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ABSTRACT

While girls and women in Laos are not the target of strong discriminatory practices, they are at a higher risk of dropping out of school and never attending school. Specific components have been developed within educational policies and strategies to address needs of and concerns for girls and women. Reasons that girls and women lack access to formal and nonformal education are girls' responsibility for domestic chores; in rural villages, parents' concern for daughters' safety if they must walk to a distant school; female dropouts in urban areas who do not see improved job opportunities resulting from education; ethnic groups with a cultural bias against girls acquiring education; ethnic groups in which girls marry at young ages; language barriers; and lack of perception of the relevance of education to girls' and womens' lives. The Ministry of Education has developed the strategy Called Education for All. A number of projects have been designed that address the practical implementation of the Lao government's commitment to improving access to education for girls and women, including Gender Resource and Information Development Project; UNESCO nonformal education projects; and basic education (girls) project. Continuing concerns are lack of suitable jobs, insufficient jobs for girls, and using only the Lao language in education. (Contains 24 references.) (YLB)

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GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION in Laos

I. Introduction

This study, which has been requested by the Education Section, UNESCO/PROAP, is one of five case studies prepared for the Asia-Pacific Region. The Government of the Lao PDR has signed several major international conventions and declarations that commit to focusing on girls' and women's education. The Government has committed itself to improving access to education and to monitoring and evaluating the affects of education on individual lives. This study examines how the Government of the Lao PDR has translated the international declarations into concrete operational national policies. It analyzes the extent to which these policies are being implemented. It discusses the nature of the implementation mechanisms. And it points out what is working and what is not.

The study will focus specifically on issues related to education for girls and women as addressed at three international conferences attended by the Government of the Lao PDR:

- ***World Conference on Education for All*** held in Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990
- ***Sixth Regional Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in Asia and the Pacific*** held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 1993
- ***Fourth World Conference on Women*** held in Beijing, China, September 1995

Background of the Lao People's Democratic Republic

The Lao PDR is a small landlocked country in Southeast Asia. Land area is 236,800 square kilometres and population is estimated to be 4.6 million. The country is divided into 18 provinces, including Vientiane Municipality, which is an administrative prefecture on the same level as a province.

Although the population density of the Lao PDR is low, 19 per square kilometre, only 3.3% of the land area of the Lao PDR is arable. The majority of the land is hilly or mountainous rugged terrain. Thus, population is not distributed equally throughout the country. There is a greater population burden placed on flatter or less hilly land. (UNDP 1996: Chapter 10)

It is estimated that more than 85% of the population of the Lao PDR is agriculturally based, approximately 40%, or 300,000, of whom practice swidden agriculture. Authorities speculate that the current 2.4% population growth rate, if unchanged, will result in the population doubling within the next 30 years. This will create significant stress on available agricultural land.

As part of its objective to preserve the forests in the hilly and mountainous areas, the Government has created the **Medium Term Socio-Economic Development Plan up to the Year 2000**. The primary objective of the plan is reforestation through the cessation of swidden agriculture. As part of the plan, the Government intends to relocate up to 800,000 people, mostly from upland areas to lowland, by the year 2000 (UNDP/UNESCO 1997, Vol I: 14-21.) The Government expects this policy to result in permanent agricultural communities to bring villagers closer to educational and health facilities.

The Plan has created serious problems for the relocated populations. However, it highlights the desperate measures taken by the Government of the Lao PDR in its attempt to unify a country divided by geography and ethnic diversity.

Ethnic Composition of the Population of the Lao PDR

The population of the Lao PDR is distinguished by its ethnic diversity. The Lao, the politically, socially and culturally dominant population, make up only a slight majority in the Lao PDR. According to the 1995 census, the Lao PDR comprises 47 different ethnic minorities. Each group speaks its own language, often only understood by that population. Each language is, in fact, mutually incomprehensible.

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Each group has its own differing social, cultural and religious practices and traditions.

The majority of these ethnic groups live, traditionally, in remote, mountainous regions. Such regions are accessible only in the dry season, many only by small footpaths. Communities are often distanced from one another by hours, or days, of travel time. These communities tend to be the least developed, for they have far less access to health care and education than the lowland groups. Integrating these populations with the lowland people is a highly important objective for the Government of Laos, as its national policy is dedicated to creating a unified nation and to establishing Lao as the national language.

It is important to draw attention to a problem in classification that is frequently encountered in literature and documents on Laos. The Government of the Lao PDR, many international agencies, and NGOs, commonly classify the 47 ethnic groups into three major groupings. The groups are classified on the basis of geography. They include the Lao Loum, the Lao Theung and the Lao Song. The Lao Loum generally refer to lowland Lao people speaking Lao and other Tai related languages. The Lao Theung refer to those people living in the mid-uplands, and the Lao Song to those people living in the highest part of the uplands.

This classification is highly misleading. It obscures the real ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural differences amongst the 47 groups. As revealed by the many studies and documents produced by agencies and NGOs working in Laos, the use of the geographically based classification frequently obstructs the creation of meaningful solutions to many socio-economic problems.

The vast diversity of ethnic groups creates significant obstacles for the Ministry of Education (MOE) whose primary goal is to provide basic education for all citizens of the Lao PDR.

Difficult geographical location, lack of common language, differing social and cultural customs and traditions, are all factors that play an important role in hindering universal education of the ethnic populations. As access to basic education is, in general, difficult, it is particularly difficult for minority girls and women.

II. The Organization of the Educational System of the Lao PDR

The country's educational system is divided into five levels:

- preschool education (crFche and kindergarten),
- primary (5 years)
- lower secondary (3 years),
- upper secondary (3 years), and
- post-secondary (2 to 6 years)

The educational system is organized and administered by the MOE at the national level. It reaches into the countryside through a network of Provincial Education Service (PES) offices and District Education Bureaus (DEB). Integration at the village level is the responsibility of the village heads, school management committees and school principals. In actuality, many villages, especially those in upland areas, do not offer more than two years of primary schooling. Thus, integration at the village level is often limited or nonexistent.

In general, the authority for decision-making about educational policy is concentrated in the hands of the national level ministry. In theory, a clause exists permitting accommodation of curriculum and teaching methods to specific needs of rural situations, for different ethnic groups. However, this flexibility does not exist.

