Trip to Northern Laos with Child’s Dream (27 September – 4 October 2010)
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Laos ‘at a Glance’

Classified by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country (LDC), Laos (officially known as the Lao Peoples’ Democratic Republic) is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. With an estimated per-capita income of US$580, a population of around 5.7 million and a land area of 236,800 km², Lao PDR has significant natural resources, including forestry and minerals, as well as hydropower potential. In spite of a declining share, agriculture is still the largest sector in the Lao economy, contributing 42% to the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2006 and employing nearly 80% of the labor force. Landlocked and increasingly becoming land-linked, Lao PDR shares borders with Thailand, Viet Nam, southern China, Cambodia and Myanmar, most of which are growing rapidly.

Lao PDR also is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with 49 official ethnic groups comprising some 200 ethnic subgroups. The population can be grouped into four broad ethno-linguistic categories: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Iu Mien and Sino-Tibetan. While the variety of languages spoken by different ethnic groups contributes to the rich linguistic diversity in Lao PDR, it also makes the task of including these groups in national development more complex. Most of the non-Lao-Tai live in upland areas, where there is wide disparity in geographic, economic and social living conditions as well as cultural diversity, which adds dimensions to the already-challenging task of reducing poverty and moving a subsistence-oriented and low-income country out of the LDC category by 2020.

Introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986 began the country’s transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. Since then, Lao PDR’s economy has grown at an impressive rate, with an annual average in the 1990s of 6.3%. During 2000-2007, annual growth has averaged even higher, at 6.5%. The Government aims to maintain rapid economic growth to improve the living conditions of its people.


Education in Laos – Some facts...

Education is among the better-performing sectors in Lao PDR, as reflected in continuous progress across all key indicators. However, some challenges remain with respect to ensuring equal education opportunities for children in all parts of the country, especially poor children, children in rural areas and children who do not speak Lao as their mother tongue.

While progress on enrolment has been satisfactory so far in Lao PDR, with net enrolment rates in primary schools soaring from 58% of primary school-age children in 1991 to 84% in 2005, reaching the last 15 to 20% of the population is always hard, and will require additional effort and resources.

Like in many countries, progress in retention of students at the primary level has been slow, with the primary completion rate increasing by slightly more than 1 percentage point per year from 48% to 62% during 1991-2005. The overall dropout rate (for grades 1 to 5) is 9.4% but considerable variations are found across provinces with the main reason being that some villages have no or only incomplete primary schools. Because of the small number of children, lack of teachers or limited facilities, some primary schools offer only the first two or three grades. The share of villages with complete schools fell from more than one in two in 1992-93 to less than one in three in 2002-03. Although 80% of villages have a primary school in the area, only 36% have complete primary schools (all five grades), according to the 2005 Population Census. The situation in the North is of particular concern. Nationwide, 90% of schools in the poorest districts are incomplete, with more than 40% of students attending an incomplete school.

Overall, education continues to be a luxury when it goes beyond the grades available in the village. Only a very small number of children continue education in other villages or in the nearby district, since expenses become prohibitive. This data further underlines why Lao PDR represents one of the core focus areas of Child’s Dream and why our continuous focus on educational facilities in rural and remote areas addresses the most urgent needs.

Having been working for Child’s Dream for almost 2 months in their head office in Chiang Mai (Thailand), I was very excited to join the Laos team on one of their field trips to the Northern part of the country. Although I had been to Luang Prabang for a short weekend trip a few weeks ago, I very much appreciated the opportunity now to not only get to know the country from a ‘non-touristic’ angle but also to learn more about the work of Child’s Dream and hence, better understand the broader concept of ‘helping children and communities’.

As soon as we reached the Thai-Lao border at Ban Huai Kon, leaving Thailand and the ‘civilized world’ behind us, I was directly confronted with the hallmarks of Lao PDR’s bureaucratic and laid back society. When we arrived at the Lao immigration office at around 3.30pm, the officers responsible for entry visas and customs had already gone home so that we asked them to come back to the office and issue one last visa for the day. After one and a half hours, we finally received our visa and entry stamps and continued our way to the final check-point before entering Laos. As soon as we crossed the border, I felt an immediate and dramatic change: Laos is markedly less populous than other countries in South-East Asia and the people, while just as enterprising, move at a less frenetic pace. Everyone seems to have sufficient time and there is absolutely no need to hurry.

