

The CONNECT Project: A model for advancing development goals at a local level in Lao PDR

June 2021



Cord



European Union
ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ

Funded by the
European Union

ABOUT CORD

People flourish when all parts of society work together. Peaceful relationships make that possible. The simple act of talking begins a journey of growth which transforms mistrust, includes the excluded and turns adversaries into allies.

Cord recognises that relationships are like seeds. They are the beginning of point needed to make peace a reality. It is only once trust puts down roots that you can start to tackle the issues that can lead to violence such as poverty, denial of rights or cultural division. We turn those seeds and roots of peace into a blossoming garden in three key ways.

We provide people with new skills and confidence. We open the doors to make connections possible between key groups that were previously distanced from one another. We ensure that everyone understands their rights, responsibilities and resulting power.

Like a well-cared for garden, peace can grow and stand fast, weathering whatever comes next. This makes it possible for communities to have futures where its members live free from the threat of violence, being wrongly arrested or being mistreated.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of CONNECT project Consortium partners and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Cover photo: Students from Long Lan primary school, Kham district, Xiengkhouang Province gathering and enjoying their break in the classroom. © Cord

Background

The European Union (EU) supported project: Capacity Development and Networking to Enhance Civil Society in Lao PDR (CONNECT), ran over a period of four years, from July 2017 to June 2021, implemented by Cord, in partnership with HELVETAS Intercooperation GmbH, Participatory Development Knowledge Agency (PAKA) and the Learning for Development Association (LDA) in the provinces of Xiengkhouang, Champassak, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Oudomxay and Vientiane Capital.

The overall objective of CONNECT was to strengthen the capacity and conditions through which Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Local Authorities (LAs) are able to contribute to reaching Lao PDR's development outcomes more effectively and sustainably.

CONNECT comprised four elements, with each building progressively upon the other throughout. The first strengthened the capacity of Lao CSOs in the areas of organisational development, governance and representation, while the second created spaces for networking and dialogue. The aim was to build a strong and well-respected civil society capable of confidently working with other institutions. The third and fourth elements built upon these foundations, seeking to improve relationships and build trust between the Government and Civil Society through the joint design and implementation of a development project, and by using the learning from these endeavours to influence education and nutrition policy.

The third and fourth elements are the focus of this model and included the design and implementation of a collaborative project in local communities between one lead Non-Profit Association (NPA) - the sub-grant recipient, LAs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs). Seven projects in total were funded under a sub-grant scheme. The collaborative projects began with a joint needs assessment to determine the particular challenges related to nutrition and education in the respective communities, followed by planning sessions to design a project in response to the identified needs. All lead NPAs and their partners were supported and coached by the CONNECT team throughout the process.

Lessons learnt from the 4 provincial case studies have been collated into this model outlining a pathway for successful engagement between CSOs, LAs and others stakeholders on development issues. Cord and its partners hope that the recommendations and lessons can be used by others to replicate successes across different provinces and development sectors, in order to improve policies, planning and service delivery for communities.

Case studies methodology: A series of interviews were held with stakeholders involved or impacted by the projects. Observations were also shared from participation at the sharing and learning events which took place at the end of the sub-grant period. In each province, the main achievements were highlighted and a series of key trends and common patterns were identified. Lessons learnt from these elements have been analysed to elaborate a model and list of recommendations for future projects.

THE CONNECT SUB-GRANTS

The aim of the CONNECT sub-grants was to improve and strengthen the capacity of Lao CSOs and LAs to respond effectively to local development needs and provide higher quality and more inclusive community service delivery to vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. The focus of the sub-grant projects was on education and nutrition, targeting mostly primary schools and their communities.

The NPAs selected did not all have mandates relating specifically to these sectors, however it is important to note that there are limited NPAs across the whole country and thus part of the project design idea was to test whether it was possible to build capacity and confidence, and vitally relationships that could successfully improve development outcomes across various sectors. Part of the overarching CONNECT methodology is to showcase the added value of a strong and diverse civil society to support its continued growth and development.



