks of economic cooperation and trade. The German side exported heavy vehicles, machinery, fuel, and medical supplies to Laos while Laotian exports to the GDR included parquet wood, craft items and raw coffee. Special attention and GDR support received the cultivation of coffee, including projects to supervise new cultivation methods, the building of secondary infrastructure, training of cultivation experts and provision of direct material aid like sewing machines, motorbikes and other technical equipment (cf. Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht).

By the early to mid-1980s, the training of Lao specialists by GDR instructors started to both increase and become one of the most defining aspects of the cooperation between Lao PDR and GDR. It was understood by both sides that the training of qualified personnel would bring long-term effects for an eventual self-sufficiency of Laos (ibid). GDR vocational advisors were sent to support and oversee the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports, an effort that was continued by the Federal Republic of Germany after the German

Reunification. Other institutions received similar support, like the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. With GDR support, an existing forestry school in Dong Dok was expanded to first a vocational centre for the training of forestry specialists and in 1986 to a proper college; Laotian forestry instructors received additional training in the GDR, some graduated with Diplomas in Engineering and became high ranking officials within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In the capital city Vientiane, support efforts were largely concentrated on expanding vocational education as well. Among the recipients of this support were the Pakpasak Technical School and the Lao-German Technical School (now: Lao-German Technical College (LGTC), to both of which GDR instructors were sent to improve the curriculum. At Pakpasak for instance, the curriculum expanded drastically and by 1981 offered vocational training for electricians, metal workers, car mechanics, brick layers, carpenters and other occupations. Since 1981, a "brigade of friendship" of the "Free German Youth" (FDJ) – the official youth movement in the GDR – provided further support for construction and training at the school (ibid, 2008). Similar developments occurred at the Lao-German Technical School.

GDR efforts to improve (vocational) training in Laos did not stop at projects confined to the Southeast Asian country itself. Between 1975 and 1990, over 3000 Laotians went to the GDR to be trained in various fields of expertise, around 2000 of them stayed for a prolonged period of time and graduated from various East German colleges and universities, especially in technical fields such as electronic engineering. On average, the GDR accepted 70 Laotians per year into their colleges and universities, with an additional 5 – 10 per year as potential doctorates (cf. Deutsche Botschaft Vientiane 2020; Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht). Sending Laotian students abroad was part of a broader Laotian strategy to augment the ranks of government and administration with more educated people. Around 2000 Lao students a year were sent to the Soviet Union and other socialist states between 1975 and 1985, including the GDR (cf. Stuart-Fox 2002, 245; Schneider 2000, 261). The impact of this strategy regarding GDR involvement in this training and education process can still be felt today: Many Lao students who were in their twenties during the 1980s and studied in the GDR are today part of the Laotian generation who are involved in high ranking positions within government and administration, education institutions and companies. Furthermore, the preparatory German classes for Lao students headed for the GDR during the 1980s – conducted at Dong Dok – soon outpaced their initial scope and would eventually form the foundation for the German department at the National University of Laos. The first

generation of Laotian computer technicians was trained in the GDR, as were a large number of today's core staff of Électricité du Laos, the state-owned electricity company of Lao PDR (cf. Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht).

The support directed towards Laos had cost the GDR an approximate 18 million Eastern DM per year since 1975. Some additional 190 million Eastern DM total were also paid to the Laotian government for development efforts over the 15 years of Lao-GDR cooperation as in form of grants without repayment obligation. With the German Reunification, this financial support, as well as most other cooperation efforts between Lao PDR and the GDR, came to an end in 1990. Due to planning and financing uncertainty, many projects and aid efforts were put on indefinite hold or cancelled in the aftermath of Reunification, although some carried over and continued by the Federal Republic of Germany or non-governmental organisations that succeeded GDR institutions. The perhaps most symbolic event of this diplomatic shift came about when the FRG embassy moved offices from their former location to that once owned by the GDR embassy; Lao PDR was actually one of the few developing countries both German states had accredited ambassadors to (cf. Schultze 2013, 322). With the unification of Germany, the German Democratic Republic was no more, and in its place, a united Germany stood – complete with economic, political, and overall diplomatic priorities differing from their socialist predecessors (cf. Verband für Internationale Politik und Völkerrecht).

3.3 Diplomatic relations after the German Unification

When West and East Germany officially reunited in 1990, the now unified nation had many tasks ahead of itself. While the legacy of the GDR was of course most heavily felt in Germany itself, the FRG also inherited responsibility for a wide host of development cooperation projects the GDR had started prior to its fall, some of which were at full momentum when the GDR dissolved. Now, the Federal Republic of Germany had to review what development projects the GDR Ministry for Economic Cooperation (MWZ) oversaw before its dissolution. The MWZ work at the time of German unification however was not exactly comprehensible and easy to assess; instead, it was a wide net of projects, policies and responsibilities splintered across various institutions. This made it very difficult to bring those projects which were still running in October 1990 – 106 projects in 15 countries in total – to a proper, albeit premature end. Germany did not want to leave behind any GDR

development projects in a state of ruin and thus set out to either find satisfying conclusion for those projects not deemed in their interest or outright continue them. Out of the 106 projects, it was decided to continue 64 with funds from the BMZ. Among those projects was the fate of the 650 Laotians who studied and received training in the former GDR at the time of reunification; BMZ funding allowed them to finish their respective stays. Four projects in Southeast Asia, one of them in Laos, were transferred to non-governmental organisations (cf. Bohnet 2015, 138-139).

As the assessments of GDR development work slowly came to an end in the early 1990s, ties to Laos in the form of development cooperation were left unsevered. In 1991, specialists of the German Development Service (DED) replaced those once sent by the FDJ friendship brigade; the GDR support for Laotian training centres for specialists in the fields of forestry and finance was also continued by a now united Germany (cf. Schultze 2013, 322). Additional agreements and treaties followed over the next three decades. Especially bilateral development projects intensified drastically: While Germany had maintained only remains of GDR development work in Laos during the early 1990s, it would commission six major projects aimed at the construction of infrastructure and education in Laos between 1995 and 2005 with a total budget of over 21 million EUR (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2020b). In August 1996, Germany and the Lao People's Democratic Republic reached a bilateral agreement concerning "the encouragement and reciprocal protection of investments" (Europäische Union 2016). Six years later, in 2003, Germany redefined its approach to development cooperation with Lao PDR to be mainly aimed towards two focus areas: rural development and sustainable economic development. Other development efforts were also undertaken, including the renovation and expansion of the Laotian National Road 6 and more recently the preservation of several UNESCO World Heritage sites and other sites of cultural significance for Laos in the cities of Luang Prabang and Vientiane (cf. Schultze 2013, 322; Auswärtiges Am, 2020). For the past few decades, political relations between Laos and Germany developed to a degree of friendly exchange between government officials for state visits (cf. Schultze 2013, 322). In this regard, the highest-ranking official visitor to Germany was Laotian Prime minister Thongloun Sisoulith in 2019 who in turn extended an invitation to Chancellor Angela Merkel (cf. Die Bundesregierung). Aside from the political aspect, relations are also fairly pronounced in culture and tourism, with economic ties weakly trailing behind. Bilateral development cooperation between the two remains by far the biggest aspect of Lao-German (diplomatic)

relations. In a way, the legacy of Lao-GDR cooperation also lives on in the good relations that today's Germany enjoys with those Laotian specialists who once received their training in the GDR (cf. KfW).

