RESEARCH

Rethinking Rural Schooling in Laos: From a Deficit Perspective to Patchworked Mobilities, the State, and the Trope of Remoteness

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Abstract

By combining insights from mobilities studies and the anthropology of the state and development, conceptual space is created for thinking about the social effects of the diverse sets of mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling. This includes realising the state as a social relationship. Thereby, this article goes beyond a common deficit perspective on rural schooling. Drawing on ethnographic data, I show how diverse mobilities involving different sets of actors are valued and recognised differently, in part, because of their particular relation to constructs of remoteness, the state, and visions about rural futures.

Keywords: development, education, ethnography, mobilities, Laos, rural schooling, state

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Rethinking Rural Schooling

Mobilities have long been an important component of rural life across the global south (e.g. De Haan 2002; Evrard 2011; Grieg 1994). Rural transformations, including infrastructural and technological developments, have expanded, shifted, and intensified these mobilities (Rigg 2007; Rowedder 2022). It has given rise to new movements and flows while older mobilities have not necessarily ceased to exist but continue to unfold albeit in changed circumstances (Huijsmans 2019a; Pholsena and Banomyong 2006; Rigg 2007). Yet, as argued by Doreen Massey (1994:149) not all mobilities are equal. Various mobilities are valued differently, have differentiated effects. and are not similarly realisable or avoidable for differently positioned groups of people.

It is with these points in mind that I turn to the seemingly sedentary institution of rural schools. Drawing on research conducted in a northern province in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter 'Laos'), I argue that rural schooling in the global south comprises various mobilities. Some of these mobilities are unquestioned or considered contributing to the improvement of rural schooling. Yet, other mobilities by other actors are deemed problematic and viewed as getting into the way of realising educational objectives and associated futures. Foregrounding the patchwork of mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling, I argue, illuminates how schooling, as a development intervention, plays out in practice whilst simultaneously providing a unique vantage point for developing an anthropological understanding of the state.

The dominant narrative about rural schooling can be characterised as a 'deficit perspective'. This reflects prevalent discourses about rural areas in general (Clarke-Sather 2020; Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). This view is particularly prominent in the development practice related literature. For Laos, a joint publication by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Sport of Laos (2015) makes a good example. The report is titled *Situational Analysis: Student learning outcomes in primary education in Lao PDR*. It presents a long list of well-documented problems that are perhaps not unique to rural schooling but are often most pronounced there (see also: Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018). This includes, amongst other things: poor learning outcomes, irregular attendance (of both teachers and students), limited or poor quality infrastructure, shortage of learning materials (UNICEF and MoES 2015). These observed shortcomings, attract new development interventions, which, in turn, lead to further studies assessing the impact of such schemes of improvement. This not just perpetuates a deficit perspective; it also means that rural schooling receives scholarly attention mostly for its shortfalls in relation to planned change and much less frequently for its role in actually unfolding processes of development and social change.

In order to create the conceptual space to go beyond a deficit perspective, this article draws inspiration from the new mobilities paradigm (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006) and combines this with insights from anthropological approaches to studying development (Hilhorst 2003; Mosse 2005) and the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; High 2014). This allows reflecting on the productive function of school-related mobilities, and its various social effects. Anthropological research on education has shown, amongst other things, how rural schools symbolise the presence of the state in contexts in which the state is otherwise hardly visible (e.g. Trần Thị Hà Lan and Huijsmans 2014), the role of rural schooling in making real the idea of the nation even in the nation-state's remotest corners (Evans 1998:167; Keyes 2014:61), and rural schools as spaces of distinction in a temporal, embodied, occupational and aspirational sense (Dungey and Ansell 2022; Huijsmans and Piti 2021:167). Yet, anthropological work on the interplay between schooling, development and the state has been relatively silent on the role of mobilities therein, something I seek to redress in this article.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section I explain the research methodology, reflect on its 'compromised' status, discuss the notion of 'remoteness' and introduce some key description on rural schooling in Laos. Next, I briefly outline a mobilities perspective and discuss how it has been used in research in the global south and in relation to rural schooling. I also link mobilities scholarship to anthropological work on development and the state. The analytical section that follows is divided into two, pivoting on the state. In the first part, 'mobilities of state', I analyse some mobilities part of rural schooling in which state-related officials are those that move. These mobilities rarely attract any attention because they are seen as unproblematic. This silence has left underemphasised how the Laotian state as a social relation and encounter is produced (High and Petit 2013:421), among other things, through the various mobilities underpinning rural schooling. In the second part, 'sideway mobilities', I discuss mobilities related to rural schooling that are deemed problematic focusing on the mobilities of actors other than state-officials. In the concluding section, I reflect further on how the mobilities discussed relate differently to state practices, the trope of remoteness, and visions of rural futures. I also tease out implications for development practice, arguing that some of the answers to the question of why rural schools too often fail to deliver the many development outcomes they are meant to realise are found in the friction between the multiple mobilities comprising rural schooling.

