

BEQUAL NEWSLETTER

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

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Issue 2



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MESSAGE FROM THE AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY EDUCATION TEAM



On behalf of the Australian Embassy Education Team I would like to thank the Ministry of Education and Sports, the European Union and all of BEQUAL's implementing partners for the strong collaboration on BEQUAL over the past two years.

Australia recently conducted a mid-term review of BEQUAL to reflect on progress and lessons learned from the first two years. Interim findings highlight the significant work that has already been undertaken and identify opportunities to ensure our joint efforts continue to reach the most educationally disadvantaged children.

After three fantastic years in Laos I will shortly be returning to Canberra to take up a new role. It has been a privilege to be part of the BEQUAL program and I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with such knowledgeable and committed education sector stakeholders. I have also been fortunate to have worked with an outstanding team who I would like to briefly introduce to you:

Bounmy is passionate about community development. She focuses on inclusion, participation and access, and is the contact point for the BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund and the BEQUAL NGO Consortium. She is also the disability focal point across the Australian Embassy's development cooperation program.

Davone has a Master of Educational Management from Australia and has quickly become an important member of the team since joining last December. She is focusing on primary

curriculum development, education sector coordination and supporting Australia's role as co-coordinator of the Global Partnership for Education in Laos.

Phonethida supports BEQUAL's ambitious agenda to improve the quality of teachers. She completed a Master of Educational Management in Australia and loves engaging with a range of education partners.

Sounisa awakened her passion for rural education during her studies in Australia for her Master in Educational Management. She is responsible for capacity development, District Operational Grants, program management and Monitoring and Evaluation aspects of the BEQUAL program.

Kaykhoun manages school infrastructure, governance and public financial management related activities under the BEQUAL program, in addition to managing the WASH and School Meals Program with the World Food Program and UNICEF.

I believe BEQUAL has the potential to make a real difference to education outcomes in Laos and am excited about the opportunities in the years to come.

I wish you all success, health and happiness.

Clemency Oliphant
First Secretary

MESSAGE FROM BEQUAL TEAM



BEQUAL is quite a unique program, as it is very much a collaborative educational initiative aligned to the Ministry of Education and Sports' (MoES) 2016–20 Education Sector Development Plan. Policy guidance is provided by senior personnel from the MoES, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the European Union Delegation through the Program Steering Committee. Technical implementation is managed by senior MoES personnel, in Vientiane and in the Provinces, with advice and guidance by international and Lao technical advisors working directly with Ministry personnel.

The BEQUAL team is made up of MoES, DFAT, non-government organisations, national and international expertise working

all together as one. BEQUAL is very much dependent upon the skills and professional commitment of all associated with BEQUAL.

The technical and collaborative partnership is very important as it allows the delivery of a number of key educational activities. In recent time the BEQUAL team has successfully managed:

- The drafting and piloting Grade 1 curriculum materials. This has also involved partnering with JICA and other donors working with MoES.
- The rehabilitation of over 300 schools so the classroom environment is appropriate for active learning.
- The collaboration with NGOs, teachers and community members to encourage reading and increased participation of disadvantaged students in classroom learning.
- The implementation of Lao language learning activities in remote ethnic communities, so they are better positioned to progress through primary school.
- The assessment of basic Lao language and maths skills of Grade 3 students, largely working through Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) and District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) networks.

On behalf of all associated with BEQUAL, I wish to thank the entire BEQUAL team for their collaboration and professional commitment to improve the quality of educational delivery across Lao PDR.

Peter Deacon
Team Leader



LAO WOMEN'S VOICES

To celebrate the contribution of women in Lao PDR, BEQUAL interviewed women involved in education and the BEQUAL program. We gathered their views and opinions on the challenges faced by women and how education could help. Several interviews were broadcasted on the Lao National Radio in March ahead of International Women's Day.

Let's hear the voices of Lao women...



Mme Varadune Amarathithada,
Former Deputy Director General,

Department of Teacher Education,
Ministry of Education and Sports

"I think education has played a very important role for changing perceptions about women. Once women have access to knowledge and skills, they can stand for themselves and share their voices. This is very critical."



