

BEQUAL NEWSLETTER

Delivering quality and accessible basic education to more girls and boys in Lao PDR

September 2018

Issue 3



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Basic Education Quality
and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL)



Australian
Aid 



WELCOME MESSAGE

We have the pleasure to share with you the latest newsletter of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) program.

The Lao Government has placed a high priority on improving its education sector and places education development as an important key in national socio-economic development to compete in the ASEAN economy and move to industrialization and modernity.

BEQUAL program was designed to support the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to address challenges in basic education in Lao PDR and is aligned to the National Education Sector Development Plan 2016-20. BEQUAL is a unique collaborative educational initiative between the Ministry of Education and Sports of Lao PDR, the Australian Government, the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and non-governmental organisations.

“BEQUAL program supports the priorities of the Ministry of Education and Sports in primary curriculum development, teacher induction and training, and others. The implementation of the program is successful and the progress is very satisfactory. BEQUAL is aligned with and follows the priorities of the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan. On behalf of the Ministry of Education and Sports, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Australian Government, the European Union, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for their substantial support. I am committed to maximize the outcomes of the program and make your support sustainable.”

Dr Bounpanh Xaymouny, Director General, Department of Planning, MoES.



“As we all know, it takes a holistic approach to improve educational outcomes – learning and teaching materials, infrastructure, government financing, leadership and school management, and community engagement. But the most fundamental ingredient of learning is teachers. That is why we are pleased to support the Ministry of Education and Sports to improve teaching skills and pedagogy, including through the new curriculum.”

Ms Katie Smith, First Secretary, the Australian Embassy in Lao PDR.

“Quality of teachers is one of the most important factors contributing to education learning outcomes. We are glad to work in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Sports and Australia in supporting the professional development of teacher educators and training ethnic students to be deployed as teachers in rural villages.”

Mr Bryan Fornari, Head of Cooperation, European Union in Lao PDR.



“BEQUAL’s goal is that more girls and boys of primary school-age, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, achieve functional literacy and numeracy and acquire life skills which is closely aligned to the EDSP. This requires a revised curriculum, changes in teaching and a focus on monitoring these changes at the classroom level. We want to see teachers who have the skills and attitude to actively engage with and encourage children to learn and school administrations, communities and MoES at central, provincial and district level that provide the required support to teachers.”

Mrs Sylvia Bitter, Team Leader, BEQUAL.



BEQUAL’s approach focuses on collaboration and partnership—with Governments and Ministries, at national, provincial, district and village level, with teachers and students, with partners and stakeholders. Through these pages, we look forward to sharing with you our stories and updates from all active partners from central to field level.



Joint mission from the Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Australian Embassy, European Union Delegation and BEQUAL advisors in Luang Namtha and Oudomxay to monitor and promote education – April 2018.

AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR VISITS SAVANNAKHET PROVINCE

For his very first visit outside Vientiane, the new Australian Ambassador, Jean-Bernard Carrasco, chose Savannakhet Province and was delighted to see first hand how the BEQUAL program was helping disadvantaged children access education.

After a call on Savannakhet Governor, HE Mr Santiphab Phomvihane, to discuss the province's economic, social and education development progress, and a meeting with Director General of Savannakhet Provincial Education and Sports Services, Mrs Lingthong Sengtavanh, to learn how to better support the education priorities of provincial and district governments, the Ambassador started his field trip with the Savannakhet Teacher Training College (TTC).

The Ambassador met with the enthusiastic students and inaugurated their recently renovated dormitories and new latrines and bathing facilities.

Then, alongside Savannakhet Vice Governor, HE Mr Khamphoune Touphaythoune and Acting Director General of Teacher Education, Ministry of Education and Sports, Mr Keth Phanhlack, the Ambassador officially launched the school infrastructure work for the whole region at Ban Theum Noy School, Phalanxai District. The delegation broke ground and poured the first concrete ground beam for the construction of new classrooms. The 11 ethnic student teachers who will be relocated to their home villages in the district in September 2018 proudly participated in the ceremony.

Ambassador Carrasco remarked, "Australia has been a long-term supporter of education in Lao PDR. We have a shared interest in giving children the chance of a good education—there is no issue more important for Lao PDR's socio-economic development".

