

# Global Media Journal

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From the Field

## Communicating the Environment in Laos

**Manfred Oepen**

**Abstract:** This article reflects experiences and results from an environmental education and communication strategy (EECS) as part of a Lao-German development project of Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) over a 10-year period from 2011 to 2021. The article is divided into four parts. First, an overview of the project context and the media landscape in Laos is provided. Next, the conceptual framework of the communication strategy at the GIZ policy and project management level is presented. Subsequently, major features of the wide variety of environmental education and communication media productions and educational materials are highlighted. Another chapter summarizes the results of Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys related to environmental awareness. Finally, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment results conclude lessons that can be learned from the project's communication strategy.

**Keywords:** communication for social change (C4SC), environmental education & communication strategy (EECS), 3H learning: Head, Heart, Hand, transformative education for pro-environmental behavior, edutainment, environmental radio & TV, roadshows, KAP surveys, Laos

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**Fig. 1: Media in a Lao village**

## Background

### *Project Context*

Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranked 137th of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Its national economy highly depends on natural resources. Some of the landlocked country's main forms of natural resource utilization such as rain-fed rice cultivation and hydro-power generation are threatened by climate change. The resulting impacts such as floods and droughts most severely affect rural communities, whose livelihoods largely rest on forest ecosystems and smallholder agriculture. Unsustainable hunting and timber exploitation, and the granting of large concessions for hydro-power development, mining and monoculture farming projects have led to deforestation, lack of access to potable water, and loss of biodiversity and wildlife (EEAL, 2021).

A KAP survey<sup>1</sup> conducted in 2012 (see below) revealed that large sections of the rural population as well as urban decision-makers lacked knowledge about the correlation between sustainable development and environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and climate change. Public discourse pays little attention to this correlation as the agenda setting of mass media, mass organizations, and the education system rarely take up environmental and climate change issues. Moreover, mass media outreach in Laos is restricted by geographical, socio-economic and language

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<sup>1</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/about-eeal/background-info/awareness-surveys-2012-2019.html>

barriers. Law enforcement and the implementation of environmental protection and climate policy is inconsistent, and the rural population lacks the knowhow and capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change at the local level.

In 2011, this situation analysis was the starting point for ProCEED – Promotion of Climate-related Environmental Education,<sup>2</sup> a Lao-German development cooperation project implemented by the Lao Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and GIZ, financed by the German government. The project has aimed at improving knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding environmental and biodiversity protection as well as climate change adaptation in Laos through communication and education. A wide range of national mass media, community communication channels and non-formal education activities have been combined in a multi-year Environmental Education and Communication Strategy (EECS). ProCEED's focus during 2012–2014 was on districts in the Sayaboury, Houaphan and Khammouane provinces, where other Lao-German environmental projects were implemented, with Bolikhamxai added as a fourth province in 2015. In late 2017, ProCEED has become the Environmental Education and Awareness (EEA) component of GIZ-ProFEB<sup>3</sup>- the Protection and Sustainable Utilization of Forest Ecosystems and Biodiversity program, which, in 2019, was outsourced to GFA Consulting Group<sup>4</sup>. Until completion of this component in mid-2021, its focus is on the Khammouane Province with its Hin Nam No National Protected Area,<sup>5</sup> human capacity development of government and civil society partners, and scaling up and mainstreaming their environmental communication and education experiences and competencies.

Over time between 2011 and 2021, the GIZ project team comprised an expatriate team leader and, until 2017, an assistant, 1–3 national experts and 2–5 administration staff and drivers, and two German junior development advisors and their Lao assistants posted in the Khammouane and Houaphan provinces in 2015–2018. The counterpart team at the Ministry of Environment mostly consisted of 10–12 so-called volunteers, young job starters hoping for a civil servant position, supervised by 4–8 permanent government staff. In addition, teams of 12–15 volunteers of several non-government and student organizations helped the project put theater plays, learning aids, games and exercises, and other environmental communication and education activities on the road in urban and remote rural areas.

### ***Media landscape***

According to Freedom House, “Laos is a one-party state in which the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) dominates all aspects of politics and harshly restricts civil liberties. There is no organized opposition and no truly independent civil society. News coverage of the country is limited by the remoteness of some areas,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/about-eeal/background.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/> for more detail, see. [http://www.eea-laos.org/images/stories/pdfs/kap-survey-report\\_final\\_march2019.pdf](http://www.eea-laos.org/images/stories/pdfs/kap-survey-report_final_march2019.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gfa-group.de/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/17453.html>

repression of domestic media, and the opaque nature of the regime. Economic development has led to a rising tide of disputes over land and environmental issues” (Freedom House, 2020). Hence, the country’s total *Freedom in the World* score and status of 14/100 and “Not Free” is one of the lowest scores worldwide (Freedom House, 2020). Lao media are suffering from self-censorship as the government owns or controls all newspapers and broadcast media. The circulation of major dailies, Pasaxon<sup>6</sup>, and Vientiane Times<sup>7</sup>, are very low. State-run Lao National TV (LNTV)<sup>8</sup> and Lao National Radio (LNR)<sup>9</sup> provide nation-wide coverage. But because Lao TV competes with Thai TV channels - many Laotians understand Thai - the signals of which can be received across the Lao border, Lao TV has switched from analogue to digital TV in 2017. Thai TV with its soap operas and commercials is the most popular media, but radio is the only media with local content, e.g. on weather, markets, agriculture, health, etc. (KAP Survey, 2020). Laos was one of the focal points of Deutsche Welle Akademie’s (DWA) long-term training and consultancy projects in Asia since the mid-1990’s, and many Lao TV and radio journalists joined Deutsche Welle trainings in Germany (Oepen, 2019).

