



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

2004/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/67

Background paper prepared for the  
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4  
*Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality*

## **Progress on EFA in Laos**

Amanda Seel  
2003

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2003/4 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, The Leap to Equality*". For further information, please contact [efareport@unesco.org](mailto:efareport@unesco.org)



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Lao PDR has **5.2 million people**. Population density is low and growth has been steadily reducing to a current rate of around **2.2% pa**. Around **43% of the population is aged 15 or under**. Laos is landlocked and mountainous, with agriculture continuing to engage over 80% of the population. Since 1997, Laos has slipped below Cambodia on the HDI ranking to a **current rank of 143**, to become South East Asia's poorest country and the only one to remain in the **"least developed" category**. Indicators for life expectancy and infant mortality, in particular, remain poor at 54.2 years and 93.3/ 1000 respectively (UNDP 2000). Laos is divided into **18 Provinces** (including Vientiane Municipality and the Special Economic Zone), comprising **141 districts** and around **11, 000** villages (EFA Assessment, 2000).

One defining characteristic of Laos is its **rich ethnic and linguistic diversity**. There are 47 officially recognised ethnic groups, with 149 sub groups; but Chamberlain (1996) listed **236 ethnic groups** that have tentatively been identified. About 64 % population are "Lao - Phutai", speaking four different varieties of mutually- intelligible Lao (Tai- Kadai language group), but only just over half the population is "Lao". 22% have Mon -Khmer languages (Austro-Asiatic language group), 7% are Hmong- Mien (or Hmong-Yao) and 2% Tibeto- Burman (Sino- Tibetan language group)<sup>1</sup>. One difficulty has been that, until recently, a simple classification of *Lao Loum* (Lowland Lao) 67%, *Lao Theung* (midland Lao) 30% and *Lao Soung* (Highland Lao/ hill tribes) 3% has been used, based purely on "typical" elevation. This overestimates Lao speakers, and underestimates others (for example Hmong are classified as "highlanders" and underestimated by more than half); and made it very difficult to obtain accurate information, especially on differences *between* groups. However, with the wide recognition of this problem, Parliament seems set to soon approve the replacement of the traditional system for ethnic classification by a more accurate one. In contrast with some neighbouring countries, all ethnic minority people in Laos have full citizenship.

**Ethnicity and poverty are closely linked.** While wealthier districts lie along the Mekong River and are predominantly Lao, development indicators lag behind for most ethnic minority and non- Lao-speaking groups in the more remote, mountainous areas to the North and East. For example, the poor province of Phongsaly on the northern border with Yunnan (China), has only 7.6% of people who have Lao as a first language. However, there are differences between groups as well as between individual communities, for example many upland Hmong, while particularly isolated from the mainstream, often have relatively fertile lands and more reliable food production<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> From Richard Noonan, MoE

<sup>2</sup> From interview with James Chamberlain, consultant

While geography and ethnic disparities play their part in the low levels of development, these also have their roots in a **long period of colonialism, followed by the "secret war" between 1966 and 1975**, in which Laos experienced some of the heaviest, most sustained bombings in history. In 1975, with the defeat and withdrawal of American forces in Vietnam, the Lao Government was faced with rebuilding a country torn apart by war, with a destroyed infrastructure and the long term blight of unexploded ordinance. In human terms, in addition to those who died or lost loved ones, many qualified and educated people had fled the country and over half a million people were displaced within Laos; creating massive challenges for building human capacity.

Initially, a **socialist route to development** was pursued, with similarities to neighbouring Vietnam and include a degree of collectivisation of agriculture. **Mass organisations** (e.g. the women's and youth union) have traditionally played an important part in community level development. In 1975 only 30% Lao children had access to any kind of Primary Education. For the understaffed Ministry of Education and Provincial and District Education offices, the period up to 1990 was one of setting in place of the rudimentaries of an education system. Since 1986, there has been a cautious **opening up of the economy** through the "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM), which has included the reversal of collectivisation and development of tourism. Thailand became a key trading partner, hence the **Asia Financial Crisis** in 1997 had considerable impact in Laos, and (owing in part to relative inexperience in economic management) there was some loss of the ground that had been achieved in previous years. However, there has been slow but steady economic growth annually since 1998, to a current figure of around 6% pa.

The opening up of the last 15 years has hailed **increased development aid and the establishment of a number of development agencies in Laos**. Of total government expenditure, **34% comes from foreign aid**, about 22% as loans and a further 12% as grants. Only around 1.6 % of GNP, but 5.9% of aid and 10.9 % of government recurrent expenditure; is spent on education<sup>3</sup>. Loans for education have been secured from the WB and ADB, often after very long negotiation periods, particularly in relation to the banks' concerns about low government funding of the social sector relative to other sectors, particularly infrastructure. **For education, aid makes up about 26% of the total expenditure, but 45% of this is investment expenditure, where aid makes up 80% of the total**. UNICEF have had a long engagement in Laos and played an proactive role in encouraging project information- sharing around key themes. The key bilaterals are Sweden (SIDA), France, Australia (AusAid) and Japan (JICA). More recently the EU has become involved in the Education sector. While there are no Lao NGO's (since it is perceived that the mass organisations can play this role), the door has been opened to a number of international NGOs<sup>4</sup>, an number of which are active in the Education sector, tending to focus work at provincial and district levels<sup>5</sup>.

Recent **restructuring and decentralisation** plans aim to bring implementation down to district and even village level and planning and budgeting to provincial level; while the centre maintains an overall policy direction and monitoring role. In an attempt to bring services within reach of all people, a controversial policy is also currently being pursued of settlement of formerly semi - nomadic groups. There is some evidence that insufficient attention has been given to support the development of alternative livelihoods options, increasing the poverty of some groups. It is yet to be seen how decentralisation will enable more locally responsive and participatory development approaches. Changes are only just beginning to be implemented, roles and responsibilities are not yet clear and districts and provinces seemingly not yet confident to exercise their new powers. Meanwhile, a **PPA** has been undertaken, from which a **National Poverty Eradication Programme (NPEP)** is being developed. Key messages from the PPA are on the importance, in Laos, of beginning with detailed attention to community assets (both natural and human) and optimising on

<sup>3</sup> Richard Noonan, MoE 2003, and ADB 2000.

<sup>4</sup> INGOs include SC-UK, SC-Norway, Ecoles Sans Frontiers, World Vision, World Education and Japanese Social Reconstruction Committee.

<sup>5</sup>. See summary of current projects in Annex A.

ethnic diversity and knowledge, as well as finding culturally- specific ways of addressing issues of women's high workloads and low participation in decision making.

In Education, the WB and ADB have previously worked with the Government on "Sector Development Plans", focusing on "packages" of teacher deployment and training, school construction, materials production and management development, though these were not seen as particularly participatory, nor comprehensive. The **impetus of the 2000 Assessment and the Dakar WEF** has brought **increased attention to sector -wide objective setting, planning and monitoring**, following which the Ministry prepared an "**Education Strategic Vision for 2020**", part of a wider vision for Laos moving out of "Least Developed Country" status by that time. This document gives the government's own assessment of its successes and the reasons for them, as well as constraints and challenges to be overcome. It expresses the purpose of education in terms of developing good citizens and promoting social and human and economic development, balanced with environmental protection. Objectives are grouped around *Equitable Access*, *Quality Improvements* and *Improved Management*, however, achievement of the objectives is couched in terms of quite a long list of activities, without the "middle level" of overall strategies and priorities. The **Education Component of the NPEP** uses these same three objectives as its "three pillars". UNESCO are giving ongoing support for the development of "**EFA**" plans, and a recent meeting took place with development partners to present the draft targets (attached in Annex B), which are now articulated around the six Dakar goals. The UPE target for 2015 is 95% and the gender targets are set later than for the global target.

