Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia. However, it is stepping into a progressive phase of expansion, moving from a land-locked country to a land-linked country, and looking to escape from the least-developed country status by 2020 through a National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). Since, 1997, the Lao Government (through Ministry of Health) is advancing a Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector Strategy involving the pioneering of new institutional solutions. The School Sanitation receives adequate attention by the RWSS Sector Strategy and therefore, the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat) under the Ministry of Health (MoH) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) advancing the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR through its local counter-parts, with support from NGOs and External Support Agencies. However, some recent studies reveal that there are further scopes existing for the School Sanitation Programme to improve. This paper explains the background of the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR and provides a way out on how to further improve the activities in Lao PDR to make the programme more effective and efficient.

Background
The remoteness of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, its ethnic diversity and the aftermath of the war in Indochina have hindered the economic development of the country until the 1990s. Lack of human resources and basic infrastructure were additional challenges for the Lao Government and its external partners. But the government is committed to finding appropriate solutions for sustained growth and prosperity. Lao water supply and sanitation programme in schools is one such initiative.

Under the School Sanitation Programme (defined as improved effective use of latrines and safe water in schools), water supply schemes were provided and latrines built in many schools. The earlier focus was mainly on easily accessible areas, usually along main roads. The reality, however, is that some 80 percent of Lao school children live in rural, remote and often inaccessible areas. Thus in 1994, the Lao Government decided to review its past practices and prepared a Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector Strategy to show a new path towards sustainable development. The National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat), the national agency responsible for rural water supply and sanitation sector, under the Ministry of Health (MoH) took the lead in the preparation of the RWSS Sector Strategy that adequately covers some key principles for School Sanitation Programme of Lao PDR.

Institutional mechanisms
The School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR mainly consists of following activities:

- Providing support to schools with the installation of water supply systems and sanitation facilities, through community participation;
- Providing materials and manuals for operation and maintenance of the water supply and sanitation facilities;
- Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign;
- Providing training to primary school teachers;
- Coordinating and collaborating with government agencies and ministries, external support agencies, NGOs and Private Sector in the promotion of School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR.

The School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR involves many agencies. Nam Saat Central in collaboration with Ministry of Education (MoE) while oversees the promotion of School Sanitation Programme, many other government departments and agencies are also involved in the school sanitation activities.

The roles and responsibilities of different agencies in School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR can be categorized as follows:

Nam Saat’s role:
- Providing support to schools with the installation of water supply systems and sanitation facilities – assist in planning, designing and supervising the implementation of facilities in line with the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy, which promotes effective use, sustainability and impact;
• Producing materials and manuals for operation and maintenance of the water supply and sanitation facilities;
• Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign in collaboration with the Ministry of Education; and
• Providing training to district and provincial Nam Saat staff.

The role of Ministry of Education:
• Setting up and revising the course curriculum on hygiene education and school sanitation for primary school students and teachers;
• Producing manuals and materials for hygiene education and awareness campaign in collaboration with the Ministry of Health; and
• Providing training to primary school teachers.

The role of several other organizations:
• The Lao Women’s Union (LWU) works predominantly at the village level supporting the use of water supply and sanitation facilities, coordinating needs assessments with Nam Saat and conducting school hygiene education seminars.
• The Lao Youth Union (LYU) has recently started using ‘The Pioneers’, a Lao youth group, to help disseminate hygiene messages to their communities.
• The Centre for Information and Education on Health (CIEH) produces posters, pamphlets and other hygiene education materials that are used widely by other departments. The CIEH also uses mass media for awareness campaigns. Their mandate covers activities other than hygiene, although hygiene is a big component of their work.
• Rural Development Committee (RDC) plays a catalytic role in School Sanitation Programme at local level (district and provincial levels) to integrate the school sanitation related activities within the overall rural development and infrastructure projects. The representatives from RDC also sometime join the local Nam Saat team during supervision of the school sanitation activities.

In addition to the above, various NGOs and external support agencies, such as, UNICEF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and others, also join the initiatives of the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR by providing their technical back-up support and financing. Thus the main challenge is how to coordinate and harmonize all the above support activities to create an efficient and effective School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR.

To achieve effective coordination, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between MOH and MOE, and as an outcome of that a National Steering Committee was established. The Steering Committee is chaired by the Deputy Director of Nam Saat and represented by key line agencies and ministries. The Steering Committee provides overall guidelines to the School Sanitation Programme in Lao PDR. Therefore, the key responsibility of coordination and collaboration on School Sanitation Programme rests on Nam Saat (Ministry of Health) and Ministry of Education.

Timeline for School Sanitation Programme

The timeline for the school sanitation programme in Lao PDR is highlighted in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Achievement/Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>First class opened at National Hygiene College to train hygiene workers by Central Namsaat.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Information Training Workshop held for Hygiene Education (Provincial level).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Sector Strategy for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector developed and school sanitation program emphasized.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School Sanitation Programme begins in collaboration with Ministry of Education.</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>Participatory approaches for school sanitation introduced.</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>School Sanitation tools prepared.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Programme for training of teachers in school sanitation begins.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Training of Trainers for school teachers upgraded and continued.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Hygiene Strategy developed with various hygiene options.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Establishment of the National Steering Committee for School Sanitation Programme.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion promulgated (49/PR).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IEC materials produced for ‘Cholera Prevention’ and introduced to schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Sanitation Study conducted including schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>National Workshop organized to discuss sanitation, including schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Ongoing discussion on how to focus more on school sanitation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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The participatory learning approach to school sanitation

One of the main challenges of the school sanitation programme is to reach over 8,000 schools (approximately...
In past years the Blue Box has continuously evolved and will continue to evolve. With the support of UNICEF, from 1996 to 2002, four revisions have already been made. In the early years, the first ‘learning with joy’ box was based on five different types of letter cards games and three sets of full color story cards. With feedbacks and comments from teachers, more materials were gradually added on. This included additional games, cartoon books, textbook and teacher’s guide/activity book.

In 2003, in order to strengthen the framework for the cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education on support for school health, an IEC review meeting was held to examine the existing materials developed by the various organizations. The objective of the meeting was to develop an effective participatory tool kit to promote the teaching and learning of health and hygiene in primary
A consensus was made that the Blue Box was the kind of package the committee had in mind for promoting school health. However, recommendations were made to include more materials, to create a comprehensive educational tool. As a result of the combined efforts of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and UNICEF/WHO, a standard resource was developed to create a child friendly and health promoting environments in schools.

The current Blue Box includes educational materials related to diarrhea, malaria, intestinal parasites, personal and environmental sanitation, etc. The tool kit is being promoted for use among the various partners working in the education sector. By bringing in more partners to promote this participatory learning tool kit, the school sanitation programme aims to expand its reach to cover more schools. In the academic year 2004 -2005, the new Blue Box to promote health and hygiene will start to materialize in primary schools of targeted provinces.

**Some lessons learned**

It is acknowledged that school sanitation and hygiene education focuses on the development of life skills, a healthy and safe school environment, and outreach to families and communities. Improving the sanitation and hygiene in schools and the development of life skills is an essential investment both in the short and long term for future generations of school children and their families. Some lessons learned by partners of the school sanitation programme are noted as follow:

- Water facilities should be as close as possible to the school latrines since girls are mostly the ones who carry the water
- Teachers have to set a good example and become a role model to promote good hygiene practices
- Schools have to ensure that not only hygiene is properly taught but that hygiene and water use practices are observed every day at school
- Hygiene behavioral changes and practices takes time and requires a long term investment

**References**


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