



Evaluation of the District Operating Grants Pilot

Final

Sept 2017

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Acronyms / Abbreviations

BEQUAL	Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos
BEIF	BEQUAL Education Innovation Fund
DESB	District Education and Sports Bureau
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DOGs	District Operational Grants
ESG	Earmarked School Grant
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoL	Government of Lao PDR
GPE II	Global Partnership for Education Phase II Project
KRA	Key Result Area
LADLF	Laos-Australia Development Learning Facility
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
PESS	Provincial Education and Sports Services
VEDC	Village Education Development Committees

Executive Summary

The purpose of the evaluation of the District Operating Grants (DOGs) pilot is to examine the implementation and results of the grants to District Education and Sports Bureaus (DESBs). The findings presented in this report should inform decisions about the extension of the DOGs and discussions about its contribution to Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos (BEQUAL) outcomes.

The DOGs objectives as identified in the relevant guidelines are:

- DESBs to implement school visit activities using the additional funds.
- Increased number of visits to schools and villages by DESB, including Pedagogical Advisors (PAs).
- DESB staff to provide support, guidance and professional development to teachers, principals and village education development committees (VEDCs).

The study involved the analysis of qualitative data collected from 172 subnational participants, BEQUAL regional teams and DOGs documents. Key findings from the evaluation are summarised below.

1. Conduction of school visits

- The number of school visits has increased since the baseline. The average number of DESB visits per school has increased as a result of the grant. This demonstrates the grant has achieved part of the DOGs objectives.

2. Support and guidance to schools and VEDCs

- DESBs have used the grant to target teachers and improve teaching quality. For example, 58% of DESB DOGs plans identify teaching support as the purpose for school visits. Of all school staff interviewed, 57% report receiving supporting and guidance with the curriculum and teaching techniques. However, over half (54%) of school staff reported that DESB visits are not long enough.
- Most school staff (76%) and VEDC members (66%) across the 12 districts reported the level of support from the DESB to be adequate. With the exception of school staff in Mahaxai and Phathoumphone districts, most school staff reported the level of DESB support was adequate - ranging from 67% to 100% approval. This suggests that the perceived quality of support from DESBs was mostly satisfactory. With a longer period to monitor attitudes, it may be possible to assess trends over time.
- Support and guidance to VEDCs is not as apparent. Even though two of the 12 DESBs prioritised their planned visits to support VEDCs, it is not clear from the work plans, reports and interviews that VEDC visits were carried out according to plan. According to VEDC members interviewed, DESBs support could improve further with more dedicated visits to the committee.

3. DESB support to improved learning in schools

- The grant and its direct disbursement to DESBs have generated motivation to implement school visits. Of the pilot sites, 6 DESBs (Mai, Namor, Viengphoukha, Tonpheung, Lao Ngam and Thatheng) appear to be the most ready to maximise the impact of their grants.
- DESBs acknowledge that technical skills at the district level needs to be improved if the quality of teaching and learning are to change.
- The BEQUAL regional teams provided significant support in the implementation of the DOGs. This level of resourcing is unlikely to be sustained if the DOGs are expanded.
- The DOGs was perceived and used by DESBs as budget support rather than additionality.
- The role of Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) in the DOGs implementation was limited compared with the role outlined in the guidelines. Their role will need to be strengthened in an expanded roll out.

Based on these findings and their analysis, the study provides the following recommendations for the design of future DOGs iteration.

Recommendation 1: Theory of change

The DOGs should not be scaled up or progress to Phase 2 until its theory of change is clear and demonstrates alignment with major BEQUAL reforms.¹ As part of the design process, assumptions about performance bottlenecks and opportunities to leverage change at the subnational level should be verified. In particular, the assumption that the DOGs modality can facilitate and/or leverage increase of DESB recurrent budget for school visits deserves scrutiny. Other factors of district performance, such as incentives and environmental constraints should be considered and they should be targeted if external support can confidently leverage desired changes.

Recommendation 2: Monitoring and reporting system

The development of a solid theory of change and outcomes framework for the DOGs initiative should allow an assessment of inputs and activities required and benefits expected at school level. Reporting tools used in the pilot are relevant to DESB work, however if the DOGs scale up and expansion is pursued, a more robust monitoring and reporting system is needed to adequately identify and measure progress and results - notably on teaching quality.

¹ Discussions about options for continuing the DOGs in semester one of the new school year (2017-2018) have considered the risks, momentum and commitments. Beyond semester one of the new school year, the DOGs should be put on hold until its design and plan are clarified.

Recommendation 3: District targeting

The DOGs' target districts should be reviewed as part of the design process. An assessment of districts that are ready and best placed to use the grants should be carried out with appropriate engagement of the regional teams, province and district government stakeholders. A clear targeting strategy should be developed, justifying the prioritisation (or not) of these districts. In addition, analysis and enhanced monitoring of these districts experience would provide a better understanding of factors of performance and eventually lead to necessary learning and adaptation of the DOGs model.

Recommendation 4: PESS engagement

An enhanced engagement of PESS in the model should be secured. The intensive support provided by BEQUAL regional teams during the pilot phase needs to be gradually carried out by PESS if they are to fulfil their supporting role for DESB receiving the grants. The geographical scope of the DOGs should not expand to new locations unless resourcing and support at the subnational level is carefully considered and accounted for.

Recommendation 5: Integration with other BEQUAL initiatives

The DOGs design should have a clear reference and institutional linkages to the suite of BEQUAL initiatives at subnational level. The relationship between and integration of all these BEQUAL initiatives should be strengthened and well-articulated so that their collective impact is maximised. Program and activity planning should identify clear sequencing of activities, alignment between objectives and actions and rationale for geographical coverage across activities and initiatives. Again, champion districts could be identified and selected and an integrated performance assessment mechanism implemented so that BEQUAL gains further understanding of its impact at district level.

1. Introduction

1.1 BEQUAL and the DOG pilot

Basic education is the flagship sector of Australia's Aid Investment Plan in Lao PDR. Australia's engagement and investment in basic education supports the Government of Lao PDR (GoL) to renovate and rehabilitate schools, reform teacher training and curriculum and provide school-based meals. Australian aid investments also help strengthen national-level management of the education system through the development and implementation of the Education Sector Development Plan 2016-20 that governs the efficient and effective allocation of resources. It seeks to ensure that high net enrolment rates are sustained, primary school completion rates improved, more children progress from primary to lower secondary education and more students - especially the disadvantaged - are numerate, literate and have the life skills needed to lead productive lives. These are ambitious objectives given the current social and fiscal context to primary education in Lao PDR (see Annex 1).

Building on Australia's longstanding investments in the sector, the first phase of Australia's Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos ([BEQUAL](#)) program represents a AUD45 million investment between July 2015 and June 2019. It provides targeted support to the 66 most educationally disadvantaged districts in Lao PDR with a focus on ethnic children, girls and children with disability. The objectives of BEQUAL are:

- increase student participation;
- improve learning environments; and
- improve the availability of quality teaching.

To achieve its objectives, BEQUAL recognises that subnational government authorities play a critical role in improving access to education and quality of education services. The program is strengthening subnational government authorities to improve their performance and service delivery through capacity building activities and supplementary budget support to DESBs. BEQUAL Phase 1 presents an opportunity to trial several district-level initiatives and test different modalities for supporting effective school performance. Specifically, BEQUAL is delivering support directly to district education authorities rather than through the line ministry or provincial government system.

As such, the DOGs pilot is a mechanism that provides DESBs with supplementary funds to increase DESB support to schools and VEDCs. According to the DOGs guidelines (see Annex 2), the DOG pilot goals are:²

² Guidelines for BEQUAL DESB Operating Grants, 2016; p2.

- By providing DESBs with additional funds to **implement school visit activities** under District Education Development Plans to improve the quality of education delivery at the school level.
- By providing DESBs with supplementary funds to enable an **increased number of visits** to schools and villages by DESB staff, including PAs.
- The DOGs will support DESB staff to **provide support, guidance and professional development** to teachers, principals and VEDCs.

A condition of the grant is for PESS to maintain current levels of operating budget for DESBs to carry out school visits.

The DOGs pilot phase started in late 2016 in 12 districts from 9 provinces (Phongsaly, Oudomxai, Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravan, Sekong and Champassak) and concluded in June 2017. The pilot phase was implemented over one school semester (January-June 2017) with a budget of AUD 61,069.

The DOGs pilot has been implemented under BEQUAL Key Result Area (KRA) 1, Policy and Co-ordination, with support from the BEQUAL regional teams in the north, central and south offices. BEQUAL inputs in the DOGs pilot have included:

- A two-day workshop with officials from 12 pilot DESBs to select priority schools that receive support, develop a work plan for conducting school visits and develop a realistic budget.
- Provision of operating grants valued between AUD 2,500-7,500 for each of the 12 DESBs to travel to schools (petrol, accommodation, transport and per diems). A full list of disbursements for all 12 pilot districts is in Annex 3.
- BEQUAL regional team and PESS Focal Point post-workshop support to DESBs to assist with completing the DOGs work plan; reporting on school visits and financial expenditure; and monitoring fiduciary risks.
- Templates provided to DESBs for work plan, budget plan, financial report, school visit report, quarterly progress report and monitoring checklist for DESBs and schools.

1.2 Scope of the evaluation

The goal of the DOGs evaluation is to inform DFAT and BEQUAL decisions on how to best support the performance of district delivery of primary education services. The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the operational challenges, service delivery outcomes and fiduciary management of the DOGs. The assessment will inform a decision to extend the grant scheme in its current form and scale up to other BEQUAL districts, extend it with modifications, or terminate it.

The evaluation focuses on the implementation of the grant scheme and the perceived value of the school visits from DESB, school, VEDC and PESS staff (see ToR of the evaluation in Annex 4).

As stipulated in the ToR (see Annex 4), the evaluation objectives are to:³

1. Understand the relative merits of the DOGs to influence improvements in education service provision. Including the assessment of relative merits of the DOGs design.
2. Understand the effect of one semester of budget support to DESBs from DOGs on current DESB processes and systems to plan, implement, monitor and report.
3. Determine the perceptions of teachers, principals and VEDCs about services and support provided by DESB staff.
4. Determine the perceptions of DESB staff and PESS about education activity planning, budgeting, implementation and reporting.

It should be noted that the DOG pilot's implementation period was one school semester rather than the planned two semesters. The shortened pilot period means the lessons stemming from this evaluation offer suggestions for improving future design and implementation of this type of initiative.

1.3 Methodology

To fulfil its objectives, the evaluation seeks to answer the following key question and sub-questions:

Key question:

"To what extent has the DOGs pilot achieved its objectives?"

