

Until we are all equal



Children learn through play and music in SPP| Plan International Laos

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- In Lao PDR, our support has helped the Ministry of Education and Sports approve the expansion of LEARN Plus’ 10-week Summer Pre-Primary program (SPP). Now the program is set to grow nationwide.
- Thanks to strong advocacy from all levels of government, the program is now part of a major Global Partnership for Education grant. This means more young children in remote districts will have access to early learning.

# Bridging Research and Policy: Institutionalizing an Early Childhood Education Innovation in Lao PDR

In this brief, we share the journey of institutionalizing innovations in early childhood education into national education policy in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), highlighting strategies, challenges, lessons, and recommendations.

## What’s at stake

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Lao PDR has faced several challenges, especially in rural areas with limited access to ECE, a lack of trained teachers, and insufficient learning

materials. Children from non-Lao-speaking backgrounds, often living in rural and remote areas, face the additional challenge of learning in a new language. Without sufficient exposure to the Lao language prior to entering school, these children often struggle to engage with the curriculum, placing them at a disadvantage from the outset.

These issues are well-documented in several key assessments. The [World Bank's Social Assessment Report for the GPE III Learning Equity Acceleration Project](#) highlights the structural barriers faced by ethnic minority children, including language difficulties and limited access to quality ECE services. Similarly, the [UNESCO Bangkok Tracer Study](#) underscores the need for improved teacher training and support systems to enhance the effectiveness of ECE programs. Furthermore, [UNICEF Lao PDR – Early Childhood Development](#) emphasizes the disparities in access and outcomes among children in remote and ethnically diverse communities, pointing to the urgent need for inclusive and equitable early childhood development strategies.

The GPE KIX [LEARN Plus](#) project and its predecessor, LEARN<sup>1</sup>, were designed to address these gaps. Our goal was to adapt and scale an accelerated and affordable model that could prepare children for primary school, using existing infrastructure and resources to ensure sustainability.

In Lao PDR, a significant number of children, particularly those in rural and ethnolinguistic minority communities, enter Grade 1 without adequate preparation. Many of these children do not speak Lao as their first language, which creates a barrier to learning and contributes to poor educational outcomes.

Recognizing this challenge, the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) supported a multi-country initiative from 2020 to 2024 to adapt, test, and scale a summer pre-primary education model in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Tanzania under the LEARN Plus project.

## Methodology

The Summer Pre-Primary program was adapted from the model implemented by the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) an NGO based in Turkey and pilot tested in Lao PDR through LEARN by [Plan International Laos](#) to respond to key challenges faced by children in small rural and remote areas where there is no government pre-primary education. At the end of the project, the SPP program was evaluated by the American

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<sup>1</sup> LEARN (Lao Educational Access Research and Networking) project was a research-based education initiative implemented in Lao PDR from 2014 to 2019 by Plan International, with financial support from Dubai Cares, in close collaboration with MoES.

Institute for Research. Later, it was further supported by LEARN Plus. The 10-week SPP program, was designed to develop foundational skills language, numeracy, and social skills for children prior to entering Grade 1. The course was taught by Grade 1 teachers for 5-6 hours per day, five days a week during the school long summer break. What made the model unique was its adaptability and cost-effectiveness. It leveraged existing classrooms and teachers, reducing the need for new infrastructure or extensive training.



**Children in SPP, gather in circles to learn, one story at a time| Plan International Laos**

The program was first piloted in selected provinces, targeting communities with high numbers of non-Lao-speaking children. Teachers received targeted training and mentoring support, and classrooms were equipped with culturally relevant teaching materials. The curriculum emphasized play-based learning and language development, helping children build confidence and readiness for school.

## Key Findings

Early evaluations of the program were largely positive:

- **The pilot program results revealed that 94% of children who participated in the SPP program enrolled in Grade 1 on time, compared with only 57% of children who did not have any form of ECE. The children who were enrolled in the SPP program exhibited better numeracy and language skills compared to both**

children who did not enroll and children who attended a formal nine-month pre-primary school.

- Results of an impact study within the LEARN Plus project indicated that the SPP program can help prepare children in small villages in rural areas for primary school. SPP is an affordable program that doesn't require additional infrastructure or additional teaching staff.

## Activity Spotlight: Institutionalization Process

Institutionalizing the SPP program in Lao PDR meant embedding it into national education systems and policies to ensure sustainability. This was achieved through a phased, collaborative approach over nine years, grounded in evidence, inclusive engagement, and alignment with national priorities. Here are the key processes we prioritized to support institutionalization.

### 1 | Government Engagement and Co-Creation

From the outset, we aligned with national education priorities and engaged the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) as a key partner. Their strong involvement in research, pilot implementation, and policy discussions ensured contextual relevance and fostered ownership—critical for institutional support.

### 2 | Multi-Level Engagement

Institutionalization extended beyond the national level. District and provincial officials helped pilot and refine the model, influencing policy through feedback and advocacy. Sharing tools and results with the Education and Sports Sector Working Group (comprising of INGOs, CSOs, UN agencies) built broader ownership.

### 3 | Research as a Driver

Evidence guided every stage. Studies included feasibility assessments, implementation research, child learning evaluations, gender analysis, cost-effectiveness reviews, and scaling strategies. Conducted with MoES and local authorities, findings were widely shared to build credibility and inform policy.



**Children build early learning skills through play and active participation in SPP| Plan International Laos**

## 4 | Flexible Models

Recognizing diverse provincial capacities, we developed two versions of SPP: a comprehensive model and a lighter version for resource-limited areas. This flexibility enabled broader adoption and scalability.

## 5 | Knowledge Products and Communication

Research findings were translated into policy briefs, guidebooks, teaching materials, and videos tailored for different stakeholders—essential for communicating value and supporting adoption.

## 6 | Policy Integration

Advocacy by key departments, such as Early Childhood Education and the Research Institute of Education and Science, kept SPP on the national agenda despite challenges like COVID-19 and budget cuts. Through policy dialogues, capacity-building, and monitoring, SPP gained formal recognition in the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2020–25—a major milestone for sustainability.

## Challenges and Solutions

Operating in a crowded donor landscape, differentiating the SPP was a key challenge. The program's unique value was demonstrated through strong evidence from feasibility studies, which highlighted its scalability, cost-effectiveness, and alignment with national goals. Financial constraints and resistance to change were addressed through strong partnerships, flexible program design, and sustained, evidence-based advocacy.

As a result, SPP is now embedded in national plans, paving the way for nationwide scale-up and enabling more children—particularly those in disadvantaged communities—to benefit from a fair start in education.

## Lessons Learned

### 1 | Co-Creation Builds Ownership

Engaging government stakeholders from the beginning fosters trust and ensures that the innovation meets real needs. Co-creation also increases the likelihood of policy adoption, as stakeholders feel a sense of ownership over the process and outcomes.

### 2 | Work within National Priorities and Processes

Aligning research with national planning cycles and priorities strengthens the case for institutionalization.

### 3 | Plan for the Long Term

Institutionalization is not a one-time event. It requires strategic alignment, resource planning, and persistent effort. Flexibility and adaptability are key to navigating changing political and institutional landscapes.

Institutionalizing innovation in education is a complex, long-term process. But with strong partnerships, evidence-based advocacy, and a commitment to co-creation, it is possible to bridge the gap between research and policy. Our experience in Lao PDR demonstrates that when governments are engaged from the start, and when innovations are aligned with national priorities, sustainable change is within reach.

### *Authorship/Acknowledgement*

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