In common with other poor, donor- dependent countries, there is increasing realisation that projects can bring problems as well as benefits, particularly for the Ministry responsible for their management and coordination. **Agreements are now being reached on the early stages of development of a Sector Wide Approach (SWAp)**, with a long term aim of enabling budget support to a coherent set of agreed prioritised strategies. Among the donors, SIDA are spearheading this process, beginning with consultancy support to the MoE Department of Planning and the development of a more regular "round table" process between Ministry and the "Development Partners", aiming to move gradually from project information- sharing towards more strategic policy dialogue. There is gradually a coming together of the different plans, for example the most recent EFA workplan has *setting feasible goals and targets*, more *financial analysis* and a *consensus building workshop* as its next steps, and also explains that EFA will draw on earlier documents as well as integrating donor project plans. However, for now, there is some way to go with this, and in the meantime actions taken continue to be donor- driven to some extent, as well as constrained by a top- down Government budgeting process, leaving the MoE underfunded and with little leeway for non- project activities.

## THE DAKAR GOALS: PATTERNS OF PROGRESS 1990-2003

### 1. UNIVERSAL QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION

There has been **very significant progress in the expansion of primary education and improved enrolments**, from around 62% in 1990 to around 80% currently<sup>6</sup>. Improvements have been experienced in **both rural and urban areas** and **across different ethnic groups**. For example, the province with the very lowest NER, Sekong, had an NER of only 6% in 1989, which by 2000 had increased to 44.5%. There are currently around 7500 primary schools, however only 35% are "complete" schools offering a full five grades, while 35 % offer grades one and two only. Within this overall increase in enrolment, it would seem that **gender parity in enrolments has improved somewhat**. UIS report a slight change in the gender parity index from 0.79 to 0.86, while the latest MoE Figures suggest 0.89. Lao PDR has also seen **very significant expansion of secondary education** over the decade. UIS statistics indicate that NER increased from less than 15% to 30.2 %, while the EFA 2000 Assessment indicates an NER of 35%. There are around 6000 children, only 24% girls, enrolled in a number of Provincial level ethnic minority boarding schools (mainly secondary but also some primary students), following a Vietnamese model to give some able ethnic minority students the chance to proceed to higher levels of education. (Lower secondary grade eight graduates can move into a variety of vocational training courses (including teaching), while higher education requires completion of upper secondary grade 11).

However, **significant disparities in enrolment remain** between Provinces and between Districts within a Province. These disparities seem to reflect an **interplay of rural poverty-, ethnicity- and gender - related factors**. While complex and difficult to disentangle, it can generally be said that **poverty is higher among "ethnic minority" communities, and that, within these, gender differences also tend to be more pronounced**. For example, relatively well off, urban and Lao-speaking Vientiane Municipality has an NER of 99.8 % (100 % m, 99.7% female); while poor, mountainous Phongsaly, with a high population of "ethnic minorities", has an NER of 55.4% (63.2% for boys and 47.4% for girls). Within Luang Prabang Province, the Municipality has 31% ethnic minority children, only 3.4% non- enrolled and a gender ratio of 48f: 52m. Meanwhile, Phonxay, one of the more remote districts in the province with an ethnic minority population of 83%, has 36% non- enrolled and a gender ratio of 39f: 61m (Luang Prabang Provincial statistics). A higher percentage of ethnic minority children have never enrolled in or attended school, and some groups have barely begun to participate in education for example UNICEF (1996) estimated 94% of the Kor minority to have never attended school.

That said, it needs to be noted that both Ministry and donors agreed that a long period of frustratingly slow progress on ethnic minority enrolment rates and gender ratios, has been followed by some **recent significant improvements, just over the last three years**. The latest figures from the Ministry<sup>7</sup> indicate an annual NER growth rate of 8.3% overall, but 9% for girls, 9% for ethnic minorities and 12.1 % for ethnic minority girls.

While poor, rural ethnic minorities, especially girls, constitute the major disadvantaged groups, there are other smaller groups of children who need consideration. Figures on the number of **disabled children** in school (which unfortunately are not gender -disaggregated), come from the Lao Inclusive Education Project, which in 2001 included 147 Primary schools, covering 1627 children with disabilities and special needs, but is expanding to a goal of 400 schools by 2005<sup>8</sup> . The project identifies as pilot "IE" schools those which already have good relationships with communities, are making progress gender and in implementing Active Learning; and build on this to further develop skills of working with "mixed ability" classes and with parents/ communities.

<sup>6</sup> The EFA 2000 Assessment gives an improvement in NER from 62% in 1990 to 76.2%, (79.8% m, 72.4% f), while the WB (2000) gives a somewhat lower figure of 72.2%. The MoE's 2003 statistics suggest some further improvement to 79.8%, while UNICEF quoted 80.9%.

<sup>7</sup> MoE Presentation for NPEP

<sup>8</sup> Holdsworth 2002

However, even within the catchment areas of the IE schools, it is reported that there are more severely disabled children who are not reached. Therefore, outside of these, especially in more remote areas it can be assumed that there are very few disabled children in school as yet and that gender issues might become more pronounced as the approach expands. The IE approach adopted in Laos is nevertheless significant, as it demonstrates a model by which, as schools establish to become basically functional, the majority of disabled children can be included successfully within them *at that time*, rather than being left until last, or until a distant date when special provision becomes a feasible option.

There are also **orphans** living in orphanages under Ministry of Labour, some of whom are reportedly receiving an education but who do not appear in statistics<sup>9</sup>. With increasing rural-urban migration, it can be anticipated that **urban street and working children** might become a group needing attention in the future, but thankfully there are only small numbers as yet. Although figures were not available, the EFA Assessment also refers to Buddhist monasteries which provide a traditional education to boys in some (Lao) villages.

Enrolment, of course, is a limited measure<sup>10</sup>. In Laos, it is far from the case that enrolment in school indicates that a full 5 year, five grade cycle of meaningful and useful education will be completed. **Drop out rates are high**, resulting in a **national "completion" rate (survival to Grade Five) is only 56%** (MoE, NPEP document). According to the MoE classification for the Poverty Eradication Programme, in "non poor" districts it is 65%, while for the "poorest" (ethnic minority) districts it is only 46% overall, but in some as low as 20%. Drop out rates in all three categories are higher for girls than for boys and are by far the highest in Grades one and two, often exceeding 20%. These figures are perhaps not surprising, given that over 60% of Primary schools in Laos are incomplete, i.e. they do not offer the chance to study to Grade Five, and this figure rises to 80% in some of the poorest Provinces. However, even in some "complete schools", drop out rates remain high.

In addition, there are **high levels of under-age and over-age enrolment**, which probably inflate NER figures. Many young children accompany their older siblings (usually sisters) to school and are registered in Grade One for a number of years. Conversely, particularly in certain ethnic groups, children often enrol only from the age of around ten. Nationally, only 40% of primary school entrants in 1996/7 were the correct age of six years (ADB 2000).

Given the high drop out figures for primary, it is not surprising to find the much lower secondary enrolment rates. **Rural-urban and ethnic disparities are even greater in secondary than in Primary Education**. Secondary Education remains a realistic aspiration only for people in towns and district centres. Given the patterns of drop out seen above, it is not surprising to find that, at secondary level, almost all students are those with Lao as a first language.