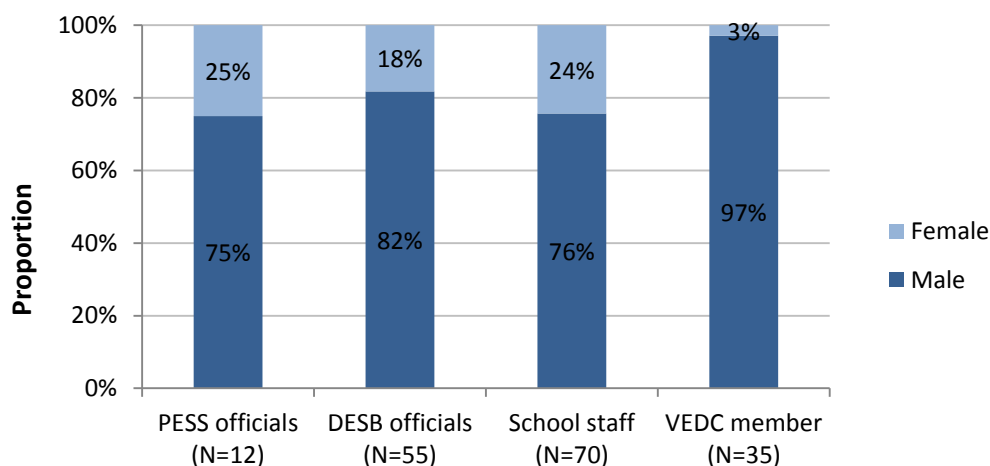
Sub-questions:

- a) To what extent did DOGs allow additional activities to take place that support improved school performance?
- b) How efficient are DESBs in implementing the DOGs?
- c) What are the DESBs perceptions of managing and implementing grants to support education services?
- d) How effective is the DOGs pilot in improving DESB service delivery to schools?
- e) How do VEDCs, teachers and principals view services and support provided by DESB staff?
- f) To what extent is the DOGs pilot effective in improving education functions at the district level?
- g) To what extent are the DOGs replicable and scalable to the other BEQUAL districts?

³ The original evaluation TOR included an assessment of the Global Partnership for Education II (GPE II) school grant model to contrast with the DOGs modality. However, the GPE II grant was not implemented at the time of the DOGs pilot and has been removed from the evaluation objectives and key questions.

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative framework. Data was collected about key DOGs implementation processes carried out by DESBs and PESS, including school visit planning and conduct as well as monitoring and reporting activities. A total of 172 respondents from the PESS, DESB, schools and VEDCs were involved in the data collection process from which 18% were females (see Figure 1 below). As detailed in Annex 5 (Methodology), the data was analysed in light of contextual factors such as local capacity, motivation and environment. The results of this qualitative data analysis were grouped in thematic findings which form the basis of this report.

Figure 1 - Evaluation participant groups and gender



1.4 This report

This report summarises the messages from the evaluation. It is organised into five main sections;

- Section 2 presents findings around DESB visits to schools.
- Section 3 presents findings around DESB support to improved learning in schools.
- Section 4 discusses the findings and answers the key evaluation question.
- Section 5 suggests some recommendations.

2. DESB School Visits

This section presents the results from the analysis of DOGs documents, survey interviews with school staff and VEDC members as well as interviews with DESB staff. These findings focus on DESB school visits - their number and perceived value by school staff and VEDC members.

2.1 Number of school visits

2.1.1 Conduct of school visits

In the short pilot period all DESBs, with support from BEQUAL regional teams, were able to prepare work plans and implement school visits within two months after receiving the training. Activity planning and budget calculations were completed with good adherence to DOGs guidelines by DESBs. The evaluation team collected DESB DOGs work plans from all 12 pilot sites. A review of the DOGs work plans show that plans were complete with the required details (e.g. number of schools, number of visits, purpose of visits and target group of visits). The evaluation team also collected DOGs budget plans and these forms were also completed in full with support from the BEQUAL regional team.⁴

Based on the work plans collected, prioritisation of target schools to receive support varied between DESBs.

- In the north region, the number of prioritised schools to receive visits varied between DESBs. For example, Tonpheung DESB selected 7 schools to receive 3 to 4 visits each while Namor DESB prioritised 19 schools to receive between 3 to 6 support visits per school.
- In the central region, the DESB's approach to prioritising the number of schools that received support was more uniform, ranging from 6 schools in Mahaxai DESB to 10 schools in Nong DESB.
- In the south region, Paksong DESB (Champassak province) prioritised 26 schools in their district to visit twice, while Thatheng DESB (Sekong province) prioritised 10 schools to be visited three times each (Table 1).⁵

⁴ Of the 12 DESBs, 6 provided the evaluation team with expenditure acquittal forms for selected school visits. At the time the evaluation visited, DESBs could not provide a summary of expenditure to compare with the budget plan.

⁵ Paksong DESB initially prioritised 47 schools to receive support, after some support from the BEQUAL south region team this revised to 26 priority schools. Similarly for Lao Ngam DESB the team prioritised 62 schools after support from the BEQUAL regional team to realistically plan for visits for one semester, their target schools were revised to 31 priority schools.

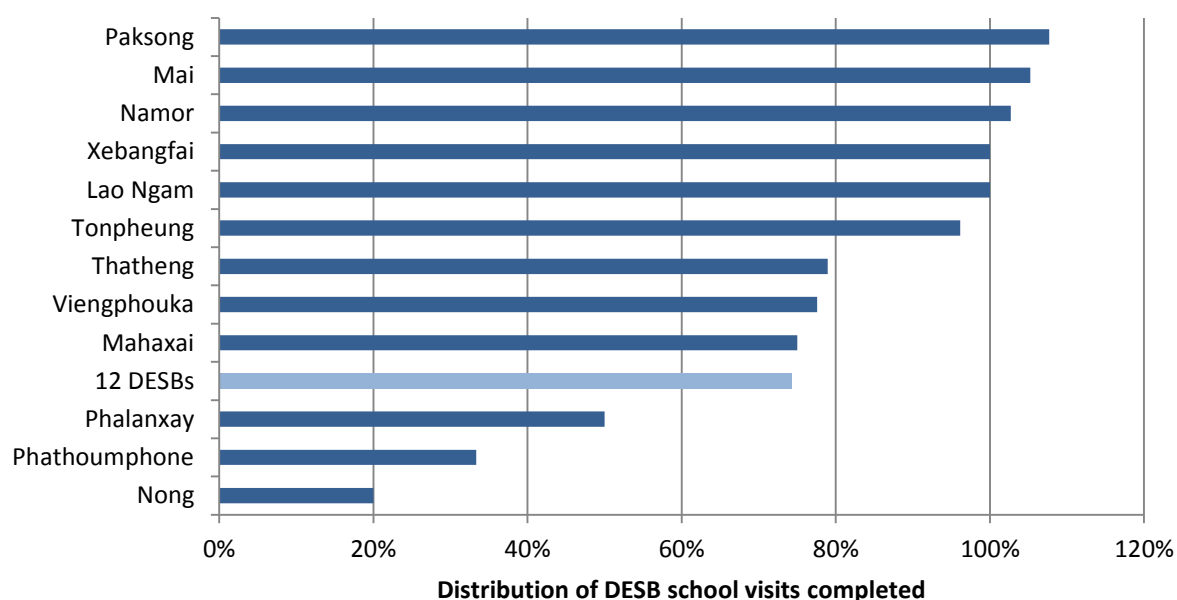
Table 1 - Number of DOGs planned and actual visits

Region	DESB	DOGs Work Plans		Actual (at 31 May 2017)	
		Number of target schools	Number visits	Number of target schools visited	Number of visits completed
North	Mai	15	57	15	60
	Namor	19	74	19	76
	Viengphoukha	15	58	15	45
	Tonpheung	8	26	8	25
Central	Mahaxai	6	24	6	18
	Xebangfai	7	35	7	35
	Phalanxai	9	54	3	27
	Nong	10	50	10	10
South	Paksong	26	26	26	28
	Phathoumphone	30	90	30	30
	Thatheng	10	38	10	30
	Lao Ngam	31	43	31	43
	Total number	186	575	180	427

Source: DOGs work plans (12 DESBs), DOGs school visit activity reports (6 DESBs) and DESB interviews (n=55)

DESBs received support from the BEQUAL regional teams as needed during the planning and establishment of the DOGs. This has contributed to good compliance with completing the DOGs work plans and budget. At the time of the evaluation team's visit most DESBs in the pilot were on track with completing their school visits according to their activity plan. As at 31 May 2017, 74% of planned school visits were completed across 12 DESBs (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Completed school visits by DESBs, at 31 May 2017



Source: DESB DOGs activity reports (n=6) and DESB interviews (n=55), May 2017

Paksong, Namor and Mai DESBs exceeded their planned school visits for two reasons: additional visits were conducted with funds left over (Mai and Namor) and in Paksong DESB conducted visits in two additional schools that needed support. Slower progress against work plans can be observed in Nong and Phatoumphone DESBs. Nong DESB reported the lowest progress in school visits (20%) due to competing demands on the DESB time from a World Vision grant.⁶ Phathoumphone DESB staff interviewed reported that school visits only commenced in March 2017 as the first tranche payment was delayed.

2.1.2 Number of school visits

At baseline of the 12 DESBs, Mahaxai, Lao Ngam and Phathoumphone DESBs reported carrying out school visits during semester one of 2016-2017 (Table 2). Other DESBs either did not carry out school visits because funds were not available or the information was not available.⁷ During the DOGs pilot period in semester two of the 2016-2017 school year, all DESBs conducted school visits.

Of the three DESBs that carried school visits in semester one of 2016-2017, the DOGs funding has facilitated an increase in the number of visits. Most DESBs did not report carrying out school visits using their recurrent budget, that is, funds from the DESB Operations (Chapter 62) and miscellaneous expenditure (Chapter 63) during this pilot period.

Namor and Tonpheung DESB staff reported commencing school visits in Nov - Dec 2016, before they received their grant. After receiving support from the BEQUAL regional team to complete their work plans the DESB teams felt that with the grant assured to be disbursed, activities could start.⁸

All DESBs reported at baseline that school visits were conducted when funds became available. Given this budget constraint on service delivery to schools, it is quite likely that the school visits carried out in semester two during the DOGs pilot period is a significant increase in activities compared with activities reported in the baseline. With greater efficiency of disbursement, this may have allowed DESBs to carry out more school visits over two semesters rather than one semester.

⁶ Nong DESB agreed with the BEQUAL regional team to carry over the DOGs funds into the next school year to complete school visits as planned.

⁷ The reported figures for semester one of 2016-2017, school years 2015-2016 and 2014-2015 are based on participant recall as records of school visits could not be provided. Some caution should be used to interpret these figures as actual activities completed. The baseline found that recurrent budget was often unavailable for school visits, and it was difficult for DESB staff to predict resource availability and therefore plan for activities.

⁸ Tonpheung DESB staff also conducted one unplanned school visit to a DOGs target school due to extenuating issues at the school, however, the DESB used their recurrent funds for the unplanned visit.

