



LAO PDR EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORTS



Developed with the support of UNICEF Lao PDR

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Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The COVID-19 outbreak is global public health crisis. In this connection, most the governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the Lao education and sport sector with the nationwide closures impacting more than one million students. The Education COVID-19 Response Plan has been developed by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) with the support of UNICEF and in collaboration with the Education Cluster. MoES leads the Education Cluster with UNICEF and Save the Children as co-leads. The intent is to use this plan as a key reference for interventions of the MoES and Development Partners to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the education sector and ensure the health and well-being of students and education staff, as well as support continuity of learning.

Objectives

This response plan has the following objectives:

1. Support learners, educators, caregivers/parents and school communities to prevent the transmission and spread of Covid-19 in line with national public health guidance, and ensure the well-being of learnings and education staff
2. Ensure continuity of learning through the implementation of diverse/key learning activities/opportunities aimed at quality learning and wellbeing of learners, teachers, caregivers/parents, school communities taking into account equity and inclusivity
3. Support the safe and inclusive return to school/educational institutions for learners, teachers, caregivers/parents, school communities
4. Ensure a coordinated Government and Development Partners response to COVID-19 prevention and control measures for the education sector, in coordination with other sectors

Education Cluster Coordination

The Lao PDR Education Cluster is led by the Ministry of Education and Sports, and co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children. Education Cluster members include UN agencies, multilateral and bilateral organizations, INGOs, NGOs and civil society organizations working in the Lao Education Sector. An updated list of Cluster Members is included in the Annex. From MoES, cluster coordination is led by the Cabinet Office. See contact details below of the Cluster lead and co-leads. A Cluster WhatsApp group has been set-up as well as google drive shared folders to facilitate sharing of information and materials on COVID-19.

The Government of Lao PDR (GoL), under the leadership of the National Task Force Committee for Covid-19 Prevention and Control is leading Lao PDR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. MoES is part of the National Task Force Committee.

Lead	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)	
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Needs Overview

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020. Like other countries, Lao PDR has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with the first case confirmed on 23 March 2020. Latest figures and updates on the COVID-19 situation in Laos are available from the [Lao Government's website on COVID-19](#).

All schools and educational institutions have been closed since 19 March. This has disrupted the learning of 1,708,501 students enrolled in the pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary as well as technical-vocational schools and other educational institutions throughout the country for the school year 2019-2020.¹ A prolonged school closure could further put children and young people's learning and well-being at risk. The protection of learners and education staff is particularly important. Precautions are necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings. At the same time, care must also be taken to avoid stigmatizing students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus. As of 1 May 2020, the Government has announced partial re-opening of schools, in particular Grade 5 (last year of primary education), Grade 9/Secondary Level 4 (end of lower secondary), and Grade 12/Secondary Level 7 (end of upper secondary). Other grades will continue the learning from home modality until further notice.

Moreover, an estimated 1,900 schools have been used as quarantine centers for returning migrant workers and would need to be properly disinfected before the reopening of schools. In total, Lao PDR has 24,862 pre-schools, 25,979 primary and 19,147 secondary schools; 1,708,501 students; 89,945 teachers and 16,571 education administration staff; 8 Teacher Training Colleges, four universities, 18 technical and vocational schools under the jurisdiction of MoES. Community Learning Centers (CLCs) have also been providing non-formal education to out-of-school children who have been as affected by the pandemic as those who are in school. Boarding schools (schools with dormitories) are also common across the country and would require additional support to re-open.

In the last five years, Lao PDR has experienced a surge in natural disasters that have destroyed school facilities, educational equipment and teaching-learning materials, particularly textbooks and teacher guidebooks. This further exacerbated the lack of textbooks, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, the majority of rural households have limited access to national television as well as the internet. Many schools don't have access to electricity. Digital literacy remains low, including among teachers. An estimated 25% of schools do not have water supply or functioning water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) facilities making it a challenge to practice proper hygiene as part of prevention and control of the spread of COVID-19.

The Lao context necessitates putting in place a mix of interventions to meet the learning needs of the population, including vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. This would include a blend of using print, TV, radio and online platforms to support continuity of learning, accompanied by support to teachers and parents/caregivers so they can facilitate learning at home. When schools eventually re-open, additional support may be needed by some students who have lagged further behind. It is also important to put in place interventions that are inclusive and sustainable and can continue to be used post COVID or during other emergencies, such as closure of schools due to floods. The current situation provides an opportunity for MoES to put in place a sustainable distance education system of good quality, including a satellite education television that can be used both by students and for professional development of teachers.

Assumptions

The COVID-19 pandemic is defined by a rapidly changing situation and uncertainty. This Education COVID-19 Response Plan took into consideration the following assumptions:

¹ Source: MoES.

