



Education Technical Program National Evaluation Report

in Lao People's Democratic Republic

KEY FINDINGS
& RECOMMENDATIONS

AUGUST 2021

Background

Lao PDR has demonstrated progress in educational outcomes for children¹. The Lao Government aims to provide all learners with the foundation knowledge, skills and behaviour, needed: for personal growth, to contribute positively to their community and broader society, and the wider socio-economic development of the nation.

The midterm review of the Education & Sports Development Sector plan (2016 -2020) in December 2018, highlighted significant achievements but **disparities remain and low learning outcomes at primary level have flow-on effects**. The Government of Laos (GoL) is committed to improving equity, efficiency and quality in the education sector in Lao PDR. This commitment is reflected in the forthcoming Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP 2021-2025) with:

1. Increased number of graduates at all levels with improved learning outcomes with special focus on disadvantaged and gender equity;

2. Increased number of knowledgeable and competent teachers and principals meeting the teaching standards with regular performance assessment;

These two areas of commitment aligned strongly with the outcomes and implementation of World Vision's Unlock Literacy (UL) project model² and the evaluation provides the Government with additional evidence to assist with their planning. World Vision International Lao PDR (WVI-L), through the evaluation report sought, in its broadest sense, to understand the context/lived experience of the most vulnerable children and their educational outcomes.

The report reflects on the time and resources allocated to working with these children in their communities were used in the most efficient and effective way. The findings from the evaluation report will support and inform future educational program design and project opportunities by WVI-L. The education technical program model discussed include Unlocked Literacy (UL) and Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) in Schools. The following primary research questions were used in the evaluation report:

1. What is the current level of reading ability in children in grade 3? (Impact)
2. What is the current situation in regard to literacy activities in the community? (Impact)
3. To what extent has the program/project achieved its goal, objectives and contributed to Child Well-being outcomes? (Effectiveness)
4. What have been the factors that affected program/project implementation (positively or negatively)? (Effectiveness)
5. What has been the impact of networking and advocacy for the improvement of education, services and practice of the community members? (Efficiency)
6. To what extent have Technical Program targets and outcomes been achieved? (Efficiency)
7. To what extent are community members satisfied with the implementation and results of the project? (Relevance)
8. What structures, processes and systems did the programs put in place to ensure sustainability? (Sustainability)
9. To what extent have the TP's addressed equity and equality for MVC, people with disabilities, ethnically diverse populations and women? (Equity).

A total of **586 students in grade 3** from the Unlock Literacy project implemented in Soukhouma district (Champasack province), Nong and Xonnabouly districts (Savannakhet province) were assessed for the purpose of this evaluation.

¹Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS-II), (Lao PDR Statistics Bureau, 2017);

²World Vision's flagship education program *Unlock Literacy* has been implemented since 2018 in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Champasack provinces and is embedded in World Vision Korea's School Up project and MOFA Japan funded iRead project.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Unlock Literacy has successfully achieved the target set for improved reading with comprehension rates for girls and boys in grade 3. **Students who could read showed a 100% increase from 20% at the baseline in 2019 to 40% in 2021**. Improved educational outcomes contributes to improved child wellbeing as children have the opportunity to learn and participate in new experiences, develop friendships and develop a range of skills for lifelong learning.

Unlock Literacy was evaluated as a successful systematic intervention to improve reading comprehension which focused on training teachers to implement five core building blocks of reading comprehension. The UL project prioritised time and resources on the Training of Trainers (TOT) components and mentoring practices to embed new teaching behaviours and techniques. Children have improved access to reading materials and storybooks, so they can practice their reading skills at home. WASH in School renovated and constructed water systems and supplied elements to ensure adequate water supply for handwashing stations and toilets to improve water quality and hygiene to reduce diarrhea and/or other water related illnesses. WVI-L aligns with the GoL priority to improve water quality and to reduce open defecation in communities.

Procedures to ensure sustainability were incorporated into all levels of the program design and implementation. Staff members from the Research Institute of Educational Science, Provincial and District Education Offices in Nong, Xonnabouly and Soukhouma, and staff from the Teachers' Colleges in Nong and Xonnabouly were selected as UL Master Trainers to support knowledge transfer and sustainability. Core concepts from Unlock Literacy informed training for pre service teachers enhancing the reach of Unlock Literacy principles beyond the implementing districts providing an additional unplanned level of sustainability. At the sub-national level, efforts focused on transforming relationships, enhancing local ownership and developing shared commitment to improved educational outcomes for children within communities enhanced achievements.

IMPACT

Key findings

Unlock Literacy has had an **overwhelming impact on children in grade 3 who can read with comprehension from 20% in 2019 to 40% in 2021**. When comparing the change for girls there was a 136% increase from 19% (2019) to 45% (2021) and for boys the rate moved from 20% to 35% and represented a 75% increase;

Improved skills of children were achieved as demonstrated by **increased outcomes for each indicator of core reading skills**, the building blocks for reading comprehension (letter identification improved from 4% in 2019 to 24% of children who could read all letters, and the ability to read common words increased from 18% to 45%);

More children had improved literacy environments at home. Children reported seeing more people reading at home, received help with their homework and have people that read to them or to told them stories (36% in 2019 against 57% in 2021);

Community Base Reading Groups were successful in providing additional increased literacy opportunities outside the school. These groups organized weekly sessions for 920 children and provided reading awareness sessions for 905 caregivers to increase their understanding of the importance of literacy and how to support their children's reading at home.

