

PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES TO WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

## School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR

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*Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia. However, it is stepping into a progressive phase of expansion, moving from a land-locked country to a land-linked country, and looking to escape from the least-developed country status by 2020 through a National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). Since, 1997, the Lao Government (through Ministry of Health) is advancing a Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector Strategy involving the pioneering of new institutional solutions. The School Sanitation receives adequate attention by the RWSS Sector Strategy and therefore, the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat) under the Ministry of Health (MoH) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) advancing the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR through its local counter-parts, with support from NGOs and External Support Agencies. However, some recent studies reveal that there are further scopes existing for the School Sanitation Programme to improve. This paper explains the background of the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR and provides a way out on how to further improve the activities in Lao PDR to make the programme more effective and efficient.*

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### Background

The remoteness of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, its ethnic diversity and the aftermath of the war in Indochina have hindered the economic development of the country until the 1990s. Lack of human resources and basic infrastructure were additional challenges for the Lao Government and its external partners. But the government is committed to finding appropriate solutions for sustained growth and prosperity. Lao water supply and sanitation programme in schools is one such initiative.

Under the School Sanitation Programme (defined as improved effective use of latrines and safe water in schools), water supply schemes were provided and latrines built in many schools. The earlier focus was mainly on easily accessible areas, usually along main roads. The reality, however, is that some 80 percent of Lao school children live in rural, remote and often inaccessible areas. Thus in 1994, the Lao Government decided to review its past practices and prepared a Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector Strategy to show a new path towards sustainable development. The National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat), the national agency responsible for rural water supply and sanitation sector, under the Ministry of Health (MoH) took the lead in the preparation of the RWSS Sector Strategy that adequately covers some key principles for School Sanitation Programme of Lao PDR.

### Institutional mechanisms

The School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR mainly consists of following activities:

- Providing support to schools with the installation of water supply systems and sanitation facilities, through community participation;
- Providing materials and manuals for operation and maintenance of the water supply and sanitation facilities;
- Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign;
- Providing training to primary school teachers;
- Coordinating and collaborating with government agencies and ministries, external support agencies, NGOs and Private Sector in the promotion of School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR.

The School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR involves many agencies. Nam Saat Central in collaboration with Ministry of Education (MoE) while oversees the promotion of School Sanitation Programme, many other government departments and agencies are also involved in the school sanitation activities.

The roles and responsibilities of different agencies in School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR can be categorized as follows:

Nam Saat's role:

- Providing support to schools with the installation of water supply systems and sanitation facilities – assist in planning, designing and supervising the implementation of facilities in line with the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy, which promotes effective use, sustainability and impact;

- Producing materials and manuals for operation and maintenance of the water supply and sanitation facilities;
- Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign in collaboration with the Ministry of Education; and
- Providing training to district and provincial Nam Saat staff.

The role of Ministry of Education:

- Setting up and revising the course curriculum on hygiene education and school sanitation for primary school students and teachers;
- Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign in collaboration with the Ministry of Health; and
- Providing training to primary school teachers.

The role of several other organizations:

- The Lao Women’s Union (LWU) works predominantly at the village level supporting the use of water supply and sanitation facilities, coordinating needs assessments with Nam Saat and conducting school hygiene education seminars.
- The Lao Youth Union (LYU) has recently started using ‘The Pioneers’, a Lao youth group, to help disseminate hygiene messages to their communities.
- The Centre for Information and Education on Health (CIEH) produces posters, pamphlets and other hygiene education materials that are used widely by other departments. The CIEH also uses mass media for awareness campaigns. Their mandate covers activities other than hygiene, although hygiene is a big component of their work.
- Rural Development Committee (RDC) plays a catalytic role in School Sanitation Programme at local level (district and provincial levels) to integrate the school sanitation related activities within the overall rural development and infrastructure projects. The representatives from RDC also sometime join the local Nam Saat team during supervision of the school sanitation activities.

