Navigating the Middle Ground: Roles of Ethnic Hmong NGO Field Workers as Local Development Brokers in Laos

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article explores the roles of INGO workers with an ethnic Hmong background in Laos through the concept of "local development brokers," examining how their brokerage unfolds across multiple interfaces—with communities, country offices, and government authorities.

Originality: This study provides a more nuanced understanding of development brokerage by employing interface analysis to examine the incompatibilities faced by field-level NGO workers and how they negotiate across different local actors. It highlights how ethnic identity and organizational resources shape their brokerage practices within complex institutional settings.

Methodology: A qualitative approach was employed, drawing on in-depth interviews with five Hmong INGO field staff and one international staff member. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, and data was analyzed using inductive open coding.

Result: Hmong field workers based in the field office act as interpreters, knowledge brokers, and trusted interlocutors at the community level. Their shared ethnic identity fosters trust and facilitates access to Hmong communities. Their understanding of field realities enables them to advocate community priorities to staff at the country office in Vientiane. While maintaining cooperative ties with local government officials under strict government oversight, field workers exert subtle power over them by leveraging organizational resources to facilitate project implementation.

Conclusions and Implication: The study reveals how brokerage is shaped by ethnic identity, organizational resources, and the political contexts in which development unfolds. Recognizing the tensions, roles, and negotiations of field-level brokers is essential for designing more contextually grounded and politically attuned development interventions.

Keywords Local Development Brokers, Local Staff, NGO, Laos, Hmong

I. Introduction

1. The Concept and Roles of Local Development Brokers

International development projects involve a range of actors. At one end of the aid chain are donors, at the other are beneficiaries, and in between are those who connect the two—intermediaries working in the middle. Bierschenk et al.(2002) conceptualized them as local development brokers.

> The group we are referring to is that of intermediaries between 'donors' and potential 'beneficiaries' of development aid. We will call them 'development brokers.' […] They are supposed to represent the local populations, express its 'needs' to the structures in charge of aid and to external financiers.

These brokers mediate between development agencies and target populations, identifying local needs and channeling external resources as development aid, based on their understanding of the local context and global agendas(Bierschenk et al. 2002; Lewis et al. 2006; Olivier de Sardan 2005).

The studies on development brokers emerged during the 1970s, alongside the denationalization and decentralization of aid during the wave of economic liberalization, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Lewis et al. 2009). The economic reforms imposed on African states as well as donors' distrust of state partners fueled by corruption scandals have resulted in a shift in aid modalities from channeling funds directly to states to via non-state intermediary organizations(Bierschenk et al. 2002; Olivier de Sardan 2005). While brokerage roles are performed by a variety of actors, from peasant associations and traditional authorities (see Abrefa Busia 2022) to individual public servants (see Pot 2019), local NGOs or local staff employed by

international NGOs have become some of the most prominent professional development brokers in today's development field.

One of the key roles of local development brokers is to articulate local needs in ways that can be converted into fundable development projects. Based on their knowledge of "project availability," local development brokers shape local needs into forms that align with what donors perceive as viable or urgent, rather than simply identifying 'problems' (Bierschenk et al. 2002, 24; Knodel 2021; Pot 2019).

Another crucial role is translation. As international development cooperation inherently involves cross-border exchanges of knowledge and norms, translation becomes essential for their transmission. Olivier de Sardan(2005) notes that development organizations often overlook the language gap between "developers" and "developees," leaving individual development agents to improvise translations on their own. He also emphasizes that translation is not merely a word-for-word replacement, but a process of bridging two distinct semantic fields, which inevitably brings different systems of meaning into confrontation.

In this sense, local development brokers not only bridge between international languages—often English or the language of the donor—and local languages, but also contextualize new norms and concepts introduced through development interventions. Lewis et al.(2006) connected Bruno Latour's notion of translation to the discourse of development brokers' roles in adapting, reinterpreting, and negotiating between competing interests within the "chain of translation"(Latour 1999, 311 as cited in Lewis et al. 2006, 15). Scholars have referred to these roles as "norm translators"(Berger 2017, 608), "norm entrepreneurs"(Bierschenk 2014, 83), or "knowledge brokers"(Merry 2006, 40).

While previous studies have advanced the understanding of local development brokers, they have tended to focus on how such actors mediate between international agencies and local communities,

often treating 'local' staff as a homogenous group. Despite distinctions in the "layers of brokers"(Watkins et al. 2013, 200), limited attention has been given to how ethnic identity and organizational embeddedness shape brokerage practices in complex political and institutional environments.

This article addresses this gap by examining the case of ethnic Hmong NGO field workers in Laos, a country marked by ethnic stratification, a single-party authoritarian regime, and historical tensions between the Hmong and the state. The study provides a more nuanced understanding of development brokerage by highlighting how ethnic identity and organizational settings shape the practices of local brokerage, as these field-level NGO workers negotiate their roles and navigate multiple interfaces—with project communities, organizational country offices, and local government authorities—to implement development interventions.

