

BEQUAL NEWSLETTER

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

November 2016

Issue 1



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Message from the Ministry of Education and Sports

On behalf of the Ministry of Education and Sports, I welcome the publication of the first BEQUAL newsletter. It will help to inform the broader community of education stakeholders on the progress of BEQUAL initiatives in Lao PDR. I am particularly pleased that Australia has developed a program approach rather than a stand-alone project and that BEQUAL advisers are embedded in key line departments, institutes and centres. This provides capacity building through on-the-job training for MoES staff as well as implementation at sub-national levels.

We would like to thank both Australia and the European Union for their financial and technical support to improve basic education in Lao PDR which will help reduce the gap of education access and quality between remote rural areas and urban centres. BEQUAL is a role model program. The focus on sustainable outcomes rather than “getting things done” to a specific timeline aligns to our own priorities. We know that the teacher is the key to improving learning outcomes and so it is pleasing to see the emphasis on improving what happens in the classroom.

At the central level, we are renewing the primary curriculum, textbooks, other learning resources and teacher guides to make the curriculum stronger and more relevant to our current situation. BEQUAL will also support us to renew the curriculum and teaching/learning materials for both of the primary pre and in-service teaching program. We are confident that these interventions will lead to improved learning outcomes. At the same time, BEQUAL is building capacity of our managers and education administrators at sub-national level, an approach that aligns closely with the Government’s “Sam Sang” policy.

The education vision is “By 2030 all Lao population equally and equitably have access to quality education in order to become good citizens, disciplined, healthy, knowledgeable, highly-skilled with professionalism in order to sustainably develop the country, to align and be compatible with the region and the world.”

The BEQUAL goal fully aligns with our vision and as a result, we know that we are both working towards the same goals.

We look forward to working together.

Mme. Sengdeuane Lachanthaboune
Minister, Ministry of Education and Sports.

➤ **“By 2030 all Lao population equally and equitably have access to quality education in order to become good citizens, disciplined, healthy, knowledgeable, highly-skilled with professionalism in order to sustainably develop the country, to align and be compatible with the region and the world.”**

Message from the Australian Government



I am delighted to be contributing to the first edition of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) program newsletter. BEQUAL is Australia’s flagship aid investment in Laos, and our most significant to date. Education is a sector where we believe Australia can add significant expertise, and continue our close partnership over many years with Ministry of Education and Sports.

We also have a new partner in BEQUAL - Australia and the European Union have recently embarked on an exciting new collaboration in basic education. A substantial EU contribution of €11.5 million will help us achieve our ambitions under BEQUAL – to enable girls and boys, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, to complete a quality basic education, achieving literacy, numeracy and other life skills. It’s also a positive step forward on donor coordination, as we welcome the EU as a co-chair, alongside Australia, of the Education Sector Working Group.

Impressive results have been achieved in the first year of this program. Around 217 students (of a total of 520 under the program) have been awarded ethnic teacher scholarships, and are studying to become qualified teachers. We are embarking, together, on a process of primary curriculum renewal which will see the Ministry of Education and Sports revise the primary curriculum, textbooks and teacher guides over the next 6 years. Improvements to 406 existing primary schools have commenced to ensure children enjoy studying in safe and quality learning environments.

From Australia’s perspective, the key to this early success has been the quality partnership that has been developed among colleagues at the Ministry of Education and Sports, provincial and district officials, the BEQUAL program management team, our NGO consortium and my own education team at the Embassy. UNICEF and the World Food Program are an important part of the BEQUAL story too, including in the vital work of helping strengthen school environments so Lao children are better able to get to school, stay in school and learn at school.

The success of this broad partnership will be pivotal for BEQUAL’s innovative program approach. The initial signs are extremely positive.

BEQUAL in many ways represents a new way of working. It brings a program-based approach working to support the Ministry’s core business, working directly with the Ministry at the central, provincial and district levels. The Ministry’s ownership and leadership will ensure BEQUAL’s long-term success and help deliver lasting development outcomes.

I am convinced that better education outcomes for future generations, and for Lao girls in particular, is the best possible contribution Australia can make to the socio-economic development of the Lao PDR.

John Williams
Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR

Message from the European Union



I am pleased to share with you the first newsletter of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) Program. Together with Australia, the Government of Laos as well as our other partners, I strongly believe that we will be able to improve the quality and accessibility to basic education in 66 of the most educationally disadvantaged districts across Laos by increasing student

participation, improving learning environment and strengthening teacher quality.