There are difficulties in getting direct measures of **learning outcomes** in Laos, due to lack of systematic processes for monitoring of these, either at school or national level. In addition to the high drop out, there are also **high grade repetition rates**. It is not uncommon for rural Grade One classes to have more "repeaters" than new entrants. This, in theory, indicates that many children are not able to pass a test of what they have learned during a year of school. However, in reality, "non progression" is only likely to give an accurate indication of teaching (and learning) quality in a minority of complete schools where some basic system for testing children is in place, and both teachers and children have an incentive for children to pass, and to pass through the grades. Even where this is the case, testing focuses on recall and not skills and competencies acquired. Perhaps

<sup>9</sup> Information from UNICEF

<sup>10</sup> A recent discussion paper produced by the ADB- Aus Aid Basic Education Girls Project presents an interesting simulation, demonstrating that a statistical result of NER 71% can be obtained in a situation (like that common in rural Laos) where "only 80% of children attend school and of those who do, only 43% complete primary school. That is, only 30% of children aged 6 to 10 years complete 5 years of primary school, the figure being inflated due to the age profile of entrants and the high repetition rates". The author urges attention to a wider set of measures to give a better indicator of progress towards "real" UPE

the clearest measure that we have is from the National Literacy Survey finding that **almost half of Grade Five "graduates" were unable to pass a simple literacy test**, this figure being higher for youth who have recently left school than for those who left some years ago.

In terms of **quality of inputs**: there has been the **deployment and training of many more teachers**. Primary teacher supply is currently increasing at 1.5% per annum, and secondary at 3.3% (Richard Noonan, MoE). 11 TTCs have developed to deliver five systems for pre-service training, including a system for rural (especially ethnic minority) teachers with only a primary education to train for four years combining periods of secondary study with in-school teaching. A provincial-based system of teacher upgrading has also now been in place for over ten years. UNICEF reported an **increase over last decade in the percentage of trained teachers** from 61.5 to 76.8, an impressive achievement<sup>11</sup>. Parallel with this has been the **expansion of infrastructure**, which has been a high priority for international assistance. There has also been considerable production of **materials and resources**, and some work to reform the **curriculum**.

Overall then, there has been **progress on bringing some experience of schooling to many more villages and children**, but **many rural and ethnic minority children, especially girls, are not yet competing a five year cycle of meaningful education leading to minimum learning outcomes**.

***Causes of the patterns described lie both in relation to "demand" and to "supply":***

On the **demand** side, the findings of the PPA, as well as the WB, suggest that **poverty** is an important factor determining enrolment and/ or attendance, owing both to difficulties for families (often on a seasonal basis) in meeting costs of pens, notebooks and basic clothing (not necessarily uniform) and also the need of children to work. **Livelihoods means** are also very important. Many groups practice 'swidden' agriculture and are away from their villages for up to 9 months of each year, living in small family groups tending fields in the hills, making school attendance almost impossible. In some of the "resettlements", traditional livelihood means have been severely eroded and developing alternative means of survival is a priority over education. **Cultural practices** are important too, for example marriage patterns and assumptions about work roles influence gender patterns in enrolment and attendance. However, the PPA, as well as research undertaken by SC-Norway, find that the **reality is more complex and relates also to the actual situation of the local school**. Gendered assumptions<sup>12</sup> are most pronounced where poverty forces parents to make the choice of which children to send to school, and for how long. Different groups each have their own sophisticated ways of making decisions about education, balancing economic situations with their own assessments of "quality" and "relevance", and even very poor people would use education if it was **relevant, useful and compatible** with their life styles and agricultural calendars. **Practical learning** is rated as being as important as literacy and many people expressed perplexity at so much attention being given to just one skill (literacy) for all children. In villages where only one or two grades are offered at an **"incomplete" school**, in a **language that the community do not understand**, parents do not see any quick evidence of progress or useful skills learned, acting as a disincentive even to enrol. **Teacher non-attendance** was also seen very negatively and some children pointed out **feeling unwelcome** due to language; different, poorer clothes (or no clothes); and different food ("tubers instead of rice"). To increase demand, further action on **reducing costs to poor parents** and **supporting improved livelihoods**, along with **"advocacy" for girls education**, are important, but need to be **combined with improving quality and relevance and ensuring access to a full primary cycle**.

<sup>11</sup> There is some project evidence (UNICEF, SC-Norway) that this qualification does make a difference to teachers' classroom performance, as well as bringing with it a salary incentive.

<sup>12</sup> SC-Norway research found that some Hmong, in particular, had a traditional attitude to girls education since girls will soon marry into another family, and even the women who had been educated claimed that they had forgotten everything once they married

These issues force attention to the "supply" side of the equation, in order to explore what are factors that have improved enrollment and what are those that continue to act as a disincentive to completion or a barrier to learning. Tracing back over the last 15 years, it can be seen that, until quite recently, government and donors focused on "packages" to support **quantitative expansion to increase numbers of qualified teachers and schools**. Except for some provision of scholarships to encourage ethnic minority adults to become teachers, there were **limited explicit efforts to target more disadvantaged areas**, indeed many donors favoured larger settlements for construction grants. As is discussed further in more detail, while these efforts have been extremely important, they are largely donor-funded and "donor driven", and with government funding also tied up with counterpart funds, have brought about severe problems for recurrent funding even for salaries, let alone for anything else.

Therefore, while some degree of schooling is now in reach of many more children, almost inevitably, **improvements have reached the urban and "better off" first and disproportionately**. Urban schools have better infrastructure better qualified teachers and better resourcing. The curriculum is more relevant to urban and ethnic Lao children.

However, even in the better schools, there are a number of problems in delivering quality. **Teachers' skills and competencies remain limited and** rote learning approaches are still very often used. **Too few Pedagogy Advisers** have too many schools to cover, resulting in insufficient emphasis on ongoing follow-up and support to teachers. Furthermore, there rarely seems to be a **linking of teacher's skills to student outcomes** and assessment systems remain weak. Some problems are being experienced with the **curriculum**, particularly the pacing and level of the maths curriculum being too ambitious. There is a **lack interesting reading materials** to extend children beyond the confines of the text books.

Meanwhile, the **poorest and most remote places have been the last to be served**, have the **worst infrastructure** and most likely to have an **incomplete school**. 80% of teachers overall are from the Lao ethnic group. The mountainous districts have **more unqualified teachers**, e.g. Sekong still has over 70%. Untrained teachers in ethnic minority areas have particularly low levels of education. A further dimension is the **inequity in learning hours**, since most rural and incomplete schools operate for only 2-3 hours per day. Lack of knowledge of alternatives and degree of confidence/ motivation to be more flexible, often leads to **ineffective use of teachers within a school**, or of the limited time available for learning. While many of the problems are "logistical" (it is extremely difficult and costly to develop schools in remote and rural areas), it is perhaps also fair to say that **in the earlier stages of expansion there was dependence mainly on a "trickle down" approach**, and only more recently has come the acknowledgement that achievement of UPE in rural areas will need deliberate targeting of extra assistance and effort, as well as more responsiveness to specific contexts.

Furthermore, for almost 40% of children, (some estimate more) **the language of the school is not the language of the home**. In this area, perhaps more than any other, rigidity in looking at the issue has had a negative effect. The pattern of high drop out in areas where language of instruction cannot be understood by the children is very clear. Howse notes that Grade One repetition is very often because of language: the whole of the first year is spent learning Lao, and then the second year children have some hope of understanding something of the content of the curriculum. Maths and writing (more than reading) have been identified as particularly difficult for Lao as a Second Language (L2L) learners. The curriculum and text books do not take account of their needs, and only to some degree consider minority cultures and lifestyles. Even where ethnic minority teachers are present, they may be unsure of how to develop children's mother tongue learning and help them to learn Lao, possibly discouraging them from using their own language at all.