2. The Political, Ethnic, and NGO Context of Laos

Laos is home to over 50 ethnic groups, further divided into 200 sub-groups. Ethnic Lao constitute 53% of the population, while the other half is made up of various ethnic groups including Khmu (11%) and Hmong (9%)(Lao Statistics Bureau 2018).

The Hmong, who originated from southern China as a subgroup of the Miao and settled in Laos' mountainous areas, have been regarded as distinct by other groups due to their culture and beliefs. Their clan-oriented way of life as well as their anarchic state of constant movement from place to place was troublesome to rulers(Evans 2002). They practice slash-and-burn farming in the highlands and believe in shamanism or Christianity, which sets them apart from other groups practicing rice cultivation and

Buddhism. Additionally, their cultural practices such as polygyny and premarital sexual relations were viewed in the past as "immoral savages"(Ovesen 2004).

Most importantly, the Hmong's involvement in the so-called secret war supported by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Vietnam War shaped their image as "traitors." During the Vietnam War, Laos was divided by the Royal Lao Government (RLG) side supported by the USA, and the communist-nationalist Pathet Lao (PL) side allied with Viet Minh (North Vietnam). General Vang Pao, a prominent figure among the RLG-sided Hmong, was in charge of recruiting a guerrilla unit backed by the American CIA with promises of economic assistance for Hmong communities in Long Tieng and the establishment of a sovereign Hmong state.[1] After the Pathet Lao's victory in 1975, tens of thousands of those on the "enemy side" including the Hmong were imprisoned or sent to re-education camps, leading to a mass exodus and diaspora(Amnesty International 2007; Evans 2002). By the late 1980s, 120,000 to 200,000 Hmong had fled Laos, with over 30,000 in Thai refugee camps(Lee 2000; Ovesen 2004).

Historically regarded as either traitors or victims politically manipulated by the CIA, the Hmong people are now being represented as a socially vulnerable group in need of development intervention. Since the 1980s, numerous rural developments funded by international agencies have been initiated, which involved the internal resettlement of ethnic minorities from highlands to lowlands. Xieng Khuang, known as "the traditional heartland of the Hmong in Laos"(Ovesen 2004), has been a key target for international development projects aimed at eliminating slash-and-burn farming, promoting cultural integration, and eradicating opium cultivation(Baird et al. 2007; Evrard et al. 2004). These issues have been typically addressed

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1) Regarding the promise for Hmong sovereignty, Ovesen(2004) stated that "Vang Pao's supporters were promised a sovereign Hmong state," while Hyun(2022) described that "Vang Pao 'propagated' that the involvement of the "secret war" with the CIA was not simply against the Communists, but for Hmong independence and the creation of a Hmong nation-state"

in the National Socio-Economic Development Plans (NSEDP), which seek to "lead the country out of the Least Developed Country status" and build a "civilized society."(Government of Lao PDR 2021, 3)

NGOs in Laos implement development projects that are strictly aligned with the government's development plans. The political context of Laos is defined by a single-party socialist authoritarian regime, with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) holding centralized power and authority(Creak et al. 2018; Stuart-Fox 2007). Since the establishment of the Lao PDR, party-led mass organizations have been responsible for delivering basic social services and disseminating government policies to remote areas, functioning as extensions of the state(High et al. 2013; Kunze 2012).

NGOs in Laos are permitted to operate only as service providers in support of the government and are not allowed to challenge or oppose it(Asian Development Bank 2011). While international NGOs are treated as donor entities that channel external funding, they are nonetheless subject to strict regulations(Asian Development Bank 2011) to ensure alignment with the overarching goal of "poverty eradication" as outlined in the NSEDP(Government of Lao PDR 2010, 2014). INGOs are closely monitored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which requires approval for all administrative and operational matters, including the establishment of offices and branches, project proposals and budgets, recruitment of national and international staff, quarterly narrative and financial reports, proposal modifications, and project extensions. The process of signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government and an organization typically takes between six and eighteen months, as it must pass through multiple layers of approval, from district and provincial authorities to relevant line ministries, and ultimately MOFA.

Culturally distinct, historically oppositional, yet marginalized, the Hmong as the beneficiaries create a complex interplay of local dynamics within development projects. Hmong NGO field workers, who share an ethnic background with the beneficiaries but possess different social statuses, navigate their roles as development brokers in this intricate socio-political landscape.

II. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

This study draws on Norman Long's actor-oriented approach and the concept of social interface to analyze how ethnic Hmong NGO field workers navigate their brokerage roles. In Long's(1977) Introduction to the Sociology of Rural Development, he emphasizes that the meaning of development projects is negotiated and thus reshaped by the actors involved. He argued that development interventions are "composed of complex sets of historically unfolding social encounters and struggles over meanings and resources"(Long 2004, 77) as well as "an ongoing, socially-constructed, negotiated, experiential and meaning-creating process" (Long 2001, 25), rather than as the mere implementation of a fixed set of activities. In this approach, change occurs through human agency, which implies actors' knowledgeability, capability, and room for maneuver exercised by all actors with some sort of power(Long 2001).