Miss Taliam Ban-Art,
Ethnic Student Teacher,
Saravan Teacher Training College

"Once I graduate, I will go back to develop my village by encouraging the children both boys and girls, to go to school and study. I will talk to their parents to support them to attend school."



Mme Nuansy,
Head of Pre and Primary Education Division,
Xiangkhouang Provincial Education and Sports Service

"When women receive education, they will know how to protect themselves, how to access information; they will be able to develop themselves, their families and get a permanent job which means they will have stable income that gives them the ability to resolve problems."



Miss Cheng Vongkhamchan,
Ethnic Student Teacher,
Saravan Teacher Training College

“When there are many children in the family, parents will support boys more than girls because they think girls are too weak to travel long distance to reach school.”



Mme Chanthamala Southammavong,
Director,
Ban Keun Teacher Training College

“As a woman in a leading position, I would like to send this message to all women: be patient and keen to learn more; be committed and work hard to reach a leading position; help each other and always look at the gaps and mistakes and find a solution to achieve your goal.”



Miss Aeng Sisaket,
Ethnic Student Teacher,
Saravan Teacher Training College

“Girls have equal rights to boys. If boys can go to school, girls can as well. Women can also play a role in society.”

FIRST STEPS TOWARDS A STRENGTHENED PRIMARY TEACHER TRAINING CURRICULUM

For the first time in donor history in Laos, a single program has been tasked with revising both the national primary curriculum, which will be taught in all classrooms across the country and the primary teacher education curriculum which will be used to train future teachers.

Effective teachers are crucial for student learning. Trainee teachers need strong orientation in the curriculum they will be delivering, mentoring on how to help children learn in the classroom and sufficient time to practice teaching. However, the curriculum currently used to train teachers is not well aligned with the curriculum used in primary schools and is not sufficiently focused on classroom practice. BEQUAL represents a unique opportunity to strengthen the current Lao primary teacher education curriculum, link it to classroom practice and ensure the primary curriculum and the primary teacher education curriculum are well aligned.

In March 2017, more than 200 people from all departments related to primary education, including representatives from the Teacher Training Colleges - in charge of training the future teachers - and from the Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES) – in charge of writing the revised primary curriculum, gathered for a two-week workshop to reflect on the future curriculum framework. It was the biggest and the most important workshop yet to be conducted in this area.

“To have more effective teaching, it is essential that teachers understand the curriculum being taught to students at primary school” said Mme Varadune Amarathithada, Former Deputy Director General, Department of Teacher Education, Ministry of Education and Sports. “The main achievement of the workshop was to enhance participants’ understanding of the revised primary curriculum of RIES; now they can see the student learning competencies identified by RIES; they can make the links with the teacher training, see the gaps and adjust the teacher education curriculum.”

Many other issues were discussed and guiding principles proposed such as the need to bring theory and practice better together; the importance of all practice subjects being guided by key theoretical principles and the need to relate “theory” subjects to classroom practice. Participants agreed that the program should contain at least 20 weeks of practice teaching.

Participants also recommended that Lao Language should be given the highest priority in the revised primary teacher education curriculum. Indeed, language is key to all learning, and student learning outcomes in Lao remain poor. In the last Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) reading and comprehension test done in 2012, only 42 per cent of grade 5 students understood what they read.

The foundations have been laid down, but the work has only just started. The next step will be to reach final agreement on the curriculum structure and the composition of the curriculum development teams. After those decisions are made, the actual curriculum writing will begin.



➤ ***“To have more effective teaching, it is essential that the teacher knows the curriculum being taught to students at primary school”***

Mme Varadune Amarathithada, Former Deputy Director General, Department of Teacher Education, Ministry of Education and Sports.



STORY FROM THE FIELD - A MONITORING VISIT IN SEPONE DISTRICT



Grade 1 classes in Kengkham, Oudomsouk, Kadap, Nahouanam and Nalouang schools were among 25 primary schools selected nationwide to trial new textbooks and teacher guides during the 2016-17 school year as part of the revision of the national primary curriculum. The new curriculum promotes an active learning approach to primary school teaching. A special feature of the Grade 1 trial curriculum is a readiness program that children follow in the first weeks of school. This is designed to familiarise students with school life and prepare them to learn to read and write in Lao.

