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Developing Sustainable Inclusive Education in South East Asia through School and Community Development: Critical Challenges in Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia.

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Abstract

This paper builds on the symposium presented at ICSEI 2010 in Malaysia, ‘Developing Inclusive Schools in South East Asia’. Presenting the findings from research undertaken in 3 countries in the region between 2006 and 2010, the paper aims to explore some of the experiences of Inclusive Education projects concerning with translating policy into sustainable development for schools and communities. It is concerned with the development of more inclusive practices and systems in contexts which might be considered as particularly challenging, both socially and economically in Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia. All three projects share the common aim of trying to support the inclusion of students with disabilities1 in mainstream schools, whilst at the same time facilitating the development of quality education through the introduction of a child centred teaching pedagogy. These initiatives reflect national policy development, driven by the Education for All / Millennium Development Goals agenda and attempts to initiate system wide change. The paper describes some of the complex issues affecting these policy changes through the lens of practice development at local level in schools and communities. The paper draws on research and reflects the experiences of project workers in all three countries and considers the challenges faced in trying to ensure that inclusive values reflecting the rights of all children are at

1 Language related to disability issues is often sensitive and relates to a particular perspective. In this paper we choose to use the term ‘students with disabilities’ in accordance with the language that is used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities.
the heart of any attempts to improve the quality of schools. The research identifies a number of critical issues concerning the inclusion of children with disabilities in education, which the writers believe need to be addressed through a more systematic approach which demands greater investment in local communities and schools.

**Key Words:** Inclusive Education South East Asia  School Community Development

**Introduction**

The slow progress towards meeting Education for All (EFA) targets by 2015 has led to a focus on the clearer identification of the barriers to accessing basic education for disadvantaged groups (UNESCO 2010). Croft has argued that the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will not be achieved ‘without the inclusion of children with disabilities and young people in education’ (Croft 2010, p1). There has also been criticism that disability was not mentioned in the MDGs (Albert, Dube et al. 2005). It is increasingly recognised that significant numbers of children with disabilities do not have the opportunity to attend school on a regular basis. Some never enter school, others may start but often make poor progress and ‘drop out’ (Croft, 2010). There is also a growing understanding that there is a clear link between poverty and disability (DFID 2000).

‘Being poor also increases one’s probability of becoming impaired and then disabled.
This is not surprising as people living in poverty have limited access to basic health care, have insufficient and/or unhealthy food, poor sanitation facilities, and an increased risk and likelihood of living and working in hazardous conditions.’
(Singal 2007, p1)

The three projects we describe in this paper have the common aim of working closely with schools and communities to reform education in order to improve access and quality for all children but in particular children with disabilities and children from poor backgrounds. In this paper we define inclusive education in its broadest sense, as being concerned the right of all learners to quality education. The paper will present a brief overview of Inclusive and Quality Education, before examining in more detail the project work undertaken in the three countries. We then identify a number of critical issues which we believe need to be addressed through a more systematic approach which demands greater investment in local communities and schools.

**Inclusive Education and Quality Education**

The understanding of the term ‘Inclusive Education’ changed and developed over the years reflecting the way in which ‘Inclusion’ becomes a subject of debate internationally (Peters 2003). It has been argued that Inclusion as a concept became confused and lost its clarity, meaning different things to different people (Slee 2004). For some, inclusion is viewed as an attempt to move away from segregated provision for students with disabilities to creating mainstream placements for them (Rieser and Mason 1992). For others it is a broader concept concerned with identifying and removing barriers to participation and achievement for all students (Booth and Ainscow 2002), therefore maximising the participation of all in mainstream schools (Allan 2003) and demanding radical changes within schools (Barton 1997). The projects discussed in this
paper share the view that inclusive education involves an educational approach in which school, communities, parents and children cooperate to identify and remove the barriers to participation, enjoyment and achievement at school.

