

Japan's International Cooperation in Education in the Globalized World: The Case of the Lao PDR

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1. Issues in the basic education sector in the Lao PDR and Japan's cooperation

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) is located in the center of Indochina. It is the only landlocked country among the ASEAN countries, bordered by China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. The land area is about the same as that of Honshu Island. The population is 6.7 million. It is a multiethnic nation, composed of 49 ethnic groups. Among them, the lowland ethnic groups called "Lao Loum," who speak Lao, account for more than 60%. The remaining 30% is composed of minority groups who speak their own languages. The main industry is agriculture. About 70% of the people are engaged in agriculture. The GDP growth rate has been above 7% since 2005. The economy of the country has been steadily growing, benefiting from its rich natural resources such as water and minerals. Its human development index, however, is 138th among 187 nations, and about 30% of the people live on less than one dollar a day. Therefore, balanced and sustainable economic development is needed.

The highest priority goals of Laos are to rise above least developed country (LDC) status by 2020 and to achieve the MDGs by 2015. The Seventh Five-year National Social Economic Development Plan (NSED) aims to ensure poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth; to maintain political stability, peace and an orderly society; and to promote autonomous and sustainable development to prepare for regional economic integration. Education is considered a key sector as it plays an important role in developing human resources, which form the foundation for national development through promoting poverty eradication, modernization and industrialization. Universal access to basic education and improvement of the quality of education are the highest priority objectives to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

In order to achieve the goals set by the Seventh NSED, the Seventh Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) was established and launched in 2011. Its midterm review was conducted in 2013 and confirmed the progress in major educational targets. The main indices of primary education include the net enrolment rate and the retention rate through the fifth grade. Net enrolment reached 96.8% in 2013. This shows a steady expansion of primary education, and it is expected that the target will be achieved by 2015. The retention rate of the final grade, however, has remained around 70%. In this situation, it is impossible to achieve the target of 95% by 2015. The high dropout rate and repetition rate are issues affecting the retention rate. They are particularly high among first graders (dropout rate: 11.37%, repetition rate: 22.8%). The Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) has also been conducted three times, supported by the World Bank, to assess the effect of school education. The ASLO II was conducted in 122 districts nationwide, targeting 6,181 students in the fifth grade at 432 schools. This study showed that about 72.8% of the fifth graders were "pre-functional" in math. "Pre-functional" means that they have not acquired the minimum level of skills to function as members of the society. It was also found that ability in the Lao language greatly affects the academic achievements of the students in math and other subjects. The language used for teaching and the teachers'

knowledge in the subjects are major factors that affect students' achievement levels.

These issues of basic education, such as the high dropout rate and repetition rate among lower-grade students and the students' low academic achievement levels, are caused by various cultural, social and economic factors, and are related to diverse issues including physical, policy, institutional and organizational issues.

For example, the factors hampering the expansion of primary education and improvement of quality are closely related to the geographic, social and cultural background of the country, such as the mountainous terrain, multiethnic groups and the language issues faced by minority students who do not speak Lao used at school, and gender issues. Furthermore, due to these reasons, there are shortages of schools (incomplete schools) and teachers in remote areas. The weak management ability across the educational sector hinders the appropriate planning and implementation of the allocation of teachers and of teacher training schemes. Various other issues are also factors behind the insufficient teaching skills, including the gap between the needs in the classrooms and the pre-service teacher training; the lack of adequate professional development provided by the in-service teacher training; and the insufficient system to evaluate teachers and to provide remuneration and incentives accordingly. Issues concerning irrelevant curricula and low-quality textbooks were also pointed out.

Therefore, in order to address these issues, efforts must be made to comprehensively analyze the factors and the background behind the issues in order to formulate policies and institutions based on the actual achievements at the school level and to implement specific actions. In order to improve the quality of education, it is important to analyze the issues, focusing on the actual situation faced by principals, teachers and students at schools and to fully incorporate past achievements and lessons learned into improving and formulating policies and institutions. To sustainably put these policies and institutions into specific actions at the school level, it is also necessary to draw up feasible plans backed by a sufficient budget and to secure human resources who are capable of implementing them. The government's firm commitment is imperative in order to continue these activities, and capacity-building is needed for appropriate planning and implementation of necessary actions. In order to advance these processes effectively, it is necessary to mobilize the wisdom of development partners and resources in a comprehensive and organic manner under the ownership and leadership of the government. A great deal of coordination and collaboration is required on the side of the development partners to make this possible.