A monitoring team visited pilot schools every quarter to assess children's learning and to interview teachers, school directors and Village Education Development Committees. The objective of the visits was to gather feedback on pilot learning materials and assess progress of Grade 1 students. The District Education and Sports Bureau in Sepone was a great support in organising these visits.

➤ **It was a very hot day in Sepone; So, when the monitoring team was at Kengkham primary school they took the children to the shade of a tree in the school grounds to finish the assessments after lunch. The young students were excited but for some it was a long wait, so they showed their enthusiasm for drawing while they waited.**

Feedback on the trial has shown that teachers and students are particularly happy with the layout of the pilot textbooks – with more pictures making the books more interesting and engaging for children. It has also highlighted the need for more support and resources for learning Lao language, and revisions to Grade 1 textbooks and teacher guides are now underway. The data and information gathered during this monitoring visit also helped the curriculum writers to plan the Grade 2 pilot which started in September.



WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY OF GRADE 3 STUDENTS IN LAOS?

In the first two weeks of May, the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) tested 17,535 Grade 3 students on their Lao language skills and basic mathematic ability. The logistics were impressive with a team of 456 enumerators from Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES), different departments from the Ministry of Education and Sports, Provincial Education and Sports Services and District Education and Sports Bureaux travelling to 1,305 primary schools across the country. At the same time, there has also been good cooperation during the assessment from school directors, teachers and students as well as parents.

"It is the first time that the ASLO test covered all 148 districts of the country" noted Mr Khamchanh Latthanhhot, Head of the Evaluation Division of Research Institute for Educational Sciences. "It was a real challenge in terms of organisation and deadlines; there was a very short window of opportunity to administer the test between the end-of-year school exams and the start of holidays. We packed all the materials including school coding, test papers, questionnaires for the interviews and wrapped them individually for each school in only three days".

➤ *"I found the maths test fun with its lovely pictures and I finished before the ending time"*

Miss Naleumon, grade 3 student.

The ASLO test was designed jointly by the evaluation team from RIES and advisors from the Australian Council for Education Research with the support of the BEQUAL program. The test consisted of open-ended and multiple choices written questions, together with individual interviews of students, teachers and school directors.

"I never sat for this sort of exam before and I was very excited when I learned about it", said Miss Anoulack, a 9 year old Grade

3 student at Sisavath Primary School in Vientiane. "I found the maths test fun with its lovely pictures and I finished before the ending time" added her friend Miss Naleumon. Mr Banchong Xayyalath, an enumerator from Chantabouly District attended the training organised by RIES and funded by BEQUAL. "At the workshop, they showed us the test and explained the process; in each school, we selected the students randomly; the test usually lasts two days because there are two test types, written part with all the students and then an oral part which is individual; the questions are really appropriate so it is not difficult to explain to the students" said Mr Banchong.

"These ASLO 3 test results will be used as the baseline to assess the changes in learning outcomes and the effectiveness of the upcoming revised curriculum in 2020-2021 under the Curriculum and Learning materials renewal project supported by BEQUAL and Mathematics Learning and Teaching improvement project funded by JICA" explained Mr Khamchanh. In doing so, it will enable the Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos, the Australian Government and other development partners to better target and monitor their program intervention.



COMMUNITY ACTION FOR READING PROMOTION

Lao PDR has made great progress in increasing access to education over the past decade. However, in many remote and disadvantaged communities, a lack of teaching and learning resources and high rates of dropout are undermining education outcomes, particularly literacy.

The BEQUAL NGO consortium comprised of Plan International, Save the Children, ChildFund and World Vision, is helping to improve participation of disadvantaged girls and boys in 171 schools and communities across six remote districts of Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Houaphan and Khammouane Provinces.

The Consortium is supporting a range of community activities to help children learn, practice, and enjoy reading Lao language. They are establishing book banks, organising reading camps and reading festivals to promote a love of reading, and holding parents' awareness sessions on the importance of reading.

The project began in February 2017, by training participants from the NGO Consortium, District and Provincial officials in techniques for reading promotion. 40 community volunteers and 40 parents from target villages participated providing valuable insights into the community environment.