However, this section can be finished on a more positive note. As stated earlier, MoE and key donors agree that just **in the last few years there have been some sudden significant improvements in rates of progress**. It is yet to be fully analysed why this is the case. However, a

few causes can be postulated, back up by early findings from key projects. **Teacher incentives** to work in remote ethnic minority areas were introduced in 1998, and to teach in "multigrade" contexts since June 2002. Those qualifying for both allowances receive almost double pay- a very significant incentive (though actual payment has suffered the same delays as teachers salaries). Another possibility is the **sudden improvement in the recruitment of ethnic minority teachers**. While the numbers of "Lao Loum" teachers has slightly decreased in 2001-2, the percentages of Lao Soung and Lao Theung have increased by 6.2% and 6.1 % respectively, and overall teacher numbers have increased most rapidly in the poor, ethnic minority districts, e.g. by 18 % in Sekong, compared with the 1.5% average (Richard Noonan, MoE). Much of this may be down to the Basic Education (Girls) Project, which is currently in the process of **locally recruiting, training and supporting over 300 woman ethnic minority teachers**. Project data suggests very significant change in enrolment in some of the targeted schools.

Furthermore, we might tentatively say that, perhaps due to decentralisation, there has been some recent widening out from the rather conventional approaches based on "inputs", and a **greater realisation of the need for creative and flexible responses and school and community level, based on "outcomes"**. A focus on a "responsive" or "child- friendly" learning environment, "whole school development", school - level "indicators of quality" as well as monitoring of actual learning, and real community participation in schools; is becoming more prominent in project practice and in Vientiane development discourse. Along with this, just in the last six months, is an interesting synergy of different moves to bring ethnicity and language issues into greater prominence. With the possibility of local recruitment of ethnic minority teachers, at least for the early grades, now being explored, even the idea of piloting mother tongue literacy in the early grades for languages where Lao script could be used is being discussed. Donors are hopeful that a "small window of opportunity" has opened for really beginning to make progress on the "lanague issue", and are seeking to find useful examples of approaches used with related ethnic groups in neighbouring countries, as well as showing willingness to fund pilot initiatives in Laos.

## 2. EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)

For primary education, a "universal" target reflects an international agreement that there are many skills that children will need in a fast changing world (like literacy, numeracy or scientific knowledge), which some parents (particularly non literate people) might not be able to fully develop, and hence a formal institution is required to ensure that basic needs and rights are met for all children. "Non enrolment" rates in poorer countries give a good indication of the *minimum* number of children who will be illiterate and vulnerably to poverty in the future. For Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), however, a measure of enrolment or non enrolment in some kind of formal early years provision cannot be used in the same way. The aim is the optimal development of young children: physical, cognitive, social and emotional. This process (including extraordinary language acquisition in the first five years) can take place very effectively within homes and communities, indeed the best "formal" ECCE for young children is that which mirrors the best of these environments. Therefore, this discussion tries to unpack the statistics and look to see what we know about the quality of young children's early learning experiences in different Lao contexts.

**Kindergarten education for 3- 6 years olds** was established in Laos under the socialist system, but unlike in neighbouring China and Vietnam, has not become widespread. The main users of 722 government and 95 private kindergartens are teachers, civil servants and others in "urban" areas and district centres. For this group, childcare is useful, and modest fees are paid. Enrollment in such kindergartens increased only slightly from 7.3- 7.8 % over the 1990-2000 decade, and the number of private kindergartens has actually decreased by 10% (perhaps due to the higher costs to parents). Enrolment is 15% in Vientiane and 13 % in Savanakheth (the second town in Laos) but less than 4.5% in ten of the 18 provinces. Over 90% of children enrolled are of Lao- Phutai ethnicity. The EFA Assessment gives no indication of the quality of this provision. Project workers in Laos hear teachers often claim that children from the kindergartens do "better" and are "more ready" for school, but this is often based simply on children's ability to do things that are learned in kindergartens, for example knowledge of the alphabet, numbers etc. and ability to use a pencil). Rural and ethnic minority children can easily be labelled as "not ready", regardless of their actual cognitive abilities. Attempts to encourage use of kindergartens seem based on assumptions, perhaps based on international evidence, that good kindergartens can support better learning achievement, but there does not seem to have been any systematic research undertaken in Laos, disentangling the effects of kindergarten education from that of other social advantage. Projects do report that in general, urban kindergartens demonstrate somewhat better practice than the primary schools and have been used as "resource centres" for demonstrating Early Years methodologies, as well as playing an important role in the development of Inclusive Education.

Over the last four years, the government has been trying the idea of a "one year attached pre school" class in rural areas, in order to "spread the benefits" of kindergarten education more widely as well as to address the issue of under- school age children in school. (Many of these remain "invisible", often counted incorrectly in Grade One figures, and rarely is any system of care and play opportunity set up for them within the school). However, the attached pre-schools are not yet widespread and reports so far are somewhat negative, often described as very poor quality annexes, in which an unqualified teacher gives what is basically a rehearsal for Grade One, and it might be wondered if the "benefits" accrue more to the Grade One teachers than to the children. Such classes are anyway largely irrelevant to more remote ethnic minority communities where there are often not enough children to form a class (i.e. if the school is multigrade anyway) and where it is already difficult to get children enrolled at age six, so that the entry age has been raised to seven years. A number of donors have declined to support pre-schools in rural areas with the rationale that the children would be better off at home, rather than being turned off school at an even earlier age, and that resources best put into improving the quality of the multigrades. Meanwhile, one new NGO project<sup>13</sup>, aims to slightly re-conceptualise the "attached pre-school" as

<sup>13</sup> Early Learning in Primary Schools (MoE/ SC-UK)

a "bridging year" for ethnic minority children most at risk of school failure and drop out, using ethnic minority teachers from the local community and focusing strongly on both mother tongue and Lao verbal language learning. If successful, these might come to be seen (and monitored) as an integrated part of Primary Education tailored for ethnic minority areas, rather than a "watered down" version of a 3 year urban kindergarten.

However, the majority of 3-6 year olds, and almost all 0-3 year olds, are outside of any formal institution. It has been noted above that in rural areas, where traditional forms of community organisation, including the extended family, are still the norm; many children's learning and development needs will be being well met, possibly more so than for their peers in the poorer quality kindergartens or pre- schools. However, the health impacts of poverty, stresses on traditional social support systems and heavy work demands on poor families, particularly women; can affect the emotional, social and cognitive development of young children. UNICEF have been trialing community- based ECCE, focusing on improving support to these vulnerable families and communities, in five provinces and 480 villages in Laos, now extending to a further three provinces. Interventions combine "parenting" skills, health education, informal child care and play opportunities. UNICEF reported that the context has been challenging and that good measures of impact are not yet available. However, it can be hoped that this provides the beginning of some coverage of vulnerable communities as well as bringing new thinking about how to support the healthy development of young children in Laos. Challenges that lie ahead will include building on the existing capacities and strengths of parents and communities, including traditional knowledge; developing methods of monitoring and recording the "coverage" of different types of provision and, in order to get a better handle on their impact, finding more culturally- appropriate measures of young school- entrants' (mother tongue) language and cognitive development. This should also assist with fully integrating appropriate ECCE interventions, targeted where they can make most significant impact, into sector -wide plans.