Table 2 - Number of school visits conducted by DESBs, 2014-2017

District	Number of schools in district	2016-2017		2015-2016	2014-2015
		Sem 1*	Sem 2^	Sem 1 & 2*	Sem 1 & 2*
Mai	98	NA	60	30	NA
Viengphoukha	46	0	45	10	NA
Namor	63	NA	76	NA	NA
Tonpheung	34	NA	25	34	NA
Mahaxai	71	12	18	20	NA
Xebangfai	43	0	35	10	NA
Nong	74	0	10	69	NA
Phalanxai	62	0	27	124	NA
Lao Ngam	94	26	43	64	31
Thatheng	50	0	30	210	210
Paksong	86	0	28	11	14
Phathoumphone	87	2	30	38	20

*Source: DESB interviews (n=27), DOGs baseline Nov-Dec 2016.

^Source: DESB DOGs activity reports (n=6) and DESB interviews (n=55), DOGs evaluation May 2017.

NA= data not available

The average number of visits per school carried out by DESB staff provides an alternative measure of the change produced by the DOGs. The DOGs funding has increased the average number of visits per school during the pilot period (Table 3).⁹ Compared with baseline results from semester one all surveyed school staff in the 12 pilot districts have, on average, received more visits from DESB staff in semester two. The increased average number of support visits with school staff during the DOGs pilot in semester two of 2016-2017 is also higher than previous school years, i.e. 2015-2016 and 2014-2016.¹⁰

⁹ The average number of visits during semester two of 2016-2017 appears to be consistent with the number of planned visits per school in the DESB DOGs work plan. For example, Mai DESB planned to target 15 schools to visit 3 to 5 times each. Phathoumphone DESB planned to target 30 schools to visit 3 times each, at the time of the evaluation, 33% through their work plan was complete and an average of 2 visits per school has been conducted.

¹⁰ Thatheng and Phalanxai DESBs reported a significantly higher number of school visits in 2015-2016. These figures are based on memory recall and are informant estimates only.

Table 3 - Average number of DESB visits with school staff

Region	District	2016-2017		2015-2016	2014-2015
		Sem 1*	Sem 2^	Sem 1 & 2*	Sem 1 & 2*
North	Mai	1.5	3.7	2	2
	Namor	1	5.3	0	1
	Viengphoukha	1.6	3	2.3	1.6
	Tonpheung	1.6	5	1	3
Central	Mahaxai	1	3.2	2	1
	Xebangfai	1	5	3	2.3
	Nong	1	2.5	1	1
	Phalanxai	2	2.8	2	2.5
South	Lao Ngam	1	2.2	3.6	3.6
	Thatheng	2	4	2.3	2
	Paksong	1	1.8	1	1
	Phathoumphone	1	2	1	1
	Average all districts	1.3	3.3	2.4	2

*Source: School staff, DOGs baseline survey, Nov- Dec 2016 (n=51)

^Source: School staff, DOGs evaluation survey, May 2017 (n=70)

VEDC members also report receiving more support visits from DESB staff in the second semester than in the first semester of 2016-2017 (Table 4). Even DESB teams that did not target VEDC in their DOGs work plan (Lao Ngam and Thatheng) managed to provide some support to VEDC members while visiting school staff.

Table 4 - Average number of DESB visits with VEDC members

Region	District	2016-2017		2015-2016
		Sem 1*	Sem 2^	Sem 1 & 2*
North	Mai	1	2	2.7
	Viengphoukha	0	2	2
	Namor	1	3.7	2
	Tonpheung	1	1	1
Central	Mahaxai	0	1.3	1
	Xebangfai	0	2.7	1.7
	Nong	0	1.3	2.7
	Phalanxai	2	2.7	2
South	Lao Ngam	2	2	3
	Thatheng	2	1.7	2.7
	Paksong	1	0.8	1
	Phathoumphone	0	NA	1.7
	Average all districts	0.8	1.9	1.9

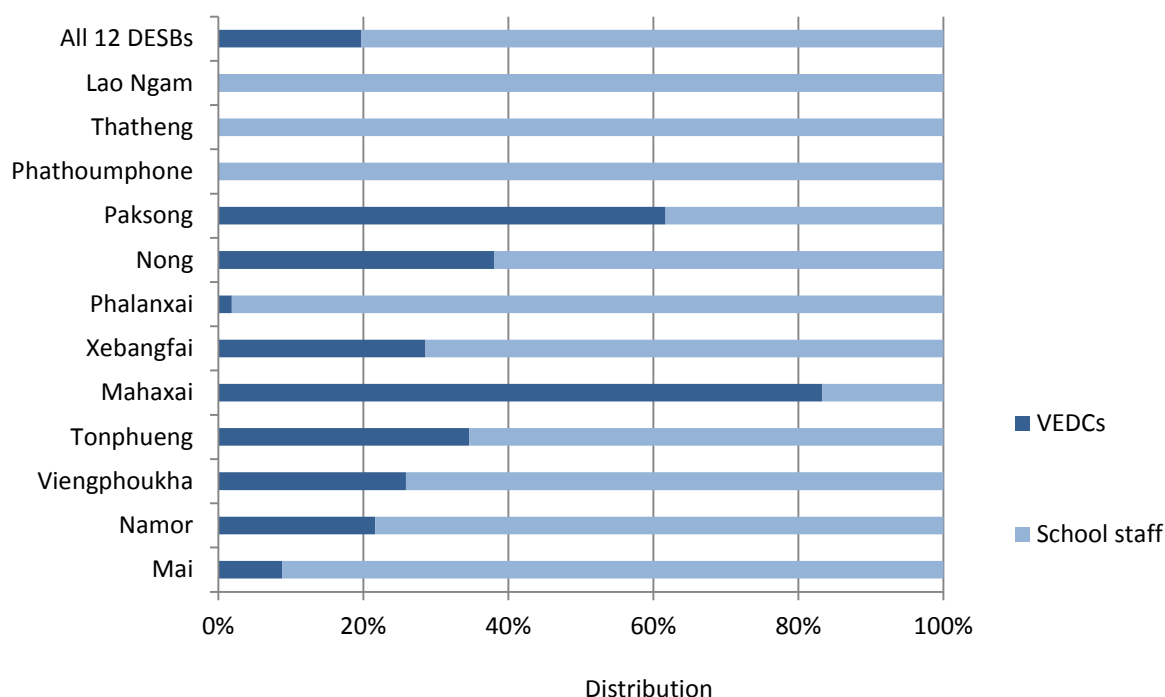
*Source: VEDC member survey (n=37), DOGs baseline, Nov- Dec 2016

^Source: VEDC member survey (n=35), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

2.2 Visits to VEDCs

The VEDC target group for visits varied between the 12 pilot DESBs. This reflects the DOGs pilot design which allowed for DESBs to prioritise targeting of VEDCs in their school visits. VEDCs comprise 20% of planned school visits across all DESB work plans (Figure 3). Looking at individual DESB plans, 82% of school visits in Mahaxai were targeting VEDCs and 62% of school visits in Paksong were targeting VEDCs. Lao Ngam, Thatheng and Phathoumphone DESBs had no VEDC visit target and prioritised school staff exclusively in their plans.

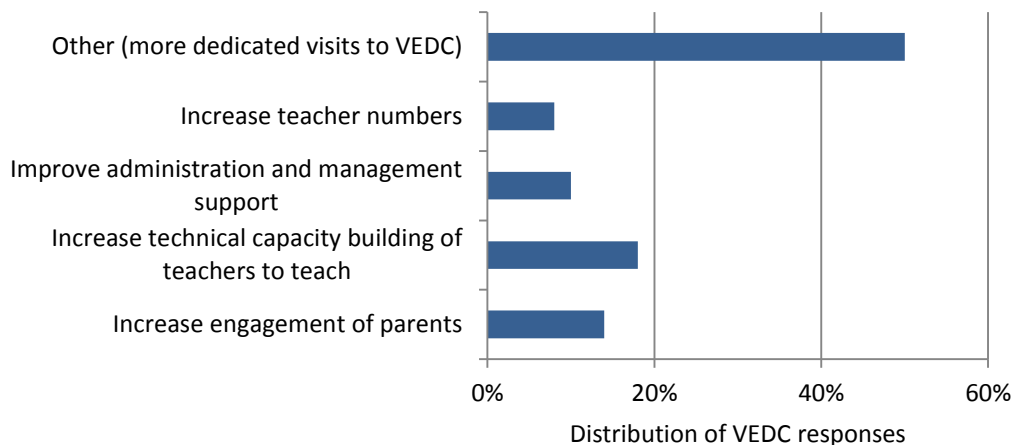
Figure 3 - Distribution of school staff and VEDCs identified to receive support in DOGs work plans



Source: DESB DOGs work plans (n=12), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

The demand for support is present among VEDCs in the pilot sites. Of the 35 VEDCs participating in this evaluation, 50% reported that DESBs could improve their service by targeting the VEDC (Figure 4). Facing this demand, DESBs interviewed identified the challenge of balancing the need to support teachers and VEDC members. A common barrier often reported is that support to VEDC members requires a significant time impost on DESB staff to stay overnight in the village to meet with VEDC members after they return from their fields. Although the DOGs provide an allowance for accommodation costs, other barriers (time and terrain of travel) reported by DESB staff remain a strong disincentive to work with VEDCs after hours.

Figure 4 - VEDC member perspective on improvements to DESB school visits



Source: VEDC interviews (n=35), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

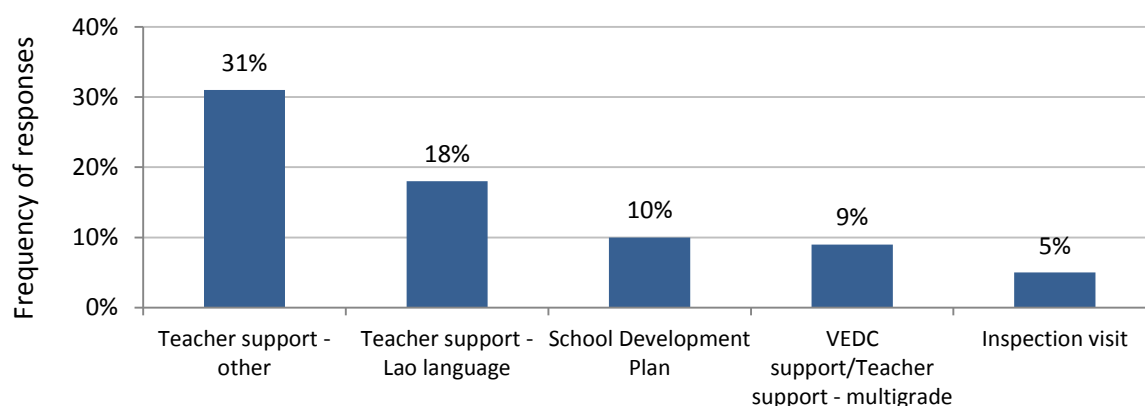
2.3 Focus of DESB visits

In all 12 DESB pilot sites, unit teams (except the Sports Unit) participated in developing the initial DOGs work plan after the initial BEQUAL workshop. During this planning process, all DESBs used local criteria (guided by MoES regulations) for identifying and prioritising schools and VEDCs to receive support visits from DESB.¹¹ DESB staff interviewed all report prioritising support to schools and VEDCs using local understanding of low school 'performance' (e.g. net enrolment, lack of lesson plans, number of volunteer teachers, student absenteeism) and low functioning VEDCs (e.g. limited knowledge of VEDC roles). In addition, schools and VEDCs with emergent issues that require urgent support from technical staff or mediation by DESB leadership were also prioritised.