The Reality of the Educational System in the Lao PDR, including Literacy and Enrollment Statistics for Boys, Girls, and Minorities

Let us begin this section by emphasizing that the entire educational system in the Lao PDR is in crisis, and that basic education is needed for ***both*** boys and girls. It should also be pointed out that girls and women in Laos are not the target of strong discriminatory practices. Traditional lowland Lao culture, for example, is not prejudiced against girl children as is, for example, traditional Chinese culture. In addition, the Lao legal system does not discriminate against women. The 1991 Constitution states that *men and women are equal in all aspects, namely in politics, economy, culture and social and family affairs sectors* (Chapter 3, article 22 of 1991 Constitution – as quoted in UNICEF 1992:94 and Rodenburg 1996:10).

Nonetheless, it is true that girls and women are at a higher risk of dropping out of school, and of never attending school. In response to this, within the educational policies and strategies that have been developed over the past eight years, specific components have been developed addressing the needs of, and concerns for, girls and women.

Despite consistant emphasis on education since its formation in 1975, educational system of the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic is very poor. One-third of primary school teachers have not been trained at a teacher training school. Resources, such as schools, books and qualified teachers, remain scarce. Many people, especially ethnic minorities, have had no schooling. Preschool education exists only in a few urban areas. Very few children in rural areas complete more than two years of primary school, and only 2% of the people make it beyond secondary school.

According to information provided by UNICEF (1996:15):

- Less than one-half of the students entering primary school complete the five-year primary programme.
- Over one-half of the ethnic minority girls never attend school, and of the other half, most complete only two grades.
- Over 4,000 remote villages lack access to primary schooling.

Finally, at all levels of education, there is an imbalance between the education received by boys and girls. This gap widens as the level of education rises. For example, while girls make up 43% of primary school enrollment, this figure drops to 37% at the upper secondary level, and to 17% at the university level (UNICEF 1996:16).

Literacy rates for the entire country are disturbingly low. Figures are low for rural areas, lower amongst ethnic minorities, and even lower amongst girls and women from the ethnic minorities. Data from the 1995 government census indicate that as much as 40% of the population of the Lao PDR above the age of 14 is illiterate. If we distinguish literacy figures by gender, we discover that 65% of the males are literate compared to 35% of the females.

When considering boys aged 6 and above, 27.7% have never been to school. Among girls the same age the figure is 47.1%. If we make a distinction between urban and rural children, statistics are even more disturbing. Among urban boys, 9.0% have never attended school, urban females, 18.9%. In rural areas, 31.9% of the boys have never attended school, nor have 53.1% of the girls. These data indicate that serious problems exist in the educational system's ability to reach the countryside, while at the same time highlighting the special vulnerability of girls and women who live in rural regions.

The differences in literacy rates and school attendance between boys and girls, especially those in rural areas, are more a result of household responsibilities than of specific discrimination against girls receiving education. Culturally, girls are expected to do domestic chores. Additionally, older daughters are responsible for taking care of their younger siblings. And while girls and women may be equal under the constitution of the Lao PDR, they are still considered to be more vulnerable than boys and men. Parents worry about the safety of young daughters when they have to walk long distances to attend school.

The MOE has recognized that customs and practices of the ethnic minorities and of the lowland Lao affect whether or not girls receive education. For example, ethnic minority girls in remote villages in the southern plateau region marry and bear children at a young age. Some marry at age thirteen. In minority cultures with patrilineal traditions, such as the Hmong and Yao, women still have strong roles in commercial and economic activities. Hmong and Yao women are major players in rural markets close to their villages. These facts suggest that reasons other than sexual discrimination come into play when considering the problem of minority girls receiving education. As previously suggested, one reason is long distances between villages and schools in rural areas.

In this regard, Mr. Am Phathammavong, Assistant Project Officer, Education, UNICEF, provided an interesting example. In one Hmong village that had been resettled from the uplands to a lowland location, UNICEF discovered that girls were not attending school. When asked why, the parents said that the current school assigned to their village was too far away to send girl children. While they saw no problem in sending boys to the distant school, sending girls that far was another matter. Parents said that if they had a school in their village, then they would send their daughters. The village already had a structure that could serve as a school, but it was in need of repair. Mr. Am requested funding from UNICEF to undertake the necessary repairs.

This request was granted. When Mr. Am returned to the village several months later, the classroom was filled with girls. The lowland location of this school facilitated the task of finding and retaining a teacher. (There is often difficulty in finding and keeping teachers who are willing to work in the remote areas.)

Education of Minorities

The ethnic minorities present special educational problems. The lowland Lao comprise about 50-55% of the population, and 73% of school enrollment. While Hmong, Yao and Akha, for example, account for approximately 18% of the population, but only 4% of primary school enrolment. Among the minorities, girls and women are especially at risk.

According to Jacquelyn Chagnon (1996:10):

Ethnic minority women and girls represent 49.5% of the female population and are clearly the most disadvantaged in Lao society. They perform 70% of the agricultural and household tasks, have little access to labor-saving devices and annually lack rice for about three months. They are the majority of the poorest quintile. Their infant and child mortality rates are some of the highest in the world – one out of every four die before age one, and three out of twenty do not reach five years.

... many have never seen the nearest district town or market. They comprise the largest segment of illiterates (about 70%), non-school attendees and primary school dropouts, usually leaving after grade 1 or 2. Reverse literacy.... is common among women in minority villages, as it is difficult for them to retain a non-mother-tongue they may not hear or see for months. As a result, few ethnic minority women engage in formal or non-formal businesses or are employed in manufacturing or government work.

