Laos Project Trip Report 12- 20 September 2016

After seven months of volunteering with Child’s Dream, I had the opportunity to join Daniel and Sak on a trip to Laos. The planning looked rather ambitious: 9 school opening ceremonies in 8 days, covering a distance of nearly 5,000 km. We left Chiang Mai early on Monday September 12th and arrived at the Laos border around noon. After all the necessary paperwork, we crossed the border and entered the northern province of Bokeo. From there on we drove half an hour, crossed the Mekong on a small ferry, and drove southwards towards Xaignabouli province. The dirt road was quite challenging, given it had been raining a lot and we were in mountainous area. It was a good opportunity to witness the off-road capabilities of our SUV and our driver, and both passed with flying colours!

In the evening we arrived at Pang Hai Secondary school, an exemplary school which we have supported with several projects. We checked up on a recently completed school building, had dinner and then drove to a guesthouse nearby. The following day we had a short drive to Had Ngam Lower Secondary school for our first opening ceremony. I had seen some photos from these ceremonies before, but I had no idea how interesting they would be.

Every school opening on our trip would roughly follow the same ‘template’: first there is the official opening, with speeches from a varying array of government officials, the principal and Daniel. Then we would be invited to the Buddhist blessing ceremony, which for me was the most interesting part. After the official part, the blessing ceremony was much more informal.

After the blessing ceremony it was time for festivities with a lot of food, drinks and dancing.

At Had Ngam we had a session of jeu de boules, the French game that was introduced during the French colonial occupation. This game is very popular in Laos and we were no match for the seasoned players of Had Ngam.
The next day we drove to Ekkaphap and Na Tan Secondary School, where we had similar celebrations. Then we were headed to the central province of Savannakhet. We took a detour through Thailand because some parts of the road to Savannakhet were flooded. When we arrived in Savannakhet, we met up with Koy and Gee, who were touring Laos for the new batch of scholarship students.

Savannakhet is one of the biggest cities of Laos, but like the rest of the country it’s very laidback and there is not all that much to see or do. It made the same sleepy impression on me as Vientiane did when I visited the capital earlier this year as a tourist. The cities in Laos have a similar vibe to the remote areas: time appears to be ticking a little slower. There is little to no frantic traffic nor the buzzing energy that most cities have. In Thailand, the rhythm of rural life and the cadence of urban areas are very different. The flow of rural Laos on the other hand seems to have seeped into the cities’ foundations.

Progression in Laos might not be as tangible as in neighbouring countries, but of course things do change: since the start of Child’s Dream in 2003 for example, a lot more children have access to basic education. More and more Laotians are able to afford a basic smartphone, allowing them to ‘escape’ their small community circle and connect with the rest of the world. Education and connectivity are just two examples that will have a huge long term impact on the Laotian people, they are just more difficult to detect for a glorified tourist such as myself.

The day after we arrived in Savannakhet, we drove to Na Thom Lower Secondary School. We were already behind schedule, thanks to long administrative procedures to open a local bank account for the project teams to use. To make things worse, we hit one bump too many on our way to Na Thom and severed a cable for the braking fluid. With barely working brakes, we arrived in a small community near Na Thom. From there on, we walked, took a canoe to cross the local river, and then hitched a ride on a local tractor through the rice fields. We arrived and quickly conducted the school ceremonies, where after Daniel raced
to the other school on our schedule, Baan Vieng Lower Secondary School. Sak and I stayed behind to talk to the local community.

They were very friendly, and had gotten quite drunk when waiting for us. A lot of them had questions for me, which were translated by the English teacher. It was one of these times when something you know already still catches you by surprise. I knew the communities we visited were poor, and a lot of people had never left their district or province. But then again, my own grandparents in Belgium had never visited the beach before they turned 70, and it was only a two hour train ride or drive. Still, when they asked me which countries I had visited and they looked completely baffled when I started naming all of them, I realised again how much I take these kind of luxuries for granted.
When we returned from Na Thom, we drove to the nearest car repair shop, got our brakes fixed, and met with Daniel. The next day we drove to Laosuliya Secondary School, which I liked a lot. It is a large school that’s very well maintained, and the community seemed very invested in the school. A lot of people in this community were migrant workers in Thailand, who sent money back home to their families. With some of this money, the community had built a school building. It was very impressive to know that so many people, earning money in a country where they work illegally and are often exploited, not only recognize the value of a good education but are also able to cooperate and save a serious amount of money to build a school building.