A review of the DOGs work plans reveal that improving teaching is a priority for DESBs. This is not a surprise as DESBs are the responsible agency for implementing MoES policies and achieving set targets. The most frequently identified purpose for visiting school staff is to provide general teacher support, this included lesson planning and teaching techniques (Figure 5). DESBs also identified support for school staff with Lao language teaching (18% of purposes identified in plans), followed by support with School Development Plans (10%), support to VEDC (9%) and multigrade teaching (9%) in their work plans.

¹¹ During the DOGs training workshop in Oct and Nov 2016, the BEQUAL regional teams provided suggestions for selection criteria as guidance.

Figure 5 - Purpose of visits by DESBs



Top 5 purposes for DESB school visits

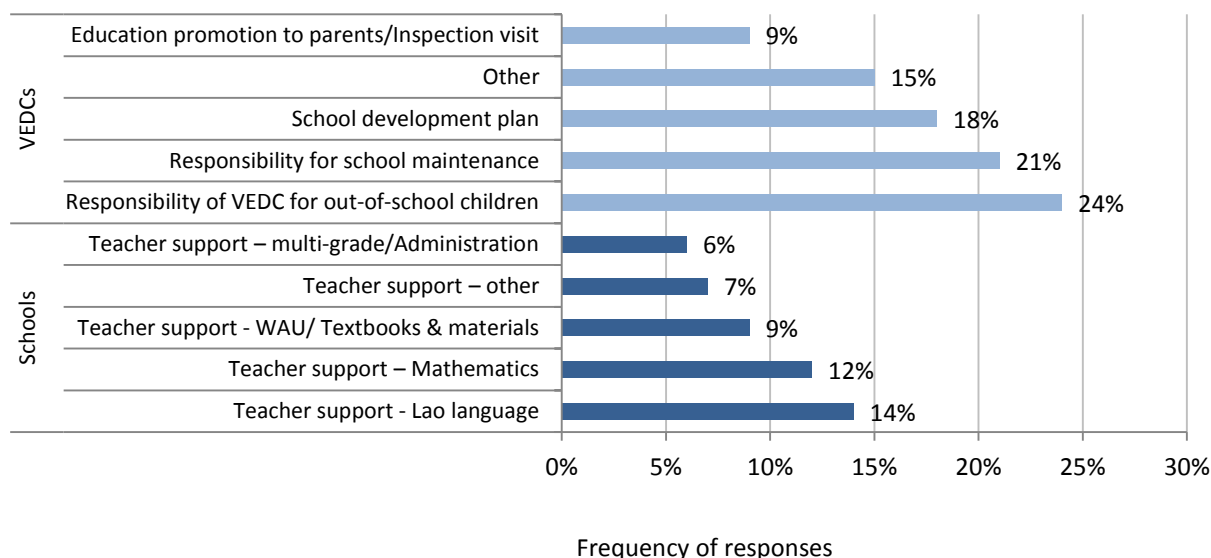
Source: DESB DOGs work plans (n=12), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

2.3.1 Types of support provided by DESBs

Support provided to school staff appears consistent with DESB plans to focus on teaching quality. According to teachers interviewed for this evaluation, 57% of teachers report DESB staff support focused on curriculum and teaching quality mostly provided by the PAs (Figure 6). For example, support to teach Lao language (14%), mathematics (12%), *World Around Us* (WAU) (9%), using teaching materials (9%), teaching support (7%) and multigrade teaching (6%).

Not surprisingly, DESB support to VEDCs focus on building knowledge and skills of members to perform the function of committees, such as encourage school children to attend school (24%), maintain school facilities (21%), compile the School Development Plan (18%), other (15%, e.g. finance and book keeping), mobilising parents (9%) and school inspection (9%).

Figure 6 - Support received from DESB staff, top 5 responses from school staff and VEDCs

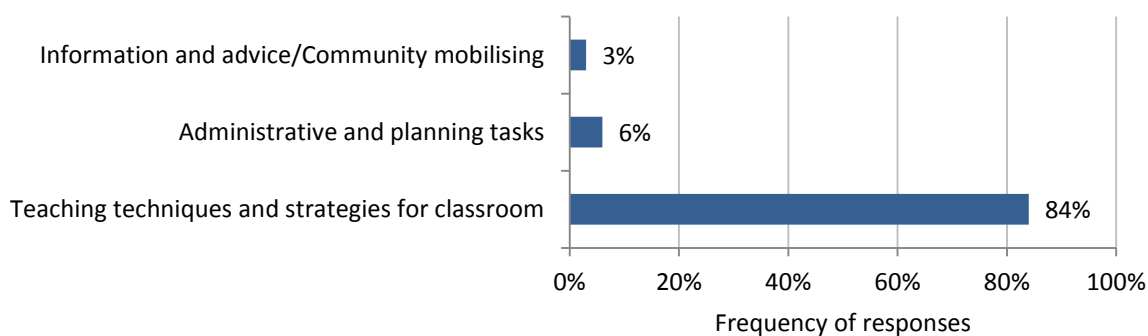


Source: School staff survey (n=70) and VEDC survey (n=35), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

2.3.2 Perception of support

Demand for pedagogical support among school staff remains relevant. In the baseline (2016), 56% of school staff reported the most useful support provided the DESB was assistance with teaching techniques and classroom strategies. School staff interviewed for the evaluation reported the most useful support provided by the DESB was teaching techniques, activities and strategies for the classroom (84%) (Figure 7).

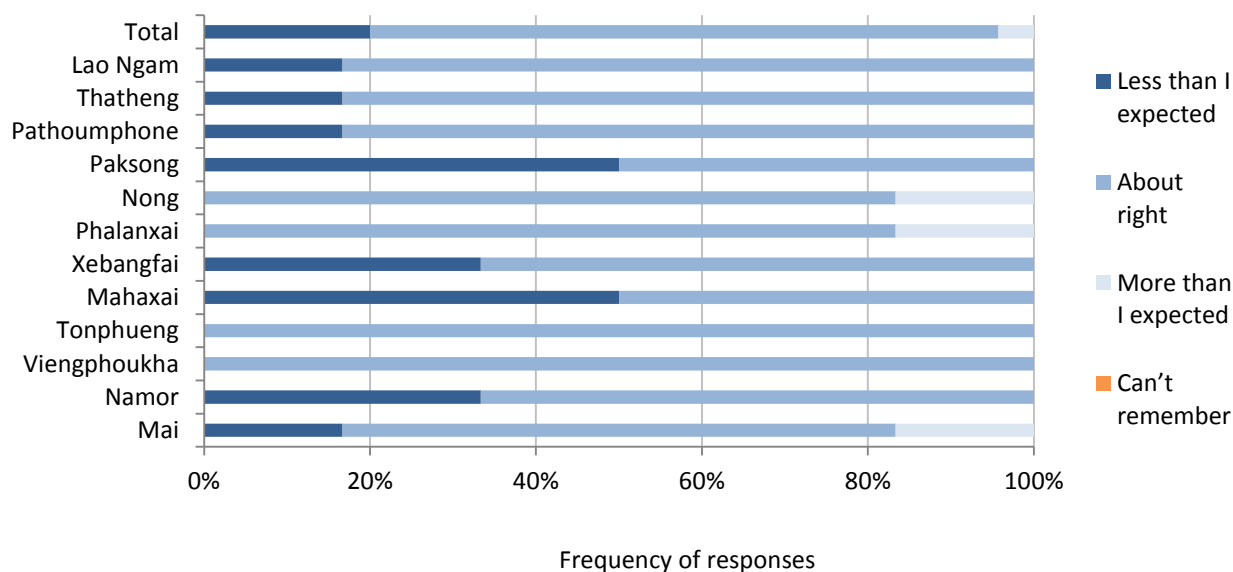
Figure 7 - Useful support provided to school staff by DESB teams



Source: School staff surveys (n=70), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

School staff and VEDC members were asked to describe their perception of the level of support provided by DESB staff in the most recent visit during the pilot period. Across the 12 pilot sites, 76% of school staff (Figure 8) and 66% of VEDC members (Figure 9) reported the level of support provided was 'about right'.

Figure 8 - School staff perception of support provided by DESB teams



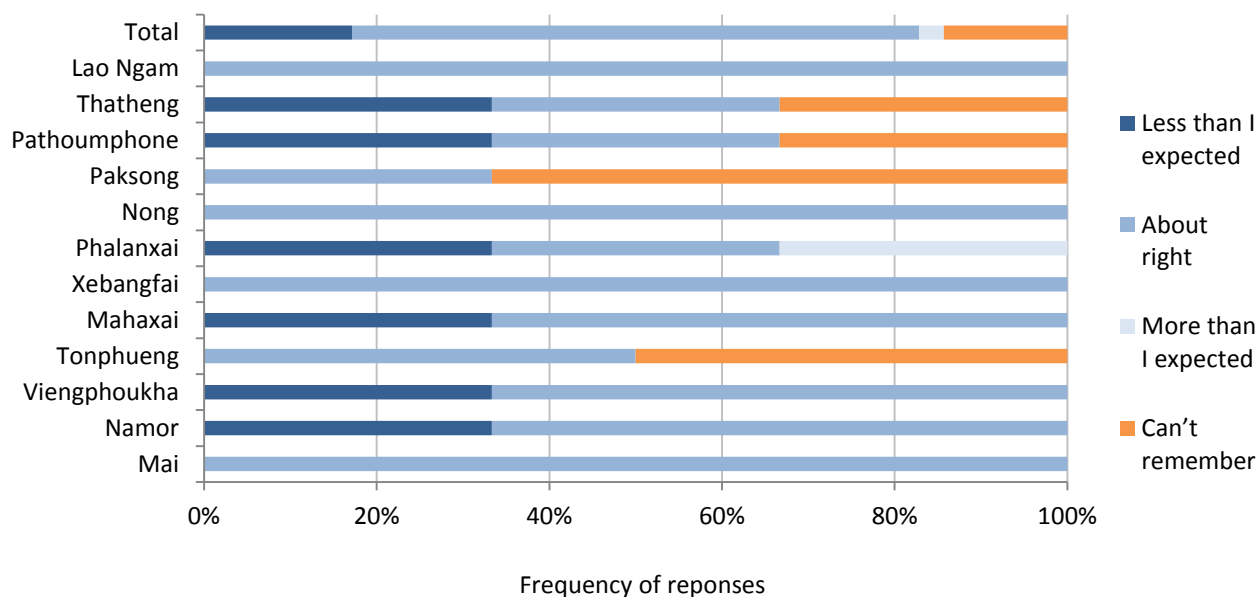
Source: School staff surveys (n=70), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

Of all responses, 4% of school staff and 3% of VEDC members reported that support from the DESB was 'more than expected'. In three districts (Mai, Phalanxai and Nong), school staff reported support from DESB was more than they expected.

