

COUNTRY REPORT

Lao PDR: Promoting Digital Transformation for Teaching and Life Long Learning Sustainability in Education

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Promoting Digital Transformation for Teaching and Lifelong Learning Sustainability in Education

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I. Country Overview

Lao People's Democratic Republic covers an area of 236,800 km² in the center of the Southeast Asian peninsula. It is a land locked country bordering China and Myanmar in the north, Viet Nam in the east, Thailand in the west and with Cambodia in the south. A large part of the country is mountainous. Mountains and plateaus cover approximately 80% of the country. The Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse country, and the livelihoods of most ethnic minorities have deep roots in the natural environment. The population at over 7.69 million (2024) comprises four main ethno-linguistic groups (Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Chine-Tibet, and Hmong-lu Mien) and 49 officially recognized ethnicities. The Lao-Tai is the largest ethnic group, which accounts for around 67 percent of the population. Many of the minority ethnicities live in rural, physically isolated areas. The demographic breadth and geographic challenges are important factors to take into account for the expansion and delivery of quality education services.

The Lao society and its education system have been impacted by a heritage of indigenous culture, colonialism, the socialist revolution, the market economy and privatization, and more recently, globalization. Since the introduction of a market economy in the early 1990s, the national education system has gradually improved in terms of quality and quantity. The current education system has developed through a hybrid approach, which has drawn together the best aspects from the education system of the colonial era with those of the semi-royalist era, together with the emphases of the revolutionary era. The recent system has also introduced ideas pertaining to “new education,” drawing on lessons learned from historical perspectives and experiences in other countries, as well as influences from global pressure and conditions.

The education system in Lao PDR is structured into four main parts: early childhood education, general education, technical and vocational education, and higher education. In addition to child care for the earliest years, there is kindergarten for children ages three to five. General education begins at age six with entry to primary school, which covers grades 1 to 5. This is followed by lower secondary and upper secondary school. In parallel to upper secondary, Lao PDR offers technical and vocational education for those 15 years and older. Graduates from upper secondary and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs are eligible to apply to higher education institutions to continue their education. On the other hand, non-formal education is provided mainly for adults and children who have never attended school. The system provides academic programs for those who have completed upper secondary education. Academic program offers associate degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and Doctoral degree. The Department of Higher (DHE) is responsible for managing coordinating, and monitoring the higher education sector.

Related to the education strategy, Ministry Education and Sports (MOES) Lao PDR has a strategic planning that already written in the document Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021 – 2025 which has four priority policy objectives, such as: 1) Refocus the sectoral priority on primary education to improve content knowledge and pedagogical skills of primary teachers. This will require a significant budget; 2) To expand lower secondary in more affordably, effectively and realistically, but benefits of access to lower secondary will not occur until primary graduates have much improved literacy and numeracy skills; 3) Realign the skills and competencies of MoES staff in order to more effectively meet the current and foreseen needs of the system; and 4) Provide institutional strengthening to the Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS), District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB), clusters and schools to enhance their efficiency, effectiveness and accountability through realigning their mandates, roles and responsibilities; clarifying Job Descriptions and Specifications; establishing systems to allocate human and financial resources according to needs.

II. Promoting Digital Transformation for Teaching

Lao PDR is still at a nascent stage in its progress towards digitalization of the education sector. However, there is evidence of some existing preconditions that support broader efforts to transform the economy and government services through ICT adoption. In turn, these could also benefit the education sector. For example, response to the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a high level of coordination from education stakeholders including line ministries, subnational government divisions, development partners and the private sector. These actions provided an opportunity for greater efficiency in responding to the pandemic through targeted funding for vulnerable students, a focus on teacher development and the establishment of the Khang Panya Lao online platform to support online and blended learning approaches.

Since Covid-19 Pandemic the government rethink and drawn up on framework for distance education developed by the ministry of education and sports as soon available, including the capacity of students to adapt to this new mode of learning because online learning unfamiliar, even teacher lack of experience of teachers limited online resources and inadequate infrastructure and etc.