Better school resourcing is one of the three BEQUAL's expected outcomes. Schools where an ethnic graduate will be deployed will receive upgraded infrastructure.

In Savannakhet, BEQUAL is also working closely with sub-national governments to improve financial management and increase support for teachers. Phalanxai and Nong District Education and Sports Bureaus



➤ Australian Ambassador to Lao PDR, Jean-Bernard Carrasco, and Savannakhet Vice Governor HE Mr Khamphoune Touphaythoune talk to students at the Teacher Training College.

📎 197 student teachers, including 132 women are supported to study in Savannakhet TTC.

👤 Amongst 197 students, 123 will be deployed in primary schools of their home districts in Savannakhet Province and 74 in Khammouane Province.

🎓 Five teacher educators from Savannakhet TTC received master scholarships and two teacher educators were selected for Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) scholarships.

🔨 12.4 billion LAK invested for infrastructure.



received supplementary funds to increase the number of visits to schools and villages, providing support and on-the-job guidance to teachers, head teachers and Village Education Development Committees. Finance staff at provincial and district levels have been trained in basic Excel functions to improve procedures and increase efficiency.



➤ Launch of school infrastructure work in the province at a ground breaking ceremony at Theum Noy Primary School, Phalanxai District.

NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM TO BE IMPLEMENTED STARTING IN SEPTEMBER 2019



➤ **Mr Andreas Zurbrugg and Associate Prof. Dr Khamphay Sisavanh chairing the Primary Curriculum Steering Committee inaugural meeting.**

Since 2015, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) has been in the process of revising the Lao PDR national primary curriculum that will be implemented gradually beginning with Grade 1 in September 2019.

The new curriculum will be organised thematically. This new organisation is designed to increase integration and opportunities to revise key learning.

Nine subjects will be taught in primary: Lao language, mathematics, science and environment, morals, arts and handicraft, music, physical education, English (starting Grade 3) and social studies (starting Grade 4). The themes in each subject are taught at the same time in each grade, and this will help multigrade teachers with planning and delivery of lessons.

The new textbooks use colour and plenty of visuals, to increase attention and memory retention of the students. Meanwhile, the new teacher guides are more detailed and contain guidance on how to organise each lesson and suggestions for using local knowledge, creating extension activities, working with multi-grade classes or teaching non-Lao first language-speaking students.

A special feature of the new curriculum is the orientation week. During the first week of school, all Grade 1 students will follow a program of activities to help them feel familiar with school life and build their confidence in key routines, behaviours and skills needed in school.

With the objective to improve student learning outcomes, the development of the new curriculum was informed by child learning theory and established

principles of effective primary school pedagogic practice. Hence, one of the main changes with the new curriculum will be in the pedagogy approach. The new curriculum promotes active learning.

The students will be engaged in the lessons by doing activities to encourage them to process new information and apply new knowledge learnt. The teachers will be facilitators rather than one-way providers of information. Students will learn by doing meaningful learning activities and by reflecting about what they are doing.

“Certainly, when we have new curriculum and instructional materials we want our teachers who are playing a key role in the implementation of curriculum at grass-roots level to be familiarised with both contents

and methodology of teaching”, said Associate Professor Dr Khamphay Sisavanh, Vice Minister for Education and Sports at the Primary Curriculum Steering Committee held in May 2018.

“Developing a primary curriculum is the first step to improve student learning outcomes. But the second step, the development of good quality teacher training and support is essential to ensure that teachers can successfully implement the curriculum”, added Mr. Andreas Zurbrugg, former Deputy Head of Mission, Australian Embassy. *“Australia, European Union and USAID are proud to be partnering with the Research Institute for Educational Sciences and Ministry of Education and Sports to support the development of the new curriculum and its implementation.”*

Teacher training and support is essential to ensure that teachers can successfully implement the new curriculum. It is teachers who bring the curriculum to life in the classroom

and they are crucial to the success of a curriculum innovation. In-service teacher training modules will be developed based on the revised primary curriculum content and teaching methodology.

