Joyful learning makes happy children.

The Search for ‘Heart’.

Festival of Learning.
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It would be tempting to say that PADETC has ‘arrived’ but the truth is that a lot of hard work lies ahead. We have to continue to sell our idea of attaining true happiness or ‘livability’ in Laos and the region. Our belief is that genuine happiness is possible if the four pillars of economy, culture, environment, and spirituality are in balance. For this, we have the Bhutanese to thank for their unshakeable faith in the concept of Gross National Happiness while the world raced ahead to compete on Gross Domestic Product.

It is time for us to dare to measure a nation’s wealth in other terms than cold hard cash.

In this issue of Livable Laos, we have chosen to focus on the young people who are the driving force behind PADETC’s work. Without them, we cannot build a new generation of leaders who are enterprising and yet possess compassion and social responsibility. Without them, we would not have proved that committed young people can be agents of change, and that their ideas are valuable. I hope you enjoy reading the few stories we have put together, and that you too will be convinced of the energy and potential of the young.

Thanks to PADETC staff who have assisted in one way or another. For more information & inquiries, please email: padetc@etllao.com or visit www.padetc.org.
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Sombath Somphone  
Director, Participatory Development Training Centre  
Lao PDR

Towards Genuine Happiness

Thanks to PADETC staff who have assisted in one way or another.
JOYFUL LEARNING MAKES HAPPY CHILDREN

“One, two, three, four!” a young man shouted as he punched the air energetically with his fists, his feet keeping to the beat of music belting out of an old sound system. Behind him, forty grade school children fervently followed his every move. Beads of sweat formed on their foreheads as their hearts got pumping, and sometimes they giggled when they could not keep up.

Further away in a classroom, a small group of children were concentrating on the right way to move their fingers, hands, feet and bodies to the traditional Lao music in the background. A female volunteer corrected their poses, paying attention to the exact height of their hands and the delicate way they curled their fingers.

Over at the small school library, another female volunteer was encouraging eight boys and girls to take turns telling folklores. Two girls used their hands to make the shapes of a tortoise, a rabbit and a shark, thrilling their listeners.

This colourful scene at Noungbuathongtai Primary School takes place every weekday afternoon when young volunteers, known as Youth Leaders, from PADETC (Participatory Development Training Centre) turn up.

Noungbuathongtai was the first school in 2003 to welcome PADETC’s Youth Leaders to carry out extracurricular activities like aerobics, dance, storytelling, basic English, and art and craft with its students. Now there are 125 volunteers who visit ten schools that are part of PADETC’s Quality School (QS) pilot project.

The QS project, which began officially in 2005 to improve the quality of education, takes a multi-pronged approach: first, lesson plans based on the national curriculum were formulated using active learning principles; second, teachers were introduced and trained in child-friendly methods to implement the new lessons plans, and encouraged to move away from the ‘chalk and talk’ method; third, Youth Leaders were trained to carry out extracurricular activities, and to assist the teachers to adopt the child rights approach to teaching and learning; fourth, parents were encouraged to be more proactive with their children’s education by getting involved in school activities.

“That atmosphere in Noungbuathongtai wasn’t an easy one to achieve,” said Sombath Somphone, director of PADETC. “It took the teachers a while to accept that some level of noise and play in school is acceptable and that it makes school fun for the children.”

Making the ten schools a fun destination to go to has led to higher school attendance rates and better performance in the national examinations.

Teacher Khamhoo Phanthalasy said: “It’s very good because all the activities make the children less stressed and there is now higher attendance in school than before.”

She pointed out 11 year old Hatsaphone Mahaxay
who travels 40 km daily to attend Noungbua-thongtai Primary although there are many other schools nearer to his village.

“My father got to know about the school here and the activities so he decided to send me here. I like the activities here especially the Lao dance class,” the boy said.

In fact, the high attendance at Quality Schools is uncommon: most Lao schools are facing low attendance rates and high repetition rates in classes, as a local newspaper pointed out on January 14, 2007. The problem of truancy, it says, is affecting the quality of education at all levels.

Following the pilot’s success, the government gave the green light for PADETC to expand its project to more schools. In mid-2006, PADETC staff trained teachers in 134 schools in Vientiane, Xiengkhuang and Sayabouly provinces, on child-centered teaching methods and to introduce the lesson plans.