The term ‘Quality’, as with Inclusion, is often rather loosely defined (Sayed 1997). There are important parallels between the concepts of ‘Inclusion’ and ‘Quality Education’. Sayed and others (Bunting 1993; Holt 2000) argue that definitions of quality are driven by the values and beliefs which underpin education. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) emphasises the importance of equality, rights and the contribution of inclusive practices to ‘combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities …(and)… building an inclusive society’ (UNESCO 1994, p.6). However, concepts of Quality Education have been partly shaped by the way in which elements within the international educational community have sought to measure it. It has been argued that ‘an economist view of education uses quantitative measurable outputs as a measure of quality, for example enrolment ratios and retention rates, ... and cognitive achievement as measured in national or international tests.’ (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan et al. 2006, p2). We would argue that this is an approach which has become overriding within a policy setting which is effectively dominated by Education for All (UNESCO 2008) and the EFA fast track initiative (Buse 2005; WorldBank 2008). The measurement of the quality of the educational outcomes for children attending schools can be viewed in this way, however, as we argue later in this article this can also create a smoke screen which covers the true story which lies beneath the statistics.

**Contexts**

**Vietnam**

The Vietnamese history is marked by the wars against France and the United States of America. Since the Doi Moi, or economical reforms, in 1986 however, Vietnam achieved high rates of economic growth (MoLISA, 2008). By 1995 Vietnam managed to recover from a long period of war. For the first time in the history there were resources to invest in social policies. In the educational field this can be seen in the increase in educational policies since 1995 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2006) and the efforts to achieve education for all.

Vietnamese policy statements clearly indicate the will to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (Socialist Republic Vietnam, 2005). The country has already achieved 5 of the MDGs already and is very likely to achieve the others by 2015 (Bartholomew, 2009). With a primary school enrolment of 95.4% in 2005-2006, it is very likely that Vietnam will achieve universal primary education by 2015 (MoLISA, 2008). Although the net enrolment rates are high, there is still a difficult 5% of the children to reach. There is a growing consensus that the target of education for all cannot be achieved without the inclusion of children with disabilities, children from ethnic minority groups, children living in remote areas and children from poor families in the educational system (Socialist Republic Vietnam, 2005). The introduction of child-friendly school approaches and inclusive education have often been suggested as a way forward to achieve education for all in Vietnam. The signature of the Vietnamese government of the UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Biwako Millennium Framework of
Action has further motivated the Vietnamese government to develop a comprehensive law on People with Disabilities (Socialistic Republic of Vietnam, 2010). The law stipulates inclusive education should be the main approach of education for children with disabilities, but special and integrated education will remain to exist.

In its definition of inclusive education as written in the Vietnamese Disability law (Socialistic Republic of Vietnam, 2010) the Vietnamese government focus only on children with disabilities and not on other groups of children who may be at risk of being not being included in education.

As will be argued later in this paper, the efforts so far in Vietnam to realize inclusive education have been mainly concentrated on providing access to education for all and less on quality education for all.

The paper will draw up on the reflections, observation and experiences made by the project partners of the inclusive education project in the Bac Kan province. Bac Kan is a remote province in the northern highlands of Vietnam, about 160 km above Hanoi. Bac Kan is about 4,850 square km large and has a population of 308,000 inhabitants (Socialistic Republic of Vietnam, 2006). According to the national household statistics (Socialistic Republic of Vietnam 2006), Bac Kan is the third most poor province of Vietnam, with 69% of the population living beneath the poverty line. The largest ethnic minority groups in Bac Kan are the Tay, Nung, Dao and H’Mong. They form together 80% of the population in Bac Kan.

The Bac Kan Department of Education and Training, Handicap International and Save the Children are cooperating to implement the directions in inclusive education of the Ministry of Education and Training. The inclusive education project is supported by AFD (Agence Francaise de Developpement), and the European Union (European Institute of Democracy and Human Rights). The main activities of the project are identification of children with special educational needs, capacity building of teacher and school managers through trainings and in school support, provision of resources, awareness raising among community members and local authorities on the importance of education for all, stimulating community involvement in improving the quality of education and the participation of children with disabilities in community life.

