



Lao People's Democratic Republic
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

Meeting Minutes
Education and Sports Sector Working Group, Technical Level (ESSWG)
Tuesday, 24th September 2024, 14:00 - 16:45 pm

Chair: Dr. Samlane Phankhavong, Vice-Minister of Education and Sports
Co-Chair: Ms. Benita Sommerville, Australian Deputy Head of Mission
Co-Chair: Ms. Veerle Smet, Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to Lao PDR

Meeting modality: Face-to-face and Online

Participants: Total of 87 participants - Face-to-face 45 (female 11) and Online 42

Meeting topics/objectives:

- To endorse the GPE Grant Agent selection (STG and SCG)
- To endorse the PDG application for developing the STG Project document
- To discuss the 10th 5-year ESSSDP (2026-2030) development process and support
- To discuss the top up budget for GPE III
- To inform about the priority actions for the school year 2024-2025

1. Opening remarks by Dr. Samlane Phankhavong, Vice-Minister of Education and Sports, the Chair of the meeting

Dr. Samlane Phankhavong, Vice-Minister of Education and Sports, expressed his gratitude to both co-chairs for their first sector working group meeting, Ms. Benita Sommerville and Ms. Veerle Smet. He especially welcomed Mr. Bilal Aurang Zep Durrani, the new UNICEF Representative to Lao PDR. The chair also thanked and sent regards to Mr. Dan Heldon and Mr. Vincent Vire, former co-chairs from the Australian Embassy and the European Union, who have completed their missions in Lao PDR and returned to their countries. He expressed gratitude to the development partners for their support and good cooperation throughout and hoped for a frank discussion and fruitful result of the meeting. In addition, he highlighted the purpose and importance of the meeting held today as follows: 1) to endorse the GPE Grant Agent selection (STG and SCG); 2) to approve the PDG application for the development of STG project documents; 3) to discuss the 10th 5-year ESSSDP (2026-2030) development process and support; 4) to discuss the top up budget for GPE III; and 5) to inform the priority plan for the development of education, sciences and sports for the school year 2024-2025.

2. Remarks of the Co-chair

Ms. Benita Sommerville, Australian Deputy Head of Mission, introduced herself, noting that she has been working in Lao PDR for six weeks and that this is her first meeting as ESSWG Co-chair as well as for Ms. Veerle Smet. Ms. Sommerville expressed her sympathy for the loss and damage caused by the recent flooding in Luangnamtha province and in other northern provinces of Laos and Vientiane Capital. She also commended the great work by different Ministries and Development Partners who provided assistance to those affected by the flood and for their ongoing support. She took this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Sithong Sikhao on his recent appointment as the Acting Director General of the Department of Planning and thanked Dr. Bounpanh Xaymouny for his leadership of the Department of Planning over the past several years.

In addition, she congratulated Ms. Vongdeuane Osay and Ms. Dokkeo Phonthachit, who have just been promoted to the role of Acting Director General of the Department of Teacher Education and the Department of Student Affairs. Although She has only been in the role for a short time, she has been told by many that the Education and Sports Sector Working Group and associated Focal Groups are the most coordinated forums where important issues are discussed openly and frankly. Australia is proud to partner with the Ministry of Education and Sports and the European Union through this mechanism, as well as through direct support activities, to help improve the quality of education for children in Laos. The meeting has several important agenda items. The co-chair requested participants to provide comments on the 10th five-year ESSSDP. Lao PDR is expected to receive \$12.6 million from GPE, and it would be beneficial to approve the selection of the Grant Agent and continue this important process. The co-chair also mentioned that the issues in the education sector may have causes that extend beyond education itself, and solutions may require collaboration with multiple sectors. Before concluding her comments, Ms. Benita invited her Co-chair, Ms. Veerle, to introduce herself.

3. Comments and discussion:

3.1. Presentation 1: endorsement of the GPE Grant Agent selection (STG and SCG) by Mr. Sithong Sikhao, Acting DG of Planning Department.