Here you will find different and interesting articles on the latest development and actions delivered under BEQUAL.

As you may be aware, despite of significant progress in access to basic education several challenges remain. For instance, survival rate to grade 5 was 78.3% in 2014/15, which was lower than the MDG 2 target at 95% by 2015 and enrolment rate in upper secondary level was very low at, 45.7% in 2014/15. Large numbers of school-age children are currently out of school.

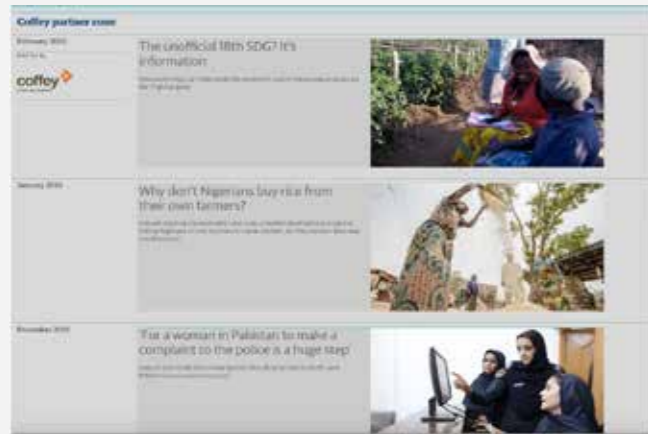
We recognize the central role of basic education, and understand that it is the foundation phase to equip children with the necessary numeracy, literacy and life skills and is essential to the success of any society.

Let me also remind you that education is one of the three priority sectors under the EU Development Strategy for Laos from 2014–2020.

I believe that quality education is a driver of strong and sustainable development, economic growth and a vital element in the fight against poverty. Together with our partners Australia and the Ministry of Education and Sport, BEQUAL will deliver considerably to help Laos strengthen the capacity of its human resources for country’ integration into regional and international economy community.

I hope you will find information in this publication interesting and useful.

Leo FABER
EU Ambassador



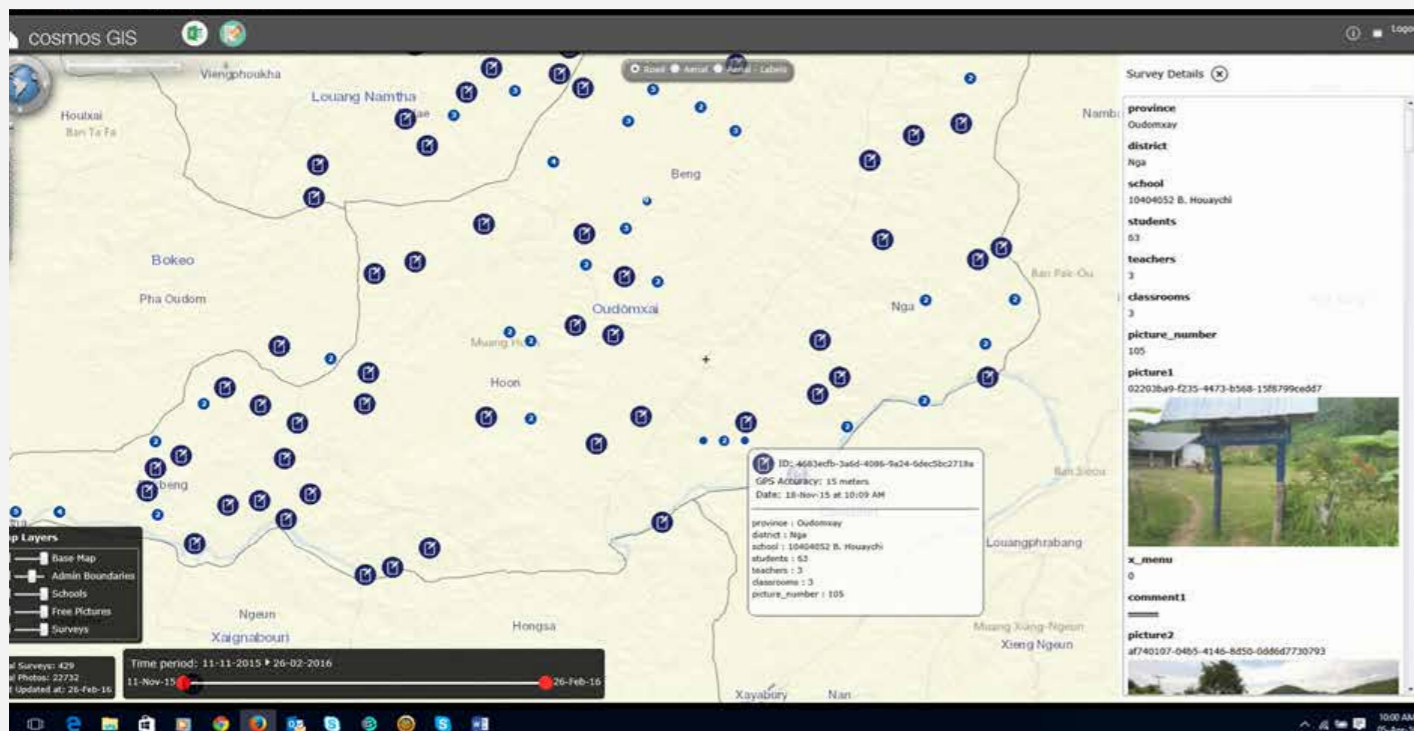
BEQUAL's use of innovative technology was featured in a recent article titled **"The unofficial 18th SDG? It's information"** in The Guardian's February partner zone series. It featured COSMOS, a data capture system developed by Coffey, BEQUAL's managing contractor on behalf of the Australian Government, shows how technology can help tackle the mammoth task of measuring progress on the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An excerpt from the article is below.