IMPACT

Lessons learnt

Implementation of the new project model took longer than anticipated to contextualise and translate the materials and handbooks for the project model, most of the first year.

42% of children reported they had attended an early childhood program before they started school but rates of attendance varied from 60% in Soukhouma to 39% in Nong and 28% in Xonnabouly.

When COVID lockdown occurred in 2020, UL technical program staff were responsive to ensure children continued to learn at home. Staff developed separate home activity books for Grade 1, 2 and 3, and provided learning packs for 1,756 students. Repurposing funds to a different UL activity prevented a loss of UL activities in the community during the lockdown period.

Recommendations

1. An integrated programming approach incorporating quality literacy outcomes in the early grades, early child development and nutrition will deepen the impact for the children who are most vulnerable.
2. Continuation of UL, as a successful project model into the next strategic cycle 2022 to 2026
3. Training for teachers should be extended in the second year of future programs to include additional workshops on Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities or children with diverse learning needs. Also teachers requested additional workshops on teaching in multi grade classrooms and managing children's behaviour.
4. Continue regular mentoring and classroom observations of teachers to enhance their skills. When teachers are intentional in the instructional strategies they use and reflect on these methods, they are supported to make changes, to implement new teaching methodologies and behaviours. The MEQA³ tool has generated specific information obtained during supportive supervision visits.

EFFECTIVENESS

Key findings

WVI-L Unlock Literacy demonstrated effectiveness through **increased in all indicators for reading skills on the STAR⁴ assessments.** The information provided through the focus group discussions provided many examples of the effectiveness of the Unlock Literacy and the WASH in School project model. **Literacy is the cornerstone of lifelong learning and sustainable development.** When students can read with comprehension this leads to improved learning outcomes which are associated with:

- better health and nutrition
- better employment opportunities
- girls continue to study secondary school

WVI-L used a collaborative approach with the communities it partnered with, which built strong relationships developed over time. **Orientation for the VEDCs supported the committees to develop a deeper understanding on their role to manage educational outcomes in their communities.**

³Measuring Evidence of Quality Achieved (MEQA) is a monitoring tool developed by World Vision used to track progress in classroom and provide instant feedback to teachers.

⁴School-based Test About Reading (STAR) provides critical information about children's foundational reading ability. It measures reading skills for Grade 3 students who are the focus of WVI-L's literacy programming

Communities used micro projects (community cash-based conditional transfer to the education sector) to support improved learning environments in schools to motivate student and support reading in schools and the community.

The integration of UL, WASH in Schools and community engagement, Child Protection Minimum Requirements, Gender Equality and Disability Inclusion, and Faith and Development components into the Education technical project model helped to deliver the objectives and the implementation plan in the most cost effective way possible.

Building innovation into approaches used and adapting to changing times occurred as a response to COVID pandemic was possible.

Lessons learnt

All teacher training was provided using a participatory approach including hands on learning. Teachers experienced the learning UL project asked them to provide for the children in the classroom. Teachers were provided with a range of classroom materials to support learning and activities, games and songs to increase children's participation and skills in Lao language.

Recommendations

1. Teacher training under UL to develop workshops on teaching in multi grade classroom, behaviour management and teaching children with diverse needs.
2. WASH in schools should continue to be included in all UL projects to motivate girls to attend school.⁵

EFFICIENCY

Key findings

Information from Focus Group discussions **highlighted how the education system was supported at the village and district levels.** VEDCs, as the link between communities and the schools strengthened their knowledge on implementation of UL in the school and community.

Strong partnerships developed between caregivers and schools led to increased school enrolments as trust was built and caregivers understand the importance of education. Government counterparts through training and regular support from WV staff were able to implement new methods to observe and support classroom teachers to implement Unlock Literacy to embed new teaching methodologies.

Project implementation was affected by the number of schools. Originally project target was selected by village but as the project commenced some villages had more than one school per village and in Xonnabouly there were 20 schools in 10 villages.

Budget efficiency: it has been noted that budget of 150,000 USD for one project model brings the desired impact. If the project plans to improve the additional support like child play care spaces or WASH in school activities, there might be need of increased budget. Micro projects has been a very empowering model for the communities to plan facilities for their schools and mitigate the gaps. With the next cycle of programming, more attention to cross cutting issues, especially climate change and school Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is needed. **The findings and the analysis on return on investment shows how the programme has been able to make an impact with the available budget, optimising the manpower and partnerships.**

⁵ Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) 2017 Report 2020

EFFICIENCY

UL principles integrated into the Government system through the training of teachers and government counterparts in Provincial Education and Sports Service and District Education and Sports Bureau. Original targets for the number of master trainers or teachers trained were high but the Unlock Literacy program trained all government counterparts assigned to the program and teachers in target communities to ensure appropriate targets as the program evolved.