Compromised Research, the Construct of Remoteness, and Rural Schooling in Laos

The research underpinning this article was embedded in the logic of development practice, and therefore implicated in a deficit perspective on rural schooling. First, it was realised through development research funding from the United Kingdom's DFID/ESRC joint scheme on *Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems*[2]. Second, per the requirement of the funding scheme the research was conducted in collaboration with a Laos based partner organisation; the Laos office of the international development organisation PLAN International[3]. Third, our research project had to be accommodated within an existing Memorandum of Understanding between Plan International and the Laotian government. This meant that, a) our project got attached to an ongoing development intervention focusing on pre-school education, b) had to be conducted in target villages covered by this intervention, c) had to be carried out together with the Laotian government partner of Plan International, the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports.

These complex partnerships shaped in important ways how the research unfolded. Indeed, one could say that our research got compromised by the circumstances and relations through which our work had to flow. In the research site in northern Laos, for example, it meant that spending time at the district level office of the Ministry of Education and Sports (DESB: District Education and Sports Bureau) became a significant part of the research. And since all our trips to the study villages were accompanied by (a) DESB official(s) (formally: to ensure the security of members of the research team) we ended up spending more time with DESB staff than with the children, teachers and parents who were the core focus according to project's research design.

Admitting that the research was compromised since it was materially, institutionally, and discursively embedded on the interface between development practice and the Laotian state does not mean the research has failed or has become futile. Rather, for any research conducted in Laos on the basis of a formal research approval this

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2   Project title 'Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings' (ES/N01037X/1). DFID is the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, and ESRC is the British Economic and Social Research Council.

3   In Laos, there are no Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs). Additionally, collaborating with the National University of Laos (an otherwise suitable partner) is difficult to realise because of the tight and rigid deadlines of most funding bodies, including ESRC/DFID. For these reasons, we ended up partnering with the Laos office of PLAN International, an organization whose international leadership was used to working with the particularities of international funding bodies and rigid funding deadlines.

is inevitable, and is something that needs to be reflected on as part of the findings (Herberg, Seeliger, and Möller 2023:4). Spending lots of time in meeting rooms and in cars with district level state-officials, staying with them in the villages and taking part in the village meetings they called for (on our behalf), made clear that moving and waiting for things to move was not just a key feature of the governing of rural schooling, it was also part and parcel of state practices in rural Laos. Consequentially, a focus on mobilities provides unique insight into how, in rural Laos, the Laotian state manifests in a situated manner as sets of social relationships. In addition, spending time on the road and waiting for things to happen in the company of district level education officials was highly instructive for learning about rural schooling, including about efforts to improve it and how key stakeholders related to it. In the spirit of an ethnographic research approach, I let the insights obtained through the actual unfolding of the research guide the analysis rather than the research questions set out in our original research proposal. Therefore, the data presented in this paper are largely ethnographic and generated mostly through informal encounters. This included, for example, informal chats with district officers and teachers, or when socialising in between our various formal research activities (sharing food, going for walks, playing games of pétanque, etc).

Our research activities were led by a Laotian national researcher of Lao ethnicity[4] (who prefers to remain anonymous) per the requirement of the hosting organisation (PLAN international). The author joined the Lao researcher on several trips to the study villages and other research activities. The data presented in this article have been processed by the author and the Lao researcher together, through constant conversation about the material.

In Laos, we carried out research in two villages in a northern province. One village, the smaller one, we refer to with the pseudonym *Baan Noi*.[5] *Baan Noi* is mostly populated by people of Hmong ethnicity. It is a relocated village, built on a road-side running across the ridge of a hill. *Baan Noi* has a full primary school. The other village (which I will refer to as *Baan Nyai*) was slightly bigger, had long been a site of residence, and was located in a valley. Here the ethnic profile was more mixed with ethnic Khmu making up the majority. Next to a full primary school, *Baan Nyai* also

4   Laos is home to multiple ethnic groups. The Lao is the largest group, and economically and politically dominant.
5   In other protect the anonymity of the various Laotian nationals involved in this research, I have decided to anonymise geographical and personal information to the extent possible.

had a near complete secondary school which drew students from various neighbouring villages.

According to our study design the research was conducted in two villages that can be considered 'remote'. However, we soon realised that remoteness is relative, fluid and most importantly, a perspective from the vantage point of the centre. Martin Saxer (2022:10) notes in this respect that 'remoteness is seldom just a descriptive device' and draws attention to remoteness as a 'figure of thought' that illuminates particular aspects and ideas about rural places whilst muting others.