### 3. ADULT LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the focus on improving primary education, there have been attempts to address directly the issue of high adult illiteracy. A National NFE Programme has been running since 1992, giving a three year course in basic literacy (in Lao language) as well as basic numeracy and some nutrition and health information. While "Lifelong Learning" is only just beginning to be considered more systematically, there have been programmes that aimed to combine literacy with wider practical knowledge and skills, and income generation. UNESCO has supported the development of 23 Community Learning Centres, which aim to act as resource centres for communities, not only for literacy learning but also for technical vocational learning and lifeskills. The earlier project ran into difficulties due to lack of capacity and it was found to be too narrow and top down. There are now attempts to develop programmes that can offer a variety of skills training, related to agricultural production and food processing, as well as to developing existing traditional and skills, according to local need and demand. GTZ, UNDP and the Swiss government have also supported vocational skills training linked with the government NFE programme, integrated into wider community development or agricultural projects.

According to UIS statistics, Adult literacy rates increased from 56.5% to 64.8 %, with improvement in gender parity from 0.61- 0.72. The Laos EFA Assessment (based on 1995 census data) gives a reported literacy rate of 68.7%, 77% for males and 60.9% for females, indicating an increase of 3.5 % for males and of 13% for females since 1995. A National Literacy Survey has been undertaken in 2001-2, the first of its kind in Lao PDR, supported by UNESCO and UNICEF. Its specific aim has been in order to set in place, and build capacity for, an ongoing monitoring of literacy rates in order to plan literacy interventions and to work towards the EFA literacy goal. This survey has been based on more scientific surveying and testing of actual functional literacy (and numeracy) skills, across clusters in all 18 Provinces, disaggregated by age group, gender, location and ethnicity. The Survey Report is currently being finalised and prepared for publication, however the MoE and UNICEF gave some general information about some key findings. These induce the possibility that **literacy might have been over -reported** in previous census exercises and that **gender differences might be bigger than had been thought**. As could be expected, the impact of the expansion of primary and secondary education seems to be beginning to be reflected in **higher levels of literacy for 15- 24 age group, among the Lao speaking lowland groups**. Some concern was expressed over the high number of Grade Five "completers" who were not able to pass the test, indicating the ongoing problems or teaching quality, though there was a correlation between literacy rates and numbers of years at school/ grade on leaving. It would seem that **Adult Literacy remains poor for the older age group**, suggesting that improvements that have been made are mainly due to improvements in primary education rather than adult literacy programmes per se. However, it should be acknowledged that internationally adult literacy programmes struggle to be widely effective.

UNICEF noted that there appear to continue to be **extremely low literacy rates among the poorest 20% of the population** and, closely related to this, a **continued high illiteracy among many "ethnic minority" communities**. This is consistent with the earlier findings of the 1995 census (quoted by Richard Noonan, MoE 2003) which gives the following statistics:

<i>Ethno- linguistic category</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>F/M</i>
<b>Lao- Phutai</b>	73	62	0.7
<b>Mon- Khmer</b>	37	20	0.4
<b>Hmong- Yao</b>	27	8	0.2
<b>Tibeto- Burman</b>	17	12	0.5
<b>Others</b>	47	33	0.5

*Lao PDR 1995 Census data*

This suggests a **gender difference between ethnic minority groups which does not relate to levels of literacy overall**, e.g. the Tibeto- Burman group has very low literacy but better gender

parity, while gender inequality is very high for the Hmong- Yao. It was also found that where ethnic minority people are literate in their own language, they are almost 100% also literate in Lao as well (i.e. literacy is almost never obtained first and only in a language other than Lao).

With so few ethnic minority children completing primary school, adult literacy rates are not yet being improved. A number of people spoken to in relation to this report noted that the continued lack of completion of primary, especially for many ethnic minority girls, risks that the cycle of early marriage and educational disadvantage in the next generation, will continue. Furthermore, it would seem that the NFE programme is so far struggling to reach those who do not have Lao as a first language. Literacy in the mother tongue has been trialed only on a very small scale. It is now felt that this needs further consideration, participation in relation to language that could be written using the Lao script and thus stimulate and support Lao language learning also. However, creating scripts for languages that do not have one (and whose speakers thus have an "oral" culture) has not been particularly successful in other similar contexts such as Vietnam. Meanwhile, Hmong has traditionally been written in Mandarin Chinese characters, which does not lend itself to short adult literacy courses.

Certainly, there are formidable challenges ahead. Success in improving adult literacy over the long term will be intimately tied up with addressing issues of access to a complete cycle of primary education, of at least a minimum quality, in rural and ethnic minority areas. However, in order to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy, it would seem that there will need to **continue to be concurrent intervention to support adults, perhaps linking it more to the concept of "lifelong learning"**, with increasing attention to direct linking of literacy with income generation and practical skills, numeracy as well as literacy, and to developing reading materials to motivate and sustain learning. Given the PPA finding that literacy is not seen as more important than other skills, it may be worth considering going even further and **trying programmes where practical skills are the starting point** (possibly leading to demand for literacy in time). In the light of the discussion above on communities where young children are "at risk" of sub optimal development and thus a poor start in school and early drop out, it would also seem that there could be a strong case for "holistic" community- based interventions, addressing immediate livelihood and life concerns including early childhood development and adult literacy, targeted where poverty, illiteracy and school drop- out rates are all high and linking as far as possible to local school development initiatives. As a part of the developing debate on language issues, the **language of initial literacy for adults, and/or ways of helping adults to learn Lao language**, might be revisited.

#### 4. GENDER PARITY IN EDUCATION

Referring back to the four earlier sections, it can be seen that gender parity in education has improved slowly in primary and secondary education, at least in terms of enrolment, but there is still some way to go, particularly for the many "ethnic minority" communities. Fewer ethnic minority girls enrol, and more drop out from school. There are still very large differentials for adult literacy, reflecting a past when schooling for girls was almost non-existent. There is a strong perception among MoE and donors that there has been fairly poor progress on gender, but, conversely, the sense of some promising very recent progress.

**Cultural perceptions and traditions** continue to play a role, with traditional roles and marriage patterns meaning that education is seen as less relevant. However, a conscious choice to only educate boys seems to occur where **poverty** forces it. Where **livelihoods needs** are met, in the main it would seem that families will send both girls and boys to school.

The **quality and relevance** of education is very significant for enrolling girls, along with the relationship built up between the school and the communities. Positive change now seems to be occurring where **initiatives are being taken locally** to ensure that girls are enrolled and to make changes within the school environment and ethos. These include the **appointment of women teachers** (particularly from the local community), **more flexible timetabling** to respond to local lifestyles and the need of girls to work, **ensure that the curriculum is relevant to girls** as well as boys and to **develop relationships with the community** to encourage girls attendance.

#### POLICIES AND STRATEGIES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PROGRESS ON EFA TO DATE

From the above analysis of progress on the different EFA Goals in Lao PDR, it would seem that "conducive factors" in enabling achievements so far have been:

- **A period of peace and stability** has enabled a focus on economic and social development and seen some modest economic improvement.
- The **stated government commitments to developing education for all Lao citizens, and achieving the 2015 UPE goal**, provide a starting point and some clear, shared, overall goals.
- There has been **some small improvement in expenditure on Primary Education**. Aid to Laos has increased overall in the 1990s and, while remaining low, government expenditure on education has increased in real terms. Even given the somewhat "piecemeal" project approach, this has enabled significant educational expansion, perhaps helped by Lao PDR's relatively small population.
- Through **donor-funded projects of the MoE**, there has been an increase in terms of **buildings, teachers and basic materials**. Certainly, all of these have been seen as necessary basic first steps in developing a rudimentary education system in Laos and in particular the national **teacher upgrading system** has been seen as successful. Many more children are now within walking distance of a school building than was the case ten years ago and are able to access some degree of education. Vision 2020 also emphasises these achievements, and points out some modest reduction in drop out and repetition rates, as well as some improvements in management and internal efficiency.
- The **development of an EMIS** has been seen as very helpful for monitoring progress. Systems for data collection and use are seen as being comparable to those of other countries of a similar level of development (and geographic problems/ financial constraints), and are given high priority by the MoE, though of course challenges are still faced.
- There has been a **promising recent shift from "packages" of inputs towards developing more "bottom up" and locally-relevant models of "quality", linked within a more**

**coherent overall strategy.** These approaches, embracing concepts such as whole school development, local support for teachers through a cluster system, creative use of local and community resources, and community involvement in defining and monitoring simple indicators of quality; require much deeper engagement in local issues, cultures and realities. While it is difficult to make clear judgements of impact just yet, early evidence suggests that this will be a wise direction to take in Laos. The beginning of stronger co-operation between key donors is seen as very positive.

