Introduction and Context

For the last six months, I have been a Special Tasks Volunteer in the Chiang Mai office of the Child’s Dream Foundation. One of my main responsibilities is to develop proposals and final reports for the projects our Basic Education (BE) team implements in the Mekong Region. I work closely with the BE team to understand the project situation so that I can successfully communicate to potential and existing donors.

The main challenge in developing this type of documentation is to effectively convey the situational need without every visiting the community. I utilize secondhand information and journal notes from our team to piece together the situation. An additional challenge is that I have had very little exposure to the kind of poverty in the region, which makes it difficult to even fathom the dire situation in which many children attend school. In an effort to address these issues and provide context for the volunteer, we are encouraged to travel with the field representatives to the areas in which we support.

I recently had the opportunity to travel with P’Tai and P’Koy of the Basic Education team to conduct a survey of the Luang Prabang Province in northern Laos. Currently, Child’s Dream implements projects in four provinces in Laos. The team is now exploring potential expansion options and Luang Prabang Province is one of the possibilities. In order to analyze the need and evaluate if we should include the area in our scope of work, we needed to conduct a survey trip. The main focus would be to meet with the Provincial school officials, visit as many schools as possible, and then make recommendations to senior management.

In the following report I will elaborate on what we accomplished on the trip, how I was affected by the experience and what I learned as a result.

Day #1 – 07/04/2014

Goal of the Day: Travel from Chiang Mai, Thailand to Xaingabouli, Laos

Summary: My girlfriend Sarah and I met Tai, Koy and Jack at the Child’s Dream Headquarter office at 11am on Monday morning. It was a public holiday, so the rest of the office was closed. Sarah is a teacher here in Chiang Mai and was on break, so she had the
opportunity to come on the trip as well. In addition, Tai felt her experience and perspective as a teacher would be helpful in analyzing the schools. We left Chiang Mai at noon and drove East through the Thai provinces of Lampang, Phrae, and Nan.

Once we crossed through the Thai border and into Laos, we began driving on the other side of the road and traversed the bumpy and unpredictable roads. Tai and Koy were the perfect tour guides, discussing the economic situation of this region and pointing out the communities which we have previously supported. We arrived in the provincial town of Xaingabouli at around 10 pm and spent the night at a very nice guesthouse.

**Highlights:**

- The amazing scenery we traversed as we crossed the mountainous region near the border of Thailand and Laos near sunset. (See picture below)

**Lowlight:**

- We arrived at the border crossing at about 7pm and everyone cleared the Thai side easily. However, we ran into a serious issue at the Laos immigration. It turns out that Jack’s passport was set to expire in early June and you must have at least 6 months before it expires in order to get into the country. After 8 straight hours driving us all to the border, he was forced to go back into Thailand, stay overnight near the border, and take a bus to Chiang Mai the next day.

**Est. Driving Time:** 10 hrs.

**Schools Visited:** 0

**Pictures:**

![Sunset as we neared the Thai / Laos border](image)

**Day #2 – 08/04/2014**

**Goal of the Day:** Travel to Luang Prabang and meet with the Provincial Educational leaders. Then, travel with them to the schools within close proximity of the city.

**Summary:** We woke up at 6am and enjoyed rice soup at the guesthouse before getting on the truck. As we drove to Luang Prabang, we passed many small villages and communities which Child’s Dream had built schools or boarding houses for. One thing that I noticed right away was all the activity and work being done by 6am. Considering the Southeast Asian heat, it makes sense that the people would start their day’s work so early in the morning, but it was still amazing to see.
We arrived in Luang Prabang by 9am and met with the Provincial Education leaders. Although I previously thought Laotian and Thai were similar languages, I quickly learned the accents were so different that I couldn’t understand a single word. That being said, not understanding the language allows you to focus more on body language and I was actually able to follow the conversation by just paying close attention to facial expressions and hand gestures. The meeting went well and they were excited to have us there. The head of education for the province said he would supply someone from his team to chaperone us to the schools for the week.

After the meeting we drove down a dirt road to the first school which was about 10 km’s away. We met with the school officials and toured the school grounds which included three school buildings and a small boarding house made of bamboo. Although older, the school buildings were acceptable structurally speaking. They were not being properly cared for however, and the grounds were pretty messy. Although the boarding house was insufficient and should be replaced, the risk with this school was the overall management and leadership.