Remoteness features firmly in development discourses. It is associated with backwardness and poverty and remote rural areas are seen as disconnected from markets and the state – precisely the kind of issues development interventions seek to remedy (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox this issue). It may also map onto ethnic differences (Clarke-Sather 2020). This is no different in Laos, both historically (Pholsena 2006:21) and contemporary. For example, Jonathan Rigg quotes from a speech of a Chairman of the Laotian National Rural Development Committee in which rural areas are described as 'areas which are isolated, remote and uncivilised, in which the ways of living of people are different from others' (UNDP 1996:14; IN: Rigg 2005:83).

Saxer (2022:10) further notes that the 'trope of remoteness' suggests 'a degree of isolation'. Isolation refers here to a lack of connection with state centres and with state services and formal markets more generally. This perspective summons certain mobilities while muting others. For example, it calls for mobilities from the centre into rural areas to undo its assumed isolation while it leaves out of sight the many mobilities comprising rural areas, both historically (e.g. Evrard 2011; Tappe 2023) and contemporary (e.g. Ó Briain 2018:177; Trần Thị Hà Lan and Huijsmans 2014).

Historically, formal education was very sparsely provided for the population of what is now Laos, even if seen in relation to other parts of French Indochina (Bilodeau, Pathammavong and Lê Quang Hông 1955), through a colonial-era school system that was largely urban-based. During the Indochinese wars, the communist *Pathet Lao*, from the 1950s onwards, provided basic forms of education in parts of rural Laos that were under its control (Chagnon and Rumpf 1982:166) and also sent many children and young people from these areas for education to North Vietnam (Pholsena 2012:178). Following the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975, the agenda of expanding basic education provisioning across the country was continued, not least because for the new regime state-provided mass schooling was a key tool for nation-building (Evans 1998; Faming 2007). As a result, education enrolment figures have increased substantially. The primary school net-enrolment rate stood at 93.8 *per cent*

in 2017. Yet only 82 *per cent* of those enrolled in primary school reached its final (fifth) year and secondary school enrolment rates have remained relatively low at 60.4 *per cent* (Boualaphet and Goto 2020:963). Moreover, there is a notable concern with education quality. A joint report by the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports and the World Bank Group titled *The Learning Crisis in Lao PDR* states that 'on average, fourth-grade students can correctly answer only 23 percent of math questions and only 58 percent of Lao language questions' (Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018:1).

These national averages hide important differences. Studies on education in Laos repeatedly remark that, on the whole, in rural areas school attendance and learning outcomes are lower than in urban areas. These rural differences are even more pronounced for children from poor households, children of ethnic groups other than the Lao, and girls, and further aggravated by the intersection of these factors (Boualaphet and Goto 2020; Demas, Naka, and Mason 2018). It is in part because of these challenges that 'Laos has been subject to a range of external interventions that seek to enhance educational provision' typically taking the form of external donor agencies collaborating with Laotian government (Jeong and Hardy 2023:1).

Mobilities and Rural Schooling in the Global South

Over the past decades, the theme of mobilities has received increased attention across the social sciences as the so-called 'new mobilities paradigm', or the mobilities turn (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). The new mobilities paradigm sets out to challenge 'the ways in which much social science research has been 'a-mobile' and underpinned by sedentarist theories (Sheller and Urry 2006:208). Sedentarism, Mimi Sheller and John Urry, explain, 'treats as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness' (ibid 2006:208).

Research published as part of the new mobilities paradigm has tended to focus on relatively contemporary infrastructures and products of mobilities such as the internet, airports, and digital devices. Subsequentially, research flowing from this paradigm has been skewed towards research conducted in the global north – especially initially (Benwell 2009:78; Rigg 2007:118). Reflecting on this in his *Everyday Geography of the Global South*, Jonathan Rigg (2007) argues that the premises of the new mobilities paradigm are of relevance for research in the rural global south, too. First, it calls for taking serious 'old mobilities', such as long-standing trade and migration patterns part of peasant societies (e.g. Evrard 2011). This is relevant for debunking persistent popular, and at times academic, assumptions about the remoteness and boundedness of rural villages and peasant life (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024; Rigg 2007:124). This point needs to be extended to include assumptions about the lives of

rural children and youth, which especially in the context of the global south were and often have remained mobile, too (Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010). Second, new mobilities have unfolded in the global south as well, ranging from young women's involvement in migration to the particular ways in which mobile technologies have become part of everyday life in the global south, too (Mills 1999). With regard to the latter, it is again young people who have incorporated such new digital mobilities most fully into their rural lives (Huijsmans and Trần 2015; Porter 2016).