A group of Students from Nong Mai primary school, Kham District, Xiengkhouang Province are having lunch together as part of an activity on nutrition promotion. © Cord

Sub-grants were awarded to seven NPAs in seven districts, with projects running across a total of thirteen communities and primary schools (see table 1). The projects were implemented collaboratively between the NPAs, LAs and CBOs,

these were predominantly the local Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). The common goals of the sub-grant projects were to improve nutrition awareness and education outcomes, including on Lao language comprehension.

Table 1: Sub-grant project implementers

Province	District	Lead NPA	Local Authority	Community Based Organisation
Champassak	Pathoumphone	Lao Disabled People's Association Champassak Province (LDPA CPS)	Social Welfare Bureau	Ban NaKham VEDC Ban Lak40 VEDC
	Khong	Khong Community Development Association (KCDA)	District Education and Sports (DoES)	Ban Boung VEDC Ban NaFang VEDC
Savannakhet	Xaybouly	Community Development Association (CoDA)	District Education and Sports (DoES)	Ban SomSaAt VEDC
	Champhone	Sengsavang (SSV)	District Education and Sports (DoES)	Ban PakKoui VEDC
Vientiane Capital	Hadxayfong	Association for the Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE)	Lao Front for National Development (LFND)	Ban Thamouang VEDC Ban Thana Leng VEDC
	Pakngeum	Life Skills Development Association (LSDA)	Lao Front for National Development (LFND)	Ban Tha Koi Hai VEDC Ban Xieng Lae Tha VEDC
Xiengkhouang	Kham	Lao Disabled People's Association Xiengkhouang Province (LDPA XKH)/ People with Disabilities Development Association (PDDA)	District Education and Sports (DoES)	Ban Long Lan VEDC Ban Nong Mai VEDC Ban XaiyNadu VEDC

Highlights from the Case Studies



CHAMPASSAK PROVINCE

The Khong Community Development Association (KCDA) was well-known and respected in Khong District and they had had good relationships with various local authorities for several years prior to the CONNECT project. This proved advantageous as there was **already a clear space for engagement and existing channels of communication**. The sub-grant project was however the first time that KCDA had engaged with VEDCs and worked collaboratively with village authorities and schools to establish a joint action mechanism. The result was an improvement in the achievement of education and nutrition targets in schools and VEDCs representatives from Pathoumphone Village reported feeling they could finally understand their roles and contribute to improving education.

The Lao Disabled People's Association in Champassak (LDPA CPS) had a clear mandate to assist and improve the livelihoods of people with disabilities, but had not previously translated this into work in schools. As education and nutrition were not their areas of expertise it was important that they were able to **build strong collaborative relationships with the DoES and District office of Health (DoH) in order to draw on their technical expertise** in the implementation of the projects. The sub-grant project provided an opportunity for them to develop new relationships with local authorities, teachers and students, which are valuable soft skills for future projects. Through the project they were also able to particularly draw attention to the specific needed of two students with disabilities and their families in the schools.



XIENGKHOANG PROVINCE

Similar to their counterpart in Champassak, the Lao Disabled Peoples' Association in Xiengkhouang (LDPA XKH)/People with Disabilities Development Association (PDDA) has a mandate to improve the livelihoods of disabled people in Xiengkhouang Province, with limited knowledge and experience working in the education sector. Through the sub-grant project they managed to work collaboratively with DoES and the three target schools and communities. LDPA XKH/PDDA have **realised that they can engage and utilise technical expertise from LAs and support from VEDCs and their communities** in order to implement projects outside of their own expertise. The CONNECT project capacity building activities combined with sub-grant project implementation enabled LDPA XKH/PDDA to expand its reach to primary education, schoolteachers and students. LDPA XKH/PDDA also reported that relationships built and strengthened through the project led to **the organisation being invited to be involved with provincial and district activities related to people with disabilities**.

Complications around Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) resulted in poorly managed collaboration, delays and confusion in the early stages of sub-grant implementation. The budget was also stretched over three communities and schools. It was nevertheless concluded that the success of the project is owed to the participation and collaboration between the schools, VEDCs and LAs with assistance and leadership from LDPA XKH/PDDA. CONNECT provided an opportunity for the VEDCs to put the skills and competences they had gained from previous capacity development activities to use. The project helped them identify how they could contribute to education outcomes and gave them incentives to engage with their partners.