In early 2007, a nationwide forum was held in Vientiane to discuss the incorporation of Youth Leaders and extracurricular activities into the mainstream education system. This would be the precursor to eventual adoption and implementation of the Quality School model to all Lao schools in the future.

“I think a lot of the success of the QS project was due to the participation of our youth volunteers,” said Somphone. “They helped to demonstrate and assist the traditional teachers to implement the activities in the lesson plans in activity-based learning. The young people promoted discovery-based approaches and were more student centred.

“It was only after seeing how the children loved the activities and learnt much better that the traditional teachers were willing to apply the activities in the lesson plans.”

The idea of young people showing older people how to teach, runs against the grain of traditional Lao culture: it turns the concept of education on its head, and demands that both the young volunteers and teachers be open-minded in order for the exchange of knowledge to occur.

“Initially the community and the school couldn’t understand the activities, and were not sure if the volunteers really could teach. They said they were too young and inexperienced,” said Bouachan Thanouvong, QS Project Officer.

She continued: “At first they only allowed me to teach so I would teach for the first hour and then let the volunteers teach the second hour to let the teachers see if they are ok.

“The teachers saw the change in students and asked, ‘How did the volunteers do it?’ After members of the community came to see some of the activities, the school allowed the young people to teach.”

On weekends, it is not uncommon to see a cluster of slippers and shoes at the bottom of a staircase leading up to PADETC’s training room. Here is where groups of young people come for training before they can run classes. After all, they are considered ‘teachers’ by the young children and their work closely scrutinized by the community and authorities.

Each batch of Youth Leaders undergo general orientation and then specific skills training in their chosen subjects. These trainings are conducted.

“The children are showing off their abilities more now. They don’t just come to study but to also have fun.”

- Dune Sioubon, teacher of Thong Kang Primary School.
by the centre’s staff, senior volunteers and also members of communities. Most of the young teachers are undergraduates who have to balance their schoolwork with voluntary work.

At Thongkang Primary school, a class of eight students in a drama class were putting up a short drama about rural communities not seeking proper medical help when ill. The script was developed by their teacher Dune Sioubon, who had been assisted by two Youth Leaders to run the drama class.

“The children are showing off their abilities more now. They don’t just come to study but to also have fun,” said Sioubon.

School director Khounvilay Khenkitisack observed that the volunteers have really made a difference in both students and teachers.

“In the past, the students were afraid of the teachers, but now not so much after the volunteers came. This was because the age gap of the volunteers with the children was narrower than with the teachers. The children treat the volunteers like older brothers and sisters and also dare to joke with them. And when the volunteers teach, there is always a teacher with them, so the teachers have improved their teaching skills too,” she explained.

The Youth Leaders, acting as bridges between teachers and students, have gained the respect from adults with their commitment and abilities. The communities they work in, as well as the authorities, are now aware of the role that these young people can play in the country’s development.

“I’ve seen a change in the young people. Before, they were like children, now they are like adults. They’ve learnt to manage their time, learnt to be leader and follower, and learnt to appreciate what it means to be a teacher. They have also developed values to help society,” said Thanouvong.
Lamthong’s nickname is Aot. She has volunteered for three years and teaches English using the Jumpstart and Gogo programmes. She graduated from the National University of Laos in 2006 with a bachelor of arts degree in English. Aot was born in Xaysettha district in Vientiane Province. Her parents are retired and she is the youngest of four children.

Lamngeun’s friends call her Aor. She began volunteering with PADETC when she was in lower secondary school at 13 years old. At that time, she learnt a lot about recycling and organic farming and now she uses this knowledge to teach Environment in Quality Schools. Aor was born in Khammouan Province and moved to Vientiane when she was 18 to study Politics Administration in National University of Laos.

Leda was born in Savannakhet Province, and he is the eldest of five children. Leda started volunteering with PADETC when he was only 15, and still living in his province. Like Aor, he learnt about recycling and organic farming but now he teaches school children how to do aerobics exercise. Leda studies Electronics at the National University of Laos.