Schooling has hardly received any attention in the mobilities turn inspired literature. The few exceptions, that also focus on the global south, include a small body of work looking at children's journeys to school (Benwell 2009; Gerber and Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010; Tran and Huijsmans forthcoming). This literature conveys several important points. First, in rural areas children's everyday school attendance often adds a further layer of mobility to young lives that are already mobile. Journeys to school come in addition to various other mobilities rural children are involved in (e.g. walks to collect water or firewood). Children experience journeys to school, often by foot, at times as dangerous but also as fun, often varying substantially by season (for similar findings from rural Malaysia see Gerber and Huijsmans 2016; Porter et al. 2010). Second, rural children's journey to school requires rethinking indicators of school-readiness. Given the distance children need to cover, their physical strength becomes a more relevant measure than chronological age which is used in education policies (Porter et al. 2010:97). Third, the emplaced institution of the school stands in friction with the mobility requirement of rural school attendance. For example, rural students' journeys to school may lead to them arriving late, or getting their shoes or school uniforms muddied which 'can result in punishment at school or being barred from school for 'not being neat'' (Porter et al. 2010:97). Such disciplinary measures contribute to forging a disconnect between young people's everyday rural realities and the aspirations cultivated and promised through modern schooling (Ansell et al. 2020; Morarji 2014).

In the anthropology of the state and development, mobilities have received somewhat more attention (Bærenholdt 2013; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta's (2002:982) seminal piece focusing on development practices in the Indian context shows the role of spatial metaphors and mundane mobilities of state practices in making real the idea of states as positioned above *and* as containing its localities, regions and communities. Amongst other things, this representation of the state is realized by the muting and marking of different mobilities. For example, being mobile is considered an unquestionable part of the job for state-officials to become more encompassing, realized, for instance, by following up and checking on the implementation of development interventions "on the ground". Yet, these very

same conceptualisations discursively fix other people in place; effectively making them "local" so that they can become encompassable by the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:985).

The discussion above has begun to unravel some of the mobilities that comprise rural schooling, how these matter, and how these are differentially recognised. Whereas children's muddied clothes caused by their journey to school flags remoteness and may be reason for punishment, a visit by education officials to a rural school is often met with praise and contributes to the undoing of remoteness by reinforcing its relation with the state. In other words, the construct of remoteness, or its opposite connectedness contributes to constructing different mobilities differently – with the state playing a pivotal role. For this reason, the next section first attends to 'mobilities of state' before moving to examples of 'sideway mobilities: mobilities despite the state and development'.

Mobilities of State

Long pai baan: Realising the State Through Mobilities

Laos' political system is hierarchically and spatially structured running from central, provincial, district, to village level (Pholsena 2006:9). The 2012 *Sam Sang* (literally: Three Builds) policy directive sheds light on how power flows through Laos' political structure. It describes '(1) provinces as strategic units; (2) districts as sectorial strengthened units; and (3) villages as development units' (Vongpraseuth and Choi 2015:793), and notes that the latter may include the merging of villages into clusters (*khoumbaan*).

Permission for our research had to flow through this chain of command, starting at central level (the Laotian Ministry of Education and Sports) all the way to the DESB office at district level who, then, introduced the research team to the village authorities. The DESB continued to play a crucial role throughout the research project; any request for visiting the study villages had to be approved by the DESB, all our research visits to the study villages had to start and end with reporting at the district office, and all our village stays had to be accompanied by a DESB official.

The power differentials between village and district are apparent from Laos' political structure. Yet, how do these pan out in practice and what is the role of mobilities in this? The expression '*long pai baan*' makes a useful starting point. We heard it being uttered many times by district level officials when talking about work-related trips to villages. It literally means 'descending to the village'. Yet, the district centre concerned

is located in a valley and reaching any of the villages in the district required climbing the hills and ascending from the valley. Therefore, '*long pai baan*' needs to be understood metaphorically. The utterance refers to travelling down the power hierarchy of Laos' political system from district to village (compare: Clarke-Sather 2020:27).

Once district level officials arrive in the village, it is the expectation that the village hosts them by offering accommodation (often staying with teachers or village level officials) and sharing meals. During these stays, village-level actors and district officials interact intimately. They share the same food, and enjoy leisure time together; creating a degree of intimacy between the political centre and its peripheries that Herzfeld (1997) refers to as 'cultural intimacy'. In these instances, formal hierarchies and power differentials articulated by the phrase '*long pai baan*' blur and moments of good times can be observed without difficulty (Huijsmans and Piti 2021). Nonetheless, social hierarchies quickly resurface in formal meetings that are part of these visits, too (Singh 2014). Although co-chaired (by a village level official and a district level official), roles are distinct in such meetings: district level official instructs villagers about policies, village authorities welcome the district guests and further participation is typically limited to listening, note-taking and listing reasons for why it has been difficult to live up to policy expectations.

