

ວາລະສານວິທະຍາສາດມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລສຸພານຸວົງ, ຄົ້ນຄວ້າວິໄຈສະຫະສາຂາວິຊາ, ວາລະສານເປີດກວ້າງ
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ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນ ໃນການເພີ່ມທະວີການເຂົ້າຮຽນຂອງເດັກນ້ອຍ ໃນຊັ້ນປະຖົມສຶກສາ ທີ່ ມີຄຸນນະພາບພາຍໃນ ສປປ ລາວ: ກໍລະນີສຶກສາ ໂຄງການສຸພະນິມິດ ¹

ສົມພຽນ ມະຫາພິມ ²

ພາກວິຊາ ຄຸຝາສາອັງກິດ, ຄະນະສຶກສາສາດ, ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ຈຳປາສັກ.

ບົດຄັດຫຍໍ້

ການນຶກໄດ້ເຖິງຄວາມສຳຄັນຂອງການສຶກສາຕໍ່ກັບການພັດທະນາປະເທດຊາດ ໄດ້ນຳໄປສູ່ການປະຕິບັດໂຄງການພັດທະນາ
ດ້ານການສຶກສາຫຼາຍໆໂຄງການ ທີ່ແນໃສ່ການປັບປຸງການເຂົ້າເຖິງການສຶກສາຂອງເດັກນ້ອຍທຸກຄົນໃນ ສປປ ລາວ. ໜຶ່ງໃນ
ໂຄງການທີ່ແນໃສ່ການສຶກສາຂັ້ນພື້ນຖານນີ້ ແມ່ນໂຄງການບິຄົວ (ໂຄງການສຸພະນິມິດ). ບົດວິໄຈບົດນີ້ໄດ້ປະເມີນລະດັບການມີ
ສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນໃນການປະຕິບັດໂຄງການບິຄົວ ທີ່ສົ່ງເສີມການເຂົ້າຮຽນຂອງເດັກນ້ອຍໃນລະດັບສາມັນສຶກສາຂັ້ນພື້ນຖານ
ທີ່ມີຄຸນນະພາບ. ພາຍໃຕ້ວິທີການວິໄຈແບບຄຸນນະພາບ (ເຊິ່ງລວມມີ ການສັງເກດຖອນຢ່າງ, ການສ້າງແຜນວາດລະບົບການ
ສື່ສານ, ການສຳພາດ, ການສື່ສານແບບກຸ່ມ ແລະ ການນຳໃຊ້ຂໍ້ມູນຈາກເອກະສານທີ່ກ່ຽວຂ້ອງ) ບົດດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ໄດ້ວິເຄາະ
ປະສິດທິພາບຂອງການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນ ໃນການປະຕິບັດງານຂອງໂຄງການ. ກຸ່ມຕົວຢ່າງໃນການສຳພາດ ແລະ ການ
ສື່ສານແບບກຸ່ມລວມທັງໝົດມີ 13 ຄົນ ເຊິ່ງມາຈາກ 3 ກຸ່ມແຕກຕ່າງກັນທີ່ລ້ວນແລ້ວແຕ່ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໂຄງການຄື: ກຸ່ມຄູສອນ
ໂຮງຮຽນຊັ້ນປະຖົມ, ກຸ່ມພໍ່ແມ່ນັກຮຽນ ແລະ ກຸ່ມພະນັກງານໂຄງການ. ຜົນການວິໄຈໄດ້ໃຫ້ຮູ້ວ່າທຸກຄົນໃນຊຸມຊົນຮູ້ສຶກເປັນ
ບຸນຄຸນຢ່າງຍິ່ງຕໍ່ການເຂົ້າມາຂອງໂຄງການ ເຖິງແມ່ນວ່າລະດັບການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າຍັງຕ່ຳ. ຜົນປະໂຫຍດທີ່ຊຸມຊົນໄດ້ຮັບ
ຈາກໂຄງການມີ ຜົນການຮຽນຂອງນັກຮຽນດີຂຶ້ນ, ພໍ່ແມ່ນັກຮຽນເຫັນໄດ້ຄວາມສຳຄັນຂອງການສຶກສາທີ່ມີຕໍ່ກັບຊີວິດຂອງລູກ
ແລະ ຄວາມເຂົ້າໃຈເຖິງຜົນກະທົບຂອງທັກສະການເປັນພໍ່ແມ່ທີ່ມີຕໍ່ການຮ້າຮຽນຂອງລູກ. ຜົນການວິໄຈຍັງໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ຮູ້ອີກວ່າ
ໂດຍທົ່ວໄປແລ້ວ ສະມາຊິກໃນຊຸມຊົນມີທັດສະນະຄະຕິທີ່ດີຕໍ່ກັບໂຄງການ, ເປັນທັດສະນະຄະຕິທີ່ປຸງບອກວ່າພວກເຂົາລໍຖ້າ
ແຕ່ການຊ່ວຍຈາກໂຄງການ. ເພື່ອແກ້ໄຂບັນຫາດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້, ທາງໂຄງການບິຄົວ ຄວນເພີ່ມລະດັບການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນ
ໂດຍສ້າງແຮງບັນດານໃຈ ແລະ ກະຕຸກຊຸກຍູ້ໃຫ້ທຸກຄົນໃນຊຸມຊົນທີ່ມີສ່ວນກ່ຽວຂ້ອງກັບໂຄງການໂດຍພື້ນຖານ ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໃນ
ຂະບວນການສຳຫຼວດບັນຫາ, ການແກ້ໄຂບັນຫາ ແລະ ການຕັດສິນໃຈ. ພ້ອມກັນນັ້ນ, ທາງໂຄງການອາດຄວນພິຈາລະນາ ຄູ, ພໍ່
ແມ່ນັກຮຽນ ແລະ ອາສາສະໝັກບ້ານ ເພື່ອມອບໝາຍໃຫ້ເປັນຕົວແທນຂອງການປ່ຽນແປງ ໃນຊຸມຊົນຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າ ເນື່ອງຈາກຫຼັກ
ຖານຂອງການວິໄຈນີ້ໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າ ທັງສາມກຸ່ມພວກເຂົາມີບົດບາດທີ່ສຳຄັນໃນການຈັດການກັບການເຂົ້າຮຽນຂອງ
ເດັກນ້ອຍພາຍໃນຊຸມຊົນຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າ.