Laos is one of the least connected countries in Asia, scoring last in Southeast Asia. Only about half of the 7.4 million Lao population are internet users, and 60.8% have mobile phones. At a median age of 23 years Laos has a very young population, which is why internet and mobile broadband use are increasing and 72% of internet users are at age 18-34. But social and online media are almost exclusively used for entertainment, gossip, and marketing while factual information about Lao politics and economy is extremely limited. Content quality is even lower than in conventional media due to a general lack of media viability and basic journalistic skills. In addition, the use of the internet and smart phones in Laos costs 10-20 times more than in neighboring countries (Inter World Stats, 2021; Oepen, 2019; Kemp, 2017).

There is hardly any evidence of online political activism as the government monitors social media usage for content and images that portray Laos negatively, and courts have handed down heavy sentences in response to individuals' posting of such material under the 2015 cybercrime law. In a related move, the press law was amended in 2016, ensuing that reporters of state-owned media disseminate the policies of the ruling communist party (Oepen, 2019).

Lao media or academic institutions do not conduct audience research. But the 2012, 2016 and 2019 environmental awareness surveys of GIZ (KAP Survey, 2020) in three provinces and the capital Vientiane (N=1,450) showed that media consumption patterns differ widely: In rural areas, conversations (72%) range before watching TV (71%) while 91% state they never used the Internet, newspapers (56%) or

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pasaxon.org.la/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.lntv.gov.la/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://lnr.org.la/>

other publications (40%). Urban respondents prefer surfing the Internet (84%), watching TV (80%), and reading newspapers (57%).

## **Conceptual Framework of the Environmental Education and Communication Strategy**

GIZ was one of the first organizations worldwide that defined environmental education<sup>10</sup> after the Rio Conference in 1992 (Fuhrke, Krüger, & Oepen, 1994). The conceptual framework of the environmental communication strategy has a GIZ policy and a project management level.

### ***Policy level***

At the policy level, GIZ strives at transformative education for pro-environmental behavior changes, or Green Education<sup>11</sup>, in all three dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: economic, environmental and social. Green Education combines knowledge and information transfer and communication processes with pedagogically innovative and participatory methods to raise awareness about environmental sustainability while fostering an understanding of problem-solving action (Kehrer et al., 2018; Oepen & Hamacher, 2000a). The GIZ concept goes as far back to the diffusion of innovation concept of E.M. Rogers, one of the founders of development communication and change management (Rogers, 1962), and reaches out to the holistic approach to transformation required by learning organizations (Senge, 1994).

Communication and education have two key dimensions: What and How, subject matters and methods, of which visualization is a key element. The project's understanding has been that information diffusion alone is **not** the missing link between a problem, or, paraphrasing behaviorist Konrad Lorenz' to whom the *Said – Done* classic is attributed: “[...] Said is not heard, heard is not understood, understood is not agreed, and agreed is not done...” (Franz, Kaletka, Pelka & Sarcina, 2018, p. 73). Instead, learning requires a complex communication process to overcome these obstacles. As people learn differently, the project has applied a Head-Heart-Hand approach that aims at the cognitive, affective and practice-oriented dimensions of perception and learning (Hermerling et al., 2018).

In the debate on sustainable development, perceptions of the environment are mostly determined by cultural values, lifestyles and normative judgments acquired through communication and education, while criteria and options for decisions regarding sustainable practices are a result of public discourse and transparently communicated and learned alternatives. GIZ sees strategic communication for

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.quomodo.de/documents/ukomm.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [https://tuewas-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/gem01\\_web.pdf](https://tuewas-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/gem01_web.pdf)

sustainable development<sup>12</sup> as socio-political interventions in combination with pragmatic, empirical social research methods in five branches: 1-development and environmental communication, 2-social marketing, 3-non-formal and environmental education, 4-civil society mobilization, and 5-conflict management and negotiation. This approach empowers people to become informed citizens and take action by providing knowledge and skills to protect the environment, to take part in local, national and global governance, and to influence decision making processes through peaceful participation (Oepen, 2006; Kolb, 2015). To this end, the project's communication strategy is based on the interrelated elements of edutainment, learning by doing based on MOVE – Moderation and Visualization for Group Events<sup>13</sup> (Oepen 2003), and combining the Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) approach from social marketing with the Head-Heart-Hand (3H) approach from adult education.

### *Project management level*

**Fig. 2: Communication Strategy in a Nutshell**

<b>Communication Strategy in a Nutshell</b>	
<b>Stage 1 Assessment</b>	
o1	Situation analysis and problem identification
o2	Audience and Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) analyses
o3	Communication objectives
<b>Stage 2 Planning</b>	
o4	Communication strategy design
o5	Partner involvement
o6	Media selection and mix
<b>Stage 3 Production</b>	
o7	Message design
o8	Media production and pre-testing
<b>Stage 4 Action &amp; Reflection</b>	
o9	Media performances & field implementation
o10	Process documentation and M&E

As indicated in Fig. 2, the project management level has been shaped by the author's 10-step environmental communication guideline<sup>14</sup> (Oepen, 2000) developed on behalf of GIZ and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Environmental communication is defined as the planned and strategic use of communication processes and media products, communication channels, and learning aids to support effective policy making, public participation and project implementation geared towards environmental sustainability. It is a two-way social interaction process enabling relevant social groups to understand key environmental factors and their interdependencies, and to respond to related problems in a competent way.

