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# **BEQUAL: MTR Report**

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Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR

August 2017

<b>Document:</b>	BEQUAL: MTR Report
<b>Version:</b>	2.2 (FINAL)
<b>Assignment:</b>	Midterm Review
<b>Client:</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)
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<b>Date:</b>	27 February 2018

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## AID INVESTMENT SUMMARY

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<b>Aid Investment Name</b>	Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL)		
<b>AidWorks investment number</b>	INL332		
<b>Commencement date</b>	1 May, 2015	<b>Completion date</b>	30 June, 2020
<b>Total Australian dollars</b>	<b>AUD61,305,840.98</b>		
<b>Total other dollars</b>	€11.5 million (approx. AUD17.1 million)		
<b>Delivery organisation</b>	Coffey International		
<b>Implementing Partner(s)</b>	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)		
<b>Country/Region</b>	Lao PDR		
<b>Primary Sector</b>	Education		

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The mid-term review team wishes to thank DFAT's management and the education team for commissioning and managing this mission; BEQUAL management and advisers for their cooperation and assistance; Government of Lao PDR and development partners for the generous time given for interviews.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This document reports the findings of a midterm review (MTR) of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) Program—conducted over the period 14 August – 1 September 2017 by four independent evaluators.

The BEQUAL design was supported by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) to take a comprehensive and broad-based approach to addressing challenges facing basic education in Lao PDR: access, participation, quality and demand. Improved education is seen as being fundamental to achieving many of the Government of Lao PDR (GoL) development priorities—including competing in the ASEAN economy, and graduating from Least Developed Country status by 2020. Australia has a strong interest in ensuring Lao PDR continues to develop as a stable neighbour that is increasingly well positioned to contribute to regional security and prosperity. BEQUAL is Australia’s flagship aid investment—expected to be a ten-year investment (2015 – 2025) with the first phase concluding in June 2019.

### *Program scope and focus*

The BEQUAL design document identified five key result areas (KRAs) to guide implementation and as the basis for defining end-of-Phase 1 (four years) outcomes. Since finalisation of the design in 2013, there has been significant change in the political landscape in Lao PDR, and a deterioration in fiscal conditions. This, combined with the reduced development assistance for disadvantaged communities in rural Lao PDR, has curbed the potential for BEQUAL to realise the original ambition. BEQUAL goal explicitly focuses the program on children—especially disadvantaged girls and boys in remote areas. The KRA structure that underpins the implementation arrangements was designed to address key constraints in relation to the goal. However, national primary curriculum reform and national teacher training activities emerged as early priorities of the program, directing a predominantly national focus that risks reducing the capacity of the program to address the multifaceted root causes of low levels of education among learners from the most disadvantaged districts. In essence, the concentration on national curriculum development (KRA 4) and teacher training activities (KRA 3)—while worthwhile—contributes only indirectly to the BEQUAL goal.

The MTR team noted that the BEQUAL goal, which was formulated under an earlier aid policy framework, could be amended to reflect the latent national policy reform focus. However, there are notable risks for DFAT in such a redesign: timeframe slippage, cost blowout, poor-quality curriculum, limited impact on educational outcomes. There are also significant risks to the GoL; namely, that the current course of action may not adequately address the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged, thereby inadvertently undermining parallel efforts for increased national social cohesion as identified in the NESDP. Nevertheless, recognising current momentum, the MTR does not recommend terminating the national-level support outright. Rather, a refocussing is recommended in which targeted support to national curriculum development in core subjects and selected grades is provided, with such support emphasising capacity building of GoL counterparts to then lead on curriculum development for non-core subjects and for subsequent grades. Similarly, support for the design of national teacher development framework could be continued, but with implementation funded in BEQUAL target districts. By slowing and narrowing the extent of support for nationally-focussed activities, BEQUAL should be able to refocus at subnational level in target districts to address fundamental classroom quality issues—in line with the intent of the design.

A further matter that seems to have attracted limited focus is the ‘triggering’ of the demand-side for education participation at scale. In the Lao PDR context, it is known that a range of

household factors conspire to constrain the attendance of girls and boys, and their meaningful participation in learning—especially among some ethnic groups. While BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) members working in KRA 2 have been broadly dedicated to these issues, efforts so far have been localised and NGO-dependent, and no mechanisms have been identified that can work at scale to meaningfully foster demand for good education across target areas.

### *Activities and structure*

The KRA structure is well imbedded; however, several key informants expressed concerns that relying on this structure to manage implementation has tended to devise a program of separate parts rather than enabling an integrated focus on achieving program outcomes. It seems that there are few internal incentives for KRA leaders and their teams to collaborate beyond their immediate remit. This is most evident in relation to geographic targeting when seen from the standpoint of DESB officials who are obliged at times to liaise with several discrete BEQUAL activities implemented across different schools/villages within their districts—a situation that reportedly creates confusion.

BEQUAL is perceived by some stakeholders to be predominantly oriented towards national activities, which is considered in conflict with the local/classroom-focused intent of the program design. Certainly, we were advised of such concerns among PESS stakeholders. A national focus makes sense to some extent with activities such as curriculum development. The MTR team suggests that going forward, BEQUAL should aim to decentralise the bulk of programmatic support, including most TA, to the provincial and district level in targeted provinces.

Beyond conventional technical advisory services, BEQUAL has employed a range of modalities including: small grants mechanisms, an NGO consortium and ethnic teacher training scholarships. Of note, the scholarships for ethnic teacher trainees assume that ethnic teachers will be more readily retained in remote areas, creating a stable workforce and thus a more stable learning environment. This logic is plausible, if untested. However, what is now critical is the degree of risk to program sustainability that has emerged because of complexity in if/how the ethnic trainee teachers will be absorbed into the GoL workforce—creating a ‘do no harm’ issue that requires urgent resolution by MoES, DFAT and BEQUAL.

### *Management arrangements*

The BEQUAL organisational structure is flat with 11 direct reports to the Team Leader. This carries the risk that team management issues can compete with strategic and reflective processes, and potentially constrained program integration. At mid-term, having successfully mobilised BEQUAL, and with the imminent leadership transition, it is timely to reflect on the most appropriate organisational structure. It may be that program integration can occur more readily if the team is structured around end-of-program outcomes rather than the KRAs. Also, the apparent success of regional adviser teams has arguably proven the benefits of a decentralised program structure.

Several interviewees acknowledged some issues/frustrations with processes such as recruitment delays, ambiguous communication protocols, late visa requests etc.; although most also agreed that systems had continued to mature over the past six to eight months. The MTR team was also advised that there have been notable improvements in the internal communication processes and tone within BEQUAL over the past six to eight months. Interviewees—including the Minister of Education and Sports—were generally positive about communication and coordination between GoL and BEQUAL. However, beyond the effective operational or technocratic communication is a subtler issue raised by some—the

extent to which individual advisers are effective in engaging with their counterparts, and maximising the influence of the program. Communication between BEQUAL and DFAT's education team is evidently free-flowing and includes an appropriate mix of formal and routine contact. Perhaps what is less present is opportunity for strategic dialogue—noting DFAT's priority is to seek strategic influence and access within the GoL. Most interviewees reflected that while there is frequent dialogue between advisers and DFAT, there is no structure/format to introduce constructive contestability, and no systematic way to track lines of argument, decisions made, and their strategic implications. Unsurprisingly for a large, multifaceted program, some sector development partners indicated a closer and more productive relationship with BEQUAL than others. It is well-appreciated that as the largest bilateral program in the sector, other actors look to BEQUAL for leadership and communication brokerage. DFAT has established a strong leadership position in the education sector, and is arguably best placed to lead sectoral communication processes from a development partner standpoint (and in fact has evidently done this effectively in the past).

### *Stakeholder engagement and capacity*

The MoES leadership affirmed both the alignment of BEQUAL with GoL policies, and the Government's own commitment to the program. As expected, beneath these official affirmations is an array of individual experiences. Notwithstanding BEQUAL's generally good standing within the MoES at central level, we encountered less positive perspectives at sub-national level. We were advised that lessons have been learned through the first round of District Operating Grants, and that a more collaborative approach with PESS is assured in the future.

The MTR team encountered diverse approaches and an array of perspectives concerning how BEQUAL is fostering sustainable capacity. It is not uncommon for program teams to feel a tension between the expectation for early results, and the desire to build lasting capacity. The MTR team formed the view that DFAT at Vientiane Post has largely accepted the 'long road' to capacity, with internal documents and also correspondence with the BEQUAL team affirming a willingness to revisit timeframes or scope to allow a more achievable development agenda. On the GoL counterpart side, we encountered a strong appetite for capacity strengthening. The Director of the MoES Department of Planning noted that *Sam Sang* represents a significant policy change for the GoL and articulates an entry point for capacity development and decentralisation. In response to questions about the program investing in 'direct delivery' versus 'capacity strengthening', some BEQUAL advisers compellingly argued that both approaches could co-exist—with the program producing both high-quality products within strict timeframes, and fostering enduring institutional performance. Evidently, this debate about BEQUAL's core focus extends back to the design phase when the fundamental rationale for BEQUAL was not universally agreed within DFAT, thus setting up an 'existential ambiguity' about program purpose. The MTR team formed the view that at this juncture—by default or design—BEQUAL is subtly oriented towards direct delivery rather than capacity strengthening. There are a number of elements of the program that fundamentally rely on direct delivery—for instance classroom construction, textbook delivery, school feeding, the ETSP and to a lesser extent curriculum development. These types of interventions can generate good 'reportable numbers', but may contribute little in terms of enduring capacity within 'the system'. There is a growing body of international experience (including within the Australian Aid program) with employing contemporary approaches such as an 'outputs-based aid' (OBA) approach or the use of 'smart subsidies'. Such approaches can turn 'direct delivery' into a significant lever for reform. OBA/smart subsidy approaches are not a panacea and are not necessarily straightforward to implement,

but offer a more empowering engagement which situates the counterpart as an active change agent, rather than a passive recipient.

### *Adequacy of progress*

The MTR team appreciated the intensity of effort required to mobilise a program with the scope and scale of BEQUAL, and the sense of pressure associated with establishing credibility and building momentum in approximately 16 months of implementation. Several notable achievements have been reported. However, a definitive assessment of the adequacy of progress of the overall program is challenging for several reasons, but mostly because the program lacks an overall ‘architecture’ to link the efforts of the various KRA teams, making it difficult to assimilate a narrative about progress and achievement towards the outcomes and goal. The IDD and M&E Plan provided a program logic that was expanded to include a Results Framework. Baselines and annual targets were set for a modest proportion of the indicators and are included in six-monthly progress reporting to DFAT with ‘traffic lights’ that self-assess progress. In broad terms the current status aligns with expectations of a program of this scale at this stage—that is, at mid-term three-quarters of the indicators are either completed or ongoing.

### *Learning and adaptation*

The BEQUAL IDD set out a broad theory of change, though this was at the level of established sector wisdom. There has been no agreed articulation of a more detailed theory of change customised to the Lao PDR context—identifying the most plausible ‘actors’ and ‘actions’ that the program can invest in to progressively influence the desired education reforms and outcomes. A ‘program logic’ was developed early in Phase 1 and provides an organising structure for 28 Outcomes to be achieved by the end of Phase 1 (four years) that will in turn contribute to three End-of-Program Outcomes (ten years). This logic does not include an explication of how these outcomes will be pursued (i.e. a ‘theory of action’). There are also a number of anomalies in the logic. An M&E Plan was developed in January 2016, based largely on the program logic, but was not definitive/prescriptive concerning the performance measures. An area that has seemingly received little attention is the development of appropriate M&E processes to assess changes in counterpart performance and capacity. Given that this is core to the sustainability strategy of the program, it seems to be a fundamental aspect of program performance that should be systematically tracked. It would be timely to conduct a systemic review of the program logic and M&E plan, with a view to aligning with a more focussed sub-national agenda. A revised theory of change could then be matched with a revised organisational structure that could be more strategically focussed on end-of-program outcomes.

The M&E function has evidently been challenging. Not only is the technical task of monitoring and evaluating a program of the scope and scale of BEQUAL difficult, but there have been various conceptions of the purpose of BEQUAL’s M&E at play: ‘MoES Help-desk’, ‘BEQUAL Program’, ‘KRA Secretariat’, ‘Reporting Bureau’. In addition, the M&E specialist was engaged only for 12 months (renewed for a further year), which seems to be a case of under-resourcing. Notwithstanding, BEQUAL has several assets to support learning and adaptation: first, the investment design and contract provides considerable flexibility to enable the contractor to adapt and respond to opportunities and lessons; second, resourcing by Post of the LADLF and TAF provides BEQUAL with a rare opportunity for learning.

### *Gender equality, disability and social inclusion*

The BEQUAL goal neatly aligns with MoES’ objectives for inclusive education, as does the criteria for its 66 focus districts. However, the centrality of crosscutting themes to the program design has seemingly resulted in some of BEQUAL staff aligning with the view that



*“everything BEQUAL does furthers inclusion”*, with the implication that dedicated advisory inputs are surplus. This conflation is problematic, and overlooks the need to truly strengthen an inclusive education system in Lao PDR. The BEQUAL design is comprehensive in its situational analysis of various barriers to enrolment and completion for girls and boys, especially those with disabilities or from ethnic minority groups. It explicitly foreshadows the strengthening of inclusive education concepts within all KRAs, and it prescribes using gender and inclusive methodologies in the training needs assessment and professional development program at teacher training colleges.

The BEQUAL design called for a full-time Education, Participation and Community Engagement Specialist. This role would be responsible for liaising with the DPPE (presumably with the IEC), liaise with DFAT and the NGOs, and advise on integration of these cross-cutting issues. This role did not materialise, and has been filled by a composite of short-term consultants—up to 10 days of advice per year, with an optional annual visit to Lao PDR. Notably, not all 10 days have been used. This allocation is patently insufficient for a program of BEQUAL’s dimension and intent. Building consensus on inclusion takes a clarity of purpose, an understanding of the added value, evidence to enable informed judgements, champions, and careful communications. By being based offshore, the GEDSI adviser cannot perform these roles. A full-time adviser based in Lao PDR is needed. A related issue is the underutilisation of available tools and material resources. DFAT could also demonstrate stronger leadership and accountability for these Departmental priorities. The MTR team heard from five interviewees that DFAT could be more emphatic on its own cross cutting policies. Furthermore, there is no particular DFAT staff member in Lao LDR responsible for GEDSI or inclusive education.

## CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. DFAT must clarify the continuing purpose of BEQUAL and in so doing address the emerging tension between national-level engagements that benefit all learners, versus targeted engagements focussed on closing the gap in educational outcomes among disadvantaged communities. .... 9
2. DFAT, MoES and BEQUAL should open good faith discussions about the implications of continuing with a full national curriculum rollout on the current timeline. The aim of these discussions should be to streamline and refocus BEQUAL support towards meeting the program Goal and End-of-Program-Outcomes by slowing the pace of national curriculum development, and refocussing resources in targeted districts. .... 11
3. BEQUAL should prioritise improving teacher quality in the most disadvantaged districts to ensure that teachers are able to effectively use the new curriculum resources, and to supplement these with locally appropriate and affordable classroom resources. .... 12
4. BEQUAL should review the KRA 2 modality and activities to extract value for the program from BNC expertise and experience. KRA 1 and KRA 2 should collaborate to identify viable strategies to trigger household demand for education at scale. .... 13
5. DFAT should commission a review of BEQUAL targeting in order to establish a rationale for the scope, scale and depth of BEQUAL engagements, and to inform an integration strategy. .... 15
6. BEQUAL should proactively work improve the integration and coherence of program activities in target districts, including deploying Technical Advisers at regional level to the extent possible. .... 16
7. DFAT and BEQUAL should liaise with MoES and key provincial government stakeholders to reach agreement on how to optimally resolve the conflicting expectations of ETSP stakeholders. .... 18
8. The contractor and DFAT should work together to clarify the leadership skill-set, style and structure most appropriate as the program transitions through the mid-term of Phase 1. .... 21
9. The contractor (in consultation with DFAT) should consider engaging specialist organisational effectiveness advice in relation to a structure that is optimally aligned with the strategy, and operationalises the principles of a decentralised program. .... 21
10. BEQUAL and DFAT should explore practical ways to enable strategic/reflective discussions about the BEQUAL strategic horizon, and systematically track decisions/actions agreed. .... 24
11. DFAT should consider the most effective ways to ensure that education sector stakeholders are briefed on learning and progress within BEQUAL. .... 24
12. DFAT and BEQUAL should reposition the program’s significant investments as ‘smart subsidies’ to leverage education reforms and improve performance. Such an approach could accompany a stronger focus on capacity strengthening and a more modest emphasis on program-delivered outputs. .... 27
13. DFAT should commission a review of the theory of change and M&E plan and have these products updated to reflect the decentralisation and refocussing of the program on target school performance. Such a review should also examine the

mechanisms and incentives to drive learning across the program and the adequacy of the M&E resources over the remaining life-of-program. .... 32

14. BEQUAL should prepare a management response to all major reviews or studies undertaken by LADLF/TAF. .... 32

15. BEQUAL should appoint a full time Education, Participation and Community Engagement Specialist or GEDSI Adviser based in Lao PDR, to work with and ultimately be replaced by a national team member. .... 38

16. The above specialist should be engaged to review the GEDSI checklist (2016) and the Inclusive Education Guidelines (2016) in order to set work priorities. This should include ensuring that M&E and reporting adequately capture cross-cutting results and issues (especially child safe content, diverse disabilities and the intersection of gender and disability). It can be a collaborative process with partners, but is for the specialist to lead. .... 38

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

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AIP	Aid Investment Plan
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AUD	Australian Dollars
BEIF	BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund
BEQUAL	Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR
BNC	BEQUAL NGO Consortium
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DESB	District Education and Sports Bureau
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
DPPE	Department of Pre-primary and Primary Education
ESDP	Economic and Social Development Plan
ETSP	Ethnic Teacher Scholarship Program
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GD&SI also used)
GoL	Government of Lao PDR
IDD	Investment Design Document
IE	Inclusive Education
IEC	Inclusive Education Centre
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
KRA	Key Result Area
LADLF	Laos-Australia Development Learning Facility
LDC	Least Developed Country
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MTR	Mid Term Review
NESDP	National Economic and Social Development Plan
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NHDR	National Human Development Report
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PA	Pedagogical Adviser
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PESS	Provincial Education and Sports Service
RIES	Research Institute of Education Science
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TA	Technical Assistance
TAF	The Asia Foundation

ToR	Terms of Reference
TTC	Teacher Training College
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollars
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Document Purpose

This document reports the findings of a midterm review (MTR) of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) Program—an investment by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The MTR mission was conducted in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) over the period 14 August – 1 September 2017 by four independent evaluators.

## 1.2 Background

### *Lao PDR context*

Lao PDR is a land-locked developing country with a population of 6.5 million (2015)<sup>1</sup> spread across 18 provinces. According to United Nations criteria, Lao PDR is a Least Developed Country (LDC). The 2016 Human Development Report ranked Laos 138th of 188 countries, and seventh out of 10 countries in the ASEAN region. Over the past decades, the country has made progress in human development and poverty reduction based on the Human Development Index rising from 0.340 in 1980 to 0.586 in 2015<sup>2</sup>. However, despite an improvement in global ranking of five places since 1990, key measures of inequality have deteriorated over the same period, warranting a focus on disadvantage.

Lao PDR is ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse; and has grappled with a range of significant economic constraints. These constraints include limited human capacity—especially in skills needed for a modern, entrepreneurial, and increasingly knowledge-based economy. The legislative and institutional foundations of a market economy remain underdeveloped, and approaches to economic management still constrain the economy with excessively discretionary and opaque decision-making and regulation<sup>3</sup>. Approximately 67% of the population live in rural areas, mostly inhabited by multiple ethnic communities. Within the four major ethno-linguistic groups (Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Chinese-Tibetan, and Hmong-Mien) there are 49 recognised ethnic communities that contribute to the country’s rich cultural diversity<sup>4</sup>. Efforts to obtain accurate, disaggregated data about ethnic communities, beyond the four linguistics groupings, have proven difficult due to different dialects, people movements, and limited government resources, among other factors.

In the fifth National Human Development Report, Lao PDR’s progress on poverty reduction and human development are uneven, both across its regions and among its ethnic groups. Poverty and deprivation are largely concentrated in remote and rural provinces where social infrastructure remains inaccessible, or absent. Development progress is limited among non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups who receive less education and are primarily dependent on family farming livelihoods. A challenge for the eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) is how to address sustainable, equitable and inclusive growth by better understanding the needs of vulnerable groups and more effectively targeting policy interventions.

The diversity and the economic difficulties combine with governance and corruption difficulties<sup>5</sup> to impose significant challenges for the delivery of all social services, including education. The education sector in Lao PDR comprises: pre-primary (crèche, kindergarten and pre-primary schools); primary (grades 1 – 5); lower secondary (grades 6 – 9); and upper secondary (grades 10 – 12). There are also informal and technical vocational and education

<sup>1</sup> 2015 National Population Census, Lao Statistics Bureau

<sup>2</sup> 2017 Lao PDR National Human Development Report, Ministry of Planning and Investment

<sup>3</sup> World Bank. 2015. Lao PDR Economic Monitor April 2015: Restoring Macroeconomic Stability and Building Inclusive Growth

<sup>4</sup> 2015 National Population Census, Lao Statistics Bureau

<sup>5</sup> Transparency International ranked Lao PDR at 123/176 on the 2016 Corruptions Perception Index.



training sub-sectors administered by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Basic education is defined as comprising primary and lower secondary schools. Challenges facing basic education in Lao PDR include issues of access, participation, quality and demand.