The implementation of the new curriculum is a huge task which will need the commitment and support of all stakeholders, from national, provincial, district and school levels. But the new national curriculum and associated teaching and learning resources will make an important contribution to the quality of the learning outcomes of children. It will help more Lao girls and boys of primary school-age achieve functional literacy and numeracy and acquire life skills.

-  Grade 1 new curriculum to be implemented in September 2019.
-  All teachers to be trained in new pedagogy.
-  Every primary school to receive the revised teaching and learning materials.
-  Every Grade 1 student to receive a new textbook.
-  All materials were tested in pilot schools around the country and improved with feedback from the trials started in 2015.



➤ **Lao Language lesson with the revised textbooks and teaching materials in one of the 25 primary schools selected for the pilot of the new curriculum.**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' LEARNING OUTCOMES



“If you don’t have a good teacher with a deep knowledge of the topic, strong pedagogy skills and efficient teaching techniques, you will not achieve successful learning outcomes for the students.”

Mr Keth Phanhlack, Acting Director General, Department of Teacher Education, MoES.



Literature and research around the world state that the quality of a teacher has a direct impact on student learning outcomes. To improve the learning outcomes of children in primary schools in Laos, it is important to act at the beginning of the learning-teaching journey by improving both the quality and relevance of the primary teacher training curriculum and the training of the teacher educators to deliver that curriculum. This is the rationale behind the BEQUAL-supported Professional Development Program (PDP).

The PDP program is organised around bi-annual intensive workshops when key teacher educators from the eight Teacher Training Colleges (TTC) gather for two weeks. The first PDP workshop organised in August 2017 in Luang Prabang Province was followed by a second one in early February 2018, in Savannakhet Province.

“For most of the workshops, the teacher educators are divided into subjects and each group goes in depth into the specificities of their subject, both in terms of subject content and pedagogical knowledge. Between the two workshops, the key teacher educators disseminate their new learning to their subject colleagues in the TTC and organize activities around classroom observations, lesson study and study groups”, explains Mr Keth Phanhlack, Acting Director General, Department of Teacher Education, MoES.




Learning from classroom observations is central to this approach. “We brought the teacher educators into primary schools to conduct classroom observations to get a better understanding of real situations in classrooms in primary schools and to build their own experience of teaching young children and the challenges faced by the teachers in a classroom”, points out Mrs Khamkhuane Vannasouk, the BEQUAL Education Coordinator working closely with the Department of Teacher Education.

Results from the teacher educator training needs analysis carried out from September 2015 to January 2016 informed this approach. It highlighted that the majority of TTC lecturers have little experience in teaching in primary classrooms and that a strong focus on the practice of teaching in the primary classroom was essential to the PDP.

Mr Sonekeo Thippavanh, Deputy Head of Academic Affairs at Khang Khai TTC and teacher educator for Lao language and literature, is one of the participants in the PDP program. “When I came back to Khang Khai TTC, I organised four classroom observations with my colleagues teaching Lao language. We listed the key findings from our

observations and picked the issues we wanted to focus on in our study group. For example, how could we train the teacher to help the children struggling with spelling?”

“PDP is crucial to ensure that our teacher educators are always improving their knowledge, looking for the best teaching methods to solve the reality of the challenges faced by Lao primary students”, concludes Mr. Keth. “We are now preparing for the next workshop in August 2018. The focus will be facilitation and organisation skills of the trainers. This time the trainers themselves will take a leading role in delivering the workshop to their colleagues”.

-  PDP aims to support TTC educators to deliver the preservice teacher education curriculum to primary teacher trainees.
-  62 teacher educators and educational development officers have participated in the PDP.
-  The program initially focus on three main subjects, namely Lao language, mathematics, and science & environment.



“During the first workshop, I went to a primary demonstration school. I observed how the children were learning and the problems they were having. I also had to prepare a lesson and teach a primary class. I now have a much better idea of the difficulties my student teachers will face with a young audience.”

Mr Sonekeo Thippavanh, Deputy Head, Academic Affairs, Khang Khai TTC.

FIRST COHORT OF LOCAL TEACHER GRADUATES TO RETURN TO THEIR VILLAGES SOON



212 future teachers to be deployed in their home communities in rural areas in September 2018.