The project document prepared by Asian Development Bank (ADB) consultants for the upcoming ***Basic Education (Girls')Project*** (Eduplus 1997 Table 32:b) provides detailed gender disaggregated data for literacy rates from specific ethnic groups, data which underscore the educational problems of ethnic populations in remote areas, and especially those of minority girls and women. In order to highlight the differences in literacy rates between ethnic minority females and males, a few of these statistics have been reproduced:

	% of Literate Females	% of Literate Males
Lao	66.12%	86.03%
Khmu	22.71%	60.76%
Hmong	8.10%	45.65%
Ta Oi	20.29%	54.75%
Katu	10.61%	43.02%
Akha	0.74%	7.01%

Reasons Commonly Cited as to why Girls and Women lack Access to Formal and Non-Formal Education

If girls and women are less discriminated against in Laos, then what is causing the differences in literacy rates, even among lowland Lao? Some research on this issue has been conducted by the MOE team assigned to work on the ADB ***Basic Education (Girls) Project***, and by NGOs who are developing educational projects. This research has shown that:

- Girls are responsible for carrying out domestic chores and for watching over younger siblings.
- Rural villages tend to lack primary school facilities and parents are concerned about their daughters' safety if the girls must walk to a distant location.
- Girls in urban areas drop out of school because they do not see improved job opportunities resulting from education.
- Some ethnic groups, especially the patrilineal groups such as the Hmong and the Yao, have a cultural bias against girls acquiring education.
- In many of the ethnic groups, girls marry and children at very young ages, making education difficult.
  (Many villagers suggested that day-care centres be attached to the schools.)
- The Government requires that all formal and non-formal education training be carried out in Lao, a language barrier for ethnic minorities.
- The relevance of literacy, basic education and vocational training to the lives of girls and women is not readily perceived.

In order to formulate successful educational plans that will address the needs of girls and women, it is important to understand the reasons why girls and women, especially those from minority groups, have lower literacy rates and less access to education.

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III. Description of National Educational Policy and Goals of the Lao PDR

Lao PDR Government Policy for General Education

Following the ***1990 World Conference on Education for All*** at Jomtien, which recognized the importance of education in fighting poverty, Laos set itself the target of increasing primary school enrollment from 60% in 1992 to 80% by 2000 (UNDP 1996:13). **This strategy was called a national *Education for All (EFA)* action plan.**

Consequently, the 1991 Constitution made primary education (Grades 1-5) compulsory. However, by 1994, one child out of every four between the ages of 6-10 was still not attending school (UNICEF 1996:15). Recognizing that compulsory primary education was still a distant reality, the Ministry of Education, supported by the World Bank, extended their deadline for compulsory primary education to the year 2000.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education prepared an overview of government policy towards education. The overview was presented at a recent meeting with UN Agencies, NGOs and other international donors. A summary of this policy, which is divided into two parts, long-term objectives and medium-term policy framework to attain these objectives, is presented below:

Long-Term Objectives for Educational Development

- Quality Education for All
  - Improve the quality and efficiency of primary and lower secondary education.
  - Place strong emphasis on improving equity of access to basic educational services.
- Encouragement of Education
  - Develop preschool and private education.
  - Reorganize upper secondary, vocational and higher education in line with the socio-economic needs of the country.
  - Carry out major efforts to overcome illiteracy.
  - ***Provide vocational training for women and girls, minority groups and disadvantaged adults.***
  - Decentralize educational planning and management.
  - Direct resources to quality improvement.
  - Mobilize additional resources for education (demonstrated by gradual increases in revenue available for education and a number of major, loan-funded development projects).

Medium-Term Policy Framework for Basic Education (1995-2000)

The Government is committed to a number of medium-term reforms that aim to accelerate the development of the educational process. The goal is to make sustainable improvements in the quality of primary and lower secondary education through:

- A revision of school curricula, textbooks and instructional materials.
- An increase in enrollment rates and reduction of repetition and drop-out rates.
- Provision of sufficient textbooks and teacher guides for primary and secondary education.
- Strengthening of inservice teacher training and pedagogical support services.
- Improvement of access to education through a large-scale infrastructure improvement programme involving a government/community partnership for the renovation of existing school buildings and the construction of new schools and administrative offices in priority areas.
- ***Expansion of adult literacy and vocational education programmes for disadvantaged groups, including girls, women and minorities.***
- Establishing a National University of Lao PDR, to meet the accelerating demand for skilled personnel at all levels.
- Strengthening educational management and planning at central, provincial and district levels.
- Enhancement of planning capacity, co-ordination, and co-operation within the Ministry of Education and with external agencies providing funding and other assistance to education in the Lao PDR, to be achieved by the creation of a new Department of Planning and Co-operation.

Although both the long-term objectives and the medium-term policy framework summarized above include steps to address the special needs of women,

it is useful to review the recent history of Lao PDR government policy on education, with specific reference to girls and women.

The educational policy in the first ***Five Year Plan (1981-85)*** emphasized building infrastructure and targeted eradication of illiteracy. It did not include specific reference to women. The second ***Five Year Development Plan (1986-1990)*** essentially followed the same policies as the first. However, one exception was made, namely the intent to establish a special training school for women (Fourth Party Congress in 1986).

The ***Prime Minister's Decree 61 of 10 April 1993*** addressed the organization of the Ministry of Education. Although it discussed creation of new departments, there was no mention made of a department specifically in charge of girls' mainstream education.

However, just two months later, in ***Decision 319/ MOE/93 of 23 June 1993***, which reviewed the organization and role of MOE departments, a new Department of Non-Formal Education was created. Its mandate was to address the issue of illiterate women and girl drop-outs.

In the wake of the ***Fourth World Conference on Women*** held in Beijing in September 1995, the government pledged its commitment to improving the status of women. Consequently, the Political Report of the Sixth Party Congress mentions the *promotion of women and under privileged...* within the context of the revised educational strategy (Darouny Ratanavong 1996:31-34).

Nonetheless, as of 1996, this commitment had yet to be translated into concrete operational policy:

> *Women's participation to education has been mentioned in general terms in policy statements, but no actual measures have as yet been applied. There is no defined policy for the promotion of women in schools, although an unofficial trend is to promote women for studies abroad. The policy of promoting women and ethnic minorities as a disadvantaged group was formerly applied, until the policy of quality upgrading. It was judged that promoting women without considering their skills and competence would not ensure their quality. Now, only ethnic minorities are considered as disadvantaged groups and promoted.* (Darouny Ratanavong 1996:34)

Educational Targets for the Year 2000

The overall educational targets for the Lao PDR are expressed in terms of the internationally agreed-upon ***Education for All*** targets. As such they include:

- Primary education for 80% of children
- Primary school completion rate of 60% (up from 30% in 1992), and repeater rates of 30% cut by half
- Lower-secondary school completion rate of 70% (up from 50% in 1992), and repeater rates of 11% cut by half
- 80% literacy amongst adults (age 15-40) from all ethnic backgrounds (up from 64% in 1994)

The literacy goals for adults for the years 2001 - 2005 are:

- 70% literacy for adults above age 15 and,
- 85% literacy for all adults between the ages of 15 and 40.