4. Current state of Lao-German diplomatic relations

Much has changed over the 62 years in which Laos and Germany maintained official diplomatic ties. Even though these relations went through several iterations – from the Kingdom of Laos and both Germanies to Lao PDR and East Germany to a unified Germany and a still socialist Laos – they persisted over the years. No matter what government was in charge on either side, a German government always remained connected to a Laotian one. Building upon this foundation, the present-day diplomatic relations that Lao PDR and Germany maintain are of extensive and multidimensional nature. As was already the case with the project of "socialist partnership" during GDR, the by far largest aspect of present-day diplomatic relations between Lao PDR and the Federal Republic of Germany still is that of their cooperation towards promoting responsible Laotian development. The definition of what constitutes "responsible", and the concept that development in general should follow responsible, sustainable lines evolved over the decades. Likewise, while development was always an integral part of Lao-German diplomatic relations, the forms it took changed over the decades just as much as the global understanding of what development should entail. While specifically pronounced sustainable development form a main pillar of relations between the two countries, Laos and Germany also work together on an economic, political and cultural level in the form of various cooperation projects, programmes and organisations active in Laos with various degrees of intensity.

4.1 Foreign relations

Laos and (West) Germany first established diplomatic ties on 31 January 1958 and have since then maintained continued relations throughout various political shifts and changes. German embassies were established on 27 May 1974 (GDR) and 11 August 1975 (FRG) respectively. As was already highlighted earlier, relations between Lao PDR and the FRG remained at a minimum of interaction while GDR and Laos enjoyed a fairly extensive

relationship due to their ideological proximity. Despite 15 years of (albeit socialist) cooperation and the subsequent continuation of some cooperation projects, such as the education and training of Laotians in Germany, present-day diplomatic relations between the two countries are not as intensive as one would assume. A 2018 evaluation report of German foreign relations with Southeast Asian nations commissioned by the German parliament characterises relations between Lao PDR and the Federal Republic of Germany as "comparatively weakly pronounced" (cf. Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag, 2018, 16-17).

Despite this assessment, relations between Laos and Germany are not relegated to a bare minimum of diplomatic interaction. In November 2016, both countries partook in intergovernmental negotiations in Vientiane to discuss the continuation of funding for several development projects in Laos, eventually agreeing on a 45.8 million EUR budget. Furthermore, Germany was entrusted with co-chairing sector working groups for environment, trade and private sector development. In March 2019, Laotian Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith officially visited Germany and met with Chancellor Angela Merkel. He was the first Laotian Prime Minister and highest ranking official of the Lao Government to visit the Federal Republic of Germany in 60 years of diplomatic relations. Issues discussed between Merkel and Sisoulith included the renewal of funding for Lao-German development cooperation (a total of 50 million EUR for 2018 and 2019), the sustainable modernisation of the Laotian economy and numerous other economic reforms in Laos (cf. Die Bundesregierung 2019). In addition, delegations of different boards of the German Parliament visit Laos on a regular basis; recent visitors include delegates from the German board of Tourism in 2019 (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 2019) and from the committee for economic cooperation and development in 2017 (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 2017). It remains to be seen, however, in which way political relations between Lao PDR and Germany will be affected by the April 2020 announcement of the BMZ to end bilateral, direct cooperation with a third of its current partners, one of which is the Southeast Asian Nation (cf. Finanznachrichten).

4.2 Trade and economy

In terms of pure economic interaction between Lao PDR and Germany, diverging trends could be observed over the last few years. Between 2015 and 2018, imports of Laotian goods to Germany grew from 74.5 million EUR to approximately 92 million EUR, while at the same time the export volume of German goods to Laos decreased from 41 million EUR in 2015 to only 29.4 million EUR in 2018. Within the European Union, Germany is the biggest trade partner of Laos. Around 85 percent of Lao exports to Germany are clothing and textile articles, German exports to Laos on the other hand mainly consist of cars, car parts and technical appliances. Economic relations between Laos and Germany are fairly weak and unpronounced. A lack of economic infrastructure and often relatively poorly trained work force make Laos an unattractive location for investors and companies, sometimes even for Laotian ones (cf. Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2018). While it should be noted that Germany is Laos' biggest trade partner inside the European Union, trade between the two countries amounts to only 1.6 percent of all Laotian Exports in 2016, making Germany (and by extension, the EU) only a trade partner of minor importance to the Laotian economy. In 2016, out of 239 German trade partners, Laos placed 111st for imports and 157th for exports.

Instead, Laos is for the most part economically dominated by its neighbours, especially the People's Republic of China and Thailand. One third of all 2016 exports from Laos went to each China and Thailand; the same year, over 61 percent of all goods imported by Laos came from Thailand. However, especially China has steadily expanded its economic (and thus political) influence over Laos during the 2010s, as has already been highlighted earlier. At the same time, direct economic relations between Laos and Germany remained distinctively undeveloped. While it can be argued that the ongoing modernisation of the Laotian economy and related infrastructure holds potential to better connect Laos to the global economy, it is unlikely that these developments would cause notable short-term change in Lao-German economic relations (cf. Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2018). With the development of a distinct tourist sector in Laos, around 30 000 German tourists visit Laos each year. Notably, Laos was represented extensively at the ITB Berlin, the world's largest tourism trade fair, in 2018; the German Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs ("Auswärtiges Amt", AA) also extended an invitation to the Lao Government to send a delegation for talks about sustainable tourism (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2018). Even though Germany places 3rd on

the list of European visitors to Laos, it ranks only 9th in total and falls way behind Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese visitor numbers (respectively two million, one million and 550 000 visitors in 2015) (cf. Tourism Development Department). Despite its remarkable economic growth, Laos remains an LDC with a host of socioeconomic challenges still ahead, making it instead a focus country for German development efforts (cf. Wissenschaftliche Dienste Deutscher Bundestag 2018).

4.3 Culture and academia

Relations between Lao PDR and the Federal Republic of Germany are not solely confined to politics and matters of economy. The period of socialist cooperation between GDR and Lao PDR, especially the training and education of select Laotians in East Germany, would provide the foundation for further intersection between the German and Lao cultural landscape. Supported by funds from the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNESCO World Heritage sites in the historical centre of Luang Prabang (in this distinct case a royal palace and adjacent gardens) were renovated between 2015 and 2018. Additional funds were allocated towards other restauration projects of cultural heritage sites in Laos as part of the AA's cultural preservation programme. Results include the restauration of old murals at Wat Sisaket Temple in Vientiane and other Buddhist temples, as well as the documentation and digitisation of Buddhist scriptures and traditional Lao folk music between 2011 and 2017 (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2020).

Several German non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and similar humanitarian organisations are active in Laos; some do receive support from the German government through development institutions. Of note, for example, is the organisation "Deutsch-Laotische Gesellschaft e.V." (DLG), founded in 1998 by (former) diplomats, scientists, entrepreneurs, and development workers, most of whom either were or still are active in Lao PDR; since 2012, it is registered in Laos as "German Lao Association for Development" (GLAD), which also serves as the DLG's implementation body in the country (cf. DLG e.V., 2020a). Projects by DLG and GLAD in Laos include the renovation and construction of schools, scholarships for Laotian students and the training of Laotian members of parliament as mediators between GLAD and local authorities (cf. DLG e.V., 2020b). Additionally, a "German-Lao cultural centre" for cultural exchange was established in Luang Prabang with private donations (cf. DLG e.V., 2020c). Of similar significance is the "German-Lao

Friendship Society" (GLFS). Many Laotians who once studied in the GDR during the 1980s and 1990s continue to cultivate German language, culture and relations to Germany within the society. Due to membership of several high ranking Laotian government officials, the GLFS furthermore enjoys a high standing and trust with the Laotian government and is thus able to promote and cultivate successful (cultural) bilateral relations between Lao PDR and Germany (cf. GLFS e.V.; Auswärtiges Amt 2018).