124 future teachers to be deployed in their home communities in rural areas in September 2019 and 25 in September 2020.



Several studies around the world indicate that local ethnic teachers are better for remote communities, especially ethnic communities. Local ethnic teachers understand the language and the culture of their students, critical for the first years of schooling and Lao language acquisition.

In a country with nearly 50 different ethnic groups, many children in remote villages have never been exposed to Lao language when they first start school. Nobody is better placed than local teachers to provide a language bridge and help the children of their ethnic community to speak, read, write Lao and count well—skills that are essential to get a job and be prepared for their adult life. Moreover, local teachers are more likely to remain in the village and local female teachers will be a role model for women, especially young girls, in their own communities.

The BEQUAL teacher scholarship program, in collaboration with MoES, is supporting 361 local students from remote and rural locations. Mr Sipasert Somphone is one of

them. He comes from Savannakhet Province, Ban Theum Noy, the Makong village visited by the Australian Ambassador during his first official trip. *“At the ground-breaking ceremony of our new school building, the Ambassador asked who will be the new future teacher in this village. I was so proud to raise my hand!”*

He continues explaining, *“It has always been my dream to become a teacher and I worked hard at school. When I graduated from lower secondary, the village education development committee introduced me to the BEQUAL teacher scholarship program and I applied straight away. I was selected and started to study at Savannakhet TTC in September 2015; the learning was intense and very interesting”.*

Like other teacher students in their final year, Sipasert completed his 12 weeks’ practicum last semester in a primary school of his targeted district. *“I taught all the nine subjects during the practicum. The most challenging part was lesson planning. I had to prepare my teaching techniques for every subject one day ahead. I had to think how I can explain that topic to be sure my students will understand. The other difficulty is how to deal with misbehaving students—how to get them interested and engaged in my lesson. I gained a lot of confidence from the practicum. Now I can’t wait to come back in my village as ... the new primary teacher!”*



➤ Sipasert teaching in Ban Theum Noy during his last week of practicum. This temporary building is now replaced by the new school built with the support from BEQUAL.

BEQUAL SUPPORTS REMOTE COMMUNITIES TO BUILD NEW CLASSROOMS



“Allowing villagers to actively participate in the school construction gives them a strong ownership of their facilities and builds their capacity to conduct maintenance in the future.”

Mr Noukham Sisavath, Head of Salavan DESB.

“Napho Noi villagers built the primary school by themselves in 1986, with local materials such as wood planks”, explains Mr Somsak Houkhammani, the Chief of Napho Noi Village in Salavan Province.

“We were so happy to receive support from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) through the BEQUAL program to build extra classrooms and new toilets; we will also welcome Ms Baiphone Keobounhoung who benefited from the BEQUAL teacher scholarship program and she will be our extra primary teacher in September.”

The approach implemented by BEQUAL for construction utilises a community-based contracting (CBC) model enabling the works to be fully managed by local communities through their Village Education Development Committee (VEDC).

A project management team and a procurement committee, each including women, are formed by the VEDC to manage the grant funds provided by BEQUAL for the construction work. They will employ an experienced foreman and community labourer to undertake the construction rather than external contractors.

BEQUAL engineers and the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) staff are responsible for the overall technical supervision and ensure building designs meet MoES national standards. Activity has commenced all over the country in February with the training of the communities on the CBC approach.

“Salavan DESB staff came in February to explain our roles and give us recommendations on suppliers’ selection, construction monitoring and financial reports. The workers



174 schools nationwide will receive new classrooms.



296 new latrines and 149 water supply will be provided.



174 VEDCs being trained in CBC approach.

will be from our village. We will build a storage space to keep the construction materials. It is also important to prepare a temporary school arrangement to avoid teaching-learning disruption during the works. The training was really clear, especially on the logistics part and the supplier selection. Our village is proud to be in charge of the school construction. It will be our school, built by us. I think the community will more strongly encourage their children to attend class; we will build a nice school with toilets and the children won’t drop out from school like before”, concludes Mr Somsak.

“At the end of the training, the VEDC started assigning responsible people for each task of the construction. They were ready and willing to start as soon as possible”, notes Mr Noukham Sisavath, Head of Salavan DESB.