Long(1989, 1) conceptualized social interface as a "critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields or levels of social order." These sites often involve structural discontinuities arising from conflicting interests, asymmetrical power relations, and divergent knowledge systems, and function as spaces of "conflict, incompatibility, and negotiation"(Long 2001, 69). Interfaces also reflect "clashes of cultural paradigms"(Long 2001, 70), shaped by societal contexts, where individuals and groups may assert their own cultural or ideological positions. Interface analysis thus offers a lens to

comprehend social heterogeneity and the conflicts that arise during external interventions and to examine how such different interests, knowledge, and power are negotiated and reshaped through these encounters (Long 2001).

The analysis in this study is organized around three key interfaces encountered by Hmong NGO workers in their daily project implementation, which also serves as the basis for defining the levels of analysis (see Figure 1). The Hmong NGO field workers in this study are those who are based in project locations or the Field Office, also referred to as 'field staff.'

- Interface #1: Between Hmong NGO field staff and project communities
  - capturing the daily interactions between field workers and community members, who are often the direct beneficiaries of development interventions
- Interface #2: Between Hmong NGO field staff and country offices based in Vientiane Capital
  - illustrating the organizational dynamics between field-level implementation and central-level planning, often shaped by differing priorities and contextual understandings
- Interface #3: Between Hmong NGO field staff and government authorities
  - reflecting how field workers engage with local and central officials, particularly in a context where all development activities must align with national policy frameworks

At each interface, field staff encounter diverse tensions—such as conflicting expectations, institutional asymmetries, or communication barriers—and engage in mediation, adjustment, and negotiation. Rather than treating these dynamics as sequential phases, the analysis focuses on how conflict and action unfold as intertwined elements of field-level brokerage.
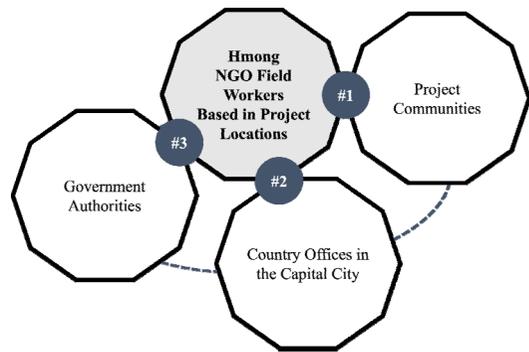
Source: Author

<Figure 1> Three Key Interfaces Between Hmong NGO Field Workers and Local Actors

III. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach focusing on in-depth individual interviews with five Hmong NGO field workers and one international staff member. Two interviews were conducted online due to the participants' limited availability for in-person interviews, while the other four interviews took place in person in Laos between February 22, 2024, and March 5, 2024.

1. Sampling and Inclusion Criteria

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to select interview participants based on the inclusion criteria below:

(1) Minimum of 2 years of experience in project implementation in international NGOs in Laos, working as field workers based in project locations
(2) Experience in facilitating project activities at the community level such as training, awareness-raising sessions, and other participatory activities
(3) Hmong ethnicity

The first criterion was designed to ensure that participants had sufficient field-level experience to

capture the unique perspectives and brokerage practices of frontline workers at the community level, which is distinguished from capital city-based local staff. Experience in training or awareness raising activities was prioritized to reflect their involvement in translating, negotiating, and localizing project-brought norms.

2. Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Based on my professional network from previous NGO work in Laos, I shared a research brief with colleagues of diverse backgrounds to identify eligible individuals. To avoid potential power dynamics, former staff who had worked directly with me were excluded. Interested participants were screened for eligibility, informed of their rights, and recruited through referrals beginning with two initial contacts.

3. Participant Demographics

Participants A and B had only worked in their home-area field offices, while C, D, and E had rotated through multiple field sites and spent time at the country office (see Table 1 for participant demographics). These differences aligned with variations in education and language skills—A and B had limited English proficiency, whereas C, D, and E held master's degrees and were fluent in English. Differences in social and educational backgrounds between the two groups were considered as potential influences on their perspectives and incorporated into the analysis.

4. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and followed a semi-structured format. Oral and written consent were obtained prior to recording. Interviews with Participants A and B were conducted in Laos with a Lao-English interpreter, while interviews with C, D, E, and F were conducted directly in English. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using an inductive open-coding approach. For interpreted interviews, analysis was based on the English translation provided by the interpreter. Accordingly, statements from Participants A and B are presented in indirect quotation, while statements from Participants C, D, E, and F, who spoke in English, are quoted directly.

Participants received an approved Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form in both Lao and Hmong languages. Before each interview, I reiterated the study purpose and emphasized participants' right to withdraw at any time. The interpreter signed a confidentiality agreement, and no identifying details —such as locations or job titles—were included in the findings to protect participant anonymity.

<Table 1> Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Working experience	Duty station	Interview language
A	Male	Over 10 years	Field Office	Lao, interpreted in English
B	Female	3-5 years	Field Office	Lao, interpreted in English
C	Male	Over 10 years	Field Office	English, without a translator
D	Male	Over 10 years	Field & Country Office	English, without a translator
E	Female	Over 10 years	Field & Country Office	English, without a translator
F	Female	5-7 years	Field & Country Office	English

Source: Author

5. Interpreter and Cross-Language Considerations

I initially intended to conduct interviews in Hmong, the participants' mother tongue, but considered Lao due to their fluency in it for daily communication. Although an interpreter fluent in Hmong, Lao, and English was preferred, such individuals were difficult to secure. In particular, it was challenging to find a female Hmong-English interpreter at the provincial level, which influenced my decision to work with a Lao-English interpreter familiar with Hmong communities.