"The system also allows voice recordings and pictures to be added to individual cases, an important feature for infrastructure specialist Andrew Whillas, who is working on the Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos (BEQUAL) programme on behalf of the Australian government. The project is looking at ways to improve children's basic primary education, especially among the poor and marginalised, and its survey team is using Cosmos to collect and collate data, including over 40,000 photos, from schools in remote and rural areas of Laos."

"COSMOS enables field staff to cost-effectively and efficiently geotag and date photos and reports from remote school sites, and seamlessly synchronise the information to a cloud database," Whillas explains. "As well as permitting early access to the field survey data for analysis, the system will reassure our clients that the approved works at the targeted schools have been completed."

BEQUAL project manager Anne Stasinowsky says everything is being done in real time. "The timing of the information coming in through COSMOS gives us a development advantage, both through the decision making process [allowing us] to respond quickly to community needs...[and] the ability to quickly assess outcomes. "When we assess the impact of an activity, such as the rebuilding of a school, we can use COSMOS to rapidly assess the impact on educational outcomes for the local students: for example, has the new building resulted in additional enrolments and attendance?"

▼
COSMOS (Coffey Spatial Mobile Solution) is a purpose-built mobile data collection tool and reporting system. Completed surveys displayed on map and zoom in and select survey to view all details.



In rural areas, social and cultural attitudes can pose significant barriers to children's education. Some children, particularly girls, are expected to stay at home and take care of their families. BEQUAL has designed an innovation fund to encourage new ways of working that can have a positive impact on the delivery of basic education.

One of the first recipients to be funded is Clay House Studio, a local Lao company. Clay House Studio is dedicated to creating animated films using Claymation to teach children about literacy and numeracy, some of which are broadcast on television.

The approach is designed to reach children through bright, positive, child-friendly animated films to be broadcast on public television. It is innovative as it uses 'edutainment' – an entertaining way to communicate a definite educational message children to learn. This methodology has been successfully developed in Korea, Japan, USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil and several European countries but is rare in South East Asia.

The aim is to improve children's motivation to attend school and increase their understanding of the importance of attending school, leading to better attendance especially from children who are pressured into helping out at home and in family-based agriculture. Each film will be supported by a set of literature including a story book, student workbook and teacher guide.

It will also raise awareness of the importance of literacy – highlighting the need to learn to read and write and develop life skills in day-to-day areas such as nutrition, keeping animals, health, safety and hygiene. This can also assist with teaching Lao language vocabulary, phrases and spelling, as well as encouraging an active, inquisitive mind and helping to include children either disadvantaged by handicap or financially.

The animated films are expected to be broadcast at the end of 2017.

HOMEGROWN TEACHERS KEY TO LAOS EDUCATION SUCCESS

Improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools and teacher training institutions, especially in the most disadvantaged areas will be a key outcome of BEQUAL.

One aim is to increase the number of ethnic teachers, especially women, teaching in remote villages. The notion of local or 'homegrown' teachers is considered vital in the Lao context. Homegrown teachers provide more sustainable solutions to three big system issues.

Firstly, local teachers stay, alleviating teacher shortages and high staff turnover in remote and disadvantaged locations. Secondly, local ethnic teachers act as role models for ethnic students, encouraging them to succeed in a country where too few ethnic students succeed.