The project analyzed (**Step 1**) a low environmental awareness among decision makers and opinion leaders as well as the general public in Laos. This is a substantial challenge to the national economy, and rural people in particular, which highly depend on natural

national economy, and rural people in particular, which highly depend on natural

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.cbd.int/cepa/toolkit/2008/doc/strategic%20communication%20for%20sustainable%20development.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.eea-laos.org/images/images/literature/oepen\\_move-moderationgroupevents\\_2003.pdf](http://www.eea-laos.org/images/images/literature/oepen_move-moderationgroupevents_2003.pdf)

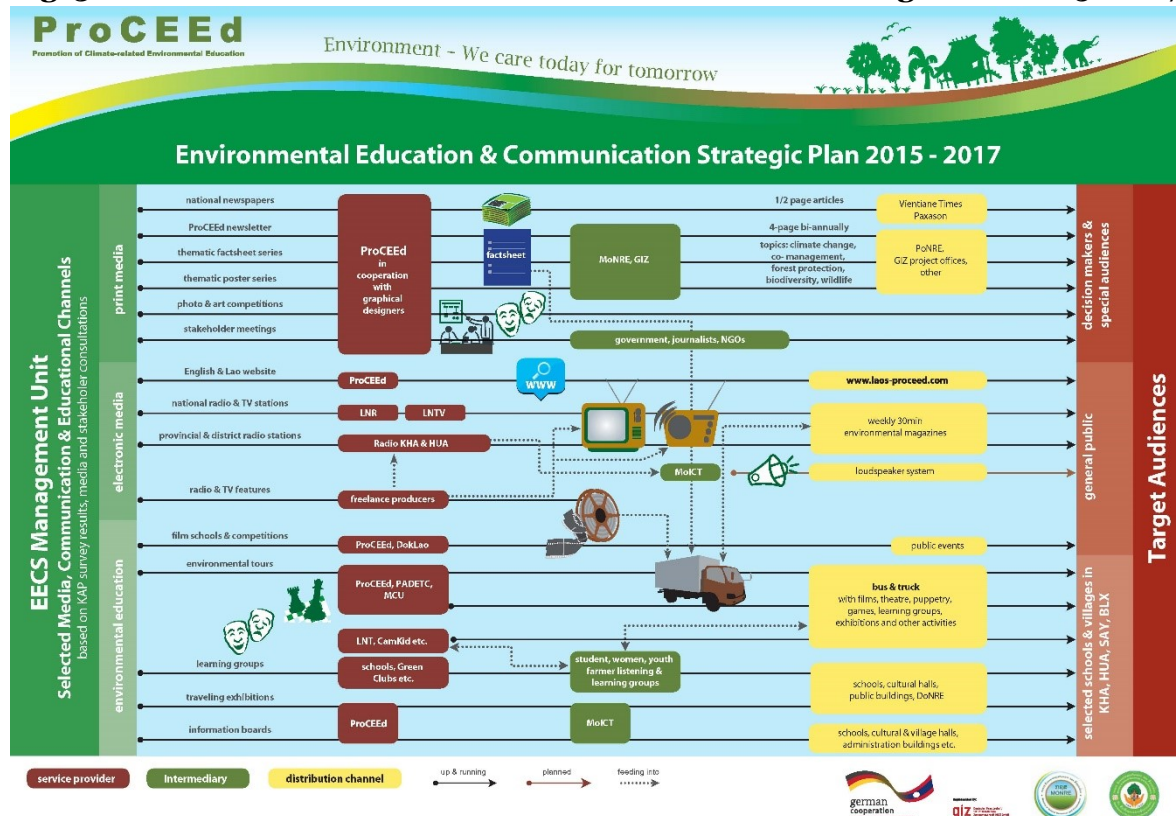
<sup>14</sup> [http://www.eea-laos.org/images/images/literature/giz\\_comstratguide\\_2000.pdf](http://www.eea-laos.org/images/images/literature/giz_comstratguide_2000.pdf)

resources. The communication strategy's three major target groups are the general public nationwide, rural people in mountainous areas and poor villages in GIZ project areas in the mentioned provinces, school children, and decision makers and opinion leaders at all levels (**Step 2**). A first-ever environmental awareness survey in 2012 collected information on what respondents in Vientiane and the mentioned provinces know, believe and do in relation with climate change, biodiversity and the environment. It also identified frequently used media which are trusted with conveying environmental information. This awareness survey was repeated in 2016 and 2019 (KAP Survey 2020), details of which are summarized below. The awareness surveys provided ProCEED with a baseline for monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and with inputs for its communication and educational activities. While communication objectives should be derived from survey results (**Step 3**), GIZ in this case defined them beforehand, which is methodologically inconsistent: Between 2012 and 2016, (1) as a result of media campaigns at the national and province level a 60% increase in knowledge about, and a 45% improvement in attitudes related to environmental and climate change issues, and (2) as a result of non-formal environmental education activities with selected target groups in the Sayaboury, Houaphan and Khammouane provinces a 75% increase in knowledge about, a 60% improvement in attitudes towards, and a 35% improvement in practices related to environmental and climate change issues were targeted. As outlined in the chapter on survey results from 2012-2019 below, these targets turned out to be completely unrealistic.