Hong has volunteered for PADETC for three years now. She graduated from the National University of Laos in 2006, with a bachelor of arts degree in English. She, like Aot, uses her skills to teach children simple English using Jumpstart and Gogo.

Lamthong BAIYAVONG (23)

Lamngeun MANIVONG (20)

Hongnapha PHOMMABOUTH (23)

Leda KHETHONGSA (22)
**Why and how did you begin volunteer work?**

**Leda:** I followed my friends when they had activities. I saw and liked the work because it develops the country and is also fun to learn for example storytelling and games with children.

**Aor:** Volunteering has helped me to see things in new ways, for example visiting rural parts of Laos where there is no electricity, no water, no educational equipment and no uniforms for the children. This inspired me to become a volunteer.

**Aot:** My friends asked me to join. When I saw how the students had so much fun and enjoyed their studies, I wanted to be a volunteer. I also wanted to improve myself because I study English and my work is to teach English so this has helped me to improve my skills.

**So how do you balance your time between volunteer work and studies?**

**Aor:** I study in the mornings and volunteer in the afternoons. My parents are really happy with what I do because they have seen a change in me. I used to be very shy, but now, I am more confident.

**Aot:** My lessons were mostly in the afternoons so I would be free in the mornings. At first my parents could not understand what I was doing and asked ‘Where do you go in the morning when your classes are in the afternoon?’ They also asked why I was not paid for my work but one day, someone told my mom that I was teaching in a school and she was very proud of me.

**Hong:** I had classes in the mornings, afternoons and sometimes in the evenings! But my teacher really helped me to find time to volunteer. My parents couldn’t accept what I did because they couldn’t understand why I was working when I should be studying. But after they saw the change and how I improved myself, they realised that I could work and study at the same time.

**What were the difficulties you faced?**

**Aot:** For me, it was the proper teaching method. When I started teaching as a volunteer, I didn’t have the technique to control the students because I didn’t know any songs or games. I was not like Aor or Leda, who had been volunteering for many years.

**Leda:** When I first started teaching aerobics it was difficult because the children were very young and they couldn’t follow the steps. So I had to simplify the moves and also select the older children from Grade 3 to Grade 5. I feel so happy when I see them enjoy the class.

**Was it stressful for you when you started teaching because you were supposed to show the teachers a new method of teaching?**

**Aot:** It was very stressful and very challenging when you stand in front of so many students, I feel like a student too. I try to be a student who can play with them and give them knowledge through activity. When the teacher stood beside me or outside the classroom to look at me, it made me less confident.

**Leda:** The first time I was nervous.

**So what is the one most important thing you have learnt from volunteering with PADET?**

**Aor:** Teamwork. When I start my career, this will help me to work with many people. Before I was a volunteer, I liked to do things on my own. But after joining PADET, and making new friends from other provinces, I learnt to coordinate with them.

**Leda:** I learnt to be a good leader and also a follower, that means to learn to accept someone else’s ideas.

**Hong:** Yes, we learnt that we’re not alone in this world. Sometimes we are treated so well at home, we forget to consider other people when we are outside.
Village festival brings PADETC’s volunteers together for the first time

After ten years of working with children, young people and communities, the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC) organized its first national gathering at Feungfa Gardens, Vientiane, in January 2007.

The campground was transformed into a bustling village festival, with more than 20 tents set up to represent 13 provinces, as well as 10 villages and 10 schools in Vientiane. The cheerful voices of young people singing folksongs and beating on drums filled the air. Many of the 200 children and teenagers participating in the 2 days fair donned their finest ethnic wear, representing tribal groups such as the Hmong, Lao, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Leu, Phutai, and Puan.

This was the first time the centre had organized a cultural exposition of this scale bringing three of its youth projects (Indigenous Knowledge, Young Volunteers, and the Quality Schools) together to illustrate the value of activity-based learning and the role of community volunteers young or old. The fair was to be a living showcase of how learning can be joyful a central philosophy of PADETC’s work.

Passing on local know-how

At the tent of the Somsamai village, little Ki Her blew on the khaen, a large mouth organ made from two parallel rows of bamboo reeds. It is a traditional Lao instrument that is played at important festivals like the Hmong tribe’s New Year celebrations. At first, the 9 year old boy stood still, focusing on the notes, then he began to circle the straw mat; sometimes skipping, sometimes going down low on his knees but always moving. Ki Her learnt this combination of Hmong dance and music from Souvanthong Lore, a farmer who has been volunteering at the Somsamai Primary School for a year now.