Since 2003, German can be studied in the National University of Laos' (NUOL) Bachelor programme, making NUOL the only university, and by extension official education institution in Lao PDR to do so (cf. Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). In contrast, Lao studies as an academic field in Germany started in the early 1980s, notably with the courses "regional sciences Laos" and "interpreter for the Lao language" at Humboldt-University in Berlin. It was initially expected that German academic interest in Laos would increase during the 1990s as a side effect of German development projects; in reality however, no such trends realised. Courses mostly disappeared throughout the 1990s or were integrated into other fields. What remains today in the German academic landscape are a few small, almost miniscule courses, labelled as "exotic subjects" and fighting for their existence due to a lack of interest (cf. Antirassistisch-Interkulturelles Informationszentrum).

Yet still, Lao PDR and Germany cooperate in the academic sector: Seven German universities cooperate with Lao partners in the academic sector as of 2020; Around 600 alumni of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) are in Laos through a wider programme of teacher and student mobility as the German government extends both long- and short-term scholarships to Lao students interested in studying at German universities. One such partnership is the cooperation between University of Education Karlsruhe (PHKA) and Savannakhet University (SKU) in Laos, formalised as recently as early 2018. Within the frame of the "Erasmus+ mobility with partner countries" programme, established in 2017 to promote cooperation and exchange between EU and non-EU countries, the first three Lao academics from (SKU) were able to take a semester abroad: two as students and one as lecturer at the University of Education Karlsruhe. In October 2018, a shared symposium under the guiding theme "Sustainable Development and Internationalization in Higher Education" was held at Savannekhet University with representatives of both universities. While initially founded on academic cooperation in the fields of English language education and support of Laotian teacher training, the partnership between SKU and PHKA has since expanded out to additional fields such as economics, biology, technical education, IT and

physics. (cf. Wochenblatt; Auswärtiges Amt 2020). In their promotion of an active academic exchange and academic mobility, cooperation projects like the SKU-PHKA partnership and similar programmes follow, in a way, in the footsteps of the projects conducted between Lao PDR and the German Democratic Republic decades earlier. These earlier projects undoubtedly left their mark with many Lao – it is unlikely that now, some thirty years later, a new generation of academic cooperation and partnership will leave Laos completely unaffected.

4.4 Humanitarian and development efforts

Although diplomatic relations between Lao PDR and Germany exhibit a wide variety of facets, efforts to promote sustainable development in the Southeast Asian nation form one of the most defining pillars of Lao-German relations. Within the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Germany is the second-largest giver of aid to Laos after Japan. After negotiations in September 2018, the German government allocated 50 million EUR in support for Laos, of which 30 million EUR went towards financial and 20 million EUR towards technical cooperation. An overall 10 million EUR went into reconstruction efforts after the collapse of a dam in July 2018 caused large damages in the South of Laos. In total, over 325 million EUR have been invested in 69 projects between 1998 and 2020; a fifth of this sum each went into agricultural and vocational development. Other supported fields are transports and logistics with an allocated 13 percent of this budget and finance and state development with 8 percent each. 22 percent of all development funds went into multisectoral projects (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2020b; BBC 2018). Furthermore, when considering Lao-German cooperation projects conducted before 1998, the total capacity of financial support directed towards Lao PDR stands at an approximate 500 million EUR since 1963 (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2020).

As defined by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the two main focus areas of development efforts between the two countries are supporting the development of rural Laotian areas and sustainable economic development (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2020b). On the official German side, development cooperation with Lao PDR is mainly overseen and carried out by two institutions, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*

(German society for international cooperation, short: GIZ) and the *KfW Entwicklungsbank* (KfW Development bank). Both are working as so called "Durchführungsorganisationen" (implanting organisations) of the BMZ and thus responsible for devising and implementing (separate) concrete strategies and projects oriented towards the aforementioned development goals on behalf of the German government. The GIZ is currently involved in 25 development projects in Southeast Asia, ASEAN and Laos specifically with a staff of 195 employees as of 2019 to provide technical cooperation assistance (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2019). The KfW meanwhile is mainly supporting Laos in the context of Financial Cooperation (FC) (cf. KfW). Apart these two main fields of development cooperation, additional projects are also carried out in various other fields, such as social development and governance.

4.4.1 Rural development

As one of the two pronounced focus areas of Lao-German cooperation, the development of rural areas is aimed towards improving the living standards of the rural Laotian population, especially in the North of the country. As much as 65 percent of all Laotians are living in rural areas of the country, many of whom are being affected by the lack of proper infrastructure for water, electricity, telecommunications and overall mobility. Northern villages especially are cut off from the rest of the country during the rain session – around ten percent don't have road access at all – and are thus handicapped in their socio-economic development when compared to the rest of the country. Lao-German development efforts in this area are directed towards expansion and maintenance of transport ways, enabling the population of otherwise poorly connected village communities better access to markets, schools and healthcare (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020b; KfW).

One of the biggest initiatives of infrastructure development in Laos is the KfW Rural Development Programme (RDP). Through the RDP, over 1100 kilometres of roads, more than 20 bridges, 10 local and regional markets were financed by the KfW, connecting an approximate 165 000 people to important facilities all year round and granting them new regional mobility, especially to schools and healthcare (cf. KfW Development Bank 2019a). Aside from the construction of infrastructure, measures were taken to secure the long-term

sustainability of rural development: The Public Works and Transport Training Institute (PTTI) in Vientiane Capital was expanded to better allow for the training of staff on different levels of the country, ranging from local to provincial level. To strengthen capacities of local companies and the construction sector, construction contracts were awarded to Laotian companies through national bidding processes. While these projects are overseen solely by the KfW, they closely cooperate with similar projects, embedding them in a large cooperative context and creating positive spill-over effects. In terms of funding, when viewed of the project term, KfW contributions amount to 50 million EUR of the 56 million EUR in project investments, the rest being financed by the Lao Government (ibid). In addition, KfW is implementing a project to secure clean water supply and nutritional security on behalf of the European Union in two northern Laotian provinces.

The expansion of infrastructure on such a scale comes with a cost, however. In the 1960s, 70 percent of Laotian land area was covered by forests, but due to "shifting cultivation, inappropriate upland farming practices, over-logging, mining and hydropower development" (cf. KfW Development Bank, 2019b) caused by the rapid expansion of the Laotian economic landscape, forest coverage reached a low of 40 percent, putting heavy pressure on the environment. In its current development plan, the Lao government has stated that it intends to again reach 70 percent forest coverage through reforestation. Accordingly, various projects were commissioned by the German government since 2008 through both KfW and GIZ and have become a part of bilateral cooperation between Laos and Germany ever since (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020b). Another important focal aspect of rural development is thus the focus on climate protection through sustainable forestry, reforms in land use and management and the protection of biodiversity.