ຄຳສຳຄັນ: ການສື່ສານເພື່ອການພັດທະນາ, ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນ, ການພັດທະນາຊຸມຊົນ, ເດັກນ້ອຍທີ່ດ້ອຍ
ໂອກາດ, ການສຶກສາຊັ້ນປະຖົມທີ່ມີຄຸນນະພາບ.

¹ ການອ້າງອີງພາສາລາວ:

ສົມພຽນ ມະຫາພິມ. (2020). ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງຊຸມຊົນໃນການເພີ່ມທະວີການເຂົ້າຮຽນຂອງເດັກນ້ອຍໃນຊັ້ນປະຖົມສຶກສາ ທີ່ມີຄຸນ
ນະພາບ ພາຍໃນ ສປປ ລາວ: ກໍລະນີສຶກສາ ໂຄງການສຸພະນິມິດ, ວາລະສານວິທະຍາສາດ ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ ສຸພານຸວົງ, ເລກທະບຽນ ISSN
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Community Participation in Increasing Children's Attendance in Quality Primary Education in Lao PDR: A Case Study of BNC project

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of the importance of education to national development has led to the implementation of many educational development programmes, which aim at improving access to education for all children in Lao PDR. One programme that focuses on primary education initiatives is Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR [BEQUAL]. This research evaluated the level of community participation in the BEQUAL NGO Consortium [BNC] project in increasing children's attendance in quality primary education. Using a qualitative research approach (including non-participant observation, communicative ecology mapping, in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups and documentation), it analysed how effective the community participation is, in the implementation of the BNC project. The interviews and focus groups involved 13 participants from three different groups engaged with by the BNC: local primary school teachers, parents of school children and BNC staff. Findings revealed that all community members highly appreciated the project intervention, although the level of their participation was low. Positive change in children's learning, parents' awareness about the importance of education to their child's life and understanding of how parenting skills affects their child's education were claimed to be key benefits experienced by members of the community. The findings also revealed that in general community members have passive attitudes towards the development project, in the sense that they wait for assistance from donors. To address this issue, it is recommended that BNC could increase the level of participation by empowering all primary stakeholders (community leaders, teachers, village volunteers and parents) to participate in the process of problem identification, problem solving, and decision making. It is also recommended that BNC could consider teachers, parents and village volunteers as agents of change for their own community as evidence indicates that these three groups can play a significant role in addressing the level of school attendance in their community.