Thirdly, local ethnic teachers better understand the language and culture of their ethnic students. This helps to provide a better quality learning experience and in doing so increases the likelihood that students remain in school.

BEQUAL is supporting 520 ethnic student teachers, two-thirds of them women, by offering scholarships to undertake teacher training in order to become a teacher in their village primary school.

For those selected into the BEQUAL program the course offers a daunting challenge, along with a world of opportunities, yet another step along the difficult path for these young people.

Many of our student teachers are from the families of poor subsistence rice farmers who have grown up in a context where cyclic food shortages are an annual event. Most come from big families – seven, eight or nine children is common. Some are the oldest of the siblings, some are the youngest. Many have lost a parent. Some have lost two.

Coming from poor villages they are struck on arrival at the Teacher Training College and the provincial capital by the array of buildings, roads, cars and infrastructure. To reach the Teacher

Training Colleges they have often travelled for two days by boat, by tractor, by motorbike or bus, and even by walking through jungle-covered mountains crossing rivers on precarious swing bridges. They have entered a new world.

Some walked several kilometres a day to reach secondary school,

➤ **But BEQUAL student teachers are survivors. Some had to walk an hour to the nearest primary school. Most come from villages where there is no secondary school. In some cases the nearest secondary school is 80 kilometres away through rugged terrain.**

some have walked ten kilometres lugging a sack of rice on their backs, returning home each weekend, others stayed with relatives where in return for board they performed all sorts of domestic duties from cooking and house cleaning in addition to the burden of studying in their second or even third or fourth language.

For some students, they are the first in their village to complete lower secondary school. Some carry the weight of village expectations on their shoulders. Many are motivated to help others out of the endless cycle of poverty by returning to their home villages to teach the most disadvantaged, to develop self and community.

Sometimes they are homesick. But thinking of parents and siblings toiling each day under the hot sun in a rice field that will never feed the family for a full year, their motivation lifts again. They look around and see the benefits of their scholarships: new clothes, for some their first pair of shoes; money to buy food, books and stationery; travel money to return home at the end of each semester and the knowledge that if they get sick they are covered by health insurance. And at the end they will be qualified primary teachers.

This is one challenge they will overcome!



From left to right, Lar Ja Nga, Khao Thaipaseuth, Khaen Keomany, Lidavanh Sithivong and Asa Xaejorthu sharing their expectation and experience after studying at Luang Namtha Teacher Training College



"The scholarship does not only support my studies, it also support the accommodation, health care, travel expenses and other necessities."

Lar Ja Nga

"I got a chance to meet with a lot of people from different ethnic communities. We become good friends who help and support each other. We also learn new a culture and language."

Mr Khao Thaipaseuth

"I am very proud that I can further my education as a teacher. My parents who cannot support me to study are also proud of me."

Miss Khaen Keomany

"The primary school in my village does not have enough teachers. Therefore, I am glad to be trained as a teacher at the teacher training centre. I will go back to my village to teach at the school there."

Mr Asa Xaejorthu

"The scholarship allows me to further my education and develop my skills. I am happy that the scholarship has reached our ethnic community in a very remote area."

Miss Lidavanh Sithivong

“ENSURE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION AND PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL.”

Sustainable Development Goal 4



DEVELOPING A MODERN PRIMARY CURRICULUM

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: HELPING MORE CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL

In 2010 a significant policy was established in Lao PDR, the Prime Minister signed the National Policy on Inclusive Education and then in 2011 the Minister of Education signed the five-year National Strategy and Action Plan for Inclusive Education 2011–2015.

Inclusive education is about changing the education system so that it fits the learner rather than making the learner fit the system. Inclusive education promotes the view that there is no such thing as a typical learner and encourages educators to recognise each learner's strengths and needs. Reforming an education system to teach diverse types of learners is a long term goal requiring ongoing commitment and resources.

In 1993 early steps towards including more diverse learners in the education system began when the National Rehabilitation Centre and one general education school in Vientiane collaborated to transform the school into a demonstration school for deaf and blind children. Twelve children were enrolled in the first year. While this school provided a separate education for deaf and blind learners, that same year the Ministry of Education began a 16-year Inclusive Education Project in partnership with Save the Children (Norway and Sweden) and with funding from Swedish International Development Cooperation (SIDA). The Inclusive Education Project increased access for and participation of learners with disabilities in more than 500 mainstream schools nationwide and brought Lao PDR into the international spotlight as an example of a country taking positive steps to promote inclusive education.