EDUCATION PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

Many young Lao girls do not attend school due to their family's financial status, and distance from school. Culturally, some families believe girls should stay at home to do housework and raise their younger siblings. Some parents do not understand the importance of education.

However, the situation is changing. The Lao Government is prioritising education with a focus on giving all students, without discrimination on race, age, gender, and religion, access to complete primary school. The Government wants to encourage more primary school girl students to continue to secondary level and be ready to contribute to the socio-economic development and future of Laos. Girls' education is proven to be a remarkably effective catalyst for social development and economic growth in developing countries. So, through access to education, it is not only the individual girl who is empowered—it is the broader society.

Mrs Sengneune Wayakone, Director of the Curriculum Development Centre at the Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES) emphasises that *“Education not only eradicates women's illiteracy, education empowers women by helping them achieve other basic human rights—a spiral of power in their lives, grounded in education. Education enables women to be leaders for their family and role models for their girls. Educated women will have the same competencies and skills just like their male counterparts; they will be equally able to work in any field, with the government, with any organisation or private company, as men are. We can see highly capable women in leadership positions in any area of work. For example, the President of the National Assembly of Lao PDR is a woman, and our Minister of Education and Sports is also a woman”*.



“In my perspective, education will certainly play a role in changing gender perceptions and will increase gender awareness for young people.”

Mrs Sengneune Wayakone, Director of the Curriculum Development Center, RIES.



Noticing a growing understanding of gender issues in Laos, Mrs Sengneune explains, *“In the education sector, management, teachers and students are being trained to have a deeper comprehension of gender parity and how education, teaching materials and resources can support women's empowerment and role in society”*.

Mrs Sengneune, along with her curriculum and teaching-learning materials development team from RIES, of which two thirds are female, is participating in the revision of the primary curriculum supported by BEQUAL. Challenging gender stereotypes has resulted in improved

representations of women and gender roles in teaching and learning materials.

“We added more girl characters in the textbooks; for example, pictures and stories of girls going to school or working as teachers. The purpose is to change perceptions on women and education. We want to send the message that education for girls is important, and girls can play equal roles to boys in the society.”



MEET MRS KAENKHAM YANG, AN INSPIRING COMMUNITY EDUCATION SUPPORTER



“Kaenkham is so helpful for the community with hygiene awareness, school readiness and reading promotion. She is the one who can read and write Lao and she often is in charge of supporting the educational activities.”

Mr Siemualee, Head of Kiewpha village.

“Many people in my village speak only their ethnic language and can’t understand Lao. This could become really challenging when they need to communicate with people outside our community. When they are sick, they need to find someone speaking Lao to go to the hospital and help with translation. This is one of the many examples why we should encourage and support our children to study Lao language and learn to become independent.”

These are the words of Mrs Kaenkham Yang, a 29-year-old woman from the Kiewpha village, Houn district, Oudomxay province who has committed herself to supporting the education of all children in her community. To achieve her mission, she volunteers to be a facilitator for the BEQUAL NGO Consortium

(BNC) activities. She runs the after-school reading activities with primary school children, coordinates parents’ awareness workshops and helps the VEDC identify disadvantaged children from her community eligible for the small grants support provided by the BNC.

Mrs Kaenkham is also a proud member of the VEDC and represents the Lao Women’s Union. She often teaches the women in the village about the importance of education and of Lao language acquisition. She motivates parents to send their children to school by explaining to them that learning and studying helps their children develop important life skills for the future. She is also a children’s hygiene awareness advocate. She hangs posters about the seven steps of handwashing in

the school reading corner and displays hygiene books in her house and at school.

With support from her husband and mother-in-law, she acquired a Diploma of Food and Hotel Service and a Certificate of English. She is the only female VEDC member to achieve such a high level of education, and this motivates her to utilise her skills to help the children and women in her village. She encourages parents in her community to spend time with their children in the evenings to read with them and share stories.

“My husband often encourages me to use my knowledge to support children and parents in our village who don’t speak Lao language to understand how much education is important to our real life.”

Mr Siemualee, Head of Kiewpha village says, *“Kaenkham is so helpful for the community with hygiene awareness, school readiness and reading promotion. She is the one who can read and write Lao and she often is in charge of supporting the educational activities. Even if she has her own duties at home with her family, she would never say no when I asked for her support”*.