The 9th Five-year national Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2021-2025) has been developed at a critical and difficult time due to COVID-19, the government policy supported guidelines and tools for e-learning transfer of expertise, strong capacity building, quality insurance and infrastructure to all level to schools, colleges and higher education institutions. The government of Laos have been promoting and developing digital education systems, which is now an important issue and a key priority for the education sector and the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures have made it clear that there is a great need for digitalization in our education system. During the lockdown of schools and education institutions in Laos, we have used various digital platforms to deliver education, Teachers and students have both benefited from the introduction of technology into their classrooms. This is evidenced by their continued interest and efforts in applying digital technologies. Teachers are choosing to use information technology and digital platforms in their teaching where possible; However, the use of such technology in Laos is limited primarily to urban areas, partly because

a Master Plan for Digital Economic Development has not yet been completed, delaying digital transformation within the broader education system.

As a result, investment and the provision of government, private and parental infrastructure and digital equipment for students remains limited, especially in rural and remote areas, digital literacy amongst teachers and students is limited and the existing curriculum is not designed for digital technologies in teaching and learning, resulting in many limitations in the management and assessment of student learning outcomes.

However, to promote the digitalization of education for teachers and students, the Ministry of Education and Sports has initiated joint projects with the private sector, notably telecommunication companies, to provide computers and internet access to information and communications technology centers at the provincial level and to the Educational Science Research Institute to assist in the development of distance learning. In addition, the ministry has partnered with a private satellite company to develop an educational television channel.

In this regard, for higher education has increased satisfactorily both in quantity and quality in teaching-learning, science research, technical services, and national culture conservation which is the mission of higher education, particularly at universities. The Ministry of Education and Sports in particular is investing in building infrastructure at four universities that are under the Ministry of Education and Sports including policies for the public and private sectors, which conduct teaching-learning together to develop higher education in both quantity and quality. At present the government invests more in higher education specifically in construction and rehabilitation for five public universities, including new construction, teaching-learning facilities, science research, and technical services.

At the same time, attention is being paid to improving the quality of teaching and learning in both public and private institutions, particularly in STEM-related courses. Alongside this for aligned to ASEAN standards that improving these human resources are being upgraded with the knowledge, ability and professional skills to bring about the socio-economic development of the nation from time to time. Especially to promote and develop technology related programmes, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) study programs for university students, especially those undertaking natural sciences program so that the number of natural sciences students increase, strengthen Centres of Excellence in both public and private universities, strengthen the quality of lecturers, especially lecturers in natural sciences programs and encourage science research, technology development and innovation as well as Higher education offer opportunities for student mobility, improving internationalization strategy, establish credit transfer regulation, establishment recognition on higher education improved curriculum development guide and cooperation research with other universities in ASEAN and abroad.

Furthermore, Department of Higher Education has E-learning policy design and Decree universities give continuity to education, distance learning options were set up by using a blended learning year 2017. The model of teaching-learning through electronic (online) or through electronic media (offline) consists of 3 models as follows: 1). Blended online learning model in regular classrooms combined with teaching through electronic; 2). Electronic learning model by 100% of the course content in the curriculum; and 3). Study mode through other electronic as appropriate to the course. Alongside MOES has a policy to encourage teachers through electronic to be appropriate to the actual implementation of teaching-learning; which

brings the lessons that develop teaching through electronic to be a technical achievement and for claim the technical position of their own teachers, just like the normal teaching-learning arrangement.

The use of technology to support learning is often seen as a cost-effective way to reach all learners, including those disadvantaged by distance, age, ethnicity and disability. This has prompted the open education movement which is based on the premise that education content can be packaged, automated, personalized and delivered at scale and at low cost. However, there remains concerns about the effective use of technology to access education content, which can be negatively affected by unsuitable, one-size-fits all products.