VIENTIANE CAPITAL

Ms. Souphone Voravong, Project Coordinator of Vientiane Capital LFND, reported that the CONNECT sub-grant project was **the first time that they had engaged in a joint community development programme**. Each stakeholder played a crucial role in ensuring successful implementation: The Vientiane Capital LFND coordinated with the District Governor to inform them about the project, while at the same time, the district LAs, NPAs and CBOs discussed and identified target villages.

The Association for the Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) works on legal education for women and access to the legal system, and thus had some, but limited knowledge and experience of primary school education and nutrition. While **ADWLE were able to collaborate, consult and engage technical expertise from DoES and DoH to help with service delivery to the target schools and communities**, the ADWLE Coordinator nevertheless concluded that they would prefer in future to focus on their initial mandate and expertise.

Life Skills Development Association (LSDA), on the other hand, is a leading NPA in the Lao education sector which **not only has the expertise but has also forged solid relationships and built up a strong reputation** with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Furthermore, its Chairman is recognised by the MoES as a National Education Expert. LSDA's experience advanced collaboration between sub-grant project stakeholders: It was reported by other NPAs that in many training sessions and capacity building events, the expertise of LSDA was shared and used to provide technical support.

VEDCs in both districts perceived being involved in CONNECT in a very positive light and reported that it had contributed to enriching their understanding of their roles and responsibilities.



SAVANNAKHET PROVINCE

As a former Provincial office Education and Sport (PoES) officer, the leader of Community Development Association (CoDA) knew and understood well the coordinating mechanism within the LAs (PoES, District office of Health [DoES], DoH, District Agriculture and Forestry Office [DAFO] and District Lao Women Union [DLWU]), which supported a smooth and efficient coordination process. His **pre-existing relationships and influence also meant that there was already an existing enabling space for collaboration at district and provincial levels**.

The Provincial Labor and Social Welfare (PLSW) have direct supervision responsibility for Sengsavang, however under the sub-grant project, Sengsavang needed to collaborate with the DoES, VEDC and village authorities. Coordinating directly with schools would have presented issues as they are under the supervision of the DoES and are under no obligation to cooperate unless notified by the DoES. In order to resolve this Sengsavang coordinated all activities through the PLSW, who in turn informed the DoES of the plans, who themselves notified the schools of upcoming activities. While the process was time consuming it was important in order to build a new trusting relationship which they successfully achieved. **Engagement was positive throughout and Sengsavang have now increased their network for future collaboration**; they have expressed that they wish to build on this new relationship and develop strategies for collaboration in relation to their projects focused on human trafficking prevention.

The role of the VEDCs was particularly valued in Champhone district where many people are from ethnic minorities; the VEDC members' knowledge of the local languages ensured that teachers could understand the project, provide feedback on the design and ultimately contribute to improved education outcomes.



Cord staff explaining group work to CBO representatives from Ban Boung village, Khong district, Champassak Province during a Technical Working Group meeting in April 2021. © Cord

THE ROLE OF CORD AND ITS PARTNERS

Field Officers were allocated for each location to coach the NPAs throughout the process. The specific responsibilities and expectations on the role that they would play however was not always clear to all. NPAs reported that while there was good contact over the phone and online, they would have appreciated more face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, some expected the Field Officers to take a more active role in coordination and implementation, as well as technical advice, where this was not their area of expertise.

IMPACT OF COVID19

The COVID-19 pandemic had limited impact on the sub-grant projects, in terms of postponement of activities, but as there was not a large-scale community outbreak over the project period this did not create significant delays and all sub-grants could be completed on time.

Common trends

1

PARTICIPATORY PROCESS, JOINTLY IMPLEMENTED

The process was **highly participatory** and began with a **policy dialogue** between stakeholders at provincial, district and village levels, followed by a **joint needs assessment** in the selected target schools and villages prior to **drafting the sub-grant project proposals**. This process was not new for LAs and NPAs, however VEDCs widely reported that this was the first time they had been involved and trained in such a process from the beginning.

A project orientation meeting was credited with helping build mutual understanding among the stakeholders. NPAs, LAs and VEDCs became acquainted with each other's roles and responsibilities regarding the implementation of the sub-grant in general.

Local authority representatives particularly appreciated learning about and taking part in the participatory needs assessments as it allowed them to see first-hand the needs of the communities.