Japan's educational cooperation in Laos emphasizes the importance of promoting active collaboration and coordination across the sector. Technical cooperation, in particular, has been focused on 1) improving schools by enhancing educational management through promoting participatory school management of the community and through strengthening the capacities of the educational administration to support these efforts, and 2) enhancing school-based training to improve lessons. In the latter case, in order to improve lessons, JICA supported strengthening teachers' skills by drawing up teaching plans and using them as well as developing key human resources who can give appropriate advice to schools from professional viewpoints. In this way, JICA tried to build a foundation for developing "professional development networks" to support schools. These networks will be further strengthened and functionalized. The technical cooperation project ended in October 2013, but JICA will continue to support improving lessons by introducing school-based training and lesson study to promote peer-to-peer collaborations among teachers and by supporting teachers' own initiatives to continue developing their professional skills. In this way, JICA's field-oriented cooperation has brought about

concrete changes and results in the classrooms. One of the major issues of many developing countries is to link improved enrolment to actual improvement in students' knowledge and academic skills. The same applies to Laos. The evidence of the outcomes and achievements at the school level must be steadily reflected in the upstream discussions to improve policies and institutions. Through this process, JICA would like to create collaborations with other programs and development partners and to promote multilevel cooperation so that individual project outcomes can produce a development effect in the whole sector.

2. Learning from other developing countries to address the common issues

JICA has been engaged in educational cooperation in many developing countries in the field of basic education, focusing on the improvement of quality, access and educational management.

The commitment made by governments and development partners on the MDGs has brought about a major outcome of steadily expanding the access to primary education. Now one of the common issues shared by developing countries is to ensure that each student who is enrolled in school learn basic academic skills. As I explained earlier, in order to improve basic academic skills, it is necessary to address many issues and factors related to schools, lessons, children's environment, textbooks and curricula and teachers' qualifications to give lessons as well as policy, institutional and technical support. JICA has conducted various technical cooperation and empirical research for cooperation to improve quality and educational management since the late 1990s. Although JICA has had different experiences in different countries, it has learned various lessons and expertise that are applicable in every country. Among them, the approach of lesson study, which has been practiced in Japan for many years to promote teachers' continuous professional development, has been adopted not only in developed countries such as the United States but also in many developing countries in JICA's projects to improve the quality of education. Based on our experiences, lessons and outcomes, we have learned that the following are necessary in order to effectively use the method of lesson study to improve the quality of learning:

- Position lesson study appropriately in school management and education management. (Support from the educational administration and the commitment of principals are imperative.)
- Focus on lessons and schools.
- Improve teachers' knowledge of subjects. (Involve teacher training universities and obtain support from the professional viewpoint.)
- Steadily support the activities at schools and disseminate the method.
- Collaborate with those in charge of policymaking and institutionalization related to schools and teachers.

When introducing lesson study in developing countries, which are quite different from Japan in terms of teachers' background and students' academic levels, a lot can be learned from the experiences and lessons learned in other developing countries that have already introduced lesson study through Japan's technical cooperation because there are similarities and resemblance among these countries in the educational issues and background and their progress in educational development.

Let me take up the case of Indonesia here. In Indonesia, too, improvement in the quality of education and

that of teachers, who play a key role in improving the quality of education, has been a major challenge for many years. To address this, Indonesia started comprehensive teacher reform in the early 2000s. Since the decentralization law took effect in 2001, Indonesia has promoted decentralization of education to better address the needs of local communities and schools, but in order to effectively implement the decentralization, it is necessary to promote capacity-building at local governments and schools so that they will be able to analyze issues and address them properly.

Based on this need, since 1999 JICA has supported the efforts to build a community and school-based school management model in order to support educational decentralization indirectly. For this purpose, JICA has supported the capacity-building of the educational administration and development of the institutions and systems to support the local initiatives. In addition to the cooperation in the field of educational management, JICA has been involved in improving the quality of education. In 1998, JICA started a project to expand math and science teacher education at the undergraduate level of three universities (Indonesia University of Education, the State University of Malang and the Yogyakarta State University). This cooperation project targeting pre-service teacher training has grown step by step over 15 years and expanded into multiple levels, starting from the school level (improvement of lessons at pilot schools through effective collaboration between the universities and schools, active implementation of in-service teacher training by subject and strengthening of school-based training) and to the activities involving the policy and institutional levels (implementation of induction training programs, nationwide in-service teacher training programs). Together with the cooperation on educational management, which was explained earlier, this has developed into comprehensive cooperation to support the improvement of the quality of the lower secondary education in Indonesia and now serves as a good example of school-based efforts to improve lessons as well as the roles played by the educational administration and teacher training universities to support them.

