

EDUCATION IN LAOS

Its Problems and Its Future

by

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Among problems of a national order in Laos, those of Education are the most urgent and the most difficult to resolve.

They are urgent problems because the future of Laotian society, its progress in essential areas such as health, technology and the economy depend uniquely upon the degree of its cultural development. Everything is tied up with education, everything comes back to education; farmers who have the most modern tractor and the richest artificial fertilizers will not increase the yield of their soil if they do not have some basic knowledge about modern agriculture; The most modern medicines, the best-equipped hospitals, will not ameliorate the health of the people if they are ignorant about the elementary rules of hygiene; the most severe sanctions taken against venal government servants will not save the administration from corruption if they are not accompanied by a civic education for the employees of the state.

They are difficult problems, because since it has maintained a state of war for more than twenty years the country cannot put enough funds at the disposal of Education. One half of the national budget is already devoted to national defense.

However, and despite these obvious difficulties, progress has been realized. This has occurred both in numerical expansion and also in the very conception of the role of National Education.

In terms of numerical expansion progress is quite considerable. In 1950, on the eve of independence, primary education involved less than 30,000 pupils; secondary education, enjoyed by 300 students, did not include a single college; technical education, of the simplest kind, was organized into short courses of in-service training; Teacher training was only given for relatively short periods and was never longer than nine months; superior education did not exist.

At present, the primary level receives more than 160,000 school-boys and schoolgirls; secondary education, with 14 schools, receives more than 4000 students; technical education is carried out in 3 institutions, and is followed by more than 800 students; teacher training education is organized in 5 schools, and is given to more than 2000 prospective primary school and secondary school teachers; superior education (NB: beyond grade 10) registered more than 200 students in 3 different institutions, and more than 300 students are presently following their studies abroad.

In terms of the conception of the role of education as a means of development, 2 important decisions have been taken; they concern the reform of the overall principles and program of education, and the adoption of the national language as the language of instruction at the primary level. The new program adopted in 1962 emphasizes the necessity of adopting education to the needs and possibilities of the country. From then on the goal of education has not been only the pure and simple acquisition of academic knowledge; mathematics, science and the humanities cease to be the principal subjects; agriculture, manual work, shop, the youth movement, and civic instruction are no longer regarded as inferior subjects and have their place in the program. If the application of such a program does not meet major difficulties in primary schools, one cannot say as much for secondary levels.

The utilization of a foreign language as the language of instruction still has an important place in the traditional academic curriculum. The teaching body of the secondary cycle, composed exclusively of foreign professors, does not always understand the goal of education in Laos. The majority, with rare exceptions, devote almost all of their efforts to making our students intellectuals more than nation-builders who are aware of their duties as citizens of a poor country.

That the present difficulties prevent the complete implementation of educational reform and does not permit the extension of instruction in the national language at the secondary level is not at all surprising. Laos, which remained a long time under foreign tutelage, still retains certain prejudices which prevent it from giving a thoroughly national character to our education. Numerous are those who, too attached to a foreign culture, come to doubt the value of instruction in the national tongue. But aware in the end of the real problems which face us, the Ministry of Education has clearly specified its choice. Education will be national and adapted to the needs and realities of the country. And, in this regard, several experiments have already been made at the Ecole Supérieure de Pédagogie in using the Lao language as a vehicle of instruction at the secondary level. The results obtained are very encouraging. For the students, relieved of linguistic obstacles, have assimilated far more easily the required knowledge. Encouraged by these results the Ministry of Education will organize beginning next school year a multiple course of studies in which subjects like shop, manual labor, agriculture, livestock, the domestic economy and civic instruction will occupy a position appropriate to their importance in real life.

The future of education in Laos depends upon the success or failure of this project.