At the end of the sub-grant project period **learning and sharing events** were held in each province inviting all stakeholders, including young students in Champassak and Savannakhet Provinces who gave presentations to the participants. At all four learning and sharing events, NPAs co-chaired with LAs. Most of the discussions during the learning and sharing events were related to sub-grant project achievements, challenges and the immediate future. LAs expressed satisfaction with their cooperation with CBOs and said that NPAs were welcome to engage with them on future projects related to community services. It was observed that these events represented an equitable balance of power and highlighted the positive relationships between LAs, NPAs and CBOs. This can be interpreted as a sign of recognition, trust and positive engagement in the delivery of local community services.

2

SUB GRANT ACTIVITIES BASED ON IDENTIFIED COMMUNITY NEEDS

All sub-grant projects targeted primary schools with almost identical activities and implementation procedures, for example school gardens, reading corners or reading rooms, hand-washing stations and teaching and learning improvement. The participants reported that the issues raised, to which these projects were responding, came out of the policy consultation between NPAs, CBOs and LAs and analysis of the community-level needs assessments.

The decision on which locations to select for the project was largely directed by the LAs, in line with government development action plans and their social and economic development aims. While this may be seen as less participatory, most of the locations were nevertheless where there were stark education and nutrition needs. On other areas the participants reported that discussions and exchanges between the three actors were collaborative e.g. selecting the key development priorities in the communities.

3

GREATER UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF EACH OTHER

The presentations made in target schools concerning sub-grant implementation have highlighted positive cooperation between LAs, NPAs, VEDCs and the schools. All sub-grant projects achieved the planned outputs and completed the sub-grant project satisfactorily. However, some minor challenges were presented including multiple steps of formal coordination between stakeholders, inconsistent telecommunication signals, difficult road access, workloads of LA officials and the lock-down during the COVID-19 epidemic.

It came to light that **LAs have better knowledge and understanding of the importance of CBOs** in community development as well as **acknowledging the role of NPAs in the delivery of community development services** as part of the contribution to national social and economic development. Although LAs acknowledged the contribution of NPAs to local development, it remains difficult to affirm NPAs' place as a community development partner instead of a mere sub-project implementer. In the context of CONNECT, the policy discussion between LAs and NPAs and CBOs were limited to the scope of the sub-grant projects. This can give the impression that LAs cooperated with NPAs because they were able to obtain development assistance and this may be sensible considering limited Government of Laos budget for local community development services. It is of interest to note that **LAs expressed interest in replicating this methodology in other communities.**

4

GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF VEDCS

VEDC members reported having a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

They further reported greater engagement with village school activities and educational development. A participating VEDC member from Xeing Lae Tha Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital, reported that the sub-grant project had helped him "...know and understand his role and responsibility to ensure that the village children go to school regularly and to encourage parents to send their children to schools". It was also reported that the sub-grant projects were the first time VEDC members had fully engaged with the schools, despite their mandates. There was an agreement during the discussion in the learning and sharing events that VEDCs will be invited to school meetings and other events related to village education development going forward.

The Model

Positive Change = Enabling Space + Active Collaboration

The observations from the case studies and sub-grant project demonstrate the impact of different stakeholders working together on a joint project of mutual interest, both for building relationships that can be called upon in future projects, and importantly for the communities.

In order for this positive engagement to occur, an **enabling space** is required that is representative of, and responsive to, vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised groups in the community. Another requirement is **fruitful and active collaboration** among development partners and all stakeholders involved in service delivery to meet local development needs.

The CONNECT project positions Lao CSOs as key intermediaries between the Government and its constituents, contributing to a more enabling environment through which planning and service delivery becomes fully representative of, and responsive to, marginalised groups who have no other platform through which to voice their needs.

The CONNECT sub-grant projects represent the enabling space for stakeholders to work together to achieve a common goal, in this case relating to education and nutrition. The sub-grant projects demonstrated that **an enabling environment requires inclusiveness and participation of all affected groups and responsible entities**, such as NPAs, LAs, and CBOs such as VEDCs and the target beneficiaries.

Participation may not be enough to bring about positive change within the target community.

Community development requires active collaboration within and between stakeholders.

