

A gateway for capacity development

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Innovative education in Laos

# Less teaching, more learning

PADETC, the Participatory Development Training Centre, introduces active approaches to learning in Laos, where education is still based on a passive and traditional one-way transfer of knowledge from teacher to students.

**S**chooling in Laos is very traditional. The emphasis is on rote learning, and children are tested only on what they have learned by heart. This means that students do not develop the analytical and behavioural skills they need to address real-life problems in adult life.

Poor education has often been cited as one of the main obstacles to development. In many countries, innovative education methods have been developed to improve the way pupils are taught – problem-based learning, student-centered education, competence-based education and experience-based education. Sombath Somphone, Director of the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC), has explored these and other approaches to learning in a bid to foster education for sustainable development in Laos's schools. *Capacity.org* spoke with him.

► **Sombath Somphone, your involvement in rural development training and education spans three decades. Can you explain PADETC's vision and how it works in practice?**

In the eighties and early nineties, I worked with the Rice-based Integrated Farming System (RIFS) project, which later became PADETC. It was here that I realised that our

## PADETC

PADETC's roots go back as far as 1980 and the Rice-based Integrated Farming System (RIFS), also started by Sombath Somphone.

The main aim at that time was to improve the food security of poor rural communities in the aftermath of the war. Working with a team of three, he trained farmers, students, teachers and agricultural extension workers in integrated farming and low-input farming techniques.

By 1992, the RIFS project had eight members and the mission was broadened from agriculture and food security to rural development.

PADETC now has 50 staff members assisted by hundreds of volunteers. Its mission has broadened again, and now focuses on building the capacities of young people as agents of change for sustainable development.

education system was not equipping young people adequately. They lacked the skills to analyse and address problems, and their presentation skills were underdeveloped because traditional learning gives them no opportunity to assume anything other than a passive role. This is short-sighted. If the country wants any kind of development activity, we need capable human resources. That means less teaching and more learning.

So I started working with young people to strengthen their capacities while they were still in school. We did this first as an extracurricular activity at weekends in locations outside the school. We would go out to the community once a month to work on such projects as the prevention of malaria, basic sanitation, HIV/Aids, and the protection of endangered species. We trained students in organisational skills, leadership skills and management skills – all in a very simple and hands-on way. Our approach used activity- and experience-based learning to complement the traditional subject-based learning in the schools.

Slowly, we managed to carry out the extracurricular activities in the school, but not during class hours, and gradually, we became incorporated into the mainstream education system. Now, after ten years, the ministry of education accepts that youth volunteers can be organised in any school throughout the country, provided the trainers are trained and that there is a need for it.

At the moment, we work with about a hundred schools. We produce teaching and learning materials that are disseminated nationwide.

► **What funding is behind these activities?**

We are totally dependent on external funding. Our main donor is Oxfam Novib, with whom we have been involved right from the beginning. They always had confidence in us, and it is mainly on the basis of this trusting relationship that we survive. Our income from sources within Laos is very limited. We are learning from the Buddhist monks. They fund their programmes pretty much on their own and know better than anyone how to get support from the communities they serve.



**Sombath Somphone**  
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Director of the Participatory Development Training Centre, Laos

► **Doesn't this dependency on one donor make you very vulnerable?**

To make ourselves less vulnerable, we have decentralised into 12 smaller learning centres, which are now raising their own funds from the aid agencies, and planning to start asking for a fee for the services they deliver. I encourage them to adopt a more

**At the moment, we work with about a hundred schools**

entrepreneurial approach. For example, the media group can generate income from the production and printing of learning materials. Ecological farms can train students, teachers and farmers. They can also produce seeds on contract. They produce their own rice and fish. Two years ago, we established a private school. It is a demonstration school and collects fees, but it is still not able to cover its costs.

I am planning my retirement, and trying to 'phase myself out'. We are trying to establish a formal board so that PADETC becomes an institution that can function without me. This board should be in place before the end of the year. We aim to have a good gender balance and an even mixture of local and international members.

However, before I retire, my biggest challenge is to get those 12 learning centres standing on their own two feet, developing their own networks and attracting the funding that will allow them to continue their work without me. That is the biggest challenge. And I will do everything I can to facilitate it. <

*Interview by Heinz Greijn*