Recognizing interpreters as "active co-constructor of data"(Chiumento et al. 2018, 606) rather than "neutral transmitters of messages"(Temple 2002, 845), I carefully selected an interpreter with relevant background. She was a native English speaker fluent in Lao, with over six years of experience in Laos, including work in field offices with significant Hmong populations. Her familiarity with Hmong culture and lived experience facilitated relaxed and effective communication, minimizing the risk of discussing sensitive topics surrounding ethnicity and politics.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size—five Hmong NGO field workers and one international staff member—limits the generalizability of the findings. However, thematic saturation was reached, with recurring patterns observed across interviews, supporting its adequacy for qualitative inquiry. Participants' affiliation with INGOs may not fully capture the diversity of local NGO staff in Laos, especially in terms of social status, education, and language skills. Nonetheless, the sample included both rural-based staff and those with country office experience to reflect a broader range of perspectives.

Second, language posed certain constraints. Two interviews were conducted in Lao and interpreted into English due to the researcher's limited proficiency in Lao and Hmong. While using Lao may have influenced responses, the risk was minimal given participants' fluency in professional settings. Though efforts were made to ensure accuracy through debriefing and transcript review, I acknowledge that the absence of third-party transcript verification may have introduced some risk of misinterpretation.
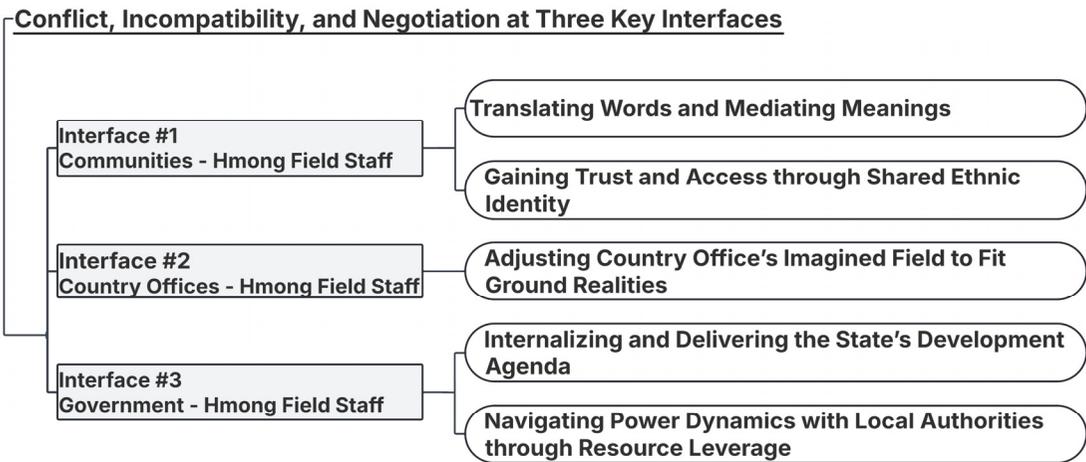
IV. Findings

The findings are organized around three key interfaces where Hmong NGO field workers negotiate their brokerage roles: with project communities, organizational country offices, and government authorities. Figure 2 summarizes the key findings identified at each interface.

1. Interface #1: Hmong NGO Field Workers and Project Communities

1) Translating Words and Mediating Meanings

Research participants commonly agreed that Hmong people face significant challenges in learning and becoming proficient in Lao as a second language. Participant F described that many Hmong women would "kind of look at you with blank stares" as "they don't know what's happening" during training sessions conducted in Lao. Participant C attributed these challenges to linguistic differences between the two languages, "because the Hmong language is totally, 100 percent different from Lao."

All participants stated that they provide partial or full interpretation support between Hmong and Lao languages in their daily work, particularly during the 'training' where accurate delivery of meaning is essential. Participant B and E noted that even when both training facilitators and communities are Hmong, the training is primarily conducted in the Lao

Conflict, Incompatibility, and Negotiation at Three Key Interfaces

Interface #1
Communities - Hmong Field Staff

- Translating Words and Mediating Meanings
- Gaining Trust and Access through Shared Ethnic Identity

Interface #2
Country Offices - Hmong Field Staff

- Adjusting Country Office's Imagined Field to Fit Ground Realities

Interface #3
Government - Hmong Field Staff

- Internalizing and Delivering the State's Development Agenda
- Navigating Power Dynamics with Local Authorities through Resource Leverage

Source: Author

<Figure 2> Conflict, Incompatibility, and Negotiation at Three Key Interfaces

language, with specific terms and content partially being translated into Hmong. Participant D further explained that training sessions involving multiple ethnic communities always require extensive translation.