The sub-grant programme has demonstrated collective action between NPAs, LAs and VEDCs. NPAs actively led the planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting of the sub-grant project with support from LAs, especially at technical level. At the same time, they have enhanced VEDCs' capacity to be active and collaborative in providing education support to schools and within communities.

In a nutshell, a positive change can be realised when a collaborative environment is enabled in combination with active contributions from all stakeholders.

The enabling environments (spaces) and the partnerships (collaboration) between NPAs, LAs and CBOs, contribute to positive changes in local communities. The CONNECT project has demonstrated that strengthening the capacity of NPAs, LAs and CBOs contributes to the success of local community development services. The combination of enabling spaces and constructive partnerships also enabled the CONNECT project partners, NPAs, CBOs and LAs alike, to identify challenges, lessons learned and evidence-based practices for future joint actions and support.



Students of Nong Mai primary school, Kham district, Xiengkhouang province sharing a healthy and well-balanced lunch in line with CONNECT's work on nutrition. © Cord

Lessons Learned

- Initiating the collaborative process from the beginning with participatory approaches and activities is critical in supporting newer players. Through this approach CBOs feel more comfortable to input in the latter stages for the greater benefit of all. LAs also perceived this approach as effective in discovering more about community needs and seeing how they fit into existing development plans. Some felt it could be interesting to replicate this experience. It also fosters greater trust among stakeholders and helps build relationships based on sub-grant implementation. These relationships can also endure beyond the project.
- While LAs will largely seek to be involved in projects contributing to the development strategy at the district or provincial levels, i.e. in selection of target locations, they still demonstrated openness to discuss and exchange views with their NPAs and CBOs colleagues when it came to priority selection and joint action plan elaboration.
- It is important to provide training programmes for policy awareness by engaging LAs to educate NPAs and CBOs on government policies, strategies and action plans. This should be done at local levels and include district socio-economic development and education development action plans. This would contribute to building consensus and mutual understanding between local development partners.
- Involving CBOs in capacity building activities and participatory action research and policy dialogues, increased their confidence and competence in delivering community development services. Specifically, VEDCs have become active participants in local education development and gained confidence in presenting their opinions in meetings and workshops at district and provincial levels. In most instances, they felt that they had become valuable partners and could contribute to better local development outcomes.

- In order to have the greatest community level impact and for the project to be of most value to NPAs, the thematic focus of projects should be aligned where possible to the mandates, strategies, target groups and/or expertise of the NPAs involved. Asking NPAs to run projects on areas where they do not have thematic expertise risks negatively affect their confidence and could undermine the aims of building their capacity to speak out confidently. The project nevertheless evidenced that it is possible for NPAs to lean on the technical expertise of LAs and CBOs to still implement a successful project to improve development outcomes in a community. While there remains a limited number of NPAs in Laos, each with their specific mandates, it is possible, where they are interested and motivated for their project management, and community engagement skills to be put to use on other sector areas.
 - Social capital is valuable in every instance. NPA leaders who have either previously worked for the Government or have connections within Ministries and Departments can influence LAs; this is in the form of consultation of NPAs, ability of NPAs to request evidence for decisions (e.g. target locations) and to collaborate with NPAs on further community development projects.
 - Collective understanding and agreement on the projects' expected outcomes and indicators of achievement contributed to project productivity and success. This benefit is evident from the start of the programme, given the provision that all stakeholders, including LAs, NPAs, CBOs and target beneficiaries, know and understand the project expectations.
 - The pilot sub-grant projects were of a limited duration (12 months) and with limited funding. While already exhibiting positive results, this is insufficient to fully address target education and nutrition issues in schools. A more extensive programme would allow the opportunity to fully realise the projects' full potential.
 - Opportunities to participate in training sessions, coaching and other capacity development related activities contribute to increasing participant confidence and skills. Whenever possible, further support should be made available on-site to facilitate community engagement and make facing challenges more effective.
- Case studies are available for the four provinces in which the collaborative projects were conducted, namely: Xiengkhouang, Champassak, Savannakhet and the Vientiane Capital.

For more information about the project and other resources please contact Mr. Khampheng Saysombath: ksaysombath@cord.org.uk

cord.org.uk

©2021 Cord. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.
Cord is a registered charity in England and Wales No. 1070684.

Cord 