Access to basic education is a function of inadequate infrastructure and remoteness, but also many primary schools do not offer all five years of schooling. Consequently, it is not unusual for students wishing to complete their basic education to move schools at least twice, and travel significant distances—imposing physical and cost barriers on families, and heightening vulnerabilities for unaccompanied children in transit, and as boarders.

Basic education quality is constrained by an array of factors. Pedagogy emphasises rote learning, and there are recognised challenges in attracting and retaining qualified teachers—especially in remote and ethnic group areas. Classroom pedagogical support and effective school management practices are not widespread. The primary curriculum has not been revised since 2009. The high volume of content, or over-crowded curriculum, creates difficulties for teachers and students—especially in the early years—and is especially difficult for non-Lao speaking children.

There are significant disparities in educational outcomes between genders, ethnic groups and across geographic areas. Cultural prerogatives in some communities, such as early marriage of girls and seasonal labour demands<sup>6</sup>, are known to be in conflict with educational attainment, or even participation<sup>7</sup>. These ‘demand-side’ beliefs or priorities compound the issues of access and quality described above.

The BEQUAL design was supported by MoES to take a comprehensive and broad-based approach to addressing these issues. Education is seen as being fundamental to achieving many of the Government’s development priorities—including competing in the ASEAN economy, and graduating from LDC status by 2020.

### *Australian context*

Australia has a strong interest in ensuring Lao PDR continues to develop as a stable neighbour that is increasingly well positioned to contribute to regional security and prosperity<sup>8</sup>. The countries celebrated 65 years of unbroken diplomatic relations in 2017. The relationship has included a long history of development cooperation, including significant engagement in the education sector.

The design process for BEQUAL commenced in 2012 at a time when Australian aid was administered by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and during a period of rapid scale-up of Australia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA)<sup>9</sup>. Australia’s aid program in Lao PDR was projected to reach AUD85.8 million by 2017-18<sup>10</sup>, with investments in education, rural development and governance—with synergies anticipated between these sectors. A change of Australian government in 2013, along with contracting fiscal conditions and a new aid policy<sup>11</sup>, culminated in aid budget cuts in Lao PDR of approximately 50%. A revised Aid Investment Plan (AIP) for Lao PDR narrowed the program focus on basic education; and correspondingly divested from the other sectors. In accord with Australia’s economic diplomacy agenda, the emphasis moved to fostering political access and policy influence.

<sup>6</sup> LADLF. (2016). Perceived value of primary education, and factors for regular participation and completion, in poor and remote households in Lao PDR.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. practices such as *Akha* in which the birth of boys is not registered because some fathers prefer them to work in the fields rather than being obliged to attend school.

<sup>8</sup> [http://laos.embassy.gov.au/files/vtan/AIP%20final%20submitted%20to%20on-line%20publishing\\_English.pdf](http://laos.embassy.gov.au/files/vtan/AIP%20final%20submitted%20to%20on-line%20publishing_English.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> At that time the Australian Government was targeting ODA at 0.5% of GDP by 2015.

<sup>10</sup> IDD, p14

<sup>11</sup> *Australian aid: promoting prosperity, reducing poverty, enhancing stability*

Within this wider context of change, the BEQUAL design was largely unaffected and became Australia's flagship aid investment. The program is expected to be a ten-year investment (2015 – 2025) with the first phase concluding in June 2019. BEQUAL is jointly managed by the MoES and DFAT and in collaboration with the European Union (the latter via a delegated cooperation arrangement), other multilateral and UN agencies, as well as non-government organisations (NGOs). The program is implemented by a managing contractor<sup>12</sup> and a consortium of Australian NGOs<sup>13</sup>.

In 2016 – 17 Australia's ODA to Lao PDR was valued at AUD40.7 million, of which AUD20.6 million was bilateral funding managed by DFAT<sup>14</sup>. The bulk of this bilateral funding was expended through BEQUAL.

### 1.3 Program Overview

The BEQUAL goal is: *“more girls and boys, especially those experiencing disadvantages, complete good quality basic education<sup>15</sup>, achieving literacy, numeracy and other life skills”*. Three end-of-program (10 years) outcomes are expected to contribute to this goal:

- **Increased participation:** more girls and boys, especially those experiencing disadvantage, participate in basic education;
- **Better resourcing:** school learning environments in targeted districts have adequate buildings, water and sanitation, and teaching and learning resources;
- **Effective teaching:** teachers in targeted districts provide good quality teaching.

The BEQUAL design document identified five key result areas (KRAs) to guide implementation and as the basis for defining end-of-Phase 1 (four years) outcomes:

1. **Education Policy, Planning and Coordination:** to strengthen the capacity of central; provincial and district MoES educational entities to better manage administrative and financial resources for education delivery in Lao PDR.
2. **Increased Participation:** to ensure more girls and boys (including those with disabilities) from remote and ethnic minority communities are able to enrol and complete their primary education.
3. **Teacher Education and Support:** to ensure primary teacher trainees, including ethnic minority women, are receiving modern and pedagogically appropriate pre-service training from qualified teacher trainers.
4. **Teaching and Learning Resources:** to ensure educators, teachers and students have access to, and are using, relevant gender inclusive teaching and learning resources, e.g. curriculum materials; lesson plans and resources; textbooks; notebooks and student materials.
5. **School Infrastructure:** to ensure teachers and students in remote and disadvantaged communities are accommodated in schools and classrooms 'fit for purpose' i.e. which provide a safe, hygienic, inclusive and well equipped physical learning environment.

The design document depicted the conceptual framework for the program as follows:

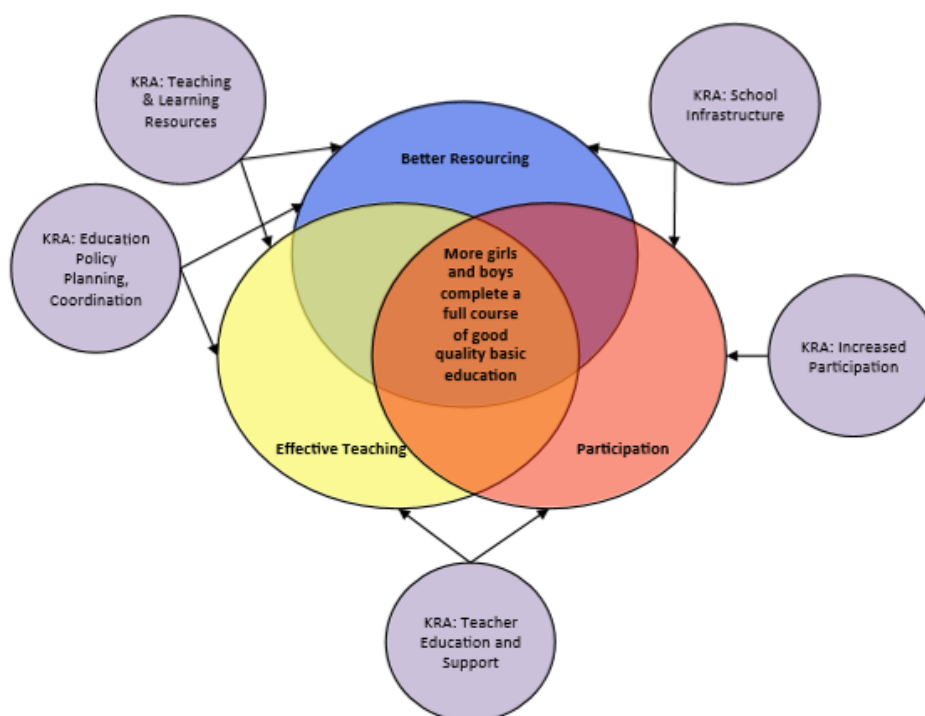
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<sup>12</sup> Coffey: A Tetra Tech Company.

<sup>13</sup> Plan, World Vision, Save the Children, ChildFund.

<sup>14</sup> Other Australian Government agencies also provide assistance programs for their Lao counterparts valued at more than A\$6 million per year, including the Australian Council for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), Australian Federal Police, and the Departments of Defence and Immigration and Border Protection.

<sup>15</sup> N.B. The MTR team was advised that in Lao law, the term 'basic education' concerns both primary and lower secondary school; however, to date BEQUAL has only focussed on primary education.



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking KRAs, Outcomes and the Goal**

BEQUAL currently funds activity in 47 districts<sup>16</sup> in 12 provinces across north, central and southern regions of the country and is aiming to reach between 15,000 – 20,000 children who drop out, do not enrol or complete grade 5; and up to a further 179,000 enrolled pupils across 2,178 primary schools with 7,080 teachers.

<sup>16</sup> The target districts include ETSP, BNC, DOGs and BEIF activities, but not EDP II infrastructure repairs which have been carried out in 60 districts across 13 provinces. EDP II was not part of the original BEQUAL design but was subsequently added by DFAT to address issues identified through a review of earlier World Bank managed support.

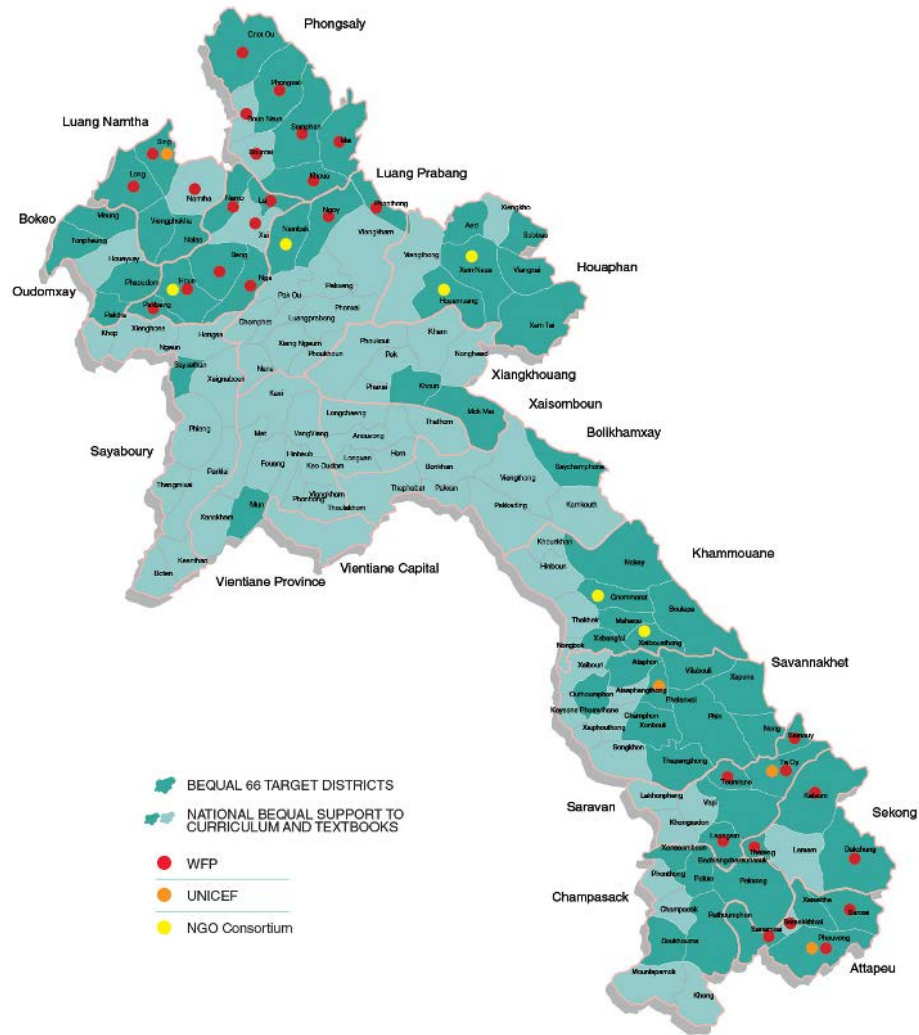


Figure 2: Map of Lao PDR showing BEQUAL target areas

## 2. METHODOLOGY

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### 2.1 Scope

The scope of this MTR was defined by DFAT in an evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR), which was subsequently refined by seven key evaluation questions (KEQ) focussed on (see Appendix A): i) program scope; ii) activities and structure; iii) management arrangements; iv) stakeholder engagement; v) adequacy of progress; vi) learning and adaptation; vii) gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI). The MTR team integrated the ToR and KEQs into an Evaluation Plan that articulated operational and conceptual details for the MTR. The intent of the MTR was for a formative evaluation to facilitate reflection at the mid-term of the first phase of implementation. The MTR team comprised an evaluation specialist (team leader), education specialist, social development specialist and Lao PDR governance and development specialist.

### 2.2 Methods

The broad methodology for data collection was qualitative:

- **Document reviews:** a comprehensive review of key documents produced by the program along with relevant sector literature helped to identify key issues ahead of the mission, and provided the basis for factual data presented in this report.
- **Key informant interviews:** more than 145 purposively selected individuals (65 female) provided the backbone of the primary data collection. The MTR team was able to probe and triangulate stakeholder perspectives during the course of the mission.
- **Focus group discussions:** open discussions were facilitated with GoL stakeholders, community representatives, teachers and students.

MTR team members compiled notes of interviews and discussions and used content analysis methods to identify common and exceptional themes against the KEQs.

### 2.3 Sample

The MTR mission was predominantly conducted in Vientiane, but with field visits taking in Luang Namtha Province, Savannakhet Province, Khammouane Province and Luang Prabang Province. These locations were selected to reflect some of the diversity in geography and political engagement. Key informants were drawn from: MoES<sup>17</sup>, other Government of Lao PDR ministries<sup>18</sup>, school-level stakeholders<sup>19</sup>, teacher training college (TTC) staff and students (including ethnic student teachers), NGOs<sup>20</sup>, development partner organisations<sup>21</sup>, BEQUAL advisers, other advisers<sup>22</sup>, and DFAT staff. A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix B.

### 2.4 Limitations

The MTR mission proceeded largely as planned; nevertheless, minor factors may have affected the findings, including:

- **Immersion:** a recognised limitation of program evaluations is that external/independent evaluators are constrained by the extent that they can

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<sup>17</sup> Across the Ministry departmental structure as well as Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) officials and District Education and Sport Bureau (DESB) officials.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Finance (MoF), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA).

<sup>19</sup> Principals, teachers, Village Education Development Committee (VEDC) members, parents and children.

<sup>20</sup> BEQUAL partners and other NGOs active in the education sector.

<sup>21</sup> Including the European Union which is a co-funder of BEQUAL.

<sup>22</sup> Past and present advisers with the Laos-Australia Learning Development Facility (LALDF) and The Asia Foundation (TAF).

become immersed in the history, technical and managerial nuance, geopolitical context and cultural norms associated with a large and complex program. To some extent this limitation was mitigated by the DFAT's appointment of a Lao governance specialist steeped in the local context. International team members had experience evaluating DFAT aid programs, including in Lao PDR.

- **Interpretation:** the MTR team employed rapid qualitative methods of inquiry to identify key issues. Such evaluation methods are known to ultimately rely on professional judgement. Individual team members each brought their assumptions and experiences to this task. The MTR team adopted a consensus approach to findings and recommendations in the first instance; but was prepared to document diversity within the team if consensus was unachievable.
- **Stakeholder access:** despite the best efforts of all involved, it was not possible in the time available for the MTR team to meet with all desired stakeholders—or indeed revisit themes or issues with some key stakeholders. There was limited engagement with sub-national stakeholders, including school/community actors. Around 45% of interviewees were female. Unfortunately, the BEQUAL Team Leader was required to attend to an urgent family matter in New Zealand and so was not in country beyond the second day of the mission.
- **Breadth:** the breadth of issues raised by the seven KEQs and 34 'sub questions' imposed significant workload in the available timeframe, which was compounded by the fact that prior commitments meant that it was not possible for the whole MTR team to be in-country for the full three weeks of the mission.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Overview

The MTR team’s findings are presented in the following sections in line with the seven KEQs articulated by DFAT (see Section 2.1 and Appendix A). Each section commences with a succinct summary of perceived strengths and weaknesses related to the KEQ. In each section, narrative arguments are broadly structured around the 34 ‘sub-questions’ posed by DFAT. Recommendations are embedded within the relevant narrative and consolidated for convenience on page v in the preliminary sections of this document.

### 3.2 Program scope and focus

- + Government officials affirm the continuing relevance of BEQUAL.
- Significant changes in contextual factors have compromised the original design assumptions.
- Emerging program priorities are at odds with the original purpose and focus of the program design.
- Current trajectory of program priorities carry risks for DFAT and MoES.

#### *Status of key assumptions*

Since finalisation of the BEQUAL Investment Design Document (IDD) in 2013, there has been significant change in the political landscape in Lao PDR, and a deterioration in fiscal conditions that is likely to persist beyond 2020<sup>23</sup>. As noted in Section 1.2, Australia’s aid program has also undergone significant changes. In this context, many of the explicit and implicit assumptions on which the BEQUAL design and theory of change were originally based have not been borne out<sup>24</sup>. Notionally, one of the four “*important assumptions*” in the IDD (p 16) concerned with Government support for improving education<sup>25</sup> was reaffirmed during this MTR by the Minister of Education and senior officials within the Department of Planning; however, there was also recognition that the fiscal environment renders this assumption weak (see Section 3.5). The other three important assumptions in the IDD—concerned with alignment under a revised Education Sector Development Plan, expectations of an increasing share of the national budget for education, and continuation of Australian-funded rural development initiatives—have not been realised.

In effect, the constrained national fiscal conditions, combined with the reduced development assistance for disadvantaged communities in rural Lao PDR, has curbed the potential for BEQUAL to realise the original ambition in the design. But beyond these contextual changes, the discussion below highlights how the program has also concentrated investment in ways that have limited its potential to realise the goal.

#### *BEQUAL support for reforms*

As presented in Section 1.3, the BEQUAL goal explicitly focuses the program on children—especially disadvantaged girls and boys. The KRA structure that underpins the implementation arrangements was designed to address key constraints in relation to the goal. However, with the changes in context noted above, and with perceived pressure for early results, national primary curriculum reform and teacher training activities emerged as priorities of the program. One BEQUAL adviser reflected: “*the coherent response set out in the design has changed...We didn’t expect that the main focus would be on curriculum and*

<sup>23</sup> World Bank Lao Economic Monitor. Monitor <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/publication/lao-pdr-economic-monitor-april-2017-financing-the-health-sector>

<sup>24</sup> LADLF 2016 Education Development Context Update.

<sup>25</sup> “*The Government of Lao PDR and its partners are, and remain, committed to supporting improved basic education for disadvantaged (ethnic minority, disabled and female) groups*”.

*teacher training...It was always anticipated that BEQUAL would support the ministry in rolling out their new curriculum in some way, but we've now become the prime force".*

The logic of these post-design program priorities is defensible insofar as the current primary curriculum is widely acknowledged to be sub-optimal<sup>26</sup>; and if a new curriculum is to be developed, then to maximise its return on investment, teachers should be supported to implement it. The MTR team appreciates this logic and the centrality of these priorities to improving the quality of education in general, but is concerned that the inevitable national focus reduces the capacity of the program to address the multifaceted root causes of low levels of education access, participation and achievement by learners from the most disadvantaged districts<sup>27</sup>. In fact, it is likely that well-performing and better-resourced schools will benefit disproportionately from the revised curriculum and teacher training activities, thereby compounding inequities. In essence, the concentration on curriculum (KRA 4) and teacher training activities (KRA 3)—while worthwhile—contributes only indirectly to the BEQUAL goal, meaning that program resources are broadly directed to all learners rather than to the particular needs of learners in the most disadvantaged/targeted districts. To be clear, while the GoL has a clear responsibility to all learners in Lao PDR, the BEQUAL IDD prioritised the needs of disadvantaged learners. The emerging tension between universal and targeted support by BEQUAL must be resolved since ambiguously/variously pursuing both approaches risks compromising effectiveness, dissipating impact and eroding sustainability—and ultimately value-for-money<sup>28</sup>.

#### Recommendation:

1. DFAT must clarify the continuing purpose of BEQUAL and in so doing address the emerging tension between national-level engagements that benefit all learners, versus targeted engagements focussed on closing the gap in educational outcomes among disadvantaged communities.

The MTR team appreciates that the BEQUAL goal, which was formulated under an earlier aid policy framework, could be amended to reflect the latent national policy focus. Further, there is an argument that the two nationally oriented program priorities (curriculum development and teacher training) could afford DFAT unique policy influence and political access<sup>29</sup> owing to their high-profile and apparently discrete/contained scope. However, there are notable risks for DFAT in redesigning the focus of the whole program on these two national reform priorities (and hence amending the program goal).

- **Timeframe slippage:** there was agreement among key informants that the current rollout program for curriculum development and teacher training is ambitious. One BEQUAL adviser reflected: *"what we're asking of the Research Institute of Education Science (RIES) is a lot. It is comprehensive and ambitious. Can they keep up with the deadlines?"* Another said: *"I think we're trying to do too much too quickly. I don't think it's possible to effectively train every Grade 1 teacher. It's asking too much of the government, teachers and BEQUAL"*. The RIES

<sup>26</sup> BEQUAL (2017) Discussion Paper on Curriculum Reform Rollout of MoES Curriculum

<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps self-evident that without a change in the BEQUAL budget envelope, resources will be predominantly absorbed by national-level priorities or by sub-national needs, but not both.

<sup>28</sup> The recommendation of the MTR team to re-affirm the original purpose of BEQUAL should not suggest a wholesale withdrawal from all national-level engagements, but rather a more delicately phased and integrated implementation that is overtly framed by the documented challenges in disadvantaged schools.