The BMZ project "Klimaschutz durch Walderhalt" (Climate protection through forest conservation), for example, aims to support local village communities in supplementing their income from deforestation practices through sustainable forms of forest usage and cultivation, thus eliminating the need for further logging and destruction of the environment; village communities receive specialised training in sustainable forestry, financial aid for conservation efforts and technical advice. "Klimaschutz durch Walderhalt" includes over 70 villages in the North of Laos, promoting nature conservation and climate protection long term alongside the benefit of helping locals to readjust their economic situation along more sustainable lines. In similar fashion, the KfW "Village Forest Management Project" outlines

the goals of supporting Laotian governmental institutions to provide for a better legal environment for sustainable forestry, the development of a coherent national forestry policy that can support improvement of the socioeconomic situation of people who would otherwise be negatively affected by a shift towards more sustainable strategies, as well as extensive technical and professional support to ensure the success of this particular project. Financing of this particular project is split between the German government through KfW and the Laotian government, with Germany covering 7 million EUR and Laos 760 000 EUR respectively (cf. KfW Development Bank, 2019b). Additionally, the German government also supports the Mekong River Commission with its headquarters in Vientane (cf. Auswärtiges Amt, 2020). Other measures include the improvement of communication between local population and government authorities, environmental education and the establishment of economic partnerships to promote sustainable tourism in the region (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2020b). Similar projects are financed by the GIZ (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2019).

4.4.2 Sustainable economic development

With the continued integration of the Laotian economy into bigger markets, accelerated by years of rapid economic growth, the country must adapt to the challenges of stepping onto the international economic stage. In its transition from planned to market economy, Laos is held back by a weak financial sector, institutional weaknesses and the lack of proper vocational training in many fields of the work force. After the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 and the subsequent emergence of a new domestic market, circumstances threaten to slow down further economic development in Laos. To ensure a proper and sustainable entry into this domestic market and further integration within the global economy, as well as to enable a larger part of the Laotian population to participate in this newly found wealth, Germany and Lao PDR are cooperating in multiple regards. Focal areas of this specific development target are the reform and implementation of administrative and regulatory guidelines and the establishment of a proper, self-sufficient Laotian micro-finance sector. More so, heavy emphasis is put on the qualitative and quantitative development of vocational education in Laos. Here, Germany sponsors the expansion of vocational institutions, systematic initial and continued instruction of

vocational schoolteachers and the creation of a country wide dual education strategy. These measures are meant to strengthen the Laotian economic by offering new generations of Laotian proper vocational education means and reducing Laos' dependence on trained workers from other countries (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020b; KfW).

4.4.2.1 Microfinance

Despite its increasing economic capacity and growth, Lao PDR struggles with a fairly underdeveloped domestic financial sector. Although progress was already made in enabling poorer parts of the population access to a wider range of financial services, "[A]ccess to formal financial services for the rural poor remains a major challenge" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2020a). Outside of major cities, only few commercial banks and financial institutions operate, posing challenges for businesses and the rural poor alike. The rural population often lacks the financial reserves to endure cases of emergency; neither do they have the ability to take out loans and expand potential business nor can they safely deposit their monetary savings due to a lack of banks. In addition, many are inexperienced with the proper management of their financial affairs. German development efforts to support the Laotian finance sector aim to provide widespread access to financial institutions for the Laotian population, better financial education and an improvement to the legal framework surrounding the finance sector. One project to implement such measures is the GIZ project "Microfinance in Rural Areas - Access to Finance for the Poor", running since 2009. By working with Network Support Organisations (NSOs) – proven to be both sustainable and efficient in supporting village banks – the project improves conditions for the rural population. On a higher level, the GIZ works with the Laotian central bank, the Bank of Laos (BOL), to improve the legal and institutional framework of the finance sector. As of January 2019, through seven NSOs – five of which already operating efficiently enough to cover their expenses – the GIZ provides assistance to over 650 village banks in 24 districts, having reached a combined 153 000 members, including 79 000 women. GIZ evaluation puts the "combined value of the savings held in these banks [at] 269 billion Lao Kip, or 27 million Euros" (ibid, 1-2). Success can also be observed in a growing number of new members and an average portfolio risk of 3 percent, which is lower than the international benchmark of 5 percent. In addition, training for literacy

in financial and business matters reached over 51 000 people, 55 percent of them women; training was also provided to teachers of 17 vocational schools within the scope of GIZ's Vocational Education in Laos (VELA) project (ibid). Another project commissioned by the German government takes the shape of KfW involvement such as financial contributions to microfinance funds of ACLEDA Bank Laos and BOL intended for loans to poor households as well as small- and medium-sized Laotian businesses (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020b; KfW).

4.4.2.2 Vocational education and training

One core requirement for sustainable growth – as promoted and supported by the BMZ in Laos within the emergent ASEAN Economic Community – is a reliable environment in which it can take place. Technical and vocational training and education (TVET), as the BMZ puts it in a 2015 strategy paper on the development of education in the ASEAN region, "can make a great difference in this regard by fostering human resource development in the region, as well as labor mobility throughout the region" (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2015). As such, the importance of TVET for sustainable development has also been fixed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDGs 4, 5 and 8 directly relate to the importance of vocational education. Economic developments like the emergence of a common economic area in the region carry with them large implications: For instance, certain ASEAN member countries such as Lao PDR experience an increasing divergence between the demands of the regional labour market and their respective vocational systems, necessitating to combat the issues of insufficient TVET. In its agenda for the support of TVET in the ASEAN community, the GMZ has identified four core issues to be addressed alongside proposed solutions: First is the realignment and restructuring of TVET in cooperation countries along more uniform lines and the demands of the local labour market as well as to enable better access to TVET systems. Second is provision of more demand-oriented training of TVET personnel; third the promotion of general labour mobility within the ASEAN region. The last issue identified by the GMZ is the need for closer cooperation between the private sector of affected countries and their respective TVET systems. In addition to those core issues, GMZ development efforts for TVET in the region also aim to incorporate the promotion of "green skills" and gender equality (ibid). Lao PDR naturally finds itself among the ASEAN countries increasingly

affected by aforementioned issues due to its rapidly evolving economy, and as such is one of the countries where the GMZ sponsors and conducts projects to reform TVET systems for the improvement of vocational education, and by extension, the overall quality of life, with regards to the previously identified issues.

Through its implementing organisations, Germany devised a variety of projects for the development of a Laotian TVET system that would in time be adequate enough to self-sufficiently respond to the demands made to the Laotian economy by the greater ASEAN economic community. In cooperation with the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) for instance, the GIZ conducts the project "Vocational Education in Laos" (VELA) since 2013 with a total financial capacity of 23 million EUR. The proclaimed goal of VELA is to implement "Dual-Cooperative Training programmes for relevant professions […] in the dynamic economic centres of Luang Prabang, Pakse and Vientiane" (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2020b). It does so in cooperation with MoES and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry by expanding upon the Dual-Cooperative Training (DCT) programme already in place at flagship colleges throughout Laos. Four of these colleges, situated in provinces with high demands for specialised labour, receive support in organisational development and building of capacities alike. On a provincial level, capacities of key actors in the private sector are strengthened due to their efficiency in supporting the conceptualisation and implementation of DCT strategies; on a national level, close coordination with public actors is pursued to better manage and steer the implementation of DCT measures (ibid).

With assistance of VELA, the Laotian TVET development plan 2016-2020 was developed; in addition, the project supported the creation of guidelines for the implantation of both DCT and Integrated Vocational Education and Training (IVET) in the country. Further assistance was provided for the conceptualisation of a National Qualification Framework (NQF). VELA thus proved itself to be "an important driver for the development of the regulatory framework". In cooperation with six Laotian vocational colleges, ten TVET programmes for improved labour market orientation were developed and three practically implemented. Vocational colleges received further support through the establishment of structures and processes that allow for a better coordination with the needs of the local private sector partners. TVET teachers, management staff and in-company trainers were provided with opportunities for capacity building and a mentoring system was established to guarantee the prolonged success of TVET reforms and development. DCT approaches meanwhile, first

implemented at the Lao-German Technical College (LGTC) in Vientiane in earlier projects, were extended towards other colleges and provinces based on the experiences made with DCT at this particular college (ibid).

