



# Lao PDR Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects  
of and Responses to COVID-19  
on the Education Sector in Asia



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October 2021

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# Foreword

The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 – possibly the largest pandemic the world has ever seen- led to an economic crisis probably more radical and global than ever before; as well as disruption of learning on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.

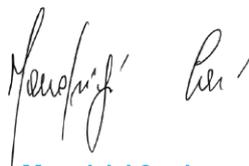
Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that many children were not learning before the crisis and several million were not even in schools. The reports therefore also explore opportunities to build back better and to re-imagine education; to shift from fact-based didactic methodologies to competency-based approaches, which are more flexible, better respond to the holistic needs and aspirations of all children, and provide opportunities for life-long learning as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 agenda.

While the suite of reports provided within the Regional Situation Analysis are particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region, contexts of course vary considerably across our huge region. At the same time, the reports may also provide insights that are relevant to other regions around the world. Hopefully the findings, including the country case studies, and regional budget needs analysis will help governments resume and accelerate progress towards SDG 4. The way education is conceptualized and delivered is changing fast, and the transformation journey will be steep and full of challenges. Governments, donors, all partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems, able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed.



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# Contents

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|            |  |           |
|------------|--|-----------|
|            | Foreword   | 5         |
|            | Acknowledgements   | 8         |
|            | List of acronyms   | 9         |
|            | Executive summary  | 10        |
|            | Country fact sheet   | 16        |
| <b>01.</b> | <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>18</b> |
|            | 1.1 Background   | 19        |
|            | 1.2 Methodology  | 20        |
|            | 1.3 Limitations of the case study  | 20        |
|            | 1.4 Structure of the case study  | 20        |
| <b>02.</b> | <b>Effects of COVID-19 on the education sector in Lao PDR</b>                        | <b>22</b> |
|            | 2.1 Effects of COVID-19 against four dimensions                                      | 23        |
|            | 2.2 Main challenges faced by the education sector                                    | 28        |
| <b>03.</b> | <b>Thematic deep dive: The education response and data use</b>                       | <b>30</b> |
|            | 3.1 Early response: Schools are closed   | 31        |
|            | 3.2 Back-to-school Part I (May 2020): Surveying perceptions and engaging communities | 33        |
|            | 3.3 Back-to-school Part II commences (September 2020): Planning for the future       | 35        |
|            | 3.4 Ongoing challenges for Lao PDR's education sector                                | 36        |
| <b>04.</b> | <b>Lessons learned</b>   | <b>38</b> |
|            | 4.1 Plans to build back better   | 39        |
|            | 4.2 Recommendations for increasing resilience to future shocks                       | 40        |
|            | 4.3 Conclusion   | 43        |
|            | Annex: Interview Framework   | 44        |
|            | Endnotes   | 46        |

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## Table

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Table 1. Survey of household access to technology | 24 |
|---|----|

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## Figures

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Three phases of school reopening       | 20 |
| Figure 2. Four dimensions of analysis of effects | 20 |

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# List of acronyms

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>AEC</b>      | ASEAN Economic Community   |
| <b>COVID-19</b> | Coronavirus disease  |
| <b>ECE</b>      | Early Childhood Education  |
| <b>GBV</b>      | Gender-based violence  |
| <b>GDP</b>      | Gross domestic product   |
| <b>GOL</b>      | Government of Lao PDR  |
| <b>GSMA</b>     | Global System for Mobile Communications Association              |
| <b>ILO</b>      | International Labour Organization                                |
| <b>LESMIS</b>   | Laos Education and Sports Management Information System          |
| <b>MOES</b>     | Ministry of Education and Sports                                 |
| <b>SEA-PLM</b>  | Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics                          |
| <b>UNDP</b>     | United Nations Development Programme                             |
| <b>UNESCO</b>   | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| <b>UNICEF</b>   | United Nations Children's Fund                                   |
| <b>WASH</b>     | Water, sanitation and hygiene                                    |
| <b>WFP</b>      | World Food Programme   |

# Executive summary

## Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a land-locked, mountainous country with a young and ethnically diverse population. Over 50 per cent of the country's 7 million population are children and young people below the age of 18<sup>1</sup>. There are 49 official ethnic groups comprised of 167 subgroups with different dialects, languages, cultures and traditions<sup>2</sup>. When schools closed on 19 March 2020 in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, it affected over 1.4 million students aged between three and 17<sup>3</sup>.

This case study is part of a series of reports across Asia commissioned by UNICEF and UNESCO to share lessons across countries. It outlines the challenges facing Lao PDR's education sector prior to the pandemic, and exacerbated by it, as well as both the successes and lessons learned from the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports' (MoES) response. This is followed by recommendations in the current context (January 2021) for 'building-back-better', and focusing on the future.

The study included a literature review as well as interviews with the UNICEF Lao PDR Country Office, and with a representative of the Government of Lao PDR (representing the education response at Cabinet level).

The focus of this study is on:

- The initial period within which schools closed and reopened, and the associated results of the first back-to-school survey (in June 2020), and;
- The priorities of the Government of Lao PDR (GoL) after schools fully reopened in September 2020, and the future of the education system.

## Effects and responses

Initially, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early March 2020, GoL responded, like many countries, by closing schools. They were partially reopened on 18 May and then fully reopened in June 2020, with terms extended into the summer break to make up for time lost. This was following a Back-to-School Campaign run by GoL, in collaboration with partners, including the UNICEF country office. By September 2020, after a shorter-than-normal break, schools reopened 'as normal' following a second Back-to-School Campaign. In their response to this pandemic, MoES aimed to support the prevention of COVID-19 transmission and spread, while ensuring continuity of learning, and later, the safe and inclusive return to school. A blended approach was adopted to transmit distance learning content.



The study uncovered a range of issues that were prevalent before the pandemic, which are predicted, or found, to be compounded as a result of the pandemic's impact, namely:

## Access to and participation in learning

- Quality of education remains a concern in Lao PDR's primary sector – for example, the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 report shows that 50 per cent of Lao PDR students in Grade 5 were in the lowest Band (2), and are still at the stage of matching single words to an image of a familiar object or concept<sup>4</sup>.
- Drop-out rates remain high, especially among poorer families – for example, only half of children complete lower secondary education<sup>5</sup>; there were almost 65,000 children at primary level recorded as 'out of school' in 2019<sup>6</sup>; and in early childhood education, more than 80 per cent of three to five-year-old children are still not enrolled. Furthermore, in lower secondary education, dropout rates are over five times higher among the poorest families than those from the richest quintile.
- Levels of access to technology and digital platforms is low – for example, only 1.7 per cent of households in 2017 reported access to the internet via a home device<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, with existing weaknesses in the system in terms of quality and retention, combined with poor capacity to deliver distance learning content, it is no surprise that the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) household survey results (2020) indicated 86 per cent of parents (from the 1,200 households surveyed) believed the disruption caused by the pandemic had a major impact on their children's education<sup>8</sup>.

## Safe operations

- Access to good water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in schools remains a challenge. By 2017, only 66 per cent of the 8,857 primary schools in Lao PDR had both water supply and latrine facilities (UNICEF/Educational Management Information System [EMIS], 2017)<sup>9</sup>. This does not include handwashing, for which there is no data available.
- Nonetheless, in the period of this study, local transmission of the COVID-19 virus has not been reported and the overall number of cases of infection remains exceptionally low.

Therefore, there are rightly concerns about schools' capacity to initiate appropriate COVID-19 precautions related to hygiene and distancing, but the urgency for such infrastructure could just as concretely be pushed from the angle of quality standards and equity, since virus transmission in Lao PDR is extremely low.

## Health, well-being and protection

Child nutrition is a major concern in the context of Lao PDR's extremely high stunting rates, combined with pressures on household incomes during the pandemic and risks of many more families slipping into poverty, which will put more children at risk. For the early years of development in particular, this represents a serious problem. In a survey conducted by the UNDP across six provinces in 2020, of 1,200 households, 48.9 per cent of families had reduced spending on food, or simply reduced food consumption, while 15.2 per cent were unable to pay for basic food<sup>10</sup>.

In 2016 the Lao Statistics Bureau reported that one in six children had experienced some form of physical violence, and one in five some form of emotional violence in the home, leading to concerns about the potential increase in incidence during this unprecedented period of school closures and high stress on families.

Disability in Lao PDR is not well captured in available data, but can be predicted to impact at least 50,000 children<sup>11</sup>. Deeper understanding of the situation for children with disabilities in education, and the impact of the pandemic, is needed.

In summary, there are areas of major concern for families in or on the edge of poverty, as well as for children in other vulnerable situations such as domestic violence, or for children with disabilities. As highlighted in the findings on finances below, pressures on family livelihoods and income as a result of the pandemic will seriously exacerbate these issues, even if Lao PDR's COVID-19 infection rate remains very low. This has a knock-on impact on the education sector due to the interplay of such factors with rates of school drop-out, the development of young children and their capacity to learn, and the ability of the system to spot and redress the gaps in enrolment of vulnerable children.

## Finances

- Lao PDR is in a vulnerable financial position as a result of the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 will increase the fiscal deficit in 2020 to between 7.5 per cent and 8.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), from 5.1 per cent in 2019<sup>12</sup>. Already in 2014 only 2.94 per cent of GDP was allocated to education and of this, 90 per cent was utilized to pay teacher salaries. There are strong concerns that further shortfalls in the education budget will be forthcoming, placing immense pressure on already-stretched resources.
- Additionally, the predictions of very low, or even negative (according to the World Bank) economic growth is also expected to effect family income, which in turn will impact their children. The World Bank, in coordination with the Lao Bureau of Statistics, reports of pressures on an already-weak job market, and the Poverty Assessment report estimates that poverty will increase by 1.4 per cent to 3.1 per cent in 2020, compared to the 0.6 per cent decline that would have been expected without COVID-19<sup>13</sup>. The 2010 Labour Force and Child Labour Survey put the rate of child labour at approximately 10 per cent.
- In 2017, MoES reported on a national teacher survey into the availability, deployment and salary status of teachers. They indicated that 12,000 more were required to fulfil national needs, with shortfalls being greatest in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, staff at the EMIS Section of the Department of Planning indicated that out of 66,119 active teachers, over 12,000 were 'voluntary', meaning they are government-trained and working in government schools, but not being paid state salaries.

Collectively, the pressures falling on Lao PDR's public expenditure, and the potential knock-on impact of this on the education budget, combined also with the impact of unemployment and economic downturn on household incomes, will put pressure on an already stretched education system. There are risks that families send their children into work or keep them at home to perform other chores that enable family members to go to work. Conversely, the numbers of salaried teachers may decrease at a time when not all working teachers are paid.