From March 2017, the Consortium conducted community meetings to engage communities on reading promotion, established 171 book banks and distributed more than 43,000 books. Local communities have enthusiastically participated and have contributed resources to start the process. For example, in Houaphan the communities donated bookshelves to display books in schools.

Ms Phouang Bounmeexay, a 28 year-old teacher at Pawan Primary School, Xamneua District has received three bookshelves. She notes that "this has motivated students, including non-Lao speaking students in our village, who are not confident in reading in Lao language, to come and look at the books and talk about pictures".

The Consortium is now training village volunteers to run reading camps for children after school hours or during the weekends. Once a week, the children will be able to join the camps, enjoy reading books and creating simple learning aids from locally available materials with the help of volunteers.



➤ ***"This has motivated students, including non-Lao students in our village, who are not confident in reading in Lao language, to come and look at the books and talk about pictures"***

Ms Phouang Bounmeexay, teacher at Pawan Primary School, Xamneua District.

XIANGKHOANG REVISITING LAO LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Xiangkhouang province, famous for its enigmatic giant stone megaliths known as the Plain of Jars, conceals another precious treasure, its cultural diversity. With eight sub-ethnic groups, this diversity translates into a variety of languages and dialects. Indeed, nearly half of the population is either Hmong or Khmu speaking.

This richness of diversity also presents a challenge for the primary teachers of the province. The young children of the ethnic groups start school unable to speak Lao. It is difficult for these non-Lao speakers to learn, with instruction, textbooks and educational materials in Lao language.

In August 2016, the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) in Xiangkhouang was awarded a BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund (BEIF) grant. BEIF is designed to encourage new thinking and new ways of working in basic education. With half of the primary students in the province starting school unable to speak Lao language, Mme Nuansy and her team at the PESS developed an innovative approach to improve teaching methods for Lao language.

Before becoming the Head of Pre and Primary Education Division of Xiangkhouang PESS, Mme Nuansy was a Pedagogical Advisor (PA). She then observed that many teachers did not have a full understanding of the Lao language system, especially grammar, pronunciation and the different Lao tones. To improve teachers' ability to teach Lao for all primary grades, she decided to establish a Lao language working team composed of four experienced PA's now working at the PESS. They shared their experience of teaching ethnic minority students, their observations from the classrooms and their ideas to boost learning for non-Lao speakers. Together, they gathered their best solutions from real teaching experience and developed training tools, teaching materials and a handbook of supplementary guidelines for teachers of grades 1 and 2, and a further handbook for grades 3, 4 and 5.

"When teachers understand the specifics of their mother tongue, they are better able to teach their students Lao language, so the training handbook gives precise instructions for teachers – such as how to teach ending consonants to Hmong speakers and



tone mark differences to Khmu speakers,” states Madam Nuansy. “Moreover, the new project encourages teachers to use local stories and the local environment to learn key vocabulary and sound patterns. We hope this will result in a teaching approach that is more relevant to the local culture and more engaging and accessible to the children. Most importantly, we hope it will boost Lao language acquisition.”

A 5-day training was delivered as a pilot program to 91 teachers from grades 1 to 5 in 12 schools in the province. The team then supported teachers through regular classroom visits, offering advice mentoring and technical support.

Teachers are very pleased with their new skills. “I had never learnt how to teach the structure of Lao language before, I can now explain clearly to my students how to write sentences in Lao and identify parts of a sentence. This has helped children’s reading comprehension” said Ms Viengkeo from Syphom primary school. “My students are asking more questions” confirms Mr Souksavanh, teacher and also deputy-director of from Nongnam School.

Although the project has only been running seven months, monitoring has shown more active participation from the children. Teachers’ classroom approach and activities have changed; they use resources known to the children, that they collect locally in the forest or nearby environment. The use of individual writing boards has helped teachers involve all children and assess students’ real progress... and the atmosphere in the classroom is now buzzing!

➤ ***“When teachers understand the specifics of their mother tongue, they are better able to teach their students Lao language, so the training handbook gives precise instructions for teachers – such as how to teach ending consonants to Hmong speakers and tone mark differences to Khmu speakers.”***

Mme Nuansy, Head of Pre and Primary Education Division of Xiangkhouang PESS.