Cambodia

Decades of conflict and political instability in Cambodia led to high numbers of people with disabilities and an education system on the point of complete collapse (Kalyanpur, 2007; Zook, 2010). In 1993 the first democratic and multi-party election were held, allowing Cambodia to recover and engage with the international community. Although many challenges remain, recent data from the Cambodian government (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2006) show economic growth and a fall in poverty rates in the early nineties. It is difficult to find reliable school based data and data about children with disabilities in Cambodia (Zook 2007; Heng et al, 2010), as different sources give different numbers. The data from the UNDP (2010) show that there is a relatively high number of children enrolled in education (89.8% in 2007), but a lot of children tend to drop out along the way, with 54.4% of enrolled children reaching the last grade in 2007. Children with disabilities are least likely to go the school and tend to drop out early if they are enrolled (Kalyanpur, 2007).
The Cambodia government (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) showed its commitment to reach the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All goals through a number of policies such as The Cambodian Law on Education For All, the Child Friendly School Policy and the Policy on Education of Children with Disabilities (Hang et al, 2010)

The Handicap International project in Cambodia is situated in Battambang. Battambang is situated in the North West of Cambodia. It includes the second largest city of Cambodia, Battambang City. The project aims to enforce the Cambodian policies on education for children with disabilities by strengthening local capacity in the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. The main partners of the project are the provincial and district offices of education, of social affairs and of health. At the community level the project cooperates with the self advocacy group of people with disabilities of the Chrey commune. The main activities of the project are capacity building of the school staff in providing quality education for all, of local authorities in inclusive education management and of community partners in community based support. Furthermore the project aims to identify children with disabilities and raise awareness about education for all among the community and local authorities.

Lao PDR

As with Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos has emerged from a period of instability. This is reflected in the progress being made towards meeting the MDGs (UNDP 2010). According to the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), in 1993, Lao PDR was ranked 141st out of 173 countries in but had climbed to 133rd by 2009.

‘While Lao PDR has made improvements in several areas and is on track to achieve some MDGs, there is concern about the sustainability of MDG gains given the country's reliance on ODA.’(UNDP 2010, p1)

The government policy is to aim to graduate from Least Developed Country status by 2020, and this will require sustained and inclusive economic growth over the coming years. The 7th National Socio- Economic Plan prioritized the MDGs requiring the government to implement a number of key interventions in basic education as well as in healthcare, inequality, agriculture and rural and infrastructure development. Lao PDR signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2007) in January 2008 and ratified this in September 2009. In 2009, work began between the government and a range of stakeholders, including NGOs, development agencies and representatives of different groups and communities, to develop a new Inclusive Education policy. Initial drafts of the policy stated that the aim for children with disabilities was ‘to provide learning opportunity for all children appropriate to their individual abilities’ through ‘provision in the education system for all children with special needs’ (CE 2009). The current policy aims to ensure that every school is ‘child-friendly’ (CRIN 2010), an initiative which is being supported by development agencies and NGOs through a new education sector development framework.

A small proportion of children in Lao PRD attend pre-school and a similar number go on to secondary school. The teaching language medium is the Lao language, but many children are from ethnic backgrounds which have a different first language, making them vulnerable to experiencing language and understanding based barriers to participation and achievement in school. Consequently, nationally, these children are less likely to attend school and, when they
do attend, more likely to drop out of school (SCN 2008). There are similar challenges concerning children with disabilities and also children from economically poor families. There are approximately 40,000 teachers, many of whom have received only 1 year of basic training, although the current National strategy is to ‘upgrade’ teachers through in-service training and to improve initial teacher training. The Ministry of Education in Lao PDR is publically committed to reaching its Education For All targets (UNESCO 2008) although it is acknowledged that there are serious challenges in achieving these by 2015 (Ministry of Education 2008).

