

## The Road to an Active “Hak Arn,” School Library Action with Lao Children (ALC)

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Action with Lao Children (ALC) has been dedicated to improve the educational environment especially the reading environment of children in Laos since 1982, striving to enhance their ability to express thoughts and ideas and to enable them to choose their own path in life.

ALC has been dedicated to work in 1) publishing books in Lao language by local authors and illustrators, 2) distribution of books by setting-up school libraries, 3) capacity building of school teachers, government staff, and instructors of teacher training schools, and 4) assistance for Children’s Cultural Centers where children can read, play a drama, learn music, art and traditional Lao dance which are not taught in school.

When ALC was established nearly 30 years ago, there was only one national library and one bookstore in Vientiane Capital; there were no books available for children in Laos. Even today, children in remote areas have a limited opportunity to read and write in daily lives. In urban areas where books and libraries are more accessible, the vast majority of teachers and parents still do not recognize the value of reading. Not only children, but teachers are not familiar with books or libraries since most of adults did not have the access to them during their childhoods.

Teachers are often obsessively dedicated in keeping books at their libraries by locking up a library door or book shelves without making books available for children because they are so afraid of loss of books.

Another major problem we constantly came across was a transfer or turn-over of trained teachers. As a trained teacher leaves her/his school due to the transfer order, maternity leaves, retirement, etc, a library is abandoned without any service providers.

In order to tackle the first challenge, the teachers’ fear for losing books, we introduced a book exchange system. Every book at school libraries has a date card in order to record names of lendees and dates of check-out/in.

Every time a book is lent out, a column of its date card is filled with a lendeer’s name. When a school has three cards which filled with lendees’ names on both sides, they can exchange with a new book with a local government supervisor or ALC. Hence, the more books children lend and the

more full date cards schools have, the more new books they can obtain. We receive positive feedbacks from teachers that they are no longer hesitant about lending books, because they can obtain more books even a few books are lost. We introduced this exchange system as a stepping stone for self-sustained operation of school libraries. In most cases, schools in Laos receive libraries, books, and trainings as an aid from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other aid agencies which often fails to create ownership among teachers. A budget for purchasing books is not allocated for schools, yet ALC attempts to prepare schools to obtain books in return for some cost or efforts they pay. ALC works with local government supervisors in the operation of book exchange and follow-up of schools' reading activities, so that schools can obtain new books and necessary assistance locally and promptly.

Furthermore, we changed the way of delivering training workshops after finding many abandoned libraries without trained teachers. Now, ALC's trainers travel to each school and deliver trainings for teachers from the entire school including a principle; whereas we previously organized a collective seminar inviting two teachers from each school. With the new approach, many teachers share the responsibility for reading activities, and they can avoid the discontinuity of service even if a few trained teachers leave. Though this approach is a costly and time-consuming way for capacity building as it requires ALC staff to constantly travel, we find it more effective in a long term.

As teachers feel more comfortable with reading activities and lending books, many homeroom teachers take a set of books to their classroom, utilize them as supplementary books during their classes and lend them before pupils go home. Many schools improved the utilization of books especially at those schools where books are kept at their small teachers' office while many schools do not have a spare room for a library.

In the area of publishing, among a number of folktales, short stories, and science books, ALC publishes picture books and Kamishibai (picture-story shows) unfolded with rhyming poems at which Lao children and adults grown up in the enriched oral tradition are overjoyed. While untangling knots of teachers' difficulties and fears towards the unaccustomed activity, reading, we trigger joy of reading among children, wishing to create feelings of "Hak Arn" – *love to read*, a nickname of school libraries ALC supports to set-up.