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## WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE EDUCATION ... CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS LEADING THE WAY IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

For every child  
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**“The state emphasizes the expansion of education in conjunction with building a new generation of good citizens. Education, cultural and scientific activities are the means to raise the level of knowledge, patriotism, love of the people’s democracy, the spirit of solidarity between ethnic groups and the spirit of independence.”**

Article 19 of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic Constitution

## Introduction

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic is a landlocked nation in Southeast Asia bordered by China, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar. A ‘Least Developed Country’ (LDC), the Lao PDR is at the crossroads of a dynamic and fast developing region.

In light of this accelerated development, the Government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic has recognized that a sustainable growth strategy requires exiting LDC status, thereby eradicating poverty in a sustainable manner. Adhering to this conviction, the Government presented at the 7th Roundtable Meeting in November 2000 its medium-term strategic approach: “Fighting Poverty through Human Resource Development, Rural Development and People’s Participation.” This strategy was further developed into the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NPAP) and adopted as a resolution by the National Assembly as a government mandate in October 2003.<sup>1</sup> This has been renamed the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) and is the Lao version of the PRSP.

The future of every country is in the development of its children, and in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, where more than half of the five million citizens are under 18 years of age, efforts to support and build the capacity of young people and to encourage their leadership are essential to attainment of the sustainable national growth target. In a country where nearly two-thirds of all people do not have access to clean drinking water or adequate sanitation facilities, and diarrhoeal disease continues to be the second biggest killer of children, the impact of youth advocacy and outreach to promote safe water, sanitation and hygiene messaging can make significant impact on the overall health and capacity of a growing nation.

This case study is designed to highlight participatory activities and interventions that were undertaken by UNICEF Lao PDR in partnership with Lao People’s Democratic Republic government counterparts and young people. The interventions were part of implementation of the revised Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Strategy that emphasizes participation of communities and spells out clear roles and accountabilities from national to community level. Children and adolescents have been engaged for more than one year [2003-2005] in the planning and implementation of wide array of participatory activities focused on safe water, sanitation and hygiene education and outreach. Activities include: district-wide radio and television production and broadcasting, rural community theatre, and school-based advocacy.

Aligned with a national mandate toward “human resource development, rural development and people’s participation” programmes that support the participation of children and adolescents in advocacy, media outreach and rural community development are both timely and meaningful. As a goal of development in itself, youth participation is inherently linked to the individual and collective capabilities, opportunities and access to information which help to construct an empowered society that is able to develop itself and is less dependent on outside assistance.



*“Most diarrhoea deaths – 88 per cent – are attributed to lack of water for hygiene, unsafe water supplies, and poor access to sanitary means for excreta disposal.”*

World Health Organization, 2004



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<sup>1</sup> Lao People’s Democratic Republic, National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES), 2004, preface, page 1

*“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”*

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12

## Conclusion: The way forward

UNICEF and government partners recognize that youth participation in water, sanitation and hygiene education in public advocacy and media promotion can not only strengthen the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the children who are involved in the programme, but also provide valuable outreach and support toward sustainable and healthy behaviour change of families and communities at large.

There are 142 districts in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 47 of which have been targeted for assistance as the ‘poorest districts’. Current programme activity is limited to 14 districts that are scattered throughout the country. The need to scale up existing initiatives as well as to expand outreach into additional intersectoral collaboration is great. Opportunities to integrate the promotion of safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices into existing UNICEF supported programmes are abundant. For example, an existing child-to-child outreach programme with children who work and live on the streets in Vientiane offers an opportunity for youth facilitators to use materials in the Blue Box hygiene promotion bag. An HIV/AIDS programme in cooperation with Buddhist monks, could equally benefit from the integration of water, sanitation and hygiene messaging, given the fact that unhygienic environments result in chronic diarrhoea, which is a leading cause of death amongst people living with HIV/AIDS.

Funding is a main challenge for youth advocacy, as it is costly to initiate and sustain a media campaign or national water, sanitation and hygiene programme. Closely related to the need for funding is the urgent call for concentrated action research, as the results of youth participation in the sector to date are largely anecdotal. Quantifiable evidence-based data of programme effectiveness in this sector would optimize funding opportunities for scale up

*“Even communities that believe in community participation commonly underestimate the competence of children. When I ask village or neighbourhood leaders about children’s participation, I am commonly left with blankness even when their own photographs of building a new well or drainage system show me that their children were centrally involved in carrying out the project. They have simply taken this involvement for granted and not found ways to build upon it.”*

Roger Hart

practices related to water, sanitation and hygiene, in the context of the overall health statistics of a community (facilitated by schoolchildren), can be synchronized with Government and UNICEF plans for provision of water and sanitation facilities. (While the programme has implemented KAP studies in communities, these did not involve school children). A target community programme would include outreach to individual homes and schools, combined with youth-led advocacy outreach, and ‘post-test’ evaluation after a defined period of time. Quantifiable impact of these activities on behaviour change and public health, combined with a look at the overall sustainability of voluntary participation is necessary. This effort would not only serve to strengthen efforts to expand youth participation in the Lao PDR, but shed a guiding light to other countries who are new to the participatory approach.