Key words: development communication; community participation; community development; disadvantaged children; quality primary education.

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1. Introduction

Development communication applied to community development over the years is based on two dominant paradigms, namely the modernisation paradigm (top-down approach) and the alternative paradigm (bottom-up approach) (Melkote, 2003). Community development, which has a central focus on the improvement of community life, is embedded in governments' policies and programmes. It requires an involvement from both private and public sectors at all levels (Lee, Kim, & Phillips, 2015). The way a community is engaged by development agents has varied over the years; one way is to increase levels of trust and confidence in the projects or organisations by encouraging people to participate in the process of decision making and bringing together those who share common goals or interests (Sanoff, 2000). This section introduces essential background information, especially about development policy in the context of Lao People Democratic Republic [Lao PDR] and about the particular project that has been used as a case study for this research.

1.1 Development policy in the context of Lao PDR

During the past two decades, Lao PDR has experienced rapid economic growth and made good progress in social sectors (World Bank, 2018; UNDP, 2019). According to the World Bank (2018), the average growth of GDP in the past 10 years was 7.8 %, with an income per capita of US\$2,270 in 2017. The poverty rate decreased from 46 % in 1992 to 23 % in 2015, enabling the country to achieve the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty. In 2015, the adult literacy rate was 84.7 % (UNDP, 2019). Lao PDR became eligible to exit the status of being a least developed country [LDC] in 2018, and is projected to formally graduate from this status by 2024

(UNDP, 2019). This progress can be regarded as a result of the country implementing a series of five-year national socio-economic development plans and becoming a member of international organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asia Nations [ASEAN] in 1997, the World Trade Organisation [WTO] in 2013, and the ASEAN Economic Community [AEC] in 2015 (UNDP, 2019).

Education has been placed at the centre of the government of Lao PDR [GoL]'s development policy. The GoL has made efforts to foster Lao PDR as a knowledgeable and skilled society through the improvement of education. In 2011, the development of the education sector focused on the expansion of equitable access, improvement of quality and relevance and strengthening of planning and management under the GoL's five-year educational plan (2011-2015), called the Education Sector Development Plan [ESDP]. The plan was used in line with the seventh five-year National Socio-economic Development Plan [NSDP] to achieve the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] on universal primary education and gender equality (Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2015).

Education remains a priority for government development and has been supported by both national and international development partners. As in previous development phases, a subsequent ESDP (2016-2020), which draws on the achievements and challenges of the ESDP (2011-2015), has been used in conjunction with the eighth five-year NSDP (2016-2020) as a guideline to reach the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] by 2030. BEQUAL [Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR], which has been used as a case study for this research, is a striking example of a development programme that has been launched as a result of cooperation

between international development partners and the GoL in implementing the plans.

1.2 Background of the BEQUAL NGO Consortium project

BEQUAL [Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR] is one of the educational programmes designed to improve the quality of education which is currently being implemented. It is a 10-year programme led by the Lao and Australian governments, with support from the European Union, UNICEF, the World Food Program and a consortium of Non-Government Organizations [NGOs]. Its goal is to ensure that more girls and boys, particularly those who are disadvantaged, achieve good quality basic education and acquire other essential life skills (BEQUAL, n.d.).

The BNC, including Save the Children, Plan International, ChildFund and World Vision, is in charge of implementing activities designed to support participation in, and increased access to, primary school. With the support of school children's parents and communities, the BNC project aims to ensure that all children, especially girls, non-Lao speakers, and disabled children enroll in and complete quality, primary education (World Vision Laos, 2017b). Across the country, BNC supports 171 schools in the 66 most educationally disadvantaged districts by training remote-village teachers, developing Lao language teaching methods and improving learning environments (BEQUAL, n.d.; World Vision Laos, 2017b). World Vision, which is used as a case study for this evaluative research, is responsible for implementing activities that increase the participation of disadvantaged children in basic education in the Khammouane province (World Vision Laos, 2017b).