Mr. Sithong represented the Department of Planning to present the selection process of grant agent, which was conducted in an open and transparent manner. The proposal to approve the selection results was discussed at the ESSWG technical level meeting on 1st July 2024. However, approval has been delayed because the UNICEF has raised questions with the GPE secretariat regarding the selection process and results, and also requested that the ESSWG do not endorse the GA selection results until there is a response from the GPE secretariat. The GPE secretariat replied on 7th August, confirming agreement of the selection results by the Grant Agent selection committee led by the Ministry of Education and Sports. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed that the Ministry of Education and Sports coordinate with the Ministry of Planning and Investment and related parties in the selection process. On 16th September 2024, the Ministry of Planning and Investment approved the results of the Grant Agent selection by the selection committee. Therefore, it is proposed that today's meeting endorse the official selection results for GPE Grant Agent, namely Save the Children International Lao PDR (SCI) as the Grant Agent of the System Transformation Grant (STG) and UNICEF as the Grant Agent of the System Capacity Grant (SCG), in accordance with the initial selection results.

Mr. Bilal, the UNICEF Country Representative to Lao PDR, expressed his appreciation to the education, science, and sports sector for their efforts in developing and improving the quality of education, science, and sports. He congratulated the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other ministries for their support. On behalf of the Representative of UNICEF, he unanimously agreed to approve the results of the selection of GPE Grant Agents. UNICEF looks forward to working with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and SCI in future processes. During his visit to Luang Namtha Province with the Minister, he observed that the education sector has been severely affected, as well as the living conditions of the people.

Under the chair's leadership, the meeting endorsed the results of the GPE Grant Agent selection as proposed by the Department of Planning.

3.2. Presentation 2: endorsement of PDG application for developing the STG Project document by Mr. Sithong Sikhao, Acting DG of Planning Department.

After the meeting approves the GPE Grant Agent for the STG and SCG, we will need to prepare the project document, which will take about six months. In addition, to prepare the project documents, Lao PDR can request a budget of approximately \$200,000 from GPE, which will be implemented by the Grant Agent. The project document preparation plan includes data collection and consultations with all parties, especially the departments under MoES and concerned local authorities, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, and Development Partners, which may involve extensive face-to-face meetings.

In response to the question of whether the budget for the preparation of the project document applies to both STG and SCG, Ms. Davone Bounpheng, representing the Australian Embassy as GPE Coordinating Agency, commented that the budget is solely for the development of the STG project document. The SCG follows a different process and does not require the same level of documentation as the STG, nor does have a budget to support from GPE.

Ms. Takaho, Chief of Education, UNICEF, further commented that UNICEF, as another GPE Coordinating Agency, along with the Australian Embassy, has withdrawn from the process of GPE Grant Agent selection to avoid any conflict of interest arising from its role as a GPE Coordinating Agency and Grant Agent application. After this meeting, since the GPE Grant Agent selection has completed, UNICEF will be able to resume its usual role as the GPE Coordinating Agency. As the selected SCG Grant Agent, UNICEF will work with the MoES and the SCI to prioritise the use of SCG and ensure there is no duplication of budget usage between STG and SCG. Additionally, Ms. Takaho inquired about how information will be collected at the local level during the development of the STG project document.

Mr. Sithong Sikhao explained that it is important to get the information in detail. He noted that the projects should create a forum for discussion. The agenda proposed earlier is the initial idea of the team for preparing the information collection. If it is not necessary, there may be no need to go to the field.

Following the chair's proposal, the meeting endorsed the project development plan as the basis for requesting funds to develop STG project document.

3.3. Presentation 3: Ms. Phanthanome Didaravong, Head of Planning Division, Department of Planning presented the preparation of the 10th five-year ESSSDP (2026-2030), particularly highlighting the lessons learned from the 9th ESSSDP (2021-2025) to guide the direction of the 10th five-year plan. The presentation focused on the goals, High Level Outcomes, and several Intermediate Outcomes related to education, along with the timeline for the development of the plan and potential development partners involved in its creation and implementation. Further detailed discussions regarding Science and Sports will be held with the relevant parties.

Ms. Phouthasone Sinthavong from the Cabinet of Lao Academy of Science and Technology agreed with the high-level outcomes and raised the issue of international obligations, as well as the achievement of SDG 9, which its goal is highlighted in the vision of Lao PDR. However, she noted that there is not enough budget for its implementation. In scientific research, it is important to link it to the teaching and learning system in science and technology, to expand scientific work into education by further integrating it into curriculum, and to propose further discussions with the science parties.