<sup>29</sup> The MTR team notes that refocusing the program on national policy reforms aligns in broad terms with DFAT economic diplomacy priorities. Nevertheless, the details of such a redesign require clear elaboration—in particular, precisely what additional access and influence outcomes could plausibly be realised through a narrower focus on national curriculum reform and teacher training.



Director acknowledged that the pace of work left little room for error or revision: *“in our planning, we measure time in weeks not months”*.

- **Cost blowout:** developing, piloting and rolling out a complete national primary school curriculum that is considered good quality and worthy of Australian Aid branding has the potential to consume more resources than is currently allocated for the entire program—especially given the acknowledged fiscal constraints facing the GoL. A poor-quality and under-resourced rollout would not serve the purposes of the GoL or DFAT, and as unforeseen costs emerge these would likely need to be absorbed by BEQUAL. The scale of the undertaking was illustrated to the MTR team by the fact that even the most basic package of teacher resources to accompany only the new Grade 1 curriculum rollout in 9,000 classes would exceed AUD2 million. While not resourced to conduct a forensic financial analysis, the MTR team concluded that it is likely that taking on the full curr
- **Quality of curriculum:** global experience suggests that curriculum development assistance can be fraught, with the results attracting criticisms—especially when the rollout is executed under time and resource pressures. There is also a discernible tension between a capacity building approach that supports MoES staff to draft the curriculum, and a technical adviser (TA) led process that can assert more control over quality and delivery times. One adviser noted: *“it’s very time consuming one-on-one work to produce good quality curriculum”*.
- **Limited impact on educational outcomes:** In education sector literature, there is debate about the relative contribution of curriculum reform to learning outcomes, with DFAT’s own analysis<sup>30</sup> aligning with the view that while curriculum is undoubtedly critical, teacher quality and classroom factors contribute more to improved learning outcomes<sup>31</sup>. Put simply, there is risk to DFAT if after significant investment in national primary curriculum there is little or no change in educational outcomes. This seems especially likely in disadvantaged areas where there is a confluence of local constraints on learning (see box)<sup>32</sup>.

A comparison of the 29 BEQUAL target districts with non-BEQUAL districts reveals stark differences:

Primary completion rate (to grade 5) is approximately 20% lower than in non-BEQUAL schools.

The Grade 1 drop-out rate is approximately 4% higher in the 29 BEQUAL districts with boys (11.8%) marginally more likely to do so than girls (10.4%).

Of those students completing the Grade 5 exam, girls (82.2) are less likely to transition to secondary school than boys (85.2).

Root causes of these participation rates are different for boys and girls, but are related to factors of ethnicity, learning in a second language, poverty and livelihood (subsistence), and cultural traditions (e.g. early female teen marriage).

In addition to these program and reputational risks to DFAT, there are compelling econometric arguments for improving the standard of education in a broad base of poor performing schools—especially given the rapidly increasing demand for skilled labour to support the GoL policy of economic integration. Australian support to improve education completion rates is fundamental to meeting this challenge.

<sup>30</sup> DFAT (2015) *Supporting Teacher Development: Literature Review*. Office of Development Effectiveness. Canberra.

<sup>31</sup> Akyeampong, K., Lussier, K., Pryor, J., & Westbrook, J. (2013). Improving teaching and learning of basic maths and reading in Africa: Does teacher preparation count? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33 (3), 272-282.

<sup>32</sup> LADLF (2017) *Assessment of BEQUAL’s Targeting Approach in Lao PDR*; LADLF 2016 *Perceived value of primary education and factors for regular participation and completion in poor and remote households in Lao PDR*; DFAT, 2013 *Investment Design document*.

Thus, there are also significant risks to the Government of Lao PDR. Namely, that the current course of action will not adequately address the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged, and may even contribute to increasing the gap, thereby inadvertently undermining parallel efforts for increased national social cohesion as identified in the NESDP. This is in addition to the risk to sustainable capacity development that can accompany a pressured rollout.

It seems that an obvious action is to slow-down the curriculum development and to realign the associated in-service teacher training activities to create more space for addressing local and classroom factors. However, the MTR team appreciates that there is considerable political momentum and commitment, and MoES is concerned that slowing the curriculum rollout

*“The timeframe is incredibly tight. There is no time to pilot. The emphasis on rolling out Grade 1 curriculum means we have to have master trainers ready by March, delivering training by April and May, with teachers starting in June.”*

(BEQUAL Adviser)

may in effect reduce funding commitments. Also, discussion with RIES and DTE highlighted that BEQUAL represents the primary means for the Government achieving the curriculum reform targets set out in the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP). It is clear that this situation calls for delicate strategic communication—and perhaps a renegotiation of targets. A radical change by BEQUAL away from the national-level support would not be prudent but a streamlining and refocussing of BEQUAL activities is ultimately in everyone’s interests. A starting point for negotiating a shift in emphasis is that all parties have an interest in improved educational outcomes and sustainability beyond the investment.

A streamlined and refocused BEQUAL could situate implementation in the 66 disadvantaged districts already agreed for BEQUAL targeting<sup>33</sup>. This could involve integrated technical assistance along the lines of KRAs 1 – 5, but with a clear and coordinated focus on improving learning outcomes in target schools. In addition (and assuming that the MoES intends to continue with the national curriculum rollout for all subjects in Grades 1 – 5), BEQUAL could continue to provide targeted technical support for the design, quality assurance and production of textbooks and teacher guides in selected subjects<sup>34</sup>, and perhaps selected grades rather than committing to full support and sponsorship of the entire curriculum reform agenda. Such targeted support would emphasise building the national systems and capacity in RIES for materials design, development, piloting and production.

#### **Recommendation:**

2. DFAT, MoES and BEQUAL should open good faith discussions about the implications of continuing with a full national curriculum rollout on the current timeline. The aim of these discussions should be to streamline and refocus BEQUAL support towards meeting the program Goal and End-of-Program-Outcomes by slowing the pace of national curriculum development, and refocussing resources in targeted districts.

A more nuanced discussion of how to deal with the plexus of issues is provided in Appendix C. Section 3.5 also discusses matters related to stakeholder engagement and sustainability.

<sup>33</sup> N.B. This should not imply a withdrawal of all national-level support—rather a refocussing on the original rationale of the BEQUAL design.

<sup>34</sup> e.g. Lao language, science and English.

### What is not being done?

The BEQUAL Progress Report (August 2017) indicated that KRA 3 activities have been modified to accommodate KRA 4 requirements. This suggests that one consequence of the concentration of effort on primary curriculum development could be that planned KRA 3 activities are swamped by in-servicing demands. This in turn raises a wider concern that the most disadvantaged schools will not get the level of targeted professional development that in-service teachers need. One Provincial Education and Sport Service (PESS) official stated: *“The [new] curriculum is good, but it’s a waste of money without improving teacher quality. Good teachers, with or without good textbooks, will teach well”*.

*“A common challenge facing schools is the way teachers teach...they’re not proactive. Teaching is only based on what they have always done. There is no innovation or creativity with local materials. 70% just do what they have always done with the resources they already have”*

(Pedagogical Adviser)

The original conception of KRA 3 presented in the IDD was for an integrated approach to teacher education and support, bridging: pre-service education; teacher professional development; and systematic Pedagogical Adviser (PA) support for teachers in classrooms. BEQUAL Advisers affirmed this broad focus, though multiple stakeholders noted the risk that supporting development of a new primary curriculum could overwhelm this more integrated approach. Likewise, KRA 4 was originally intended to support skills in developing and using low-cost locally-relevant learning materials to support the teacher education initiative, but also risks being overwhelmed by the need for resources to support the new curriculum<sup>35</sup>. To be clear, it remains open to DFAT and MoES to agree to BEQUAL taking a narrower program focus than was set out in the IDD. The MTR team has raised these issues here because there are risks to program success if such a refocussing is a function of drift rather than strategic planning.

Also of clear importance is the matter of school management capability. Developing an effective PA program managed by District Education and Sports Bureaus (DESB) should lead to improvements in classroom practices and better learning outcomes; but such improvements would be more achievable and sustainable in the context of better managed schools. The locus of such efforts would involve the Village Education and Development Committees (VEDC) and school principals.

#### Recommendation:

3. BEQUAL should prioritise improving teacher quality in the most disadvantaged districts to ensure that teachers are able to effectively use the new curriculum resources, and to supplement these with locally appropriate and affordable classroom resources.

A further matter that seems to have attracted limited focus is the ‘triggering’<sup>36</sup> of the demand-side for education participation at scale. In the Lao PDR context, it is known that a

<sup>35</sup> In interviews, some BEQUAL Advisers agreed that the provision of teacher guides that are both highly directive and locally relevant presents a challenge for the program; hence the need for centrally available and locally produced materials. See: Glewwe, P & Muralidharan, K., (2015) Improving school Education Outcomes in developing countries: Evidence, Knowledge Gaps and Policy Implications. RISE Working Paper Oct 2015. See also, WB (2018) Learning to realise Education’s Promise, World Development Report, pp9-12.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Triggering’ is a term borrowed from Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) in the WASH sector, and refers to a practice of stimulating households to abandon unhygienic sanitation practices at scale. See [http://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/sites/communityledtotalsanitation.org/files/Guidelines\\_for\\_triggering\\_CLTS\\_0.pdf](http://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/sites/communityledtotalsanitation.org/files/Guidelines_for_triggering_CLTS_0.pdf).

range of household factors conspire to constrain the attendance of girls and boys<sup>37</sup>, and their meaningful participation in learning. This is especially the case among some ethnic groups. While BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) members working in KRA 2 have been broadly dedicated to these issues<sup>38</sup>, efforts so far have been localised and NGO-dependent. There have not been any mechanisms identified that can work at scale to meaningfully foster demand for good education across target areas<sup>39</sup>. Further, opportunities for innovation within the BNC to be taken up more broadly within BEQUAL programming appear to be under-exploited. The MTR team acknowledges that evaluation of the BNC modality or the various activities has not yet been undertaken<sup>40</sup>; however, the perception was expressed several times that while methods implemented by BNC partners may be effective in addressing local demand issues, they are likely to be too resource intensive to be applied beyond the NGO-implemented model. An alternative approach could see BEQUAL drawing on expertise within BNC to design and pilot interventions to effect demand-side participation in education at scale—essentially mainstreaming the BNC work within the wider program. In practice, this could involve systematic collaboration between KRA 1 and KRA 2.

#### Recommendation:

4. BEQUAL should review the KRA 2 modality and activities to extract value for the program from BNC expertise and experience. KRA 1 and KRA 2 should collaborate to identify viable strategies to trigger household demand for education at scale.

### 3.3 Activities and structure

- + Program structure matches intuitively the MoES central departmental structures.
- + Important lessons learned for triggering demand at the subnational level.
- + Broadly positive results from piloted grant modalities.
- KRA structure promotes technical focus rather than developmental outcomes.
- Activity targeting has not optimised opportunities for program integration at sub-national level.
- Significant concerns in relation to ethnic teacher graduate employment requiring urgent resolution.

#### *Appropriateness and coherence of the KRA structure*

Program activities are structured around the five KRAs set out in the IDD. These are aligned with accepted components of a working education system. They also provided a logical way to frame the situation analysis and program design. Further, the KRA structure aligns well with the central level MoES departmental structure, and hence assists with communicating activities within the ministry. The structure also essentially defines where technical advisers are physically located; and in fact, how they introduce their roles. In short, the KRA structure is well imbedded. However, several key informants expressed concerns that relying on this structure to manage implementation has tended to devise a program of separate parts rather than enabling an integrated focus on achieving program outcomes. An informed third-party reflected: *“I had thought that there would be a theory of change for each KRA,*

<sup>37</sup> LADLF (2016) Minority Perceptions of Primary Education Evaluative Study, 2016

<sup>38</sup> E.g. through the four-week bridging course in Lao language and reading readiness for ethnic minority children.

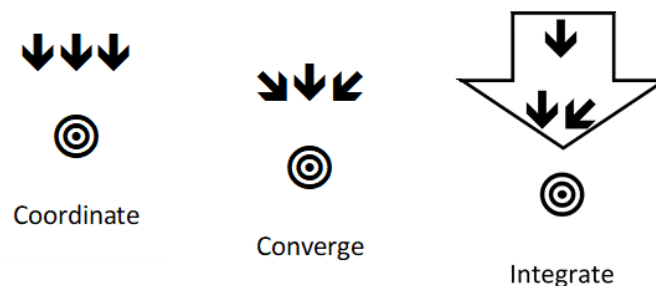
<sup>39</sup> The implication of this situation is that even good local work carried out by BNC members risks having limited impact and is unlikely to endure beyond donor-funded programming.

<sup>40</sup> The MTR team was advised at the time of the review that a randomised controlled trial and a further review of BNC activities was being undertaken, but results were not available.

*and then an overarching articulation of how it all fits together, but it seems this has never really happened”.*

This situation has arguably been compounded by the organisational structure which one person described as promoting “*fiefdoms*”. It seems that there are few internal incentives for KRA leaders and their teams to collaborate beyond their immediate remit. This is not to say cross-KRA collaboration has not happened; rather that it is not systematic or required<sup>41</sup>. The management structure is further discussed in Section 0.

It could be argued that this is not a problem, and that provided technical specialists within each KRA perform with excellence, the theory underpinning the design will ensure that efforts coalesce into program outcomes over 10 years. While this may happen to some extent with a technically sound design within a static operating environment, opportunities for synergy or integration could be missed. In other words, short-term sight may prevail over long-term vision. This is most evident in BEQUAL in relation to geographic targeting when seen from the standpoint of DESB officials who are obliged at times to liaise with several discrete BEQUAL activities implemented across different schools/villages within their districts. One DESB officer said: “*it’s confusing for us because support comes through different strands...construction, finance, primary curriculum, PAs support...the same person can be contacted by different agents of BEQUAL*”. This creates a sense that the program is not integrated—even if well managed/coordinated. To clarify: a well-coordinated program can deliver components with efficiency, but it may be criticized for ineffectiveness or poor value-for-money if the impact of the various components is diffuse rather than *convergent* within targeted geographic/demographic boundaries. An even more sophisticated notion is *integration*—a scenario in which not only is there convergence of effort/resources, but the degree of sequencing and collaboration between program components is such that impact and sustainability are maximized. These three scenarios are illustrated in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3: Three program scenarios influencing the degree of implementation coherence**

It could be argued that convergence or integration is what was intended in the design and is reflected in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, but that the mechanisms for this more sophisticated approach to program management take time to evolve within a large and newly mobilising team. However, no such argument was proffered, and multiple stakeholders concurred with the risks of fragmentation (including the DESB official quoted above). This suggests that integration is a matter that should receive focussed attention—especially given the low capacity, fragile nature of the operating context. As it stands, the District Operating Grants, BEIF and BNC are occurring in different locations. First steps to improving integration are consistent with the recommended way forward outlined in Section 3.2; that is, a refocussing of BEQUAL implementation on the targeted districts and

<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding this general finding, we should note that there are cases where cross-KRA collaboration has happened productively—for example, between KRA 1 and KRA 5 to conduct a teacher audit in target schools. Although, even in this instance, the need for an audit in part arose because the various KRA teams interpreted the school infrastructure priorities differently, and had not fully appreciated the diversity of sub-national government perspectives in relation to the ETSP allocations.

associated provinces. This could further extend to prioritising program funding in the most disadvantaged schools for pilots and trials, pre-service and in-service teacher training, deployment of ETSP graduates, classroom refurbishments/building, and expansion of sub-nationally-focussed incentives such as the operating grants and innovation fund. A more refined targeting strategy should be developed, balancing political and pragmatic choices.

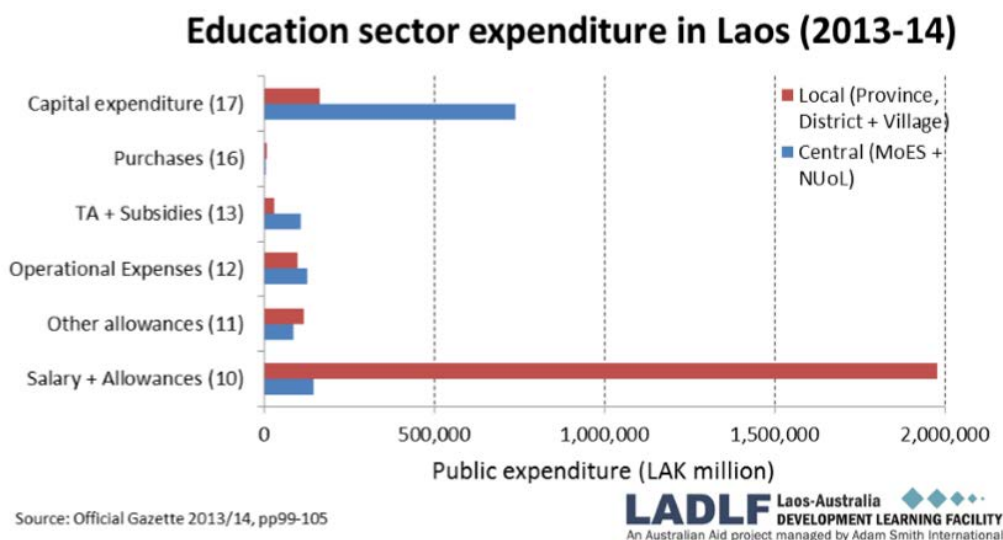
**Recommendation:**

5. DFAT should commission a review of BEQUAL targeting in order to establish a rationale for the scope, scale and depth of BEQUAL engagements, and to inform an integration strategy.

**Balance and coherence of national and subnational activities**

The governance arrangements in Lao PDR are generally accepted to be complex between central and sub-national levels and outsiders are not privy to dynamics between the government and the party. One observer noted particular challenges in relation to the centre having responsibility for policy development but facing limits in its ability to exert influence at local level; and the local level, while holding considerable influence, rarely initiating policy changes.

In this context, BEQUAL is perceived by some stakeholders to be predominantly oriented towards national activities, which is considered in conflict with the local/classroom-focused intent of the program design<sup>42</sup>. Certainly, we were advised of such concerns among PESS stakeholders. A national focus makes sense to some extent with activities such as curriculum development, but as illustrated by the chart produced by LADLF, the sub-national level is where the bulk of resources are deployed. While noting public financial management complexities in Lao PDR, the main point here is to appreciate arguments raised by several stakeholders that a program focussed on improved education quality should concentrate effort where the bulk of human resource management occurs.



**Figure 4: Education sector expenditure**

Again, the apparent ‘capture’ of BEQUAL by the centre may just be a function of the early stages of implementation. One BEQUAL Adviser pointed out: *“It’s still early days. The*

<sup>42</sup> Even the success of the apparently nationally-focussed curriculum development and teacher training activities that have dominated the first phase of BEQUAL will ultimately be determined by uptake and utilisation by subnational stakeholders.

*programmatic nature doesn't yet play itself out at the sub-national level*". However, given the clear challenges and complexity of engaging at sub-national level, this is an issue that requires proactive attention and disciplined action. It was raised during this MTR by both national and sub-national stakeholders who requested support with improving systems and processes for the governance of education all the way to school level. We note that an express wish for direct involvement by districts in planning and implementation was minuted in the 21 February 2017 Steering Committee. There was also a formal request by the Department of Planning for the appointment of a colleague to provincial level *"to help coordinate planning and liaise between all KRA staff and government on protocol matters"*.

Responsibility for driving BEQUAL's sub-national agenda could be taken up by KRA 1 (Policy and Planning)—which could even be renamed along the lines of 'Sub-national Integration'. Further (and as recommended in Section 3.2), there is clear potential for KRA 1 and the BNC (KRA 2) to collaborate more actively. This may require a shift in the perception of BNC as a discrete component of BEQUAL (albeit with management coordination) that is implementing the partners' own program agenda, to rather integrating the BNC more fully into implementation of sub-national BEQUAL activities, including the curriculum rollout. Further, BEQUAL TA assigned to KRAs 1, 2, 3, 5 could be deployed at the regional level to increase the reach and influence of the BEQUAL Regional Management teams that are strengthening systems in the PESS, TTCs and DESB offices.

The MTR team suggests that going forward, BEQUAL should aim to decentralise the bulk of programmatic support, including most TA, to the provincial and district level in targeted provinces (see Section 0). Such a refocussing should foster increased ownership and commitment at this level and should ultimately serve to ensure that program outcomes are aligned with actual needs and are more likely to be sustained. It would also send a clear message to the GoL that the DFAT investment in education is well aligned to, and supportive of, the *Sam Sang* for decentralisation.

#### **Recommendation:**

6. BEQUAL should proactively work improve the integration and coherence of program activities in target districts, including deploying Technical Advisers at regional level to the extent possible.

#### **Merits of the key modalities**

Beyond conventional TA services, BEQUAL has employed a range of modalities including: teacher training scholarships, small grants mechanisms, and an NGO consortium (discussed above). The scholarships and grants are discussed in turn.