Conversely, 20% of all school staff and 17% of VEDC members interviewed reported support from the DESB was 'less than expected'. Feedback from school staff included reasons such as; the DESB staff only observed a lesson and did not provide suggestions for improvement; the DESB visit was too short; and the DESB staff who were visiting, focused on giving general advice and did not provide practical support to teachers.

In Namor and Mahaxai districts, school staff and VEDC members both reported the level of support was less than they expected. Among school staff, 50% or half of respondents reported the level of support from Mahaxai and Paksong DESB staff was less than they expected.

Figure 9 - VEDC member perception of support provided by DESB teams



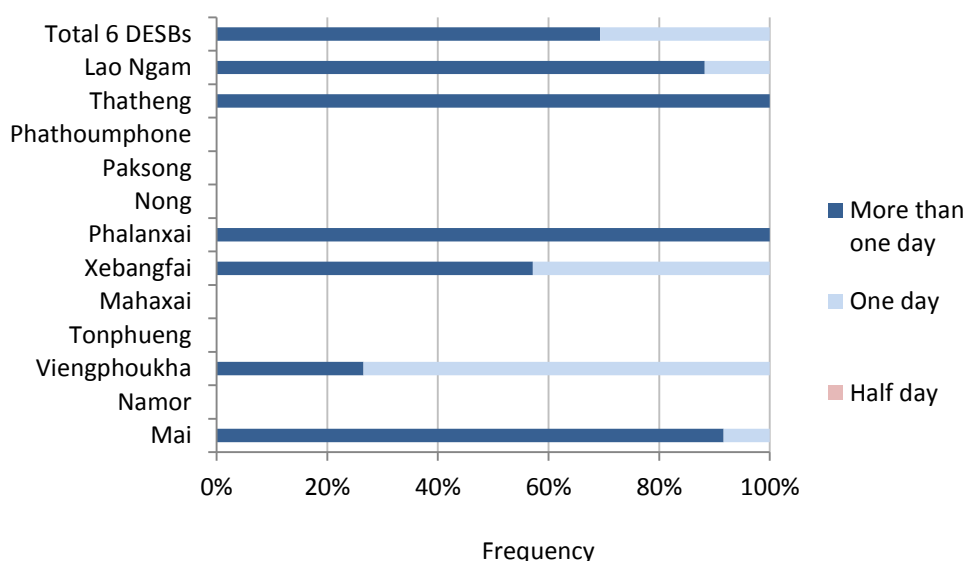
Source: VEDC surveys (n=35), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

2.3.3 Duration of visits

Time spent conducting school visits is an important factor in the perceived quality of support provided by DESB staff. Both school staff and VEDC members reported they would like DESB staff to increase the duration of their visits. A review of school visit reports indicates that overall 69% of actual visits by DESBs during the pilot period are 'more than one day' and 31% of visits are 'one day' in duration (Figure 10).¹² None of the reports reviewed identified visits of 'half a day' or less.

¹² The evaluation team was provided with school activity from 6 DESBs. Other DESBs provided activity reports but the length of time spent in schools was not recorded and is excluded from this analysis.

Figure 10 - Duration of actual visits conducted, DESB reports



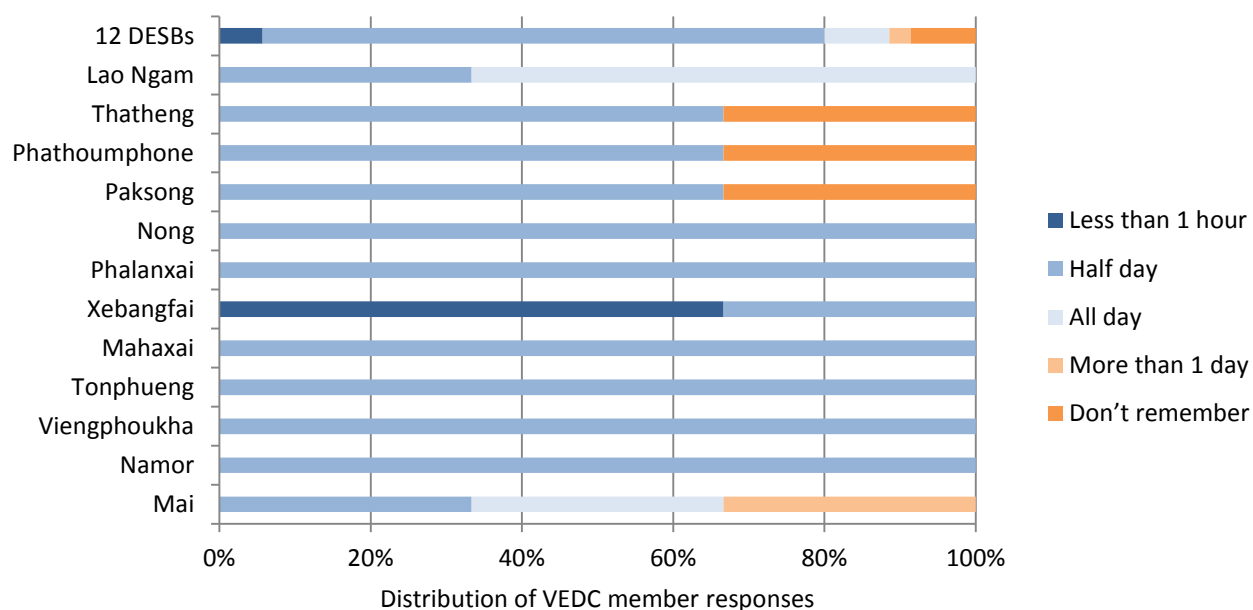
Source: DESB school visit activity reports (n= 6 DESBs), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

School staff and VEDC members were asked to recall the length of time of the most recent DESB visit. Visits lasting half a day were frequently reported by school staff (73%) and VEDC members (74%) (Figure 11 and Figure 12). Visits lasting all day were reported by 19% of all school staff and 9% of all VEDC members interviewed. Across the 12 pilot sites, 3% of school staff and VEDC members report receiving support for more than one day.

Of all school staff and VEDC members interviewed, 6% reported receiving support lasting less than one hour. In Phalanxai district, half of the school staff interviewed reported receiving support lasting less than one hour (Figure 11). This is a contrast to the school plan activity reports which recorded visits lasting more than two days. In Xebangfai, 67% of VEDC members reported receiving support of less than one hour.

The length of time spent by DESB staff with school staff and VEDC members during visits depends on the purpose of the planned visits. According to the DOGs work plans, 58% of purposes of school visits identified aspects of teaching quality such as support for Lao language, multigrade teaching and general teaching techniques (Figure 5). From the perspective of recipients of school visits, 54% of school staff report the visits are not long enough and 46% of VEDCs report the length of visits from the DESB is not long enough.

Figure 11 - Duration of DESB visits, reported by VEDC members



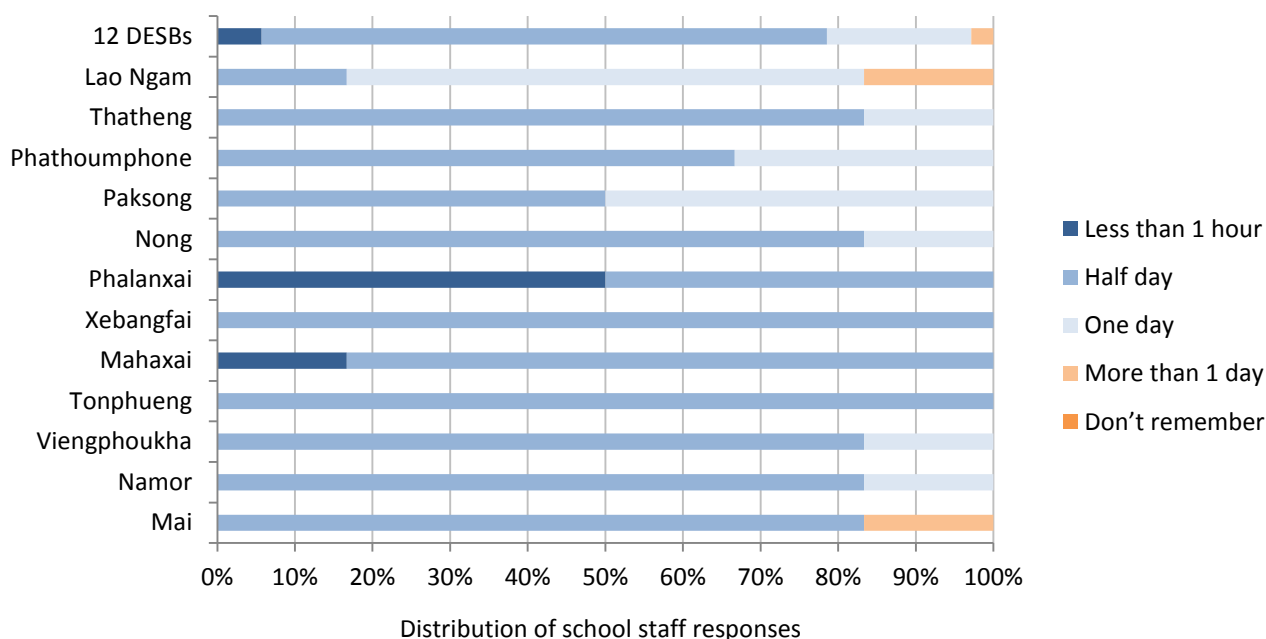
Source: VEDC surveys (n=35), DOGs evaluation, May 2017

The duration of school visit may not be adequate to provide capacity building to teachers. Three quarters of school staff and VEDCs report that they have received half day of support. In Mahaxai and Paksong districts, 50% of school staff reported the DESB support was less than they expected (Figure 8). The majority of visits conducted by Mahaxai DESB staff were half a day (83%) and less than one hour (17%). School staff in Paksong reported that 50% of visits were half a day and the other 50% of staff reported receiving one day of support. Half of teachers in Paksong district felt the visits did not meet their expectation.

School staff in Viengphoukha district mostly (83%) received visits for half a day and all reported that this had met their expectations. The results from the duration of visits, the purpose of visits and school staff expectation of support, suggest that some DESBs are better at targeting support to teachers in the time spent. For example, Tonpheung, Viengphoukha and Lao Ngam DESBs received positive feedback from school staff about providing the right level of support during the time spent.¹³

¹³ The evaluation team collected school visit reports. Unfortunately many did not contain information about the time spent with school staff and VEDCs or the outcomes from visits. This information would have been useful to cross reference against the DOGs work plans and reports from school staff.