In addition to the above, various NGOs and external support agencies, such as, UNICEF, World Bank, Asian

Development Bank and others, also join the initiatives of the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR by providing their technical back-up support and financing. Thus the main challenge is how to coordinate and harmonize all the above support activities to create an efficient and effective School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR.

To achieve effective coordination, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between MOH and MOE, and as an outcome of that a National Steering Committee was established. The Steering Committee is chaired by the Deputy Director of Nam Saat and represented by key line agencies and ministries. The Steering Committee provides overall guidelines to the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR. Therefore, the key responsibility of coordination and collaboration on School Sanitation Programme rests on Nam Saat (Ministry of Health) and Ministry of Education.

### Timeline for School Sanitation Programme

The timeline for the school sanitation programme in Lao PDR is highlighted in Table 1.

Year	Achievement/Activity
1994	First class opened at National Hygiene College to train hygiene workers by Central Namsaat.
1995	Information Training Workshop held for Hygiene Education (Provincial level).
1997	Sector Strategy for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector developed and school sanitation program emphasized. School Sanitation Programme begins in collaboration with Ministry of Education.
1998	Participatory approaches for school sanitation introduced.
1999	School Sanitation tools prepared. Programme for training of teachers in school sanitation begins.
2000	Training of Trainers for school teachers upgraded and continued.
2001	Hygiene Strategy developed with various hygiene options. Establishment of the National Steering Committee for School Sanitation Programme. Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion promulgated (49/PR). IEC materials produced for ‘Cholera Prevention’ and introduced to schools.
2002	Sanitation Study conducted including schools.
2003	National Workshop organized to discuss sanitation, including schools.
2004	Ongoing discussion on how to focus more on school sanitation.

#### Extracts from RWSS Lao PDR Sector Strategy

The work of Nam Saat is becoming increasingly integrated into rural development approaches. Nam Saat has already been drawn into a constructive relationship in some provinces with the Lao Women’s Union and the Rural Development Committees in both clean water supply and hygiene areas. Future efforts will include stronger ties with school and dispensary construction, to build sustainable water and sanitation partnerships that can be further built on during the operation of these community facilities.

November, 1997.

### The participatory learning approach to school sanitation

One of the main challenges of the school sanitation programme is to reach over 8,000 schools (approximately



**Photograph 1.**  
**Children playing with flash cards during lessons**

27,000 teachers) in Lao PDR regarding the importance of hygiene promotion. This is not easy when 20 percent of the population is concentrated in urban areas and the country is multi-cultural with 49 ethnic minorities.

One of the key activities under the school sanitation programme is teacher training. This is actively carried out by the Ministry of Education in close collaboration with the Centre of Environmental Health and Water Supply under the Ministry of Health.

The “Learning with Joy” kit or “Blue Box” has been developed for participatory learning in the classroom using games and stories. The messages are focused on hand washing, personal hygiene, environmental sanitation, water and latrine use for better health. As the project uses child-to-child and child-to-adult approaches in teaching, the messages learnt in the classroom are spread by children. They are first spread to their family, then to the community. This entails that the “learning with joy” teaching messages focuses not only on the pupils but on the community at large!

Since 1996, nearly 4,000 primary school teachers have been trained to use this approach to lead children through “hygiene education games”. The kit is handed over to the school after the teachers have been trained in the proper participatory learning techniques. At present, a total of six hundreds kits have been distributed throughout Lao PDR.

### **Transforming the Blue Box into a health promotion tool kit**

In past years the Blue Box has continuously evolved and will continue to evolve. With the support of UNICEF, from 1996 to 2002, four revisions have already been made. In the early years, the first ‘learning with joy’ box was based on five different types of letter cards games and three sets of full color story cards. With feedbacks and comments from teachers, more materials were gradually added on. This included additional games, cartoon books, textbook and teacher’s guide/activity book.