The rationale for the Ethnic Teacher Scholarships Program (ETSP) is clear, and broadly arises from the need to address the gap in educational outcomes among ethnic minority children who are challenged by the task of absorbing the primary curriculum in a language foreign to them—Lao. The underlying assumption of the ETSP is that ethnic teachers will be more readily retained in remote areas, creating a stable workforce and thus a more stable learning environment. This logic is plausible, if untested. However, what is now critical is the degree of risk to program sustainability that has emerged because of complexity in if/how the ethnic trainee teachers will be absorbed into the GoL workforce. This situation is due to competition for 'quota' civil service positions beyond a probationary period. The divergent perspectives of stakeholders, summarised below, pose a risk that must be addressed as a matter of priority:

- **Ethnic trainee teachers:** believe that they have been promised employment in their local areas, and seem motivated to improve educational outcomes for ethnic children. We detected a level of anxiety among the trainees we interviewed, triggered by rumours about the unresolved employment situation.
- **PESS and DESB officials**<sup>43</sup>: feel responsible for ensuring the best qualified/most capable teachers are employed with the resources available<sup>44</sup>; with the implication that this may not include ethnic teachers. One Vice-governor stated: “*We don’t want you to think we don’t want the [ethnic teachers] but we need to make sure they are good quality*”. PESS/DESB officials are also conscious of recruitment commitments that have been made, and the constraints to honouring those commitments—both to ethnic teacher graduates and volunteer teachers (see below).
- **Teacher Training Colleges (TTC):** are willing to invest additional (funded) support in ethnic trainee teachers, but also need to be cautious about an appearance of preferential treatment. They are concerned that ethnic teachers seem to feel entitled to quota positions.
- **Volunteer teachers:** there is a backlog of ‘volunteer teachers’ (technical advisers)<sup>45</sup> that are qualified and teaching in schools pending available quota positions. These teachers consider themselves ‘ahead in the queue’ for employment and there is likely to be malcontent if ethnic teacher graduates are seen to be privileged.
- **MoES:** is experiencing significant fiscal contraction and must contain payroll expansion within the quota system, and manage relationships with PESS.
- **DFAT:** has invested substantial resources in the ETSP and is eager to ensure that a commitment to employ the graduates is honoured in order to maximise the return on investment. DFAT has urged that a commitment to employing ETSP graduates be honoured, but is equally eager to avoid inadvertently making the broad issue of teacher allocation worse, and is open (along with the EU) to identifying workable solutions with the PESS.

This diverse set of perspectives has arisen through a confluence of factors, including perhaps a rushed recruitment of the first cohort following a delayed start to BEQUAL<sup>46</sup>. Seemingly the key parties were unaware of the implications at the time that agreements were reached<sup>47</sup>. Regardless, the situation now presents as a *Do No Harm* issue—especially in relation to the wellbeing of ethnic trainee teachers who face the potential of unemployment. However, enforcing agreements to employ all ETSP graduates risks the appearance of a donor subverting the GoL recruitment and quality processes. Arguably, the simplest and most sustainable way forward is for BEQUAL to support TTCs to invest all reasonable efforts to make the ethnic trainee teachers as competitive as possible in the ‘employment market’, while making it clear to the ETSP trainees that the onus is largely on

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<sup>43</sup> At the subnational level, views expressed to the MTR team regarding placement of ETSP graduates were varied, with some PESS (e.g. Khammouane) adamant that ETSP graduates will not be given priority, whereas within the same province at the DESB level (e.g. Gnommalat) there was a high level of willingness to respect the original Memorandum of Understanding with BEQUAL.

<sup>44</sup> There is a belief that many ethnic teachers are at lower standard—which could be true given the intergenerational disadvantage experienced by many groups.

<sup>45</sup> Non-quota volunteer teachers are deployed under different terms across the country, with some engaged under contract with the District as Technical Advisers with the agreement stipulating assignment to a school in return for food and lodgings within the community. This is often a way to address teacher shortages.

<sup>46</sup> DFAT should consider commissioning LADLDF to document the lessons learned from the ETSP.

<sup>47</sup> There is no record that alternative approaches to addressing the core issue were considered; for example, if using incentives to encourage teachers to locate to remote areas was considered; or engaging and training ethnic students to work alongside TTC graduates in remote communities as learning facilitators (i.e. a ‘blended model’).



them to perform well at study and interview<sup>48</sup>. Further, in cases where ethnic teacher graduates are not initially employed, BEQUAL could engage them on a small stipend for a limited period to assist with implementing the GoL's new curriculum in targeted ethnic villages<sup>49</sup>. This would have the effect of supporting the GoL initiative during a critical phase while investing further professional development in the ethnic teacher graduates and thus improving their employability and reducing the risk that the scholarship is wasted. Such a 'package of support' could be provided to partner PESS and DESB as a 'smart subsidy' to motivate wider reforms in target districts (see Section 3.5).



Figure 5: Ethnic trainee teachers at Luang Namtha Teacher Training College

**Recommendation:**

7. DFAT and BEQUAL should liaise with MoES and key provincial government stakeholders to reach agreement on how to optimally resolve the conflicting expectations of ETSP stakeholders.

In addition to the scholarship modality discussed above, small grants have been employed by BEQUAL: the BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund (BEIF), and the District Operation Grants (DOG<sup>50</sup>).

**BEIF:** The BEIF was set up to pilot activities that strengthen provincial, district, school and community-level actors to more effectively manage local education services. The BEIF emphasises universal education, seeking proposals that address the challenges in quality and access to primary-level education for children in disadvantaged communities, focusing on ethnic students. The grant was open to more or less any relevant organisation (or coalition). Some international NGOs opted not to apply because of the small value of the grants (up to AUD160,000). For unsuccessful applicants (approximately 75% of applicants for rounds one and two), there was understandable disappointment. Some PESS informed us that they had

<sup>48</sup> The MTR team formed the view that this scenario is preferable to (i.e. less conflicted and more sustainable) enforcing employment of ETSP graduates—which would have the appearance of subverting MoES recruitment/probation processes thus exposing DFAT to criticism. The MTR team appreciates that these same processes are also the subject of criticisms.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. for Lao/non-Lao language support, reading readiness programs and within the proposed delivery of the school cluster professional development program.

<sup>50</sup> The MTR team was advised that dogs are considered lowly in many Laos communities and hence the acronym 'DOGS' adopted by the program connotes disrespect and should be changed.

relevant ideas (e.g. a project to identify and address root causes of girls varying attendance across schools and districts)<sup>51</sup> but lacked the capacity to prepare a decent proposal. Other PESS partnered with NGOs<sup>52</sup> and were successful. All interviewees were grateful for the support provided through the application process (workshops and coaching) by the BEQUAL Regional Teams.

The MTR team formed the view that, on balance, it was appropriate for the first round of innovation grants to be exploratory and broadly focussed since it was important to test the ‘market response’ and appraise the feasibility of the modality. Going forward, and building on the generally positive response, BEQUAL should work directly with target PESS and DESB to identify priority themes or issues such as addressing school-level instructional leadership, implementation of the new curriculum, improving language and literacy outcomes among non-Lao speaking learners in Grades 1 – 3; etc. The prioritised themes should be amendable to influence/improvement through focussed once-off investment, since a fundamental limitation of the innovation grant modality is that there is no obvious mechanism for initiatives to access continued funding given the fiscal constraints faced by the GoL.

**District Operating Grants:** In retrospect, a key benefit of the District Operating Grants has been the testing of a way to transact resources between central and district levels. However, the official/original purpose was to test the notion that, if provided with minimal resources, DESB staff could be mobilised to provide more school-based support. An evaluation by the LADLF broadly found positive short-term benefits and recommended design enhancements ahead of a second round. Certainly, interviews with DESB officials during this MTR indicated that even small additional resources have been appreciated by school-level and DESB-level stakeholders, especially during a time of educational fiscal decline. Given the discussions in Section 3.2 and Section 3.3, if redesigned in line with the LADLF recommendations<sup>53</sup>, the district operating grants would seem to be a key candidate for expansion in order to strengthen the focus of BEQUAL at sub-national/classroom level. Further, the modality lends itself to being used as a ‘smart subsidy’ (see Section 3.5) to motivate improved local performance. Such a mechanism has potential to resource and strengthen the PAs whose role already extends to teacher/classroom support<sup>54</sup>.



**Avone Sengoudom** is a Pedagogical Advisor (PA), working in Viengphoukha District of Luang Namtha Province. He’s been based in the District Education Sport Bureau for the past six years where he has had responsibility for supporting 46 schools. He was previously a school principal for five years, and a teacher for three years. He graduated from the Luang Namtha Teacher Training College.

His district covers a large area with many remote and inaccessible schools—more so in the wet season. He is required to use his personal motorbike to reach schools. District Operating Grants (DOGs) provided by BEQUAL have made school visits much more possible.

He’s most proud of establishing positive relationships with many teachers throughout the District. *“It’s like broadening my friendships”*. However, it can also be challenging to raise performance issues with teachers who are sometimes stubborn. He thinks that the quality of teaching is the biggest issue facing education.

He has two daughters, aged seven and eleven, and he admits that sometimes he catches himself assessing their teachers.

<sup>51</sup> Savannakhet PESS.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Xiengkhouang Province and Child Fund.

<sup>53</sup> N.B. The MTR team was advised that there has been no formal management response to the LADLF findings by BEQUAL. Given the significance of the findings for a future phase, BEQUAL should respond.

<sup>54</sup> PAs were set up by the World Bank in 1996 (4 – 6 PAs per district) to support teaching techniques, back-stop school management and provide some administrative support at district level. Noting that PAs are originally a ‘donor artefact’ and many are currently under-qualified, their continued presence at district level points to a way to support schools moving forward. Furthermore, building on what exists is more sustainable than introducing alternate or parallel mechanisms.

### 3.4 Management arrangements

- + BEQUAL advisers are mostly co-located within relevant MoES departments.
- + BEQUAL regional coordination structures are well regarded at sub-national level.
- + BEQUAL advisers are well regarded for their technical and managerial proficiency.
- Counterparts raise concerns about the strong reliance on international advisers.
- Some negative perceptions about adviser engagement with counterparts.
- The KRA-based structure may not support a strategic focus, and may erode intra-program communication.
- A weak system to structure, focus and record strategic and operational dialogue between DFAT and BEQUAL

#### Leadership

BEQUAL is a large, multi-component program, organised along functional lines determined by the five KRAs. The organisational structure is flat with 11 direct reports to the Team Leader. This structure seemingly arises from the design logic, and hence has intuitive appeal. However, it carries the risk that team management issues can compete with strategic and reflective processes, and may have constrained program integration (as discussed in relation to Figure 3). Even for a highly capable manager, it is plausible that the sheer management workload could crowd out the intellectual space necessary for strategic and adaptive thinking. To alleviate this pressure, there has been discussion about the engagement of a Deputy Team Leader, though it was unclear to the MTR team if this will be a new role or a restructure of the current team<sup>55</sup>.

The Team Leader has indicated an intention to depart at the end of his contract in June 2018, and the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Specialist contract is due to end around the same time. The Team Leader has brought an unusual degree of continuity to BEQUAL, having also led the design. It is essential that the contractor and DFAT work together to manage this period of transition effectively. This includes opening a discussion about the skillset and style required of the leadership positions moving forward, given the evolving nature of the program and the lessons that have been learned. Such discussion should address DFAT's own evolving needs and expectations—including the question of whether a new Team Leader should be an educationalist, or someone with broader experience in political economy/advocacy—noting DFAT's strategic focus on bilateral influence and access<sup>56</sup>.

#### Structure

As discussed in Section 3.3, the KRA structure, while reflecting a logical framework for situation analysis and design, may not be the best way to execute an integrated approach to education reform in disadvantaged areas. At mid-term, having successfully mobilised BEQUAL, and with the imminent leadership transition, it is timely to reflect on the most appropriate organisational structure. It may be that program integration can occur more readily if the team is structured around end-of-program outcomes rather than the KRAs (see Section 3.6). This would create a more strategic posture than the KRA-based structure, which is arguably inwardly oriented towards the 'deliverables'.

In addition to the functionally organised, Vientiane-based team<sup>57</sup>, three geographically-based teams (north, central and south<sup>58</sup>) have been established and are evidently highly

<sup>55</sup> Some interviewees indicated that the M&E Specialist had in some ways acted as a deputy—as perhaps the other position in the structure with a strategic/program-wide perspective.

<sup>56</sup> Pending DFAT's acceptance of MTR team recommendations to adopt a 'smart subsidies' approach to fostering reform (see Section 3.5), experience with managing 'Outputs-based Aid' (OBA) approaches may also be an important criterion.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to the KRA-based advisory structure, there is also an Operations Team that provides financial, human resources, procurement, information technology management and logistics support for the program. A communications specialist has also recently been engaged.

regarded by counterparts. A PESS Director in central region stated: *“the regional coordinator is good; really good, and helps us to understand the various BEQUAL activities”*. Arguably, these regional teams have proven the benefits of a decentralised program structure.

The MTR team was cautious about prescribing an alternative structure given that such advice is ordinarily most useful when arising from an in-depth appreciation of the current situation—something not possible within the scope of this mission. Nevertheless, a high-level alternative ‘outline’ structure is provided in Appendix D for discussion purposes.

**Recommendation:**

8. The contractor and DFAT should work together to clarify the leadership skill-set, style and structure most appropriate as the program transitions through the mid-term of Phase 1.
9. The contractor (in consultation with DFAT) should consider engaging specialist organisational effectiveness advice in relation to a structure that is optimally aligned with the strategy, and operationalises the principles of a decentralised program.

Notwithstanding the above critique, one benefit of the KRA-driven structure has been that it locates advisers within the counterpart structure, which is assumed to enable ownership, build positive relationships and foster trust and influence. Indeed, we were told of several examples where this is happening (especially within RIES and DTE). However, we were also apprised of cases where the opposite is true. One MoES interviewee reported: *“I’ve heard people say, ‘why does this person sit here?’ The assumption is that they should be co-located to be in contact with government. But if they rarely engage, then why be co-located?”* The extent to which this is true/common is concerning, given the strategic ambition of the program. The MTR team believes that, if adopted, recommendations in this MTR report concerning refocussing and decentralising BEQUAL TA may help to address such matters of role perception among counterparts. Nevertheless, the contractor is urged to ensure that all TA are incentivised to proactively engage with counterparts, and are supported with a clearly articulated agenda for influence.

Many interviewees affirmed the technical and managerial proficiency of BEQUAL team members. Several also noted the strong international profile of the adviser team. One MoES interviewee observed: *“There is a perception that BEQUAL has more international experts than any other program.”* However, a BEQUAL team member countered: *“on one hand [MoES] always ask for more TA, but then seem perplexed by the coming and going of international STA”*. We were advised of an intention to progressively nationalise the adviser team, and met highly capable national advisers already engaged.

### **Management systems**

The MTR team met with key Operations Team members, but had little scope to review systems and processes in detail<sup>59</sup>. To the extent that DFAT has particular or outstanding questions, it may be advisable to commission a dedicated management review<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> At the time of the MTR the central regional coordinator and team had responsibility for central and southern regions—a situation in the process of being rectified through the selection and appointment of a regional coordinator for the southern region.

<sup>59</sup> The MTR team specifically reviewed mandatory processes such as Child Protection systems and found these to meet expectation.

<sup>60</sup> A dedicated management review could be combined with specialist advice about an optimal management structure as per Recommendation 8.

The MTR team noted that, in the normal fashion, internal processes and systems had to be developed at inception, which was understandably a significant undertaking given the size of the program and early pressure to mobilise. Several interviewees acknowledged some issues/frustrations with processes such as recruitment delays<sup>61</sup>, ambiguous communication protocols, late visa requests etc.; although most also agreed that systems had continued to mature over the past six to eight months. The Operations Team described their function as enabling or “*sitting underneath*” the technical/program functions; and key program stakeholders broadly affirmed this view. This enabling or supporting function is appropriate, but has also carried the risk that the Operations Team is not able to/empowered to assert executive authority over budgeting across the program. This was manifest in relation to the infrastructure investment being under-budgeted, seemingly because KRA 2 and KRA 5 teams held differing conceptions about the rationale and location for infrastructure works to the KRA 3 team and other managers<sup>62</sup>. The MTR team was advised of a similar issue potentially arising in relation to planning/budgeting for the curriculum rollout with KRA 3 and KRA 4 teams holding differing views and ambiguous authority.

Expenditure forecasting to DFAT was evidently been problematic in early stages of implementation. A more recent practice of updating DFAT on monthly/quarterly/annual basis has reportedly improved confidence. Two relatively minor fraud incidents have occurred, but were identified coincidentally, rather than systematically<sup>63</sup>. DFAT acknowledges the efficient response to these matters once identified.

One important aspect of ‘management systems’ is the M&E and learning function, which is discussed in Section 3.7.

#### *Internal communication*

A third-party key informant reflected: “*I can see there’s been a lot of pressure to spend a large budget. They’ve been trying to have better internal communication, but perhaps they just don’t have the time to sit and have important conversations*”. The MTR team were advised by several interviewees that there have been notable improvements in the internal communication processes and tone within BEQUAL over the past six to eight months. The introduction of regular whole-team meetings and weekly updates has evidently been well regarded. One team member stated: “*We have some strong personalities but this isn’t an impediment to robust discussions. The managers are open to outside information. [Team Leader] plays an important role in bringing everyone together*”. While this suggests a positive trajectory, the discussion in Section 3.3 concerning the limitations of the KRA structure suggests that there is potential to establish more systematic cross-program review and discussion through mechanisms such as formal peer review of new activities, and facilitated discussions between the regional teams and centrally located advisers about emerging risks and opportunities. Arguably, stronger internal accountability and communication systems may have forestalled some issues the program has had to tackle such as infrastructure prioritisation, ETSP allocation and the implications of the current schedule for national curriculum rollout. Some advisers reflected that while strong personalities have been able to voice their concerns, there has not been a mechanism to enable divergent viewpoints generally to improve program effectiveness.

The engagement of a communications specialist within BEQUAL has improved public diplomacy through initiatives such as a newsletter and Facebook presence. There is also growing internal demand for support by communications staff to augment program

<sup>61</sup> For example, recruitment of the M&E Specialist was delayed eight months.

<sup>62</sup> The issue was identified by the regional team.

<sup>63</sup> Evidently one fraud incident was identified during the LADLF review of the District Operating Grants; and the other through a third-party request for payment which then uncovered wider issues.

activities; for example, producing training videos in multiple languages and developing strategies to socialise program activities. This is a positive development, noting the underlying reform and advocacy intent of the design.

### *External communication and engagement*

‘External communication’ can be described in terms of communication between BEQUAL and: MoES, DFAT and other education sector development partners. Each of these relationships is discussed briefly in turn.

**MoES:** the MTR team was advised by various interviewees—including the Minister of Education and Sports—of generally positive communication and coordination between GoL and BEQUAL. The Department of Planning within MoES and the Operations Team within BEQUAL have jointly carried responsibility for effective communication flow. A complicating factor for BEQUAL has been that a ‘managing contractor model’ of implementation is unusual within the Ministry compared with the more common ‘Project Management Office model’ employed by many multilateral organisations. One implication of this has been an underestimation of the time required to clarify differences and streamline communication protocols—particularly given the distribution of advisers within multiple counterpart departments over which the Department of Planning has no line management responsibility. A key process requiring coordination has related to BEQUAL team member movements, which are required by protocol to be documented through official channels. Also, given the strong international profile of the team, there has been considerable liaison with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in relation to adviser visas; with one official advising that ‘last minute’ applications had created unwelcome administrative pressure. However, beyond this operational or technocratic communication is a subtler issue alluded to above in relation to the structure—the extent to which individual advisers are effective in engaging with their counterparts, and maximising the influence of the program. One interviewee familiar with the program but not involved in implementation noted: *“No one contests that the advisers have incredibly deep knowledge. They are entrepreneurial in producing their outputs...but these are not just technical problems. There seems to be less focus on the wider politics within which the program is situated”*.

**DFAT:** communication between BEQUAL and DFAT’s education team is evidently free-flowing and includes an appropriate mix of formal and routine contact. This happens between the Team Leader and First Secretary, and also between the various advisers and DFAT’s education team members who each carry different responsibilities for the program. There are also monthly meetings between the Operations Manager and DFAT in relation to financial forecasting and other management matters. Again, these channels have evidently been problematic at certain times but are generally acknowledged to have improved over the recent period. Perhaps what is less present is opportunity for strategic dialogue—noting DFAT’s priority is to seek strategic influence and access within the GoL. The MTR team appreciates that this can seem like a luxury to a hectic implementation team, but is nonetheless a key point of value for DFAT—especially given the ‘flagship’ status of the program within the wider bilateral relationship. Most interviewees reflected that while there is frequent dialogue between advisers and DFAT, there is no structure/format to introduce constructive contestability, and no systematic way to track lines of argument, decisions made, and their strategic implications. Given that this is a need raised by DFAT, a constructive first step could be for DFAT staff to articulate the kinds of insights or ideas that might have been helpful in retrospect; and BEQUAL’s management might then propose a format to try to meet the stated needs in the future.

**International development partners:** unsurprisingly for a large, multifaceted program, some education sector international development partners indicated a closer and more productive

relationship with BEQUAL than others. Although not a common viewpoint, one organisation’s representative expressed the concerning view: *“sometimes we don’t get much communication from BEQUAL. It’s understandable, because coordination and communication needs to be resourced. It doesn’t just happen by magic...All sector partners carry some responsibility...but for example, people still don’t know the results of the Grade 1 [curriculum] pilot<sup>64</sup>”*. This was one experience amongst other more positive comments; and it is well appreciated<sup>65</sup> that as the largest bilateral program in the sector, other actors look to BEQUAL for leadership and communication brokerage. However, from an internal perspective, this may seem out-of-scope for BEQUAL Advisers. More broadly, DFAT has established a strong leadership position in the education sector, and has demonstrated commitment to facilitating sectoral communication and coordination over several years, including as the co-chair of the education working group. DFAT’s positive role in the sector was affirmed by the EU and MoES interviewees. If additional communication/coordination processes can be identified by development partners DFAT may consider tasking BEQUAL with supporting MoES to take on the convening responsibility—noting that the matter of which part of the MoES structure should lead this function first needs to be clarified and resourced.