“I learnt to play the khaen when I was small like Ki,” said 56 year old Lore. “I’m very happy to teach the children this local knowledge because the more people know about it, the more we can keep this culture alive.”

“I like playing the khaen because many people look at me when I perform,” quipped Ki Her.

Lore has compiled a booklet of khaen lessons to ensure that future generations will have reference materials to learn the musical instrument. Ki Her, who took a year of hard work to learn the khean, helps by introducing
A MIND MAP FOR HAPPINESS

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

This mind map is based on thoughts from children and youth in the Lao PDR responding to the question, “What makes you most happy?”

Information contributed by the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC), Vientiane, Lao PDR.
MAKES HAPPY?

Based on thoughts from youth in the Lao PDR to the question, "What makes you most happy?"

Information contributed by the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC), Vientiane, Lao PDR

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it to his schoolmates.

“I passed by a stall where a little boy was weaving a basket with three adults looking on,” said Sombath Somphone, PADETC’s director, while touring the fair. “I thought the adults were teaching the boy a new skill but it turned out they were from another village and were learning from him! So it’s not just the child learning from an adult, but he or she can also pass on the skills to an older person.”

PADETC started this inter-generational learning of indigenous knowledge in 2006 as a supplement to the official primary school curriculum. To avoid adding to the burden of government teachers, the centre approached skilled adults to be volunteer teachers in their local primary schools. Now, there are 10 rural villages participating in the project, with more to join soon.

Some of the villages offered free homemade specialties that few could resist sampling; children crowded round the tent of the Hom village, eager to try the khao loun (sweet rice porridge with coconut milk), while others took notes in their scrapbooks on its preparation. At other tents, visitors snapped up the free local knowledge guidebooks which were written and illustrated by the villagers; they ranged from recipes for local food, to instructions on fishing and making nets.

“It is only through consciously rooting our young in their culture, traditions, and wisdom of our society that we can expect the young to respect their past, understand the present, and value and protect the future,” explained Somphone.

Positive influence through peer education

As Lao opens up to the global market, special attention needs to be paid to its children and young people. Already, social problems such as truancy, and drugs and alcohol abuse are reported to be on the rise. So apart from imbibing children in their local culture, PADETC hopes its network of Young Volunteers would be a positive influence for other Lao youth.

The centre began working with a group of 25 young volunteers in Vientiane capital in 1998. Since then, the network has grown to 56 groups, comprising 1,800 volunteers in 13 provinces, where local governments have been receptive and supportive. The youngest volunteers are only eight, while the oldest are 18. The volunteers learn a variety of skills from story telling, drama, handicraft, songs and games, which they in turn pass on to their peers.

At the fair, brightly decorated stalls were put up by the Young Volunteers; there were photographs depicting their monthly community service activities, including advocacy and awareness campaigns on drug abuse, human trafficking and HIV/AIDS. There were also cultural products on sale and cooking demonstrations, encouraging the young people to mingle and learn from each other.

“Our goal is to instill moral values in the young people, so that they can be useful members of society,” said Phoxay Chanthavongsa, deputy director of PADETC. “We teach them 32 subjects and when the young volunteers are trained, they become leaders for the activities and they help to teach other young children.

“So many communities have become interested
in the young volunteers and they have asked PADETC to help them to organize their village youth in the same way.”

At the Luang Prabang stall, young volunteers sat on the ground to teach some children to make paper lanterns out of string, bamboo sticks, glue and paper. A short distance away, volunteers from Bokeo showed other children how to make brooches with rice husks and sesame seeds.

The teenagers were also eager to perform on stage, drawing loud cheers from the crowd as they performed the classical Lao dance and other ethnic folkdances. The energy of the Young Volunteers must not be underestimated: in 2005, they reached out to almost 200,000 Lao youth through their monthly community services projects.

“The young people can help to shape the future of the society, if we adults allow them to,” said Somphone. “They have new ideas, and are energetic and willing participants if adults are willing to listen and guide them. So one of PADETC’s challenge is to train adults and peer leaders, including provincial administrators, to dialogue and take their views seriously.”