## KEY CONSTRAINTS TO PROGRESS

While there have been some impressive developments, it can also be drawn from the analysis that there have been significant economic, socio-political and institutional constraints to progress on EFA in Lao PDR, of which the following stand out:

- **Continued understaffing and challenges of human capacity** are faced by the central ministry, districts and provinces, and decentralisation is making new demands. This affects everything, including policy development, procurement and monitoring. The MoE states this in Vision 2020 and points out that there is a continued battle to keep ahead of natural population growth. Reaching remote, rural areas is particularly difficult.
- **Lack of clarity in terms of the roles of, and lines of authority between, the Ministry of Education, Provincial Education and District Education Bureaux**, compounds the difficulties with equitable resource targeting, information-sharing and monitoring. The MoE is no longer in a position to ensure appropriate allocation of available resources towards implementation of sector development strategies and EFA goals. At local level, Provinces and Districts do not have the financial planning and expenditure monitoring capabilities to assume the role specified in the regulations.
- **There appears to remain a lack of strategic policy analysis and coherent setting of priorities.** Some "policy documents" tend to resemble a compilation of key project activities and objectives, with a very high number of stated "priorities", sometimes with a degree of mismatch between these and the preceding analyses and stated objectives. A number of donors pointed out the difficulties for the Ministry (wanting to express appreciation of donors' offers of support); in being able to maintain focus and consistency.
- **Poverty levels remain high and Education remains under-funded within the national budget.** For last year, the government approved 11.3% budget for education but only 8.8% was then released. There are huge unmet needs in order to reach only a minimum acceptable standard of basic education for all children as well as unreached adults. Provinces' indebtedness towards private sector enterprises increases year after year, much to the disadvantage of the social sectors (UNESCO).
- **High donor dependency results in a skewed pattern of expenditure.** Owing to the large number of donor projects funding "investment" programmes, which also require counterpart funding from government, the remaining Lao government contribution to Education is taken up almost entirely with salary costs. There is now a real concern that schools will be built for which there will be no funding for teachers or maintenance. Funds for the pedagogy advisers (school supervisors), school cluster support and to maintain the vital incentive allowances for teachers look set to remain very limited. While at first glance it might be thought that Primary Education is very well supported and other levels need more donor support and "projects", in fact expenditure per child remains lowest at the primary level and urgently needs to be increased. Donors recognise the need for moving towards budget support and finding ways for allowing more flexibility between investment and recurrent expenditure and an approach to planning and budgeting that will allow prioritisation of UPE, but within a balanced approach to sector development as a whole.

- Closely linked to the above points on capacity, lack of strategy and skewed expenditure; **scarce resources are not always optimally, nor equitably, used.** Problems of financial management, particularly in a decentralising system, means that up to 30% recurrent budget is spent on salary arrears. The devolution of fiscal management to local governments has adversely affected the financial situation of districts and, with school budgets often stripped to a minimum, communities are assuming virtually the entire operation and maintenance burden. The payment of teacher salaries is systematically in arrears by several months. Those who have access to a complete school - and complete a 5 year cycle- take an average of 9.5 years to do so, while over half the population have access only to an incomplete school, hence even if they do "repeat", they will likely drop out before getting their full five year entitlement<sup>14</sup>. Kindergarten education, which only reaches a minority of children from better- off families (already most likely to access secondary education), costs the Ministry twice as much per child as primary education. Clearly this does not represent a fair distribution of available resources and inputs.
- While there are recent signs of encouraging change, there appears to remain **some continued reluctance and reticence to "let go" at the centre, and to enable more flexible, responsive and creative approaches to meeting local needs.** (e.g. Howse reports reluctance on trying out school calendar adjustments, despite "permission" to do so and evidence from a number of recent studies that it is important). However, it should also be pointed out that in a small and understaffed ministry in a poor country, it is very important that officials have sufficient time to absorb, reflect on and discuss new ideas, as well as support for trying them out, and taking shared responsibility if they fail. Where trust has been built up, it Government and donors have been able to "push back the barriers" of what is possible, and to work together to test out new approaches to achieving shared goals.
- As alluded to above, while external aid is very much needed and valued, the **diversity of donor approaches, agendas and priorities creates difficulties for the Ministry to take a strong lead and to have an equal footing in the directions of the sector** and to make progress on coherence of policy, prioritisation and targeting. The now internationally recognised limitations of projectised forms of assistance (lack of coherence, uneven sector development etc.) are all readily evident in Lao PDR. There is also more work to be done internationally, so that agencies "on the ground" in Laos are more able to respond to local needs, compromise on the non- essentials and give more flexible forms of support.

## **MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING PROGRESS: CRITICAL POLICIES STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS**

To conclude, **Lao PDR has made important strides in achieving Education For All, particularly UPE, in an extremely challenging and resource- constrained context.** The expansion of the system to put primary schools and teachers within in reach of very many more children is particularly impressive. Meanwhile, however, there is keen awareness of the many children, particularly ethnic minority children and girls, who do not yet have access, and who are unable to complete a full cycle of meaningful primary education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. In order to sustain the progress that has been achieved, and build on lessons learned to make further breakthroughs, the above analysis suggests that the following policies, strategies and actions (all of which are either already being tested or implemented, or are under discussion), will prove particularly important:

---

<sup>14</sup> "Efficient" complete schools are those that enable the vast majority of children to enter at the correct age (6-7) and progress up through the grades and complete in five years. But "efficient" incomplete schools would churn out 9 year old Grade Two graduates. Since these children would have only a minute chance of retaining long term benefits from their experience, the schools would in fact have been very inefficient, while incomplete schools which allow children to repeat a few times might be "efficient" if resulting in children retaining a basic level of skills on leaving school.