#### Recommendations:

10. BEQUAL and DFAT should explore practical ways to enable strategic/reflective discussions about the BEQUAL strategic horizon, and systematically track decisions/actions agreed.
11. DFAT should consider the most effective ways to ensure that education sector stakeholders are briefed on learning and progress within BEQUAL.

### 3.5 Stakeholder engagement and capacity

- + Key elements of the program respond to the MoES demand.
- + Investment appreciated by Minister and senior officials.
- Pressure to deliver has skewed engagements towards substitution rather than capacity building.
- Ambiguous incentives/drivers for BEQUAL advisers to invest in sustainable capacity.
- Provincial level stakeholders report malcontent about being bypassed despite being critical education delivery stakeholders

#### *Engagement of MoES leadership and Government of Lao PDR leaders*

The MoES leadership affirmed both the alignment of BEQUAL with GoL policies, and the Government’s own commitment to the program. For example, The Minister reiterated the intention to ‘close the gap’ in educational outcomes between rural and urban areas and stated: *“our objectives are clear, to assist girls and boys in remote areas...BEQUAL’s focus on the 29 most disadvantaged districts is the right choice”*. One departmental director said: *“I want to express our appreciation to all our specialists. We’re very impressed. BEQUAL is absolutely supporting the priorities”*. As expected, beneath these official affirmations is an array of individual experiences—both from the standpoint of MoES staff (as highlighted in Section 0) but also from the standpoint of BEQUAL advisers. A third-party stakeholder

<sup>64</sup> N.B. The MTR team was advised that there may be a misunderstanding in relation to the completion/finalisation of curriculum pilot results.

<sup>65</sup> Notwithstanding this feedback, the MTR is aware that KR3 and KRA 4 leads (and also DFAT staff) have made presentations to various development partner fora. We recognise that the matter of facilitating effective sector coordination and communication is a perennial challenge.

reflected: *“The design made a lot of assumptions about government ownership that may have been flawed from the outset”*.

As noted in Section 0, the Minister has assigned the Director of Planning with responsibility for coordinating BEQUAL engagement within MoES. This ‘focal point’ approach seems to have been largely successful in maintaining the engagement of the various departments, although it is a relationship of peers, and so has not necessarily been able to address bottlenecks or to oblige action<sup>66</sup>.

Notwithstanding BEQUAL’s high profile and generally good standing within the MoES at central level, we encountered less positive perspectives at sub-national level. The MTR team were advised of concerns about PESS stakeholders being bypassed by the program, which in some cases, has engaged directly with the DESBs (i.e. the PESS’ subordinates). This has created ill feeling and mistrust. One PESS Director counselled us that *“BEQUAL should not overlook the Province when communicating with the District”*. Interestingly, these views seemed to be shared by DESB counterparts—indicating that, they were motivated by more than self-interest. A DESB official stated: *“we need PESS involved to support our staff. They have valuable experience in other districts and provinces; for example, they know how to adapt and use local classroom materials”*. This situation is unfortunate given the influential role that PESS evidently plays in managing education resources and supporting education quality (see Figure 4). We were advised that this lesson has been learned through the first round of District Operating Grants, and that a more collaborative approach with PESS is assured in the future. KRA 3 will work through the established structure to train PAs and teacher educators to support schools with the new curriculum; and KRA 1 will support district-level officers to better assist school-based planning and reporting. The MTR team welcomes this realigned focus and urges the articulation of a plan of action as part of the management response to this review to ensure that all program stakeholders are aligned.

### **Absorptive capacity and sustainability**

The MTR team encountered diverse approaches and an array of perspectives concerning how BEQUAL is fostering sustainable capacity. On one hand, many of the advisers we interviewed demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation for capacity development and sustainable reform; but on the other hand, we heard critical voices about the approaches taken by the program. The following quotes illustrate this divergence:

*“The process we are undertaking is just as important as the end result. We’re changing the system, and we’re changing the perceptions of the system”* (BEQUAL Adviser).

*“BEQUAL has a big influence within the Ministry; however, there is a tendency to produce a ‘BEQUAL baby’ rather than supporting a ‘Ministry baby’”* (Development Partner).

*“I have a huge concern about substitution that I see happening with BEQUAL. It could end up being worse having substitution than having no investment at all”* (Development Partner).

It is not uncommon for program teams to feel a tension between the expectation for early results, and the desire to build lasting capacity. This may especially be the case in BEQUAL given that the design evidently over-estimated GoL capacity and contribution, but has maintained an ambitious agenda. In this context it can be frustrating for advisers working within weak systems if there is an expectation for high quality deliverables and measurable

<sup>66</sup> We also interviewed a selection of representatives from other ministries, but their level of knowledge of the program was limited—although this may be a function of the individuals we met. Evidently invitations to meet with us were provided with late notice.



impacts. They may feel exposed to a perception of failure if by investing in capacity strengthening, there is a perception that output is low or of inferior quality and the impacts are slow to emerge. Hence, for a capacity strengthening approach to be successful requires the ‘trifecta’ of:

- An enlightened **donor** that is prepared to create time and space for counterpart performance to be strengthened progressively (at the expense of short-term reportable ‘impacts’);
- An amenable and active **counterpart** (both the institution and the individuals) who is willing and committed to invest in improved performance (including the systems and resources necessary to maintain the performance gains);
- A skilful **facilitator**/technician that is able to transfer the required skills and motivate the desired performance gains in culturally appropriate ways.

The MTR team formed the view that DFAT at Vientiane Post has largely accepted the ‘long road’ to capacity; although the situation is complicated by the fact that corporate reporting to Canberra favours the presentation of impressive ‘impacts’. We noted internal documents and also correspondence with the BEQUAL team affirming a willingness to revisit timeframes or scope to allow a more achievable development agenda. The contract also enables flexibility from one Annual Plan to the next rather than fostering slavish delivery of outputs.

On the GoL counterpart side, we encountered a strong appetite for capacity strengthening. One MoES official said: *“We don’t want specialists to spoon feed us with best practice”*. This appetite for system reform and capacity strengthening was especially evident at provincial and district levels—such as for improving the capacity of principals and PAs to provide instructional as well as administrative leadership. The Director of the MoES Department of Planning noted that *Sam Sang* represents a significant policy change for the GoL and articulates an ideal of decentralised leadership and management in the delivery of educational services. This in turn creates an impetus and entry point for capacity strengthening and institutional culture change, and can legitimise such an approach.

In response to questions about the program investing in ‘direct delivery’ versus ‘capacity strengthening’ of counterparts, some BEQUAL advisers compellingly argued that both approaches could co-exist—with the program producing both high-quality products within strict timeframes, *and* fostering enduring institutional performance. While this is true in the main, ultimately a program places emphasis one way or the other—ordinarily with different incentives, processes and timelines—depending on the implicit *raison d’être*. Evidently, this debate about core focus extends back to the design phase when the fundamental rationale for BEQUAL was not universally agreed within DFAT, thus setting up an ‘existential ambiguity’ about program purpose. The MTR team formed the view that at this juncture—by default or design—BEQUAL is subtly oriented towards direct delivery rather than capacity strengthening.

This issue extends beyond the way that individual advisers engage with their counterparts, to the broad architecture of the program. There are a number of elements of the program that fundamentally rely on ‘direct delivery’—for instance classroom construction, textbook delivery, school feeding, the ETSP and to a lesser extent curriculum development. These types of interventions can generate good ‘reportable numbers’, but may contribute little in terms of enduring capacity within ‘the system’. One development partner reflected: *“BEQUAL seems to struggle with balancing substitution in the system, with the reinforcement of processes and people within the system—which can be less ambitious and fast, but more sustainable”*. While the MTR team acknowledges that there can be a defensible case for a

‘direct delivery’ approach<sup>67</sup>, no such case was convincingly put to us for BEQUAL. Thus, the MTR team formed the view that smarter use could have been made of these substantial investments to leverage significant reforms.

There is a growing body of international experience (including within the Australian Aid program) with employing contemporary approaches such as an ‘outputs-based aid’ (OBA) approach or the use of ‘smart subsidies’. Such approaches can turn ‘direct delivery’ into a significant lever for reform. For example: classrooms could be constructed in target schools only after there is a demonstrated quota position for a trained [ethnic] teacher provided; or an agreed quantity of textbooks could be distributed once DESBs have been allocated an agreed budget for classroom supervision activities; or the next stage of curriculum production and rollout could be funded only after teacher training curriculum reforms have been implemented; or school WASH facilities could be constructed only after VEDCs demonstrate a minimal level of school management capability and revenue raising to support maintenance activities. These are just examples of how, what would otherwise be direct delivery by the donor of an unsustainable ‘gift’, can instead be leveraged to create positive pressure or an enabling environment for systemic improvements that are sustainable. OBA/smart subsidy approaches are not a panacea and are not necessarily straightforward to implement<sup>68</sup>, but offer a more empowering engagement which situates the counterpart as an active change agent, rather than a passive recipient.

There is an argument that it is too late to change the fundamental *modus operandi* of the program towards an OBA or smart subsidies scheme, and the MTR team agrees that a radical change across the program could be destabilizing. However, it would be worth exploring ways that DFAT and BEQUAL can subtly or progressively shift posture towards this more empowering approach. For example, such thinking could provide a way to address the concerns about curriculum development pace and scale raised in Section 3.2—progressively supporting the development and rollout of curriculum across subjects/grades/locations in step with expanding counterpart performance and reform. It could also be explored as a mechanism to resolve the way that central MoES engages with sub-national counterparts on policy implementation issues<sup>69</sup>.

‘Smart subsidies’ or ‘Outputs-based Aid’ (OBA) are a form of results-based financing. OBA was first employed in the 1960s in South Korea to improve reproductive health. It has been widely employed to develop infrastructure, improve water and sanitation and tackle energy reform, but is relatively new to the education sector. A World Bank study (GPOBA 2015) found that OBA may offer “*versatile tools for addressing issues of educational access, quality, and inequity*”.

OBA projects in education bridge the gap between the cost of providing quality education and the funds available. They tie the disbursement of funding to the achievement of clearly specified and verified results or outcomes.

[https://www.gpoba.org/oba\\_education](https://www.gpoba.org/oba_education)

#### Recommendation:

12. DFAT and BEQUAL should reposition the program’s significant investments as ‘smart subsidies’ to leverage education reforms and improve performance. Such an approach could accompany a stronger focus on capacity strengthening and a more modest emphasis on program-delivered outputs.

<sup>67</sup> Notionally, emergency response is the clearest case for this approach.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. OBA requires robust verification mechanisms that are trusted by all parties since incentives/subsidies are only paid following verification and approval.

<sup>69</sup> DFAT has employed this approach with great success in Indonesia (Water Hibah) to help central government to enact policy reforms at sub-national level, and to provide a framework for transacting funds.

### 3.6 Adequacy of progress

- + Significant achievements in 16 months of implementation.
- + Overall progress against Results Framework meeting expectations.
- Program logic makes assessment of progress challenging.

#### *Implementation achievements*

The MTR team appreciated the intensity of effort required to mobilise a program with the scope and scale of BEQUAL, and the sense of pressure associated with establishing credibility and building momentum in approximately 16 months of implementation. Notable achievements include<sup>70</sup>:

- 364 ethnic students are enrolled and due to complete three years of teacher training. This is expected to address the challenges of engaging ethnic communities in children’s education.
- 42 (23 Female) Masters scholars are enrolled at Lao PDR universities and five PhD scholarships have been awarded for Teacher Educators from TTCs.
- Thirty of 90 RIES personnel (approximately 90) have been involved in writing new curriculum for Grades 1 and 2.
- Teacher educators from all TTC have participated in Training of Trainers for Lao language, Math and Science for the Grade 1 curriculum rollout.
- 171 schools have been involved in BNC activities including targeted language and literacy initiatives in remote communities—a total of 3,177 Grade 1 students from non-Lao speaking homes participated in basic lao language preparatory course.
- 43,514 books have been delivered to set up school and community libraries.
- 17,000 students have participated in Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) assessments nationally.
- 12 districts have received operating grants that have tested public financial management capacity from district to school level; and have enabled additional school supervision.
- Seven provinces and 16 districts have been involved directly or indirectly in the BEIF, which has contributed to addressing weak governance within the sector.
- Significant progress has been made on refurbishing schools in EDP II and 29 BEQUAL districts.
- Community led approaches have been employed to develop school infrastructure in ethnic villages and communities (KRA5).

*“Before BEQUAL there were less visits to schools...in general, depending on budget, a few times per year. We’re responsible for 80 schools, but would cover only around 20 schools...based on the demand of principals and contingent on budget. By contrast, for BEQUAL schools, we visit four times per month and also accompany REIS for training. More teaching materials are now available to support teachers. Also, we now know how to plan and diagnose problems”*

(Pedagogical Adviser)

The MTR team respects that these achievements have been made in a unique and challenging socio-political and cultural context<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> (BEQUAL Progress Report – August 2017)

<sup>71</sup> LADLF, 2017 Contextual Analysis of Decision Making in the Primary School Education Sector in Lao PDR (draft); LADLF 2016 Perceived value of primary education and factors for regular participation and completion in poor and remote households in Lao PDR; DFAT, 2013 Investment Design document.

### *Assessment of progress*

Notwithstanding the significant early gains made by BEQUAL, a definitive assessment of the adequacy of progress of the overall program is challenging for several reasons, but mostly because of the issues discussed in Section 3.3. The program lacks an overall ‘architecture’ to link the efforts of the various KRA teams, making it difficult to assimilate a narrative about progress and achievement towards the outcomes and goal. Such an architecture or narrative would provide the context for interpreting performance indicators or progress markers.

The IDD and M&E Plan provided a program logic that was expanded to include a Results Framework. Baselines and annual targets were set for a modest proportion of the indicators. Where this data is missing, progress measurement is ambiguous and can only rely on intuition or professional judgement. The Results Framework has been included in six-monthly progress reporting to DFAT with ‘traffic lights’ used to self-assess progress. In the most recent report (January 2017), a little over a fifth (22%) of the 49 indicators had not yet started; 4% were reported as red (‘off track’); a little over two-fifths (44%) were amber (‘ongoing’); and 30% were green (completed). In broad terms this status aligns with expectations of a program of this scale at this stage—that is, at mid-term three-quarters of the indicators are either completed or ongoing.

### *KRA Progress*

KRA 1 (policy, planning and coordination) is underpinned by six End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes. The piloting of the District Operating Grants and BEIF are notable steps towards achievement of the second, third and sixth of these. Of particular value has been the testing of a mechanism for transacting resources between the central and district levels of MoES. There have also been significant efforts invested in discrete activities such as training finance staff to use MS Excel and the implementation of a teacher allocation audit in target schools. As noted in 3.3, KRA 1 has the potential to drive integration of all program activities at local level, thereby maximising impact and effectiveness. Less evident is contributions to improved sector coordination and evidence-based policy development.

KRA 2, as discussed in Section 3.3, has involved a range of activities implemented by NGO partners that have not yet been integrated into the wider BEQUAL program. A new four-week course in oral Lao language and school readiness course has been conducted and is considered successful. NGO target areas agreed during the design were based on areas in which BNC partners had established activities and relationships, and now do not consistently align with other BEQUAL target areas—prompting the obvious recommendation that these should be aligned in the future if successful initiatives to trigger demand and increase education participation can be identified. KRA 2 is underpinned by five End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes. Precise progress against these is difficult to decipher with information available; but more insights should emerge following the completion of evaluations by BNC partners.

KRA 3 and KRA 4, as discussed in Section 3.2, were originally conceived with a broader focus underpinned by seven and six End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes respectively; most of which have been dominated by the new primary curriculum development and associated teacher training.

KRA 5 is notionally an infrastructure component to support the ETSP, with the original intent being to provide a new classroom for 520 ethnic teacher graduates. Two factors have influenced a change in scope: i) a review of an earlier World Bank school infrastructure program found significant safety issues, necessitating the KRA 5 team to rehabilitate 389 of these ‘EDP Phase II schools’; ii) for BEQUAL it was recognised that new classrooms for new graduate ethnic teachers alongside dilapidated classrooms for existing teachers was

unworkable<sup>72</sup>. Hence, the scope was modified such that more classrooms would be built but in fewer schools; which in turn necessitated an assessment of priority schools and an audit of teacher allocations. All of this contributed to significant delays.

### 3.7 Learning and adaptation

- + The mix of modalities involved in BEQUAL combined with the flexible implementation arrangements creates good opportunities for learning.
- + LADLF and TAF provide valuable external resources to support program critique and learning.
- Anomalies identified in program logic.
- M&E function under-resourced and seemingly under-valued.

#### *Basis for learning*

Development is a process of social change. To bring about social change, humans interact within a social system<sup>73</sup>. Development assistance programs can be seen as ‘policy experiments’<sup>74</sup> with an implicit ‘theory’ about how desirable social change might occur—a ‘theory of change’<sup>75</sup> (ToC). Investment designs articulate the ‘theory’—the temporal sequence of relationships (‘actors’) and interventions (‘actions’) that will influence the desired changes. M&E involves the capture, analysis and use of information to test the ‘theory’—to judge the extent and merit of the changes fostered by the program<sup>76</sup>. These judgements about performance are required to satisfy demands for accountability (‘to prove’) and learning (‘to improve’)<sup>77</sup>; and ultimately to reflect on the merit of the original ‘policy experiment’.

The BEQUAL IDD set out a broad theory of change, though this was at the level of established sector wisdom<sup>78</sup>. There has been no agreed articulation of a more detailed theory of change customised to the Lao PDR context—identifying the most plausible ‘actors’ and ‘actions’ that the program can invest in to progressively influence the desired education reforms and outcomes. LADLF evidently prompted this thinking in 2015 with a ‘root cause analysis’<sup>79</sup>, but this seems not to have had traction. An informed third-party observer of the program stated: *“there is perhaps a tacit theory of change in each KRA, but the broader implications are not articulated or interrogated”*. The value of such a theory of change could be dismissed as ‘M&E perfectionism’, but there are at least two practical consequences of not having it: i) the fragmentation of efforts between the five KRAs discussed in Section 3.3; ii) the difficulty of benchmarking progress and learning, as highlighted in Section 3.6.

A ‘program logic’ was developed early in Phase 1 and provides an organising structure for 28 Outcomes to be achieved by the end of Phase 1 (four years) that will in turn contribute to three End-of-Program Outcomes (ten years). This logic does not include an explication of *how* these outcomes will be pursued (i.e. a ‘theory of action’). There are also a number of anomalies in the logic. As reflected by a former LADLF team member: *“the program logic*

<sup>72</sup> At mobilisation it also became evident that the AUD5.92 allocated for KRA 5 was not adequate to construct 930 classrooms (i.e. 520 ETSP classrooms + 420 EDP II repairs). Actual costs for a classroom and toilet have been determined to be AUD21,000.

<sup>73</sup> Rogers, E. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York, The Free Press.

<sup>74</sup> Rondinelli, D. A. (1993) *Development projects as policy experiments: an adaptive approach to development administration*, Routledge, New York.

<sup>75</sup> Davies, R. (2002). *Improved representations of change processes: improved theories of change*. Biennial Conference of the European Evaluation Society, Seville.

<sup>76</sup> Cole, G.E. (1999) Advancing the development and application of theory-based evaluation in the practice of public health, *American Journal of Evaluation*, September 1999, vol. 20, no.3, p 453 – 470.

<sup>77</sup> Learning may be relevant to the implementing team during the life of the project (‘intra-project learning’) or may be of more generic value (‘inter-project learning’). Accountability involves communicating to interested stakeholders what has been learned.

<sup>78</sup> BEQUAL (2014) *Investment Design Document*, May 2014, p 15

<sup>79</sup> LADLF (2015) *Root Cause Analysis*, Working Draft, 24 August 2015.

*has several flaws. It is not a theory of change. It is a structure that has created management silos*". Appendix E provides a technical critique of the program logic.

An M&E Plan was developed in January 2016, based largely on the program logic, but was not definitive/prescriptive concerning the performance measures: *"Key evaluation questions and approaches to M&E will not be solely determined by the Managing Contractor but rather, produced collaboratively with MoES with support from LADLF"*<sup>80</sup>. As noted in Section 3.6, a Results Framework was developed based on the program logic with progress indicators to be reported in six-monthly progress reports; however, it is difficult to assimilate these into a narrative about overall BEQUAL progress towards outcomes, and in many cases, no baseline or target values are available—making an assessment of progress challenging.

An area that has seemingly received little attention is the development of appropriate M&E processes to assess changes in counterpart performance and capacity. Given that this is core to the sustainability strategy of the program, it seems to be a fundamental aspect of program performance that should be systematically tracked. This will become increasingly critical with an enhanced focus on sub-national education service delivery.

If the thrust of this MTR is adopted, it would be timely to conduct a systemic review of the program logic and M&E plan, with a view to aligning with a more focussed sub-national agenda. A revised theory of change could then be matched with a revised organisational structure, which (as suggested in Section 0) could be more strategically focussed on end-of-program outcomes.

The M&E function has evidently been challenging. Not only is the technical task of monitoring and evaluating a program of the scope and scale of BEQUAL difficult, but the recruitment of a M&E Specialist was delayed by around eight months. By the time an appropriately qualified specialist was appointed, reporting norms and priorities within each KRA team were largely established. Evidently there was considerable resistance by some advisers to the subsequent development of a program-wide 'M&E system'—with each KRA team operating its own discrete M&E arrangements focused on serving managerial reporting. An interviewee previously associated with the program advised the MTR team that proposals to review or refine the theory of change or M&E plan were brushed aside as *"a distraction"*. A further complication was that there were various conceptions of the purpose of BEQUAL's M&E at play:

- **'MoES Help-desk'**: a campaign to strengthen the MoES M&E system;
- **'BEQUAL Program'**: a comprehensive program-wide M&E system to standardise data and reporting from each KRA;
- **'KRA Secretariat'**: a function to respond to particular monitoring or operational research needs of the KRA teams;
- **'Reporting Bureau'**: a function to assimilate primary data reported by KRA teams and available secondary data to prepare reports for DFAT, MoES and other identified audiences.