Figure 12 - Duration of DESB visits, reported by school staff



Source: School staff surveys (n=70) DOGs evaluation, May 2017

2.4 Summary

In summary, the findings of Section 2 indicate that:

- The number of school visits has increased since the baseline. The average number of DESB visits per school has increased as a result of the grant. This demonstrates the grant has achieved part of the DOGs goals.
- DESBs have used the grant to target teachers and improve teaching quality. For example 58% of DESB DOGs plans identify teaching support as the purpose for school visits. Of all school staff interviewed 57% report receiving supporting and guidance with the curriculum and teaching techniques. However, over half (54%) of school staff reported that DESB visits are not long enough.
- Most school staff (76%) and VEDC members (66%) across the 12 districts reported the level of support from the DESB to be adequate. With the exception of school staff in Mahaxai and Phathoumphone districts, most school staff reported the level of DESB support was adequate, this ranged from 67% to 100%. This suggests that the perceived quality of support from DESBs was mostly satisfactory. With a longer time period to monitor attitudes it may be possible to assess trends over time.
- Support and guidance to VEDCs is not as apparent. Even though two of the 12 DESBs prioritised their planned visits to support VEDCs, it is not clear from the work plans, reports and interviews that VEDCs visits were carried according to plan. According to VEDC members interviewed, DESBs support could improve further with more dedicated visits to the committee.

3. DESB Support to Improved Learning in Schools

Section 3 presents findings related to the DESB perspectives on implementing the DOGs, the role of PESS and the role of BEQUAL regional teams. The section concludes with remarks on the extent to which the DOGs grant has helped the DESB to support teaching and learning in schools.

3.1 DESB planning and implementation of school visits

According to interview participants, all DESBs assigned the Pedagogical Advisor (PA) as the lead co-ordinator for planning, implementation and reporting of the DOGs (Table 5). With the exception of Viengphoukha, Tonpheung and Phathoumphone DESBs, other DESB units working with the PA included; Finance, Teacher Development, General Education and Pre- Primary School. Considering findings from the baseline and other studies about the limited opportunities for professional development for PAs, this suggests the administrative responsibility for the DOGs has increased PA workload.¹⁴

Interviews with 55 DESB staff reveal slight regional variations in approaches to DOGs work planning processes (Table 5).

- In northern DESBs (Mai, Namor, Viengphoukha and Tonpheung), staff described planning steps for the DOGs school visit that included; team planning, review/ reflection after a visit and amendment of plan.
- In the central region (Mahaxai, Xebangfai, Phalanxai and Nong), all four DESBs held an initial team planning meeting to develop the DOGs work plan, then the PA was assigned responsibility to follow up and co-ordinate with individual units. Feedback from Xebangfai and Nong DESB staff indicate that this approach was efficient for their team due to other responsibilities.
- Similarly, in the south region (Paksong, Phathoumphone, Thatheng and Lao Ngam), team planning for the DOGs school visits was carried out initially after the DOGs training workshop, then the PA was assigned the role of co-ordinator. In the south region, Lao Ngam DESB was the exception, where units reviewed the original DOGs work plan together after a school visit and adjusted the plan to support schools.

¹⁴ An example would be in Nong DESB where staff who were unable to carry school visits according to the DOGs work plan due to implementing another grant. For a recent review of the PA system see: Walsh, M, 2016, *Review of the Pedagogical support system for primary education in Lao PDR*, UNICEF, Vientiane Lao PDR. Walsh, M, 2012, *Impact evaluation of Lao-Australian Basic Education Project (LABEP)*, DFAT, Vientiane, Lao PDR.

DESBs that took a learning approach to planning (Mai, Namor, Viengphoukha, Tonpheung and Lao Ngam) could do this because staff are motivated and supported by the organisation and the leadership. This seems to suggest a level of internal organisation that is supportive of service delivery, however, it should not be concluded that these DESBs have more skilled staff to deliver quality services and reporting than other DESBs. All DESBs also reported accessing the BEQUAL regional teams when they needed support.

Table 5 - Summary of DESB approaches to DOGs work planning for school visits

Region	DESB	Internal co-ordination	Assigned co-ordinator for DOGs
North	Mai	Team plan, team review and amend plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Namor	Team plan, team review and amend plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Viengphoukha	Team plan, team review and amend plan	PA
	Tonpheung	Team plan, team review and amend plan	PA
Central	Mahaxai	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Xebangfai	PA co-ordinated meeting and compiled the initial DOGs work plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Phalanxai	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Nong	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA and Finance officer (budget plan)
South	Paksong	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA, General Education unit officer and Finance (budget plan)
	Phathoumphone	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA
	Thatheng	Team plan for initial DOGs work plan	PA, General Education unit officer and Finance officer (budget plan)
	Lao Ngam	Team plan, team review and amend plan	PA and Pre-Primary School unit officer

Source: DESB interviews (n=55), DOGs evaluation May 2017

Responsibility for co-ordinating school visits using the DOGs was assigned to the PAs. DESB staff interviewed reported that PAs were delegated this responsibility to lead co-ordination because the team was mostly involved in supporting school staff. Some DESB staff reported that PAs struggled at times with this responsibility because of competing tasks and limited computer literacy for reporting school visits and finance expenditure.¹⁵

¹⁵ PAs in Namor and Mahaxai DESBs do not have computer literacy or computers for work to complete the DOGs reporting so other staff members shared their equipment and helped to type up reports.

3.2 DESB work plan, activity and financial reporting

The DOGs reporting templates became easier to use after receiving support from the BEQUAL region teams, despite the earlier concerns from DESBs and PESS at the initial training workshop in October and November 2016. Finance officers all reported that the budget calculation and expenditure forms are easy to use, as they are familiar with using the Excel software. School visit activity reports were slightly more challenging for PA staff to complete which required activities to be reported in narrative structure with more detailed information than they are used to. At the time of the evaluation, all DESB staff reported that overall the school visit work plan, activity report and budget calculation was useful for their work.

DESBs used the DOGs activity and financial reports in various ways. In Mai, Namor, Viengphoukha, Tonpheung and Lao Ngam DESBs, the DOGs school visit report was used to assess and monitor school issues and revise the work plan according to the need of schools and VEDCs.¹⁶ As these DESBs conducted multiple visits to the target schools, staff reported that the structure and detail required for the DOGs enhanced their understanding of issues in schools and plans to address this.¹⁷ The following quote from Namor illustrates the feedback from these DESBs:

‘The DOGs work planning process is good because it helps us to discuss the problems in each school before planning the schools visit and who should go to visit. The current government reporting process never has this level of detail in the work plan and all staff do not discuss with each other very often. The DOGs plan and reports help all units in the DESB to have more discussion about problems and how to solve it.’ Namor DESB Director, May 2017.

As such, these DESBs used the DOGs process as an opportunity to carry out school visits in an integrated manner. Other DESBs in central and south DESBs approached school visit planning, implementation and reporting in a co-ordinated way between the relevant units.

The positive uptake of the DOGs planning and report forms has enhanced DESB processes compared with usual government requirements. The brief pilot period limits the assessment of the quality of service provided by DESBs to improve teaching and learning in schools. What can be observed about the DESB service and support is their focus on achieving output targets such as enrolment and completion rates, student and teacher attendance rates, exam attendance and VEDC participation. These types of outputs are proxy indicators for quality teaching and learning, as well as indicators of their ‘performance’ to demonstrate to the PESS. To improve teaching and learning in the classroom, DESBs recognise challenges involved, including the need to increase capacity at the district level to support schools and VEDCs.¹⁸

¹⁶ These DESBs report using information collected in school visit reports to review the work plan as a team involving multiple units. DESB staff also used their own monitoring forms to collect information about student attendance, lesson planning, student participation in exams, VEDC awareness of their responsibilities and school environment.

¹⁷ DESB staff reported that it was difficult to know the extent of issues in each school and across schools because the recurrent budget would only allow one or two school visits per year.

¹⁸ DESB staff interviewed across the 12 pilot sites all commented on the need to improve technical skills of PAs, school inspectors and other unit staff in Teacher Development and Basic or General Education.

3.3 Travel incentives to conduct school visits

Decree 2066 presents a disincentive for DESB staff to conduct school visits in locations less than 50km from the district centre. The time to travel to schools located closer than 50km can be substantial and DESB staff reported that for many of their schools located 30km or 40km from the district centre, it is not possible to make a round trip in one day due to the geographical terrain. DESB directors and deputies interviewed reported that the per diems provide staff with a small incentive to achieve visit school targets, in an environment where salaries are usually late and school visits are often carried out using their own motorbikes. In a quarter of the pilot districts, the grant incentivised DESBs to over achieve their target which is exceptional where output targets are rarely reached.

All 12 DESBs developed local solutions to allocate per diem for visits to schools less than 50km from the district centre. For example in Paksong DESB, 35,000LAK was the per diem allocated for schools less than 50km. Namor DESB set their per diem at 30,000LAK for schools which are 30km or less. Tonpheung DESB set their per diem at 50,000LAK for schools which are located less than 50km and 100,000LAK for schools located 50km or more. Lao Ngam DESB also set their own local per diem rate and introduced an additional requirement for staff to be reimbursed for the school visit to ensure visits are carried out. DESB finance officers interviewed all reported that per diem expenditure reporting is aligned with instructions in Decree 2066.

3.4 Financial additionality

The DOGs were used to substitute government recurrent funds for operational activities such as school visits. It is difficult to measure the extent of the substitution effect, as there is only a small general pool in the recurrent budget allocation (Chapter 63) which the DESB can use for school visits. As reported in the baseline, disbursement for Chapter 63 are unpredictable and often prioritised for other operation activities which results in few and irregular school visits taking place each year. Three DESBs reported that the DOGs is an important grant because it 'replaced', 'reduced' and 'supported' government recurrent budget for school visits.

Namor DESB commenced school visits in November 2016 after they completed their work plan. As the first tranche payment did not arrive until December 2016, Namor DESB used their recurrent budget to pay for visits in November and the DOGs were used to reimburse the government funds. It is unclear from information provided by DESB staff if school visits were carried out using government funds during the pilot period in addition to the school visits provided by the DOGs. In any case, the feedback that the DOGs replaced and reduced government funds for school visits indicates that it was unlikely that the DOGs provided additionality to the recurrent budget.¹⁹

¹⁹ The DOGs were intended to provide additionality to the recurrent budget. The DOGs Guidelines and Agreement outlined the expectation for PESS and DESBs to maintain their recurrent funding for school visits.

This is an important condition of the DOGs and supports the pilot rationale that evidence of improved performance resulting from the DOGs could be used to leverage the province to allocate and increase the recurrent budget to DESBs. There was limited evidence of the mechanism by which BEQUAL teams could monitor and enforce this part of the agreement.