During the planning stage, the 2012 survey conclusions called for a 'heating up society' strategy design (**Step 4**), where a limited series of short and simple messages are delivered through many media and communication channels and over a period of at least some years (Academy for Educational Development, 2002). A multi-step flow of communication approach (Stansberry, 2012) has been applied involving mass media, opinion leaders, change agents and influencers as well as direct peer group communication at the local level. The communication strategy has used an infotainment approach (Singhal et al., 2008) because information combined with entertainment will increase emotional identification and will make complex themes easier to understand.

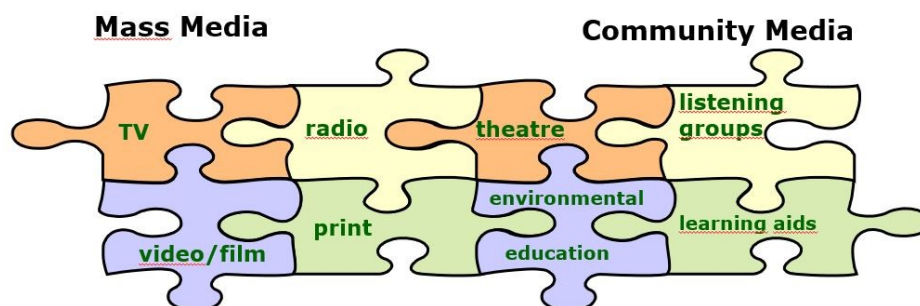
As indicated in Fig. 3, the project has managed three distinct production lines related to print media, electronic media and non-formal environmental education. Each of these lines of work has its own service providers, intermediaries and distribution channels. Service providers typically contribute contents, graphical support or media and pedagogical skills. Intermediaries such as line ministries, mass organizations such as the Lao Youth or Women's Union, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support the project in its work. The distribution channels actually deliver the media produced to the general public, rural people in GIZ project areas, and decision makers as targeted audiences.

**Fig. 3 Environmental Education and Communication Strategic Plan 2015–2017**



Step 4 also looks into the resources for the strategy’s action plan: How much money, time, and staff input are available? Due to the complex nature of environmental awareness, the project cannot implement the communication strategy on its own. Partners involved (**Step 5**) comprise the national TV and radio system, major newspapers, as well as mass organizations, and NGOs. The interpersonal and community communication channels used by mass organizations and NGOs are highly trusted and relevant for the multi-step flow of environmental communication. As no single medium is good for all purposes and target groups, the strategy’s media mix (**Step 6**) employs print and electronic media at the national, provincial and district level and non-formal environmental education activities mostly implemented at the community level. The mass media provide basic knowledge, information dissemination, massive outreach, and regular programming. The community-based activities are best suited for instigating motivation and mobilization, action orientation, easy access and local context and two-way communication (see Fig. 4).

**Fig. 4: Media mix of mass and community media**





In the strategy's production stage, message design (**Step 7**) has combined the Kiss AIDA principles – **Keep it short and simple** so that the message catches the audience's **attention**, creates **interest**, triggers a **desire**, and leads to **action** – with 'Love not Loss' social marketing in biodiversity conservation: As many negative extinction-type messages generate apathy instead of action, love of nature as a driver for public behavior has been emphasized (Futerra, 2010). As outlined in the chapter below, media and educational materials produced (**Step 8**) as well as their use and implementation (**Step 9**) have been continuously recorded for process documentation and monitoring and evaluation purposes (**Step 10**) so that measures can be improved and repeated in due time.

## **Media productions and educational materials employed**

Based on the media mix in Step 6 of the communication strategy (see Fig. 4), a variety of hundreds of mass media products, learning aids and materials have mutually supported each other and fostered their upstream compatibility, e.g. a theatre play can be recorded on video and then shown on TV or used for a training. The road shows were announced and partly featured by the respective provincial radio stations, while villagers were reminded of the environmental radio programs' airtime during the tour.

### ***Print and broadcasting media***

Regarding print media, the ProCEED project produced flyer, poster and info board series on the ten most crucial facts on climate change, forest protection, wildlife and biodiversity conservation, co-management of national protected areas, and, in 2020, illegal wildlife trade between 2013 and 2021. All these media are based on the project's corporate design, and were continuously monitored and improved. For example, the 10-FACTS flyers on the five themes were initially distributed among decision makers in relevant government agencies, NGOs and mass organizations, and published on the project website. However, the language used in the flyers is rather technical so that they were processed into learning aids that are easier to understand. When it turned out that even the info boards with limited text were difficult to absorb for ethnic or illiterate rural people, they were transformed to a series of 10-FACTS illustrations. In addition, a comic book on wildlife conservation with very little text was produced, based on the story of a girl who convinces her village to care for a wounded deer. The comic's text and visual information were pretested with various rural age groups in order to increase message effectiveness. Its storytelling approach has proven very popular and effective with rural audiences as young and old felt motivated to discuss and work on protecting wildlife from overhunting and illegal trade<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the core messages of the 10-FACTS flyers have been the basis for 65 articles and more than 100 WebNews on the above mentioned six

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<sup>15</sup> [http://eea-laos.org/images/ProCEED-Products/proceed\\_comic\\_book\\_21x21cm\\_eng\\_27sep16\\_fam.pdf](http://eea-laos.org/images/ProCEED-Products/proceed_comic_book_21x21cm_eng_27sep16_fam.pdf)

topics and project activities published in major national newspapers and on the project website in Lao and English<sup>16</sup>. Many of these learning aids were later incorporated in an environmental education and communication toolbox (see chapter below).