Founded in 1950, World Vision is an international Christian relief, advocacy and development organization working to

support children and communities to rise out of poverty and fight against injustice (World Vision International, 2017; World Vision Laos, 2017a). The organisation is committed to working with everyone, regardless of race, religion, gender or ethnicity. Today, World Vision operates in nearly 100 countries, serving about 100 million people (World Vision Laos, 2017a).

Initially launched in Lao PDR in 1968, World Vision provided relief assistance for displaced people during the Indo-China War. The organisation closed when Lao PDR gained its independence in 1975 and did not open again until 1991. By restarting development work, World Vision aims to improve the lives of vulnerable Lao children. It takes efforts to bring about change for children, particularly those who live in rural communities with a focus on child protection, health, education and food security (World Vision Laos, 2017a). In 2004, World Vision started implementing Area Development Programmes [ADPs] in five provinces, including Khammouane, aimed at improving the well-being of children affected by poverty. Alongside with ADP implementation, in 2013 the organisation launched a national strategy designed to support and contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs]. Its goals are as the following:

“Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger [MDG 1]

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education [MDG 2]

Goal 3: Reduce child mortality [MDG 4]

Goal 4: Children report increased well-being (World Vision Global Goal)” (World Vision Laos, 2017a, para. 5).

According to BNC staff, after World Vision accomplished its mission of implementing the ADP in Khammouane province for a period of five years (2011-

2016), it continued working in the province to implement the BNC project launched in early 2017. One of the communities engaged by this BNC project was chosen to be the unit of analysis for this evaluative research.

By exploring the case study mentioned above, this research aims to evaluate the level of community participation in the BEQUAL Non-Government Organisation Consortium [BNC] project to increase children's attendance in quality, basic education in Lao PDR. Guided by research question "*How effective is the community participation in the BNC project in increasing children's attendance in quality basic education?*", this evaluation explores how the project engages with the community, the level of participation from both sides, the changes being made within the community and the involvement of media and other communication tools. It also identifies some of the opportunities and challenges for promoting an increased attendance of children in quality primary education. The exploration provides a robust understanding of the community communication structure and how communication is established between community and development agents to facilitate educational improvement.

2. Materials and methods

This evaluative research applied qualitative methodology with ethnographic research techniques. According to O'Leary (2010), evaluative research is "research that attempts to determine the value of some initiatives. Evaluative research identifies an initiative's consequences as well as opportunities for modification and improvement" (p.138). The project's documentation, gained from BNC staff during the field work, was also used to serve as a source of secondary data to reinforce research outcomes. According to Smith (2008), use of secondary data usually allows

the researcher to access the highest quality data and aids deeper understanding of historical events.

2.1 Population and sample

The target population of this research live in rural communities in Khammouane province. However, the case study's focus was specifically on the community in Xaybouathong district, which has been engaged with by the BNC project. After I was formally introduced to the community leaders by an official from Xaybouathong DESB, which works in partnership with BNC, I stayed with a local resident in a nearby village for a period of one month. I travelled to the community each day to observe the community members' way of life, how they communicated and interacted with each other, and how they responded to the BNC project.

2.2 In-depth semi-structured interview

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five local parents who had children attending a local primary school, three teachers who had been engaged with the BNC project, and two BNC field workers. The participants were selected by using a purposive sampling (Litosseliti, 2003): parents whose children had attended a local primary school, local school teachers who were trained by the BNC project and BNC staff who worked in the field. Snowball sampling techniques were employed as a means of recruitment. For instance, three interviewees from parents group were introduced by the first two interviewees who were also from parents group.

2.3 Focus group

Focus group participants included parents of primary school children and teachers at the local school. These participants were chosen because they had been engaged with the BNC project and could therefore provide full insight into the overall situation of the community and the

project intervention through their experiences. The participants were placed into two groups; a group of parents and a group of teachers. The group of parents was made up of six members while the group of teachers consisted of four members – the total number of teachers at a local school.

2.4 Data analysis

The data gathered from ethnographic non-participation observation over a period of one month was analysed to understand the social and cultural norms of the community, how local people communicated with one another, and how they responded to the BNC project engaging with the community.