Official village-bound mobilities are usefully contrasted with the individual travels village level teachers make in the reverse direction (see more below). For example, a teacher recollected a visit he made to the district centre. There, he greeted some district level officials he had hosted weeks previously in his house in the village. He explained how dismayed he was that they did not know, or pretended to not know, his name any longer and did not pay him much attention.

This section has illustrated the role of mobilities, including the encounters they give rise to 'at the interface between the formal and informal' (High and Petit 2013:421), in enacting the state as a social relation in rural Laos. First, a relation of authority is realised through discourse when district officials refer to their village-bound journeys as going down the social hierarchy. Second, the direction of official mobilities reinforces this further, as district-level officials tend to travel to villages much more frequently than to provincial centres, let alone the national centre. Third, it is through the encounters and mundane interactions flowing from mobilities that the state comes to be experienced intimately and power differentials become lived experiences (Bærenholdt 2013:21).

The Intensification of Mobilities: The Role of (Inter)national Development Actors

Mobilities may be important for realising the state as a social relation in rural areas. However, in contexts such as Laos, the state, especially at district level, has limited financial capacity for such mobilities. Therefore, we need to pay attention to the role of external actors not just in terms of how they influence development processes discursively and materially (Jeong and Hardy 2023), but also to their role in facilitating and intensifying state-related mobilities.

Since development actors working in Laos need to partner with Laotian government offices, the mobilities of (inter)national development actors do more then merely mapping onto those of the Laotian state. In the case of our research project, the DESB officials assigned as our partners achieved many more trips to the villages because our project funds removed the financial constraints that normally delimit the number of such trips by covering the travel expenses and *per diems* of our DESB counterparts. It then follows that if 'the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled; around authorities and the formation of authority' that make up the state a bundle of social relationships (High and Petit 2013:421) is for a good part realised through mobilities, (inter)national development actors effectively reinforce and intensify these power differentials.

Moreover, when non-Laotian nationals, like the author, join these trips, the district office will assign yet more staff to accompany the team – often motivated based on protecting the security of international visitors. Such trips then quickly become development tours involving at least one car, often more, packed with staff and supplies such as bottled water and packaged snacks. Development tours contribute to intensifying the experience of the state, and this intensification also has effects on education.

The embodied presence of these visitors and the material objects part of the entourage exposes villagers directly to representations of the promise of education (Morarji 2014). For example, hearing that some villagers name their children 'Vigo' (after a type of Toyota often used for these trips) indicates that these mobilities affect people's aspiration (Huijsmans and Piti 2021:178). Next to stimulating aspirations for education, such trips, paradoxically, may contribute to eroding the very structure through which educational aspirations are meant to be realised. First, these larger tours, too, are hosted by village officials – including teachers. Hosting duties now become a serious undertaking and often take a gendered form with women tasked with chores such as fetching water, preparing the meals and doing the dishes. For education projects, these development tours, then, easily end up compromising the

educational improvements they seek to realise because it places additional burdens on (women) teachers which get into the way of their regular teaching work.

Second, for district level staff, partnering with an international development actor is attractive financially for the *per diems* it generates. In addition, it may also offer rare opportunities for jumping scale. As we have seen, the direction of the physical mobilities of the Laotian state are largely downwards in the state hierarchy (i.e. from district to village). Projects funded through international development assistance or research offer rare chances for breaking this pattern, for example, when such projects invite district level project partners to national level project-related events in the name of participation. These travels offer district level staff an opportunity to demonstrate their qualities at provincial and central level. At times this leads INGOs to hire local level government staff at provincial or even central level. In such instances their temporary jumping of scale gets a permanent character. Such career promotions would take much longer to realise within the state system. However, once Laotian nationals have made the transition from working for Laotian government to the INGO sector it is improbable that they can return to a government position thereafter. At stake is the low salary, slow career progress but long term socio-economic and political stability of a government position versus a higher salary, more dynamic careers but little long-term security within the INGO sector. Importantly, not all district level staff stands an equal chance in such scale-jumping. It is those with a command of English (or Japanese, Korean, French), and ideally also a command of an ethnic minority language, and who display confidence in interacting with (inter)national partners that stand out. Thereby, selective social mobilities may come to affect the quality of human resources at district level state-offices in particular ways.

Sideway Mobilities: Mobilities Despite Development and the State

The Mobilities of Non-local Teachers: Commuting and Diversifying Beyond Teaching

In rural Laos, few adults possess the educational qualifications required for becoming a teacher. Therefore, a good part of the teaching staff in rural Laos teaches in villages, districts, or even in provinces that are different from their natal ones. DESB staff observed that many of these non-local teachers 'are not willing to settle in the school or village where they are teaching', because of the more limited facilities in these locations. Many non-local teachers resolve this dilemma as follows: Part of the week they stay in the village in which they teach (the workstation) and the other part they

spend in their actual home where they have their family or where their longer-term commitments lie (the home station).