In addition to these challenges, the M&E specialist was engaged only for 12 months, and then extended for a further 12 months to May 2018. The MTR team was not privy to contractual discussions, but for a large and multifaceted program as BEQUAL in an operating context that demands learning and adaptation, this seems to be a case of under-resourcing<sup>81</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> BEQUAL (2016) *BEQUAL M&E Plan: 2015 – 2018*, January 2016.

<sup>81</sup> We acknowledge the skill and efforts of the locally engaged M&E team who will continue the routine work, but question the merits of terminating the more strategic M&E function—unless there is an alternative such as resourcing LADLF to perform more systematic review exercises.

Notwithstanding the above critique, BEQUAL has several assets to support learning and adaptation. First, the investment design and contract provides considerable flexibility to enable the contractor to adapt and respond to opportunities and lessons. This flexibility has been somewhat employed through the various modalities used by the program (as discussed in Section 3.3) but could be further exploited in a decentralised program that prioritises adaptation and innovation at local service delivery level. Second, the resourcing by Post of the LADLF provides BEQUAL with a rare opportunity for learning. The LADLF has conducted several significant studies that have influenced the program, and could be drawn on even further to inform significant program decisions<sup>82</sup>. In addition to LADLF, Post has drawn on DFAT’s partnership with The Asia Foundation (TAF) to conduct a series of rapid reviews that have contributed to refining the program’s focus and improving internal dynamics. In order to ensure learning happens, BEQUAL should prepare a management response to all major reviews or studies by LADLF/TAF.

**Recommendation:**

13. DFAT should commission a review of the theory of change and M&E plan and have these products updated to reflect the decentralisation and refocussing of the program on target school performance. Such a review should also examine the mechanisms and incentives to drive learning across the program and the adequacy of the M&E resources over the remaining life-of-program.
14. BEQUAL should prepare a management response to all major reviews or studies undertaken by LADLF/TAF.

### 3.8 Gender equality, disability and social inclusion

- + The BEQUAL design is fundamentally inclusive and so should provide a strong platform to take forward the GEDSI agenda.
- A lack of clarity or consensus on the meaning and relevance of crosscutting priorities.
- GEDSI advisory resources available to the program have been largely untapped.

This assessment has been undertaken with reference to the following: MoES’ inclusive education priorities; commitments made in the BEQUAL design to cross cutting areas; and relevant DFAT strategies and standards<sup>83</sup>.

These are not entirely overlapping, and the majority of DFAT policies were published after BEQUAL was designed. DFAT also has a strong explicit focus on child protection risk assessment and education sector mainstreaming, which conceivably requires more initiative by DFAT and BEQUAL to broach. However, collectively they reinforce that attention to gender equality, disability inclusion and child protection is important to DFAT, MoES and BEQUAL, and not elective or “*ideal*”. With BEQUAL’s prominence in the sector, and the elevation of equity and inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4<sup>84</sup>, BEQUAL strengthening of an *inclusive* education system would be well placed.

<sup>82</sup> For example, the evaluation of the first round of District Operating Grants by LADLF has identified important changes that should be adopted before a second round of grants are offered.

<sup>83</sup> Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy (February 2016); Development for All 2015-2020 (May 2015); Accessibility Design Guide: Universal Design Principles for Australia’s Aid Program (2013); Child Protection Policy (March 2017); Child Protection Guidance Note: Education Programs (2017). Also see Annex E for Summary of DFAT Strategies.

<sup>84</sup> SDG 4 is to Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

### *Conflation alongside confusion*

With over 15 distinct pieces of national legislation and policies on inclusive education<sup>85</sup>, and with what has been identified as one of the longest running inclusive education programs implemented<sup>86</sup>, the term ‘inclusive education’ is not new to Lao PDR. The MoES *National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education 2011-2015* defines this as “*eliminat[ing] disparities in access to education of disadvantaged groups, especially girls and women, ethnic groups, people with disabilities and people in socio-economic difficulty*”.

The BEQUAL goal neatly aligns with MoES’ objectives for inclusive education, as does the criteria for its 66 focus districts. However, as a result, a number of BEQUAL staff said that “*everything BEQUAL does furthers inclusion*”, with the suggestion that advisory inputs are surplus. This conflation is problematic, and overlooks the need to truly strengthen an inclusive education system in Lao PDR. A number of interviewees also noted that the concept of inclusive education needed to be better socialized within MoES, especially with the departments BEQUAL is working with beyond the Inclusive Education Centre (IEC).

Another issue is how advisers deployed by the managing contractor have used the term of ‘GEDSI’—meaning Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion. GEDSI has been construed by some BEQUAL staff as prioritising unobvious messages about the empowerment of women and girls. This is an unfortunate response (perhaps a form of resistance). GEDSI is “*a monumental mind-shift*” in Lao PDR, one interviewee noted as a caution. However, another noted that, “*BEQUAL is an eight-year program, and BEQUAL doesn’t want to be strengthening a non-inclusive system*”. It is well known that schooling plays a role in promoting equality, tolerance over ignorance, and respectful relationships<sup>87</sup>. This would be warranted work for a basic education program in a country facing widening inequality. Promoting equality and women’s empowerment is also a stated objective of DFAT for its development cooperation, and so opportunities for integration should be skillfully explored.

### *Inclusive BEQUAL design elements, selectively implemented*

As the program name suggests, the BEQUAL design is comprehensive in its situational analysis of various barriers to enrolment and completion for girls and boys, especially those with disabilities or from ethnic minority groups. It explicitly foreshadows the strengthening of inclusive education concepts within all KRAs, and it prescribes using gender and inclusive methodologies in the TNA and professional development program at TTCs. At the mid-point in Phase 1, key points on program performance are noted here:

- **KRA 1** has supported ‘catalytic’ inclusive education and GEDSI inputs. Key examples are the engagement of a consultant for review of the *National Strategy and Plan of Action on Inclusive Education (2011 – 2015)*, and development of 2016 – 2020 version, and of a consultant to inform disability measurement for in- and out-of-school children with disabilities. However, there have been challenges with using the outputs of these consultants, which is salient to note for ongoing implementation. One such example is the stalled passage of the new *National Inclusive Education Strategy and Action Plan for 2016 – 20*. It was arguably developed without sufficient time to consult and co-develop

<sup>85</sup> A Review of the Implementation of the National Strategy and Plan of Action for Inclusive Education 2011-2015: Executive Summary. April 2016:2.

<sup>86</sup> Implemented by Save the Children in Laos from 1993 – 2009. Cited in Grimes, P., Stevens, M., & Kumar, K. 2015. An Examination of the Evolution of Policies and Strategies to Improve Access to Education for Children with Disabilities, with a Focus on Inclusive Education Approaches, The Success and Challenges of Such Approaches and Implications for the Future Policy Direction. A Background Paper Prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2015 Education for All 2000-2015.

<sup>87</sup> UNESCO. 2017. A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education; Bouille, S. 2013. Developing an itinerant teacher system that supports a twin-track approach to inclusive education in Cambodia. Enabling Education Review: Special Edition: Inclusive Education and Disability, No. 2: 12–13.



the Plan with the IEC and key departments of MoES, despite advice to that effect, to ensure its ownership and endorsement. This is pertinent for the forthcoming measurement of disability prevalence among in- and out-of-school children, with a need to ensure adequate time for teachers to be sensitised to disability in order to yield more reliable data for incorporation into the routine school census from October 2018. While UNICEF's support to EMIS system strengthening is nascent, surface enquiries suggested that BEQUAL could be in closer contact with UNICEF to ensure EMIS can accommodate disability-disaggregated data.

- Integration within **KRA 2** is thorough. Addressing disadvantage is mainstreamed in the objectives and criteria for the BEIF grants, with 3 of 4 grants in Round 1 being on point; and with 7 of 11 related grants (or 64% of the grant round value) in Round 2 promoting inclusion. Attention to gender equality and disability inclusion is actively pursued across the activities of the BNC, notably the review of Grades 1 – 5 storybooks for positive portrayal of gender equality, ethnicity and disability<sup>88</sup>; and the four-week intensive Lao language and reading readiness program for children coming to Lao as a second language. The BNC is also currently producing a video to promote grants for VEDCs to address local barriers to education. The BNC design was a lengthy process (six months), to ensure the blending of each NGO's signature program to promote the same model for educational inclusion in each of the five locations. As noted above, evaluation is underway of components of the BNC. It will be important to explore and contest perceptions that the BNC is a boutique approach, that is too resource intensive for broader uptake by BEQUAL.
- The ETSP within **KRA 3**, with its focus on ethnic women trainee teachers, is intended to overcome the cultural and linguistic barriers faced by ethnic minority children in Lao language classrooms, risking drop-out. It aims to promote the skills development and income potential of ethnic minority women, and so could also be seen as promoting women's empowerment. However, the risks associated with the scheme discussed in earlier sections will offset this achievement.
- **KRA 4** was reported as being open to advice on strengthening the inclusive elements of the curriculum, but ultimately under-resourced to incorporate it systematically. A couple of questions (two) were included in the Story Book review list—covering gender balance in illustrations, and the representation of ethnic minority areas. KRA 4 staff also described having opportunistic conversations with RIES about inclusive elements like respectful depiction of ethnic minority groups. In the next phase, with advisor inputs, formalisation of this process with workshops and documented guidance is recommended.

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<sup>88</sup> BEQUAL NGO Consortium. December 2016. Gender, disability and ethnicity analysis of available primary grades reading material in Lao PDR.

- KRA 5** has been proactive in negotiating with MoES to apply Australia’s accessibility principles<sup>89</sup> and UNICEF’s WASH standards, to ensure wheelchair accessible, sex-segregated latrines in school upgrades.<sup>90</sup> It was not clear that the KRA team was considering menstrual hygiene management in its WASH support, given the increasingly early onset of puberty and the program’s reach to lower secondary years. Attention to disabilities other than physical was also not evident. Lastly, the eighteen-strong team of infrastructure specialists is all male, reflective in part of gendered occupations in Lao PDR, but highlighting an area for proactive recruitment of women.

ສະຖິຕິນັກຮຽນ 2016-2017 ຄ.ວ ບຸກຄົນ							
ລຸ້ນ	ຫ້ອງ	ນັກຮຽນ		ເດັກນາຍ		ເດັກນຳຍີງ	
		ລ	ຍ	ລ	ຍ	ລ	ຍ
1	ນັກຮຽນ 1	20	9	2	2	18	7
2	ນັກຮຽນ 2	20	8	0	0	20	8
3	ນັກຮຽນ 3	32	17	6	2	26	15
4	ປີ 1	30	12	8	3	22	9
5	ປີ 2	35	21	6	5	29	16
6	ປີ 3	31	17	5	1	26	16
7	ປີ 4	24	11	2	1	22	10
8	ປີ 5	32	14	0	0	32	14
	ລວມ	224	109	29	14	195	95

Figure 6: School attendance record at a BNC school in Luang Prabang Province showing a total of 224 students, of whom 109 are girls.

**Reinforcing child protection in practice**

BEQUAL draws on the well-developed child protection policies and procedures of DFAT and the managing contractor.<sup>91</sup> However, reference to child safe standards is conspicuously minimal in the content of program. One TTC interviewee noted that ethics and proper conduct towards children (encompassing acceptable forms of discipline, and zero tolerance of discrimination and abuse) should be included in the professional development training that BEQUAL offers.<sup>92</sup> With the elevated child protection risk level for young, marginalised children, it would also be warranted to incorporate guidance on child safe standards in the Teacher Guides, in TNAs, and in training and guidance to Pedagogical Advisers to be child safe and to identify signs of abuse.<sup>93</sup> Knowing that schools are a site for violence among children and given the current high profile in Australia and neighbouring Vietnam<sup>94</sup> of abuse in schools, child safe messages should feature more prominently.

**Nothing about us without us**

The BNC inclusive education pilot in Xaybouthong and the KRA 1 work to measure disability prevalence among children using the Washington City Group module is a great example of BEQUAL effort to promote disability inclusion. An important element of DFAT’s Development for All strategy is to involve people with disabilities and representative organisations in the design, delivery and employment for activities. It was not possible to discern from reporting or consultations whether this is occurring, but there is scope to consider this in time for both of the above pilots. The strategy also draws attention to gender and disability interactions,

<sup>89</sup> Accessibility Design Guide: Universal Design Principles for Australia’s Aid Program (2013).  
<sup>90</sup> BEQUAL Gender Equality and Disability and Social Inclusion Report: Recommendations to assist BEQUAL with GEDSI planning, monitoring and implementation. August 2017: 10-11. Note that this was produced after the storybook selection for Grade 1 was done by KRA 4.  
<sup>91</sup> Namely, Coffey International’s Child Protection Policy, including the complaint procedures; Code of Conduct; Procedures for Managing Underperformance and Serious Misconduct; and Promotional Material Consent Form.  
<sup>92</sup> Interview with TTC staff, 21 August 2017.  
<sup>93</sup> A recent survey has highlighted the experience of violence by children in Laos. Over the course of their childhood, an estimated 12 per cent of boys and 7.3 per cent of girls reported sexual violence; 24 per cent of girls and 17.7 per cent of boys reported emotional violence; and 15 per cent of girls and 17.2 per cent of reports experienced physical violence. Government of Lao PDR, Lao Statistics Bureau & UNICEF. 2016. Violence Against Children Survey in Lao PDR: Preliminary Report.  
<sup>94</sup> <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2017/07/28/vietnam-reports-nearly-700-child-sexual-abuse-cases-first-half-2017>

and that girls with disabilities will experience double discrimination. A screening of children to identify assistive device needs is reportedly underway.

### *Gender equality exemplified*

A final policy observation is on the gender equality messages conveyed by the team structure. The current GEDSI adviser for the managing contractor has undertaken a structure and salary analysis of the BEQUAL team, however this was not yet available for the MTR. The organisational chart shows that of the 10 top leadership positions (all held by international specialists), 30 per cent are held by women. There is room for the promotion of women to leadership roles, especially for Lao women.

### *Twin track budget support*

Budget analysis is a last definitive way to measure the adequacy of BEQUAL's support to stand alone and mainstreamed gender equality, disability inclusion and child protection. According to the total program expenditure reported in the most recent Annual Progress Report (January 2017), targeted IE activity amounts to 32 per cent of the BEQUAL expenditure to date (KRAs 1, 2 and 3 only). However, if you remove KRA 2-related expenditure, **discrete inclusive education activity represents only eight per cent of total program expenditure**<sup>95</sup>. The BNC and BEIF are critical parts of BEQUAL achieving its goal of reaching the most disadvantaged boys and girls. There is also scope to enhance mainstreaming in the other KRAs.

### *Untapped resources and underutilised advice*

Notably, the BEQUAL design called for a full-time Education, Participation and Community Engagement Specialist with 'an advanced level of expertise in gender and disability-inclusive education issues'<sup>96</sup>. The role would be responsible for liaising with the DPPE (presumably with the IEC), liaise with DFAT and the NGOs, and advise on integration of these cross cutting issues in the design. This role did not materialise, and has been filled by a composite of short-term consultants<sup>97</sup>, and inputs by three different GEDSI advisers from the managing contractor's head office. The absence of this full-time role likely explains the lack of coherence or evenness in approaching integration within all KRAs, and within the BEQUAL team and processes.

To date, for GEDSI adviser inputs, BEQUAL has costed up to 10 days of advice per year, with an optional visit to Lao PDR annually. Notably, not all 10 days were used per year. This allocation is patently insufficient for a program of BEQUAL's dimension and goals, and for a subject matter like inclusion which requires 'mobilising opinion in favour of inclusion principles'<sup>98</sup>, capacity building and keeping pace with partner receptivity. Building consensus on inclusion takes a clarity of purpose, an understanding of the added value, evidence to enable informed judgements, champions, and careful communications.<sup>99</sup> By being based offshore, the GEDSI adviser cannot perform these roles. GEDSI advice in BEQUAL is therefore at risk of or already being regarded as peripheral rather than core, and compartmentalised. A full-time adviser based in Lao PDR is needed, and this recommendation is supported by a number of subject matter experts familiar with BEQUAL. It was suggested that BEQUAL should scan for a suitably qualified international or national adviser; and that if a national

<sup>95</sup> Total program expenditure until December 2016 is AUD 12,246,120. The calculation of IE-related expenditure includes the MoES Inclusive Education Policy consultant (AUD 161,169), KRA 2 expenses (AUD 2,967,492) and the ETSP under KRA 3 (AUD 820,012).

<sup>96</sup> BEQUAL Investment Design Document. May 2014: 55.

<sup>97</sup> The two short term consultants were for the review and development of MoES Inclusive Education Strategy and Plan of Action (90 days) and for the assessment of a disability prevalence measurement instrument (<10 days).

<sup>98</sup> UNESCO. 2017. A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education.

<sup>99</sup> UNESCO. 2017. A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education.

adviser was not identified, an international recruit should be expected to build the capacity and hand over to a local team member over a specified duration (ideally, within two years). Given the variable engagement of the GEDSI advisers to date, and the importance of equity to BEQUAL goal, the role should be of an equivalent level to the other (currently international) Technical Advisers.

A related issue is the underutilisation of available tools and material resources. The GEDSI checklist produced in April 2016 for BEQUAL provides a list of indicative 'entry points' or activities, against each KRA. It offers appropriate and practical suggestions. The accompanying guidance note advises that additional consultation with MoES would be needed, as would extra technical support, to effectively implement these checklist activities.<sup>100</sup> These extra steps were not undertaken, missing many opportunities for strengthening the inclusiveness of the program as a result. At this mid-point of Phase 1, a review of the 77 items in the checklist found the following: there was no or limited (evidence of) progress for 46 activities; some (evidence of) progress for 20 activities; and progress or accomplishment of eight activities. Three were not possible to rate. This is a very useful resource. It alleviates the mystification and burden on KRA teams as to how to strengthen inclusive education, and yet its implementation has not been supported.<sup>101</sup>

At the time of the MTR, the BNC was also making decisions regarding technical partners for the disability inclusion pilot. Given that MoES has adopted the Inclusive Education Training Manual and Teacher Handbook developed and tested by Catholic Relief Services (CRS)<sup>102</sup> in the Lao PDR context, it is advisable that BNC pursues a close partnership with CRS and its range of education sector resources. It may also be worthwhile for CRS to be consulted on the disability measurement pilot, since the consultant report identified misconceptions about disability by teachers, and the risk that inadequately trained enumerators will produce under-estimates of disability.

### *Leadership and accountability*

DFAT's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy is a case in point for the necessity of leadership and accountability for promoting cross cutting issues. When the top leadership (in this case the Foreign Minister) reiterated the importance of gender equality and introduced an unambiguous target that 80% of programs must perform satisfactorily on gender equality, resourcing and performance increased. For gender equality, disability inclusion and child protection to be systematically integrated into BEQUAL, their importance needs to be emphasised by DFAT, consistently raised by BEQUAL's top leadership, actioned by a designated staff member, and reported against clearly. These elements are not lined up for BEQUAL at present. The MTR team heard from five interviewees that DFAT could be more emphatic on its own cross cutting policies, and that BEQUAL leadership was not expressly supportive. Furthermore, there is no particular DFAT staff member in Lao PDR responsible for GEDSI or inclusive education, and there is no stand-alone inclusive education of GEDSI section in the annual report and limited disaggregation by sex, ethnicity and disability.

<sup>100</sup> GD&SI Strategy. August 2015: 2.

<sup>101</sup> Also see BEQUAL. 2016. Guidelines for the Implementation of the National Strategy and Plan of Action Framework 2016-2020: Accelerating the Development of an Inclusive System of Education. Draft 4. (Author: Haugen, V.) These Guidelines were developed by BEQUAL's Inclusive Education consultant.

<sup>102</sup> CRS' Right to Learn project (2013-2015) in Xaybouthong was co-funded by DFAT.

**Recommendations:**

15. BEQUAL should appoint a full time Education, Participation and Community Engagement Specialist or GEDSI Adviser based in Lao PDR, to work with and ultimately be replaced by a national team member.
16. The above specialist should be engaged to review the GEDSI checklist (2016) and the Inclusive Education Guidelines (2016) in order to set work priorities. This should include ensuring that M&E and reporting adequately capture cross-cutting results and issues (especially child safe content, diverse disabilities and the intersection of gender and disability). It can be a collaborative process with partners, but is for the specialist to lead.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

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This MTR has found continuing support for the BEQUAL Program among key stakeholders, with senior GoL officials affirming the relevance of the program and appreciating the technical proficiency of the advisers. There have been notable achievements by the program in the first 16 months of implementation with reported progress against a results framework consistent with expectations at this point in implementation. There have also been significant changes in the economic and political context which have rendered some of the original design assumptions invalid. Further, the way some program priorities have evolved early in implementation is inconsistent with the original purpose and focus of the program design—especially the prioritisation of a national primary curriculum and associated teacher training. The MTR team formed the view that continuing with the current program trajectory carries considerable risks for DFAT and MoES; and hence, BEQUAL is advised to refocus implementation at sub-national level in target districts in order to improve learning outcomes in disadvantaged schools. There are also significant concerns over whether ETSP graduate employability that must be resolved, with divergent views among key stakeholders about the Government’s commitment/ability to assure full employment of the cohorts.