- While the transmission, spread and affected population is difficult to predict, the closure of schools will be one of the mitigation measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. Schools may be re-opened, in full or partially, if the situation improves but a “second-wave” of infections could be possible that could again impact on schools staying open.
- International assistance and funding will be made available for the implementation of response activities to ensure children and young people will be able to continue their education.
- Education Cluster partners have the capacity to support the MoES and the government-led national task force in the implementation of the Education COVID-19 response.
- Education Cluster partners will be able to implement programs in affected and non-affected communities. There will be no quarantine, lockdown or moratorium on humanitarian programming.

Strategic principles:

Aligned with National Government policies, plans, and rules and regulations; and priority inter-sectoral interventions

The response plan is drafted based on the National Government’s policies, plans, strategies, rules and regulations, and directives, especially in relation to COVID-19 prevention and control. Key interventions, decisions and protocols are guided by the National Task Force Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control. It is also important for the response plan to include integrated interventions and reflect coordinated, collective actions across sectors, particularly in line with health and hygiene protocols and communication.

Inclusive education, equity, gender, disability

During the COVID-19 crisis, the most marginalized children including those with disabilities, struggling learners, children from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, children in the most rural hard-to-reach and poorest communities and girls, particularly as the caregiving burden is exasperated by the closure of schools, may not be able to access remote learning opportunities. Vulnerabilities may also expand, shift, or multiply during health emergencies. For example, girls may be more susceptible to gender-based violence and be more isolated as their school peer support network shrinks. The inability to access learning may be due to a lack of access to internet, failure to afford required equipment or simply because the modality of delivery may not meet their needs.

Building back better/resilience

The response plan strives to build the resilience of school communities through the COVID-19 preparedness and response activities, for example, the development of mixed/inclusive learning opportunities tailored to the different needs of learners, the provision of WASH facilities (tippy taps and soap), dissemination of hygiene messages, amongst others. This also aligns with the MoES aim of strengthening preparedness and resilience of the education sector to disasters.

Response framework

As stated above, the Education COVID-19 Response Plan includes three objectives corresponding to schools remaining open and/or closing: objective 1 – prevention; objective 2 – mitigation, continuity of learning during school closure; and objective 3 – safe return, opening-up better. A fourth objective is to ensure a coordinated response is implemented throughout.

Key interventions are identified below based on specific scenarios. These interventions contribute to achieving the objectives identified in the response plan. Further target setting, prioritization and costing is needed.

SCENARIO 1: Schools remain open and/or decide to close

Priority objectives: prevention; prepare continuity of learning options; coordinated response

Key Interventions

- Continue with hygiene communication messages and risk communication on COVID-19, distribution of soaps, gel, alcohol and masks to schools along with communication packages (schools in urban centers and border areas may be prioritized, depending on the situation);
- Procurement of hygiene kit (e.g. soaps, tippy taps, cleaning materials for schools)
- Working with the Government-led communication task force (of which MoES is also a member), continue to develop communication materials on COVID-19 prevention and control (e.g. videos, infographics, posters and flyers) and social media messages (main channels: whatsapp groups, social media, community radio, TV spots)
- Assess risks of especially vulnerable students in the event of school closures (i.e. risk of drop out, loss of school meals, violence and sexual exploitation) and coordinate with other sectors, where needed, to provide emergency access to essential services
- Adapt to Lao context the global Safe Schools Guidance: "[key messages and actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#)" from UNICEF, WHO and IFRC (Mar 2020) with endorsement of MoES and MoH
- Continued dissemination of locally adapted Safe Schools Guidance
- Convene Education Cluster meeting(s) for sharing of information and identification of support for MoES; initiate mapping of Development Partner's support
- Planning for next phase/scenario (if schools are to be closed, provide clear instructions to schools on how to support remote learning during school closures)
- Support for MoES monthly school sharing information meeting every week with close monitoring the implementation of the emergency and disease prevention plan.

Scenario 2: Schools closed, partial or nationwide

Priority objectives: prevention; continuity of learning options; prepare for opening-up better; coordinated response

Key interventions:

- MoES set target date for school re-opening (if situation permits) and make adjustments to extend/revise the school calendar; communicate plan and new schedule for national exams (grade 5, 9 and 12, and university entrance exams)²
- Continue to share key information and messages on prevention of COVID-19 spread via the Education network; continue developing more communication materials, including advocating social distancing and risk communication
- Identify and implement interventions to support continuous learning while schools are closed. A mix of different interventions can be implemented taking into consideration the needs of different learners, including children from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, children with disabilities, children in remote rural areas, etc. and the realities in the communities. Below are some options based on examples from other countries.
 - Ensure all students bring their textbooks home and assign homework to students in line with curriculum; this requires clear guidance for teachers to monitor students' progress using various applicable modalities

² Another option is to adjust the learning priorities to ensure that the curriculum is covered in a shorter time