## Issue: What is participation?

### Children and adolescents as agents of change.

In the context of this case study, participation is understood in a programmatic sense, involving young people as active participants in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable community-based initiatives. It is, therefore, both a process and an end. As a process, it requires inputs, (safe water, sanitation and hygiene messages) and demonstrates certain outputs, effects and long-term impacts (sustained behaviour change and healthy citizens). As a developmental goal, and as an ‘end’ unto itself, it builds a feeling of ownership, greater understanding of programme goals and a greater commitment among young participants.



Baseline factors of a youth participation project include: capacity building, interaction between adults and children, integration between organizations, and the stage of the project cycle when the children were involved as indicators of

*“In Lao PDR, youth need ...*

- ♦ *A supportive environment to create participation.*
- ♦ *To have correct information and good understanding of the problem.*
- ♦ *To build youth capacity in order to increase skills and confidence.”*

Malayvanh Lao, age 19 and Komin Sidavong, age 16  
UNICEF-IRC Roundtable Meeting on Water, Sanitation  
and Hygiene Education for Schools, Oxford, UK  
24-26 January 2005

the quality of participation.<sup>2</sup> Based upon these factors, it is clear that the quality of participation in the Lao PDR, is quite high, as the children and young people were involved at early stages of programme design, many were engaged in a five-day, interactive and content-rich training programme, and the level of collaboration and cooperation between UNICEF professionals and Government partners is very strong.

Other factors, such as cultural practices, demand on the child’s time and perceived lack of youth capacity were considered and addressed on an ongoing basis. Certain negative effects of participation like creating a group of ‘superstars’, who represent the views of their generation at every event have been considered by the project coordinators, who encourage renewed programme enrolment, in an effort to maximize sustainability of the programme as well as to ensure the inclusion of as many children as possible.

UNICEF and others are keen to understand and document how these programmes were initiated, what actions are involved at each level of development, and how they can be improved and scaled up. Among other factors as referenced above, successful youth participation offers a unique and important opportunity for the voices of youth to be heard by way of intergenerational dialogue, both at a grassroots community level and at key international events where stakeholders and officials at high policy levels become accessible for communication and interaction with children.

## Action: Youth participation in WES programme in Lao PDR



All youth participation programmes in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic rely on child-friendly lifeskills techniques and entertaining extra-curricular activities to support water, sanitation and hygiene education. The “**Learning with Joy**” kit or “**Blue Box**” was designed for participatory learning both in and outside of the classroom using games and stories. The messages are focused on handwashing, personal hygiene, environmental sanitation, water and latrine use for better health. The project uses child-to-child and child-to-adult approaches in teaching, and the messages learnt are spread by children to homes, villages and district-wide by way of radio and television broadcast.

<sup>2</sup> Trasi, R./JunctionSociale, *Measuring Adolescent Participation in Bangladesh*, August 2003, page 71.

**“Participation is a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions. Participants interact in ways that respect each other’s dignity, with the intention of achieving a shared goal. In the process the child experiences itself as playing a useful role in the community.”**

‘Children’s participation in community settings symposium’ – Oslo, Norway, 2000

### Phonghong primary school, Vientiane Province

Director Mrs. Phoutone Chanthavong is responsible for 9 schools. (On-site: 303 students/138 girls, grades 1-5. Multi-grade classrooms, 10 teachers).

UNICEF supported training and programme support at Phonghong School from 1998-2000. As a result, this school has a water filtration system, eight latrines, and 3 blue boxes. The school partnership between teachers, parents and students has successfully maintained the facilities and programme since 2000. Participatory blue box materials are integrated into daily curriculum, where children engage in a daily routine of brushing their teeth in circle (so each one can see the others brushing), handwashing, and playing hygiene games. The toothbrushing programme was initiated by a one year gift of free toothbrushes and toothpaste from Unilever and adopted in subsequent years by the PTA.



**Lessons learned:** Phonghong school offers evidence as to the sustainability of a participatory approach after an initial period of training and provision of facilities has concluded.

### Sikottabong high school

This unique initiative is directly attributable to outcomes from two key international youth participation events in the sector, attended by Lao youth delegates. The Children’s World Water Forum (CWWF) in Kyoto, Japan, March 2003 and UNICEF-IRC Roundtable on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Schools, Oxford, UK, January 2005.