“I’ve volunteered for four years,” said Saisamone Khounsamane, 16, from Bolikhamsai Province “We go to each village to teach the primary school children about clean water. We perform a drama to encourage them to wash their hands after using the toilet.”

16 year old Inthachak Phouthasone from Champassak province has volunteered for six years. He and other PADETC volunteers help out at the provincial radio station to create youth programmes on health, gender and environmental issues.

“I also go to the community to give information about drug abuse, HIV/AIDS and human trafficking,” he said. “I want to volunteer because I can get a lot of knowledge and experience which I can make use of in my life. I volunteer also because we’re all part of society and we should help out.”

One School, One Product

When young people like Phouthasone turn 18 and move to Vientiane capital to study, they can continue to volunteer by becoming Youth Leaders who assist teachers in PADETC’s Quality Schools project.

This pilot project, which was started in 2005 to improve the quality of education, is now being extended to 134 schools in the country. Apart from training teachers in child-friendly teaching methods and roping in Youth Leaders to assist in extracurricular activities, the project also encourages each school to specialise in making one product. The centre has a small fund for each school to teach the children practical skills, while instilling confidence and entrepreneurship.

At the fair, the Quality Schools’ tent enjoyed brisk business as their products, ranging from stuffed teddy bears, paper cranes, rice dumplings, tamarind jam and chilli paste, were purchased by young people from the other provinces.

It was clear from the peals of laughter, the cacophony of youngsters hawking their wares, and the non-stop beating of drums that the fair had been a resounding success. It drew to a close with the 200 young people singing goodbye while holding hands in a big circle. This had been their chance to meet other volunteers for the first time, and new friendships had been made. Teary-eyed, they hugged and bade farewell, before hopping onto the vans for the long journey home.

In the wake of the youngsters, PADETC staff and Youth Leaders began dismantling the stalls and stage. Though the event has ended, more work now lies ahead for the centre as it steps into its second decade of community development work in Laos.
When the young man stepped into a classroom at Thongkang Primary school, there was a hush in the class of 50 children. His head was clean shaven, his body covered by swaths of saffron robes. When he put his palms together, the class immediately returned the gesture, greeting him with loud ‘sabaidis.’ This is a phra ajan or teacher monk; one of 50 who bring Lao tradition and dharma (Buddhist teachings) to children of 45 primary schools. The initiative, known as Dharma Sanjon or Mobile Dharma began informally three years ago, when PADETC approached some monks to help young people stay away from drugs and also to volunteer as substitute teachers in its Quality Schools project. Dharma Sanjon, which is jointly led by the monks and PADETC, is growing larger each year. Its teacher monks range from novices as young as 17, to adult monks in their 30s. They teach children from Grade 3 to Grade 5: telling stories of Buddha, sharing Lao ceremonies and traditions, showing the young how to apply Buddhist life skills, and giving information on drug prevention and HIV/AIDS. Dharma on the move contributes to PADETC’s idea of education of the ‘heart’, where the spiritual and cultural development of young people are just as important as learning the ABCs. PADETC hopes that this initiative would also encourage monks to be more actively engaged in their local communities.
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Colourfully illustrated storybooks are still a rarity in rural villages in Lao. So whenever PADETC’s young volunteers carry out their monthly community service, they never fail to bring along a suitcase of children’s books from the centre’s library. At Dong Luang primary school, the children rushed to the pile of books on the table, eager to get hold of an interesting read. They then quickly settled down at the wooden table and began reading aloud. The young volunteers also handed out photocopied storybooklets produced by PADETC, along with crayons so that the children could colour the booklets, and bring them home. In the next room, to assist teachers in carrying out daily extracurricular activities, a group of young volunteers told stories using large, colourful charts; their voices and facial expressions enthraling the children.