- Printing of textbooks and additional learning materials approved by MoES for distribution to students
- Engage parents/guardians to support home-based learning: with the support of Development Partners, activities can be developed, including routines and learning games to be shared to parents and additional learning materials approved by MoES, as well as tips for parents to support home-learning; many schools already have phone numbers or a WhatsApp group for parents, this network can be used for sharing of information; DESBs, VEDCs and some INGOs can share materials to parents via their networks; this also provides opportunity to increase parental engagement in their children’s learning and development
 - Develop key learning activities for students and share via various platforms, e.g. community radio, online/social media platforms, etc.; beginning and end of lessons can include key messages on promoting preventative measures
 - Produce additional educational programmes building on the TV/radio educational programme aired on satellite TV, national TV and radio channels under MOES and the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (MICT), including sharing of already aired educational TV programmes like “My Village TV”³ and “Learn Together Laos.”⁴ Develop more programmes as needed for example the parental involvement of children learning to educate about the new way of learning. The additional educational programmes to cover primary and secondary education, including sports, beginning and end of lessons can include key messages on promoting preventative measures. This could include a long-term plan to further expand educational programmes on national TV/satellite TV and radio, which can also be made available online.⁵
 - Provide TV and Satellite Receiver Set to rural schools, where possible. This can also help address the existing shortage of teachers and lack of qualified teachers, particularly in remote areas. Educational TV programmes can also be used as a platform to support professional development of teachers.
 - Promote online learning through the development of an education platform where education resources and materials for primary, lower secondary and secondary, even higher education and TVET are compiled. This online platform can house all online courses, apps, and integrate access to TV, Radio, YouTube channels, videos on education. The platform can be used during the school closure and post COVID/other emergencies. This will also require digital literacy and related trainings for teachers.⁶ Online safety will be a key consideration.
 - Develop resources (including videos) for teachers on how to support students’ remote learning. These can also include how teachers can help their students re-start their education and catch up in their learning when schools re-open. These resources will be made freely available on the MoES webpage and social media platforms, and disseminated through other means. Use existing social media groups (e.g. WhatsApp and Facebook Groups) or create new ones for teachers to learn from each other and provide peer support.
 - In remote rural areas, if safe to do so, identify locations for small groups of children to meet with their teacher(s) on a regular basis (e.g. every other day/once a week) following strict social distancing protocols
 - In coordination with relevant Ministries/Government bodies, provide appropriate psychosocial support to students and education staff, where needed. This could include providing teachers some

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5glkZIKxC_8&list=PLbMyTOMNzJVe_dIM1KiaW6HQw1JG51Eo

⁴ www.youtube.com/channel/UCWX8AimAWIVBsyVX3CZPFCw

⁵ According to the 2017 LSIS-II, 79.3% of Lao households have access to a TV (94.1% in urban areas, and 72.2% in rural areas); 92.3% of households (at least one person from the household) have access to a mobile phone: 98.2% in urban areas, and 89.4% in rural areas.

⁶ This platform can be developed with support of Development Partners. Partnerships with internet service providers can be explored for possible subsidized or zero cost of connection to government websites, platforms and online education resources.

orientation on providing psychosocial support to students, as well as sharing information on the psychosocial support hotline set-up by the Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, among others.

- Disseminate additional materials and messages on helping children and young people cope with stress during COVID-19
- Additional strategies/interventions can be tailored for remote areas with limited internet, radio and TV access, including further discussions on role of Provincial and District Education Officers and Pedagogical Advisers to support continuity of learning during school closures
- Put in place monitoring mechanism to monitor uptake and effectiveness of various continuity of learning options
- Enter into partnerships with Development Partners (e.g. INGOs) who have a presence in communities/districts throughout the country and can support dissemination of messages and continuous learning for children (mapping of Development Partners would also be needed)
- Convene Education Cluster meeting(s) for sharing of information and identification of support for MoES (could be virtual meetings)
- If schools are used as quarantine centers, ensure provision of cleaning and other supplies to these schools, including clear instructions for disinfection/cleaning
- Provision of take-home rations, distributing remaining food stock at the schools to the students and their families, adhering to strict protocols on social distancing and hygiene during distributions
- To prepare for re-opening of schools, ensure schools have in place water, soap and handwashing facilities and have put in place plans for regular handwashing
- Planning for next phase/scenario

Scenario 3: Safer return/re-opening of schools

Priority objectives: prevention; opening-up better; coordinated response

Key interventions:

- Depending on the situation and as per guidance from national public health authorities, school openings can be staged/phased, for example, they could initially be limited to a few days of the week, or only apply to certain grades or levels. National policies should provide clear guidance for sub-national assessment and decision making. Further guidance can be found in the [Framework for Reopening Schools](#) released by UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and WFP (April 2020).⁷
- Launch a “Back to School” campaign for information sharing and to rebuild trust/assure stakeholders on safety and protection of learners and education staff upon school reopening. The campaign will take into account how to reach teachers, parents and students in remote areas.
- MoES in consultation with the National Task Force Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control will develop clear and easy-to-understand protocols on physical distancing measures, including prohibiting activities that require large gatherings, staggering the start and close of the school day, staggering feeding times, moving classes to temporary spaces or outdoors, and having school in shifts to reduce class size.⁸
- Implement the [Lao PDR Safe School Operations Guidance](#)⁹ and disseminate widely, including trainings for school principals and selected teachers to implement the guidance and on preparing and implementing school level protocols; Disseminate widely via MoES and Development Partners WhatsApp groups and other

⁷ English version can be downloaded from: www.unicef.org/documents/framework-reopening-schools

⁸ As per guidance from the *Framework for Reopening Schools* released by UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and WFP (April 2020)

⁹ Lao version available here: www.unicef.org/laos/reports/covid-19-prevention-and-control-schools-lao-version

platforms; (Guidance is adapted from the Safe Schools Guidance: [key messages and actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#) from UNICEF, WHO and IFRC (Mar 2020).

- In coordination with the district/provincial health authorities, ensure that schools used as quarantine centers have been properly disinfected
- Ensure that boarding schools/schools with dormitories, have protocols in place and staff are trained to implement safe operations; Ensure these schools have water, soap and cleaning supplies
- Learning contents when schools resume may need to be adjusted based on what are the essential parts of the curriculum (or skills/knowledge that need to be mastered) with accompanying learning assessment also adjusted
- Prepare for additional catch-up tutorial / remedial support for children, including those who could not access online media, radio or TV.
- Put in place monitoring mechanism to monitor implementation of safe school operations guidance and school-level protocols by introducing the developed application on School Safety Self-Assessment Survey. This application can be used by the school principal and can immediately get feedback.
- Continue sharing hygiene promotion messages and provision of soaps and tippy taps to schools in need; promotion of handwashing with soap in schools.
- Promote messages that encourage empathy and inclusion, and which discourages stigma and discrimination in the wake of the pandemic.
- Increase the share of schools with safe water, handwashing stations, cleaning supplies and, wherever possible, establish or expand sex segregated toilets or latrines including provisions for menstrual hygiene management. This includes constructing or rehabilitating boreholes and gravity-fed water systems in schools with acute water shortage; and connecting village water points to schools and establish connections within schools to handwashing stations (as well as latrines, kitchens and gardens)
- Support cleaning /disinfecting schools as needed, including provision of supplies
- Creating Learning Resource Centers within the Cluster Schools, including provision of learning materials both electronic and print.
- In case of areas where there are many confirmed COVID cases, support schools to provide psychosocial support to students and teachers by providing training and relevant materials to schools and deploying additional qualified personnel to provide psychosocial support
- Convene Education Cluster meeting(s) for sharing of information and identification of support for MoES
- Identify any other measures needed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and support the education system to recover – depending on the severity of the situation (could include assessment on dropout/students not returning back to school, impact on learning outcomes, additional support for catch-up/remedial programmes for students, etc.)

Monitoring and Evaluation

Targets will be set (MoES will identify priority areas) and a simple online platform for monitoring and reporting of the COVID-19 education response will be set-up. The 3W – who is doing what, where – template used by emergency clusters around the world will be used. This will allow for various development partners to contribute to the monitoring and reporting. Available MoES data from the Education Management Information System (EMIS) will also be used. Note that further target-setting and costing of different interventions need to be prepared.

ANNEX 1: List of MoES Officials

No.	Name	Position	Email	Phone Number
1.	Assoc. Prof. Dr. Phout SIMMALAVONG	Vice-Minister of Education and Sports	Phouth_s@yahoo.com	020-2241-7101 021-253-254
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6.	Mr. Keth Phanlack	Director General of Department of Teacher Education	Keth_ph@yahoo.com	020-2220-4585
7.	Ms. Khampaseuth KITINGGAVONG	Deputy Director of Department of Planning/Project Director GPEII/ECE	khampaseuth.kitignavong@yahoo.com	020-2222-0471
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9.	Mr. Banchong LADTHAVARN	Deputy Director of Department of General Education		020-9980-1945
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ANNEX 2: Education Cluster Members – Development Partners (updated as of 27 April 2020)

List of Education Cluster Members from Development Partners				
	Organization	Name	Email	Phone Number
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21.	British Embassy			
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32.	KOICA			
33.	Lux Development	Peter Kurt Hansen Tony Donovan	peter.hansen@luxdev.lu Tony.Donovan@luxdev.lu	
34.	Pestalozzi Children's Foundation (PCF)	Khamseng Homdouangxay	k.homdouangxay@pestalozzi.ch	
35.	Plan International	Vilasack Viraphanh	Vilasack.Viraphanh@plan-international.org	
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