Efforts to promote environmental journalism in the country did not exist when the project started in 2011. This was particularly felt in broadcasting with its strict censorship. When "What are trees good for in Thakek?" became the interview question radio journalists were supposed to ask ordinary citizens in the streets of the Khammouane capital Thakek during a ProCEED project training<sup>17</sup> in 2014, even reporters trained by Deutsche Welle doubted this VoxPop approach would work in Laos. Journalists were very surprised when they listened to the stories that school kids, monks, market women and retirees told them about shade, fruits, water retention, fresh air and other benefits trees provide free of charge. This convinced some of them to combine story telling with expert interviews and the voice of the government, and a strict quality management of production plans and scripts<sup>18</sup>.

**Fig. 5: Radio training in Khammouane**



<sup>16</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/eea-laos-media-kit.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://eea-laos.org/images/stories/pdfs/environmental%20journalism\\_vol4-ec-manual\\_6feb2019.pdf](http://eea-laos.org/images/stories/pdfs/environmental%20journalism_vol4-ec-manual_6feb2019.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/eea-laos-media-kit.html#>

In 2014, prototypes of a 30-min environmental magazine format for a weekly national radio and TV program, called *Our Environment*, were produced. Until 2017, Lao Radio and TV followed this up with series of three 15-min features on the Lao situation regarding climate change, forest protection, wildlife and biodiversity conservation, and national protected areas, produced by Lao TV, Lao Youth Union and a renowned British film maker living in Laos. The series were broadcast nationwide and on provincial and district radio stations in Khammouane Province. Each production was closely supported and quality controlled by project media coordinators. A total of 12 feature film episodes<sup>19</sup> and 68 radio episodes<sup>20</sup> were produced and broadcast several times, twelve of the latter also in the Khmu and Hmong language. In 2017, the project started an innovative line of more than 30 environmental video clips together with students and faculty members of the National University of Laos. The latter were trained by an NGO, Mind Media<sup>21</sup>, in animation and film production skills and environmental know-how for video clips with easy-to-understand environmental messages, which were then broadcast by Lao TV. Together with German experts, Mind Media also provided three Summer Film Schools on environmental topics in 2014-2016, which served as a training ground for young Lao documentary film makers<sup>22</sup>.

In all the media productions, framing and nudging (Scheufele, 2003; Marchiori et al., 2016) has been a concern. Rural Laotians are very superstitious so that there was a temptation to exploit, for example, their belief in spirits and animated nature for fear-arousing, pro-environmental message design. While project managers resisted the latter temptation for ethical reasons, framing was used, for example, in the sustainability-oriented corporate design claim “Environment – We care today for tomorrow”, in “Trading in Extinction” as the title for a flyer and a campaign on illegal wildlife trade, or in contrasting the approximately 1,000 wild elephants living in Laos today with the country’s ancient name “Lan Xang - Kingdom of One Million Elephants”. As normative appeals usually do not work, complex themes have been made attractive and persuasive by ‘packaging’ messages utilizing ‘Love not Loss’ appeals and edutaining social marketing (Futerra, 2010).

### ***Non-formal environmental education activities and materials***

GIZ ProCEED was the first project in Laos that fostered a non-formal environmental education strategy by the Ministry of Environment, a government organization. Focusing on human capacity development, the strategy has combined three main approaches: Regular road shows to remote villages, performances and stands at major socio-cultural events such as major religious festivals, and a variety of awareness raising activities at the local level, including people’s theatre, and outdoor learning groups at school. These approaches have in common that they promote major facts

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<sup>19</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/tv-film.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/environmental-radio.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MindMedia2017/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/tv-film/others-films.html>

about the mentioned six main environmental themes and combine information and entertainment so that people are touched in an attractive and relaxed atmosphere. A core objective has been to make people aware of how human activities shape and change the environment around them. Hence, all elements are to stimulate the brain for knowledge, emotions for motivation and action for a behavior change - called the Head-Heart-Hand (H3) approach. This helps people understand how they can act in a more responsible and sustainable way<sup>23</sup>. Combing fun with learning by doing was also applied in interactive moderation and visualization trainings and practice-oriented elements (MOVE) that all project staff and volunteers engaged in every time new environmental tours were planned and implemented on the road (Oepen, 2003).

**Fig. 6: Environmental tour bus arriving at a village school**



The most prominent example of the project's education work has been the environmental tours,<sup>24</sup> or road shows. Between 2013 and late 2018, a bus and a truck regularly visited towns and more than 80,000 residents in 85 rural communities of four Lao provinces. Ever since, only occasional tours have been conducted. The vehicles transport edutainment by bringing teams and props required for learning games, interactive exercises, and theater performances to communities. The custom-made 14-seater bus and eight-meter truck come with a cinema-size screen, light and sound system mobile projector, a computer-assisted multimedia system, and solar-powered electricity providing 4–5 hours of energy for various electronic devices. Well-

<sup>23</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/eean-activities/environmental-education/environmental-tours.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygvSQ9XYqkc&t=1s>

trained government and NGO facilitators stay for one day in each village, working with adults in the morning, with schools in the afternoon, and having colorful community media events in the evening. In provincial and district capitals, the teams also run environmental education programs – typically three hours per visit – for more than a total of 500 invited government officials and mass organizations. Hence, the environmental tours are a media platform for a variety of non-formal environmental education activities, mostly outside the vehicles, e.g., meetings, movie shows, learning and radio listening groups, photo exhibitions etc. Villagers perform games, songs, and dances, and the tour volunteers stage the highlight of the evening, a theatre play<sup>25</sup>.