Data collected in the form of audio recordings from semi-structured interviews and focus groups were categorised and transcribed from the participants' mother tongue into English. To analyse the theme of this raw, qualitative data, a reflective qualitative analysis technique (O'Leary, 2010) was employed prior to the interpretation of the findings.

The documents derived from the BNC were analyzed by using a qualitative content analysis approach. According to (Bryman, 2012), this method allows the researcher to extract underlying themes from the documents being analysed. The researcher is then able to reflect and compare this extracted theme with the data gained from observation, social mapping, interviews and group discussion, to evaluate the level of community participation in the project being studied.

3. Results

The aim of the BNC project is to ensure that all children, especially girls, non-Lao speaking children and children with disabilities in disadvantaged communities have access to quality, primary education, with support from parents and community. The engagement of the project involves local community leaders, primary

school teachers, village volunteers and parents, who function as actors by participating in the activities which are designed to increase children's attendance in quality, primary schooling.

A sufficient level of understanding of the project's purpose can be seen among the participants who are parents. Although most of them are illiterate, they understand that involvement in the project will be beneficial for their children's education. For them, the definition of participation seems to be a state of being involved, doing or following what they are told or advised, rather than sharing, exchanging, and being involved in decision-making or co-designing the project. However, they are able to use their parenting skills, following the training delivered by the project, to provide basic support to their children's study.

Looking from three different perspectives (parents, teachers and the BNC staff), it can be seen that there has been a positive change in children's behaviour and that the needs of disadvantaged children have been addressed. All parties agree that the children in the community have better learning performances as they have become more confident and eager to learn following implementation of the project. Teachers and BNC staff have confirmed that the dropout rate has fallen to zero. In terms of disadvantaged children, those who are disabled were given assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, glasses and hearing aids, to enable them to attend school. For those who are from minority groups, a Lao language course was provided at the early stages of the project operation.

As identified by the three participant groups, the main factors that affect children's access to, and achievement of, primary education are associated with poverty and the school environment. Parents living in poverty find it difficult to provide children with the necessary learning materials and this

directly affects the school readiness of children. School infrastructure is often not appropriate for children with disabilities. Some primary schools are incomplete and only teach grade 1-3, which forces students to travel to other distant villages to continue their studies at grade 4 and 5. In this situation, those who do not have access to a vehicle face even further difficulties.

The communicative ecology of the researched community is considerably diverse. Face-to-face communication is seen as the most common mode of communication, followed by two other major forms: television and mobile phone. The next popular mode of communication is *Tholakhong* (loudspeakers). It is seen as a practical and effective tool in terms of making announcements about public policies, regulations and meetings within the community. Other communication media like radio, the internet and printed materials are available, but very limited. Common means of transportation include motorbikes, bicycles and small tractors.

Within the researched community, communication regarding the involvement of the BNC project is initiated by the village chief and members of the Village Education Development Committees (VEDC). Information is then delivered to the rest of the community in the form of face-to-face communication, particularly during meetings. Prior to the meetings, members of the community are informed about the meeting's time and place, and the announcement is usually done through *Tholakhong* set in the centre of the village. However, the announcement is sometimes made through the word-of-mouth of village volunteers, who act as communication facilitators.

4. Discussion

Understanding the local context helps development practitioners build relationships and trust with local people, and

to identify the right approach for engaging the community (Bessette, 2004). Knowing what communication channels the community already has, or what source of information its members mostly access, is useful for programme design and planning, especially in the process of selecting tools to communicate with intended audiences. The BNC, for example, should take into consideration the finding that *Tholakhong* is an existing communication channel which is effective and widely reaching within the researched community. This is because, as Hearn et al. (2009) argue, it is crucial to observe "everything that could count as a medium of communication. That is, not just press, broadcasting or telecoms, but also roads, buses and trains, visits to neighbours, gossip, and public and private places where people meet to communicate" (as cited in Lennie & Tacchi, 2013, p. 50)

4.1 The engagement of the BNC project in the intended community

Like other development programmes, the BNC project's aim is at community development. As described by Phillips and Pittman (2009), community development involves a process of developing and boosting collective action to achieve improvement in either one of, or a combination of, the following areas: social, cultural, environmental, political and economic. The findings of this research reveal that to reach the aim of increasing children's participation in quality basic education, which in turn helps fulfill children's development potentials and, ultimately, improves the life of the community, the BNC project took collective action by working closely with all concerned parties such as community members, community leaders and local government officials from education sectors at district and provincial levels. For example, as clearly specified in its objectives, to ensure all children participate

in and achieve quality primary education, the BNC project needs to create an attractive learning environment in primary schools, and strengthen mechanisms to create supportive environments in homes. This means that the intervention of the project involves not only primary school teachers but also all members in the community.