Specific Goals for Primary Education

The General Education Department of the MOE has set the following basic targets:

- To increase the net enrollment ratio of six-year-old children to 80% by the year 2003, and to 85% by the year 2005, and to gradually reduce the attendance of over-aged children.
- To reduce the drop-out rate and repetition rates, and increase the retention rate from 40% to 80% (reduce repetition to 15% for primary and 6% for lower secondary education).
- To improve pupil performance by upgrading the quality of teaching content, thus enabling students to gain knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of the community.

General Objectives and Policies of Non-Formal Education (1995 - 2000)

The Non-Formal Education Department was reshaped by a Prime Minister's decree in 1993 to do the following:

- Provide basic elementary education for adults aged 15 to 45, including opportunities for people of all ethnic groups and who are illiterate or have relapsed into illiteracy to become literate.

- Formulate vocational training through technical skills development.
- Aim to allow up to 50% of the newly literate to continue their education beyond that of acquiring basic knowledge and vocational skills. This enables individuals to further contribute to the development of their communities.
- Provide general information and knowledge to villagers to improve their daily life.
- Establish satisfactory systems to monitor non-formal education programmes.
- Raise the level and quality of the education of the learners.

The non-formal education programmes established by the government are directed at seven target groups:

1. Children believed to have never attended school.
2. Children who have prematurely dropped out of school.
3. Children who have completed primary school, but do not have access to secondary schooling.
4. The population 15-40 years of age estimated to be illiterate.
5. Civil servants and cadres who have less than a lower secondary school diploma.
6. Ethnic minorities who remain outside the mainstream of education and training due to their geographic and cultural isolation.
7. ***Women, particularly those in rural areas who are insufficiently educated concerning family health and safe motherhood.***
   (Darouny Ratanavong 1996:13)

An interview with Mr. Bounkhong Thoummavong, Deputy Director, Department of Non-Formal Education, MOE, emphasized that women and ethnic minorities were *the* priority group among the target groups listed above. This priority, repeated by other officials in the MOE, was stated as though it were current MOE policy. While this priority is now MOE policy, dating from Decision 319/MOE/93 cited above, this concern for girls and women probably derives from the influence of the international community through projects such as those formulated and implemented by UNESCO, UNICEF and ADB.

Mr. Ounheuane Saphakdy, UNESCO Liaison Officer in Vientiane, noted that when the UNESCO sponsored ***Women's Literacy and Basic Skills' Training Project*** (504/LAO/11) began in 1993, there was no clear, specific policy for girls and women in the MOE. However, in July 1996, after the completion of the project, the Department of Non-Formal Education held a conference. During this conference a policy on women's education was developed. Since this time, the MOE has officially considered the education of women to be a strong priority.

IV. Strategies for Achieving the Targets and Objectives in Formal and Non-formal Education

Listed below are the strategies developed the MOE:

- To place priority on improvements in basic, primary education including infrastructure.
- To focus on the educational development needs of rural areas, including the use of non-formal education.
- ***To prioritize the needs of educationally marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and girls/women.***
- To make efficient use of available resources by: a) improving efficiency in the use of teachers; b) reducing the number of teacher training colleges; c) strengthening vocational, technical and higher education through amalgamation of institutions, reorganising them on an inter-ministerial basis.
- To expand private sector participation in the education sector, including cost-sharing schemes.

Agencies and Institutions who Assist the MOE to Implement Strategies

1) In order to achieve the goals and targets set by the Ministry of Education, the Government of the Lao PDR, together with the two major loan agencies in the region, the *World Bank* and the *Asian Development Bank* (ADB), and various government aid organizations, has proposed five major education projects. All projects address ***Education for All***. Only one of these projects, ***A Basic Education (Girls) Project***, addresses the needs of girls and women and minority women. In sum, the five projects are:

- ***The Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP)***, funded by an ADB loan and the Government of Norway. The project began in 1991 and will be completed this year. It is primarily concerned with reforming the teacher education system and upgrading the quality of teachers, both primary and secondary.

- ***The Education Development Project (EDP)***, funded by an IDA (World Bank) loan and the Governments of Switzerland and Norway. The project began in 1993, and is scheduled to be completed in 1999. It is concerned with the renewal of basic education at the primary and lower secondary levels. Its objectives are to produce a new national curriculum, prepare and distribute new textbooks and build and/or refurbish schools.
- ***The Post Secondary Education Rationalization Project (PSERP)*** is funded by a loan from ADB. It began in late 1995 and will be completed by 2001. The goal is to consolidate and rationalize post-secondary education institutions.
- ***A Basic Education (Girls) Project*** is funded by a loan from the ABD and assistance from the government of Australia through AusAid. The project will build on the ***Education Development Project*** by improving access to rural and ethnic minority children with a special emphasis on increasing the enrollment of girls. The project has created a Girls and Ethnic Minorities Education Unit (GEMEU) within the Ministry of Education which will work to ensure that the interests of girls and minority groups remain a feature of all educational development. This project is described in detail in Section V of the report.
- ***The Private Education Project***, assisted by the ADB. A government decree issued in 1990 allowed the establishment of private schools. The objective of the project is to formalize an operational system for the sector.

2) Implementation of education policy has been further assisted by international NGOs. These include: Save the Children UK, World Education, Ecoles Sans Frontieres, Redd Barna, Church World Services, and CARE.

3) In addition, the UN system, including UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO, all provide additional support to the Ministry of Education for achieving their targets. Specifically, the UN agencies have pledged to provide support for the following:

- **planning/administration capacity-building**: strengthening management capacities for education planning and co-ordination, management and supervision.
- **teacher training**: upgrading technical skills, especially of primary school teachers without formal teaching credentials in rural areas and literacy/adult education teachers.
- **non-formal education**: expanding functional literacy and life skills courses for people of all ages and backgrounds, particularly in rural areas, through community learning centres and distance learning, with a special focus on meeting the educational needs of ethnic minorities and girls/women.