There has been a significant increase in research about how inclusive education interventions improve student outcomes, most notably for girls. The emphasis on girls' education over the past two decades has generated an impressive volume of research studies and established an evidence base of effective practices for helping girls get into, and succeed, in the education system.

➤ “Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes.”

May 2015 World Education Forum

For other learners, such as those from ethnic minority groups, from pastoralist communities, those with disabilities, those in conflict and crisis-affected contexts, those affected by HIV/AIDS, those of different gender and sexual orientations, and street children to name a few, the number of research studies and consequently the evidence base for positive interventions is more limited.

Where does BEQUAL come in?

At the request of the Ministry of Education and Sports Inclusive Education Centre, BEQUAL recruited and fielded a short-term Inclusive Education Advisor to help the Centre review its 2011–2015 Inclusive Education Strategy and Action Plan and to draft new inclusive education guidance for 2016–2020. The results of the review and the draft of the guidance was shared with inclusive education stakeholders in March 2016. So far, five workshops have been held with inclusive education stakeholders to enlist their help in these reviews.

BEQUAL is also providing scholarships to enable 520 young people from different ethnic backgrounds to qualify as teachers, so they can return to their home communities to teach in primary schools. This builds on the work of the Australian Government's highly-regarded Laos Australia Basic Education Project that was implemented between 1999 and 2007.

Lao PDR is a country of great diversity and its education system reflects this. Children may attend schools in Vientiane where they are surrounded by the influences of a modernising city and have access to many resources that children in remote and rural areas do not. Young children arrive at school to start Grade 1 coming from very different educational backgrounds. While some have had a number of years of kindergarten and pre-school to prepare them for Grade 1, others have none at all and come from families with little experience of schooling. Laos is also a linguistically diverse country with many children speaking one of many ethnic languages, with Lao not being their mother tongue.

To improve the learning outcomes of all children, whatever their background, BEQUAL will work with Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES) over the next six years to assist curriculum writers to review and rewrite the primary curriculum. This will include the curriculum framework, textbooks and teacher guides to support the implementation of the curriculum in schools. Providing additional teaching and learning resources for teachers and additional reading books for children is also part of the plan for the renewal of the primary curriculum.

Lao language literacy is a particular focus as this is critical for learning in all subjects and is a particular challenge for children who do not speak Lao when they come to school. With the assistance of a Lao linguist and education consultant, the Lao language team at the Institute will work on the curriculum framework and learning competencies for Lao language.

Improving the mathematical skills and knowledge of primary children is another focus. The maths curriculum team, with the assistance of Japan International Cooperation Agency, have had professional development opportunities in Japan to prepare them for writing the primary curriculum framework and teaching and learning materials.

RIES held a number of workshops to write the introduction to the curriculum framework. The workshops were an important opportunity for RIES and curriculum writers to discuss the direction and focus of the development of the future primary curriculum. Discussions included how the curriculum would include learner-centred approaches to teaching, what subjects would be included in the primary curriculum and issues such as multigrade teaching, inclusive education and readiness for learning.

Access to information about recent educational developments and approaches to teaching and learning is important for curriculum writers. A capacity development workshop was held during the last two weeks of February this year, with topics such as how children learn, assessment for learning, multigrade teaching, teaching Lao language and maths, social studies and science, and approaches to learner-centred methodologies. Guest presenters from the Ministry of Education and Sports and donor partners made presentations on education for sustainable development, readiness for learning, inclusive education, sexual and reproductive health and local curriculum. Participants in the workshop also started exploring the idea of a 'Model of Teaching' for Laos and developing some initial drafts of what this might look like.



➤ Writing a national primary school curriculum is a huge task but it is also an exciting one that will involve many Ministry staff and primary teachers over many years.

IMPROVING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ALL CHILDREN

With the support from BEQUAL, UNICEF is delivering water and sanitation to children living in remote and rural schools and communities of Lao PDR. Improving learning environments is essential for the healthy development of children, particularly those living with disability or those from rural, ethnic groups.

Cheet, a nine-year old from the Kmu ethnic group, rural village of Mokhokang in Oudomxay Province, was born with a severe skin disease which affects her everyday life and ability to have a childhood like her friends. The only medical treatment she received was when she was born but there was little the doctor could do to help and a lack of money means her family is unable to get any further medical support.

With each passing day she finds it more difficult to move her fingers and toes, and her delicate face shows the scars left by her medical condition.