Such non-local teachers often leave their workstation early on a Friday and return late on a Monday. This shortens the school week for teachers and consequentially also for students (see also: Demas, Naka and Mason 2018:8). At the district level office this was often interpreted as non-local teachers having their commitments in the wrong place. For example, a running joke about such non-local teachers we heard at the DESB goes as follows: 'My name is teacher …, but my surname is *lor van souk* [waiting for Friday]'. Yet, cutting teaching weeks short to realise a translocal life is not necessarily a sign of putting private concerns above professional ones. It may also be a pragmatic response to poor road conditions that makes travel in certain parts of rural Laos, during parts of the year, time-consuming and unpredictable. In such cases, leaving early on Friday, then, is necessary to reach destinations before dark and arriving late on a Monday may well be due to transport problems encountered.

Moving between places also comes with economic opportunities (Rowedder 2022:33). This is evident across rural Laos, involving diverse occupations. Bus drivers may earn a little extra by not only transporting passengers but also unaccompanied letters and goods. INGO staff or government staff may bring back from their rural work trips freshly caught fish, wildlife, or other non-timber forest produce (NTFPs) – despite protection efforts. Hence, when non-local teachers pack their motorbikes with agricultural produce, wildlife or other NTFPs to sell these in district centres and make the reverse trip with goods available at district markets they follow a common pattern of reaping economic benefits from mobilities, thereby economically diversifying beyond the salaried teaching job.

In sum, the mobilities of non-local teachers matter in multiple ways. It may negatively affect learning outcomes if it ends up contributing to teacher absenteeism (Demas, Naka and Mason 2018:8) but it also reflects a wider social pattern in which the ability to move offers economic opportunities. This latter fact is fully accepted in relation to INGO and government staff for whom *per diems* received for travelling are often much more substantial than the costs incurred. Hence, the economic opportunities that come with the mobilities of non-local teachers may be valued by the teachers concerned. Yet, the time it takes and the economic diversification it allows can end up compromising precisely what these jobs are meant to contribute to: good quality rural schooling.

Villagisation: Sedentary Development and Mobile Lives

The Laotian government has committed to providing primary schools to each village of a certain size. These schools may not offer the complete 5-year primary cycle, yet this commitment ensures that there is some basic education provided within walking distance for most children in Laos. However, not all settlements are recognised as villages. This is a relevant point for settlements in the mountainous parts of northern Laos. In these areas, so-called village resettlement policies have mobilised rural folk, mostly of ethnic groups other than Lao, to leave their settlements and their mostly non-permanent houses (built with natural material from the forests and fields) in the hills and mountains for a government identified village (either joining an existing village, or a newly established village), where they are encouraged to construct permanent houses (using concrete and metal sheets), located on the road network and where basic social services are provided (Baird and Shoemaker 2007; High 2008).

Many rural folks have followed this policy of villagisation. However, the idea of realising development in place has only worked in part. Basic social services are indeed provided, villagers increasingly build so-called permanent houses (Stolz 2019). Yet, in these rural areas of resettlement opportunities for trade and other non-agrarian income-earning activities have remained limited, let alone opportunities for salaried employment. This was also true in the study villages in which we worked (especially in *Baan Noi*) and affected villagers of non-Lao ethnicity most. Therefore, these villagers must continue to rely on their *sanam* (gardens) and temporary houses in the hills (see Figure 1) where they practice swidden cultivation even though banning this agricultural practice has long been a Laotian policy objective (MAF 2021:15).[6] Since the *sanam* is often located at some distance from the village, the villagisation policy has resulted in more rather than less mobility among rural villagers because many of them stay part of the week in their 'old settlement' at the *sanam* which is their economic mainstay, and some days in the new location that was created based on the promise of development in place (compare: Nguyen and Rigg 2024).

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6   Cross-border migration to Thailand that is widespread in many other parts of rural Laos, especially areas bordering Thailand appeared to not take place on a large scale in the study villages.