In summary, the study found the following main challenges facing Lao PDR's education sector, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Learning gaps resulting from constraints in accessing education content during school closures, and due to existing low rates of retention at schools, was predicted to further increase as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic on households.
2. Connectivity issues also underpinning access challenges to remote learning content.
3. Lack of systematic education data availability, especially during the pandemic. This includes, for example, necessary data to assess the adequacy of WASH and classroom infrastructure at schools to effectively introduce safety measures for COVID-19.
4. Vulnerable children were the worst affected, but also the most 'invisible' in data and, therefore, in targeting. This includes groups such as out-of-school children, kids with disabilities, children at risk of violence, and those being pushed into child labour.
5. Nutrition concerns in light of inhibited access to school feeding and impacts of economic downturn on household incomes.

## Deep dive

Although Lao PDR's schools were shut for a relatively short period, and the 'catch up' afforded by an extended school year then further minimized the learning gap, the study focuses on the use of digital platforms to transmit education information and content, as this was the main way for the MoES to maintain continuity. With the support of UNICEF, MoES conducted two phases of a Back-to-School Campaign and perception surveys to garner the views of teachers, parents and students on the reopening of schools. These studies provided an interesting snapshot, which highlighted concern over the perceived capacity of schools to offer a safe environment, as well as some data on whether students had been able to access online and TV content transmitted by MoES.

The results of this are elaborated in Chapter 3. Broadly, the findings help to elaborate more deeply on the challenge of connectivity highlighted in the effects findings. This showed that Lao PDR must still consider more systematically how to achieve a blended approach, which would make the education system more resilient to potential future shocks. Currently, the system has not been thoroughly tested, as school closures did not extend for a long period, and the economic impacts of the pandemic are yet to fully materialize. Hence, many of the findings relate to existing problems in the education sector, or those that it is *predicted* will be exacerbated by the pandemic's longer-term impacts. This means much needs to be done to improve Lao PDR's readiness for any forthcoming disruptions, not least to focus on redressing some of the existing challenges facing the sector that are major points of weakness if the system were to be tested.



In terms of delivering blended and distance learning, this would include evaluating the access of all children to devices that enable them to receive educational content, and for those without provided with alternative options (through, for example, print-based materials, village loud-speakers, common-good devices, and teacher outreach). Furthermore, it would not stop short at the ‘infrastructure’ of distance learning, but take into account the learning needs of children holistically, and to account for their motivation, enabling environment, access to support, and barriers, etc. In particular, linked with the finding that vulnerable children are being ‘obscured’ in Lao PDR’s education system by a lack of data, it is very important that this is redressed to understand the needs of the most vulnerable and target them first, especially if budgets are under pressure.

## Recommendations

In response to the main findings, including those of the deep dive, the consolidated, priority recommendations for increasing resilience to future shocks are:

1. **Targeting already-stretched resources** to ensure better access to and participation in learning, *especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups*.
2. **Improve data collection and how it is used in planning**, especially in times of ‘stress’ and with *particular focus on the marginalized and vulnerable*.
3. **Ensure much greater focus on community mobilization and parent engagement** to enhance the outreach potential of the education system, *especially to the most marginalized and vulnerable*, who can often be found in remote and disconnected locations.
4. **Continue existing programmes** on WASH in schools and school feeding and put the focus on targeting areas where *poverty and school drop-out rates* are predicted to increase as a result of COVID-19.

## Conclusion

Considering the severe impact of COVID-19 on the region, Lao PDR has made significant efforts to mitigate the effects of the virus on the level of access children have to learning, and the quality of that learning. However, these efforts have been hampered by existing systemic weaknesses, as well as the emerging economic impact of the pandemic on public expenditure and household income.

Consequently, the study has highlighted pre-pandemic challenges which hamper Lao PDR's capacity to respond to such shocks. The predicted economic downturn is expected to further exacerbate inequalities in access to learning, especially for the most vulnerable children. Moreover, the lack of data available to fully track and monitor this situation has been a finding that cuts across this study, as it highlights a severe problem for the MoES in its planning and response. Finally, the study's deep dive into Lao PDR's distance learning response, during school closures, shows that a majority of children are not being reached adequately, if at all. And that a more resilient future demands a holistic blended learning approach, which requires careful planning across many domains of children's learning needs.

Some successes of note that emerged through this study were MoES' coordination with UNICEF to run a Back-to-School Campaign strategy that included two phases of a perception survey to gauge student, parent and teacher feelings about returning to school. The rapid delivery of these surveys and their results enabled better planning of the government around its school opening communications, as well as some initial information around beneficiary experiences of the distance-learning provided during closure. Furthermore, while there was no data available to corroborate this, MoES issued instructions for teachers in the most remote areas to gather small groups of children for learning, in recognition of their lack of access— one step towards a more holistic approach to distance learning.

While Lao PDR is unlikely to see an increase in its education budget, the pandemic gives the country an opportunity to take stock of its current challenges and to focus on going forward to ensure better quality and more equitable learning opportunities for children. Not least through gathering a much clearer, coordinated picture of what the current situation is for kids. It is hoped that the recommendations set out in this case study would provide Lao PDR with some discussion points for how this could be done. Through the sub-regional and regional lessons that have emerged from this rapid assessment, the country can also begin to look at ideas from countries within the same geographical context, and how these could be adapted to Lao PDR's situation.



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# Country fact sheet

The table below provides a snapshot of the pandemic, the education sector's response, and background information for Lao PDR.

| DIMENSION                    | INDICATOR/QUESTION   | INFORMATION  |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Epidemiology</b>          | Date of first confirmed case   | 24 March 2020  |
|                              | Date of first confirmed death  | There have been no deaths recorded (as of 26 November 2020)  |
|                              | COVID-19 cases and deaths over time  | Between 24 March and 26 November 2020, there have been 25 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and zero deaths  |
|                              | Details about the pandemic and government responses and support                  | Cases in Lao PDR remain very low, which highlights the success of the government in managing its response. Especially considering the country has borders with five other countries, and is part of an established corridor (e.g., between Thailand and Vietnam).  |
| <b>School Closure</b>        | Were schools closed partially or fully?  | Schools were closed fully from mid-March 2020  |
|                              | Date of school closures  | 19 March 2020  |
|                              | Date of school reopening   | 18 May 2020  |
|                              | Effective number of school days lost due to closures                             | UNICEF Lao PDR reports that schools were closed for between two and 2.5 months, with staggered reopening. However, since the school calendar was extended to make up for lost time, technically there were no 'lost days' of schooling.  |
|                              | Have schools reopened fully or partially?  | Schools were partially reopened on 18 May, with 'milestone' grades the focus of this initial phase, i.e., Grades 5, 9, and 12. In June, schools were then fully reopened, following the Back-to-School Campaign run by GoL, in coordination with UNICEF Lao PDR.   |
|                              | What phase is the country currently? Phase 1, 2 or 3 <sup>14</sup> ?             | Schools in Lao PDR are now reopened, and, therefore, should be collectively in Phase 3.  |
| <b>Key Vulnerable Groups</b> | Key vulnerable groups affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector | <p>Despite improving their GDP, Lao PDR still has a long way to go in improving the situation for those in poverty – 18% of the population continue to live in poverty, and a huge proportion are at risk of tipping into poverty<sup>15</sup>. As highlighted by the World Bank, 'Lao PDR's economic growth in 2020 is projected to range between negative 1.8% and +1% due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic', and 'between 96,000 and 214,000 additional people are projected to fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic'<sup>16</sup>. More recently, this figure has pushed higher, with the UNDP predicting 383,000 more people could fall back into poverty, translating into a five-percentage point increase in the national poverty rate<sup>17</sup>.</p> <p>The most vulnerable groups are: girls and women, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, people in rural areas, and children with disabilities. In addition, the results of vulnerability and deprivation may also lead most prominently in the context of the pandemic to children at risk of child labour and early marriage, and children who cannot access remote learning.</p> |

| DIMENSION   | INDICATOR/QUESTION  | INFORMATION   |         |         |           |         |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
|---|---|---|---------|---------|-----------|---------|--|-----------|--|--|------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|-----|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------------------------------|-------|--|-------|--|-------|--|
| <b>Education System Structure</b>                                 | Brief description of the structure of the education system – federal or centralized | <p>The education system as a whole is overseen at the central level by MoES, which is then represented at provincial, district and village levels by provincial Education and Sports Services, District Education and Sports Bureaus, and Village Education Development Committees.</p> <p>The education system includes five years of compulsory primary education, followed by four years of lower secondary which, if passed, leads on to three years of upper secondary education, culminating in a diploma. Currently, pre-primary education is not compulsory.</p> <p>Expenditure on education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GDP: 4.7% of GDP and 1.4% of GDP specifically on primary (2013)</li> <li>• The Education Law, revised version 2015, states that 18% of the national budget should go to education. The Education Sector and Sports Development Plan 2016-2021 uses a 17% annual target. Despite these strong targets, the actual allocation to education has remained low and decreased from 15.84% in 2015/2016 to 13.7% in 2019.<sup>18</sup></li> </ul> |         |         |           |         |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
| <b>Education Data</b>   | <b>Indicator</b>  | <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th colspan="2">ECE</th> <th colspan="2">Primary</th> <th colspan="2">Secondary</th> </tr> <tr> <th></th> <th>Male</th> <th>Female</th> <th>Male</th> <th>Female</th> <th>Male</th> <th>Female</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Number of learners</td> <td>124,007</td> <td>121,842</td> <td>393,455</td> <td>367,111</td> <td>330,498</td> <td>304,226</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Number of teachers</td> <td>102</td> <td>9,975</td> <td>16,081</td> <td>18,662</td> <td>18,385</td> <td>19,354</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Number of education institutions</td> <td colspan="2">2,934</td> <td colspan="2">8,822</td> <td colspan="2">1,816</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>  |         | ECE     |           | Primary |  | Secondary |  |  | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Number of learners | 124,007 | 121,842 | 393,455 | 367,111 | 330,498 | 304,226 | Number of teachers | 102 | 9,975 | 16,081 | 18,662 | 18,385 | 19,354 | Number of education institutions | 2,934 |  | 8,822 |  | 1,816 |  |
|   | ECE   |   | Primary |         | Secondary |         |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
|   | Male  | Female  | Male    | Female  | Male      | Female  |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
| Number of learners  | 124,007   | 121,842   | 393,455 | 367,111 | 330,498   | 304,226 |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
| Number of teachers  | 102   | 9,975   | 16,081  | 18,662  | 18,385    | 19,354  |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
| Number of education institutions                                  | 2,934   |   | 8,822   |         | 1,816     |         |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |
| <b>Pre-COVID-19 Progress Towards SDG4 Indicators<sup>19</sup></b> | Out-of-school rate<br>Completion rate<br>Minimum reading proficiency rate           | <p>Primary out-of-school: 8.5% (2018) – approximately 65,000 children<sup>20</sup></p> <p>Primary schools meeting minimum quality of service delivery (WB, 2018): 71%<sup>21</sup></p> <p>Primary net enrolment: 98.8% for girls and 99.3% for boys (2018/19)<sup>22</sup></p> <p>Survival to last grade of Primary School (2017): 82.17%<sup>23</sup></p> <p>Primary completion rate (2018): 97.9%<sup>24</sup></p> <p>Reading proficiency (2019): 50% of Lao PDR children at Grade 5 are classified in Band 2 or below in the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 regional report. This means they can identify the meaning of some words in relation to objects, places and symbols. Only 2% of Lao PDR Grade 5 children fall into Band 6 (the highest proficiency level).<sup>25</sup></p>   |         |         |           |         |  |           |  |  |      |        |      |        |      |        |                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |                    |     |       |        |        |        |        |                                  |       |  |       |  |       |  |

# 01

## Introduction



This Situation Analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader examination initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO, to provide a snapshot of the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia.