The environmental tours are implemented by two teams, one addressing villagers and the other government agencies and mass organizations. Both teams combine education with entertainment, particularly a theatre play that focuses on the respective tour topic. But the methods used by the two teams are different. The government team uses more factual information, e.g., a series of 10-FACTS information boards with text and visual information. The village team uses games, songs, drawing contests and exercises with the children, and tools for working with communities such as transect walks, historical trends or focus group discussions supported by highly visualized information boards and illustration posters with the adults. In the evening, the filmed and documented results from the villagers' activities and discussions are presented in an entertaining community meeting full with games, film shows, video screenings and theatre performances<sup>26</sup>.

The team members, mostly volunteers, originally came from three organizations: the Ministry of Environment as a government agency, the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC)<sup>27</sup> as a civil society organization (CSO), with Mind Media as one of its learning centers, and the Mobile Conservation Union (MCU) of the National University as a student organization. Typically, volunteers were in their mid-twenties, have recently finished university or college, and look for meaningful work in government and NGOs. As volunteers come and go, they need training and coaching to learn what it means to provide environmental education and to work in rural communities. Hence, training efforts need to be repeated for each new generation of volunteers, and whenever new themes or tools are introduced to a tour. To date more than 300 government and NGO staff have developed their capacities this way, partly in a 4-level career pathway<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnj28UHAMY4>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygvSQ9XYqkc&t=1s>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.padetc.org/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/service-model/capacity-development-training.html>

**Fig. 7: Theatre performance during an environmental village tour**

The same is true for the development and production of new learning aids, games and exercises, songs and dances, posters and drawings, films and theatre plays, and other media and tools, always based on the 10-FACTS flyers and the underlying six environmental themes. For each new tour, special training workshops are needed for the various forms of community theater<sup>29</sup> with human actors or puppets – always the highlight for young and old on any tour (see Fig. 6). Together with Lao theatre specialists and trainers, volunteers from the Ministry of Environment and Mind Media have developed outlines and scripts based on the 10-FACTS flyers for numerous 30-minute theatre plays.<sup>30</sup> As more than 30% of the Lao population belong to ethnic communities who do not speak the Lao language, theater can bridge language and social barriers. It is also an effective tool to communicate sensitive issues such as wildlife trafficking and illegal logging. Theater can convey environmental messages in a way that enables communities to think, feel and interpret the phenomena presented in a performance because cause-effect chains are wrapped into exciting stories, which people can relate to their own reality (Oepen & Heidbrink, 2017a, p. 22f.).

Complementary to the tours, German development advisors and their Lao assistants were stationed in the provinces of Houaphan and Khammouane between 2015 and 2018. Small teams of volunteers, government officials and these advisors brain-

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDrWqzVxzTA>

<sup>30</sup> [http://eea-laos.org/images/ProCEED-Products/theater-script\\_eng.pdf](http://eea-laos.org/images/ProCEED-Products/theater-script_eng.pdf)

stormed, designed and implemented various environmental education and communication activities at schools or rural markets<sup>31</sup>.

In 2017, the project began its exit strategy by compiling its wide variety of media products and learning aids, training curricula and materials, lessons learned regarding road show planning and implementation, etc. Four volumes of the manual Environmental Education and Communication in Laos<sup>32</sup> were published, capturing results and experiences related to 1-environmental tours, 2-training efforts, 3-environmental education and communication tools, and 4-environmental journalism (Oepen et al., 2017b). In addition, a Media Kit<sup>33</sup> comprising 12 series of Lao TV documentary films and video clips, 34 series of radio programs, 71 newspaper articles, etc. The publications strive to enhance environmental education, communication and journalism competencies in Lao government, mass or civil society organizations, and mass media, and to become an important lever for environmental communication and education in general.

### **Environmental awareness surveys 2012–2019**

The Lao Ministry of Environment is the only environmental education focal point in any ASEAN country that has repeatedly conducted environmental surveys on what the respondents know, feel and do regarding climate change and the environment – in 2012, 2016 and 2019.<sup>34</sup> Assisted by the project, the Ministry of the Environment conducted a first-ever comprehensive environmental awareness survey among a random sample of 1,200 villagers and 140 urban decision makers in Vientiane, Khammouane, Huaphan and Sayaboury in late 2012 (Oepen, 2013). Trained survey teams of the Ministry and the National University of Laos conducted individual interviews using a coded, semi-structured questionnaire and 220 focus group discussions in 55 villages and four major Lao cities. As no Lao expert could be found, data were analyzed by an expatriate using SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences at a confidence level of 95% and a 5% margin of error. Almost all respondents know little and often have non-consistent attitudes and opinions about climate change, biodiversity and environmental issues. Even some permanent government staff stated that climate change does not affect Laos because it is a landlocked country. Villagers mostly attributed climate and environmental changes to their agricultural calendar and the natural resources their livelihood depends on, e.g. the loss of animal and plant species. Alarmingly, almost half of the respondents agreed to exploit the environment for satisfying human needs (49%) as they do not believe that the environment is in danger (45%). Villagers often referred to major environmental polluters such as industrial timber plantation concessionaires or mines. Some of the highest livelihood risks as perceived by respondents were related to climate change