Figure 1   The village of *Baan Noi* (left) and a sanam location (right).
Photos by the author

Figure 2   Student attendance recorded on the blackboard (39 registered (18 girls); 16 present, 23 absent). Photo by the author
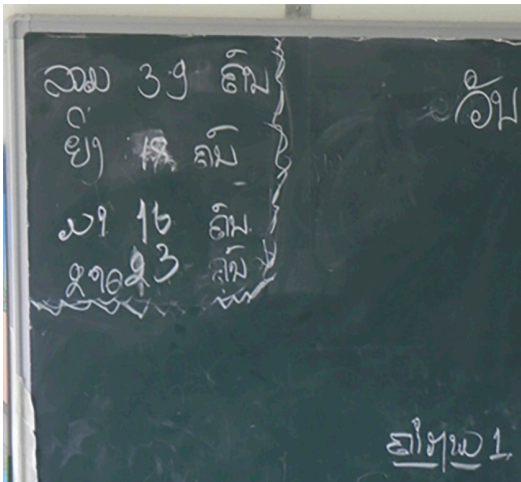
According to parents, the effects of their *sanam*-bound mobilities on children's school attendance varied by age. Parents agreed that families with young children would typically take all their children with them to their *sanam*. If children were a little older, some parents said they would leave their children behind in the village so they could attend school while the adults would stay and work in the *sanam*. Other

parents said they would take older children with them to the *sanam*, too. Sometimes so that these older children could provide childcare for young siblings in the *sanam*, but also because of fears about what could go wrong when children stayed behind unsupervised. For example, we learnt about one instance in *Baan Nyai* in which a primary school aged student had drowned in the river while her parents were away in the *sanam*.

Altogether, villagers' *sanam*-bound mobilities affect children's everyday school attendance, and during the busy agricultural season substantially so (see Figure 2).

In addition, it also stands in friction with betterment programmes that seek to improve rural schooling. This can be illustrated based on two common rural development interventions that build on the place-based premise of modern schooling. First is the school lunch programme. Providing students with school-lunches is a common policy tool implemented to increase school attendance and to improve learning outcomes (students do better on a full stomach). In the context of Laos, school lunch programmes are organised as follows: The donor provides food and the village provides the physical structure (kitchen/storage) and labour (preparing meals). The first part of the deal, villagers realise without much difficulty, the second part is more challenging because it requires a continuous effort. Moreover, while men have often constructed the kitchen and storage space, women are typically charged with the duty of preparing the meals. Especially during the busy planting and harvesting season, food for school meals often remains locked away in the storage space as women need to prioritise labouring in their *sanam* above staying in the village to prepare school meals. Second, early childhood education is another common policy tool rolled out to improve learning outcomes in rural areas. This policy seeks to address the phenomenon of late enrolment and seeks to realise a degree of school readiness, thereby aiming to increase learning outcomes in primary education. However, also this policy tool assumes a sedentary village population which stands in friction with the *sanam*-bound mobilities practiced by a good part of the village population. Sedentary development interventions that provide social services in place without attending to mobility requirements of villagers' livelihoods, thus, risk resulting into uneven development as those villagers who can afford a sedentary life benefit while those who must live their lives translocally between the *sanam* and the village lose out or benefit only partially.

Sanam-bound mobilities not just stand in friction with a mode of development that is place-based, its direction is problematic too. Villagisation policies brings villagers into the fold of the state, and the associated promises of a better life are largely desired by villagers (High 2014). It is a centripetal mobility, which can be contrasted

with the centrifugal *sanam*-bound mobilities that take villagers away from planned development and (back) into rural spaces that, as we have seen, are viewed remote and undeveloped (Mao, Nguyen and Wilcox this issue). As the discussion has shown, leading mobile lives, persistent involvement in swidden cultivation, and irregular school attendance should not be read as a rejection of the state or modernity as argued by Scott (2009) or as characteristic of certain ethnic groups (Clarke-Sather 2020:15). Rather, it is a response to the absence of a foundation for substantial livelihood options in the proposal of sedentary rural futures in Laos (compare: Nguyen and Rigg this issue).

Mobilities in the Realities and Future Aspirations of Rural Youth

Textbooks expose students to a small range of possible occupational futures. The figure of the teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer feature with marked consistency in these textbooks (Ansell et al. 2020). Except for the police officer, these are also one of the few salaried and modern occupations that rural students will have seen in their immediate environment, and their uniformed nature no doubt adds a further appeal. Our research with primary school-aged children indicates that regular exposure to such occupational futures both in textbooks and in actual reality contributes to the formation of modern occupational aspirations (Ansell et al. 2018).

For rural students, realising these aspirations requires mobilities and relocations. Full secondary schools are only available in larger villages and post-secondary schooling requires relocating to a provincial capital or beyond. For rural children and youth, educational success in the form of progressing through the school system, thus, requires gradual movement towards urban or even national centres (Huijsmans 2019b).

When we asked primary school students what steps they would need to take to become a teacher or a nurse few students could respond. The textbooks did also not explain the educational pathway and the mobility requirements for the occupations it featured. Moreover, when we discussed with primary school teachers children's lack of knowledge about realising their aspirations, the teachers insisted that at primary school level it is the task of teachers to provide students with dreams. They did not see it as their task to complicate these dreams by elaborating on the mobilities required for realising aspirations. Additionally, mobility was also absent from children's motivations for their aspirations. For example, they said they would want to become a teacher to teach children in the village, become a soldier to make the village safer, or become a doctor to cure ailing fellow villagers. Thus, primary schoolchildren drew on school-based aspirations in constructing their own images of desired rural futures.