You can truly see and feel the impact of the state controlled economy almost everywhere: the Thai tractors to cultivate the rice fields are substituted by the ploughs pulled by an ox, people satisfy their daily needs at the morning market as opposed to small shops or even supermarkets, most restaurants close rather early at 7pm, equipment being used is at least two decades old, modern technology is strictly absent, etc. The numerous villages, which exist frequently along the main roads, seem to maintain their own small economy while a transparent regional or national market does not exist yet.

Traffic too was very different: rules of the road are mostly adhered to, there are strict speed limits (e.g. only 30 km/h in villages) and you even get seriously fined for not wearing helmets on motorbikes or for ‘overseeing’ animals along the road – it seems that there are more dogs and chickens on the road than cars, motorbikes and bikes together. Also, while traffic in Thailand comprises a balanced mixture of cars and motorbikes (as opposed to Vietnam, where Honda Waves clearly dominate), Laotians primarily use either bikes or walk – functioning, motorized vehicles are still a rarity. Given the often long distances between villages or between homes and rice fields, travelling up and down the mountains in blistering heat is relatively burdensome and time consuming.
Lao PDR’s very basic and often non-existent infrastructure was definitely one of the most astonishing but also most exciting experiences. The majority of the roads are unpaved, bumpy and muddy so that cars and trucks frequently get stuck and have to be pulled out, especially in the rainy season. In fact, this happened to us a number of times but this exercise is ‘part of the game’ and quickly becomes routine. Often, when driving in the mountains, many roads are so narrow that two vehicles hardly fit beside each other. Many mountain paths also have a deep drop off on one side, which goes several hundred feet straight down, further stimulating the driving experience. Guard rails are non-existent and the only safety measure really is to be precautious. Due to the very hilly landscape in Northern Laos, roads are often impacted by landslides, falling rocks and uprooted trees, blocking the roads until they get cleared by heavy machinery.

Although I had travelled to many countries around the globe before, visiting Laos was a special experience and will definitely stick in my memory for a long time. I was very pleased to experience a country that is still so ‘untapped’ and ‘unaffected by influences of the globalised world’, contains such an enormous degree of natural beauty and above all, provides a home to so many friendly people. I am sure that Laos’ development will not halt, in contrary; I assume that the country will hardly be recognizable in 10 years from now.

Our trip and key take-aways in a broader context...

During our 8-day trip to Northern Laos we visited a total of 5 projects, thereby installing 3 water systems, building one playground and reviewing the progress of the construction of 4 new school buildings. Please refer to the adjacent map for the exact locations:

**Baan Thong Secondary School**, Muang Ngern district, Xaiyabouli province
*Task: Installation of water system, inspection of school building (30% completed)*

**Baan Kaen Secondary School**, Xiang Hon district, Xaiyabouli province
*Task: Inspection of school building (97% completed)*

**Tan Kham Secondary School**, Hong Sa district, Xaiyabouli province
*Task: Installation of water system, inspection of school building (99% completed)*

**Khon Piak Primary School**, Xaiyabouli district, Xaiyabouli province
*Task: Installation of water system and building of playground*

**Nam Pa Nursery school**, Paklay district, Xaiyabouli province
*Task: Inspection of school building (66% completed)*

All in all, the trip really helped me to gain a better understanding of the work of Child’s Dream including its mission and approach as well as the benefits and complexities involved in the implementation of education and health focused projects. Coming from a completely different background where education is free and granted to everyone and where people benefit from an excellent infrastructure (including access to electricity, drinking water, food, transportation, telecommunication, etc.) – well, take it as a given –, it is just impossible to imagine peoples’ living conditions in a remote area in Lao PDR: you have to make the experience yourself! Having said this, I really appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the installation of three water systems and witnessing the immediate impact of our work: seeing very happy school children washing their hands, drinking water and filling empty plastic bottles for their families. This experience and especially knowing that the whole community would now benefit from clean drinking water going forward provided me with a lot of satisfaction!!
Mission and approach of Child’s Dream:

Child’s Dream is dedicated to empower marginalized communities in the Mekong Sub-region [with focus on extremely remote and neglected areas] to shape their own futures. We achieve this by working with communities to improve healthcare and education for children and provide socioeconomic opportunities for families. Child’s Dream believes that the key to sustainable development is to carefully listen and understand the true needs of the communities; its bottom-up approach puts the needs of the community at the centre of its initiatives.