Further support for the development and improvement of vocational education in Laos is also provided by KfW. As part of a four-phase development programme for instance, KfW provided funds to be used in six provincial capitals for the construction of "school buildings, workshops, student residencies, public administration buildings and technical/ educational training facilities for roughly 500-600 students in each case" (KfW 2014). In cooperation with GIZ and local officials, labour-market oriented curriculums for said schools were developed; individual staff (teachers and management) received specialised training. The two first phases of the programme mainly concerned themselves with the establishment of a basic TVET infrastructure and subsequent provision of relevant technical equipment in several locations (ibid), while the latter two phases aimed to build upon previously established structures and to improve the supply of a qualified workforce to the Laotian market. Although later phases of the project were rated as overall "satisfactory", success widely varied throughout the individual schools involved, with the LGTC being the only school to meet all set criteria for measures to be considered successful. Challenges are posed by the uncertainty of funds for future maintenance of facilities and advanced vocational training of staff and graduates, courses of vocational study often being not sufficient enough for the needs of the local labour-market and the lack of intercultural knowledge and experience. Especially the latter two factors are deciding factors for Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese companies looking for staff in Laos. Nevertheless, as post-project evaluation by KfW finds, "training at vocational schools has in many cases enabled graduates to enter a qualified profession" (KfW 2018). The process of establishing a proper TVET system takes time and effort, ultimately depending on the qualification of its graduates. The level of qualification achievable in many vocational schools in Laos is, at the time, still too low to contribute immediate value to country and economy. Germany in their cooperation with a total of 13 out of 23 vocational schools in Laos visibly contributed to the capacity of the state vocational system in Laos nonetheless (ibid).

Working in tandem with the VELA project, KfW also initiated the establishment and funding of the Vocational Education Funding Facility (VEFF) as new form of development cooperation to provide proper tools of TVET financing in Laos. With funding from both BMZ and the Laotian Government, the project offers "financial support to partnerships of

Vocational Training Institutes […] and enterprises" (KfW Development Bank 2019c), thereby providing assistance to reform processes of Laotian TVET systems and the improvement of quality of training. In turn, improved framework conditions benefit the development of small- and medium sized enterprises due to a wider local availability of specialised personnel. Additionally, female participation in VEFF is promoted by means of specific targets for female enrolment and graduation (ibid).

4.4.2.3 Economic integration into ASEAN

German development aid also supports the integration of Lao PDR into the economic reality of the ASEAN economic community. Since its establishment in 2015, the AEC has grown to encompass over 600 million people with a combined purchasing power of 2.3 trillion USD, offering a plenty of opportunities for the People's Republic (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2015a). For the Laotian economy to properly function and transform, it cannot remain disconnected from the international economic situation in the ASEAN region. Concerns were raised within ASEAN itself that a lack of proper integration would eventually lead to the deepening of already existing development gaps of members and a "two-tier ASEAN" (cf. Association of Southeast Asian Nations). On behalf of the BMZ, the GIZ initiated projects both with ASEAN and Lao PDR specifically to promote economic competitiveness of the AEC and the integration of rising economic actors such as Laos (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2019). To this end, Germany directly contributes to the "Promotion of Competitiveness within the Framework of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (COMPETE)" project and extends support to the "Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)"; on a national level, it works with the Laotian Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

With its support of IAI, a framework project run in Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, GIZ assists the associated countries in several measures intended to enable a better access to and conditions for the regional market. To "strengthen the competitiveness and productivity of companies in the four countries" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2015b) said companies and enterprises are given appropriate training for integration; in addition they are being made aware of potential benefits and risks of the ASEAN regional market. Related ministries in the countries receive support to build

capacities that will help them further integration processes. Overall (intended) effects of the project include better work force mobility and an improved flow of services and investment in the region and between countries. In addition, guidelines were created by participating countries to align national qualification standards with those set by ASEAN itself to further (economic) integration between ASEAN countries (ibid).

The COMPETE project aims to further the ASEAN strategies of the IAI project. Mirroring IAI in its orientation, this project, commissioned by the German government in 2018, works towards the "implementation of ASEAN key strategies in the fields of competition policy and trade in services" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2018a) in cooperation with the countries already included in IAI. Alongside efforts to implement such strategies effectively, COMPETE also helps the participating countries with the improvement of institutional effectiveness and human resource development systems. In both cases, national institutions receive resources and training. Additional support is provided for the creation of country-specific regulations, guidelines and policies. Institutions also receive access to a variety of learning and training materials for personnel to guarantee a lasting sustainability of implemented measures (ibid.).

In cooperation with the Laotian Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the GIZ conducts the "Regional Economic Integration of Laos into ASEAN, Trade and Entrepreneurship Development" (RELATED) project on a level much more tailored towards Laotian interests and needs. Objectives of RELATED as stated by the GIZ are "[the improvement of] the regulatory and procedural framework for regional trade and investment" by the Laotian government, and an increased involvement of the Laotian private sector in economic opportunities provided by AEC-integration. RELATED furthermore advises the Laotian government in the implementation of the AEC 2025 blueprint[5] in several key areas. Advice in technical areas is provided to actors in charge of standardising and implementing regulations, legal and regulatory frameworks and general guidelines in accordance with standards set by the AEC. In the private sector, training and toolkits are provided to small- and medium-sized businesses oriented towards AEC-relevant services as are workshops for

[5] In short, the AEC Blueprint serves as a set of guidelines and frameworks for a coordinated economic integration of ASEAN members.

these businesses to help them access the AEC better – here, e-commerce as a viable access tool is promoted (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2018b).

Since its start in 2018 the RELATED project can already present considerable results. The project assisted the Laotian government in the conceptualisation and further development of the "National Work Plan for Lao PDR 2018-2020" commissioned by the Lao government to properly implement the AEC 2025 blueprint. RELATED also works with relevant governmental institutions to implement select measures of the National Work plan. Proper identification and prioritisation of reform processes for easy forms of demand-oriented business received support, as did the regulatory and legal framework surrounding logistics and transport. As the GIZ finds in project reports, "the project assists […] a series of public-private dialogue events that bring together key government officials and business representatives in order to discuss major issues for the private sector development" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2018). Furthermore, RELATED is successfully supporting various private sector enterprises in adapting to their potential integration into a wider market. Here, especially the coffee industry and other selected sectors benefitted. Involved Lao coffee enterprises, for instance, were able to both reduce their dependency on traders and increase their sales with access to wider markets where they could sell their products for a more adequate price. The project also supported the introduction of the "Plastic Free Laos" label for hotels and other tourist businesses, aimed at the reduction of single-use plastics (ibid.) – a remarkable step for the country increasingly struggling with the issue of plastic waste and pollution. As RELATED is set to last at least until 2022, it can be expected that the integration of Lao PDR into the wider ASEAN economic community will progress further still; supported by, alongside a wide range of outside actors, the Federal Republic of Germany.

4.4.3 Further projects

As German-supported development projects in Laos amount to a total of 69 projects, 31 of which are still running as of May 2020 (cf. Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2020b), it is only natural that not all of these projects fall in one of the two main categories of rural development and sustainable economic development. Instead, numerous projects outside the scope of those two fields are also conducted.