> It's always. Sometimes the community is mixed with Lao, Khmu, and the government officials are Lao and Hmong. For example, maybe you need to do Khmu translation, and sometimes you need to do a Hmong translation. Maybe the project staff are Hmong and Lao [but the community is Khmu], they ask the village chief to translate to Khmu. It takes a lot of time to complete the training. (Participant D)

Participant D further noted that the translation process from Lao to Hmong poses additional challenges due to limitations in the Hmong language.

> It's also challenging. In the Hmong language, we don't have [some words]. We just use Lao words. Or, there are Hmong words but may not be familiar to people It makes people confused, so you need to use Lao and explain more and more with some examples. (Participant D)

Despite the significance of translation in project implementation, the role of a translator often emerges on an as-needed basis without clearly defined responsibilities. Participant E highlighted that translation tasks are frequently treated as an implicit expectation rather than an explicitly assigned role. The absence of a formal translation strategy aligns with existing literature, which addresses that translation work in development organizations is generally unsystematic and ad hoc, often left to in-house staff on an "as-needed basis"(Todorova et al. 2021; Footitt 2019).

When Hmong staff are not available, interpretation is often supported by community members such as village chiefs, teachers, volunteers, or even students, either formally designated by the project or who voluntarily step in to assist (Participants A, C, D, F). Participant F highlighted that mobilizing community translators for specific project activities represents a best practice for facilitating interpretation.

> These local community translators are proficient in both languages and are familiar with the project concepts as they come to the office every day. They can explain it in a way that makes sense to the community. (Participant F)

Participants emphasized that effective translation requires understanding both the content and the context. Participant C stated, "They said 10 words and you translated 10 words, maybe it's not a good point. The translator should understand it." Participant D elaborated:

> At first, you need to understand the concept of the training or the project. [...] So maybe the facilitator says one or two sentences, then you can do more than five sentences because you know already the project. If you translate only what he or she said, maybe it's not enough for them to understand. You need to add more. (Participant D)

Participant B shared her experience translating sexual reproductive health trainings. She noted that even when Lao terms were translated into Hmong, terms like "uterus" remained difficult to understand. To ensure comprehension, she adapted her language based on expressions used in everyday conversations. Similarly, during training on early marriage, she asked reflective questions to help children understand the social implications of marrying young—since early marriage itself was not perceived as problematic in their context.

However, delivering new norms is not always done in a way that is familiar to the community. Participant F stated that project staff sometimes use overly technical terms that communities find difficult to understand.

> Their thinking is sometimes too much similar to the international thinking or the Lao thinking or technical thinking, which is too much in line with the donor, and project design. So they explain something exactly like it's written in the project document but it's too formal. Even if it is translated into Hmong language, the community still can't understand that idea. (Participant F)

This point is supported by Olivier de Sardan's (2005) critique that technical-scientific terms revised by urban intellectuals for "peasant" audiences often remain too "formal and schoolish." This reflects what Cornwall et al.(2010, viii) refer to as "developmentspeak," a standardized project language that is often reproduced rather than translated. Hmong NGO staff, particularly those more embedded in the development world, may internalize donor-driven language, reproducing it without adequate adaptation, ultimately hindering the understanding of the community members they intend to reach(Todorova et al. 2021).

2) Gaining Trust and Access through Shared Ethnic Identity

The Hmong NGO field workers' shared ethnic background played a crucial role in gaining community trust and access, particularly in contexts where external actors often face suspicion or resistance. Participants noted that being Hmong immediately fostered familiarity and comfort, allowing them to communicate more effectively and build rapport with community members without prolonged trust-building processes.

> When you go to the Hmong, they will welcome you. When you say "I'm Hmong", then they will be happy […], and then you feel like [pause] safe. When you are in the Hmong village, you feel safe because you are Hmong and you are [also] Hmong. (Participant D)

> They feel safer if I am Hmong. We are the same ethnic group and they are more open. For example, if I go to the community, I can eat what they eat and I can talk about the stories that we are all familiar with. […] I know how to enter them and what the Hmong like and dislike. The conversation can move quickly. We don't have to build a trust much. (Participant E)

This insider positioning was especially critical

during tense negotiations in large-scale infrastructure projects involving resettlement and compensation. One interesting finding is that three participants had some experience working for large infrastructure development projects funded by international organizations and banks. The research participants had previously worked on specific project activities such as education, livelihood, and ethnic cultural preservation before joining NGOs, as these large projects typically include these components along with infrastructure construction.

Participant E had worked on social development activities within an infrastructure project focusing on Hmong communities. She stated that the project implementing organization actively hired Hmong staff in order to overcome the challenges in negotiations and consultations with the Hmong communities.

> I think one reason that they hired us was because most of the villages affected by the project were Hmong. […] Hmong culture has the community clan leader and it can be very challenging for the project when trying to negotiate or have family consultation. They were not successful. So that is why they had to take into account that, okay, we need a very influential Hmong person to help with. I think that was also one of the strategies to have collaboration from the community so that the project can move forward building infrastructure. (Participant E)

The recruitment of Hmong staff is associated with the strong bond and exclusive membership centered on clans within the Hmong community, which does not easily allow outsiders to exert influence. The Hmong's clan-oriented solidarity, strict marriage rules, and the strong influence of clan elders can be barriers for outsiders sitting at the negotiation table. In most cases, particularly when interacting with those outside the community, clan elders speak on behalf of the villages and it is uncommon for anyone to oppose the elders or even raise questions(Chanthavong 2017).