## 1.1 Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it different, affecting the world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. The pandemic has impacted all parts of the world and the responses to the situation have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

Some of the most susceptible children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control its spread. Markets, workshops, farms and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. For many, the fear and uncertainty continue. Some minorities find themselves stigmatized and accused of causing or spreading the virus, while deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed.

With its huge population and overcrowded cities, Asia is potentially very vulnerable to COVID-19, which spreads through close contact with infected people. The contexts within which people of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia are having to cope with the virus are vastly different, with a disparity in living conditions and varying degrees of access to, and quality of, essential services such as health and education. Across the continent there is vast inequality between rich and poor, and therefore different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought, putting the deprived at long-term risks far beyond contracting the virus. This region regularly suffers from calamities, which lead to localized learning interruptions. For example, during the pandemic, Bangladesh and India were in the path of a cyclone, and recent floods have threatened communities.

This Situation Analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader examination initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO, to provide a snapshot of the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening, and identifies the initial impact that this may have on learners, their families, and the overall education system. In doing so, it aims to develop insight based on the variety of responses to the pandemic, with a view to assessing their efficacy in Asia. It seeks understanding on the contextual factors that may have supported or hindered learning, with particular attention on the most disadvantaged groups (who will be most affected by the pandemic). For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector and stakeholders in Asia;
- To examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG4-Education 2030; and
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

The Situation Analysis identifies examples of effective country approaches, which could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries. Following the development of the case studies (including this Lao PDR Situation Analysis), the overall study will include an overview of the situation in each of the three Asian sub-regions, and finally the region as a whole.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study includes an overview of the situation in each of these three sub-regions, with case studies providing a more in-depth look at specific areas in 14 countries. The case studies have been supported by the UNICEF and UNESCO offices in each country. They have provided relevant information and assisted the researchers to contact relevant officials to collect country-specific documents, grey literature and data that will help us tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic across Asia, its impact, and the responses of each education system.

In addition to a literature review, this case study involved interviews with the UNICEF Country Office and with a representative of the Government of Lao PDR (representing the education response at Cabinet level)<sup>26</sup>. This has provided an opportunity to learn more about the challenges faced and responses developed, and provided a space for discussion and debate on lessons learned and what still needs to be done. The framework for the interviews is included in Annex A.

A cross-cutting focus on the most vulnerable members of society, particularly highlighting girls and learners with disabilities, has been used across the assessment. The aim of this is to identify interventions that have been able to successfully reach the most marginalized communities, and how their different needs were addressed to increase accessibility and participation for all.

## 1.3 Limitations of the case study

The Lao PDR Case Study was focused on primary level information, although where possible, some information on early learners has been incorporated.

## 1.4 Structure of the case study

The case study is structured in four sections. After this introduction and the above country profile, Chapter 2 discusses the effects of COVID-19 on the education system against four dimensions (see Figure 2). Challenges are identified and then the responses are set out against the three phases of school re-opening (see Figure 1), depending on the specific context of each case study country. Chapter 3 provides a deep dive into a particular theme, which was identified in each case study country by the UNICEF and UNESCO country teams. Finally, Chapter 4 provides an overview of the lessons learned, providing specific recommendations for the case study country and other countries on building back better, increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks, and reimagining education.

FIGURE 1 | THREE PHASES OF SCHOOL REOPENING



FIGURE 2 | FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS



ສາທາລະນະລິດ ປະ  
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ຈາ ຂຍດ ອຳ ຂອດ ປັ ຄລ 1975.



# 02

## Effects of COVID-19 on the education sector in Lao PDR



Although Lao PDR's access to education is strong— 98.6 per cent primary net enrolment and a gender parity index of 0.99 for primary education<sup>73</sup>— there are ongoing problems in the quality of education, in student drop-out and in terms of inequalities of access.

This chapter looks at how COVID-19 has affected Lao PDR's education sector, and the challenges that have been faced as a result.

Lao PDR is a land-locked, mountainous country with a young and ethnically diverse population. Over 50 per cent of the country's 7 million population are children and young people below the age of 18<sup>27</sup>. There are 49 official ethnic groups comprised of 167 subgroups with different dialects, languages, cultures and traditions<sup>28</sup>. When schools closed on 19 March 2020 in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, it affected over 1.4 million students aged between three and 17<sup>29</sup>.

Lao PDR has progressively integrated into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community (AEC), a single market and production base, with the creation of transportation corridors to which the country is pivotal. Strong economic growth, driven primarily by natural resources and energy sectors, enabled Lao PDR to move from a low-income to a lower middle-income country in 2011. The economy continued to show positive trends, with GDP growing by 6.3 per cent in 2018, though slowing from 6.8 per cent in 2017, as both agricultural and industrial production declined in large part to natural disasters<sup>30</sup>.

However, inequalities remain. This was highlighted in the most recent assessment of poverty, produced by the Lao Bureau of Statistics and the World Bank (2019), based on the 2018-19 Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey. The World Bank Country Manager for Lao PDR stated that:

**"The data shows that most of the families under the poverty line share one or more characteristics: their head of household is from an ethnic minority group, has a low level of education, or has no access to employment. Government policies have helped narrow geographical income gaps. However, not enough jobs are being created to distribute the benefits of economic growth equitably<sup>31</sup>."**

These disparities are mirrored in the performance of students across different socioeconomic and ethnic groups, which are lower for those in areas of marginalization and poverty.

## 2.1 Effects of COVID-19 against four dimensions

### Dimension 1: Access to and participation in learning

#### Exacerbation of inequalities in school participation

Although Lao PDR's access to education is strong— 98.6 per cent primary net enrolment and a gender parity index of 0.99 for primary education<sup>32</sup>— there are ongoing problems in the quality of education, in student drop-out and in terms of inequalities of access (related to socioeconomic status, ethnic group, rurality, etc). A 2017 student learning assessment (of eight and nine-year olds) showed that only one-in-three Grade 3 students met literacy standards for promotion to Grade 4, and one-in-five students met the standards for mathematics<sup>33 34</sup>. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 report shows that 50 per cent of Lao PDR students in Grade 5 were in the lowest Band (2), and are still at the stage of matching single words to an image of a familiar object or concept<sup>35</sup>.

Meanwhile, dropout rates remain high: only half (54 per cent boys; 53 per cent girls) complete lower secondary education and only 32 per cent of boys and 31 per cent of girls complete their basic education<sup>36</sup>. At primary school level, there were almost 65,000 children recorded as 'out of school' in 2019<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, in early childhood education, more than 80 per cent of three to five-year-old children are still not enrolled, particularly children from rural,

isolated and ethnic minority communities where “[there is] limited teacher and human resource; [and there is] limited teaching-learning materials and other facilities<sup>38</sup>”.

In lower secondary education, dropout rates are over five times higher among the poorest families than those from the richest quintile. At the upper secondary level, the completion rate of the majority Lao-Thai population (40 per cent) is more than double that of all other identified ethnolinguistic groups<sup>39</sup>. Such inequalities have been compounded by the pandemic, which has brought into sharp relief (as discussed below) the difficulties for many children in accessing learning once schools closed – problems that span the home environment, home infrastructure/connectivity, content delivery style and substance, and motivation of both teachers and students.

In June 2020, World Vision worked with GoL to produce an Early Recovery Rapid Assessment<sup>40</sup>, covering eight districts across the country. The results are discussed in greater depth under Dimension 3, but it is useful to highlight here that the survey participants indicated their children not studying in one-third of cases, and a huge majority (78 per cent) felt unable to support their children’s behaviours and stresses. This is corroborated by UNDP’s household survey results (2020), which indicate that 86 per cent of parents from the 1,200 households surveyed believed the disruption caused by the pandemic had a major impact on their children’s education<sup>41</sup>.

There is increasing concern that certain children will not return to school<sup>42</sup>, and those that do will be affected in the medium-to-long-term by economic downturns (see Dimension 4). As predicted in the United Nations socioeconomic response framework, “the loss of household income caused by COVID-19 could also have knock-on effects for children and their education. For instance, more children and young people could be pulled out of school, leading to increased dropouts, increased child labour, and child marriage. Further budget cuts due to the economic fallout could impact the delivery of education and worsen an already deepening learning crisis.”<sup>43</sup> So, for those children who may not return to school, drop-out within a short period after their return, or in cases of already pre-existing out-of-school children, a variety of options must be considered to tackle the barriers facing these youth. This is especially important given that “the World Bank, in its analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on learning and schooling outcomes, estimated that five months of school closures due to the virus will result in an immediate loss of 0.6 years of schooling adjusted for the quality of learning”<sup>44</sup>. Which, combined with the exacerbation of unequal access to schooling in the first place, paints a very dim picture for vulnerable children.

### Levels of access to digital platforms for distance learning

During school closures, children’s ability to connect to remote learning platforms was obviously also determined by their ‘infrastructural’ access to various types of media. Table 1 shows the findings of the Lao Social Indicator Survey II (2017)<sup>45</sup> on levels of access of households to various types of technology.

TABLE 1 | SURVEY OF HOUSEHOLD ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

| TYPE OF TECHNOLOGY  | PERCENTAGE         |
|---|--------------------|
| Percentage of people age 15-49 years who, at least once a week, read a newspaper or magazine, listen to the radio, and watch television | 3.2 (F)<br>4.4 (M) |
| Percentage of households that have a radio  | 20.6               |
| Percentage of households that have a television   | 79.3               |
| Percentage of households that have a telephone (fixed line or mobile phone)   | 92.6               |
| Percentage of households that have a computer   | 13.5               |
| Percentage of households that have access to the internet by any device from home   | 1.7                |

Source: [Lao Social Indicator Survey II \(2017\)](#)

Furthermore, in 2018 the Lao Statistics Bureau reported extreme disparity in such access, with 94 per cent of households in urban areas owning a TV, as compared to only 49 per cent in rural areas<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA)<sup>47 48</sup> indicated only a 67 per cent mobile social media penetration across the region as a whole in 2018.