3.5 Role of PESS

The role of the PESS focal points was to work with the BEQUAL regional teams to review the DOGs work plan, reports and conduct monitoring and spot check visits.²⁰ Feedback from the PESS staff reveal that 75% (9) of PESS interviewees for this evaluation participated in monitoring visits with the BEQUAL regional teams and 33% (4) of them were involved in reviewing DOGs documents.

The challenges reported by PESS focal points in carrying out their role in the DOGs included:

- Staff movements in the PESS throughout the pilot period affected the continuity of PESS participation in activities such as reviewing DOGs documents, providing support to DESBs, participating in monitoring visits and co-ordination with the BEQUAL regional team. Due to internal PESS workloads the focal point was delegated by the PESS director to various staff members according to their respective availability.
- DESB staff movements presented a challenge for PESS to provide support to a new DESB officer who was delegated to co-ordinate, implement or report on the DOGs. This was more of a challenge in the south region where the DESBs would directly seek support from the PESS focal point. In the north, PESS relied on the BEQUAL region team to lead the co-ordination between stakeholders and support to DESBs.
- The BEQUAL regional teams mostly led the co-ordination of reporting and monitoring activities. At times there was a mismatch in scheduling or short notice given to some PESS focal points about these joint activities. The competing demand on time of the PESS focal point and BEQUAL regional teams was a challenge to collaboratively plan and implement the school visits.

PESS focal points interviewed for the evaluation were broadly supportive of the DOGs mission to enable DESBs to increase skilling of teachers, improve school management and VEDC functions. Most of the PESS staff interviewed also reported that the monitoring visits was useful for them to observe schools as they rarely get to do this in their usual monitoring role. Of the twelve PESS focal points, three suggested including a budget for PESS to do more regular monitoring visits and to carry out training to DESB staff.

²⁰ Of the 12 PESS staff interviewed, one did not attend the DOGs training workshop.

3.6 BEQUAL subnational support

The BEQUAL regional teams, in collaboration with the team in Vientiane and MoES officials, ran initial DOGs training workshops for DESB staff and PESS focal points in Oct and November 2016. Subsequently, post workshop support was provided to DESBs by the BEQUAL regional teams based on request and perceived need.²¹ Recall of time use by BEQUAL regional teams for support to DESBs to develop their activity and financial plans is used to gauge an estimate input to support DESBs to establish the DOGs (Table 6).

Table 6 - Time input by BEQUAL regional teams to support DESB during DOGs work planning

Regional teams	Estimated time used to support DESBs during planning stage ²²	Estimated time used during one round of monitoring visits in schools with PESS & DESB ²³	Estimated total time input to support DESB and PESS to implement DOGs ²⁴
North: (Phongsaly, Oudomxai, Luang Namtha and Bokeo provinces)	8 days	8 days	16 days
Central: (Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces)	4 days	8 days	12 days
South: (Champassak, Saravan and Sekong provinces)	5 days	8 days	13 days

Interviews with DESB staff confirm that the BEQUAL regional team provided valuable support during the planning of school visits and preparing for first tranche of payment. Specifically, support with using the pilot templates and capacity building in areas of prioritising the number schools for visits during the pilot timeframe, sequencing of visits, co-ordination of purposes of visits to school staff and VEDCs and aligning the planned activity with the budget plan.

²¹ The DOGs guidelines did not specify the level of support to be provided by BEQUAL regional teams, this appears to have been determined by regional teams.

²² Estimates are based on reported time spent provided face-to-face support to DESB staff, phone calls and emails during Nov-Dec 2016 to Jan 2017 to support development of DOGs work plans and budget. Travel time from the BEQUAL regional offices to provinces and districts is included. More time is estimated for the north region team due to the geographical spread and terrain of provinces and districts. Direct support to northern DESBs was reported as approximately 4 hours per district for planning activities. This included, 2 hours assisting DESB to plan school visits, 1 hour on support to use Excel for recording DOGs plan and 1 hour on support to the DESB Finance officer on recording the DOGs budget plan in Excel.

²³ Estimates of time used for monitoring visits (during Mar to June 2017) is based on reports of approximately two days per district, inclusive of planning and co-ordination with PESS focal points, visits to 2-3 schools and/ or feedback to DESB staff after the visits and support with DOGs activity and financial reporting. Includes travel time from the BEQUAL regional offices to provinces and districts.

²⁴ The estimate total days is for direct support to DESBs and PESS and excludes time liaising, co-ordinating and planning with the BEQUAL head office and time working in Vientiane.

3.7 Summary

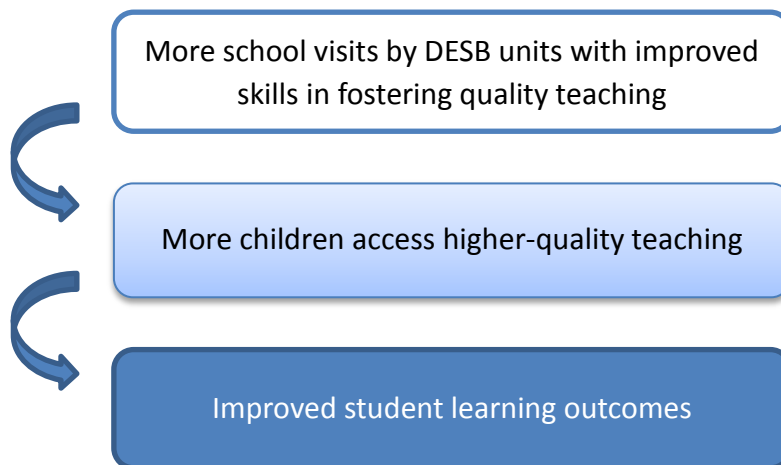
In summary, the findings of Section 3 indicate that:

- DESBs are motivated to use resources to facilitate school visits. Of the pilot sites, 6 DESBs (Mai, Namor, Viengphoukha, Tonpheung, Lao Ngam and Thatheng) appear to be the most ready to maximise the impact of their grants.
- The grant and its direct disbursement to DESBs have generated motivation to implement school visits. DESBs also recognise that technical skills in the district need to be improved if the quality of teaching and learning are to change.
- The BEQUAL regional teams provide significant support during the implementation of the DOGs. This level of resourcing is unlikely to be sustained if the DOGs are expanded.
- The DOGs were perceived and used as a budget support rather than additionality.
- The role of PESS in the DOGs implementation was limited compared with the role outlined in the guidelines. Their role should be strengthened in an expanded roll out.

4. Discussion

4.1 Underlying theory of change

The DOGs are one instrument to stimulate performance towards the BEQUAL objective of improved student learning outcomes. It is intended as a supplementary budget support delivered directly to the DESBs. According to the guidelines, the disbursement modality aims to generate *“more school visits by DESB units with improved skills in fostering quality teaching (that) will ultimately enable more children to access higher-quality teaching that will improve student learning outcomes”*.²⁵ The underpinning logic of causal changes behind the DOGs pilot can therefore be summarised as following:²⁶



Central premises or assumptions of this simplistic causal chain are:

- DESB staff who visit schools have improved skills in fostering quality teaching
- DESB school visits have a direct impact on teaching quality
- Improved teaching quality leads to improved learning outcomes

The central premise in the original Guidelines has shifted slightly with internal discussions about the DOGs modality. Some reflection on the DOGs purpose and intent suggest that the pilot was aimed at testing the modality as a mechanism of funding to facilitate service delivery (school visits). In the absence of documentation of the revised purpose of the DOGs pilot, this evaluation has relied on the stated objectives in the DOGs Guidelines.

²⁵ BEQUAL DESB Operating Grants- Executive Summary, 8 Sept 2016.

²⁶ This simplistic change diagram is developed by the author based on objective statements in the DOGs Guidelines (Sept 2016).

4.2 Achievement of operational objectives

While essential to understand and verify the impact of the model, the testing of these assumptions is beyond the scope of this evaluation. Findings from this evaluation rather shed light on the operational aspects of the modality, i.e. the use of the grant mechanism and the ability of DESBs to manage additional resource to support schools and VEDCs. A summary of the achievements against these operational objectives is presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7 - Achievement of DOGs objectives

Objectives	Achievements		
	Weak	Middle	Strong
1. Increase of DESB school visits			✓
2. DESB administration and management of DOGs funds, activities and reporting			✓
3. DESB support to schools and VEDCs		✓	
4. PESS support and monitoring of DESB	✓		

As such, the findings presented in this report indicate mostly positive results, pointing towards a successful pilot experience. The funds provided by the DOGS have led to an increased number of school visits across the pilot sites.²⁷ Data collected and direct observations have also demonstrated DESBs ability to administer and manage the grant according the DOGs guidelines: All 12 DESBs were able to co-ordinate school visits based on their work plan and half of the DESBs have used the DOGs processes and funds to promote integrated planning and reviews within their agencies.

Feedback from school staff and VEDC members indicate that DESB visits were welcomed, particularly in cases of multiple visits. However, respondents have also reported the ability and necessity for DESBs to improve their support by increasing the length of their visits and provide more technical support for teaching.

The role of PESS focal points to support and monitor DESBs seems less convincing, with the BEQUAL regional teams taking the lead. Reported constraints on the engagement of PESS focal points include limited continuity of participation by the designated focal point and limited capacity of PESS to commit personnel and time. Conversely - or perhaps to fill in the gap - DESBs were well supported by the BEQUAL regional teams to establish and implement the grants.

²⁷ With a couple of exceptions where there are delays with disbursement and activities.

4.3 Lessons for the model

Though support provided by the grant and direct resourcing to DESB have clearly generated an increase of DESB activities and willingness to adopt a more structured approach to planning, implementation and reporting school visits, the sustainability of the DOGs model and its impact on quality of teaching and learning outcomes are less clear. If one assumes the DOGs model seeks to improve DESB ability to fulfil their functions and ultimately improve student learning outcomes, two key lessons can be learned from this evaluation and applied to the design of future iterations of the DOGs.

Resource alone might be insufficient to leverage behavioural changes

A combination of the DOGs funds, training and support by the BEQUAL regional teams has undoubtedly increased the capacity of DESB to visit school and perform their functions. However, it is unclear how the support might stimulate systemic change: limited incentives - low salaries and poor working conditions – may discourage productive behaviours by DESB staff. Hence, if the model is to leverage longer and deeper behavioural changes and impact on teaching quality, other factors of performance are worth considering. These factors could relate to motivations/incentives and opportunities/environment. Examples of such factors from this evaluation include:

- Institutional HRD mechanism to improved technical skills of DESB staff to support schools and VEDCs.
- Institutional arrangements to secure financial allocation to DESB for service delivery.
- Incentive tops out for school visits where remote distance or weather access is a barrier and transport is limited.
- Institutional arrangements for PESS to provide more technical support to DESB.