A report written by a hydropower development project also demonstrated that having ethnic Hmong staff in key positions was part of "improved methods" to facilitate consultation and negotiations with the affected Hmong communities(Nam Ngiep 1 Power Company 2014, 160).

This suggests that Hmong staff's ability to engage with communities—often perceived by outsiders as resistant or uncooperative—derives from a shared ethnic identity that functions not only as a linguistic and cultural asset, but also as a basis for trust and negotiation, facilitating their acceptance within Hmong communities. Their identity thus goes beyond facilitating communication; it enables access, builds credibility, and positions them as indispensable actors in brokering development under conditions of deep social and political tension.

2. Interface #2: Hmong NGO Field Workers and Country Office

1) Adjusting Country Office's Imagined Field to Fit Ground Realities

Research participants who worked at field offices noted that the project plans written by the country office in Vientiane often differed from the actual situations in the communities, leading to challenges in field offices' implementation.

A study on workplace diversity in Laos' aid agencies (Daviau 2014) shows that 80% of the total 561 staff surveyed were Lao-Tai, including those in the country offices and field offices, with a higher percentage of ethnic staff employed in the field offices. The report indicates factors contributing to the lower number of ethnic staff, including the relatively low levels of education and professional experience among ethnic candidates. Participant A, who had only been based in the provincial offices, mentioned that he knew of only one Hmong staff member in the Vientiane office during his more than 10 years of work experience.

While the country office and field office are ideally expected to closely collaborate on designing a project, in reality, the country office writes proposals while the field offices handle implementation. Given these roles and responsibilities, country office staff are required to possess proficiency in English and knowledge of project management, prioritizing their ability to write grant proposals and communicate with international donors over their understanding of on-the-ground realities. In many cases, the national staff in the country office have advanced education degrees, with some having studied abroad and grown up in urban areas, which contributes to their limited understanding of life in rural communities.

When the project plans were not feasible for the community members to participate in, the field staff attempted to convince the country office to reflect the communities' priorities and availability in the activity plans.

> Sometimes country office doesn't understand the community situation. So we should try to let them know about the problems. [...] We have our deadline, we have our timeline, we have our plan, but when we are working with communities, it's totally different. We plan to do this in February but the community [might say], we have to move to March or April. Someone may say we should manage it, but in reality, there's something we cannot manage. If the community says they want to be at their farm for a month, we cannot say like, "you should stay" We should let them go. (Participant C)

Participant A stated that there has always been a need to adjust the project plans to reflect the field context, although he has not experienced severe conflicts with the country office. He explained that country office staff write the project proposals based on their 'image' of the communities, due to their limited understanding of the field context. He emphasized the importance of involving communities in project

design, reflecting the communities' priorities and seasonal calendars. Participant D mentioned that sometimes field staff had to work in the evening when community members came back from farms if they were not able to adjust the activity schedules but had to complete them within the timelines.

These findings uncover the gap in 'local knowledge' even among 'local' actors, emphasizing the critical role of field workers in brokering not only between international donors and local communities but also between locals at different levels.

3. Interface #3: Hmong NGO Field Workers and Government Authorities

1) Internalizing and Delivering the State's Development Agenda

Participants described a prevailing perception that Hmong communities tend to be uncooperative with NGO or government development efforts and resistant to change. Participant F observed that in multi-ethnic provinces, field staff often regarded Hmong villages particularly as "difficult to work in." Similarly, Participant D expressed disagreement with what he perceived as the community's reluctance to adapt.

> Hmong communities are not listening to the development. [⋯] I do not agree with them. Now the government has tried to move people from the rural area to the city. We don't have land to grow rice or trees to cut [in the city], so we have to listen to the government. [...] I try to convince them to listen to the government and to be involved in the development. (Participant D)

Participant E, who had worked on large-scale infrastructure projects involving community resettlement, described a more complex and emotionally fraught situation. While she regarded the government's approach as appropriate, she also expressed a personal moral dilemma in convincing communities with a

deep cultural heritage to relocate.

> The community has a very long history and they contributed to Lao national development 70 years ago. The area was rich in water, fish, and land. It made it very hard for us to convince them. It was also a very difficult decision for them to move because they were concerned about land quality and compensation. […] In the end, we succeeded, but about 10 or 20 percent of the families didn't collaborate with the project. When the water reached the community, the government had to send soldiers to force them to move. I really regret that those people couldn't receive full compensation. If they had collaborated, they could get more. But at the end, they had no choice but to move. [...] I wouldn't consider that the government did something bad or the situation as coercion. Because the government also took very appropriate measures to engage with communities. It happened because they were not open to learn, to adapt, and to collaborate. (Participant E)

This alignment with state policy also reflects the broader political context of Laos. Participants echoed the rationale of both government and development agencies, internalizing what Daviau(2014, 41) refers to as "the Lao political doctrine stigmatizing ethnic minority livelihoods and cultures as backwards." Within the context of a single-party authoritarian regime, where all projects require government approval, space for dissent or alternative approaches is extremely limited. As a result, NGO workers often operate as de facto agents of the state agenda.