One such undertaking for example is the multinational "Fit for School" project by the GIZ that is implemented in several Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and of course Laos. In its approach, "Fit for School" is targeted at children suffering from one or multiple health deficiencies (such as worms, diarrhoea or tooth decay) due to the lack of proper hygiene. In the case of Laos, the project started in 2011 at 22 select primary schools in Vientiane with the implementation of sustainable hygiene standards. Primary schools serve as an ideal environment for children to learn about proper hygiene standards and their positive impact on personal health. Project guidelines are designed in such a way that they are implementable even without external funding and include daily handwashing and tooth-brushing activities, regular cleaning of sanitary facilities at school and deworming treatments. After the initial success and positive effects of "Fit for School" became evident, the Laotian government decided to implement the project nationwide. Staff of sub-national divisions of the Laotian MoES received special training and funds to aid in the implementation of these hygiene guidelines in primary schools. As a result, over the course of eight years, the number of participating schools has increased from the 22 model schools in Vientiane to over 1100 primary schools across the entire country as of 2019, reaching a combined 150 000 pupils. Further preparations are being made on the Laotian side to adapt and implement "Fit for School" for kindergartens and pre-schools as well. The impact of Lao-German cooperation in improving access to proper hygiene for children can clearly be felt (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2020c; Fit for School).

Another project outside the main goals of Lao-German development cooperation, the "Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and the Rule of Law (CEGGA)" is a project co-funded by Germany through the GIZ alongside the European Union and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. CEGGA supports increased involvement of Lao citizens in (political) reform processes of their country. This is to be achieved by providing "technical advisory services, logistical and financial support, capacity development support and training measures for state and non-state actors at multiple levels" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2017) alongside the promotion of the rule of law and human rights, as well as good governance. The CEGGA project aligns with several consecutive plans formulated by the government of Lao PDR to reform the state apparatus towards more democratic principles and participation possibilities for citizens; state institutions on different levels such as National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies are to be integrated more thoroughly in the political landscape and gaps between

written and practiced law closed. Within these plans, the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) for the development of the country has been recognised by the Laotian government. The focus of CEGGA thus lies on "the legal and administrative environment for civil society engagement and the rule of law as well as on the implementation of international human rights conventions" (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2017). More specifically, CEGGA is implemented in three focus areas. These are: first the improvement of capacities and environment for CSOs; second the strengthening of National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies; third an improved implementation of rule of law and human rights (ibid).

As of 2018, around 250 CSOs are registered in Laos, most of them in the capital city of Vientiane. In their role as contributors to Laotian development processes, there are supported by CEGGA resources to enable them a more direct dialogue with relevant ministries. Furthermore, the project is involved in the conceptualisation of a new regulatory framework that allows for faster CSO registration and a more sufficient implementation and execution of their own civil projects. Both National Assembly and People's Assemblies are supported in exercising their newly granted powers such as drafting laws and overseeing government processes. CEGGA also cooperates with several Laotian ministries to implement its set goals. With the Ministry of Justice, the programme works to establish legal aid centres in all 18 provinces of Laos; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is supported in incorporating internationally ratified human rights into the Laotian legal framework (ibid). Even though the CEGGA programme is still running as of early 2020 and thus results cannot be properly determined (yet), its reach as one of the supporting actors of current reform processes in Lao PDR as well as its overall scope serve as an example of the degree of interconnectedness and sophistication Lao-German cooperation efforts can reach.

"Fit for School" and CEGGA are but two of the many projects of development cooperation between Laos and Germany placed outside the two focus areas of their combined efforts. The very nature of development work already suggests that projects for development seldomly confine to themselves to only one specific target area. Indeed, the GIZ itself classifies 14 of its conducted development projects in Laos as "multisectoral" in scope (cf. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2020b). As was also shown with projects in the fields of rural development and sustainable economic development, development efforts can cause wide-reaching knock-on effects regardless of their initial designation.

5. An appraisal of 60 years of Lao-German diplomatic relations

By reviewing the provided context, it becomes apparent that Laos and Germany do indeed share a connection that is deeper than mere "obligatory" diplomatic relations between countries. Although the history of their relations reaches back "only" to the 1950s, the two countries share a noteworthy bond that has left an impact, especially on the Laotian side. This relation, its past and current implications for both sides and the overall significance of Lao-German diplomatic relations will be briefly reviewed and assessed in the following.

5.1 Historical review

Although modern Laos only came to be in 1954, its historical footprint traces all the way back to the Kingdom of Lan Xang in the 14th century CE. Throughout the following centuries it would rise to regional significance before breaking apart in several smaller kingdoms before eventually being conquered by the French colonial empire at the end of the 19th century. Unified under colonial rule, and with a sense of national identity slowly growing, the Kingdom Laos eventually gained its independence after the First Indochina War in 1954. The next twenty years of its existence were marked by civil war between Royalists and the communist Pathet Lao, a war that soon merged in the Second Indochinese War, more commonly known as the Vietnam War. Large parts of Laos were destroyed by US bombings through the 1960s and 1970s. In 1975, the Pathet Lao gained control over the Kingdom and transformed it into the Lao People's Democratic Republic, turning the country east towards the communist bloc. Lao PDR opened itself and its economy to the international stage after the collapse of the communist bloc in the 1990s, exhibiting record levels of economic growth. Further integration into the international community came with the country's ascendance to ASEAN in 1997 and to the WTO in 2013.

The Federal Republic of Germany came into existence only five years earlier than Laos in 1949, yet unlike the Southeast Asian nation, several processors to Germany existed over the past one and a half millennia. The earliest mentions of a German identity trace back to the 8th century, and this identity would, over the next centuries, evolve within a confederation of hundreds of independent states, loosely bound together in the Holy Roman Empire. Conflict and a loss of imperial authority within the Empire prevailed until its dissolution in 1806, and in its place, the German Confederation stepped, this time weak by design. The

1800s saw first the rise of German nationalism, climaxing in the failed 1848 revolution and then a unification of Germany under the Kingdom of Prussia in 1871. This German Empire would play an important part in world politics for the next decades and eventually fight in the First World War starting 1914. With its defeat came its transformation into the Weimar Republic, yet the Republic did not persevere against the rise of the National-Socialist Party under Adolf Hitler. Under Hitler, Germany unleashed the Second World War upon the globe and committed crimes against humanity on a staggering scale; more than 17 million people were directly killed by their actions. After defeat and the suicide of Hitler, Germany was split between the victorious allied powers, and in 1949, two German states emerged. On the one side the western, democratic FRG, on the other side the communist one-party state GDR. Finding themselves at odds during the Cold War, both Germanies unified after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Now again a whole nation, Germany rose to take a prominent and active role within several EU and international institutions, all the while its economic situation had lifted it to a position of international significance.

As of 2020, Lao PDR and Germany find themselves in vastly different socio-economic situations. Laos, on the one side, is classified as a Least Developed Country, dependent on foreign aid and investment and facing a plethora of challenges and issues that hinder it in its further development. Large parts of the rural population either face or are directly affected by poverty and the lack of proper access to healthcare, clean water or education; issues Laos still has to tackle despite its considerable economic growth over the last years. In addition, the country still has to deal with the infamous legacy of the Vietnam War: The tens of thousands of bombs dropped on Laos by the USA in the 1960s and 1970s that did not explode are still a large danger to human life in parts of the country; disarmament efforts are still ongoing decades after the war. Those bombs that did explode destroyed much of the existing infrastructure, setting the country back by decades. Now, while the overall wealth of the country increases, it faces the challenge of letting this newfound wealth reach every single person living in Laos as well. Although the country has already promoted some degree of reforms over last few decades, it still remains a communist one-party state with little real possibility for the average Laotian to participate. With its ascendance to ASEAN and the WTO, and with the emergence of the ASEAN Economic Community, the communist nation sees itself increasingly integrated in the mechanisms of global economy and politics – the need for a proper, sustainable integration of Lao PDR rises.