The BEQUAL management structure matches intuitively with the MoES central departmental structures. The practical implication is that BEQUAL advisers are located within counterpart departments; however, a disadvantage appears to be that this compromises program integration and tends to foster siloed relationships between the KRA teams. Also, there are evidently cases when situating advisers within the departmental structure has not fostered the desired MoES engagement. The establishment of regional program teams is well regarded by most stakeholders and should be used as a model for restructuring the program with a sub-national focus. Affirming this direction are broadly positive results from piloted grant modalities as well as reported achievements of the BNC. Along with a refocussing of the program at sub-national level, the MTR team recommends a stronger emphasis on developing the capacity of counterparts, recognising the potential for a corresponding de-emphasis on achieving short-term impacts. The recommended restructuring and refocussing should help to address issues of malcontent reported by PESS stakeholders.

At mid-term, and given the refocussing of the program noted above, it is timely to review and refine the program’s theory of change and M&E arrangements. A number of anomalies have been identified in the program logic, and the M&E arrangements do not support routine assessment of counterpart capacity development or systematic assessment of progress towards targets. Further, in situating routine M&E within individual KRA teams, the assimilation of a performance narrative about the program as a whole has been challenging, and this in turn may have limited the potential for dialogue between BEQUAL and DFAT about the strategic horizon for the program and emerging bilateral risks/opportunities. Notable support for learning and reflection is available through the LADLF and TAF; nevertheless, there are arguments for additional resourcing of the program M&E beyond the current allocation. Also under-resourced/untapped has been GEDSI technical support. Although the BEQUAL program design is fundamentally concerned with inclusiveness and equality, there has evidently been a lack of agreement on the meaning and relevance of crosscutting priorities within the program.

## **APPENDIX A: KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS**

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Themes	KEQ	Sub-questions
<b>Appropriateness of design</b>	1. Is the current program scope appropriate?	<p>Primary curriculum and teacher curriculum activities have emerged as key pillars of the BEQUAL reform. These reforms contribute to better classroom practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is BEQUAL support to these reforms articulated?</li> <li>• What are the assumptions underpinning this articulation?</li> <li>• How do groups of BEQUAL activities relate to these two reforms?</li> <li>• What is not being done that also matters for these two reforms?</li> </ul>
	2. Are BEQUAL activities, structure and resources fit for purpose?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the current KRA structure appropriate, including the respective financial allocation?</li> <li>• How well are the different KRA/activities integrated and coherently contributing to the wider program objectives?</li> <li>• Is the balance of national vs. subnational activities appropriate?</li> <li>• Is there coherence between BEQUAL engagement at national and subnational levels?</li> <li>• Are the modalities used in the program, including for BEQUAL NGO Consortium, ethnic teacher scholarship program, grant facilities (DOGS and BEIF), appropriate approaches for achieving program outcomes?</li> </ul>
	3. Are BEQUAL management systems and structures effective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there effective systems in place for program management and implementation, e.g. planning, monitoring, financial and HR management?</li> <li>• Are the internal communication protocols providing space for constructive engagement and strategic decisions?</li> <li>• Are external communication with DFAT and Government of Lao PDR (all levels) adequate?</li> <li>• Is the present team structure and composition effective for BEQUAL's orientation in the next two years and beyond?</li> <li>• Does BEQUAL have appropriate management structure and systems in place at the subnational level?</li> <li>• Does BEQUAL have an effective and accountable financial management system?</li> </ul>



	<p>4. Are BEQUAL stakeholders ready and able to fulfil their role in the program?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is MoES leadership engaged effectively and strategically to leverage change through BEQUAL?</li> <li>• Is there appropriate level of engagement with other GoL leaders?</li> <li>• How has BEQUAL contributed to bilateral relations?</li> <li>• Are there critical gaps in MoES, PESS and DESB capacity to fulfil their role in the program?</li> <li>• What are the signs of and constraints to GoL (MoES, PESS and DESB) ownership of BEQUAL? Is there buy-in from provincial governments?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress towards EOPO</b></p>	<p>5. Is the program on track to achieve its EOPO and phase 1 outcomes?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the aggregation/sum of BEQUAL achievements clear and well understood?</li> <li>• Are the achievements so far satisfactory?</li> <li>• What are the key factors of BEQUAL success and failures?</li> </ul>
	<p>6. How does BEQUAL know of, learn from and adapt to its successes and failures?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How well does BEQUAL understand and document its achievements, successes and failures?</li> <li>• Is this understanding linked to the program Theory of Change and strategy?</li> <li>• How does BEQUAL demonstrate its understanding of subnational contexts and capacities?</li> <li>• How well does BEQUAL utilise evidence of performance in decision-making (e.g. planning, implementation)?</li> <li>• How and how well does BEQUAL support DFAT in its policy dialogue with MoEs?</li> <li>• How well does BEQUAL adapt its program strategy to lessons learned and contextual changes?</li> <li>• How well does BEQUAL document its adaption?</li> </ul>
	<p>7. How well is BEQUAL integrating gender equality, inclusive development and child protection?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does BEQUAL demonstrate its commitment to gender equality and inclusive development in its implementation?</li> <li>• How well does BEQUAL seek and use opportunities for integrating gender equality and inclusive development in its implementation?</li> <li>• How and to what extent does BEQUAL improve participation and learning of disadvantaged groups (ethnic minorities, out of school girls and boys, children with disability) in Laos?</li> <li>• Is BEQUAL compliance to DFAT's Child Protection policy and is there evidence of compliance in the implementation?</li> </ul>

## **APPENDIX B: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES**

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Date	Name	Organisation	Role	Gender
14/8/17	Clemency Oliphant	DFAT	First Secretary	F
14/8/17	Sounisa Sundara	DFAT	Program Manager (Education)	F
14/8/17	Bounmy Souvannalath	DFAT	Senior Program Officer (Education) / Disability Focal Point	F
14/8/17	Phonethida Vongsay	DFAT	Senior Program Officer (Education)	F
14/8/17	Kaykhoun Khounvisith	DFAT	Program Manager (Education)	F
14/8/17	John Williams	DFAT	Ambassador	M
14/8/17	Andreas Zurbrugg	DFAT	Deputy Head of Mission	M
14/8/17	Alison Bullock	BEQUAL	Education Specialist	F
15/8/17	Aaron Rosada	BEQUAL	Operations Manager	M
15/8/17	Michael Lally	BEQUAL	Education Program Specialist	M
15/8/17	Anthony Higgines	BEQUAL	Finance Specialist	M
15/8/17	Peter Deacon	BEQUAL	Team Leader	M
15/8/17	Corinne Javary	BEQUAL	Communication Specialist	F
15/8/17	Candice Tappin	BEQUAL	Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Resource Manager	F
15/8/17	Phillip Belling	BEQUAL	MEL	M
15/8/17	Peta McLean	BEQUAL	Teacher In-service	F
15/8/17	Phouangkham Somsanith	BEQUAL	Curriculum Development	F
15/8/17	Soukdalone Phommathep	BEQUAL	In-service	F
15/8/17	Khamkhuane Vannasouk	BEQUAL	Policy and Innovations	F
15/8/17	Sarah Rich	BEQUAL	KRA 4 Manager – Curriculum	F
15/8/17	Bob McLaughlin	BEQUAL	Regional Education Specialist (South/Central)	M
15/8/17	Carol McGowan	BEQUAL	Regional Education Specialist (North)	F
15/8/17	Chindavanh Vongsaly	EU		F
15/8/17	Bryan Fornari	EU	Head of Cooperation	M
16/8/17	Sengdeuan Lachanthaboun	MoES	Minister of Education	F
16/8/17	Khampaseth Kitiyavong	DoP, MoES	DDG	F
16/8/17	Anoupheng Keovongsa	DoP, MoES	Head of Planning Division	M
16/8/17	Yangxia Lee	Inclusive Education Centre, Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education, MoES.	Former Director / Deputy Director General	F
16/8/17	Holly Fuller Cantuba	CRS	Head of Program	F

16/8/17	Luellen Kazan	CRS	Education Technical Adviser	F
16/8/17	Dara Kiamtammakhoun	IEC, MoES	DDG, IEC	F
16/8/17	Pina Soukjaleun	IEC, MoES	Special Needs Education	M
16/8/17	Bounlouay Soundala	IEC, MoES	Gender equality and ethic education	M
16/8/17	Silakhone Sonephneg	IEC, MoES	Acting Head of Admin	M
17/8/17	Keoamphone Souvannahoun	Child Fund	Country Director	F
17/8/17	Katherine Dooley	World Vision	Education Adviser	F
17/8/17	Elena Reilly	Save the Children International	Program Quality Development	F
17/8/17	Mona Girgis	Plan International	Country Director	F
17/8/17	Carlos Vasowez	UNICEF	WASH Adviser	M
17/8/17	Siamphone	UNICEF	Education Specialist	F
17/8/17	Andack	UNICEF	Education Specialist	M
17/8/17	Nanna SKAU	WFP	Head of Program	F
17/8/17	Kathleen Inglis	WFP	Partnership and Communication Officer	F
17/8/17	Yangxia Lee	WFP	Government Partnership Officer	F
17/8/17	Norkham Souphanouvong	Room to Read	Country Director	F
17/8/17	Benoit Couturier	Handicap International	Country Director	M
17/8/17	Minla Nanthavong	Handicap International	Rights and Inclusion Coordinator	F
18/8/17	Bouasavanh Keovily	BEQUAL	Language specialist	F
18/8/17	Houmphanh Keoudom	BEQUAL	Curriculum Development	M
18/8/17	Khounmy Keovongsa	BEQUAL	Teaching and Learning Materials	F
18/8/17	Linda Jenkinson	BEQUAL	STA Linguist	F
18/8/17	Carol Boulanger	BEQUAL	STA materials	F
18/8/17	Anoulack Sithdof	MoHA	Head of Personnel Division	M
18/8/17	Kalouna	MPI, DoP	Deputy Director General	M
18/8/17	Kittiphone Sayaphet	MOFA	Desk Officer	M
18/8/17	Senghgeun Vaiyakone	RIES	DDG	F
18/8/17	Khamsene Xayavong	Inspection Department, MoES	Head od Division	M
18/8/17	Souksavanh Phonekeo	RIES	DDG	M
18/8/17	Ket Phanlack	Teacher Education Department	Acting DG	M
18/8/17	Kaiyasone Navaman	Education Administration Development Centre	DDG	M
18/8/17	Mithong Souvanvixay	Pre-Primary and Primary Education Department	DG	M
18/8/17	MaAly Voranouth	Statistics Center	Acting DG	M
18/8/17	Anoupheng Keovongsa	DoP, MoES	Head of Planning Division	M
18/8/17	Khampaseth Kitiyavong	DoP, MoES	DDG	F

18/8/17	Dr Santi Owen	LADLF	Development Effectiveness Specialist	F
20/8/17	Bob McLaughlin	BEQUAL	Regional South	M
21/8/17	Lingthong Sengdavanh	Savannakhet PESS	DG	F
21/8/17	Sioudone Thongsouvanh	Savannakhet PESS	DDG	M
21/8/17	Anousone Soutthivong	Savannakhet PESS	Director of Statistics Division	M
21/8/17	Thongkhen Khamsoukthavong	Savannakhet TTC	DDG	M
21/8/17	Phomma Xayavong	Savannakhet TTC	Head of Admin Office	M
21/8/17	Latsamy Phaxaisy	Savannakhet TTC	DG	M
21/8/17	Bountem Xouangsayavong	Savannakhet Provincial Assembly	Savannakhet Provincial Assembly Representative	M
21/8/17	Bounyee Keokhounmuang	Luang Namtha Provincial Government Office	Vice Governor	M
21/8/17	Bounchanh Luangluxay	Luang Namtha PESS	Director	M
21/8/17	Bounhom Chitdala	Luang Namtha PESS	Deputy Director	M
21/8/17	Khamsouk Thongkane	Luang Namtha TTC	Director	M
21/8/17	Nolasinh Fongmixay	Luang Namtha TTC	Deputy Director	M
21/8/17	Nuanchanh Thippavong	Luang Namtha TTC	Head of Technical Unit	F
21/8/17	Thongbay Syvilay	Luang Namtha TTC	Technical staff	M
21/8/17	Phaphone Summue	Luang Namtha TTC	ETSP trainee	F
21/8/17	Davone Laosy	Luang Namtha TTC	ETSP trainee	F
22/8/17	Sithong Kammacheung	Viengphouka DESB	Director	M
22/8/17	Thongdy Khounpaseuth	Viengphouka DESB	Head of Pre-Primary	M
22/8/17	Avone Sengoudom	Viengphouka DESB	Pedagogical Adviser	M
22/8/17	Chanthy Onekeo	Viengphouka DESB	Finance Officer	M
22/8/17	Syvone Sengsomphanh	Khonethou Primary School	Principal	M
22/8/17	Justine Sylvester	Independent Consultant	Independent Evaluator BEIF Grants Round 2	F
22/8/17	Syhai Keokaithin	Khammouan PESS	DG	M
22/8/17	Nanda Sointhasone	Khammouan PESS	DDG	M
22/8/17	Lamphieng Linsomphou	Khammouan PESS	Head of Teacher Development Division	F
22/8/17	Soukvilay Vanphakhamxay	Khammouan PESS	Technical staff at Statistics Division	F
22/8/17	Phimpha Phiuphaphom	Ghommalath DESB	Head of DESB	M

22/8/17	Soulichan Souliya	Ghommalath DESB	Deputy Head of DESB	M
23/8/17	Sengphet Phongoudom	Mahaxay DESB	Head of DESB	M
23/8/17	Thanouthong Kenesyvong	Mahaxay DESB	Deputy Head of DESB	M
23/8/17	Phetsala Phouthavong	Mahaxay DESB	Deputy Head of DESB	M
23/8/17	Thing Vongthikoun	Mahaxay DESB	PA	M
23/8/17	Saykham Phothilath	Mahaxay Governor office	Head of Admin Office	M
23/8/17	KhamAsa Phongoudom	Mahaxay Governor office	Technical staff	M
23/8/17	Mone Phetoudone	Mahaxay Governor office	Governor adviser	F
23/8/17	Phetmany Sivanthong	Mahaxay Governor office	Head of Coordination Unit	F
23/8/17	Khong	Sobtud Primary School	Teacher	M
23/8/17	Cara Ellickson	Coffey International	Coffey Corporate GEDSI Adviser	F
23/8/17	Laurent deSchoutheete	LADLF	Facility Manager	M
24/8/17	Dr Valerie Haugen	VoxPacis International Development	BEQUAL Inclusive Education Consultant	F
27/8/17	Gary Ovington	BEQUAL	Education Specialist	M
27/8/17	Mary Fearnley-Sander	BEQUAL	Teacher Training College Primary Professional Development Program Specialist	F
28/8/17	Viphakone Sipadith	Save the Children International	Field Manager	M
28/8/17	Somphong Sibounheuang	Louangprabang PESS	Head of Pre-and Primary Division	M
28/8/17	Phonepaserth Oudomsouk	Nambak DESB	Head of DESB	M
28/8/17	Phon Sengpanya	Nambak DESB	PA	M
28/8/17	Bounyong Phothikham	Nambak DESB	Deputy Head of DESB	M
29/8/17	Dr Annemarie Reerink	DFAT	Senior Sector Specialist-Gender Equality	F
29/8/17	Khambay Khamsy	Teacher Development Department, MOES	DG	M
29/8/17	Soth Phimalin	BEQUAL	National Regional Program Manager	M
29/8/17	Somphong Chanthamaly	Khangkhay TTC	Teacher Educaotor	M
29/8/17	Lethsamay Maimichith	Saravanh TTC	Teacher Educaotor	F
29/8/17	Mindavanh Vongdananthaphan	Khangkhay TTC	Teacher Educaotor	F
29/8/17	Carol McGowan	BEQUAL	Regional Education Specialist (North)	F
29/8/17	Phouangkham Somsanith	BEQUAL	Curriculum Development	F
29/8/17	Khamkhuane Vannasouk	BEQUAL	Policy and Innovations	F
30/8/17	Somxay Inthasone	Plan International	Education Adviser	M
30/8/17	Elena Reilly	Save the Children International	Program Quality Development	F

30/8/17	Oulath Saengouthay	Child Fund	Education Adviser	M
30/8/17	Sarah Rich	BEQUAL	KRA 4 Manager – Curriculum	F
31/8/17	Saysamone Mangnormek	Xiengkhouang PESS	DDG	F
31/8/17	Syphan Patthana	Xiengkhouang PESS	Director of Statistics Division	M
31/8/17	Nouansy	Xiengkhouang PESS	Director of Primary Division	F
31/8/17	Phet Sadakhom	Khoun DESB	Deputy Head of Primary Unit	M
31/8/17	Dr Bouasavanh Keovily	BEQUAL	Language specialist	F
31/8/17	Houmphanh Keoudom	BEQUAL	Curriculum Development	M
31/8/17	Khounmy Keovongsa	BEQUAL	Teaching and Learning Materials	F
31/8/17	Somsanith Mounphoxay	BEQUAL	BIEF Assessor	F
31/8/17	Justine Sylvester	BEQUAL	BIEF Assessor	F
31/8/17	Nirali Mehta	NBC	Consortium Manager	F
31/8/17	Kate Nethercott Wilson	Independent Consultant	Former BEQUAL GEDSI Adviser	F
1/9/2017	Chindavanh Vongsaly	EU		F
1/9/2017	Bryan Fornari	EU	Head of Cooperation	M
1/9/2017	Dr Bounpan Xaymountry	DoP, MoES	DG	
1/9/2017	Anoupheng Keovongsa	DoP, MoES	Head of Planning Division	M
3/9/2017	Mike Lally	BEQUAL staff (regarding the Disability Measurement Pilot)	Education Program Specialist and Consortium Manager	M
3/9/2017	Nirali Mehta	BEQUAL staff (regarding the Disability Measurement Pilot)	Education Program Specialist and Consortium Manager	F
14/9/17	Glenn Davies	Coffey International	Coffey Corporate Gender Adviser (including BEQUAL)	M

## **APPENDIX C: EXPANDING ON THE RECOMMENDATION TO SLOW THE PACE AND SHARPEN THE FOCUS OF BEQUAL**

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### *Support to the national primary curriculum reform*

The rationale for the national reform of the primary curriculum is based on the assumption that by making the delivery of the primary curriculum more student-centred, that students will more effectively participate in learning, and will thus achieve improved learning outcomes.

Few contest that a new curriculum will be valuable. While the educational literature agrees that improving access to good quality teaching resources is linked to improved educational outcomes for learners<sup>103</sup>, most interviewees and a significant body of the same work<sup>104</sup> caution that it will disproportionately benefit functioning and better-resourced schools and learners. Further, the literature advises that teacher quality factors have the greatest bearing on student learning. Specifically, that “textbooks are cost-effective in raising test scores for those considered academically strong. However, for ‘low-achieving’ students, mother-tongue literacy skills must be developed and textbooks provided in their mother-tongue. When these conditions are met, students who have been designated ‘low-achieving’ students’ may even outperform their academically strong counterparts”<sup>105</sup>.

National education laws and the Education Sector Development Plan 2016-2020 are silent on use in the early grades of mother-tongue languages to support Lao language acquisition. There is an expectation that the curriculum be delivered in the Lao PDR national language. A more student-centred and less crowded curriculum may improve the potential quality overall, but unless teachers feel confident and capable of applying the new pedagogies and have the skills to teach second language learners, they will likely revert to old habits quickly even in the better performing schools<sup>106</sup>.

*“The curriculum is good, but it’s a waste of money without improving teacher quality. Good teachers, with or without good textbooks, will teach well” (PESS official).*

*“Over 10 years I am confident that we can make a change in primary education and Teacher Training Colleges with BEQUAL support but this will be more so in the Teacher Training Colleges than in all schools.” (KRA 3 National TA).*

The risk for DFAT and the MoES, and highlighted throughout the education and development literature<sup>107</sup>, is that in disadvantaged and less well-resourced schools, where demand side factors of poverty, livelihood, geography, ethnicity and gender are significant barriers to learners’ participation, a new curriculum may even increase the already low levels of achievement and participation. In disadvantaged areas teachers are likely to be presented with the combined challenges of: non-Lao speakers, multi-grade teaching settings, undernourished students and intermittent attendance. This confluence of factors will almost certainly make the changes to pedagogical practises difficult to maintain.

<sup>103</sup> Snilstveit, et al, 2016

<sup>104</sup> See for example: DFAT (2015) *Supporting Teacher Development: Literature Review*. Office of Development Effectiveness. Canberra; Akyeampong, K., Lussier, K., Pryor, J., & Westbrook, J. (2013). Improving teaching and learning of basic maths and reading in Africa: Does teacher preparation count? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33 (3), 272-282.

<sup>105</sup> UNESCO, (2017) Improve Learning Textbooks and teachers’ guides: availability and use. <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/improve-learning/curriculum-materials/textbooks-and-teachers-guides-availability-and-use>. Sourced: 3 September, 2017.

<sup>106</sup> MoES, 2015 Education Sector Development Plan 2016-2020 pp5-6; MTR, 2017, KII interviews, involving PESS, DESB, BEQUAL TA, MoES)

<sup>107</sup> UNESCO, 2017; Snilstveit, 2016, Shaeffer, 2016.

Hence, the MTR team agrees with concerns expressed by stakeholders at both the national and subnational levels<sup>108</sup> regarding the inadequate readiness and absorptive capacity of the education system, including education supervisors at the subnational level, schools, principals and teachers, and proposes slowing the pace of implementation of reforms to the primary curriculum.