Their roles are further shaped by their institutional positions as INGO staff. As development brokers, they often maintain a certain distance from "real" local peasants, who are viewed as tied to backward perceptions and practices that need to be sensitized (Rossi 2006; Watkins et al. 2013). These findings reveal how brokers not only transmit but also embody dominant narratives of modernization and underdevelopment,

reinforcing their positionality as agents of the state while remaining socially and ideologically distanced from the communities to which they once belonged.

2) Navigating Power Dynamics with Local Authorities through Resource Leverage

In Laos, NGOs are required to align their project objectives with the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), as outlined in Decree 13. Participants perceived this alignment not as external pressure but as a way to ensure sustainability and aid effectiveness. Participant A noted that reflecting government plans created synergy and encouraged local officials to cooperate more willingly, making alignment mutually beneficial. While some government officials or village chiefs were difficult to work with, participants often attributed this to individual personality traits rather than structural power struggles.

Participants stated that they maintained positive, often informal relationships with local government officials. Participant B mentioned that some officials tried to make her feel comfortable, allowing her to call them informally as "older brothers or sisters" instead of using formal titles. Other forms of collaboration included notifying government partners in advance of all project activities (Participant B), holding monthly meetings and frequent phone calls (Participant C), and the consistent presence of officials during project activities (Participant D). However, these practices primarily reflect the Lao government's extensive oversight of NGO operations.

When field staff had no choice but to carry out the planned project activities without adjustment, they strategically worked through local government officials by urging them to take responsibility rather than confronting the country office or local communities. Research participants A, C, and D commonly noted that local government authorities, including village chiefs, hold both the responsibility and the authority

to influence communities under Laos's vertically structured bureaucracy. Participant A stated that government officials primarily implement project activities, while NGO staff focus on monitoring to ensure project sustainability.

> Once we agree with the government for our project plan, the government has its own protocol for working with provinces, districts, villages, and schools. We are not the person who deals with the community or schools directly. […] Because the community is under the government so they can manage the Naiban, the village head, and say "you have to do it." So we let the government deal with the community and we will be a part of supporting. (Participant C)

This tendency goes beyond working with or through local authorities. In some cases, it involves assigning tasks to government officials and expecting them to ensure compliance.

> If they [the community] don't listen, just push the village chief or government staff. […] Because the community is under the government so they can manage the Naiban, the village head. We say "You have to do like this and this" and asked them to follow. (Participant D)

This dynamic also reflects the strategic use of resource leverage. While formal authority lies with the state, NGO field workers exercised subtle forms of power by reminding local officials that project funding enables the implementation of government development goals—plans that might otherwise be stalled due to limited public budgets. Participant A explained that development is primarily the government's responsibility, but under budget constraints, local development plans can only be partially or entirely implemented through NGO projects.

Participant C described how field staff could leverage organizational funding to subtly press local officials into action.

> Once we combine the government plans into the project, then we can push the [local] government to support project activities. We say, "in case we miss our activities, that means we lose our budget and the budget will be transferred directly back to our donors." […] We say, for example, "we provide money, funding, technical support, materials, and other facilities, so you have to work, because it's your work, not our work." […] Sometimes we make a joke, saying "if you don't do it, then you don't have money to support your work." (participant C)

NGO projects also provide material incentives to government officials, both institutionally and personally. Each project includes budget lines for per diems and allowances covering transportation, meals, and accommodation at officially standardized rates. Participant D noted that some officials requested higher per diem rates or compensation for activities they did not attend. Delays in payments sometimes led to communication issues, illustrating how financial flows directly shape cooperation with local officials.

These findings reveal how Hmong NGO field workers—while operating within a highly centralized, authoritarian system—exercise agency not by resisting government power, but by strategically navigating it. Through relationship-building and the careful use of resource leverage, they manage to secure implementation support. Their room for maneuver is made possible by the project funding, enabling them to exert influence within state structures without overt confrontation. This reflects a form of brokerage grounded not in open contestation, but in quiet positioning—working within the constraints of the system to get things done.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined how ethnic Hmong NGO field workers in Laos navigate their roles as local development brokers across three key interfaces: with project communities, their organizational country offices, and government authorities.

At the community level, Hmong field staff mediate linguistic and conceptual barriers between the Lao and Hmong languages. Their translation work extends beyond words, involving the negotiation of meanings and the adaptation of technical concepts to better align with local contexts. Yet their tendency to internalize donor-driven language and reproduce jargon reveals an ambivalence in their roles. Their shared ethnic background grants them access and trust in Hmong communities, especially in sensitive situations such as resettlement negotiations, underscoring how ethnic identity functions not only as a linguistic and cultural asset but also as a key to entering communities shaped by the historical and political tensions surrounding Hmong ethnicity.