This paper will focus on data collected through the country’s 16 year Inclusive Education (IE) Project which ran from 1993 – 2009 making it one of the longest running projects of its kind. The IE project aimed to support the participation of all children in school, with a particular focus on students with disabilities. The main strategy to enable this involved working to change the education system through the introduction of child-centred approaches to teaching and learning in 539 schools across the country. From its inception, the aim of the Inclusive Education Project had been to ensure that disabled students didn’t only have access to school but that they also experienced ‘meaningful, relevant and quality learning’ (Holdsworth 2003, p3). There was an acknowledgement that in order to enable disabled children to access school, the system would need reform. The existing teaching pedagogy in 1993 was based on traditional approaches involving high levels of rote-learning and copying from the blackboard. Most teachers had not received any professional training. The project focused on training and supporting teachers to improve the quality of education by introducing child centred learning approaches to learning involving:
1. a range of different activities to take place during the lesson;
2. increased use of resources;
3. a range of approaches to student groupings;
4. different questioning styles;
5. the development of lessons which had relevance to real life or learner’s own experiences.

During 2008-9 a detailed evaluation of the impact of the project was undertaken by the Ministry of Education together with Save the Children Norway. A detailed overview of the methodology and the findings are described in detail in a recent publication (Grimes 2009). Much of the data we presented here draws on this publication as well as other recent conference papers (Grimes, Sayarath et al. 2009; Grimes 2010).

**Critical Issues**

Through the data collected in all three IE Projects, we can begin to identify a number of themes emerging which have significance for the achievement of the MDGs in SE Asian countries.

**Policy development**

In all three countries the projects experienced challenges in trying to translate national policy into practice. This reflects lessons learned internationally (Booth and Ainscow 2002; Booth and Dyssegaard 2009) which indicate that in order to achieve this with some degree of success, it is
necessary to pay attention to the development of a school culture which will enable and support inclusive practices. In the case of projects facilitated by development agencies and NGOs, this is further complicated by the fact that policy statements are often constructed based on a set of assumptions which do not always take local cultural factors into account. Recent research in this field indicates that it is useful to try and clearly identify interlinking cultural factors and constraints / possible facilitators affecting teacher development and the way in which policy can be implemented in schools (Stephens 2007, p203-12; Howes, Grimes et al. 2009). In Lao PDR, factors which can be identified as constraining the development of reflective practitioners, which is a pre-requisite for professional development of teachers, included political, social and religious factors. For example, Buddhism in Lao PDR encourages believers to attain a state of no self, where the issues of day to life become irrelevant to the spiritual development of the individual. This may conflict with the development of a professional dialogue which aims to encourage an awareness of the ‘self’ in a school and social context. Additionally, Lao PDR and also Vietnam, has a social structure, headed by a one party government which is essentially centralist, authoritarian and hierarchical. This reflects both the communist political ideology of the government and deep rooted Confucian influences on Lao society (Stuart-Fox 1997). The outcome of these factors is often deference to authority and also any forms of ‘support’ being interpreted as a covert form of monitoring and control. Nguyen et al, explore this in some detail in their discussion of co-operative learning in Asia (Nguyen, Elliott et al. 2009). They identify the importance of conceptualising trust and identity in trying to make sense of the way in which individuals in Asian contexts engage with new developments and initiatives. One of the experiences of the project work in Vietnam has been that it takes a long time to build up relationships based on reciprocal trust which are a pre-requisite to begin any significant work which will be supported by officials at all levels. Handicap International in Vietnam for example set up the inclusive education project from a rights-based perspective and social model of disability. Therefore, the project team believed it would be inappropriate to give gifts to children with disabilities on special occasions, as this would further stigmatise them as a special group, needing special attention. The focus was rather on supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities and disadvantaged children in existing social events, and providing small gifts to all children. Later on in the project it became clear that this way of thinking was quite opposite to the ‘gift culture’ and the way people are consolidating relations in Vietnam. The reaction from some local officers to this was quite negative and made the implementation of further activities more complicated.