The next school was much closer to the city and was dedicated to providing education to orphans. It was a huge complex with many school buildings and boarding houses. All the students live on the property and assist with the upkeep of the facilities. The school was very well cared for and managed. The classrooms were in good shape and the students were very well behaved. In addition, the school had a large music room and an art building with supplies and examples of the fantastic art the students had created. It was all very impressive and we commented that instead of requiring funding, this school would be a good example for other schools in the area who may be struggling with management.

We then went back into town and had lunch with our chaperones and then checked into our guesthouse to drop off our things. After a quick rest, we left once again to visit a school on the main road into the city. Generally these schools are the highest funded since they are easy to get to, but this school still had significant needs. One of the secondary buildings was in very poor shape and needs to be repaired. The school leaders were very committed to improving the school and the students seemed very happy. They were very excited to see Sarah and me and many of the older ones wanted to practice their English with us.

The fourth school of the day was holding a large party for a group of teachers who had just finished their tenor there. The school leaders were quite distracted and random in their requests, so we left after a short visit and headed back into the city.

Considering we finished the day relatively early, we were able to walk around Luang Prabang some and have a nice dinner on the river. Afterwards, we walked the famous night market before heading back.

**Highlights:**

- A group of boys at the first school were playing Pétanque, the French version of Lawn Bowling which provided a glimpse into the French influence on the country. They were all very good at the game and I was happy to hold my own the little they let me play.

- The second school we visited was incredibly well run and organized. It was exceptionally clean and their process for serving food was impressive. Each child was responsible for collecting their food in the kitchen and then they could eat wherever they wanted. It was a great example of empowering the students.
The principal at the third school we visited was a strong leader and respected individual. She also happened to be a woman, which in a culture still holding onto its patriarchal past, was good to see.

**Lowlight:** I noticed the teachers at the first school need to improve their dedication and commitment to the students. The students seemed to have free reign to do whatever they wanted and the teachers were somewhat disinterested.

**Est. Driving Time:** 8+ hrs.

**Schools Visited:** 4

**Pictures:**

Pictured clockwise: The first school we visited, students playing, primary students on the playground, boys playing Pétanque, 'Teacher' Tai leading the class

The students at the second school were well behaved and the school was well managed
Day #3 – 09/04/2014

**Goal of the Day:**
Survey the educational landscape in the district across the Mekong River from Luang Prabang.

**Summary:**
After a quick breakfast, we picked up our guide for the day from the Ministry of Education office. We then drove the truck to the banks of the Mekong River and took a ferry across in order to tour one of the poorer sections of the province. As soon as we got onto the other side of the river, the difference between the city side and this side were obvious. Gone were the clean roads lined with French styled architecture. Instead, just off the bumpy dirt roads were bamboo buildings with thatched roofs.

The drive to the first school took about 45 minutes. It was a small primary school overlooking a beautiful valley. It was comprised of 2 school buildings, one of which was made of wood framing that had severely deteriorated. The walls were full of large holes and it actually looked like the building may simply collapse at any moment. Unfortunately, in addition to the buildings being in bad shape, the classrooms were very dirty and not well maintained. One of the things that we were closely monitoring on this trip was not only the structural integrity of the buildings, but also how the school tried to make the best of what they had. Tai and Koy were concerned about the sustainability of a new school building here because it may not be sufficiently maintained.

Next, we drove to a Secondary School about an hour deeper into the mountains. The school suffered from severe overcrowding and insufficient infrastructure. At least four of the classrooms looked more like temporary buildings with only a steel roof and five foot high bamboo walls. The height of the walls left the upper portions wide open. The teachers stated that these ‘rooms’ are especially difficult to utilize during the rainy season because they become flooded and the students are rained on during class. Furthermore, most classrooms have at least 50 students.

Impressively, the students were incredibly well behaved and I never heard anyone talking out of turn while we were there. The English teachers at the school were very eager to talk with Sarah and me. At this point, we were getting into remote enough villages where seeing a Westerner was pretty rare, so they were excited to practice their English. They brought us into their classes so the students could hear a native English speaker speak. Later, all of us would agree that this school would be...
the top priority of all that we visited due to the poor state of the buildings and the dedication to education shown by the students and teachers.

Next, we crossed more mountainous terrain and arrived at a village where a new two story school building had just been built. Unfortunately however, at least half the students are from villages far away, so they are forced to be boarding students. The students have built dozens of bamboo structures to live in. It resembles a refugee camp with the structures very close together and up to 4-5 people per hut. Every year the parents of the kids have to rebuild the structures, which is expensive and time-consuming. It was evident they needed a formal boarding house.