The Co-chair, Ms. Veerle remarked that the time available for preparing and developing the 10th five-year ESSSDP is very limited.

Ms. Khamtanh Chanthy, a representative from the Asian Development Bank, remarked that the 9th five-year ESSDP (2021-2025) contains extensive information in certain sub-sectors, such as primary education. However, other sub-sectors, particularly secondary, vocational, and higher education, lack data. To address this, she proposed to have a template to collect information from all sub-sectors, enabling all stakeholders to provide the necessary data to the Department of Planning to develop the 10th five-year plan.

Mr. Sithong Sikhao informed the meeting that the European Union will continue to provide technical support, with an advisor assisting the Department of Planning as the lead advisor in the development of the 10th ESSDP, at least until the end of 2024 with the contract of 20 days. Additionally, numerous development partners will offer support across various sub-sectors, contributing to the plan's development as outlined in the presentation.

- 3.4. Presentation 4:** Mr. Anoupheng Keovongsa, DDG of Department of Planning presented about the top up budget for GPE III, specifically, the first component focuses on preparing and encouraging students, while the third component involves school management and effective projects. This includes allocating the budget to priority and emergency activities, with a focus on the 40 education disadvantaged districts. The expected outcome is an increase in the number of beneficiaries of children, households, and educational workers. Further details are provided in the presentation.

Ms. Dara Phrakonekham, Director General of the Department of Finance, remarked that the expansion of activities should prioritise sustainability and ensure efficiency. Whether the target group continues to expand within the previous target districts or extends to new districts. At the same time, the implementation within 40 districts should also be re-evaluated. Additionally, the design should involve collaboration from the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment.

A senior expert from the World Bank proposed focusing on 40 districts while incorporating additional target groups that have not been previously implemented, particularly activities regarding the multi-grade teaching. Since the target districts have already undergone capacity-building training at the district level, expanding to new districts may require additional time to build capacity

The chair of the meeting requested that the GPE III project team and the expert team engage in further discussions to reach conclusions and implement them effectively.

- 3.5. Presentation 5:** Ms. Phanthanome Didaravong, Head of Planning Division, Department of Planning reported on the priority actions in education development plan for the school year 2024-2025, in accordance with the resolution of the Education Annual Conference for the 2023-2024 school year. The report emphasised measures to address issues such as reduced enrollment, increased dropouts, improving the quality of education, addressing the shortage of teachers, and addressing problems related to the administration and management of education.

4. Conclusion:

4.1.1. Ms. Veerle Smet, Head of Development Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to Lao PDR, co-chair summarised the meeting results on five topics as follows:

- Endorse the results of the GPE Grant Agent selection (STG and SCG). Endorse the plan and timeline for the development of STG project documents. Prepare the 10th Five-Year ESSDP (2026-2030) in a coordinated way. Establishing a sub-group mechanism for discussion could be considered. Discuss about the top

up budget for GPE III and choose between the options put forward. The use of a loan should be carefully considered to ensure that the results are effective.

- The priority actions for the school year 2024-2025 should be delicately selected and focused on priorities, utilising the budget effectively to address the urgent issues within the education sector. Mechanisms should be put in place to regularly monitor / report on the advancement of priority actions.
- The preparation of the budget proposal for the development of the STG project documents is requested to be expedited to ensure that the implementation meets the deadline.

4.1.2. **Closing remarks:** Dr. Samlane Phankhavong, Vice-Minister of Education and Sports summarised the meeting and endorsed: 1). The selection of GPE Grant Agent (STG and SCG); and 2). PDG application for developing the STG Project document. In addition, the meeting also discussed and considered the content of important documents, which can be concluded as having significant outcomes, determined by the engagement of the participants. The meeting last for half a day, starting at 14:00 and ending at 16:50 on the same day.

The chair expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the co-chairs, all participants from the Ministry of Education and Sports, the line ministries, and the development partners who have continuously supported the education in Lao PDR. The secretariat will prepare the meeting minutes and report to the executive level.

Chair

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Dr. Samlane Phankhavong
Vice-Minister
Ministry of Education and
Sports

Co-Chair

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Ms. Benita Sommerville
Deputy Head of Mission
Australian Embassy

Co-Chair

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Ms. Veerle Smet
Head of Development
Cooperation
Delegation of the European
Union to Lao PDR