Having visited a number of projects in Laos I can now really make sense of Child’s Dream’s mission statement as well as the underlying rationale. For example, I now know what it means to focus on communities in rural and remote areas. These are typically villages far off the main roads which are very difficult to access – sometimes, the roads are so bad that it’s impossible to get there by car. I remember one day-trip when we tried to deliver building materials to a new school but had to return half-way as the road turned into a complete disaster. Some of these villages and schools are totally neglected, have never been visited by Laotian government officials, lack attention of other NGOs and truly rely on self-support. Consequently, Child’s Dream’s focus on those areas is absolutely necessary and fulfills its objective to support the ‘neediest communities’.

The trip also highlighted to me how important it is to focus ones efforts on children and education as they represent the root of helping communities as a whole. Education provides children with the knowledge and skills to not only better understand the environment they live in but also to reflect on their lives and to pursue a lifestyle which is built upon social and economic freedom and independence. Today, 80% of the people in Laos are still employed in the agricultural sector, often on a self-sustaining basis. Education will ultimately enable the children (and the working population of tomorrow) to take on ‘higher-skilled’ jobs in the areas of manufacturing and services and hence, to contribute to the development of the local economy, benefiting society as a whole.

At the same time, I realized that schools represent very suitable and probably the best access point to educate children, and via them whole communities, about health and sanitation topics: hand washing, collection and disposal of waste, usage of toilets, exclusion of cattle on school property, etc. This is a very important task as most people lack the knowledge and sanitary conditions in some schools are far from ideal and require drastic action. Besides offering general teach-in sessions for students – Child’s Dream initiated the School Health Programme in 2009 promoting “best practice” sanitation behavior in schools in Cambodia – the most important task remains with the teachers to lead by example and to encourage students to adhere to better sanitary standards. Students can then share their newly acquired health knowledge with family members and friends and hence, let their communities benefit as well. However, I experienced that many teachers lack the knowledge themselves and are not able to foster change!

Another very important take-away and one of the main deficiencies in delivering successful development aid is Child’s Dream extensive involvement of the communities in its projects. Why is this so important? First of all, involving the communities serves the purpose of aligning interests between beneficiaries and supporters. As the realization of the projects often takes a few months (e.g. school construction) and since Child’s Dream only has limited resources, we rely on key people on the ground (foreman) to support, manage and oversee the implementation process. In most projects, the communities contribute by providing labor and/or raw materials. However, for a project to be effective over the long-term, Child’s Dream also requires ongoing support by the beneficiaries post implementation.
Example: a newly installed water system providing clean drinking water to an entire school and community implies theoretically a favorable input-output ratio, i.e. limited installation costs while providing clean drinking water to a large number of people for an extended period of time. However, as the filter of the water system requires daily cleaning, this project will only be successful over time, if teachers and students take full ownership of the project and are committed to daily cleaning. This example demonstrates that for projects to be effective, it is a pre-requisite to involve communities and to win their engagement prior to implementation.

Last but not least, the trip also raised my awareness for weaknesses and deficiencies in the general education system, i.e. why education in some villages is not as effective as it could be despite the availability of basic infrastructure such as school buildings. Some schools simply lack sufficient teachers so that the teachers available need to cover an extensive number of subjects, while potentially lacking the required education and knowledge themselves. This means that some schools are not able to teach the official curriculum, thereby creating discrepancies in the quality of teaching amongst schools. For example, I experienced that some English teachers could hardly speak English which raises the question how students can learn a language if the teacher is not capable. Also, the awareness of the importance of education among families is naturally lower, which is well comprehensible since they often just don’t know better or face economic difficulties (e.g. lack financial means to support their child’s education or require the children to work at home). As a result, many children drop out of school at some point or refrain from attending a secondary school.

While NGO’s and charity organizations carry out an incredibly important task by providing basic infrastructure and advice on education and health topics, clearly the overall responsibility for the education system remains with the national and local educational administration. According to recent publication by UNICEF (Schools of Quality in Lao PDR: an Evaluation, 2009) the allocation of the national budget for the education sector remains insufficient to meet the Government of Laos’ goal of universal primary education by 2015. Teacher salaries are lower in relation to GDP per capita than in almost all other Asian countries, which does not help in raising the attractiveness of the profession as such. The Ministry of Education in Vientiane, responsible for policy and program coordination, currently employs 3,200 teachers but estimates a need for around 6,500 teachers to meet its objectives, representing a significant shortfall. It is illusionary to believe that the national government will significantly increase its education budget from one year to another, purely due to a lack of resources; and if it did, there would not be sufficient teachers available anyway. But the education situation in Laos can be improved materially over time if all parties involved (government, national and local education administration, universities, schools, teachers, NGOs, etc.) maintain their focus towards the common objective.