The current reform plan covers 2016 – 2022. Key informants acknowledged the need for a curriculum underpinned by a more contemporary educational philosophy that is age-appropriate learner-centred and competency-based. However, the majority were also of the opinion that the magnitude of the curriculum change combined with the demands placed on teachers (academically, pedagogically and culturally), meant that there would be highly variable implementation of the new curriculum across the system. Consequently, the curriculum reform—as necessary and well intentioned as it is—will likely leave behind the most disadvantaged learners and potentially increase the educational gap in the very districts that the BEQUAL program was intended to target.

Even if the BEQUAL goal is modified to focus on all Lao PDR learners, rather than the most disadvantaged, the risk remains high that teachers in general will be overwhelmed, and won't have developed a deep enough understanding of the subject matter and teaching methods to effectively adopt the new pedagogies<sup>109</sup> within the proposed timeframe.

The literature related to education in developing contexts concurs with the above observations. Changing teaching practices (including curriculum reforms to make education more student-centred) has been a key priority of many education reform programs. However, many single-country and multi-country studies have found that the success of such initiatives is compromised because of a lack of teacher preparation, weak support from the school, and limited community engagement. Of note, DFAT's own findings (2015a) are that for reforms to education to be effective: "teacher development programs need to be embedded in education systems...recognising that provincial and district officers, district supervisors and principals need to be recruited and trained as educational professionals with roles in supporting, mentoring and monitoring teaching and learning"<sup>110</sup>. These concerns are not unrecognised by BEQUAL stakeholders. During this MTR, interviewees from BEQUAL, MoES, PESS and DESB officials all aligned with concerns that the success of a new curriculum rollout would be hindered by low teacher motivation, poor school infrastructure, under-qualified teachers, a lack of pedagogical support by district personnel and school principals.

For these reasons the MTR team advocates concentrating BEQUAL support for curriculum and teaching reform in the most disadvantaged districts as originally intended in the program investment design; and concentrating efforts to build teachers pedagogical competencies for teaching non-Lao speakers Lao language, science, and maths in Grades 1 – 3, with support to the teaching of English in Grades 4 and 5.

#### *Support to materials development, publication and use*

The MTR team notes the significant effort and resources that have been invested in building capacity for curriculum writing and piloting of the new materials<sup>111</sup>. RIES personnel have been provided with intensive training in primary teaching methods and curriculum design, development and production. They have also been actively engaged in year-long piloting of

<sup>108</sup> LADLF, 2017, Contextual Analysis of decision Making Processes in the Primary Education Sector in Lao PDR; Implementing Partners; BEQUAL Technical Advisers and MoES personnel.

<sup>109</sup> MTR, 2017 FGD and KII – BEQUAL TAs; DTE officials, PESS and DESB; BEQUAL, 2017 Grade 1 Pilot Report.

<sup>110</sup> See also DFAT 2014a and b; DFAT 2015b; Westbrook et al, 2013.

<sup>111</sup> MTR, KII - 14-31 August 2017; BEQUAL Progress Report, 2017.

the Grade 1 textbooks and teacher guides in a sample 25112 public schools in Lao PDR—which is itself a new experience for the institute.

Learning from the first pilot has been enlightening and has led the Ministry (and RIES in particular) to reduce the academic content in Grade 1—specifically the number of letters to be covered in Grades 1 and 2113. Additionally, feedback from the teachers and observations of teaching practice, strongly indicated the need for significant revision of the teacher guides to more comprehensively direct and prescribe effective approaches for teaching the new curriculum. However, as observed by several key informants, the task of making teacher guides that are relevant for all teachers faces multiple compounding challenges<sup>114</sup>.

The general standard of teacher competency, along with the necessity in many schools to deliver the curriculum in multigrade settings, will likely militate and reduce the efficacy of the textbooks and teachers' guides in many schools—certainly in non-Lao speaking classrooms. Thus, in contexts where getting to (and staying in) school presents challenges for both students and teachers, the demands of the new curriculum without systematic and embedded support will most likely have little effect on improving students' participation and achievement in education.

It is therefore recommended that BEQUAL, DFAT, and MoES review the scope and current plan for implementation of the new primary curriculum. In deference to the BEQUAL Goal, refocus on effectively implementing the core subjects (and materials): Lao language (and English in Grade 4 and 5), science and maths (with JICA support) for Grades 1 to 5 in schools from the 66 most disadvantaged districts.

The MTR team respects that retracting from the commitment to support the design, development, production and nationwide implementation of the primary curriculum for Grades 1 – 5 presents DFAT/BEQUAL with a reputational and political challenge. But, in the longer term, not attending to the acknowledged risks with the current schedule and approach will likely lead to similar or worse risks. Therefore, the following recommendations are presented as points for consideration in discussions between DFAT and the MoES to streamline and refocus BEQUAL support towards meeting the program Goal and End-of-Program Outcomes.

#### *For consideration*

**Assumption:** The MoES intends to continue with the current rollout plan for all subjects in Grade 1 – 5, 2018 – 2022.

1. DFAT-BEQUAL continues targeted technical support for the design, QA and production of textbooks and teachers guides in selected subjects e.g. Lao language, science and English in upper primary grades for national distribution. Use this focus to build the systems and capacity in RIES for materials design, development and production – standards and QA processes covering all stages of production.
2. Continue to support RIES with the DPPE, and TTCs to pilot grade level materials during their development.
3. Provide coordinated and dedicated support through KRA 1 – 5 to implementation in the 66 BEQUAL most disadvantaged districts. A potential model is outlined below.

<sup>112</sup> 25 primary schools selected from 3 provinces, from north, central and southern Laos - BEQUAL, 2017 Report: Pilot of Grade 1 Curriculum and Teaching and Learning Resources.

<sup>113</sup> The combined scores of students in pilot classes, apart from the demonstration school in LNT, were below 40% with 16 classes scoring less than 20% in the recognition of complex vowels in the assessment at the end of semester 2. (BEQUAL, 2017 Grade 1 Report, p10).

<sup>114</sup> Challenges include teachers' lack of: pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1987), second language learning, experience with diagnostic and formative assessment techniques for learning progress, experience and resources for differentiating instruction and contextualising curriculum for local delivery.

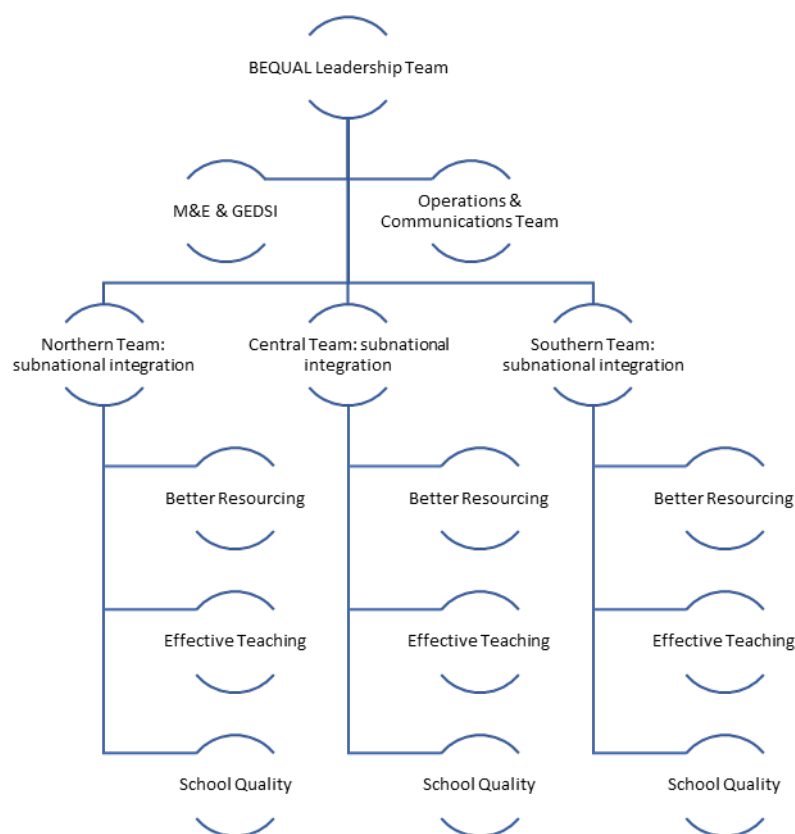
<b>BEQUAL – models effective curriculum design in selected subjects and implementation in the 66 target districts.</b>	<b>MoES – relevant counterpart departments – national and subnational practice and apply</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limit KRA 4 technical support in RIES for curriculum materials development (textbooks/teacher guides) to core subjects - Lao Language and Science G1-5; English grade 4&amp;5. Support RIES through this process to develop QA systems / capacity including review of materials for GEDSI and apply to the development of textbooks in other subjects.</li> <li>2. BEQUAL fund printing of all textbooks G1-5 meeting the MoES/BEQUAL agreed quality standards</li> <li>3. Support with STA - MoES/RIES to complete the curriculum framework and scope and sequence for G1-5 – through formalised linkages with other development partners, e.g. UNICEF and ACER support for educational assessment</li> <li>4. Continue to support the conduct of the pilot in 25 schools to inform curriculum and materials development. Supporting RIES/DEPC to collect data and report on implementation for selected subjects per grade level.</li> </ol>	<p>MoES-RIES responsible (technically) to develop textbooks for other subjects in line with agreed curriculum scope and sequence and following BEQUAL supported standards, production and QA processes.</p> <p>MoES / RIES / DTE / DPPE /TTC and other relevant departments actively involved in the design and conduct of pilots for each grade level and responsible for analysis and reporting of non-BEQUAL supported subject implementation</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Limit support for national rollout from BEQUAL for curriculum implementation to the 66 most disadvantaged BEQUAL target districts – coordinated through KRA 1, 2 and 3 – e.g. initially intensive support for in-service training based on the proposed cluster models in the current 29 districts involving DTE/DEPC/PESS/PA, DESB and the associated TTC.</li> </ol>	<p>Implementation models provided by BEQUAL implemented in non BEQUAL districts by MoES</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Involve the TTC's under KRA3 and review the BNC contract - KRA 2 to provide direct support to implementation of the new curriculum in 66 BEQUAL districts rather than NGO priority areas.</li> <li>7. Monitor implementation trials in BEQUAL 29 and use this learning to provide advise for the revision of the Teacher Guides so as to ensure more comprehensive and contextually relevant guidance to teachers to deal with mixed ability and second language learners in the early grades.</li> <li>8. BEQUAL supports the conduct of six monthly curriculum implementation M&amp;EL forums – north, central, and southern provinces.</li> </ol>	<p>MoES funds and uses TTCs and PAs to monitor implementation in non-BEQUAL districts.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Use this more targeted approach – to build capacity - systems and processes at the sub-national level for support to curriculum implementation (PESS, PA's, TTC, DESB, Cluster / Schools/VEDC in the most disadvantaged districts) and teaching of the new</li> </ol>	

<p>curriculum.</p> <p>10. Use pilots, action research based monitoring of implementation trials (KRA 3 - TIP, PDP and PAUP models) and integrated with KRA 1- PESS – DOGs / KRA 2 BEIF – to provide smart incentives for effective monitoring and implementation of G1-3 curriculum (targeted subjects) in most disadvantaged districts.</p> <p>11. Depending on separate decisions regarding allocation of teacher quotas ensure the engagement of ETSP graduates in targeted ethnic villages (home or same ethnicity) on quota positions or stipend positions to implement the new curriculum.</p>	
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## **APPENDIX D: ALTERNATE STRUCTURE OUTLINE**

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The following diagram and points are provided for discussion purposes between BEQUAL and DFAT, to illustrate structural/managerial implications of some of the recommendations of the MTR Report.



### Leadership Team:

- Maintain a centrally located leadership function to provide strategic vision, and foster productive partner engagement (GoL, DFAT, sector partners etc.).
- For coordination, learning and accountability purposes, a leadership team would convene regularly, comprising the BEQUAL Team Leader, Deputy Team Leader, M&E Specialist, GEDSI Specialist, Operations Manager and each of the three Regional Team Leaders (aka ‘Integration Managers’).
- Particular management responsibilities would be divided between the Team Leader and a Deputy Team Leader based on individual strengths and interests; notionally as follows:
  - **Team Leader:** strategic/political engagement; performance and context synthesis; strategy refinement and adaptation; line management of M&E and GEDSI specialist services; facilitation of team-wide communication and collaboration. A critical role of the Team Leader would be to negotiate the terms of ‘smart incentives’ with GoL as outlined in Section 3.5 of the MTR report.
  - **Deputy Team Leader:** line management of Regional Team Leaders; line management of operations and communications team.

### Regional Teams:

- Each of three regional teams would be set up to respond to the particular opportunities and challenges in the local contexts. The focus would be on facilitating an integrated approach to reducing the gap in learning outcomes in targeted districts (i.e. BEQUAL 29/66 districts); and also, localised support for implementation of national policy. To the extent possible, investments and activities would be sequenced as ‘smart incentives’ to motivate reforms that are likely to sustain educational outcomes.
- Teams would be organised broadly around the end-of-program outcomes:
  - **Better resourcing:** coordinating investments in school infrastructure, WASH facilities and affordable/relevant classroom teaching and learning resources.
  - **Effective teaching:** investing in pre-service and in-service training and support for teachers in target districts—including supporting improved classroom-based supervision.
  - **Quality learning environments:** strengthening school management and leadership and supporting active and coordinated VEDCs; motivating parents and communities to prioritise education (i.e. demand-creation).

**Cross-cutting leaders:**

- M&E and GEDSI leads would be centrally located but coordinating technical efforts within each regional team. Key to the success of their roles would be to establish appropriately systematic methods within the regional teams to enable program-wide synthesis to inform strategic discussions.



## **APPENDIX E: PROGRAM LOGIC CRITIQUE**

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The following points are a technical M&E critique of the BEQUAL Program Logic, offered to inform a proposed review and refinement of the theory of change and M&E plan to accommodate recommendations arising from the mid-term review.

### **Overall structure:**

- The program logic comprises four parts: Goal, End-of-Program Outcomes (EoPO), End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes; Enabling Activities.
  - The Goal explicitly defines the target demographic as girls and boys in disadvantaged areas.
  - Three EoPOs address functional deficiencies/barriers identified in the design in relation to the Goal, and are expected to be achieved within 10 years.
  - Twenty-eight End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes (to be achieved within 4 years) are organised around five Key Result Areas (KRAs).

### **Goal:**

- The Goal appropriately scopes the purpose and relevance of the program, informed by the situation analysis presented in the Education Delivery Strategy and Investment Design Document.
- The human actors ("*girls and boys*") that are the subject of the Goal are explicit, and the desired 'end-state' is clearly articulated.
- Two terms used to describe the desired end-state require elaboration/definition:
  - "*good quality basic education*";
  - "*and other life skills*".

### **EoPO1 (Better Resourcing):**

- The outcome statement clearly frames the desired end-state (i.e. schools with better resources/facilities), but fails to articulate the class of human(s) whose performance will be strengthened by the program such that this ten-year outcome will be realised, and will be sustained.
- The outcome is framed as a 10-year outcome, but the functional elements of the outcome (e.g. classroom construction) will be achieved within Phase 1 (four years). Hence, the logic-step between the underlying End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes (KRAs 4 & 5) and EoPO 1 is indistinguishable (i.e. achieve X in order to achieve X).
  - E.g. the logic between End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes #1 for KRA 5 and EoPO1 is essentially circular, stating that the program will: "*increase supply of...classrooms*" [in order that] "*schools...have adequate buildings*".
- The effect is that there is no change in state moving up the logic hierarchy within Outcome 1. This could be addressed by reframing EoPO1 in terms of longer-range outcomes; e.g. "*VEDCs and School Principals are ensuring that school facilities and resources are appropriately managed and maintained*".

### **EoPO2 (Increased Participation):**

- EoPO2 essentially restates the goal, and hence is redundant.
- The human actor that is the subject of the EoPO2 is the same as in the goal. The effect of this is to render circularity in the logic between EoPO2 and the Goal (i.e.

*girls and boys have better education [in order that] girls and boys have better education).*

### **EoPO3 (Effective Teaching):**

- The outcome statement clearly identifies the human actor that will be the focus of program influence, and the desired end-state.

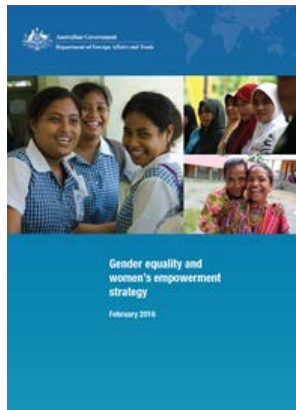
### **End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes:**

- Twenty-eight outcomes are defined for achievement within the first four years of implementation. This is an unusually large number and is probably unmanageable from a M&E standpoint.
- Many of the 28 End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes are well framed with an explicit human actor/subject and a clearly articulated end-state (e.g. *“Pedagogical Advisers are providing effective and frequent pedagogical support in 66 target districts”*). Some are not well defined (e.g. *“More effective management of school facilities maintenance”*; with no human actor/subject and an ambiguously defined end-state).
- Several of the outcome statements seem redundant:
  - End-of-Phase 1 Outcomes 3 & 5 within KRA 4 are both concerned with the production of low-cost learning materials.
  - End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 1 within KRA 2 and End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 7 within KRA 3 are essentially the same as EoPO 2 and the Goal; and hence are redundant and circular.
  - End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 4 is essentially the same as EoPO3.
- Arguably some of the functional logic is mal-placed:
  - In retrospect, the classroom and WASH construction work (KRA 5) could be more appropriately conceived as the infrastructure component of KRA 3 (in particular the ETSP).
  - It is debatable if the pre/in-service training of teachers should be positioned in KRA 4 (teaching and learning resources) or KRA 3 and more broadly (teacher education – covering pre and in-service teacher education).
- Some of the outcome statements are ambiguous, and hence are likely to be unhelpful for assessing progress/achievements:
  - E.g. End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 4 in KRA 2: *“School leaders monitor and support learning with community engagement”* (who are the ‘leaders’, what is the ‘support’, what is the nature/purpose of the ‘community engagement’?)
- Some outcomes are phrased as program ‘deliverables’ rather than counterpart behaviour changes:
  - E.g. End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 1 in KRA 4: *“Renewed and improved curriculum is being implemented”*. In this case the absence of a human actor/subject to be influenced (e.g. RIES) implies that ‘BEQUAL’ will deliver the renewed and improved curriculum.
  - E.g. End-of-Phase 1 Outcome 1 in KRA 5: *“Increased supply of adequate and accessible primary school classrooms generates increased enrolment and retention of boys and especially girls in target schools”*. This statement

conflates the program deliverable (classrooms) and the program outcome (increased enrolment and retention).

## **APPENDIX F: SUMMARY OF DFAT GEDSI POLICIES**

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Gender equality & women's empowerment

**Focus:**

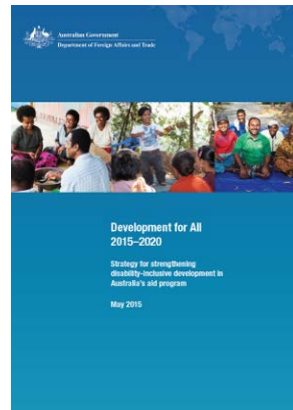
Gender equality is an important right and a powerful driver for growth, development and stability. Promoting gender equality is integral to advancing Australia's national interests and reflects Australian values of fairness and substantive equality. The strategy acknowledges the systems and structures that can play a significant role in entrenching or exacerbating discriminatory practices.

**Three Priorities:**

1. Enhancing women's voice in decision-making, leadership & peace-building.
2. Promoting women's economic empowerment.
3. Ending violence against women and girls.

**Approach:**

Twin-track approach – i.e. taking measures specifically designed to tackle gender inequalities while incorporating gender issues into all of Australia's work.



Disability inclusive development

**Objective:**

To improve the lives of people with disabilities in developing countries through:

1. Enhancing participation and empowerment of people with disabilities as contributors, leaders, and decision makers.
2. Reducing poverty among people with disabilities.
3. Improving equality in all areas of public life, including service provision, education and employment.

**Principles:**

- Support an active and central role for people with disabilities – *nothing about us without us*.
- Develop policies and programs based on evidence.
- Take account of interaction between gender and disabilities.
- Improve inclusion of a diverse range of people with disabilities.



Child Protection

**Focus:**

The policy provides a risk-based approach to the management of child protection in DFAT activities. The first question to ask is 'does the program, activity or grant involve potential contact with children?' If yes, an assessment of child protection risk must be undertaken.

**Principles:**

1. Zero tolerance of child exploitation & abuse.
2. Assess and manage child protection risk and impact.
3. Sharing responsibility for child protection.
4. Procedural fairness.
5. Recognition of the best interests of the child.

**Minimum Standards:**

- Child protection policy and reporting procedures in place.
- Undertaking risk assessment.
- Recruitment, screening and employment practices in place.



Child Protection Education Guidance

**Focus:**

The policy provides a risk-based approach to the management of child protection in DFAT activities. The first question to ask is 'does the program, activity or grant involve potential contact with children?' If yes, an assessment of child protection risk must be undertaken.

**Principles:**

1. Zero tolerance of child exploitation & abuse.
2. Assess and manage child protection risk and impact.
3. Sharing responsibility for child protection.
4. Procedural fairness.
5. Recognition of the best interests of the child.

**Risk-Based Approach (Education Guidance Note):**

- The education facility is not child safe, causing harm to a child or reduced attendance at school.
- Child is abused, exploited or bullied by staff, consultants, volunteers or peers
- Child is discriminated against causing harm or exclusion.

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