At the organizational level, Hmong field staff mediate between project plans developed by the Vientiane office and field realities, often advocating for revisions to better reflect community priorities and constraints. They occasionally shift accountability toward government officials when field conditions make adaptation difficult. The disconnect in contextual understanding between urban-based country office staff and field-based frontline workers underscores the heterogeneity among local staff and highlights the critical role of field workers in bridging institutional priorities and on-the-ground realities.

At the interface with government, the study identified two interrelated dynamics: brokers' alignment with state development agendas and their subtle leverage of organizational resources to shape implementation. Field workers largely accepted state-led visions of modernization, viewing ethnic Hmong communities

as uneducated and uncooperative in the context of national development. The role of NGOs in Laos is limited to realizing depoliticized national development plans, which paradoxically reveals their highly politicized status as de facto agents of the state agenda. At the same time, as demonstrated by Participant E—who supported the government's relocation agenda yet expressed regret over its impact on cultural heritage and compensation—brokers face moral dilemmas operating at the intersection of state priorities and their social and cultural embeddedness within the communities they serve.

Significantly, the study highlights how field workers, while operating under strict state regulation in a single-party authoritarian regime, still exercise a degree of agency. While maintaining cooperative ties, they also press officials to act in support of project implementation, emphasizing that local governments risk losing project funding if they do not. Given the limited budgets of local authorities, government development goals can only be realized with financial support from NGOs, granting field workers a measure of informal influence. This subtle balancing act between cooperation and quiet coercion reflects their capacity to maneuver—leveraging resources without directly confronting the state. While prior scholarship has emphasized brokers' ability to mobilize resources for local gain, this study demonstrates how brokers strategically leverage organizational funding to subtly influence authoritarian governance structures.

This study contributes to the broader literature on development brokerage by expanding our understanding of how ethnic identity and organizational resources shape the practices of local brokerage in authoritarian contexts. By highlighting how ethnic Hmong field workers gain access to and build trust within Hmong communities through shared ethnic identity, the study underscores the significance of brokers' social backgrounds—particularly in settings marked by historical stigmatization and tensions between the state and specific ethnic groups. Moreover, the

analysis expands the scope of brokerage beyond the conventional donor-community binary to reveal how brokers operate within and across multiple interfaces: between head and field offices, between field staff and communities, and between NGOs and government authorities. These layered sites of negotiation illustrate that brokerage is also about navigating internal organizational discontinuities and managing power dynamics with local authorities.

In doing so, the research offers a more nuanced, multi-positional account of brokerage, emphasizing that recognizing the roles, positions, and tensions of field-level brokers—and the negotiations, translations, and compromises they engage in—is essential for designing development interventions that are both contextually responsive and politically attuned.

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라오스 INGO 몽족 현지 직원의 지역개발 중개에 대한 질적 연구

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국문초록

연구목적: 본 연구는 '지역 개발 중개인(Local Development Broker)' 개념을 바탕으로 라오스 INGO 내 몽족 출신 현지 직원들이 지역사회, 수도 비엔티안 사무소, 지역 정부와의 접점에서 수행하는 중개 활동의 전개 양상을 분석한다.

연구의 중요성: 본 연구는 인터페이스 분석(interface analysis)을 활용하여 현장 사무소 기반 NGO 직원들이 다양한 지역 행위자들과의 관계에서 직면하는 갈등과 협상 방식을 조명하며, 중개자의 역할이 민족 정체성과 조직 자원의 영향 아래 정치적·제도적 맥락 속에서 구성된다는 점을 드러낸다.

연구방법론: 질적 접근법을 채택하여 INGO 내 몽족 출신 현지직원 5명 및 외국인 직원 1명을 대상으로 심층 면담을 실시하였다. 연구참여자는 유의표집 및 눈덩이 표집을 통해 선정하였으며, 면담 내용은 전사하여 개방코딩으로 분석하였다.

연구결과: 몽족 현지 직원들은 몽족 지역사회 대상 개발 프로젝트의 실행에서 라오어-몽족어 간 통역자, 지식 중개자의 역할을 수행하며, 공통의 민족 정체성을 바탕으로 민감한 협상이 요구되는 상황에서 신뢰받는 교섭자로 받아들여진다. 조직 차원에서 비엔티안 사무소의 직원들에게 현장 상황과 지역사회의 우선순위에 대한 이해를 제공하며 프로젝트 활동의 조정을 요청하고 협상한다. 정부의 개발 정책을 내재화하고 강력한 권한을 가진 지역 정부와 우호적인 관계를 형성하는 동시에, 프로젝트 기금을 활용해 권력 관계를 미묘하게 조율한다.

결론 및 시사점: 본 연구는 중개 활동이 민족 정체성, 조직 자원, 그리고 개발이 전개되는 정치적 맥락에 의해 어떻게 형성되는지 입체적으로 분석함으로써, 개발 프로젝트에서 현지 직원이 직면하는 긴장, 위치성, 그리고 협상을 이해하는 것의 중요성을 강조한다.

주제어 개발중개, 라오스, NGO, 현지직원, 몽족