On the other side stands Germany, an integral part of several international institutions and alliances, an economic "powerhouse" and great power on the stage of international politics. With a high standard of living, a high degree of urbanisation and easily accessible means of healthcare, education and social security, the country places fourth on the Human Development Index scale. German foreign policy has, over the decades, come to include a separate field solely dedicated to development policy and efforts abroad. Following the notion that the wealth Germany enjoys as a major beneficiary of the mechanisms of globalisation carries with it an obligation to help those in need, German development policy in recent decades adhered to first the UN Millennium Development Goals and since 2015 the succeeding Sustainable Development Goals. With Germany's promotion of an agenda that the problems of globalisation require global solutions to achieve global justice, development cooperation with other nations, especially in the bilateral sense, becomes essential.

Their respective histories show that both Laos and Germany remained separate from one another for the longest part of the past few centuries. Unlike how other developing countries are often connected to countries in the West through a history of colonialism and imperialism, Laos and Germany were never connected through (the legacy of) a coloniser-colony relationship. Instead, the starting point to their relations can be placed shortly after the independence of the Kingdom of Laos in 1954. When the Federal Republic of Germany first established diplomatic relations with Laos in 1958, it was a move meant to deny the German Democratic Republic, their German communist counterpart, any international recognition by forestalling their diplomatic advances in other countries. The unstable political situation in Laos however caused a constant change of government, and only a few years later, a new government of Laos was set on establishing ties to the GDR. It would however take until 1975 for both German states to accredit ambassadors to Laos. Shortly thereafter the Kingdom of Laos was taken over by the communist party Pathet Lao and subsequently turned into the Lao People's Democratic Republic. West Germany almost instantly cut most of their ties to Lao PDR, while East Germany intensified theirs. Over the next 15 years, the GDR and Lao PDR enjoyed extensive diplomatic relations, a huge part of which were bilateral development projects. The biggest accomplishment of these projects was the training and education of several thousand Laotian specialists in the GDR who would go on to augment the Laotian workforce and later rise to high positions within the Laotian government. When the two German nations reunified under the FRG in 1990, it continued

some of the development work of their communist predecessors. Since the mid-1990s, diplomatic relations between Germany and Lao PDR again started to intensify, especially in the form of a multitude of bilateral cooperation products.

Since they first established diplomatic contact in 1958, Laos and Germany continuously maintained relations throughout various political and social transformations in both countries. Germany – be it either the West-aligned FRG, the communist GDR or in unified form – and Laos remained connected, and not only that. The history of Lao-German diplomatic relations is largely characterised by bilateral development efforts and cooperation: Starting with the provision of humanitarian funds and loans for construction of infrastructure and the GDR support of training Laotian specialists, the two countries always maintained projects of cooperation with the aim of promoting development in Laos. Over the decades, the notions of development aid changed, and with them, the aid itself: instead of mere monetary funds, development evolved to now promote projects for sustainable development. Especially the process of Laotian specialists being trained in the GDR did much to promote sustainability early on. The large aspect of current Lao-German relations that concerns itself with promoting development and sustainability follows these efforts in a way – yet still with a bigger scope and on a larger scale.

5.2 Bilateral development cooperation in 2020

Germany and Laos maintain varied, in some areas rather mute, diplomatic relations since 1958. While political relations between the two countries are regularly renewed with mutual visits by state officials – the most significant visit being that of Laotian Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith to Germany in 2018 – and both cultural and academic relations flourishing due to the legacy of GDR-trained Laotians now occupying high ranks within the Laotian government, trade and economic relations between Laos and Germany are fairly underdeveloped. Instead, the largest pillar on which Lao-German diplomatic relations rest is that of development cooperation. Since 1963, Germany directed over 500 million EUR in development funds towards various projects in Laos, 50 million in 2018 and 2019 alone. Germany conducts and oversees a plethora of projects in Laos, most of them keeping to the two main goals of development policy outlined by the BMZ in the early 2000s: rural development and sustainable economic development. These projects are mainly implemented by two German institutions, the KfW and the GIZ; through these

implementation organisations, Germany is able to provide both technical cooperation assistance and financial aid. As of 2019, GIZ was involved in 25 development projects in Southeast Asia with a staff of 195 specialists. KfW meanwhile provides financial support.

The two main goals of German development policy – rural development and sustainable economic development – are being implemented by way of various cooperation projects between Germany and Lao PDR. The importance of rural development in Laos becomes evident when the Laotian socio-economic situation is taken into consideration: As 65 percent of Laotians live in rural parts of the country, providing these people with access to commodities such as clean water, electricity, education and healthcare greatly improves their living standards. To this end, KfW supports projects like the Rural Development Programme, through which 1100 kilometres of roads, 20 bridges and other key elements of basic infrastructure were constructed, connecting 165 000 people to important facilities all year round; another KfW support programme helped expand the Public Works and Transport Training Institute in Vientiane. In addition to German support provided to the construction of infrastructure in Laos, steps are also taken to ensure that acting Laotian parties move towards sustainable growth of enterprise and sustainability in general. Here, projects like "Klimaschutz durch Walderhalt" or the "Village Forest Management Project" come into play to promote responsible forest management and counteract the effects of deforestation (short-term) and climate change (long-term). Like most cooperation projects between Laos and Germany, these projects are co-financed by the two countries, although the majority of funding almost always is provided by the German side.

With the ongoing process of Laotian integration into new emerging international institutions and markets such as ASEAN and the ASEAN Economic community, Lao PDR faces several challenges from inherit factors: It is hindered, among other things, by a weak financial sector, institutional faults and the lack of proper vocational education for a qualified work force. Again, Germany and Laos work in tandem to combat these challenges through various measures and projects with the ultimate goal to promote sustainable economic development in the country. In the field of supporting the domestic financial sector in Laos, the GIZ conducts the project "Microfinance in Rural Areas - Access to Finance for the Poor" since 2009, with results including the establishment of a proper, self-sufficient system of local village banks which allows larger parts of the population and small enterprises access to financial institutions and the provision of financial education. Measures were also introduced

to improve the legal framework of the financial sector. In further projects, Germany also supports Lao state banks in their ability to lend loans for poor Lao households.

Another process that is supported by German development projects is the proper economic integration of Lao PDR into ASEAN. With the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, it has become apparent on the Laotian side that steps must be taken to ensure that eventual "development gaps" between ASEAN members remain closed for Laos to not fall behind its neighbours – a lack of proper integration poses the great risk of a "two-tier ASEAN". To ensure a sustainable and proper integration into international markets and communities for Laos, the GIZ initiated a variety of projects in Laos and other ASEAN countries. Among these are the "Promotion of Competitiveness within the Framework of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (COMPETE)" project, the "Regional Economic Integration of Laos into ASEAN, Trade and Entrepreneurship Development" (RELATED) project and support for "the Initiative for ASEAN Integration" (IAI); on a national level Germany works together with the Laotian Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry. While designed with different scopes and targeted at different countries and challenges, all these projects aim to (and in some cases already did) provide assistance to official institutions, small and medium enterprises and various other key actors of the economic landscape in the region. Guidelines and policies for proper, ASEAN-wide quality standards are being drafted and introduced, training is provided for specialists in the field to allow enterprises to better oversee potential integration processes, and the overall flow of goods, workforce and information streamlined. While some of these projects are still ongoing, notable results have already been produced, such as the economic integration of select Laotian businesses or the introduction of the "Plastic Free Laos" label for single-use plastics in the tourism sector. Further Laotian integration into ASEAN is still supported by various Lao-German development projects, and in case of some participating enterprises, has already shown signs of success.