4) ***The Lao Women's Union (LWU)***, founded in 1955, is one of the three ***mass organizations*** of the Lao PDR (the others are the Lao National Front and the Lao Youth Union). As such, the LWU is a political organization whose mandate is to mobilize the masses to support the cause of socio-economic development among all women in Laos. Its role is to heighten women's political awareness and understanding of the Government's policies and directions. Thus, although the LWU does not normally implement policy, it is an important organization for supporting policy on women, and is one of the few organizations able to reach all levels of society from the national to the village level. Consequently, individuals from the LWU play a key role in projects targeting the development of women.

Specific Strategies for Non-Formal Education

According to the Deputy Director of the Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), the MOE began using the stategy of the ***Community Learning Centre (CLC)*** in 1992 to provide literacy training and vocational training to adults.

This approach was a new one for the DNFE, and the Department is currently assessing the experiences of the past six years in order to determine the future of the CLCs. The DNFE met with several NGOs who have assisted the MOE in creating and implementing CLCs, including World Education, ZOA, Church World Services, Ecole Sans Frontieres, and several Japanese NGOs.

The Department is pleased with the strategy of the CLCs and believes that they have been fairly successful. The Department concluded at the end of the meeting that it plans to make a policy for the inclusion of more CLCs in the educational system of the Lao PDR.

Funding for Education

Funding for education in Laos faces severe restraints. The MOE relies heavily upon economic and technical assistance from international aid agencies, the UN system and international NGOs. The amount of funding made available for education is minimal, and the Ministry of Education is expected to find educational funding through assistance from international organizations, foreign governments and World Bank and ADB loans. Government funding for education at the national level, is, in fact, lower than funding at the provincial level because the national level is assumed to have more access to potential funding from the international community. There is no specific educational funding allocated to girls' and women's education from the Government of the Lao PDR, neither on the national nor provincial level.

Nonetheless, overall, the education budget has grown in the past few years, from 8.3% of the total government budget in 1990 to 12.8% in 1995-96 (Eduplus 1997:A19-9). Both the World Bank and the ADB are sufficiently optimistic about the Lao economy that they have provided multi-million dollar loans to the Lao PDR for education projects.

V. Current Projects Which Aim to Improve Access of Girls and Women to Formal and Non-formal Education

In 1993, the ADB stated that *most Government policy-makers acknowledge that women's participation in mainstream development is crucial. Less clear is how this can be achieved* (Rodenburg 1997:12).

Since 1993, and especially since the *Fourth World Conference on Women* in 1995, a number of projects have been formulated which specifically address the question of the practical implementation of the Lao government's commitment to improving access to formal and non-formal education for girls and women.

A. Gender Resource and Information Development Project (GRID)

This project, funded by UNDP and the Government of Norway (NORAD), is linked with the Lao Women's Union. It focuses on gender issues and its objective is to collect and disseminate data regarding women's conditions in three pilot provinces of the Lao PDR. It is hoped that the data base will be used to formulate consistent development policies and planning with regard to gender issues. The centralization of information will be combined with the training of government statistical and planning personnel and teachers, as well as the production of specific curricula and teaching materials (Bonacorsi 1997: 11).

The project, which began in 1997, has already conducted several workshops at the provincial and district level aimed at sensitizing the local authorities to the needs of women.

B. UNESCO Non-Formal Education Projects

UNESCO, together with the Department of Non-Formal Education and the Government of Norway, formulated two interrelated and linked non-formal education projects designed to address the low literacy rates and vocational skills among women, especially minority women. The projects are:

Project 504/LAO/10 This project aiming to provide literacy and basic skills training to minority women was essentially a pilot project for Project 504/LAO/11 described below. It was carried out in Luang Namtha Province, beginning in 1993.

Project 504/LAO/11 ***Women's Literacy and Basic Skills' Training***

This project began officially in 1994 by the Government of the Lao PDR with the support of UNESCO and the Government of Norway (NORAD). It was executed by the Department of Non-Formal Education within the MOE. Technical assistance was provided by Ecoles Sans Frontieres. It continued the work in Luang Namtha Province begun during Project 504/LAO/10.

The project included literacy classes as well as technical skills training to develop women's skills

in income generating activities such as sewing, weaving, poultry keeping, gardening, buying and selling, with the possibility of access to short term credit at the end of the project. It proposed three levels of intervention:

- The creation of *community learning centres* in the villages.
- The promotion of three regional NFE centres aimed at improving curricula and teaching materials, train teachers and supervise NFE projects in the region.
- The training of the DNFE staff at the central level in administrative, planning and co-ordination tasks (Bonacorsi 1997:11)

The main objectives of the project are:

- To integrate all ethnic groups into the social life of the country.
- To improve the well-being of mothers and children.
- To introduce basic elements of market economy to village women.
- To participate in Women in Development (WID) programmes, and to help bridge the literacy gap between men and women.
- To improve the efficiency of the literacy programme and its retention rate.
- To participate in drafting a non-formal education curriculum and system, and to prepare for mass implementation to disadvantaged populations and ethnic minorities.

(Ministry of Education, DNFE, Lao PDR & UNESCO 1998:1)

Initially the project began in one province, Luang Namtha, and was then expanded to include six others: Sayaboury, Luang Prabang, Xiengkhouang,, Vientiane, Champassak and Saravane.

C. Basic Education (Girls) Project

After the ***Fourth World Conference on Women*** in Beijing in 1995, the Government renewed its commitment to overcome a number of socio-economic constraints and to give girls and women opportunities to receive education at all levels through both the formal and non-formal education systems. This project was initiated by the MOE, together with technical assistance from the ADB. Its objective was to address the needs of girls and especially minority girls within the context of primary education. This project is very ambitious, and aims not only to construct 300 new schools, but provide new teaching methods as well as reorganize and strengthen the organizational structure of the MOE. It is the first of the major projects designed during the 1990s to address the need for improved access to formal and non-formal education for girls and women. Full implementation of the project is scheduled to begin in the spring of 1999 and will be completed by 2005.