Story telling, drama and book reading are activities that the centre uses to make learning fun for children. Earlier on, the primary school students had all been outside in the warm morning sun, learning action songs, and playing games that emphasised team work. One of the games required them to pass rubber bands from one to another, using only straws in their mouths. The entire day’s activities were planned and organised by PADETC’s young volunteers, who were not much older than the Dong Luang students. The centre accepts and trains volunteers from as young as eight, up till 18, after which they can choose to become Youth Leaders.
It takes a while for an outsider to fully grasp the work scope of the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC). Why? Because there are so many “tentacles” (a word used by its director) that it has spread out over its ten years of development work in Laos. The centre, which is entirely staffed by Lao people, has its fingers in many pies: from the production of fuel-efficient stoves, to fish farming, recycling, media, young volunteers in schools, and even to teacher training.

“We had to try out different things over the years, to find an entry point into what we really want to achieve,” said Sombath Somphone, director of PADETC. “So everything we did were like little pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which we have developed and pieced together. Now after ten years, a picture is slowly taking shape.”

The ‘heart’ of development

PADETC’s quest can be summed up in four words: Education for Sustainable Development.

Imagine a house with four pillars, built on sturdy foundation. This is PADETC’s model of sustainable development, which is built on a sturdy base of good governance and education, while upheld by four pillars of economic development, environmental harmony, promotion and preservation of culture, and lastly the spiritual well being or heart of the people. All these work together to form the roof (or ultimate goal) which is Genuine National Happiness, a concept of joyful living inspired by the Bhutanese’ idea of Gross National Happiness.

It seems zen or even old-fashioned to speak of spirituality in the 21st century, but PADETC believes that modern day education and development models have ignored this crucial element. Societies are highly skilled but sorely lacking in qualities like compassion, and social responsibility.

In the model, good governance sits at the bottom of the house and will determine how shaky or firm the building is. For PADETC, a government is only as good as the people who run it, which is why education is stacked together with good governance.

“So education is at the centre of the sustainable development model. Unless we have a good
education system, we will not have good governance,” said Somphone. “And for us, education of the heart, should be the heart of education.”

Early days

In 1981, Somphone began working in sustainable agriculture techniques, using a participatory bottom up planning approach. But he was constantly stonewalled by adults who were not open-minded enough to accept new ideas, and skills.

“After 15 years of hard work, I came to realise that the root of the problem lies in the human component. Human attitude can be changed more effectively only when they are still young and the window of learning opportunities are still open,” Somphone said. “So I changed my approach and started training university graduates to promote sustainable development techniques in our rural development programme.”

This was in 1997, a year after PADETC had registered as a non-profit Lao institution to build human resource for sustainable development. But Somphone soon realised that training university graduates was too late as well as they were “already too old to learn certain new skills.” So it went further down the education chain to reach primary and secondary school children. In 1998, the centre introduced recycling and organic farming at some schools in Vientiane; teaching a range of skills while ensuring joyful learning.

“For example, through raising earthworms with kitchen waste, the children learnt about biology, the environment, and also the discipline of taking care of another life form. They also learnt to organise and work in teams,” explained Somphone.

The children recruited to take part in its activities in turn imparted their knowledge to others during monthly community service in villages. Year after year, the network of young volunteers grew and the activities diversified to include storytelling, drama, and drug prevention awareness campaigns.

At the same time, PADETC made forays into small businesses, encouraging villagers to try out environmentally-friendly and sustainable appropriate techniques. There were some hits and misses but those that worked has helped villagers to have better income and employment. Today, villagers are earning more money producing fuel-efficient stoves, weaving better quality silk, and selling green tea from mulberry leaves.

PADETC hopes such successes might persuade more Lao youth to stay home to develop local industries instead of migrating to the capital or to other countries in search of employment. Already, there has been increasing numbers of Lao youth lured abroad as cheap labourers in human trafficking scams.

“In whatever we do, we have to foster self-reliance and reduce dependence on outside assistance. So PADETC tries to help communities, that are ready and able, to care for their own, now and into the future,” said Somphone.

In recent years, the organisation has begun to streamline its work, to focus much more on youth development and economic enterprises. These two initiatives have the potential to build a new generation of citizens who are socially responsible, and yet possess the entrepreneurial spirit to make good use of the rich resources and indigenous knowledge Lao offerers.

Together they would form the four firm pillars of economic development, environmental harmony, culture, and spiritual well-being, referred to in PADETC’s model of sustainable development.