We visited two other small primary schools that afternoon and I couldn’t help but think, as we met the students and their teacher, that these were the ‘one room school houses’ from late 19th century America. Each village has their own worn out and dilapidated building for the youngest children in the community to go. The students were again very curious about us and especially liked it when I would take their picture and then show it to them.

On our way back to Luang Prabang, we went back to the second school to pick up one of our chaperones who we had left there earlier in the day. Once we arrived, the teachers insisted that we stay for lunch. We agreed, and as they prepared the food, I could hear them discussing whether we would like it or not. When I went out to wash my hands, I noticed the pile of feathers on the side of the building and I realized that once we left they had killed a duck to feed us. They passed out sticky rice and a soup with every piece of the duck in it (beak included). Then they brought us a dish with basil, and chili and some kind of meat. It wasn’t until after my first big bite that I realized the base of the dish was the warm blood from the duck. I managed a few more bites before declining anymore. The teachers were very nice though and served us cold Laos Beer and Rice whisky. We spent an hour socializing and then they gave us a warm sendoff.

Sarah and I again took advantage of the evening in Luang Pabang and visited a few temples and climbed to the top of Wat Phousi to watch a beautiful sunset over the Mekong. We finished off the day with a delicious meal with Tai and Kai before getting a much needed night’s sleep.

**Highlights:**

*Where to begin! This was one of the most interesting, moving, and thought-provoking days I have had in my time in Southeast Asia.*

- The children at the first school we visited were engaging and incredibly photogenic. They were very curious about us and one little boy especially liked Sarah and chased her around the school.

- Seeing where the students lived at the second school we visited was amazing. Considering they are all pre-teens or early teenagers, it is incredible that they do their own laundry, cook their food, and live entirely on their own.

- The opportunity to interact and speak English to Laotian students was wonderful.

**Lowlight:**

- Blood Curry... that is all

**Est. Driving Time:**

- 9 hrs.

**Schools Visited:**

- 5
Pictures:

*P'Tai in the Child's Dream truck crossing the Mekong*

*The very cute students of the first school*

*The classrooms at this school were very overcrowded and exposed the students to the elements*

*I was completely blown away by how self-sufficient the students were at this makeshift boarding camp*
Day #4 – 10/04/2014

Goal of the Day: Travel north out of Luang Prabang and meet with another NGO worker to discuss a project proposal. Then, continue to survey the schools in the area.

Summary: We woke up early and checked out of our guesthouse in Luang Prabang. We then quickly ate Pha soup before meeting with an Australian man who runs his own NGO in Luang Prabang and lives there permanently. He has a connection with a school a few hours north of the city that he wanted us to visit and potentially support. So, Koy jumped in his car and we headed out of the city. We were actually able to make ok time considering the constant barrage of potholes.

When we arrived at the school he introduced us to everyone and gave a tour. He obviously feels passionate about supporting the school and his organization has already built two boarding houses there. The school’s population is quite large and growing so overcrowding is a concern. The difficult task for the BE team will be to decide between this school and all the other schools we saw the day before that all clearly needed our help.
After visiting the school, we went to the District Education office and met with the leaders there so we would again have a guide to the schools nearby. We ate a quick lunch and then we followed a group of the officials farther north and into some very remote villages. After almost two full hours crossing beautiful landscapes on some of the worst roads I can even imagine, we finally arrived to a small village. The school there was made of two very basic and rudimentary wood buildings. The buildings do not provide a sufficient learning environment. We did credit the school however with keeping everything maintained and clean. As we walked the school grounds, I was amazed at how diligently the students were paying attention. I was very impressed with how committed the school seemed to be to education.

Although we had already had lunch, the school leaders would not let us leave until we ate and drink. So once again we were served sticky rice and a bowl of chicken bits. We then took a few pictures with them and went on our way. As we were leaving the village we had our windows down and little kids were waving and chasing after the truck. It was a fantastic experience.

We stopped at one last school which will most likely not need our support. Then, we said bye to our guides from the Ministry of Education and started to drive west. In order to cut down on the trip back to Chiang Mai the next day, we decided to start driving that direction and stay somewhere along the way. We quickly found ourselves on a terrible road and deep in the mountains. The farther we went, the worse the road was and the more it balanced precariously on the edge of the mountain. As the sun set we drove on and passed endless small villages built right on the road with views out the back of gorgeous mountain landscapes. After three hours of driving, we had only gone 90 km's. We had planned on getting farther but decided to call it a day and stay in the provincial town of Udon Xay. It was another long but very interesting day.