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/eean-activities/environmental-education/activities-at-province-level.html>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eea-manual.html>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/eea-laos-media-kit.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/about-eeal/background-info/awareness-surveys-2012-2019.html>

itself (63%), natural disasters (86%) or deforestation (76%). Gender and age had hardly any effect on perceived environmental risks. Measures to solve environmental problems are predominantly seen in stricter enforcement of environmental laws (81%), and awareness raising at school (53%) or through mass media (32%). In terms of environmental practices, the more educated and wealthy respondents were, the less they engaged in practices that are potentially harmful to the environment. This confirmed the project's assumptions that practices with potential negative environmental impacts are often consequences of structural poverty and the lack of access to information and education. In respect with subsistence and food consumption practices, 60% of respondents had expensive wild animal meat once a month or occasionally. The forest products used in households are dominated by firewood (93%), food (90%) and fish (84%) followed by traditional medicine, timber for local use and traditional housing material.

**Fig. 8: Focus group discussion during an environmental awareness survey**



The second awareness survey in 2016/2017 was based on 1,413 interviews and 216 focus group discussions in the same locations and using the same questionnaire and methodology as in 2012 and was again conducted by the same team (Krumbiegel, 2017). It showed modest success regarding the project's communication strategy, even though the targeted 60% knowledge increase or 45% improvement in attitudes induced by media campaigns, or the 75% knowledge increase, 60% improvement in attitudes, and 35% improvement in environmental practices related brought about



by environmental education activities at the local level turned out to be completely unrealistic. Results showed that 84% of the respondents pro-actively participated in the project's environmental road shows, and 64% consumed project-supported mass media productions. The climate change knowledge of respondents who participated intensively in local environmental tours improved by 22% since 2012, while consumers of the ProCEED project's mass media products showed an improvement of 17%. The more often these products were consumed, the higher was the knowledge gained. Compared to 2012, respondents in 2016 felt better informed on environmental issues. The number of tour participants who believe they have enough information on climate change increased from 4% to 19%, while deforestation and species extinction scored similarly: 6% vs. 28% and 4% vs 20%. The assumption that increased knowledge will necessarily lead to improved attitudes was weakly reflected in this survey. Villagers who participated intensively in the project's environmental tours in remote areas showed an improvement of 5% in environmental attitudes as compared to 2012 results. This illustrates that four years of project duration was too short a period for achieving significant attitude changes in general. But a look at specific questions revealed a differentiated picture. Compared to 2012, significantly more participants believed that species should not be lost to meet human needs. Audiences of media productions were increasingly recognizing environmental problems as a risk to their livelihoods, e.g. climate change + 26%, loss of species + 24%. But, despite increased environmental knowledge and improved attitudes, the environmental practices with negative impact on the environment have increased by 46% since 2012. This was mostly driven by increased wildlife consumption (+33%), which is not a subsistence but a luxury issue. One possible reason for this trend is the sharp income increase between 2012 and 2016. The majority of the people – 61% in 2016 vs. 24% in 2012 – stated they "can buy expensive things like a refrigerator" or "all the things they want". This may have been a reason for the increased wild meat consumption.

The project outsourced the third awareness survey in 2019 to ACT Assist from Germany and Enterprise & Development Consultants (EDC) from Laos (Oepen et al., 2019). A survey team of the Ministry of Environment and EDC interviewed 422 villagers and 80 urban decision makers in Vientiane Capital and Khammouane Province on selected knowledge and attitude questions from the 2016 survey. This time, the project's main output indicator was that target groups' knowledge and attitudes related to specific questions on the environment have increased by 20% between 2016 and 2019. Survey respondents stated that the project's environmental tours turned out to be the most important and the most trusted source of information on the environment. They consistently put "protecting the environment" their second most important topic on a national policy agenda after "promoting education" in 2019, 2016 and 2012. Even though the ProCEED project stopped supporting the weekly radio and TV programs "Our Environment" in late 2017, these programs had a wider audience among respondents in 2019 than in 2016. This indicates that the programs, supported by the ProCEED project between 2013 and 2017, gained in recipients. Media users felt better informed than non-users about climate change

(+21%) or the extinction of animals and plants (+15%). Demographic strata show little variance in their knowledge-related responses as men, urban respondents and educated ones do only slightly better than women, rural respondents and the ones with low education. Respondents attitudes show they were increasingly concerned about the future of the environment their children will inherit: 43% in 2012, 56% in 2016 and 71% in 2019. An alarming proportion of steadily about 40% of respondents over the period of 2012-2019 believes that the environment is not in danger. Utilitarian attitudes towards the environment were shared a lot more by urban than rural (72% vs 47%) and highly vs less educated respondents (88% vs 50%). The younger the respondents were, the more they put “protecting the environment” their second most important priority on a national policy agenda in 2019. Overall, however, the 2016–2019 comparison of survey results show that a -1% decline in knowledge and a -4% decrease in environment-friendly attitudes was short of the targeted +20% increases (Oepen, 2019).