"It's difficult for Cheet to walk to school," her father says. It takes one hour each day for Cheet to walk slowly towards her school in this hilly remote village. This is a huge challenge the best of times, and close to a nightmare during the hot season when temperatures get close to 40 degrees celsius. But Cheet is a girl determined to get an education.

This was especially clear when her frail face and weak eyes suddenly lit up as she moved towards the blackboard to lead her classmates in a class exercise. She clearly savoured these moments.

When break time was signaled by the school teacher the quiet, dusty yard in front of the school suddenly came alive with 125 students talking and playing. Many quickly drank water and went to play petanque, a traditional game from France played throughout Lao PDR.

As the boys took turns with the girls to throw the balls into the dusty ground, Cheet moved through the shaded veranda with her

friends. Her soft walk and slow, deliberate movements reflected her determination to walk the seven metres or so from the classroom door to the end of the corridor to watch children play in the school yard.

As part of UNICEF Lao PDR's water and sanitation team, representatives from UNICEF visited the remote rural village of Mokhokan in Oudomxay Province, to check on the recently built toilet facilities and water connection system. These facilities included ramps which would make it easier for disabled children, like Cheet, to access toilets. This is especially important in a country like Lao PDR, where an estimated 57 per cent of the schools do not have functioning water and sanitation facilities and rural communities still practice open defecation. This facilities offers children like Cheet easier to access to adequate sanitation services in schools.



HELPING CHILDREN REACH THEIR POTENTIAL WITH HEALTHY FOOD

The World Food Programme's school meals program not only provides children with a nutritious meal during the day, but supports them by ensuring they stay in school, remain alert and attentive, and reach their potential through improved health and education.

Thanks to the support of BEQUAL 150,000 school children are receiving a nutritious snack or lunch every day. The World Food Programme provides pre-primary and primary aged students with either a mid-morning snack consisting of a vitamin and micro-nutrient-rich corn-soy blend with sugar and vegetable oil, or lunch made with rice and oil supplemented by fresh vegetables from the school's garden.

Since September 2015, the World Food Programme has been transitioning from providing children with the snack to lunch, in line with the 2014 Lao PDR Government policy on school feeding. The transition has occurred in 259 schools with the goal to move to all 1,450 schools where the World Food Programme works. The programme has included the establishment of school vegetable gardens, which are looked after by the students and teachers and used as a platform for learning about nutrition and school gardening. The gardens provide them with nutritious vegetables for the lunch meal.

BEQUAL's generous support is helping children thrive with the nutrients and energy they need, while encouraging communities to take part, and building the capacity of government to lead the programme in the future.

➤ **Through this partnership with BEQUAL, the World Food Programme has been able to provide technical support and train communities in order to ensure the sustainability of the program in preparation for a gradual handover. Funds have also been used to pilot water tanks for improved access to water for the vegetable gardens.**

BEQUAL MOVING FORWARD >>

As BEQUAL programming beds down and strong operational and policy foundations are established, the focus for the coming twelve months will be delivery of key initiatives. These activities will establish a foundation for further educational initiatives across the five key result areas supported by BEQUAL in 2017 and beyond. Initiatives include:

- Ongoing collaboration with the NGO consortium and the Department of Pre and Primary Education to deliver initiatives that will provide enhanced literacy and numeracy, strengthen community participation in educational activities, enable more disabled students to access education, and manage water and sanitation programs to improve health and hygiene standards in remote and disadvantaged communities. The aim is to enhance participation of disadvantaged students across one hundred and nineteen schools in six districts.
- Support educational managers at central, district and provincial levels with formal and on-the-job training to assist them to better understand and manage the key policy and operational functions within and across the Ministry of Education and Sports.
- Ethnic teacher selection for cohort 2 has been confirmed. This means 320-plus ethnic teacher trainees have received a training scholarship at Ministry teacher training colleges. We expect that 70 per cent of the trainee teachers supported by BEQUAL will be female.
- The primary education curriculum continues to be developed by the Research Institute for Educational Science in partnership with other Ministry departments and donors. The development of associated primary subject curricula and materials has begun. Ongoing professional development support will be provided to Institute personnel to ensure there is sustained capacity in the organisation over the coming years.
- Infrastructure repairs have been carried out at more than three hundred and eighty schools and scoping of cohort 1 and 2 schools will continue over the next six months. School communities will manage the repairs and upgrades through a community-based contracting system. This will encourage village education development communities to take an active role in the managing the community's key infrastructure and educational activities. Additional infrastructure upgrading will take place in the three teacher training colleges, to provide safe facilities for ethnic teacher scholars.





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