**Highlights:**

- The smiles and looks of surprise on the faces of the little kids as we left the very remote village.
- Although somewhat painful and a little scary, the drive through the mountains was absolutely gorgeous and I was struck at the views the villagers would be waking up to each day.

**Lowlight:**

- Just a sore back from getting bounced around in the truck dodging potholes!

**Est. Driving Time:**

11 hrs.

**Schools Visited:**

4

**Pictures:**

![Image 1](image1.jpg)

![Image 2](image2.jpg)
Day #5 – 11/04/2014

**Goal of the Day:** Travel from Northern Laos back to Chiang Mai with a quick stop at the Chinese border

**Summary:** After a wonderful night sleep at a great guesthouse, we again woke up early to get on the road. We knew that the day was dedicated to simply getting back to Chiang Mai so we decided to get a few hours under us before we stopped for breakfast. Again, we crossed through many small villages and communities full of people working early in the morning. Around mid-morning we stopped at a small market and enjoyed some hearty soup and bought some fresh fruit.

We decided to make a short detour and visit the Chinese border. I had never been this close to China and Tai and Koy wanted to see how the border had changed over the years. So, we took a road about 30 km to the north and made our way to the border. We went through a checkpoint and then drove to a town that Tai had said use to be full of Casinos and hotels. Instead, it was a complete ghost town. All the buildings were boarded up and looked like they crumbling. The hotels were empty and there wasn’t person in sight. It was all very strange. After driving around for a bit, we decided to head back to the main road.

After a few hours we made it to the Thai border and easily got through customs and immigration. Big thanks go to Koy who handled all the paperwork all week. Once through, we crossed the Mekong River one last time and were back in Thailand. We spent the afternoon driving through Chiang Rai province. It actually ended up being the Friday before the famous Songkran festival, so little kids were already on the street throwing water at passing cars. It got us all excited for the celebrations in the day that would follow.
We made it back to the office in Chiang Mai around 8:30 pm, unloaded the truck, and said our goodbyes.

**Highlights:**
- The ghost town just before the Chinese border was so incredibly strange that it made the trip to the border worth it.
- Getting home just before a big rain storm hit Chiang Mai!

**Lowlight:**
- What an amazing trip, but I may try and take some time off from being in a car for a while.

**Est. Driving Time:** 13 hrs.

**Schools visited:** 0

**Pictures:**

*Left to right: The border crossing from Laos to China; the strange Chinese ghost town at the border; leaving Laos*

**Key Takeaways:**

One of my main takeaways from the survey trip was how difficult of a job the Basic Education team really has. They spend endless hours traveling on difficult roads and through incredibly remote locations. They work long hours, getting up early and staying up late. Most difficultly, they are burdened with contributing their opinion to the prioritization of the schools that receive support. The management team of Child’s Dream relies heavily on the BE team to provide information, and their opinions on which schools should be proposed and funded. Prioritizing the schools, considering they probably all need some help, is a very difficult job. In spite of these challenges, I only experienced positivity and passion from Koy and Tai, which I greatly respected.

I was, and still am, deeply affected by the living conditions and poverty level of northern Laos. By visiting the villages and meeting the people we did, I was provided the opportunity to experience how the people live and how poverty impacts their lives. For the most part, despite the hardship, I was pleasantly surprised by what I found. First of all, the people are incredibly happy. I was consistently greeted with a smile and a hello. Also, they were unbelievably generous with their food, drink, and time. No matter where we went or what the living condition was, the people, and especially the children, were a bright spot.

Furthermore, the experience really made me value the efforts of Child's Dream and validated the ‘Child's Dream Process’. I more thoroughly understand the hard work it takes to implement a project and the impact the projects actually have. By making personal connections and building a community network, the Basic Education team is capable of making significant improvements for individuals and communities.

Lastly, this trip once again affirmed how fortunate I, and my friends and family really are. It is unfortunate that it takes an experience like this to be reminded of this fact, but it is important nonetheless.
An Experience I Will Never Forget...

The opportunity to participate and contribute to the Luang Prabang survey trip was an exceptional experience and something I will never forget. It brought into context all the work I have done as a volunteer and validated the reasons why I came to Child’s Dream in the first place. I now have an even deeper respect for the work the Basic Education team does and for the goals and values of the organization. I will look back on the trip with a measured fondness; part of me appreciative for the chance to witness the significant need of the people I met, but also further determined to help and support those who can make an impact.