1. **Prioritisation of actions that will ensure that all schools can offer either through a grade by grade approach or through five years in a multigrade system.** Often, this needs a change of attitude (from a preoccupation with "grade" to a focus on learning outcomes) and improvement in teacher confidence and skills (in order to be able to teach in a mixed age and mixed ability context), rather more teachers or more classrooms. This is recognised in the plans to continue to **expand multigrade schooling** and to continue the **incentive for multigrade teachers**.
2. In aiming to achieve UPE and redress current inequalities in the system, it may be that **agreeing and defining a "minimum entitlement" for all children in terms of actual learning hours** (ie the equivalent of five school years in an urban primary school), would prove useful. Once a school is able to offer this "five year entitlement, it would seem important to consider **automatic promotion**, in order to ensure more equitable distribution of teacher input. Currently this is under debate and discussion, with the WB and ADB concerned about system efficiency, but other agencies expressing a concern that automatic promotion might simply disguise poor quality teaching. Clearly, such a policy would need to apply only where "five grades" are on offer in some form, and in conjunction with quality improvements and clear measures of learning outcomes.
3. **Flexible time-tabling** to fit with local harvest times (and perhaps to enable children to have their "five year" entitlement over a longer period). Decentralisation regulations already allow for re-scheduling school days and terms, and the need is widely recognised and acknowledged, so here the issue seems to be finding a way to actually support a number of districts to pilot this idea and monitor the effects.
4. Seeking to better enforce regulations on the **age of entry**, both to achieve Universal completion as well as to monitor progress on UPE. This too, is recognised, but currently different strategies are being tried. The trailing in some districts of increasing the age of entry to seven years for ethnic minority children needs careful monitoring, and compared with the ELPS strategy of a "bridging year" (which could be for 5-6 or for 6-7 year olds) as an "equaliser" for ethnic minority children.
5. All players seem agreed that **further progress towards UPE in Lao PDR now requires a really serious focus on the ethnic minority and non- Lao speaking communities** who lag behind. There seems to be a sense that this is now coming to top of agenda and there is a need to "seize the day". Better data on ethnic minorities is needed (disaggregated by gender as is already the practice) and the pending approval of the new classification should enable this. Projects trialling the use of community primary (and pre primary) teachers need to be monitored closely to assess their impact. Success is likely to lie with allowing enough flexibility (but also guidance and support) within the system to support local schools, officials and local teachers to develop and respond to a deeper understanding of local culture, realities and lifestyles. There may also be scope for the tertiary education sector to play a role, by developing social and cultural subjects and encouraging greater interest in, and understanding of, the ethnic cultures and languages represented in Laos. The issue of the quality of ethnic minority boarding schools might come under further discussion and debate, given that these are supported by the Government of Vietnam, who are now re-considering their own policy on these schools.
6. **Better attention to language issues and language learning.** As an important part of addressing ethnic minority concerns, there would seem to be an urgent need for greater awareness of how children learn language and literacy, as well as piloting of effective and feasible strategies for improving language learning in the mother tongue and in Lao, including mother tongue literacy using the Lao script. What would seem essential is that good language teaching is seen as an extension of the principles of good teaching generally, and to focus on simple understandings and skills that minimally- qualified teachers in poorly resourced

classrooms can actually use and apply. The recommendations of the PPA, and the growing concern about the "ethnic minority gap" bodes well for achieving more focus on this issue. A number of donors have signalled interest in funding good quality pilot studies.

7. **Piloting and monitoring school and locally -based approaches to improve quality.** Responsibility needs to be taken at the "lowest" levels" to integrate different inputs to make an actual difference to the participation, completion and learning outcomes of children, focusing on their skills, understanding and competencies in enabling "Active" approaches to learning and supporting language learning, literacy and numeracy. This means a greater focus on whole school development and in-school support for teachers. It also includes engagement of schools in local cultures and realities, finding out how communities perceive education and what factors will attract children to school. Attention to ongoing monitoring of children's learning, as well as progress on the quality of provision as a whole, will also be important. This school- and community- based approach is very much being recognised within the major projects, significantly in the new phases of the WB project. Achieving this shift in focus will depend on wider progress on decentralisation, along with better mechanisms for sharing and coordination, the time scale for which should not be underestimated.
8. **Identifying communities of multiple disadvantage including poverty, high adult illiteracy and children are at risk of a "poor start" in learning, and seek to address these through targeted, "holistic" interventions.** There is some discussion on this, and attempts at project/ programme level to integrate different interventions. It might be possible to coordinate more the expansion of appropriate ECCE and adult literacy programmes, linked to livelihoods strategies, and synergised as far as possible with the actions mentioned above on school improvement, language- learning and enhanced community participation in schools. Again, this will depend on progress on decentralisation, as well as cross- ministerial collaboration and aid coherence.
9. **Monitoring of key indicators,** including net intake of 6-7 year olds, survival to Grade Five (completion) and competencies of Grade Five graduates and functional adult literacy, is planned by the MoE, based on recommendations from the UNESCO EFA review, and current approaches of the WB and others. It was felt that the recent experience of the literacy survey and the EFA Assessment, have helped to build up capacity for effective monitoring.
10. **Increased financing of education, linked to guidelines for decentralisation to enable better targeting, equity and internal efficiency.** There is strong recognition of the need for improving systemic efficiency and financial management and an number of initiatives aimed at building capacity for this. In addition to offering direct support to these initiatives, the moves towards a "SWAp" will help if it means that more accurate costing can be achieved and donors reach closer agreement among themselves on what would be minimum requirements for increasing aid.
11. Developing a **coherent approach to balanced sector development,** led by the Ministry of Education, in order to facilitate prioritisation and effective implementation of key strategies, based on a single, agreed, coherent and costed plan for the sector. This clearly lies behind all of the above and, as noted throughout, the foundations are now being laid for moving towards this approach, and away from the current project modality.
12. **Coherent support from the development partners** Starting with working more together to bring together learnings around common themes, there will be opportunities to move from information- sharing towards deeper dialogue and coordination. Donors are now challenged to report and document work in such a way that can be used as a basis for policy analysis, prioritising and planning. A further challenge will be to find ways to prevent fragmentation when giving technical support locally in an increasingly decentralising system. Meanwhile, work in Laos will depend on further measures beyond Laos, within each donor agency, to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of their support. For the **INGOs** that work in education in Lao PDR, many of the same challenges apply. There is real opportunity for those that are able to

move from a "project implementation" to a policy pilot" mentality, and to undertake work that, rather than being "scaled up" per se, can be used to trial new and creative approaches to improving educational access and quality in the many unique communities in Laos; generating learning to inform wider policy-making. In the absence of "civil society" structures and mechanisms, organisations that can support approaches to enabling community level monitoring of progress on EFA and sector development will prove particularly valuable.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

ADB Education Sector Development Plan, 2000

ADB, Participatory Poverty Assessment Lao PDR (2000), State Planning Committee, James Chamberlain et al, ADB, Vientiane 2002.

Daovong Vongsay (SIDA) Discussion Paper: Uneven Social Sector Development, SIDA, Vientiane  
Government of Lao PDR/ MoE The National Poverty Eradication programme- Education Sector, 2003- 2005

Holdsworth, Janet Seeking a Fine Balance: Lessons from Inclusive Education in Lao PDR SC-UK, SEAPRO, Bangkok, 2002

Howse, Geoff (Consultant for UNESCO, Bangkok) "Education For All" in Lao PDR: A Review of the Current Situation, 2002

Lally, Mike, Team Leader of BEGP (AusAid) Discussion Paper: Use of the Net Enrolment Ratio as an Indicator for Educational Development in Lao PDR, 2002

MoE Lao PDR National Literacy Survey MoE with UNICEF and UNESCO

MoE, EFA Year 2000 Assessment Final Country Report for Lao PDR, MoE Lao PDR, Vientiane (with UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, World Bank).

MoE, Lao PDR EFA Planning Status Report. 3<sup>rd</sup> MoE Development Partner Coordination Meeting, April 10<sup>th</sup> 2003 at MoE.

MoE, Lao PDR Ministry Of Education: Education Strategic Vision 2020, 2000

MoE, Ministry of Education Draft EFA Action Plan, Lao PDR, October 2002

MoE, Overheads from Consultative Workshop on the National Poverty Eradication Programme Education Sector. April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003

MoE/ SC-UK, Mid Term Review of Lao Inclusive Education Project, May 2002

Noonan, Richard, Factsheet on Teacher Salaries: Table on Salary Supplements and Subsidies for 2001- 2002

Noonan, Richard, Glossary of Terms for Education Sector Development in Lao PDR, MoE, Vientiane.