She supports teachers to collaborate with parents, encouraging them to send their children to school. She translates from Hmong to Lao language and vice versa during workshops, trainings and meetings. She also translates between English and Lao for people who visit Kiewpha village or assists other villages when necessary.

Mr Leepor, Principal of Kiewpha’s Primary School says, *“She often encourages children in the village to come to school, participate in reading camp, borrow books to bring back home and to read after dinner. She also supports women in this village to join the caregiver’s workshop. Some parents don’t want to come because they don’t understand Lao but she will motivate them”*.

Mrs Kaenkham hopes that through these joint activities within the community, families will recognise the importance and benefits of education and send their children to school at the right age. She hopes for a better future for all children.

“I’m really pleased and proud that I had the opportunity to join this project and to support my community. Through the BEQUAL activities, I’ve learned many things. I think I will be able to better support the children from my community in their Lao language acquisition and help them to better connect with native Lao speakers classmates. Moreover, I help the children with handwashing techniques, and in that way, help them stay healthy in the future.”

-  616 community volunteers (including 267 women) were trained for reading camps and reading awareness.
-  18,645 VEDC and community members (including 10,404 women) participated in reading events and awareness meetings.
-  5,609 children (including 2,842 girls) borrowed books from book banks.
-  8,915 children (including 4,300 girls) participated in reading clubs, groups, or camps.
-  14,498 children (including 7,040 girls) directly benefited from small grants for Village Education Development Committees.



GIVING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ACCESS TO SCHOOL



➤ **Por Ju is excited to be able to go to school like other children in the village.**

Every child has the right to education. However, children with disabilities form a significant proportion of the out-of-school population in developing countries. Very often, their abilities are overlooked, their capacities are underestimated and their needs are given low priority. Yet, the barriers they face are more frequently a result of the environment in which they live than a result of their impairment.

The BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) supports the right to education for all through its small grants program. In the villages where the BNC project is implemented, and in collaboration with the Provincial Education and Sport Service (PESS), the District Education and Sports

Bureau (DESB) and the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) identify out-of-school children and the reasons why they are not going to school. During this process, they found several children with impairment and collaborated with other organisations such as COPE to find a solution to enable these children to go to school.

Por Ju is an 11-year-old Hmong girl living with her parents in Kiewpha village in Houn District, Oudomxay Province. She has cerebral palsy and had never been enrolled in school because her parents were concerned she would not get the help she needed. With support from the BNC and VEDC, Por Ju spent 12 days in

Luang Prabang Provincial Medical Rehabilitation Office where she was properly diagnosed and received appropriate treatment. Por Ju learned specific exercises to improve her physical movements.

Por Ju's father, Morheu explained, *"Since my daughter couldn't walk like other girls, we didn't know what to do and where to go for treatment. But after the BNC came to support our village, teachers in Kiewpha primary school suggested I take my daughter to the rehabilitation office. I am very proud and happy that one day my daughter might walk as her friends"*.

The VEDC also encouraged Por Ju to join the BNC reading camp, which is



➤ **Nak took his rehabilitation very seriously and he's now back at school attending Grade 3.**

a community library for children and where young secondary students conduct reading activities for younger children. Por Ju was so happy to interact with children of her own age-group and start socialising.

Plan International Laos staff in Houn District, Somphone added, *"Por Ju was one of the most active and excited children who join my reading activity when I was a volunteer in her village. She tried to sit next to her brother and sometimes repeat words when her brother reads a book"*.

Nak is a 14-year-old Khmu boy who lives in Mokprai village, Houn District, Oudomxay Province. He suffers from clubfoot and short-term memory

disorder. He used to crawl to school until Grade 3 and then dropped out. Nak received the same treatment as Por Ju. When he was at the rehabilitation center, he proudly told BNC staff, *"I am very happy that I can walk. Not perfectly, but now I can walk and not just crawling on the floor. One day, I will be back to school"*. And his dream has come true! Nak is now attending Grade 3.