The technical cooperation project on basic education in Indonesia ended in early 2013, but, since the project was ongoing, Indonesia has shared the process of the JICA project, the outcomes and the lessons learned with the other countries in Asia and Africa which face similar issues, through South-South cooperation, and has contributed to strengthening and implementing educational policies of various countries. Specifically, Indonesia has accepted project-type third-country training and implemented training supplemental to the training held in Japan. When the supplementary training of the region-focused training to improve the quality of lessons was held in Indonesia last year, supported by Hiroshima University, there were participants from Laos, too, as observers. The officials from the Department of Teacher Training of the Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports and the heads of the teacher training colleges had a good opportunity to learn the outcomes, issues and lessons learned from the key leaders who have introduced and disseminated lesson study in Indonesia, including the teaching staff of the teacher training colleges and the participants from the Ministry of National Education and from local governments in Indonesia. The participants from Laos also visited schools to see how lesson study was actually conducted. They are now considering the introduction of lesson study in the school-based training and in the activities of school clusters, building on the outcomes of Japan's technical cooperation. Discussions are being conducted at the policymaking level and at the school level to promote understanding of lesson study among the relevant people and to decide how to introduce lesson study. The officials of the Department of Teacher Training were highly inspired by the training conducted by those who had actually experienced the method in Indonesia, facing the same challenge of improving the quality of

teachers. The Indonesian case serves as an important reference to promote discussion in Laos. From the viewpoint of the regional integration of the ASEAN countries as well as the strategic utilization of JICA's past experiences, JICA would like to actively provide opportunities to learn from the experiences of those at the management level within the region in order to promote educational development to prepare for the regional integration.

3. Japan's international cooperation in the globalized world

International educational cooperation has a major role to play in developing human resources who can contribute actively in this age of globalization. In order to expand human resources who will lead sustainable economic development, basic academic skills must be guaranteed through basic education. In this respect, Japan's educational cooperation must also support the improvement of the quality of basic education more comprehensively, investigating new approaches to promote improving lessons so that the activities based on lesson study can actually lead to enhancing students' basic academic skills.

Japan's international cooperation has been focused on basic education and higher education. Now that many of the projects for primary education have advanced from the pilot phase to the institutionalization and dissemination phases, in the process of identifying educational cooperation toward the post MDGs, Japan must once again study how the cooperation for primary education should be. It must be noted that improving the quality of primary education will remain as a major challenge.

Cooperation in basic education has produced certain achievements, but further efforts must be made to improve basic academic skills, which is still a common objective shared by developing countries. South-South cooperation, as shown in the Indonesian case, can be a viable approach to advance that goal.

To sum up the cooperation on basic education, particularly on primary education, and to promote South-South cooperation, which can grow sustainably into the future, it is imperative to empower the countries and bases to become centers to share with other countries, through hands-on sessions, not only identified outcomes, lessons learned and issues but also effective approaches and processes to address the issues at the policy, institution and school levels. It is also important to explore the strategic utilization of accumulated expertise.

Although JICA has conducted various activities such as technical cooperation exchange projects and South-South cooperation through the supplementary training conducted in the third countries, the main approach of JICA's educational cooperation is basically the technical cooperation conducted in the target countries. As explained earlier, the networking and triangular cooperation with the countries that can demonstrate examples of JICA's basic educational cooperation should also be clearly and strategically positioned in Japan's educational cooperation plans and technical cooperation projects. In this process, we would like to find new directions for sustainable South-South cooperation to improve the quality of basic education. The projects to support math and science education and the improvement of school management in Africa have already exemplified such a new direction.

In Laos, as I have explained, preparations are being made for the regional integration of the ASEAN countries in 2015. As education is also to be integrated, educational cooperation should make further efforts to establish more effective networking. Furthermore, it is essential to facilitate the effective and strategic integration of triangular cooperation and networking into technical cooperation so that these approaches can be strategically used in the program projects as well.

Finally, further collaboration with the regional centers established by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) should be promoted as a model to utilize regional educational networks effectively. Already collaboration with the Regional Centre for Education in Science and Mathematics (RECSAM) has been promoted through the third-country training. Strategic collaboration should be sought so that these regional centers will play more active roles and serve as centers of knowledge and information on practical approaches and lessons learned to address the common issues shared by developing countries. JICA must investigate more specific activities, such as giving feedback on JICA's practical approach, the lessons learned and the accumulated knowledge to jointly develop training contents, to enhance collaboration with these regional specialized organizations.