Noonan, Richard, Government Expenditure Analysis Year 2000- 2001

Noonan, Richard, Recent Trends in the Supply of Primary and Secondary School Teachers in Lao PDR: progress and problems in the period 1999/2000 to 20001/2002, MoE April 2003

Power, Lorna (Save the Children UK) Language and Education Issues in Lao PDR, SC-UK, SEAPRO, Bangkok.

SC-Norway Report on Participatory Research on Communities' Views of Education, 2001

SC-UK Early Learning in Primary Schools (ELPS) Project Documents 2001-3

UNESCO, EFA Monitoring Report team, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002 Education For All: Is the World on Track? UNESCO 2003

## **INFORMANTS**

Very many thanks to all of those who gave their time to meet with me, or to communicate by phone or e-mail:

### **Informants met on visit to Laos in April 2003**

Mr. Khamhoung Sacklokham, Director of General Education, **MoE**

Ms Bounmy Ounnarath, Department of General Education, **MoE**

Mr Kadam Vongdenane, Department of General Education, **MoE**

Dr. Richard Noonan, **MoE** (Consultant)

Dr. James Chamberlain, **Consultant** (Social Assessment and Policy) based in Laos, lead author of Participatory Poverty Assessment

Mr. Am Pathammavong (Project Officer) and Mr Hiroyuki Hattori (Programme Officer), **UNICEF**

Mr Daovong Vongsay, Senior Programme Officer, **SIDA**

Ms Yukiko Okada, Assistant Resident Representative, **JICA**

Mr. Serge Villas, Senior Programme Officer, **EU**

Ms. Barbara Keller Shuey, **Consultant**

### **Other Informants**

Mr. Sheldon Shaeffer (Director), Mr. Dominique Altner and Mr. Toshiyuki Matsumoto. **UNESCO** Bangkok Asia- Pacific Regional Bureau for Education

Ms Norkham Souphanouvong and Ms Stella Murray, **SC-UK**, Lao PDR

## **ANNEX A**

### **LAO PDR DRAFT EFA TARGETS: EFA PLANNING STATUS MEETING, APRIL 2003**

#### **Goal: *Universal Access to and Completion of Quality Primary Education***

##### **Provisional Targets:**

- Increase NER to 95% by the year 2015 and 98% by 2020
- Reduce repetition rate by 2% annually and drop out rate by 3%

##### **Strategies**

- Implement free and compulsory primary education
- Special emphasis on ethnic minorities, remote areas and children with special needs

#### **Goal: *Improve the Quality of Education and Learning Achievement***

##### **Provisional Targets:**

- Reduce repetition rate by 2% annually, and drop out rate by 3% annually

##### **Strategies**

- Upgrade skills of untrained/ unqualified teachers
- Improve multigrade teaching in remote areas
- Improve school supervision and learning and assessment systems

#### **Goal: *Expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education***

##### **Provisional Targets:**

- Expand pre-schools to increase the enrolment ratio to at least 5% annually

##### **Strategies**

- Expand both school based and community- based ECD programmes
- Promote private sector involvement

**Goal: *Equitable Access to Appropriate Learning and Life Skills Programmes for Youth and Adults***

**Provisional Targets:**

- Up to 50% of the newly literate continue complementary education to acquire basic education and vocational skills

**Strategies**

- Link illiteracy eradication with basic lifeskills and vocational training
- Expand vocational training especially for disadvantaged populations

**Goal: *Improvement in Levels of Adult Literacy***

**Provisional Targets:**

- Increase literacy rate among 15-40 age group by 95% by 2020
- Increase literacy rate among 15+ age group to 90% by 2020

**Strategies**

- Continue to expand literacy programme for adults, particularly for disadvantaged groups
- Improve and expand the Community Learning Centres

**Goal: *Elimination of Gender Disparities in Primary and Secondary Education***

**Provisional Targets:**

- Increase primary NER for girls to 95% by 2020
- Increase lower secondary NER for girls to 74% by 2020

**Strategies**

- Expand access for girls in ethnic minority areas through provision of new schools and community mobilisation
- Provide qualitative inputs for multigrade education for minority children, especially girls.

**ANNEX B:  
MAIN EDUCATION PROJECTS IN LAOS, 2003**

<b>Education QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT- EQUIP I (1995- 2000) AND EQUIP II (2001-5)</b>	<b>37.3m \$ (EQUIP II)</b>
22 of the poorest districts Teacher training and upgrading Teacher status and motivation Construction TTCs- materials and facilities	<b>ADB and SIDA</b>

<b>EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME- EDP I (1998- 2002) AND EDP II (2003- 2007)</b>	<b>21m \$</b>
School construction- community based contracting Curriculum development Text books Teacher guides Phase two focusing further on learning assessment and on Lao as a second language. Headteacher and school administrator training EMIS Policy development Admin and management	<b>WB and France</b>

<b>FACILITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT- FIP 2003-5</b>	<b>35m \$</b>
Building 700 primary schools in Vientiane Municipality and Vientiane Province	<b>JICA</b>

<b>BASIC EDUCATION (GIRLS) PROJECT- BEGP (1998-2006)</b>	<b>33 m \$</b>
Focuses on ethnic minority areas and on girls participation in 28 of the poorest districts in Laos Philosophy that this will benefit boys too. Main strategy is local recruitment, training and support of over 300 ethnic minority teachers, which will also involve recruitment of 50 new Pedagogy Advisers (school supervisors). Multigrade teaching and teacher upgrading Development of supplementary materials relevant to ethnic minority communities and training in their use. Community participation in school management and pilots of subsidies for the poorest families who send their girls to school. Research on gender issues and strategies in different minority communities.	<b>ADB and Aus-Aid</b>  <b>Aus-Aid and SIDA support one linked component</b>

<b>BASIC EDUCATION PROJECT FOR CHILDREN IN REMOTE AREAS (2002-6)</b>	<b>5.4m \$</b>
Teacher upgrading and school clustering Promoting lifeskills Monitoring learning outcomes Second Phase of a project to expand ECD opportunities in poor districts and communities.	<b>UNICEF WITH NGO's</b>

<b>BASIC EDUCATION EU PROJECT</b>	<b>6.4m Euro</b>
Building multigrade schools Training pedagogy advisers and administrators	<b>EU</b>

<b>WFP MIDDAY FOOD PROVISION PROGRAMME</b>	
Midday snacks to children in remote areas	<b>WFP</b>

<b>LAOS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROJECT- IE (2002-5)</b>	
Inclusion of disabled children in mainstream primary schools through a focus on active, "mixed ability" approaches and school- parent relationships.	<b>SC-UK, SIDA, UNICEF</b>

<b>EARLY LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS- ELPS(2003-6)</b>	
Trialing a "pre-primary" bridging year for rural ethnic minority communities, focusing on mother tongue and second language learning and school-community links Selection training and support of pre- primary teachers from the local community, especially ethnic minority women.	<b>SC-UK</b>

<b>SC-NORWAY EDUCATION PROGRAMME</b>	
Quality improvement through support to extension of activities of UNICEF project (school clustering, teacher upgrading ECD), as well as child- to child and non formal primary education.	<b>SC-Norway</b>

<b>NFE PROGRAMME</b>	
Adult literacy, especially Women's Literacy Development of Community Learning Centres Basic skills training and health education, now expanding to included technical/ vocational opportunities for primary school leavers, income generation and "lifeskills".	<b>UNESCO, UNDP, Swiss Government, GTZ</b>