*“The ‘3 cleans’ principle of the Health Information, Education and Communication (IEC):*

- boiled drinking water,
- cooked food,
- handwashing before eating and after using the latrine;

*is a major element of preventive health care.”*

Lao PDR, NGPES, 2004, p. 84

CWWF delegate, Malayvanh Lao, returned home from Japan and formed the school “Water and Environment, WET team.” The WET team members are a self-motivated group of students engaged in cleaning and maintaining school grounds and latrines. The Sikottabong High School programme functions under the auspices of site-based school administrators and other programme innovations include creation and display of original artwork, origami and clothing fashion style made from recycled waste.

Oxford Roundtable delegate, Komin Sidavong, has returned home with a commitment to lead WET team expansion into a second Vientiane High School, forming a core group and initiating a substantial clean-up effort.

**Lessons learned:** Young people’s commitments from large international events can make impact at a grassroots level with positive administrative support. Site-based programme management allows for a bit more flexibility and creativity than centrally driven programmes of similar nature, due largely to logistical issues relating to lengthy governmental process for new initiatives.

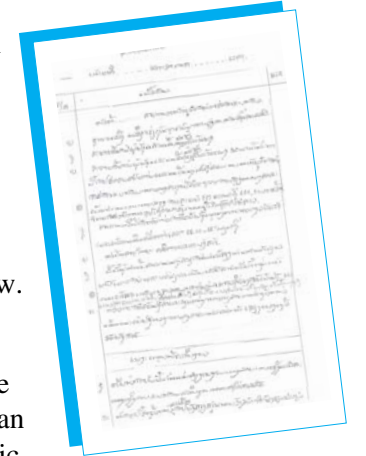
### Lao Youth Radio: young radio presenters

Lao youth radio is an intersectoral initiative within UNICEF between the Advocacy and Communication (A & C) Section and Water, Environment and Sanitation (WES) Section. The programme works in partnership with Lao National Radio, PADETC (a non-governmental Lao training center); the Central NamSaot (Center for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation) and Children’s Cultural Center.



Young people from two provinces, Savannakhet and Saravan, were engaged in a five-day training session to learn media skills in radio production. In addition to technical and interview techniques, training included content materials from the Blue Box, with each young radio presenter equipped with a ‘hygiene promotion bag’, that includes some of the contents of the Blue Box, such as the ‘health board game’, cartoon stories and booklets for use in community outreach activities.

### Young radio producer’s script Savannakhet province



After a period of preparation, young people and mentors visited a rural village to interview villagers on selected water and hygiene related topics. After the interviews, small gender and age balanced groups of 5, were formed to write the script and prepare for the weekly radio show.

At Sokvang village in Savannakhet province young radio producers outreach activities on water, hygiene and sanitation include interviews with children and adults, as well as theatre presentations and concerts featuring cultural song, dance, comedy and drama. The more than 100 talented young people who are trained and mentored as radio presenters are enthusiastic, bright and infectious in their commitment to good hygiene practices and clean water, making positive impact on the lives of thousands of rural villagers who are supported, not only by great entertainment, but by the effective delivery of critically important messaging.

**Lessons learned:** The support of caring and committed adults has ensured the success of this programme. When asked about lessons learned, organizing radio professionals shared that as this was the first programme of its kind in Lao PDR, and because of the high-level government support, they had a huge fear of failure and lost many nights sleep in concern over issues including capacity of the children, and very old radio equipment that is prone to failure at times. However, their fears never came to pass as the children far exceeded all expectations and the biggest concern today is scaling up and finding resources to select and train additional children. Generally, radio programme success is measured through contest participation by audience members and this standard of measurement has not yet been implemented for youth radio, but organizers were quick to note that fans are beginning to gather at the station to meet the children on their broadcast day.



### Young pioneers of the Lao Youth Union

Ten young pioneers (students from grades 4 and 5) are trained from each of 14 participating districts. Each young pioneer is given a ‘hygiene promotion bag’ for use in community outreach activity. With support of UNICEF volunteers from the Young Pioneers groups are formed to perform mini-concerts and drama competitions. Young pioneers spend their Saturdays together in preparation for outreach activities. The participants themselves as well as the communities at large are benefiting from sanitation and hygiene messages which includes the ‘3 cleans’ of the government IEC programme.

**Lessons learned:** Similar to the young radio producers, the children involved in young pioneers outreach are enthusiastic and engaging in their hygiene advocacy work. In remote rural communities, under often difficult circumstances, these young people are affecting change. An additional ‘hands-on’ component of handwashing with soap would add value in support of message effectiveness.