While the ceremony at Laosuliya was in full swing, Sak drove our car to the nearest garage, as our brakes had been failing again on our way to the school. Since these repairs are done by handy locals in their shops using only the materials at hand, the fixes were temporary and our brakes would fail us again later when we arrived in Champasak for the last school opening.

After Laosuliya we headed to Dong Khan Khoo Lower Secondary School for the second ceremony of the day. The official part of the ceremony at this school took a long time, students had prepared several dances and officials gave long speeches. It was very hot and I was amazed yet again how it was possible for the students to keep their uniforms so clean. They all wear white shirts in an environment that is either dusty during the dry season or muddy during the rainy season. Yet somehow students always wear impeccable white shirts. At the same time my trousers looked like I had been jumping in muddy puddles.
After eating at Dong Khan Khoo I went outside for a cigarette break and sat on a chair in the middle of the playground. While I was smoking, I started to think about the job I had one year earlier. It had been a boring, uninspiring job which I disliked a lot. Everyday my colleagues and I would complain about everything, from the weather to politics to the way the office was run. I was completely fed up with that job at the time, and had made plans to travel through South-East Asia for a while. Here I was one year later, somewhere in a distant community in communist Laos, sitting in the sun on a dusty playground with loud Laotian party music blasting from the sound system. It felt a little absurd and extremely gratifying at the same time.

After the festivities at Dong Khan Khoo we drove back to Savannakhet to attend the ceremony at Baan Phin Lower Secondary School the next day. At the previous ceremonies students attended but we mainly interacted with officials and community members. We were delighted when one of the teachers at Baan Phin asked us if we could meet with the students at the school. After the Buddhist blessing ceremony, we went to the different classrooms where we met students and they tied white ribbons around our wrists. I was a little embarrassed though when it turned out some of the students had attached small amounts of money to the ribbons.
After meeting the students it was time yet again for some good food, drinks and the inevitable dancing. The local DJ had set up his synthesizer and a huge sound system, and he was conducting the party like an oriental Jean-Michel Jarre. I quite enjoy the Laotian music since I am a fan of Molam, the music from the eastern Thai Isaan province, which has a lot of similarities with Laotian music. Back in Thailand, Thai people had made fun of me when I played molam songs, joking only old people and Isaan taxi drivers listen to this kind of music. At least here, I was still considered hip.

Afterwards, we drove all the way down south to Champasak, where we had our final ceremony at Ka Touat Primary School. This area is located on a plateau, making it a lot cooler than most parts of the
country. The climate is perfect for growing coffee, which is what most farmers do here. Ka Touat was a charming little primary school, and when we arrived early, I had time to hang out with the students. When you visit secondary schools, students are very friendly but extremely shy. They don’t or barely speak English and you can’t really connect with or talk to them. At Ka Touat, the children were very young and also very shy. But young children do relax around you after a while, especially if you are prepared to act a bit like a fool. It was very endearing to see all these smiling faces and I had a lot of fun at this school acting silly.

After the ceremony at Ka Touat it was time to return home, one and a half day later we were back in Chiang Mai. After this trip I have gotten even more respect for the project teams. They have a lot of different responsibilities, work long days in difficult circumstances and being on the road so often can be physically and mentally draining, especially if you have a family or partner. For me personally, I’m very pleased I could participate in one of these project trips. It gave me the opportunity to get to know Laos in a much more profound way. You go to remote places you would otherwise never visit, and you get to experience the food, culture and people much more intimately. I would do it again in a heartbeat!