The strategy for enhancing women's education in the Lao PDR, as stated in the Final Report for the project document (ADB TA No. 2557-Lao:III-3), is first to focus on increasing girls' enrollment in formal primary education and on ensuring the completion of the entire primary cycle of five years. The second priority will be to increase the transition rate for girls from the primary level to the lower secondary level of education. In parallel with this project, non-formal education will be developed as a short-to-medium-term measure to supplement efforts to enroll more girls into formal schooling, as alternative educational opportunities are necessary for those ethnic girls who miss out on formal education opportunities.

The project will be described in greater detail than others mentioned so far because it is ***the*** first project targeting girls and women. It clearly indicates the current direction of Lao government policy towards girls' and women's education, and is intended to serve one of the important mechanisms for implementation of this policy.

Project Formulation

Project formulation was carried out by a team of specialists including:

- ADB Officers, Mr. Brent Dark (Senior Program Officer), Mr. Nurul Huda (Project Specialist) and Ms. Clare Wee (Counsel)
- ADB Senior Education Specialist, Ms. Gudrun Forsberg
- Independent consultants hired by the ADB
- Ministry of Education staff
- Lao Women's Union

The Government of the Lao PDR conducted several workshops during the preparation of this project document. About 50-60 persons attended, including directors of ministries and departments within ministries, the LWU, provincial level bureaus, international agencies and NGOs. During these meetings

the primary objectives were discussed, and a general project design was worked out and agreed upon.

Project Approval

The project was approved by the Department of Planning and Cooperation, MOE, on behalf of the Government of the Lao PDR.

Overall Strategy and Content

Within the overall framework of the Education Policy of the MOE of the Lao PDR, the main objective of this project is to strengthen basic education of improved quality, especially for girls in ethnic minority areas, and, in so doing, to bring more women into the mainstream of socio-economic development.

The short-term project objective is to expand access to improved primary education for children in ethnic minority areas, particularly girls. The project has three specific components:

1. Expansion of access and retention by:
   - phased provision of education facilities in primary education and strengthened capacities at the central and provincial levels to plan, manage and implement school construction programmes, school management and school and community development
   - community participation and targeted assistance to increase the enrollment of children, particularly girls, in primary schools
2. Improvement of the relevance, quality and efficiency of primary education by providing:
   - supplementary materials and adapted curricula
   - inservice support for teachers and school principals in multigrade primary schools and schools in minority areas
   - specialized professional supervision for teachers
   - support for recruitment and training of female minority teachers
3. Strengthening of management systems and capacities of:
   - management support systems at MOE
   - management capacities of MOE, PESs(Provincial Education Services) and DEBs (District Educational Bureaus)

Six provinces have been targeted as the beneficiaries of this project: Phongsaly, Oudomsay, Bourikhamsay, Khammouane, Sekong, and Attapeu.

Responsibility for Implementation

The responsibility for operational management and for day-to-day implementation of activities will rest with the various MOE departments and with the local provincial (PESs) and district level educational offices (DEBs) and the Committees for Community Education Development (CCEDs).

Monitoring Mechanisms

The following mechanisms have been built into the project as a means to monitor and manage it.

- Project reports (all levels)
- Action plans
- GEMEU reports
- Site visits

Creation of the Gender and Ethnic Minorities Education Unit (GEMEU)

The Gender and Ethnic Minorities Education Unit was created in 1996 by the MOE in co-ordination with the ADB as a mechanism to oversee this project. The unit oversees and controls all of the activities of the other departments which are charged with the actual implementation in the field.

The office has three specific tasks:

1. To serve as a secretariat for the working group for the project,
2. To assist in co-ordinating among the technical departments in the MOE,
3. To monitor the project in the field.

The office currently has a staff of six persons, four women and two men. All are lowland Lao. However, two staff from the ethnic minorities will be added. A Hmong women, currently undergoing training in the USA, is scheduled to return shortly. An eighth member has yet to be selected. This individual will be from one of the Austro-Asiatic language groups.

Although MOE staff expect that the GEMEU will be important for the future of girls' and minority education, the unit was only created in November 1996. Its successes and/or failures during the

duration of the ADB project will obviously indicate the strength of the role it will play in the future for co-ordinating and monitoring girls' and women's education policy.

There are certain conditions that must be fulfilled if this unit is to be successful in its role of co-ordinating and monitoring programmes designed to improve the education of girls and ethnic minorities. These include:

- **Adequate and secure staffing.** Staffing is currently guaranteed, and paid for, by the MOE. The MOE has, so far, tried to keep a balance in the unit staff between women and minorities.
- **Definition of a clear role to play after the completion of the ADB project.** As the GEMEU was created specifically to fill a role in the ADB Project, the question remains, what will be its role *after* the completion of the project? Ms. Khanthaly, the head of the GEMEU, is confident that the unit will not only continue to function, but will play a continuing role in co-ordinating educational activities for women and minorities and serve as a research unit on girls and minority education. However, this future role is still very vague, and the unit will need clearer terms of reference to guarantee its future success. Due to the newness of the unit and its present function, a clear mandate for its future is perhaps premature at this time.
- **Access to resources.** In order to function effectively, the GEMEU requires access to resources. Unfortunately, at the moment, the MOE relies heavily upon outside assistance for GEMEU programmes. The MOE, encourages the capacity building of office staff by sending them to workshops and conferences. Ms. Khanthaly, for example, has attended various international women's forums. The MOE, however, rarely has the funds to do this, and is constantly seeking outside assistance. The training in the United States given to the Hmong woman soon to join the staff was paid for by outside funding. As mentioned above, the MOE has severely restricted economic resources and relies heavily upon international assistance. In light of this strategy, the MOE has given the GEMEU relatively free rein to approach potential outside donors for financial assistance.