Winning formula

PADETC knew early on that it had found a winning formula working with young children. It believed that it was building a future generation of leaders that had character, self-esteem, responsibility and civic-mindedness leaders with ‘heart.’ It was keen to introduce its activities nationwide, but the time was not right. The government viewed it suspiciously, and was doubtful of the young volunteers’ abilities.

At the same time, it advocated schools to include life skills and...
cultural traditions so that Lao children would be better prepared for life outside the classroom.

“When the schools teach the children, they don’t teach about ‘the heart’ which is the source of decision making. They only teach the facts,” said Phoxay Chantavongsa, who heads the Youth Development Unit. He recounted the early years of advocacy as “painful and difficult.”

Finally in 2003, the tide began to turn as the work of young volunteers gathered momentum. The centre’s 300 young volunteers were officially recognised by the Ministry of Education and the network grew dramatically. By the end of 2006, 56 groups had been formed in 13 provinces, totalling 1800 volunteers.

Getting to the heart of education

It was at this ‘ripe’ time that PADETC began to move forward in a few ways. In 2005, it was able to launch its pilot Quality School project at 10 primary schools in Vientiane capital. It helped teachers to prepare lesson plans based on the national curriculum, trained them in child-friendly teaching methods, and placed older volunteers called Youth Leaders to assist in extracurricular classes. It even roped in monks to teach meditation and dharma (Buddhism) to the primary school students twice a week.

Communities and authorities saw that the children at the 10 schools enjoyed coming to school which now included Lao dance, Buddhism, aerobics, English, storytelling, drama, gardening and indigenous skills. This was the ‘heart’ of education that PADETC was talking about, and it was finally being accepted.

The teachers were motivated, having learnt how to use discovery-based learning to engage their students - a skill they picked up from the Youth Leaders. Most importantly, the Quality Schools reported higher school attendances and better examination results, at a time when truancy was escalating elsewhere.

In 2006, the centre was allowed to expand the Quality Schools project to another 100 schools. It scored another coup in 2007, when officials nationwide gathered to discuss how they could follow in PADETC’s footsteps to engage young volunteers to carry out extracurricular activities with positive impact on communities.

The next lap

“We started from zero 10 years ago, with no tools, no network, no human resources, to now becoming accepted into the mainstream,” said Chanthavongsa, almost with an air of vindication. “We have begun to understand the government better in the last two, three years and the reverse too. So there is much more synergy now. I’m really happily surprised that we have won them over and now are close partners.

“I’m also glad that the Ministry of Education now appreciates and recognises the strength of the youth networks and what the young people can do.”

PADETC’s network of young people with ‘heart’ can be a powerful and positive social force to encourage other young people to use their time meaningfully, and steer clear from temptations such as drugs, alcohol and prostitution. In fact, one of its latest projects relies on 500 students to spread the word on drug prevention through forum theatre. In just 14 months, this group reached out to 98,000 students and villagers.

The home grown organisation is not resting on its laurels; it already plans to develop packages of multimedia teaching and learning tools to support teachers and volunteers; and to train more volunteers to prevent a drop in quality as the project widens its coverage.

“So the picture emerging from the jigsaw puzzle is the ‘house’ of sustainable development, and with it, education of the ‘heart.’ With it, we can help communities practise good governance, and find genuine happiness. We want to popularise this model not just in Lao but also in the region,” said Somphone.

An ambitious plan but as the last ten years have shown, hard work and passion can reap some surprising rewards.
PADETC
Participatory Development
Training Center in English has been purposefully chosen to sound like the Lao term Pa-Dèc (蹼שמח), which means fermented fish. Pa-Dèc (蹼мещен) has a very distinctive flavour and is ubiquitously found in every Lao kitchen and universally used in everyday Lao cooking. Just as Pa-Dèc is uniquely Lao and an indispensable ingredient in Lao food, PADETC, too, as an indigenous all-Lao organization rooted in Lao culture and society, is committed to make a unique and distinctive contribution to the development of Laos.
“Helping the Lao people to think and solve their own problems for sustainable living”

“PADETC is designing and implementing alternative models of development”

PADETC is a group of Lao who care about the future of the Lao people and work to improve the livelihood of communities in a just and sustainable way.

PADETC Founder and Director
Sombath Somphone
receiving the 2005 Magsaysay Award
for Community Leadership