Table 1 highlights that in Lao PDR only 1.7 per cent of households in 2017 reported access to the internet via a device at home. Although distribution of printed materials (as pick-up materials to be available at schools) was being planned by MoES as of September 2020, when interviews for this study were first conducted, TV, radio and online content were the main sources for learning prior to reopening. Additionally, although adult literacy rates – to a large extent determining the type of home environment a child may experience in terms of reading and learning – have been on the increase, reaching 80 per cent of females and 90 per cent of males in 2015<sup>49</sup>, the consistent disparities between rural and urban areas, and particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups, indicate the likelihood that children in remote areas may not have family members who can read. They are also less likely to

access phones, radios, TV or print materials, especially in their own language and, furthermore, compete with other members of the household, including siblings, for access to devices that do exist.

Therefore, a large proportion of children are very likely to have missed out due to a lack of access to the necessary media platforms that enable full uptake of the blended approach. The only potential countermeasure to this so far in the COVID-19 response by MoES has been the instruction at the village cluster level to enable teachers in remote areas to meet with small groups of children to conduct face-to-face teaching. However, there is no tracking of this to enable a fuller picture of whether such meetings occurred, in how many villages/communities, how often, and with what result. Furthermore, although MoES is now planning with UNICEF to engage with the private sector and internet companies to expand access (with the idea of distributing tablets to a select number of pilot schools), such efforts are not yet underway.

## Dimension 2: Safe operations

In 2005, GoL approved the National School Health Policy for primary schools and expanded this in 2010 to include secondary schools<sup>50</sup>. The policy implementation is led by MoES, in coordination with the Ministry of Health. It aims to ensure all schools have safe access to water and sanitation facilities, as well as bringing recognition to the importance of this aspect of school infrastructure. Consequently, GoL, MoES and international partners<sup>51</sup> have already been focusing on this issue and the adverse effects that poor WASH have on education. These are linked to reduced enrolment, attendance and retention rates, and are often interrelated with stunting, with particular negative impacts on girls' education.

However, despite huge advancements, by 2017 only 66 per cent of the 8,857 primary schools in Lao PDR have both water supply and latrine facilities<sup>52</sup>. This access is judged on WASH-in-School standards of the MoES, but does not include handwashing in schools for which there is currently no data available. Other sources place this figure even lower, and it is evident that access to safe drinking water and sanitation in schools is better in urban areas; 2017 data indicated 40.4 per cent of rural areas with no water source at all, compared to 18 per cent of urban areas<sup>53</sup>. The UN socioeconomic framework (2020) reported that about half of schools have no electricity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into stark relief the urgent need for appropriate WASH facilities at schools – 11 per cent of primary schools are recorded as having no WASH facilities whatsoever<sup>54</sup> – and for accompanying (accurate) data that deepens MoES' understanding of facilities at schools and whether these are indeed appropriate to facilitate hygiene practices. Without such facilities, the basic measures deployed to prevent COVID-19, namely regular handwashing and controlled use of toilet facilities to manage children accessing the area of the toilet (i.e., queueing around cubicles/stands and sinks), will not be feasible. This must also be reflected in the classroom and outdoor/play facilities, which need to enable social distancing during lessons. Although the teacher-pupil ratio in Lao PDR is in line with the global average, at 22.3<sup>55</sup>, this does not automatically equate with there being sufficient space for children and staff. Furthermore, other measures such as mask-wearing, temperature checks, and decreasing the number of children interacting, may be a challenge and require further data for MoES to target those schools with the most immediate infrastructure support needs. However, the situation currently in Lao PDR is different insofar as local transmission has not been reported. Although MoES is planning to collect additional data to be certain, for now such measures are not deemed urgent.

## Dimension 3: Health, well-being and protection

At the end of May 2019, the World Food Programme (WFP) handed over their school-feeding programme to GoL. Up to that point it covered 140,000 children in 1,450 schools across the country. Starting from the new school-year in September 2019, the plan was for the government to support the programme in 800 schools, including 515 of them handed over by WFP, disbursing \$0.10 (LAK 941) per child daily. Thus far, data on the actual coverage of the school-feeding programme between September 2019 and March 2020, when schools initially closed, is not available and makes it difficult to judge what the current situation is. However, the levels of inequality and pressures on household income (see Dimension 4) raise concerns about how the pandemic is likely to affect child nutrition and ultimately, in the longer term, stunting resulting from extreme nutritional deficiencies. As highlighted by the UN Socioeconomic Framework for 2020:



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"In a survey [conducted by the UNDP across six provinces in 2020] of 1,200 households, 48.9 per cent of the families have reduced spending on food or simply reduced food consumption; 15.2 per cent are unable to pay for basic food. Among a sample of 232 who took out loans during the period March-May, 78 per cent stated the main purpose of their new debts was for buying food ... As most children in Lao PDR are multidimensionally poor, with only 12 per cent of children experiencing no deprivation at all, and 50 per cent of children suffering from three or more deprivations at the same time, the COVID-19 health crisis and its socio-economic implications pose threats to children in poverty and subject children and adolescents, especially from poor families, to multiple deprivations that can have a long-term impact on their growth and development, including consequences for productivity and human capacity development<sup>56</sup>."

UNICEF Lao PDR's report in 2019 on 'Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis [MODA] on Stunting Among Children Under five years in Lao PDR'<sup>57</sup> focused on the nutritional status and stunting among kids under five, based on a sample of 11,812 children in Lao PDR. The study highlighted that these children generally experience high levels of deprivations, ranging from 33 per cent of children deprived in the Water dimension, to 93.9 per cent of children deprived in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) dimension, and 51.6 per cent of children being deprived in the Nutrition dimension. Moreover, the geographical differences in how children experience such

deficiency are stark, with almost 20 per cent difference in the nutrition dimension for example, where children in rural areas without roads are always worse off. Given that the brain is almost fully developed by the age of six, the foundation for the future potential of a child to learn and to be successful is established in this early period of their life. Poor nourishment and particularly stunting are known to have a significant toxic effect on a child's brain in terms of the capacity of cognitive pathways to form, and even on the actual size of the brain. This issue in Lao PDR is complex—on the one hand, the pandemic's impact on public spending might curtail the direct tackling of the issue of stunting and reverse any initial progress for children most at risk, or already experiencing stunting patterns; on the other hand, more children may suffer nutritional deficiencies, lack of access to stimulation, and wasting as a result of income pressures, food shortages and stress within their households, especially, for example, if compounded by other disadvantages related to gender or disability.

As highlighted above, in June 2020 World Vision worked with GoL to produce an Early Recovery Rapid Assessment across eight districts<sup>58</sup>. The survey was purposely sampled, targeting households hosting the most vulnerable children, under-five children, pregnant and lactating women, and people living with disabilities. The survey reached 212 respondents across five provinces (Luang Prabang, Khammuane, Savannakhet, Salavan, Champasak), of which 74 per cent lived in rural areas, and 26 per cent lived in semi-urban areas.

The results of the assessment highlighted severe effects on household income (see Finance section below), which raises concerns about the potential impact that this could have on children in terms of being pushed into labour or early marriages, and/or experiencing increased risk of violence— factors which could cement the risk of these children dropping out of school. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) states that:

**"The COVID-19 crisis has affected mostly those who were already socially and economically vulnerable. This includes workers in informal employment, migrants, women and children. While children are not the face of the crisis, it will have long-term impacts on their well-being, education and health. It will hit children particularly hard and the root causes of child labour -- poverty, social marginalization, discrimination and the lack of quality education-- are likely to be exacerbated. Globally, it is estimated that 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year, adding to the estimated 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019<sup>59</sup> 60."**

In Lao PDR specifically, the UNDP predicts 383,000 *more* people could fall back into poverty, translating into a five-percentage point increase in the national poverty rate.<sup>61</sup>

In 2016 the Lao Statistics Bureau reported that one-in-six children experienced some form of physical violence and one-in-five children some form of emotional violence at home, which leads to concerns about the potential increase in incidence during this unprecedented period of school closures and high stress on families. Furthermore, while a majority of households responded in the assessment that their meal frequency had continued, they also confirmed changes in meal content and sourcing of food, which is highly concerning from a child nutrition standpoint.

In addition, though data is not available within the limits of this study, there is also concern about the impact on health services as a result of the pandemic, and the implications for children. One aspect of this is in access to important routine vaccinations and basic healthcare. Prior to the pandemic the Ministry of Health had worked to ensure over 90 per cent of health clinics across the country were connected to stable electricity, to enable cold storage of vaccines, but the remaining unconnected clinics tended to be in rural/remote areas. Moreover, much is still needed to be done to convince parents (especially within rural areas and among ethnic groups) of the safety of clinics and vaccines for their children, and also on the training of health staff to deliver vaccines<sup>62</sup>.

Another aspect of this impact materializes in terms of its impact on children's mothers in particular.

**"The first Lao National Survey on gender-based violence (GBV), released in 2016, revealed that one in three Lao women in a relationship had experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence at the hands of their partner. The survey showed that 28.6 per cent of women who encountered physical and/or sexual violence sought help from local authorities, 18.9 per cent from local leaders, and 11.7 per cent from a Village Mediation Unit. Only a handful of women approached the Lao Women's Union, police, or healthcare facilities. Quarantine and isolation policies, coupled with financial stress on families, individuals, and communities, will exacerbate the conditions for women already vulnerable to domestic violence. Moreover, care and support to GBV survivors may be disrupted when health service providers are overburdened."<sup>63</sup>**

This has implications for children, and traditionally girls in particular, both in terms of their increased exposure to violence in the home, but also potentially their own increased experience directly of abuse.

Finally, with regards to children living with a disability in Lao PDR, which encompasses at least 50,000 children<sup>64</sup>, the pandemic pressure on healthcare services (if not from the virus itself, then from wider economic and public expenditure pressures), will impact on much-needed services for this group. The capability for children to participate in their community and school will be hampered where such services are withdrawn or weak.

## Dimension 4: Finances

Since 2017, Lao PDR's GDP has been positive but slowly declining in its growth trajectory. Given the global predictions of economists on the likely impacts of the pandemic on country markets and the risk of recession, Lao PDR's trend is of concern. "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will increase the fiscal deficit in 2020 to between 7.5 per cent and 8.8 per cent of GDP, from 5.1 per cent of GDP in 2019. Consequently, debt levels are expected to increase to between 65 per cent and 68 per cent of GDP in 2020, from 59 per cent of GDP in 2019, which will generate higher debt service obligations"<sup>65</sup>.

The impacts of this downturn on the public education budget are disturbing. The government estimated in May that 30 per cent of revenue in 2020 would be lost, causing budget deficits, already widening, to increase to nearly 7 per cent of GDP<sup>66</sup>. Already in 2014 only 2.94 per cent of GDP was allocated to education and of this, 90 per cent was utilized to pay teacher salaries. There is strong concern that further shortfalls in the education budget will be forthcoming, which will place immense pressure on already-stretched resources.