The BEQUAL NGO Consortium closely monitors the two children's physical improvement, following up on any difficulty they may encounter with their rehabilitation therapy and providing special care-giver support to their parents and community. They are also encouraging them to join

learning activities with other children in their village.

Through the BEQUAL program, the Lao Government, Australian Government and the European Union are working to ensure that more children will have access to school and be able to complete basic education in the future. Because every girl and every boy, every child with disability, has the right to a quality education so that they have more chances in life.

BEHIND THE SCENES OF CLAYMATION MOVIE

One of the very first recipients of the BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund is Clay House Studio, a local Lao film making and animation company. Their project combines educational animation films and learning materials to motivate children to go to school and participate more. While the accompanying student books and teacher guides will be used in six pilot schools in Attapeu and Salavan Provinces, the clay animation videos, *Learn Together*, have been screened on Lao national television since 10 June. All children in Laos—along with their parents—can discover the adventures of Ai Deng, the wise red dog and his two friends, Puna, the clever ethnic girl and Santi, the boy living in a tree house with his grandpa. In the different episodes of *Learn Together*, children hear stories about the importance of going to school, making friends and helping each other. They learn about protecting the environment, road safety, health, nutrition, safe and unsafe water, telling the time and many other interesting topics.

Mr Souliya Phoumivong is a teacher at the Department of Communication Design at the National Institute of Fine Arts. He is the founder of the Clay House Studio and is the artist behind *Learn Together*. "Clay animation is a kind of art and it's fascinating. But putting together a clay animation production is not easy and the work requires great patience and care. First you start with writing the story. I collaborated with the Research Institute for Educational Sciences and the Department of Mass Media. We used the national primary curriculum and selected the most relevant and important topics for young learners. This is the most difficult and longest stage: getting a good story that will sparkle the interest of young students. Giving life to the curriculum took us nearly two years and many rewritings to get a script we were all satisfied with."



➤ **Souliya giving a last touch to the cat and dog characters.**

"The most exciting part of the project was the creation of the characters and the atmosphere. With the team, we made several field trips to meet the children and the teachers, get their ideas and impressions. We showed them our first sketches, and recently the first edits of the animation movies. We wanted to have characters adapted to the taste of our audience; characters that they will love straight away and listen to. While in Northern Laos elephants and buffalos are famous, the children from the Southern regions wanted a dog or a cat as the main hero. This is how Ai Deng was born. I created the sets from sketches we made when travelling to the South. The costumes, the background, the houses, the plants, the trees ... they are what you can really find in Southern Laos."

There are six other people working with Souliya in the studio. All together they have created eight complete sets and hundreds of clay characters

and objects for the shooting of *Learn Together*. Souliya explains, "The modelling part is magical; you mould the clay into the required shape, add the colours, and slowly your story takes life under your fingers. I modelled all the main characters myself. I created my own special dough made of rice, my secret recipe; I needed a clay strong enough for the character to stand, long lasting but also flexible to allow action and movement."

The actual shooting part requires a lot of concentration and precision to create realistic animations. Souliya leads and supervises each production session very carefully. "Following the script, we place the characters and take photos using the stop motion technique. Then we combine the pictures to make a video with the rhythm of 15 pictures per second. Some scenes are extremely difficult because they have many characters. We need to be very careful to ensure each action completely matches that

of the preceding shot. The risk is to have what we call a jump cut, when characters jump to a slightly different position. If something goes wrong, we have to begin all over again."

The last part is the easiest with the recording of the actors who give their voices to the main characters and the live action shots. Each episode lasts around fifteen minutes and mix 'claymation', real acting scenes and storytelling with cartoons.

Souliya concludes, "I am an artist; but I am also a teacher. I wanted to use my art to make education stronger; to help the children of my country be more knowledgeable. I would like to thank all the different partners from the Government and the BEQUAL team for supporting *Learn Together* since the beginning as well as for the trust they have shown in us".



➤ **And... Action! Santi and Puna, the two friends starring in *Learn Together*.**

📺 **On air every Sunday:**

09:00-09:15 Lao Public Security

16:35-16:50 Lao National TV 3

17:00-17:15 Lao Star TV

To see a preview of the trailer, scan this QR code.



➤ **Test screening of the first episodes with children from primary schools.**



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