BETTER SCHOOL FACILITIES FOR A BETTER LEARNING

It's difficult to study when rain is blowing on your book through the planks of the classroom wall or when there are not enough tables to write on. How can you go to school when you are in a wheelchair and there are only stairs leading up to the classroom? And how can you stay healthy at school when there is no toilet and no tap to wash your hands?

The learning environment matters in ensuring the safety of young students, their well-being at school and importantly, the quality of the learning and teaching.

That's why a key priority for BEQUAL last year was the rehabilitation of classrooms and toilets in 389 primary schools in 21 of the poorest districts in Phongsaly, Houaphan, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha, Sekong and Attapeu provinces.

These schools are in very remote locations, with some only accessible by foot. This makes sourcing construction materials and maintaining buildings difficult.

"Many school repairs were needed, as original construction sometimes used poor quality materials. For example, school roofs had leaks because the correct roof sheeting may not have been available during construction. So we replaced all rusted sheeting", explains Suliyarn Viengkhamson, BEQUAL's senior infrastructure technical supervisor.

➤ **How can you write when there is not enough bench to sit on or table to put your notebook?
How can you stay healthy at school when there is no toilet and no tap to wash your hands?**



"The team replaced dirt floors with concrete where possible, making the classrooms cleaner, more pleasant and healthier places for children to learn. We also added access ramps where necessary and checked that the doors were wide enough for wheelchairs" adds Suliyarn.

"The original blackboards were made from painted plywood making writing difficult. With this climate and the low quality of the material used, the surface of those blackboards quickly came off. We replaced the damaged ones with new painted metal blackboards making them easier to write on and read from" says Daovone Siheuangxay, BEQUAL's infrastructure manager.

At some schools, toilets became unusable because of failed water supply systems. The repairs ensured students and teachers have access to appropriate and operational toilet facilities.

The repairs were undertaken using a community-based contracting model, where the Village Education Development Committee manages the repairs using paid community labour supervised by BEQUAL engineers and District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) staff, rather than using external contractors. "This community approach builds ownership of the school by the community" said Mr Thipphamonh Chanthalangsy, Former Head of Education Construction and Design Management Division at the Ministry of Education and Sports.

The DESB staff and BEQUAL Engineers visited all 389 schools to provide financial and technical training to the Village Education and Development Committees with more than 4,000 villagers



trained. "In addition to being a cost effective approach, the additional village capacity ensures that skills stay within the village, improving the sustainability and the community's ability to maintain their school in the future." concludes Mr Thippamonh.

Teachers and students in 389 schools located in remote and disadvantaged communities now have a safe, hygienic, inclusive and well equipped classroom!

➤ ***"And the village capacity ensures that the skills stay within the village, improving the sustainability and its ability to maintain their schools in the future"***

Mr Thippamonh, Former Head of Education Construction and Design Management Division, Ministry of Education and Sports.



2017 IN 6 GLIMPSES

3 Most Significant Milestones Achieved January – June 2017



▶ **Revision of the Primary Curriculum** framework by the Research Institute for Educational Sciences. Grade 1 textbooks and teacher guides drafted and tested in 25 pilot primary schools. A revised primary curriculum is critical to achieve improved learning outcomes.



▶ 17,535 Grade 3 students tested on their comprehension of Lao Language and basic mathematic ability. The results of this **Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO 3)** test will enable the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Australian Government and other development partners to better target and monitor their program interventions.



▶ 20,000 children in 171 villages benefited from **Community Action Activities Supporting Literacy and Reading Promotion**. 171 book banks established and more than 43,000 books were distributed.

3 Key Activities Planned July-December 2017



215 students out of the 364 trainees from the **Ethnic Teacher Scholarship Program** started their final year at the Teacher Training College in September. On graduation, they will return to remote villages in the most educationally disadvantaged areas of Laos.



District Operating Grants will be provided to select pilot District Education and Sports Bureau for school support, teacher professional development and strengthening Village Education Development Committees.



Teacher Education Curriculum will be revised to align with the revised primary curriculum.



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