Yet another big field of Lao-German development cooperation undoubtedly is the field of vocational education. Technical and vocational training and education was identified by the BMZ as an important factor to improve human resource development and labour mobility and is thus a big focus of German development efforts in Laos. Projects such as "Vocational Education in Laos" (VELA) are active in Laos to help reform the country's vocational education system along the lines of a dual cooperative training programme. VELA assisted

in developing the Laotian TVET development plan 2016-2020, as well as with the conceptualisation of a national qualification framework for specialised professions. Further projects were conducted by German implementation organisations with the declared goal of improving the standard of vocational education in Laos. Within a four-step programme by KfW and GIZ for example, vocational schools in six province capitals were first renovated and furnished with proper technical equipment before staff received specialised vocational training and support, and "proper" curriculums were created in cooperation with involved schools. Later phases built upon these first steps, and although deemed generally "satisfactory" by closing project evaluations, the uncertainty of funds often provided a challenge for potential future developments. Connected to VELA, another project initiated by KfW was the establishment of the Vocational Education Funding Facility (VEFF) to provide proper tools of TVET financing in Laos. Funded by both BMZ and Laotian Government, the VEFF offers financial support to vocational training institutes, improving development conditions and framework for future TVET projects in the country alike. In the greater scheme of things, German implementation organisations provided significant support for the Laotian government in establishing a common TVET framework (such as the Laotian TVET development plan 2016-2020) and concrete TVET concepts. Of note is the ongoing support of the Lao-German Technical College, which was established in the 1960s with German support and has since then become the prime example of successful vocational training and education in Laos with German assistance, as well as a nucleus for further TVET developments in the country.

German development support does not confine itself to the two main goals of rural development and sustainable economic development, though. Support in other areas for example takes the shape of the GIZ "Fit for School" project targeted at fighting health deficiencies children in participating countries suffer from (e.g. worms or tooth decay). After its pilot phase in Laos, "Fit for School" became official policy of the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports and is now implemented at over 1100 schools, reaching a combined 150 000 pupils. Further steps are planned to include kindergartens and pre-schools as well. In another project, the GIZ and European Union co-fund the "Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and the Rule of Law" (CEGGA) which intends to promote the democratisation of political processes in Lao PDR, to bridge the gap between written and practised law and to provide Laotian citizens the opportunity of political participation.

Overall, bilateral cooperation between the Federal Republic of Germany and Lao PDR is widespread and designed towards providing aid and solutions to the multitude of challenges that Laos faces both as a result of its history and resulting socio-economic circumstances, and those that arose from its accelerated economic growth and starting integration into the more international context of both politics and economy. Some benefits of this bilateral cooperation already started to become apparent, especially in the fields of technical and vocational education and training and sustainable rural development. Due to the nature of some conducted projects, which are still ongoing as of 2020, it is however not possible to precisely assess the overall success of all Lao-German development projects – some concluded projects however already indicate that, although not always fulfilling the highest set criteria, the results of cooperation are an overall "satisfactory" success.

5.3 Future developments – An end to Lao-German bilateral cooperation?

The nature of Lao-German diplomatic relations is largely defined by bilateral cooperation between the two countries, as Lao PDR is one of the 79 countries that the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development maintains direct bilateral cooperation with. Over the last six decades, this bilateral cooperation has grown to include wide-reaching support of several areas of development in Laos: the construction of infrastructure, support of different institutions aimed at improving teaching standards for Laotian specialists, measures aimed towards a sustainable and proper integration of Laos into larger economic and political communities and, of special note, efforts to support the development of a self-sufficient Laotian technical and vocational education training infrastructure with connected guidelines, standards and policies. Germany is the second-largest donor of aid to Laos, as well as the second-largest donor of aid worldwide. Cooperation between Laos and Germany is essential to guarantee future, sustainable growth in Laos along the guidelines provided by the UN Sustainable Development Goals; the German view on development aid in general is that such aid is a duty. As Germany finds itself on the benefitting side of globalisation, the German government views it as obligation – turned GMZ policy – to help those affected by the global challenges and problems of globalisation.

Despite over 60 years of continued cooperation throughout various political and social changes, it is unclear if Lao-German cooperation will be able to continue in the future. In April 2020, German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development Dr Gerd

Müller announced the extent of long planned changes to the structure and agenda of the German BMZ. Among them is planned exit from a third of all countries the GMZ currently cooperates with in form of bilateral development efforts. Lao PDR is included on the list of countries bilateral cooperation is set to be discontinued with. While diplomatic relations would naturally continue between the two countries, one of, if not the most significant aspect of relation would mostly vanish. Germany and Laos share a long history of bilateral cooperation, and the BMZ announcement comes as a heavy blow to the over 25 GIZ projects, KfW-sponsored initiatives and all the programmes that so heavily depend on German support. A point can be raised that because so many development projects in Laos are dependent on a constant flow of funds, they are not profitable enough to be continued by the BMZ. Development work, however, should not concern itself with short-term financial gains. Rather is it BMZ policy to support those people and countries who are less fortunate and wealthy due to Germany's position as major beneficiary of globalisation and connected economic gains. Additionally, development cooperation aims at long-term sufficiency and the improvement of living conditions. Seeing how Laos PDR is not at the end, but rather in the midst of a rapid and all-encompassing process of transformation in political, social and economic sense, it would be unwise to deny them further means of support that helped guide these transformation processes along reasonable and sustainable lines.

Lao PDR is a nation still dependent on foreign aid and investment. Although economic progress prevails and the country is projected to leave behind the status of Least Developed Country within the next few years, it needs outside help to reach a level of (economic) self-sufficiency and standard of living that enable it to act independently on the international stage of economy and politics. Germany is in a pristine historical position to do so. Unlike other European countries, Germany has no colonial legacy in Southeast Asia. It did not partake in the Second Indochinese War that so drastically devastated large parts of the country, and when the Pathet Lao took control of Laos in 1975, one German state remained connected and increased their efforts of cooperation with Laos, training Laotians in various technical fields of expertise back in the GDR. Even after the fall of the GDR, some form of cooperation persisted before relations again intensified during the late 1990s.

In a world that sees itself increasingly divided again between the spheres of the long-persistent presence of the United States of America on one side and an increasingly ambitious China with its (often criticised) "Belt and Road Initiative" on the other, many development countries such as Laos fall risk to become engulfed in geopolitical struggles

without having any say in the matter. Cooperation between Laos and Germany however can rely on a shared history that is free of real dispute or conflict, and Germany is held in high regard by many Laotian state officials who once studied in the GDR. An opportunity arises for Germany to become a “third option” of international cooperation.

Whatever the future holds for Lao-German relations, the past speaks a clear language; a language of successful bilateral cooperation between two nations that helped to elevate Laos when it found itself devastated by civil strife and war, one that made a large impact on the Laotian nation. The conditions are favourable to continue this shared history.

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