Furthermore, the predictions of very low, or even negative (according to the World Bank) economic growth is also expected to stress family income, which in turn will impact their children. It is feared that the pandemic will increase the proportion of people losing their livelihoods and employment, and that a large number of families will fall into poverty. Indeed, by mid-August 2020, estimates put unemployment at 25 per cent, equating to approximately 475,000 people.<sup>67</sup> The aforementioned Early Recovery Rapid Assessment highlighted that 56 per cent of households reported experiencing some effects (ranging from slight to severe) on their household income, and average reductions of 42 per cent of household income were being felt (1,052,276 LAK down to 605,429 LAK, approximately \$114 down to \$64). Additionally, as highlighted by the World Bank and in coordination with the *Lao Bureau of Statistics, in a follow-up to the 2019 Poverty Report from the Expenditure and Consumption Survey*:

**"The pandemic has brought an unprecedented employment shock, putting pressure on an already-weak job market. At the same time the return of migrant workers, particularly from Thailand, has led to a substantial fall in remittances. The Poverty Assessment report estimates that: poverty will increase by 1.4 to 3.1 percent in 2020, compared to the 0.6 percent decline that would have been expected with no COVID-19. Given these challenges, a broad set of interventions, targeting different groups of the poor, will be required to restore poverty reduction momentum in Lao PDR<sup>68</sup>."**

There is an assumption of a link between pressures on household income and increased vulnerability of children. This will manifest in a variety of ways, but will most certainly play upon the multidimensional aspects of children's vulnerability, not least the likelihood that more will now be pushed into child labour; the 2010 Labour Force and Child Labour Survey put the rate of child labour at approximately 10 per cent. Such pressures will in turn exacerbate drop-out rates, and stress on a child's capacity to learn when in school due to the layers of disadvantage they face.

In addition to the impacts on the economy, the education budget and family income, the underlying issue of teacher recruitment and payment are a concerning backdrop to the pandemic's impacts in Lao PDR. In 2017, MoES released a report on a national teacher survey into the availability, deployment and salary status of teachers. Since the report is only available in the Lao Language, the following information comes from interview data collected during a separate UNICEF-commissioned formative evaluation conducted in 2019. Such qualitative data indicated that 12,000 more teachers are required to fulfil national needs; staff at the EMIS Section of the Department of Planning indicated that out of 66,119 teachers, over 12,000 are 'voluntary', meaning they are government-trained and working in government schools, but not being paid government salaries. Finally, this formative evaluation highlighted the gaps in rural and remote areas as being greater, though that data is unavailable. The strains that COVID-19 have placed on school staff and teachers globally underpins concerns that the Lao PDR teaching force was already under immense strain. This could make the country's ability to bounce back and improve its resilience to future shocks a harder prospect.

## 2.2 Main challenges faced by the education sector

The underpinning factors outlined above will continue to play a huge part in the ongoing response of Lao PDR's education sector to the pandemic, and to the recent reopening of schools in September 2020. There is no updated data yet available to complete the picture of how the pandemic has altered the situation. These include: the numbers of children that have returned to school, the demographic of those not returning, the experiences and potential well-being and psychological issues affecting kids, the nutritional status of children and food insecurity issues, and the extent to which children and their families were able to access digital learning and other types of remote support. As of November 2020, UNICEF Lao PDR reported that there is an ongoing drop-out study underway. This qualitative study will conduct interviews with students in and out of school, community members, teachers and district education officers. The aim is to identify what factors are influencing drop-out at different levels of education. The results are expected in April 2021, at which time there will also be an update to EMIS. However, the pre-pandemic situation outlined above does paint a concerning picture for the 'baseline' upon which the pandemic hit.

In summary, therefore, the education sector in Lao PDR faced the following challenges during the pandemic:

1. **Learning gaps:** Although the government responded quickly and in a coordinated manner to protect the safety and well-being of children, adopting a National COVID-19 Response Plan and an associated Education Response Plan, this did not reach a stage of comprehensively mapping education content across age groups, geographies, and vulnerabilities. Therefore, the reliance on children themselves to access content, and to some extent on teachers to support students, did not adhere to a national 'vision' that assured coverage to all children. Furthermore, pre-pandemic rates of drop-out were very high, indicating a problem with retention that may now be exacerbated by the economic impacts of the pandemic, which will further worsen the learning gaps for children vulnerable to leaving school.
2. **Connectivity challenges:** As will be further elaborated in Chapter 3, the actual coverage of distance learning that could be achieved is difficult to gauge, given what is known of gaps in connectivity and technology penetration in Lao PDR, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. However, there are many concerning indicators to suggest that Lao PDR's 'digital readiness' for delivery of good quality education content during school closures is weak, and that much needs to be done to prepare the country for better resilience to future shocks and a more robust blended learning approach.
3. **Lack of systematic data availability, especially during pandemic:** As yet, there has been no analysis of the learning that children *did* achieve through distance platforms, which children were able to access such platforms, nor the effects of the closure period on their overall progress. Other types of data have, to date, also not been gathered, needed to improve the picture for GoL on whether children are returning to school, which children are not returning to school, and the different needs of children who do return. Furthermore, the necessary data to identify which schools require infrastructure support on their WASH and classroom facilities, or to track children who are vulnerable, often in multiple ways, is lacking. This makes it impossible to respond to emergencies by re-targeting resources, and to plan better for future scenarios.
4. **Vulnerable children got hit hard, but also the most 'invisible' in data:** Large disparities continue to create huge inequality in Lao PDR, with available data on learning performance confirming that the most susceptible households are suffering greater educational disadvantage. However, equally, data flows in Lao PDR are still not regular and coordinated enough to allow for a full picture of the situation for these children, such as clarity on where they are and what layers of disadvantage they are facing, and what evidence there is for policy-makers to provide tailored support. This includes groups such as out-of-school children, kids with disabilities, children at risk of violence, and those being pushed into child labour.
5. **Nutrition concerns:** Lao PDR already has a concerning rate of child stunting which, in an effort to manage services for young children holistically, will require an education response following the pandemic. Especially where existing responses have been curtailed. Equally, pressures on family income and the removal of school-feeding during school closures could exacerbate hunger and increase micronutrient deficiency and anaemia. Even if kids return to school, the medium to long-term impact on their capacity to learn, especially for young girls and children with disabilities, could be hampered.

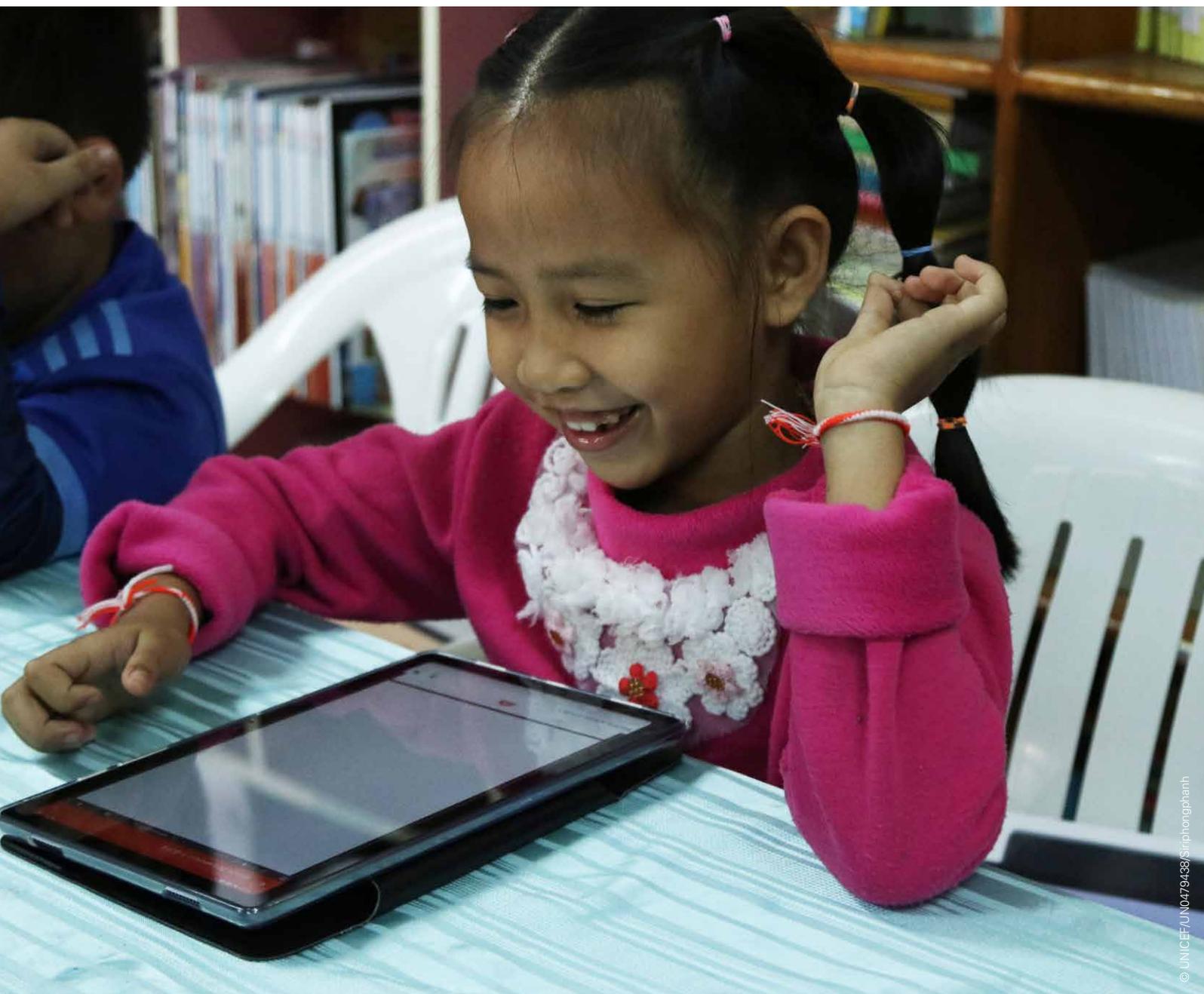
The education sector response in early and later phases is detailed in Chapter 3. It examines not only how these challenges have been exacerbated and realized, but also how MoES created a coordinated effort to best get children returning to school safely and quickly. Members of the government task force commented on the willingness of many line ministries to divert funding and priority to the education sector during the pandemic, while international donors responded with additional funding.

As a result, the focus of this case study is on:

- The initial period within which schools closed and reopened, and the associated results of the first back-to-school survey in June 2020; and
- The priorities of GoL since schools fully reopened in September 2020 with an eye on the future of the education system.

# 03

## Thematic deep dive: The education response and data use



To guarantee ongoing education, a blended approach was adopted to transmit distance learning content.

### 3.1 Early response: Schools are closed

The Government of Lao PDR (GoL), supported by UN agencies, immediately formed a COVID-19 Task Force, with the UN issuing Monthly Situation Reports from April 2020. School closures in March 2020 led GoL to release its [Education Response Plan](#), which was drafted in partnership with Save the Children and UNICEF Lao PDR, building upon the principles set by the National Response Plan. The Education Response Plan aimed to support the prevention of COVID-19 transmission and spread, while ensuring continuity of learning and the safe and inclusive return to school for students.