Financial Resources

- **The Asian Development Bank (ADB)** is assuming responsibility for Components I and III of the project. They have also funded international specialists and consultants to provide technical assistance during the preparation stage and formulation of the project document. In addition, the ADB purchased the computer equipment for the recently created GEMEU. Although some assistance was provided as aid assistance, the majority of the funding is in the form of a loan.
- **The Government of Australia through AusAid** is assuming responsibility for Component II of the project. The Government of Australia, as seen in AusAid guidelines, has a strong and definite policy towards women. It recognizes that effective development is dependent on the full integration of women into all aspects of the development process and supports the Lao Government policy of actively promoting equality for women (AusAid, 1994 Australia-Lao PDR Development Cooperation Program 1994-1997).
- **The Government of Lao PDR** has contributed to the formulation of this project and will continue its economic support and assistance after the project has begun. So far, the Government of the Lao PDR has paid for:
  - Preparatory field research by the GEMEU
  - Workshops to prepare documents
  - Salaries of GEMEU staff

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations for Improving Formal and Non-formal Education and Training for Girls and Women

Overview/Conclusions

The basic educational needs of the Lao PDR are so great that until recently few policies or plans were directed specifically at women. Nonetheless, since the mid-1990s, reference and attention to girls' and women's issues have appeared within the framework of the ***Education for All*** action plan. Thus, targets for enrollment and literacy from 1995 to 2000 and to 2005 are expressed in terms of both males and females. Because of the diverse ethnic composition

of the Lao PDR, special attention is paid in these projects to the ethnic minorities as a disadvantaged group within the population. Consequently, as seen in the recently formulated, soon to be implemented ADB ***Basic Education (Girls) Project***, the special needs of women and girls are linked with the needs of ethnic minorities. This link is reinforced by the creation of the GEMEU office, which addresses the needs of girls and women and minorities.

The success of this unit remains to be seen. Educational policy comes directly from the MOE. Although their officials usually attend policy meetings held at the national level, the provincial and district level bureaus and offices have little to do with actual policy formulation. Implementation of educational policy at the provincial and district levels is dependent upon the individual strength of each province and/or district. Strong and charismatic governors, such as the current governor in Luang Namtha, are reportedly able to implement educational policy effectively.

It is interesting to note that budgets of provincial education bureaus are higher than the budget for the Ministry. The reason given is that the Ministry is expected to rely more heavily upon aid provided by international sources and donors. The Government of the Lao PDR currently relies heavily upon external assistance from international agencies, UN agencies, international NGOs and international consultants.

Overall Concerns

In principle, and in theory, the Government of the Lao PDR has made a strong commitment to improving the accessibility of education to girls and women and eradicating the high rates of illiteracy which are widespread in the rural areas, especially among ethnic minority women. Current statistics, however, reveal that the reality differs greatly from the theory, and that much work remains to be done.

By creating the GEMEU, the Ministry of Education has implemented a mechanism which has the potential to monitor and influence future educational policy towards girls, women and ethnic minorities. The unit is currently a discrete agency directly linked with the ADB ***Basic Education (Girls) Project***. However, after the completion of the project, the unit will be an office based in the Department of Non-Formal Education within the Ministry of Education. As mentioned above, the success of the unit with regard to these monitoring and policy objectives remains to be seen.

During discussions with various officials and NGOs, criticisms and concerns were expressed about the usefulness or applicability of the current kinds of formal and non-formal education. The question was raised not only for rural children and young adults but for urban children and young adults as well. A selection of these concerns is provided below:

- One concern was the lack of suitable jobs for youths after having completed their schooling. Rural people have been quoted as saying: *I sent my son to secondary school or even to university, and now he is farming just like his parents. Why did I spend this money?*
- Another concern solely addressed girls and young women. There are apparently insufficient jobs even for the relatively few girls who complete lower or upper secondary school. Thus, there is a trend (as yet not officially documented) for girls who live in the larger towns and who have better access to and incentives for schooling to drop out of school and take jobs as vendors in the market, or worse, work in the drinks shops and karaoke bars (which means that they were becoming involved with sex work).
- Several people recommended that the Lao Government, together with the agencies and organizations that are providing technical assistance, to be more creative in developing non-formal education training. There were complaints of too much emphasis on weaving and sewing for women. In the UNESCO supported ***Women's Basic Skills and Literacy Project*** in Luang Namtha, for example, weaving was taught to minority women who did not have a tradition of weaving, and hence had no use for it. It was recommended that more in-depth discussions be held with the community women before deciding on what kind of training to provide. Thus ensuring that the training reflects the women's actual needs.
- The Department of NFE recognizes four main problems with the Community Learning Centres:
  - The lack of good co-ordinators and the need to improve human resource capacity.
  - The need to reach out to the villagers in a more effective manner.

- The lack of understanding of non-formal education on the part of the village leaders (This lack underscores the need for more and better community work by co-ordinators.)
- The lack of guidelines for implementing the CLCs.

Finally, the problem of using only the Lao language in education was raised repeatedly during the course of interviews. The Government of the Lao PDR is reluctant to use bilingual teaching during the first two or three years of primary school, or use bilingual teaching in the non-formal training for ethnic minority women. This strategy is clearly counter-productive, and does not work towards advancing the goal of a unified nation speaking a national language.

Recommendations

Since 1990 the Government of the Lao PDR has received substantial assistance from international organizations and governments to improve and upgrade their educational system. Funds have been spent on school construction, training Laotian officials in the Ministry of Education, improving the quality of teaching, redesigning curricula, producing new higher quality textbooks, restructuring teacher education, creating community learning centres, and identifying girls' and women's issues as priority targets.

Yet despite these efforts, many problems still remain. There is a wide gap between theory and practice. Although this case study has focused on national policies and implementation mechanisms for girls' and women's education in the Lao PDR, the reality is that the Laotian educational system does not yet have the capacity to tackle the problems of girls' and women's education.

It is critical that the Government of the Lao PDR manages to put into practice the policies and strategies it has formulated. In order to accomplish this task, it is recommended that more in-depth work be carried out at the community level in order to determine the real needs of the communities and to give provincial departments of education more authority. Provincial level authorities have little real input into MOE policy, and are given little flexibility in adapting national level policy to local conditions.

Having said this, the discrepancy in literacy statistics between boys and girls, combined with the high drop-out rates for girls, argues that policies aimed at improving the educational system must contain components targeting the special needs of girls and women. In order to formulate and implement better programmes, it is recommended that:

- Data and information regarding girls and women continue to be collected and analyzed more professionally. One of the goals of the GRID Project described above is, in fact, to collect such data and make them available in regional centres around the country. It is recommended that support be provided to the efforts of this project and that the resulting data be made available to all policy makers and planners.
- The opinions of girls and women concerning their educational needs be respected, and that authorities respond to these needs. Shamali Guttal, Director of World Education, strongly emphasizes the need for better *action research* on the community level and to combine the practical needs of villagers with education.