In 2003, in order to strengthen the framework for the cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Ministry

### **“Learning with Joy” Testimonials from teachers**

#### **Ilay Primary School:**

Ms. Bounnem Nouansalon, age 45, is one of the teachers at Ilay primary school in Nasaythong district of Vientiane municipality. The school is 27 km away from Vientiane – capital city of Lao PDR. Ms. Nouansalon has been teaching at this school for over twenty years. In 2002 she had attended the hygiene education training provided by the master trainers from the Vientiane municipality. She cited the following about the “learning with joy” approach:

“Children learn better when they participate and talk. Colourful and funny pictures in story cards are extremely attractive and lead children to pay attention to the main contents around hygiene.

In the beginning I told the story a number of times. Later on, I asked for a volunteer from the class to help me tell the same story. You should have seen the eager eyes of my pupils! So many hands raised, wanting to do what I had done.

As a result, many of the pupils stood in front of the classroom, holding the cards and telling their classmates the same story but using their own descriptive words. It was just amazing to see how talented and brave pupils are these days”.

#### **Phonehong Primary School:**

Head teacher Mrs. Phouthone Chanthavang says that both her teachers and their pupils love working with the blue box. “The materials fit into the curriculum and we can use them within lesson plans and as “fillers” in between or at the end of classes. If I had one complaint, it would be that we would like another box so that we could use the materials more often”.

Two teachers at Phonehong school, Ms. Souksavanh and Ms. Saysamone, are very impressed by watching one of the experienced staff, Mrs. Aloun, uses it with her grade 4 class. Children are given flash cards each containing a single word and have to arrange themselves into lines so that when they hold up their cards, the correct sentence is displayed.

“Sleep under mosquito nets” reads the first line. “Why?” asks Mrs. Aloun. “Otherwise mosquitos can bite us and give us a fever” shouts nine-year old Manilack.

“Don’t defecate in the bushes”, runs the next sentence. The children are bursting to explain why, and Mrs. Aloun asks an eight-year old boy, Dodo, for the answer. “Because it smells bad and we can get sick”. “How is that?” “Flies land on the faeces and then fly into the house and land on your food”, responds Dodo.

“There were no materials like this when I was at primary school”, says Ms. Savsavanh. “These are good for the teachers, because you are not just telling the children what to do, but you ask them to think about what they are doing. They learn to understand the consequences of their actions”.

of Education on support for school health, an IEC review meeting was held to examine the existing materials developed by the various organizations. The objective of the meeting was to develop an effective participatory tool kit to promote the teaching and learning of health and hygiene in primary



**Photograph 2.**  
**Children discussing a picture story**

school. A consensus was made that the Blue Box was the kind of package the committee had in mind for promoting school health. However, recommendations were made to include more materials, to create a comprehensive educational tool. As a result of the combined efforts of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and UNICEF/WHO, a standard resource was developed to create a child friendly and health promoting environments in schools.

The current Blue Box includes educational materials related to diarrhea, malaria, intestinal parasites, personal and environmental sanitation, etc. The tool kit is being promoted for use among the various partners working in the education sector. By bringing in more partners to promote this participatory learning tool kit, the school sanitation programme aims to expand its reach to cover more schools. In the academic year 2004 -2005, the new Blue Box to promote health and hygiene will start to materialize in primary schools of targeted provinces.

### Some lessons learned

It is acknowledged that school sanitation and hygiene education focuses on the development of life skills, a healthy and safe school environment, and outreach to families and communities. Improving the sanitation and hygiene in schools and the development of life skills is an essential investment both in the short and long term for future generations of school children and their families. Some lessons learned by partners of the school sanitation programme are noted as follow:

- Water facilities should be as close as possible to the school latrines since girls are mostly the ones who carry the water
- Teachers have to set a good example and become a role model to promote good hygiene practices



**Photograph 3.**  
**Girls carrying water for school**

- Schools have to ensure that not only hygiene is properly taught but that hygiene and water use practices are observed every day at school
- Hygiene behavioral changes and practices takes time and requires a long term investment

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