## Conclusions and lessons learned

Hence, the results and experiences that can be drawn from this project are mixed. On the one hand, its outreach was wide as almost 66% of respondents in 2016 and 2019 awareness surveys had watched, listened to or read mass media productions supported by the project. These media users felt better informed than non-users about climate change (+21%) or the extinction of wildlife (+15%). This has led, at least partially, to increased environmental knowledge and improved environmental attitudes. Moreover, respondents put more trust in the environmental tours as an information source (85%) than village authorities (79%), the government (53%), or TV (52%).

Empirical evidence indicates that quality content and media products related to people's everyday life and needs attracts audiences in Laos. This was confirmed by a 2017 project survey among academic and civil society stakeholders working in the environmental sector. The results show that the content of the radio and TV features produced by ProCEED project's partners improved significantly over time. More than 77% confirm an improvement of environmental journalism, and almost half of them followed project-supported environmental features on the radio, on TV or in newspapers. Stakeholders remembered specific features related to environmental topics that they heard or saw on the Our Environment radio and TV programs. Respondents noticed that more interesting environmental issues were brought up, and that these were better researched and explained. An increase in quality was regarded highest with Lao TV as 5% of respondents observed an 80-100% improvement. In the case of the Lao national and Houaphan radio channels, 13% of respondents stated an improvement of 61–80%. The audience- and infotainment-orientation of environmental radio programs<sup>35</sup> by Lao National Radio at the province and district

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eeal-media-kit/environmental-radio.html>

level in particular evidently attracted audiences' attention and curiosity as they convey locally relevant news and stories with innovative formats such as VoxPop or radio drama (Rehag, 2017).

This explains why the 10-step communication strategy design, including the awareness survey approach, were taken over by regional climate- and biodiversity-related GIZ programs in Central Asia<sup>36</sup> and the South Caucasus<sup>37</sup>. Volume 3 of the Environmental Education and Communication Manual, the toolbox<sup>38</sup>, was adapted by a GIZ project related to biodiversity conservation in protected areas in Mongolia<sup>39</sup>.

But, on the other hand, the project's relative success did not last. When GIZ funding of the mass media ran out, Lao radio and TV stopped the high-quality *Our Environment* programs. Project media coordinators concluded in 2017 that their "capacity development investments resulted in a new generation of environmental journalists... (but) ...the new, outdoor and interactive formats ... need to be maintained and practiced to become part of Lao media's corporate culture" (Oepen & Heidbrink, 2017a, p. 15). They warned that well-trained journalists with opportunities to market their skills for commercial purposes often lose interest in environmental topics or are unwilling to leave their studio's comfort zone to get to the source of hard facts, good stories and well-researched interviews. Their warning went unheeded. At the same time, opinions critical of the government have been criminalized under the mentioned 2015 cybercrime and the 2016 press laws so that interactive formats such as VoxPop became even more risky.

A similar development could be observed in relation with the environmental tours. On the one hand, the tours were the most trusted source of information by staging multi-media events with a variety of interactive learning, film and theatre performances, etc. This improved school children's and adults' knowledge and attitudes on environmental issues. They also created a platform for the government to engage with civil society organizations, and, at least temporarily, mutual trust flourished based on shared experiences in the field. When GIZ insisted on choosing the NGO PADETC in 2013, it had sent a strong civil rights message. PADETC has a network of ten-thousands of volunteers across the country and offers youth opportunities for learning community-based development, education and communication skills. Its choice became particularly sensitive when PADETC founder and civil rights activist Sombath Somphone was abducted in Vientiane in December 2012 after he was stopped by police and taken away in a pickup truck. To this day, the Lao government denies responsibility for his disappearance (Wikipedia, n.d.).

But, on the other hand, the tours have always been quite expensive, both financially as well as in terms of staff and skills so that the Ministry of Environment could

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/40944.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/20319.html>

<sup>38</sup> <http://eea-laos.org/en/media-materials/eea-manual/vols/item/14-vol-3-discoveries-along-the-way.html>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/78329.html>

hardly manage them alone. GIZ was needed for funds, and the NGO PADETC for organizational and pedagogical skills. When GIZ stopped regular funding of the tours in 2018, no more road shows took place. During the same period, PADETC was forced to break apart into separate units such as Mind Media, and thus became a victim of intensified government moves against civil society organizations. The Decree on Associations of 2017 imposes severe restrictions on the latter's operations and finances as well as freedom of expression, assembly and association, particularly in relation to online surveillance. Other than with Sombath in 2013, international protests today are modest at best. For example, when one of PADETC's successor organizations, Phan-Thin Social Enterprise<sup>40</sup>, was excluded from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment-led association that became the Lao-German Environmental Education and Awareness in Laos (EEAL) project in 2019, GIZ – which even has a good governance project in the country<sup>41</sup> – let it happen.

Possibly the ultimate conclusion from these developments is that it is difficult for any development assistance project to generate lasting effects if the political environment is not conducive. All may be good while the project funds and human resources last, but not enough momentum can be gained to result in sustained structural change. What remains is the change in the heads and hearts of the people the project trained, touched and reached out to. This may be hard to measure but a lot can be learned from statements in a film<sup>42</sup> by volunteers of the Ministry of Environment about their motivation “I changed a lot. Before (the tour training), I wasn't good at speaking and had no self-confidence, ... followed others. Now I changed my thinking, ... cooperate with many people. ... Since I am working on this project, I have learned a lot about me and the environment, it's a great experience”.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.laocivilsociety.org/en/business/phan-thin-social-enterprise-ptse/>

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