To guarantee ongoing education, a blended approach was adopted to transmit distance learning content. MoES dispensed directives across their administrative hubs to ensure that schools continued to issue homework to children, that lessons were transmitted online (YouTube) and on TV and radio, that communications channels (WhatsApp, Skype and Facebook) were used by education actors, and that in rural areas teachers were enabled to meet with very small groups of children (mobilized through the Cluster System, i.e., via communication down to village committees capable of coordinating the plan). This approach also combined some online resources on [UNICEF's website](#) (and through UNICEF and MoES Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp groups), with programmes on TV and radio, as well as printed materials (mainly focusing on risk communications) for parents and caregivers.

Examples of the type of content that was distributed (some of which was not curricular but supplementary, to support home learning) includes:

- A total of 15 TV spots and 30 radio spots were broadcast across the country in Lao and local languages – the Lao Education and Sports Programme, which is entirely managed by the MoES Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES), continues to be broadcast on Channel 8 from 6am to 10pm daily;
- UNICEF broadcasted episodes from the animated series 'My Village' and 'My House', which was originally produced in 2015. It generated 191,000 views, reaching an estimated 72 per cent of the population;
- Learning materials to support home-learning were developed and shared via UNICEF online platforms with one video post receiving 189,000 engagements;
- A 'read-aloud' series showing parents reading storybooks to children launched in April and is estimated to have reached over 280,000 people; and
- One hundred per cent of public primary schools in Laos received COVID-19 posters, and 740 schools were provided with thermometers.

The above content was targeted at primary school children, although 'My Village' and 'My House' also targeted early childhood education levels.

GoL's early response, therefore, focused on the access to learning and education system coordination aspects of this study. However, given the known gaps in connectivity (discussed in the previous chapter), access to the various forms of content transmission is likely to have been variable for the student beneficiaries. Consequently, coupled with the low number of COVID-19 cases and deaths<sup>69</sup>, it was evidently a positive move that GoL was able to re-open schools on a partial basis on 18 May 2020, and fully by June 2020, after only eight weeks of full closure. MoES also proceeded to extend the school period, to account for this 'lost phase', so that once schools fully reopened in mid-June, children then remained in school

until August, instead of having a more extended summer holiday, which essentially enabled them to ‘catch up’ on the time lost during closure. Additionally, the country’s rates of infection have remained extremely low, despite the reopening, so even after three months of relatively normal functioning, there are still no reported COVID-19 deaths. This implies that for now, the government’s safety measures and the environments currently in schools are working effectively.

The phase in which students’ return to school commenced was built upon the Education Response Plan, the [COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#), and the [Framework for Reopening Schools](#). As part of balancing priorities for learning with safe operations (Dimension 2), firstly the transition grades were reopened: Grade 5 (end of primary level), Grade 9 (end of lower secondary), and Grade 12 (end of upper secondary). Then from 2 June 2020, schools fully reopened to all students. In the lead-up to reopening, a first Back-to-School Campaign was conducted by MoES, in which once again the focus was on preparing the population (Dimension 3) and ensuring safe operations (Dimension 2). During this period, between May and July 2020, 13,149 schools across kindergarten, primary and secondary received information, education and communication materials through a combination of TV, radio, social media and loudspeaker.

In addition, for the initial reopening, an improved learning environment was targeted through more comprehensive support to children at the school, including WASH facilities, health, nutrition, protection, and psychosocial care. UNICEF Lao PDR reports that construction of WASH facilities was completed by UNICEF in 36 primary and early childhood education (ECE) schools (noting that these schools are one and the same, i.e., catering for both ECE and primary at the same time) in the three provinces of Xieng Khouang, Salavan, and Attapeu, serving 3,051 students (1,452 of them girls). Schools were encouraged to adopt conditions that reduced disease transmission, including access to soap and clean water, procedures on when staff or students feel unwell, protocols on social distancing, and good hygiene practices. Although other non-governmental partners are supporting other schools with WASH interventions, data is not available on this to verify overall coverage. But with only 36 out of 8,600 public primary schools<sup>70</sup> covered, the gap is still undeniably large.

Key aspects of the information circulated under the #SafelyBackToSchool campaign aligns with Dimensions 1, 2, 3 and 4 of this study, including:

- School sanitation and cleaning;
- Handwashing, including how to plan for communities to take turns bringing water to rural schools to enable students to wash their hands;
- Temperature checks;
- Social distancing;
- Clear communication channels where students and others can find reliable, targeted information;
- Catch up opportunities; UNICEF is working on developing a package with the Ministry that it and its partners can scale up across the country;
- Ongoing monitoring of students and schools conducted by MoES visiting schools and utilising some real-time data collection tool— although Lao PDR’s GIS Platform is not yet fully functional and linked to EMIS;
- Building on the learning modalities and materials used during school closures to enable the education system to improve access and learning among children at risk of exclusion; and
- Building on families’ increased engagement in their children’s learning.

To support MoES with their risk communications around the reopening, a survey to accompany this campaign was conducted. Although the pressures created by the pandemic on capacity and resource led the scope of the survey to be limited (quantitatively), it was nonetheless the only source of information on perceptions and concerns of key stakeholders in education at the time. There is already some survey data and analysis available, which will be reviewed below.

However, this early monitoring did not verify the effect and outcomes of distance learning, nor is there data for the ‘lost learning’ that children may have experienced, or might continue to experience. Furthermore, there is no systematic data captured to track the conditions enacted in schools to ensure and measure safe operations for the return of children, nor to highlight what type of financial, infrastructure and in-kind support (if any) schools managed to obtain to assess and update their environments to make them COVID-19 avoidant. Therefore, the #SafelyBackToSchool campaign remains an input-driven and mainly information-centred initiative, without clarity of its outputs and impact.

Despite this, the results captured in the survey on the reactions to reopening have enabled MoES to tailor their communications around the virus. Moreover, this initial phase of reopening undoubtedly served to reconnect children to the system, after a relatively short gap. When



combined with the extended school year to ensure progression across all grades, the disruption has arguably been minimized. Special government guidance on progression is now tabled for development, but at the time of the September reopening, the assumption is that children transitioned ‘as normal’, i.e., automatically, and MoES tailored their own targets, in terms of examination results, to reduce expectations of the overall results. As with other countries, it is likely there was a disconnect between individual children’s expectations of their own performance, and the results that they each achieved (which, again, is not yet captured in available data). For some kids, the continuation of the curriculum, and lack of ‘catch up’ education content, may continue to hamper them into their next grade, while for others the effect on their examination results could be individually very long-lasting.

For all students who commenced the academic year in September 2020, there was a second phase of back-to-school campaigning and preparation, for which results are not yet available, but a description is provided in section 3.2 and 3.3.

### 3.2 Back-to-school Part I (May 2020): Surveying perceptions and engaging communities

To bolster the first Back-to-School Campaign, a survey (in Lao and English) was conducted between 1 May and 8 May 2020 to gauge the reactions of students, parents and teachers on the imminent reopening of schools on 2 June 2020. It was administered online and promoted through UNICEF’s social media channels, as well as through networks of development partners and MoES’ own large networks. These include the Ministry of Health’s Centre for Communication and Education on Health (aiming to reach the general public), MoES (aiming to reach teachers) and Lao National Radio channels (aiming to reach students through its youth radio division). The survey is unlikely to have touched the most marginalized communities, as per the results below, and therefore does not provide insights into experiences of families and children who are vulnerable, nor children with disabilities. However, through UNICEF’s channels, promotion of the survey did succeed in reaching 812,214 people, resulting in 24,590 engagements (likes, shares, comments and clicks). The survey link was accessed 1,856 times, resulting in a total of 772 completed survey responses: 189 parents, 534 students and 49 teachers.



Of the 49 teacher respondents, only 60 per cent were in favour of school reopening, whereas the remainder had concerns about safety and feasibility. Some suggestions to support re-start among respondents included:

- Governments and partners providing financial support to schools;
- Encouraging social distancing;
- Having teachers support students in the first three months after resumption; and
- Offering discounted or free masks, sanitizers for kids, and teaching appropriate hygiene

Of the 185 parents who participated in the survey, there were roughly equal male and female participants, but a huge majority (95.1 per cent) lived in urban areas, which confirms the observation made above that the survey did not reach rural areas, and thus could also have missed various vulnerable and marginalized groups. The respondents had children spread evenly across all stages of education. Eighty-five per cent indicated that they found their information on COVID-19 from government websites and Facebook, which indicates a high-level of engagement of the public in urban areas in government-led communications. The respondents actively engaged on what concerned them about a return to school, indicating their strongest concerns for the school's capacity to contain and respond to COVID-19, and then closely behind that, children's hygiene practices. A number of quotes were drawn out of parent responses, including for example:

**"Review lessons for all courses. Don't scare the students but explain to them on how to protect themselves. Strictly apply safety measures and ask students to maintain social distancing. Set up a new course to learn about COVID-19. Allow students access to school-standard hygiene practices such as hand washing stations with soaps, and hand sanitizer at school entrances. Seating in classrooms and lunchrooms should be one to-two metres apart. Maintain social distancing during paying homage to the national flag and activities. Regularly check students' temperature. Listen to students if they have questions or are interested to know about COVID-19."**

A total of 534 students participated in the study, i.e., a huge proportion of the overall survey participation. Over 60 per cent of student respondents were girls, almost 50 per cent of respondents came from Central Laos, and more than 90 per cent were from urban areas. The vast majority of respondents—over 95 per cent—also came from secondary and vocational levels of school, i.e., were of an age group better equipped to respond autonomously to this type of survey (which also indicates a gap in the survey itself, in being difficult to capture the views of younger children). When queried about returning to school, only 35 per cent equivocally responded as happy to return, whereas 52 per cent were worried about safety and 42 per cent worried about learning. More reassuringly, over 70 per cent of students felt confident of protecting themselves from

COVID-19. On returning to school, students appeared most concerned about institutes not supporting them with protective supplies and processes, and that their learning needed to be supported. For example, one student commented:

**"In my opinion, teachers and schools should have measures in place to prevent COVID-19. Advice and propaganda in the education institutions for all students to be alert to protect themselves from this virus. In addition, I think teachers, schools and the Ministry of Education should have online teaching plans through various media, while putting an emphasis on high-level safety measures before reopening schools. This will help compensate for the lost time during school breaks, or the wet season, and help to allow students to have complete lessons and quality. Some students might feel disappointed from previous experiences, and feel discouraged that they may not have school breaks, but instead have to study longer in 2020-2021 because of the disruption during COVID-19. Some subjects or some schools might have online studies, but some students might not get access to those, and some students might feel that they don't have full lessons. I personally am concerned over the safety and worries of studying, so believe that teachers, the ministry of education, the ministry of health, and the government should put more measures into place that support the recovery from this situation."**

Furthermore, there were some efforts to engage communities during the pandemic, e.g., through online, radio and TV platforms, as well as through government-led information campaigns. For example, a workshop on child protection was organized by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism and UNICEF in July 2020, which was attended by 30 government representatives across eight provinces. There was a distribution of 4,800 USB sticks containing public speaking announcements, to be dispersed to villages with community loudspeakers able to spread the messages. In another example, UNICEF launched the '*What does your Pi Mai look like*' campaign<sup>71</sup> to support families to celebrate the New Year without leaving their homes— the focus being on children. As part of that campaign, UNICEF published five illustrations and one animation, with the caption '*Pi Mai may be a bit different this year, but early moments always matter*'. Together, the posts reached over 600,000 people, engaging them over 48,500 times in just five days.