Seeking to expand participation, by encouraging all community members to actively participate in the processes and activities of the community, is a crucial task of community development (Tesoriero, 2010). In this case, the BNC project maximises participation through the formation of parent and village volunteer groups. These two groups, along with local primary school teachers and community leaders, are involved in the activities designed to promote an increased attendance of children in basic education. While parents play a role in supporting children's learning, volunteers conduct additional reading classes. Teachers, who attend the project training, utilise their gained knowledge and skills in their teaching. In the meantime, community leaders urge all community members to actively take partake in their responsibilities. This suggests that, at a local level, everyone in the community participates in the community development process and activities in order to meet the objectives. To assist children who are disadvantaged by language, a Lao language course, conducted by teachers and assisted by village volunteers, are provided for grade 1 students at early stages of the project. Activities such as this help to increase children's participation at school and to achieve the ultimate goal of the project. Considering how the researched community has been engaged, the intervention of the BNC project mainly reflects the way development agents have engaged with communities in the past four decades (Sanoff, 2000) in which community

members only take part in implementation but not design. In meaningful participation, Bessette (2004) argues that local people must be viewed as beneficiaries and development partners, taking part in both activities implementation and the process of decision making, as well as the development initiative planning. Although community members involved in this research have opportunities to identify their needs regarding access to quality primary education, the opportunities are given during the implementation of the project, not during the design and planning process.

4.2 Level of community participation

Communication actors in the researched community include community leaders (the village chief and VEDC member), village volunteers, teachers and parents. These actors have a different role to play in implementing the project's activities which are designed to increase children's school attendance. At a community level, community leaders are generally perceived as powerful people and general members of the community (villagers) may feel uncomfortable speaking to them or in front of them. The interaction between community leaders and villagers in this case study however, is natural and lively. This was noticeable during the parents' focus group, in which a member of the VEDC and the village chief also joined. All parents perceived everyone else as just another one of the group members and expressed their opinion openly. For example, when discussing children with disabilities in the village, most of them, without any hesitation, shared the same opinion that such disabilities are partially attributable to malnutrition (Parents' focus group, August 18, 2018).

The way all community members are engaged with cannot be defined as genuine participation (Deshler & Socks, 1985, as cited in Sanoff, 2000). This is because

community members are not empowered to take control of the action. The communication between the project team and the community members appears to be monologic (one-way communication) rather than dialogic (two-way communication) (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Although they have a space for discussion, it does not happen in the process of planning and decision making. Rather, the discussion is about how to implement activities which is already designed by external development practitioners. Because, in this instance, villagers are present to do what they are told, their participation level can be referred to as what Deshler and Socks (1985, as cited in Sanoff, 2000) call 'pseudo participation'. One of the participants actually said: "I had no reason to decide to participate in the project, but I did so because I was told to do it" (In-depth interview, August 18, 2018). This statement is supported by findings from the teachers' focus group, where all members affirmed that they were not given the opportunity to give feedback or recommendations on the project operation. Instead, they were monitored and evaluated on their teaching performance when applying new techniques gained from the project training (Teachers' focus group, August 31, 2018).

The points raised by the parents' focus group and community leaders, however, indicate that feedback and recommendations were sought in the assessment process of the project. To reflect on the implementation of the project, parents, along with community leaders, are invited to attend a meeting held in the village to discuss the project's strengths and weaknesses. However, the discussion takes place in such a way that input from local people is garnered by having them answer a set of questions posed by the project team. As two participants confirmed during the parents' focus group discussion, there was no other way of giving

feedback or recommendations. Comment boxes were not available in the community (Parents' focus group, August 18, 2018).