In our study villages, few parents could afford the cost of school-related mobilities and relocations and certainly not for all their children. Some ethnic students would benefit from scholarship programmes and boarding facilities (Faming 2019). Yet, for most rural students, aspirations for completing secondary education, let alone entering further studies, remained unrealised. More commonly, rural youth terminated their schooling prematurely and entered the world of work. Sometimes this took them to provincial or even national centres. Yet, more commonly rural youth found work (typically farm work) in other rural areas, within the district or in neighbouring districts or provinces – often in combination with contributing labour to their natal household. In sum, the mobility requirements for realising the aspirations propagated through schooling remained absent from textbooks, as well as students' and teachers' reflections on these aspirations. This might be to save rural students from, or suppress, the frustration that their families would be unable to finance the mobilities required for progressing through the school system. Once out of school, mobilities came to shape young people's lives, nonetheless. Yet, these were typically rural-bound mobilities for purposes of low-skilled manual labour. Any mention of these mobilities was equally missing from student textbooks, and thus scripted out of state-proposed visions of rural futures (Huijsmans and Piti 2021).

Conclusion

Education is central to a range of development objectives rendering it a key instrument *and* promise for realising particular futures (Jeong and Hardy 2023; Naafs and Skelton 2018). Over the past decades considerable progress has been made toward realising universal access to at least some years of primary schooling (Gerber and Huijsmans 2016). Yet, various challenges have remained especially in the provisioning of education in rural areas. As a result, a deficit perspective on rural schooling continues dominating research and policy discussions on rural schooling.

The research presented in this article was institutionally, discursively, and materially embedded in such a deficit perspective. As I have shown, this does not have to dictate the methodological and conceptual approach taken. 'Compromised research' can provide a unique vantage point for observing and reflecting on the actual working of the social systems rural development interventions become embedded in (Herberg, Seeliger, and Möller 2023:4; Hilhorst 2003; Mosse 2005). I have done this, by foregrounding ethnographic observations of the mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling. This has shown that rural schools must be appreciated as more than service providers or institutions, and also as nodes in diverse mobilities. The sedentary structures of rural schools are emplaced in highly mobile rural landscapes, consisting of new and old forms of mobilities, which pose a challenge to thinking

about rural and urban spaces in a neatly bounded manner (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). The various mobilities underpinning and related to rural schooling each have their own social logic and involve different sets of actors. Thinking across these differences illuminates a patchwork of mobilities that shapes in important ways the actual unfolding of development interventions related to rural schooling.

The different mobilities described in this paper are valued differently, pivoting on their connection with the state, and relate to rural future making differently. I have distinguished between 'mobilities of state' and 'sideways mobilities'. Mobilities of the former kind are rarely questioned. These are considered part of everyday state practices, further reinforced and intensified by agents of international development because in the context of Laos development projects always involve the Laotian state (High and Petit 2013:420; High 2014). I have argued that in rural areas these state-related mobilities contribute in important ways to realising the state as a set of social relationships, which includes the formation of authority, relations of power, but also intimate engagement with state-officials and the production of aspirations. As such, these mobilities are insightful not just for their relation to formal visions of rural futures from, i.e. official development agendas, but rather for the mundane practices they give rise to that change social relationships in the present. Sideways mobilities, on the other hand, are often constructed as a problem in development discourse, not least because they are viewed as reproducing remoteness, a trope that development interventions, such as rural schooling, are set up to counter. Nonetheless these sideways mobilities remain essential for rural folk precisely because the economic promise of rural development in place, whether it is schooling or villagisation, albeit not resisted, remains unrealised or unrealisable for many.

The analysis presented has implications for intervening in rural schooling. Most importantly, development interventions seeking to address the problem of poor learning outcomes such as introducing preschool programmes, school meals, curricula reforms, etcetera, necessarily become embedded in, and further reconfigure the patchworked mobilities comprising rural schooling. Thereby, they shift or intensify the mobilities making up rural schooling. The analysis has indicated that these interventions, therefore, can never be viewed as mere technical fixes. They reshape the patchwork of mobilities related to rural schooling. This includes ways in which the state becomes realised and experienced, materially and discursively, in rural areas (Bærenholdt 2013; Ferguson and Gupta 2002), as well as the role of place and mobilities in diverse forms of present and aspired livelihoods. The point is not whether this is good or bad, but rather a reminder that development interventions are rarely just linear pathways of improvement, as common theories of change suggest, but have social effects that may well be different from its stated objectives and will affect different groups of people differently.

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