### 3.3 Back-to-school Part II commences (September 2020): Planning for the future

The responses of all participants in the first back-to-school survey highlighted the following common concerns:

- The capacity of schools to maintain safety in response to COVID-19 and to proactively manage the ongoing risks of the pandemic once schools reopened; and
- The need for support in dealing with 'lost learning' during school closures and under the pressures of school reopening.

These fears were certainly recognized by MoES and their partners in the education response, but more needs to be done, as recognized in the Recommendations section below.

Following the extended period of schooling between June and August 2020, children were given a much shorter holiday at the end of August. Schools were then reopened as normal in September. UNICEF Lao PDR has coordinated with MoES to organize another back-to-school survey, using a similar format and questions that were used for the first survey in May 2020 (which is likely to lead to largely urban-centred responses once again). This latest round of the survey involved 90 teachers/school administrators, 672 students, and 247 parents. The survey was on the UNICEF website and distributed via Facebook. It closed in mid-September and the key findings include:

- Students are most concerned about the cleaning and disinfecting of school buildings and grounds when schools reopen;
- 66 per cent of students are confident that they know how to protect themselves from COVID-19 in school;
- 55 per cent of students have seen the TV programmes distributed by MoES via Lao Sat, National TV channels or online;
- 88 per cent of student respondents indicated they have access to a smart device (e.g., smart phone, tablet, laptop, computer) that can be used for online learning. Although it should be remembered that a) this is not a robust sample for confirming national status of access, since the students are self-selecting, and b) students would have needed internet access to complete the survey in the first place, so are highly likely to have such devices in that case; and
- The top two sources of information about COVID-19 were social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter) and the News (TV, radio, online).

These results have been used to highlight the perceptions of education stakeholders in GoL's ongoing COVID-19 planning. In particular, the priorities of MoES may now be cemented or adjusted according to such information, while also influencing the ongoing relationship with international donors. These include the Global Partnership for Education (who have already committed \$7 million) and the European Union (who are being petitioned to commit \$3 million or more to the education response).

### 3.4 Ongoing challenges for Lao PDR's education sector

Although there have been some successes in Lao PDR around its use of technology and different media platforms to transmit learning content at short notice (as well as in the coordination between government departments and levels of the administration), the following challenges and gaps in the response nonetheless remain:

1. For a truly blended approach to work, more comprehensive strategies and associated training and capacity will be required to ensure that schools, principals, teachers and parents are aware of how to support children with distance learning. This includes periods when schools are reopen with face-to-face learning, versus when 'stress' periods arise that potentially lead to partial or full-school closures. This means i) children need to have engaging and accessible content that is tailored to their age/grade; and ii) teachers in particular need developmental support to ensure their readiness to react and tailor education content to different scenarios and different student needs;
2. Access to media platforms, such as TV, radio and internet access, is not universal across Lao PDR, so it cannot be assumed that even a majority of children are accessing content if there is reliance on such methods for transmission, which is particularly the case for very young children in the early years who are reliant on parents/families ensuring their supported access to materials;
3. Children who struggle to access the 'main methods' of transmitting learning content will often be those who are already facing barriers in gaining their education. These include remoteness and distance to schools, weaker access to education resources, demands on the child for household chores and other distractions, lack of support to improve the environment for learning, and risks of being co-opted into agricultural activities and child labour and/or early marriage. Consequently, these vulnerabilities need to be recognized in the context of stress periods as being exacerbated and having a strong impact on the ability of children to engage with distance learning content. Other forms of access to learning and socioemotional support need to be planned for, and the different demands this puts upon schools, communities and parents also recognized and enabled;
4. Furthermore, given the stressors on family/household income, the likelihood that child safeguarding issues could be exacerbated needs recognition and strong efforts to counter, including through communications and training. For example, the risks of malnutrition (especially in light of lack of access to school feeding) and poorer health outcomes (given lack of access to school health screening services), which are potentially most damaging for children in the early and highly formative years of development;
5. The weak availability of data, especially in rural and remote areas, constrains GoL's capacity to target resources, especially when stretched, and to assess the impact of emergency responses. This needs redress through innovative ways of ensuring responsive and reactive data gathering. For example, via tapping into school-level collection methods, or even using village or parent committees to rely on data gathering; and
6. Recognising that budgets will likely contract in the aftermath of stress periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid adjustment to ensure the targeting of the most vulnerable first is needed.



# 04

## Lessons learned



As highlighted during interview, “the health and safety of children is our first priority”, and, “before, we hesitated to use technology, but the pandemic has forced us to adopt any means possible to deliver continued learning.

## 4.1 Plans to build back better

Following interviews with senior representatives of the Lao PDR's MoES and the focal point for disaster response, four major priorities were identified as a result of the learning that has emerged during the pandemic, namely:

1. Prioritising investment into WASH facilities in all schools, especially those in remote areas affected by climate change stress;
2. Adopting a mixed mode of teaching, to ensure the education system can be responsive to shocks;
3. Training and preparing teachers and principals to cope better during disasters; and
4. Increasing spending on education, especially during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, when education outlay could otherwise suffer a decline.

Respondents highlighted during the interviews that, “the health and safety of children is our first priority”, and, “before, we hesitated to use technology, but the pandemic has forced us to adopt any means possible to deliver continued learning”. In light of the ongoing economic downturn, it is likely that rather than increasing spending on education, the focus will be on cost savings, as well as ensuring that allocated resources are targeted at the most marginalized groups. This equitable allocation of funds needs to be done vertically, by targeting the most disadvantaged groups, and horizontally, by supporting ECE/primary/basic levels rather than TVET and higher education.

Lao PDR's experience of the pandemic has been tempered by the relatively short period over which schools were fully closed. As the closure period only lasted eight weeks, MoES was able to extend the school year into the summer holidays to broadly ensure a corresponding ‘catch up’ period. Although this does not eradicate the various issues that are likely to have arisen as a result of the pandemic

and the school closure period, it could have mitigated some of the impacts on education. Nonetheless, children already at risk of drop-out are now much more likely to have been pushed into leaving school; families living just above the poverty line are also likely to be pushed into poverty by the decline in economic activity and reduced GDP; and the various issues facing school-aged children before the pandemic will now be under additional pressure as resources and capacity are stretched.

Aside from the success of reopening schools so quickly and managing to keep children engaged for an extended period to enable catch up, MoES and GoL, with UNICEF Lao PDR, can also point to the following lessons:

- **In a time of emergency, a clear and coordinated response is necessary:** Lao PDR implemented a strong and immediate reaction at national level, in a coordinated manner across line ministries and with leadership from the MoES' Cabinet Office. This was enabled by the use of WhatsApp groups within government to coordinate between different task forces and different levels of the government.
- **One size does not fit all and contextualized responses are needed:** Members of the government and partner organizations used their existing understanding that remote areas were unlikely to benefit from online/media-based platforms, and mobilized the cluster networks of MoES to instruct teachers in such areas to conduct face-to-face, small-group sessions.
- **A range of content for different media and age groups is one of the first steps to continuing access to learning:** MoES rapidly mobilized lesson content, mainly using TV, but also transmitting content via radio, social media and online. The launch of ‘My Village’ – a first-of-its-kind television show for young Lao children under six – provided basic knowledge and skills to support the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.

- **Communication and feedback mechanisms are needed to ensure people are reassured and the response is meeting their needs and fears:** The management of two back-to-school campaigns encouraged the safe return of children to school, first in June, then in September. The delivery of a stakeholder perceptions survey, after each Back-to-School Campaign, enabled MoES to assess the success of the campaign, and the additional communications required around risks.
- **Lessons learned need to feed into plans to build back better:** Clear priorities were identified, based on the gaps emerging during the pandemic, for improving the education system going forward.

## 4.2 Recommendations for increasing resilience to future shocks

In light of the successes, lessons learned and challenges emerging for the education sector in Lao PDR during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following recommendations, to add to the existing priorities identified by GoL, have emerged:

### **Target already-stretched resources to ensure better access to learning, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups.**

Although there have been some successes in Lao PDR around the use of technology and different media platforms to transmit learning content at short notice, the challenges of access are clear and affect marginalized and vulnerable children the most. To enable more equitable and inclusive access:

- Available resources should be re-routed and targeted towards populations known to be vulnerable, especially under stress, which should be backed up by policy. This requires clear mapping of those children at greatest risk, and the 'layers' of disadvantage affecting them. For example, using databases from other ministries on social welfare and health; drawing from civil registries and census; improving the linkage between this data and Lao Education and Sports Management Information System (LES MIS); and also using 'deep dive' research to create a clearer picture of the different profiles of children. Processes for such emergency reaction, as used during natural disasters and humanitarian crises, can be deployed to manage such a response;
- Enhance the communications/connectivity of areas known to be 'out of touch', both through national efforts to improve infrastructure (e.g., exploring the support of options such as the GIGA programme or similar), but also through clustering and networking approaches. For example, via handing out core devices to nodal points and building capacity and training around the use of these during emergencies in particular. This also presents the opportunity to build in overall improvements to teaching and learning by enhancing community engagement and ownership in education;
- Improve data gathering on students' relative access levels during 'normal' times. That is, via mapping of their distance to roads, to nearest populations/village sites and schools, and also charting what types of communications they can access if restricted to their homes, their villages/communities, or their schools;
- Train community volunteers in emergency phase response to education. That is, to be an 'education legion' able to support outreach where school staff are hampered from doing so, focus efforts on training teachers to manage community responses during emergencies, and to be familiar with blended learning approaches to improve overall resilience of the system;
- Support the existence of print libraries at even the most remote levels, which could be linked with not only the 'education legion' and ability to provide basic storytelling and reading services during difficult times, but also with the knock-on impact of enhancing literacy outcomes in future;
- Equip teachers and school staff to perform greater levels of outreach if operating in remote and vulnerable areas, when schools close, or even as an addition to the 'normal' school functioning, which would improve overall quality of teacher support to their students; and
- Target vulnerable and remote communities in particular with initiatives that address the multidimensional needs of children, through for example community-led initiatives and training of community volunteers. UNICEF's Community-Based School Readiness (CBSR) programme was recently evaluated (2019) and one of the main recommendations emerging was that the programme could usefully be continued, but with a more holistic and joined-up approach to the way that CBSR Centres are used, and that these could instead be community hubs for the delivery of various services. For very young children especially, it is essential that basic needs can be met closer to home<sup>72</sup>.