Integration of BEQUAL initiatives at subnational level will maximise their impacts

To increase its influence over the institutional performance of DESB, the DOGs model could be strengthened with a rational alignment with key reform initiatives supported by BEQUAL at subnational levels. As it stands, increasing school visits without clear links to major activities of BEQUAL aimed at building capacity of teachers and PAs, implementing curriculum reforms and developing teaching resources presents a missed opportunity to enhance the BEQUAL impact. Conversely, the DOGs model has a promising potential for fostering the integration of the delivery of all these reforms initiative at district level. In that light, one might consider how insights from positive deviants (i.e. champion districts) might be used to spark interest, understanding and support for reforms at subnational levels.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations outlined below focus on the improvement of the DOGs design for future roll out. They are based on the assumption that the DOGs initiative keeps an objective of enhancing the performance of district support to schools. They should be considered in the broader context of the BEQUAL annual planning process and the upcoming BEQUAL phase 1 mid-term review.

Recommendation 1: Theory of change

The DOGs should not be scaled up or progress to phase 2 until its theory of change is clear and demonstrates alignment with major BEQUAL reforms.²⁸ As part of the design process assumptions about performance bottlenecks and opportunities to leverage change at the subnational level should be verified. In particular, the assumption that the DOGs modality can facilitate and/or leverage increase of DESB recurrent budget for school visits deserves scrutiny. Other factors of district performance, such as incentives and environmental constraints should be considered and they should be targeted if external support can confidently leverage desired changes.

Recommendation 2: Monitoring and reporting system

The development of a solid theory of change and outcomes framework for the DOGs initiative should allow an assessment of inputs and activities required and benefits expected at school level. Reporting tools used in the pilot are relevant to DESB work, however if the DOGs scale up and expansion is pursued, a more robust monitoring and reporting system is needed to adequately identify and measure progress and results, notably on teaching quality.

Recommendation 3: District targeting

The DOGs target districts should be reviewed as part of the design process. An assessment of districts that are ready and best placed to use the grants should be carried out, with appropriate engagement of the regional teams, province and district government stakeholders. A clear targeting strategy should be developed, justifying the prioritisation (or not) of these districts. In addition, additional analysis and enhanced monitoring of these districts experience would provide a better understanding of factors of performance and eventually lead to necessary learning and adaptation of the DOG model.

²⁸ Discussions about options for continuing the DOGs in semester one of the new school year (2017-2018) have considered the risks, momentum and commitments. Beyond semester one of the new school year, the DOGs should be put on hold until its design and plan are clarified.

Recommendation 4: PESS engagement

An enhanced engagement of PESS in the model should be secured. The intensive support provided by BEQUAL regional teams during the pilot phase needs to be gradually carried out by PESS if they are to fulfil their supporting role for DESB receiving the grants. The geographical scope of the DOGs should not expand to new locations unless resourcing and support at the subnational level is carefully considered and accounted for.

Recommendation 5: Integration with other BEQUAL initiatives

The DOGs design should have a clear reference and institutional linkages to the suite of BEQUAL initiatives at subnational level. The relationship between and integration of all these BEQUAL initiatives should be strengthened and well-articulated so that their collective impact is maximised. Program and activity planning should identify clear sequencing of activities, alignment between objectives and actions and rationale for geographical coverage across activities and initiatives. Again, champion districts could be identified and selected and an integrated performance assessment mechanism implemented so that BEQUAL gains further understanding of its impact at district level.



Annexes

Annexes

Annex 1: Social and Fiscal context to primary education

Social context of primary education

Lao PDR has a young population with an estimated 60% being under 25 years of age, and with almost 70% of the young living in rural areas²⁹. In Lao PDR approximately:

- 16% of youth have no formal education
- 39% of 15-24 year olds have not completed primary education
- The literacy gap is largest between young people who live in urban areas (91% literacy rate) and those in rural areas without road access (48%)
- Girls and women are proportionately less literate than men across geographic, age, wealth and ethnic groups.

Recent analysis of data from the 2012/13 LECS-5 survey and the 2015 Population and Housing Census confirms the highly diverse social context across provinces and districts. For example, the national average net enrolment rate for primary education (75.8%) hides large spatial disparities. Urban districts tend to have much higher rates while some isolated rural areas, suffer from very low rates. In particular, the isolated group of districts in the south-east part of the country along the Vietnam border has the lowest enrolment rates. The northern-most districts also present below average enrolment rates.

Comparing the 66 Districts targeted by BEQUAL and the national average shows wide differences³⁰ in:

- Net intake rate – 93.9% (BEQUAL) compared with 96.6% (Lao PDR national average)
- Net enrolment rate – 97% (BEQUAL) compared with 98.5% (Lao PDR national average)
- Drop-out rate (Grade 1) – 12.4% (BEQUAL) compared with 8.9% (Lao PDR national average)
- Survival rate (Grade 5) – 66.7% (BEQUAL) compared with 77.8% (Lao PDR national average)
- Completion rate – 64.3% (BEQUAL) compared with 75.4% (Lao PDR national average)
- Pupils per qualified teacher – >57 (BEQUAL) compared with <30 (Lao PDR national average).

²⁹ Fargher. J, 2017, *Education Development Context - Update*, 1 March 2017, Laos Australia Development Learning Facility, Lao PDR, p.4.

³⁰ BEQUAL, 2015 Cohort 1 - Comparative indicator baseline from EMIS. BEQUAL Project Team, Vientiane, Lao PDR, cited in Fargher.J, 2017, *Education Context Update*, p. 6.

Fiscal context

The overall Government of Laos (GoL) budget balance is in deficit. The financial resources available for investment in development are likely to be constrained in the period to 2020. This is partly due to forecast commodity and energy prices remaining depressed as well as restrained economic growth in China and ASEAN, key trading partners for Laos.

The GoL deficit is largely financed by external public borrowing, bringing total public debt to about 65 percent of GDP in 2015 (about US\$7.7 billion). This is significantly higher than other ASEAN countries (e.g. Cambodia 33%, Myanmar 25% and Indonesia 31%).

The government is now faced with lower revenue than planned. GoL responses to this budget setting include tight control over civil service wages and public recruitment, which have limited the growth in expenditures. For example, total public expenditure, measured as percent of GDP, declined from 28% in 2014 to 26.6% in 2015. Similarly, non-wage recurrent expenditure, which is important for the efficiency and quality of public service delivery, remains less than 2% of total public expenditure.

Public expenditure, including debt servicing, is projected to reach slightly more than 30% of GDP in the period 2016-2020 while revenue is projected to remain below 25% of GDP in the same period. National projections to 2020 suggest that most public expenditure will be allocated to recurrent salary expenditure (~36%), the capital budget (~32%), and debt repayment (~20%) – which leaves a small amount (~12%) for non-salary recurrent expenditure to support service delivery, such as operation and maintenance of effective teaching environments in primary schools.

Annex 2: DOGs Guideline



DOGs Guidelines
Draft 20161006.docx

Annex 3: DOGs disbursement to 12 pilot districts

Districts	Amount (LAK)
Namor	14,879,840
Viengphoukha	10,630,000
Mai	22,439,000
Phatoumphone	20,550,000
Paksong	20,075,500
Xebangfai	13,619,000
Thatheng	11,573,500
Mahaxai	16,767,200
Lao Ngam	22,203,500
Tonpheung	8,030,840
Phalanxai	15,155,200
Nong	17,450,700
TOTAL	185,343,440

Source: BEQUAL

Annex 4: ToR for the Evaluation of DOGs



DOGs baseline study
TOR draft.docx

Annex 5: Methodology

The evaluation of the DOGs pilot is taking the DESB organisation as its main unit of analysis; in this way its capacity to use resources (human, financial, systems and processes) is relevant for examination. Access to adequate resources does not always result in improved performance. The level of motivation within DESB units provides incentives that affect performance and quality of work. The external environment in which DESBs function is an important consideration in understanding behaviours that drive planning, expenditure, implementation and management of local resources. These factors are used to examine the implementation of the DOGs in relation to processes such as planning, conducting school visits, reporting and monitoring.

A thematic analysis of data collected from primary (interviews and surveys) and secondary (documents-plans, reports) sources was conducted resulting in the identification of key analytical themes for structuring the information collected (Table A). Data collected was organised into themes and verified by cross checking for coherence with other sources. Where there are variations or inconsistencies, data were interrogated for explanations where possible.

Table A: Analytical themes and data sources

Components	Influencing factors			Data source
	Capacity	Motivation	Environment	
School visits	✓	✓	✓	DESB DOGs work plans and budget plan Interviews with DESB, PESS, BEQUAL Regional Teams
DESB implementation of school visits	✓	✓	✓	Interviews with DESBs Survey interview with school staff and VEDC members
DOGs reporting on activities and finance	✓	✓	✓	DESB activity and financial reports Interviews with DESBs, PESS and BEQUAL Regional Teams
DOGs monitoring	✓	✓	✓	Interviews with PESS, BEQUAL Regional Teams and DESBs.

The study methodology is used to guide data collection tools to elicit information about each implementation process. For example, document reviews of DESB DOGs work plans and reports examined the allocation of human and financial resources to carry out school visits. Interviews with PESS (PESS) and DESB officials explored their roles, engagement and perceptions about implementing activities using the DOGS. Survey interviews conducted at the school level was carried out to capture the perceptions of beneficiaries of the school visits.

Data collection

Qualitative methods were used to collect data for the baseline of the pilot (Table B). Tools in English and Lao can be found in Appendix 6.

Table B: Data collection tools

Tools	Endline
Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) of DESB staff, PESS officials, BEQUAL Regional teams	✓
E-survey of school staff and VEDC members	✓
Document review (e.g. budgets; work plans and records; progress report).	✓

Data collection

The evaluation data collection was conducted in the 12 pilot locations from 16th to 31st May 2017, one month before the end of the pilot period.

Sample Groups and Size

A purposeful sampling approach was used to recruit participants in the 12 DOGs pilot districts. The selection criteria for participants in the evaluation are:

1. District government officials who directly implement the DOGs during the pilot period.
2. School staff working in schools prioritised by DESB to receive school visits using the DOGs funds.
3. VEDC members of schools prioritised by DESBs to receive school visits using the DOGs funds.

Three schools in each district were selected by DESBs from the DOGs work plan to participate in the evaluation. The selection criteria for the school included:

1. DESB prioritised school to be supported using the DOGs funds.
2. School located 20min or less from the DESB office.
3. School located between 30-60min from the DESB office by car.
4. School located more than 1 hour drive from the DESB office.

A total of 172 participants contributed to this evaluation. Of which 18% are females. Interviews were conducted with 55 DESB staff in 12 districts. Of this group 18% are female participants. The evaluation team conducted surveys using tablets in 34 schools with 70 school staff. Of this group, 24% are females. Surveys were also conducted with 35 VEDC members, of which one was a female committee member.

Acknowledgement

The views expressed in the report are those of the author and contributors. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Adam Smith International, Australian Aid, BEQUAL or the Government of Lao PDR. The content represents the views of LADLF and all errors are the author's own.

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