



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter March 2013

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Dreams come true for a social worker in Laos: From village schools to social work education Xuyen Dangers

Laos is a mountainous landlocked country of 6.5 million people (2012 estimate) in Southeast Asia bordered by Burma, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. About 85% of the people live by subsistence agriculture in rural villages. The 49 ethnic groups speak various languages and many do not speak Lao, the official language. Although rich in resources, Laos is one of the least developed nations. The poverty rate is 26%, declining steadily in the last decade.

Problems of Children and Youth

School attendance is increasing. However about 14% of children still do not attend elementary school especially in remote areas, where there are high levels of poverty or the children do not speak Lao, the language of instruction. Many drop out of school for a wide range of reasons, such as not being able to afford uniforms, the distance to school may be too great or getting there is too dangerous. Some families have to sacrifice children's education to more pressing needs. Poor conditions at the schools also discourage attendance. Schools may be poorly equipped with inadequate educational tools, textbooks, tables and benches. Teachers are poorly paid and sometimes salaries are delayed. The lack of toilets, running water for washing and drinking water is another deterrent, especially for girls.

School children and families are showing a variety of social problems as Laos adapts to a changing society. Drug use, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, health problems and poverty all contribute to children dropping out of school.

Starting to work with School Children

I am a Vietnamese American social worker trained in Vietnam and the Philippines. After over 20 years working in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea and Thailand, I came to Laos in 1995 to use my social work skills to meet the needs of village children, their families and the community. I watched, listened and talked with the people, and found that the best way to start was with culturally acceptable activities that the people enjoy and could be done with available resources. The following is just a sketch of what has been accomplished in the villages and how social work has started in Laos. My observations showed me problems such as teenagers sniffing

glue, human trafficking and child labor, but these problems had to wait while I worked with the flow and developed a program.

By 1998 it was possible to help establish the Donkoi Children's Development Center, DCDC, at the primary school in Donkoi village near Vientiane, the capital. First we had to identify a small problem that could be easily solved. Should it be addressing the glue sniffing youth or repairing the broken tables and benches at Donkoi primary school? That is it! Repairing the broken tables and benches was a real need of the school and local resources were available for this in Mr. Khamvanh, a good carpenter and a good villager, the first manager of DCDC for 13 years, before he became the Donkoi village chief in 2011.



Monkey Dance training by social worker

We started with locally available familiar resources, i.e. the carpenter for teaching carpentry, a vegetable/flower garden and weaving. We formed a dance club with drumming, singing and Lao traditional dance. Slowly an after-school program containing these few activities was introduced and the program became DCDC. Other activities were introduced including rice planting, recycling plastic and garbage, reading promotion, music, clown training, theater and drama and sports. Soon the village authorities recognized DCDC, and we added more activities such as computer training and new facilities such as the Dream

Garden, the Dream Toilet and the Dream Library.

Slowly we began working to rehabilitate drug abusers. We began to hold workshops on HIV/AIDS and drug abuse and we facilitated workshops for many different groups from the community including children, youth, teachers and parents, focusing on after school activities for youth, volunteerism, and child rights (UNCRC).

We also work on improving the quality of education, providing training to the teachers to equip them to help children who are weak academically or at risk. Teachers in Donkoi are involved in the after school activities, working with DCDC. We provide scholarships, uniforms and notebooks for the poorest children. When a child is absent from school, either a DCDC staff, volunteer or social work intern goes to the child's home to talk and follow-up with parents.

After 13 years, after-school activities and centers similar to DCDC have been slowly established at schools in seven more villages. With help from DCDC and NGO's each village has developed its own program.

Social Work Education in Laos

By 2005, After 10 years working directly in the schools in the communities, including eight months with The National Drug Rehabilitation Center in Vientiane in 2004-2005, the time seemed right for me to introduce social work training in Laos. Now the National University of Laos has a program called the Bachelor of Social Work and Development at The Faculty of Social Science. In 2010 the first batch of 79 students graduated. Laos now has 250 trained social workers/development workers. Over 30 of them have volunteer experience in three child development centers/hospitals under my mentoring program.



Graduation ceremony for sw graduates

Journey to DCDC in Laos <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVK7bq7IVLE>