Finally, the Government of the Lao PDR is very reluctant to face the reality of the language problem, preferring to place politics over practicality. More than 50% of the Laotian population belong to non-Lao speaking ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the national policy makers rigorously reject a strategy of employing bilingual teaching for the first two years of primary school or for adult literacy classes. Girls and women, and especially minority women, suffer the most from this policy because in their rural and often remote villages, they are the ones most likely not to speak the Lao language. The result of this language policy is continued failure, rather than the success the government policy makers seek. Thus it is strongly recommended that the national level policy makers rethink their policy on language and develop better methodologies for teaching Lao as a second language. In this way, they will be better able to reach their goal of a literate population speaking a unified national language.

APPENDIX I

Abbreviations Used

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CCED	Committee for Community Education Development
CLC	Community Learning Centre
DEB	District of Education
DNFE	Department of Non-Formal Education
EDP	Education Development Project
EQIP	Education Quality Improvement Project
GEMEU	Gender and Ethnic Minority Education Unit
MOE	Ministry of Education
NFE	Non-Formal Education
PES	District Education Bureau
PSERP	Post Secondary Education Rationalization Project
WID	Women in Development

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APPENDIX II

Persons Interviewed

Ministry of Education (MOE)

Department of General Education

Mr. Khamhuong Sacklokham, Acting Director
Ms. Khanthaly Silyphongphanh, Head of Basic Education (Girls) Project Office
(also called GEMEU – Gender and Ethnic Minorities Education Unit)
Mr. Heng Daovannary, Secretary General of UNESCO National Commission

Department of Non-Formal Education

Mr. Bounkhong Thoummavong, Deputy Director
Mr. Jeff Burke, Australian Advisor to Ministry of Education

Lao Women's Union

Ms. Khemphet Pholsena, Vice President

Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID)

(UNDP Project LAO/96/019)
Ms. Patricia DeBoer, Project Development Advisor
Ms. Outhaki Khamphoui, Gender and Development Consultant

UNDP

Mr. David Eizenberg, Assistant Res Rep
Mr. Titta Maja, UNV Gender Specialist

UNESCO, *Vientiane, Lao PDR*

Mr. Ounheuane Saphakdy, Liaison Officer

UNICEF

Mr. Am Pathammavong, Assistant Project Officer, Education
Mr Maurice Apted, Head, Communication/HIV/AIDS Programme
Mr. Thongdeng Silakoune, Assistant Project Officer, HIV/AIDS, Communication & Social Mobilization
Mr. Pricha Petlueng, Radio & Community Mobilization Specialist

World Bank

Ms. Linda Schneider, Chief Liaison Officer

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Save the Children, UK

Ms. Vatthana Manoroth, Pre-School Project Manager

ZOA

Mr. Wessel Huisjes, Program Manager

World Education

Ms. Shamali Guttal, Co-Director

JICA

Ms. Naomi Morikawa, Consultant on Minority Issues

AusAID

Mr. Terri Irvine, Program Officer, Development Cooperation Section

Ecoles Sans Frontieres

Mr. Benoit Heuchenne

APPENDIX III

Documents Consulted for Girls' and Women's Education

Asian Development Bank

1997 Lao PDR – Women's Education Project, a Final Report – 5849
T.A. No. 2557-LAO
Eduplus Management Group Inc.

1998 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Lao People's Republic and the Asian Development Bank Appraisal Mission for the Basic Education (Girls) Project, Vientiane, Lao PDR

AusAid

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1997 Technical Support Study on Women in Development, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Chagnon, Jacquelyn

1996 Women in Development, Lao People's Democratic Republic
Paper prepared for Asian Development Bank, Programs West Division 3 as part of the Lao PDR Country Operational Strategy Paper (COSS).

Chape, Stuart

1996 Biodiversity Conservation, Protected Areas and the Development Imperative in Lao PDR: Forging the Links. IUCN – The World Conservation Union, IUCN Lao PDR, Discussion Paper 1

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Lao Women's Union, Lao People's Democratic Republic and UNDP

Goudineau, Yves

1997 Basic needs for Resettled Communities in the Lao PDR: Resettlements and New Villages Characteristics in Six Provinces. Vol. I Main Report
UNESCO, Paris and UNDP, Vientiane Lao PDR

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1993 Strategies for the Promotion of Basic Education for Women and Girls. Study done for UNDP, Lao PDR, UNESCO, Paris and MOE, Department of Non-Formal Education, Lao PDR

Lao Women's Union

1995 Country Report on Women in the Lao PDR
National Preparation Committee for the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995)

Ministry of Education, Non-Formal Education Department, Lao PDR & UNESCO

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Draft Report on UNESCO Project 504/LAO/11
Vientiane, Lao PDR

1998 Women's Literacy and Basic Skills Training, Project 504/LAO/11
Final Evaluation Report, Vientiane

Ministry of Education and Sport, Department of Literacy and Adult Education, Lao PDR

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Vientiane, Lao PDR

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1996 *Girls' Study Paper.* Commissioned by the World Bank.
Vientiane, Lao PDR

Rodenburg, Hermien

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The World Bank

1993 Staff Appraisal Report, Lao PDR, Education Development Project, March 26
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Document of The World Bank, Population and Human Resources Division, Country Department I, East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

UNICEF

1992 *Children and Women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*
Vientiane, Lao PDR
1996 Children and their Families in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: A Situation Analysis

UNDP

1996 Country Strategy Note: Cooperation between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the United Nations development system until the year 2000.
Vientiane, Lao PDR

Vattanan Manoroth, Pre-school Project Manager, SCF (UK), Lao PDR

n.d. Changing practice in Preschools from Didactic to Active Learning with Low Resources as Experienced in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (probably 1997).

World Education

1995 Daily Work Load, Health and Education: Focus Group Discussions with Women in Four Villages in Salavan and Attapeu
Vientiane, Lao PDR

ZOA

1997 Formal and Non-Formal Education Development for Ethnic Minority Villages. Project Proposal
ZOA: Vientiane, Lao PDR

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