### Marginalized and vulnerable groups are hardest hit, but data is not available to support a focus on their needs.

During the pandemic, the initial priorities have, rightly so, been on reacting to ensure the safety and well-being of children, followed by the continuity of their learning. However, over time the demands for data and information have become much greater, so that in the medium-to-long-term better planning can be initiated, both to not only cope in the aftermath of the first wave of this pandemic, but also to better handle in future waves or other major stressors on the education system. At the moment, there is a lack of data across Lao PDR's education system to capture the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's socioemotional well-being, their learning progress, those who have not returned to school, and the status of schools and their staff. Therefore:

- This requires an urgent focus at a system level on ensuring that data-gathering is systematic and routine, through effective LESMIS and by fully operationalising the GIS system that UNICEF Lao PDR and MoES have established for such tracking. It is critically important to move to a system that tracks individual student profiles and their progression through education. Such a system, linked with other databases on welfare and health, would enable MoES to target and tailor their programmes appropriately. Certain indicators need to be prioritized to enable faster response during emergencies, namely:
  - » The 'baseline' status of school operations and infrastructure— to ensure responsive tracking of the readiness of schools to resume and safely accommodate children; and
  - » Ongoing coordination of data on the numbers of children in schools, their relative levels of vulnerability, and the factors impacting their 'access' to learning (e.g., distance from school, remoteness of their homes, access to devices for communications).
- This also needs to be reviewed through the lens of the pandemic to ensure that future lockdowns and stresses on the system can be better managed to enable continued information flows. For example, by mobilising combined sources of data through WhatsApp and other software apps such as KoBoCollect (which is free and easy to use), and also through telephone surveys, or even some protected types of physical surveying.
- In addition, a functional LESMIS must incorporate better tracking of children that are out of school, and those not yet being fully catered-for by the system. For example, children in their early years, children in remote, marginalized and vulnerable communities, and children forced into child labour. It is essential there are more efforts to track these groups, and to improve planning and targeting for redressing the hurdles facing them.



**Enhance participation in learning by better identifying the needs and localized mechanisms for the most marginalized and vulnerable children. Develop, as part of the education sector plan, clarity of information/ mapping of such needs, and the barriers affecting children in terms of their access and participation in education, especially when schools close.**

There were some efforts to engage communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as outlined in the above chapter. However, just as with managing access to learning, there must be recognition that access to communications and support is not equal, especially for individuals in rural and remote areas, and that additional and different types of outreach will be required to ensure engagement. The pandemic has highlighted the essential role of communities and parents in supporting children to access good quality learning (which indeed must be available in the first place), as well as in guarding the well-being and safety of children. Vulnerable children are time-and-support-poor, so they may merit different solutions in terms of learning, but such solutions are nonetheless likely to benefit all children, including urban-based and/or well-off children. Therefore, future planning should explore the type of options that can work for households in stressed and vulnerable settings— particularly remote and under-served areas. This could be done, for example:

- By mobilising the power of village loudspeakers and arranging for community radios/TVs, as well as through safe face-to-face training;
- By building upon the involvement and functions of village committees, thereby enhancing the understanding and capacity of parents to encourage and support their children's education. This could also include the establishment of community hubs, with targeted training for selected volunteers, to enable better mainstreaming of basic services for children (as has to some extent been the unintended benefit of UNICEF's Community-Based School Readiness programme).
- Equipping (including with additional resources) and enhancing the role of teachers in remote areas to manage these more difficult realities in terms of overseeing and supporting their students.
- Developing tools for parents, teachers and other adults in the community to support play and well-being of children (which can be transmitted via radio, TV, etc).
- Introducing policies, data and quick-response routes available to address the immediate needs of vulnerable

children, tailored to their categories of vulnerability. For example, ethnicity, language, disability, risk of early marriage, and the likelihood of being pulled into child labour. This needs a robust 'monitor' map, and clear action for different ratings of severity.

- Developing a longer-term approach to challenging social norms that put children at risk of missing opportunities for learning, through working with communities to identify the structural and discriminatory social and gender norms that create these challenges. To do this, attitudes and behaviour need to take root, and be led by the communities themselves, allowing space for all voices to be heard and respected and responded to. This will enable a new consensus on the value of education to the community itself to emerge, which education can respond to, through adapted delivery approaches.

**Existing programmes on WASH in schools and school feeding should continue and be targeted to areas where poverty rates and school drop-out are predicted to increase as a result of the pandemic.**

Both MoES and UNICEF recognize the crucial importance of ensuring that the essential aspects of water, sanitation, hygiene and nutrition are factored into the schooling of Lao PDR's children. Especially for the most vulnerable and poorest children, these are determinants of whether kids can concentrate on their learning, grow, develop and stay in school. There were programmes before COVID-19 to ensure good quality WASH facilities in schools and to manage school feeding. The pandemic resulted in additional pressure on such programmes as out-of-school children may not have access to sufficient nutrition, while those schools with poor or no WASH facilities cannot effectively ensure hygiene despite medical advice for regular handwashing. As a result, more children will now fall into vulnerable categories due to pressure on households. Therefore, as children have returned to school, it is essential that:

- These programmes are not only continued and expanded, but directed to the most vulnerable; and
- There is sufficient disaggregated data to capture the condition in schools of both WASH and feeding, against the needs to meet standards and to provide for students. Thus MoES and partners can rapidly address the gaps and strengthen facilities/services.

## 4.3 Conclusion

Considering the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region, Lao PDR has made significant efforts to mitigate the effects of the virus on the level of access children have to learning, and the quality of that learning. However, these efforts have been hampered by existing systemic weaknesses, such as a lack of timely and accurate data, high rates of drop-out and poor-quality indicators, and existing inequalities within the country that have for many years resulted in unequal access, participation and learning outcomes.

The purpose of this study was:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector and stakeholders (children, adolescents, teachers, parents, education officials etc.); and
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

In response to these objectives, it is important to first factor that a) Lao PDR's schools did not close for a prolonged period and the school year was extended sufficiently to match the lost time; b) the pandemic is not being felt first-and-foremost as a health emergency as infection rates remain extremely low in Lao PDR; and c) therefore, the main challenges emerging in Lao PDR are a combination of existing problems (pre-pandemic, combined with the economic impact that is beginning to emerge). So, on one hand pre-pandemic problems are under the spotlight as they indicate a lack of readiness for a serious shock to the education system if, or when, that arises. on the other hand, the economic downturn will affect the education system's ability to function, and indeed to improve, while simultaneously deepening the challenges faced by the most vulnerable families. This will play out in rates of drop-out or non-returnees to school, as well as the ability of children to continue their learning when it is interrupted.

Therefore, as summarized in the findings of this study and its recommendations, the most stark impacts currently are: 1) Increased inequality in access to, participation in and results of education for children, with the most vulnerable at the losing end; 2) A great number of families

at risk of dropping into or further into poverty, impacting their capacity to support their children's learning; and 3) A lack of clear oversight of this situation within GoL, given its poor access to systematic and adequate data to present the situation. Furthermore, this study highlights that while distance learning is a necessity when schools close, there is no evidence yet that Lao PDR has been able to provide this for all children adequately, and the impact of what has been provided has not been assessed. Consequently, to build more resilience, and a much more holistic-blended learning approach that extends beyond the requirements of emergency-response alone, there is a need for data on impact and what worked. And also planning for how, in future, all children can be reached, all staff are ready for different modes of education delivery, and the system as a whole is more resilient and flexible to shocks.

Some successes of note that emerged through this study were due to MoES' coordination with UNICEF to run a back-to-school campaign strategy that included two phases of a survey to gauge student, parent and teacher feelings about the return to school. The rapid delivery of these surveys and their results enabled better planning of the government around its school opening communications, as well as some initial information around beneficiary experiences of the distance learning provided during closure. Additionally, while there was no data available to corroborate this, MoES directed teachers in the most remote areas to gather small groups of children for learning, in recognition of their lack of access— this being one step towards a more holistic approach to distance learning.

While Lao PDR is unlikely to see an increase in its education budget, the pandemic gives the country an opportunity to take stock of its current challenges and to focus going forward on ensuring better quality and more equitable learning opportunities for all children. Not least through gathering a much clearer, coordinated picture of what the current situation is for children. It is hoped that the recommendations set out in this study would provide Lao PDR with discussion points for how this could be done. Through the sub-regional and regional lessons that have emerged from this rapid assessment, the country can also begin to look at ideas from similar countries within the same geographical context, and how these could be adapted to Lao PDR's situation.

# Annex: Interview framework

The purpose of this interview will be to learn from the experience, insights and ideas of GoL representatives. It would be useful to hear the story of the period between initial closure of schools in March 2020, to the full reopening of the new school year in September 2020.

We would like to focus on what went well and worked effectively, what didn't, and any challenges: For example, any 'new' responses/actions that were initially devised during the pandemic, which the government has now decided to continue; any awareness of major gaps that the government has now recognized and decided to redress and prioritize going forward; plus, what the current situation is now that schools have reopened. So, we will move from how the sector initially reacted, to how the response matured, into what lessons, challenges and insights from this period are now being used to plan ahead.

It would therefore be helpful to discuss:

1. **March – May 2020:** The initial response of the education sector in Lao PDR– what happened? What went well? What were the immediate challenges?
2. **June – August 2020:** How were the initial lessons emerging captured? What information sources did the government rely on to keep an accurate picture of what children, communities and teachers were doing? Were there any gaps in information and understanding, i.e., 'invisibility'? Did you have concerns about 'loss of learning'? What was done to tackle these issues? Do you feel the measures worked? How did the situation and information then influence the planning for reopening in September?
3. **September 2020 and beyond:** What preparations were made for reopening in September? Do you feel the preparations were comprehensive, or are there gaps? How are you now capturing information on the situation in schools? Is there any focus on 'lost learning'? How are you handling the potential anxiety and stress from the pandemic? In terms of thinking about the future, how are MoES working on the long-term planning to make the education system more resilient to future shocks? Do you have thoughts/concerns about the funding available for future planning, especially if pandemic readiness creates an additional burden? Do you think the education allocations will remain the same, be increased, or reduced? And, ultimately, how do you see the situation affecting the progress towards SDG-4?
4. **Overarching:** Throughout all three phases above, it would also be useful to understand what you feel the situation for the most marginalized and vulnerable children was– were they able to access education? Were they able to access other types of support? Have they come back to school? Are their needs being managed?



Handwritten text on a framed poster, likely a motto or educational message in a non-Latin script.

# Endnotes

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# Lao PDR Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects  
of and Responses to COVID-19  
on the Education Sector in Asia

This report reviews the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on education in Lao PDR, provides reflections on lessons learned so far in Lao PDR's COVID-19 response, and analyzes capacity gaps for recovery. It explores successful elements of the Government response, issues and challenges faced, and strategies adopted to continue students' learning during school closure. It also looks to the future, in building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

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