By summarising the ways community members engage in the project, it can be concluded that the level of community participation remains low and could be categorised as the second type of participation identified by Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009), 'participation by consultation'. The participation by consultation is a process in which stakeholders answer questions which are posed by external experts or researchers. Input from stakeholders is unlimited, but at the final stage of analysis all power in making decisions rests with the outside professionals, who are not obliged to incorporate the input of stakeholders.

4.3 How the BNC contributes to change in the target community

The project intervention has generated some positive changes at multiple levels, including personal and organisational. At the personal level, children are more eager to learn and more confident to participate in classroom activities. Parents realise that their parenting skills are a significant element in supporting their child's learning and are able to apply them to encourage and help their children to learn the basics, regardless of their own literacy levels. Teachers feel empowered and confident with new teaching methods gained from the project's training. At the organisational level, a local primary school has a greater variety of resource materials with which teachers are able to run a class, and in a way that includes all children such as girls, children with disabilities and those who are from ethnic minority groups. Pupils have access to new and interesting learning materials. This has led to a better quality of primary education and the dropping out rate of dropouts has declined to 0%.

For long-lasting change, however, the BNC should consider teachers, village volunteers and parents as agents of change for the community. Although in this case study they are participants implementing the project activities, their role in addressing the focused issues suggests that they could potentially become change agents in their own community. For them to become agents of change however, the BNC should have better participatory practice, empowering them to have a sense of ownership of the project. According to Figueroa et al. (2002), a sense of ownership refers to “the community’s feelings/belief that the problem/issue and/or programme belong to them and they have a commitment to the program ...It reinforces what people learn and encourages them to integrate the shared learning into related solutions” (p. 32), which in turn helps strengthen outcomes of other social change.

4.4 The involvement of the media

The media employed in the BNC project is considerably limited. Only printed materials and Tholakong (loudspeakers) are usually used. Weekly television program on the subject matter is available, but unknown to the community members. Promising communication channels recommended are community radio and local television. It has been suggested that it would be effective to use an edutainment model as an approach to communicate with these audiences. Singhal and Rogers (1999) describe edutainment as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience knowledge about an educational issue, create favourable attitudes, and change overt behaviour” (as cited in Waisbord, 2001, p. 13).

According to the Internews’ Global Theory of Change (2018b), extending access to information at a local level is very important because limited or no access to

information contributes to a loss of freedom of expression and a reduction in informed choices. By extending the access, local people have greater freedom of expression, enlarged knowledge and a better understanding of critical local development issues. Once they have an understanding of the issue, they are able to make informed decisions. One of the stories highlighted by Internews (2018a) was the use of media to transmit information to the Maasai community in Tanzania regarding women’s rights and health. By cultural practice, women in this community are forced to undergo female genital mutilation [FGM] prior to marriage, which leads to gender-based violence and mental and physical suffering. As a result of the media coverage, this issue has now been addressed. This story indicates how a strengthening of information access significantly contributes to the improvement of community life. It is another aspect that should be taken into consideration when designing community interventions.

5. Conclusion

This research has used the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR Non-Government Organisation Consortium [BNC] project as a case study and was conducted at Phonesa-ard village, Xaybouathong district, Khammouane province. The study set out to evaluate the level of community participation in the project for increasing children’s attendance in basic education in Lao PDR, and was guided by the key research question: *How effective is the community participation in the BNC project in increasing children’s attendance in quality basic education?*

Overall, the community participation in the BNC project, to promote an increased attendance of children in quality basic education, has been effective. The participation has created supportive learning

environments in the community where all disadvantaged children have been positively affected. The implementation of the project has highly satisfied all three groups of community members: teachers, parents and community leaders. The parents' awareness about the importance of children's education has generally been raised, which also resulted in the understanding of how parenting skills affect child education. However, since the community members were given opportunities to identify their needs in the process of implementation, instead of decision making and planning of the project, they have not been perceived as stakeholders but rather, beneficiaries. Their participation level, therefore, remained low and their attitude towards the development project was passive, waiting for assistance from donors rather than helping themselves. The effectiveness of the community participation would be improved if community members were: viewed as equal stakeholders; involved in decision making about predetermined goals set by development agents; empowered to take control of the development process and; had a sense of ownership of the project.

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