Lessons learnt

Community engagement for education requires Village Education Development Committees, schools and caregivers to work together. WVI-L facilitated these conversations and implemented opportunities for people to work together and contribute to community education projects.

Recommendations

1. Micro projects should continue to engage VEDC's in improved educational outcomes for their communities.
2. Selection of schools in new designs will be limited to 10 schools as sub villages in districts can increase number of schools and reduce the impact as resources are spread thinly. The program can be scaled up as program progresses and outputs achieved.

RELEVANCE

Key findings

Collaborative work with staff from MoES General Education, Research Institute of Educational Science, PESS and DESB ensured Unlock Literacy was aligned to Government objectives, with 36 staff working together to achieve UL outcomes.

Most respondents from FGDs reported they were very satisfied with project implementation, with improved literacy outcomes in school and the community which was reflected in the improved reading with comprehension results.

Infrastructure projects which improved learning environments in school were appreciated by DESB, VEDCs, school directors and teachers (7 school renovations, 14 playgrounds, 33 handwashing stations and 9 libraries).

Lessons learnt

Training for 90 teachers provided practical skills, activities and the provision of books and teaching materials to implement suggested activities in the classroom. Observation and supportive supervision helped to embed the UL practice principles into teaching through feedback and demonstration of skills by UL master trainers.

Recommendations

1. Continue and strengthen collaborative partnerships through discussion of UL implementation and presentation of evaluation report.
2. More traditional stories to be included in the reading groups. Community Members could be invited to tell these stories to the children especially in ethnic communities where there are no written stories in their home language.

SUSTAINABILITY

Key findings

Project sustainability is one of the most crucial elements to ensure the long-term success of project implementation. **The inclusion of VEDC and community consultation for school improvement projects ensured local solutions and ownership of projects were developed.** Communities worked together on project proposals, selection, design and implementation, collaborated and contributed wood and labour to the micro projects.

Selection of 25 Master trainers for UL who were influencers at all levels of government, National, Provincial and District, and worked collaboratively to implement the project from the development of materials, review, training and monitoring of project activities ensured a strong process of knowledge transfer and the development of shared understanding of core project elements. Staff from RIES and the TTC are able to include core activities into curriculum approaches at the National level and for pre service training for teachers.

91 community volunteers increased the members of the community who have the skills to implement literacy activities in the community.

Lessons learnt

Regular refresher training for teachers and community volunteers built their knowledge and skills. School principals were included in the Unlock Literacy training which ensured school directors as the educational leaders are able to provide support to the teachers to implement the core reading skills. Government counterparts in PESS and DESB as master trainers under UL have the skills to continue to support teachers to ensure sustainability.

Recommendations

1. Continue to provide opportunities self-sustaining processes for teachers to take responsibility for their ongoing professional development through communities of practice, teachers learning circles or WhatsApp groups to ensure new knowledge and skills continued to be implemented.
2. Unlock Literacy should be scaled up and continued to be implemented in the early years in Grade 1 to 3 to ensure core reading skills are developed.

EQUITY, DISABILITY & GENDER

Key findings

Children in remote and rural communities continue to experience many barriers to access education. UL provided practical strategies to bridge the language gap for ethnic students from their home language to the Lao, language of instruction. In schools where UL was implemented children had improved learning outcomes.

Girls had parity of access when data was averaged with higher percentage of girls attending school in Soukhouma (10% higher) and Xonnabouly (7% higher) while in Nong 17% more boys were in school.

Women did not achieve parity for UL master trainers, teachers trained or in community volunteers trained.

EQUITY, DISABILITY & GENDER

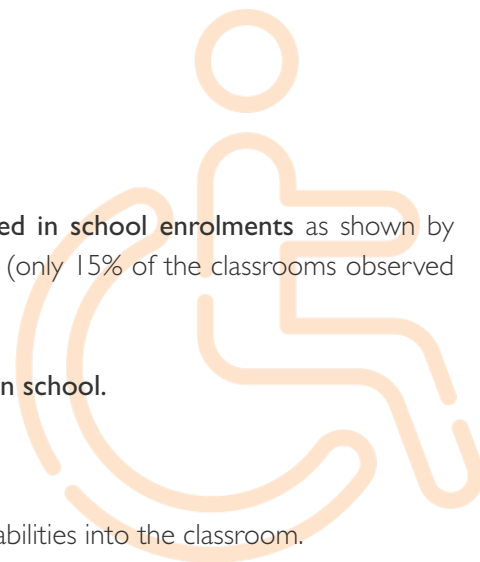
Key findings

The inclusion of children with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in school enrolments as shown by the data in the Measuring Evidence of Quality Achieved (MEQA) dashboard (only 15% of the classrooms observed included children with disabilities);

There is a lack of data on the number of children with disabilities enrolled in school.

Lessons learnt

Teachers felt they lacked the skills and knowledge to include children with disabilities into the classroom.



Recommendations

1. Strengthen training on disability, social inclusion, teaching students with diverse needs are added to the UL program;
2. Identification, targeting and benefiting children who are the most vulnerable are encouraged to enrol and stay in school;
3. Improve gender balance of community reading volunteers so women in leadership roles are promoted.