One of the key interventions by the Government of Lao PDR to support online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was the introduction of the Kang Panya Lao (Wisdom Warehouse, in English) digital platform. The platform can be accessed via the web or an app to allow for offline learning. It was developed with the support of development partners to: 1). Facilitate learning during periods of school closures and as a supplementary learning resource for classroom-based and home learning; 2). Support professional development of teachers, school and system leaders with resources for blended training approaches; and 3). Enhance the digital skills of children, young people, teachers and technical staff

III. Promoting Lifelong Learning Sustainability in Education

Lifelong learning incorporates different forms of learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, with an aim to provide all people, both male and female, with access to learning opportunities throughout their lives, and to create knowledge societies in order to promote sustainable development.

Laos's Decree on Lifelong Learning aims to enable all Lao citizens to access learning opportunities to advance their level of education, knowledge, vocational and professional capabilities; develop sound morals and ethics; and be ready to contribute to national socio-economic development. Moreover, it seeks to ensure that the provision of teaching and learning as well as the assessment, recognition, certification and transfer of learning outcomes acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning is implemented uniformly and to a consistent and high standard.

The decree determines regulations for lifelong learning in three main areas, such as: 1). Teaching/ learning; 2). Assessment, recognition, certification, equivalence and transfer; 3). Quality assurance of lifelong learning programmes.

Meanwhile, measures for lifelong learning shall be implemented in accordance with the following principles: 1). Lifelong learning shall be conducted in line with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's policies, laws, national socio-economic development plans, and national strategies for human resource development; 2). Lifelong learning shall be embedded within a system that includes assessment, recognition, equivalency, accreditation and transfer of learning outcomes between formal, non-formal and informal learning approaches; 3). Lifelong learning shall be flexible, continuable, shall encompass various learning approaches, and be relevant to the contexts in which the learning takes place; 4). Lifelong learning shall be implemented in line with the national education qualification framework and be compatible with

regional and international standards; 4). The implementation of lifelong learning shall involve cooperation and participation of ministries, organizations, local authorities and other relevant sectors; and 5). The implementation of other principles of lifelong learning shall proceed in compliance with the international conventions and treaties to which the Lao PDR is a party.

The Ministry of Education and Sports has been authorized to be the lead agency in the implementation of the lifelong learning policy, working in collaboration and coordination with other relevant ministries, agencies and relevant local authorities to implement lifelong learning through assigned roles and functions. The agencies for management and monitoring comprise:

1). The Ministry of Education and Sports; 2). The Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) in Vientiane Capital; and 3). District, municipal and city education bureaux. In addition, the decree defines the rights and duties of ministries, state ministry-equivalent agencies, and other relevant sectors and local authorities, all of which shall contribute to the implementation of lifelong learning. These 3 components will emphasize on 5 policy objectives: 1). All learners are equipped with the foundation knowledge and skills needed, including adequate safeguards for their health, to either join the labour market or continue to post-basic education; 2). Post-basic education is relevant to the requirement of Lao PDRs' socioeconomic growth in each period, and that can be integrated into and compete with labour forces within ASEAN member countries is provided; 3). Human Asset Index target for exit from LDC status is achieved with reduced disparity; 4). The education sector is planned, financed and monitored to utilize resources effectively; and 5). Lao sport is gradually integrated to regional and international standards.

IV. Conclusion

In Lao PDR, “Promoting Digital Transformation for Teaching and Lifelong Learning Sustainability in Education” will support related to education access, completion, gender parity and education infrastructure and facilities can be monitored through the Effective Education Management Information System (EMIS). While literacy and numeracy can be monitored by the population census, the Lao Labor Force Survey, and the Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS), information on technical and vocational education and training (TVET), as well as on higher education will need to be strengthened and linked to employment outcomes. Meanwhile, actual outcomes and quality of education services would also need to be assessed. Independent surveys need to be standardized to harmonize information, ensuring the monitoring of the SDG indicators.