The same cultural perspective can be found in the 3 countries when it comes to implementation strategies of the education policies. Although the general laws and policies are constructed from the rights-based perspective and social model on education, the implementation strategies often reflect a rather medical model. In Vietnam for example, the implementation strategies focus mainly on financial support, education credit and creating favourable conditions for children with special educational needs rather than on equal rights (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2006). Nguyen and Nguyen (2006) describe for example the case of a group of students with a visual impairment who wanted to enter university. The university agreed, and give them exemption from the entry exams. The students with a visual impairment felt stigmatised by this as they believed they had the right to take the entry exams like any other student in order to prove they had the same capacities. The students believed they had the right to take the exams in Braille.
A further complication in the transfer from policy to practice in the three countries is that the policies remain vague about the choice for inclusive or special education. In Vietnam for example the Ministry of Labour Invalids and Social Affairs promotes special institutions, while the Ministry of Education and Training stimulates inclusive education (Le, 2000). This is quite confusing for the government staff at provincial and district level who have to implement both of the directions. The research of Heng et al (2010) shows that also in Cambodia there is confusion and an important number of education officials at provincial and district level and school staff are not aware of the policies supporting inclusive education. This was also the case in Laos and was compounded by the fact that the Ministry of Health retained overall control over provision for disabled students in special schools. However, the Lao research also found that in some communities where the IE Project had been working for many years, attitudes towards disability had begun to change at community level. One community leader in Luang Prabang Province, commented that the IE Project had had a significant effect on his village, helping people to work more closely together to positively support all those who needed help to overcome barriers to participation in social institutions such as school. Perhaps this is an indication of the need to acknowledge that the movement from policy into practice can take a lot longer than is sometimes recognized.

**Teacher training**

The projects in Lao PRD, Vietnam and Cambodia focus on (in service) teacher training to improve inclusive practices in schools.

Research and experiences around the world and within the IE Project, has found that in fact, the attitudes of the teachers are fundamental in developing innovative and inclusive practices. The experience of the projects is that where teachers engage with the idea of changing lessons so that all children are participating and achieving, then their attitudes being to change. As well as enjoying their teaching more and becoming increasingly motivated, they are also enabled to understand *how* children with disabilities and special needs can be included in ordinary lessons in mainstream schools.

Training in the inclusive education projects in the different countries has been important but it has been those aspects of training which supported the development of positive teacher attitudes to disability which have been particularly successful. Teachers need to be shown that all children can enjoy and achieve at school.

Perhaps the key word here is ‘shown’. It is not enough to tell teachers ‘how’ to change their practice. If one thing is clear from the experience of training within the projects it is that it is hard for teachers to make the transfer from what they have learned in trainings to the daily practice of the school. Training on itself is not enough. Teachers need to visit other schools, discuss ideas and lessons with colleagues and then reflect on how they can try new approaches out in their own classrooms. Importing new ideas into schools requires teachers to take ownership of them, adapt them and integrate them into their own practice so that new pedagogies are no longer new but ‘the way we teach in our school’ (Balshaw, Grimes et al. 2005).

Strengthening pre-service training for Inclusive Education is part of the current national strategy in the 3 countries. In Lao PRD the teacher training students have to follow separate modules on inclusive education, based on the UNESCO toolkit on creating inclusive, learning friendly
environments (UNESCO, 2004). In Vietnam the universities tend to set up departments on special education, with special course on inclusive education. In Cambodia the pre service teacher training in inclusive education is under development. The existing programmes on Lao PRD and Vietnam lack practical knowledge. Inclusive principles of education need to be embedded in all areas of teaching and learning. There are specific components of core IE training that can be included within an IE module or training course, such as challenging attitudes and misinformation, or approaches to meeting the needs of identified groups of learners such as those with Visual Impairments, Hearing Impairments, etc. However, inclusive teaching is about:

- providing good quality teaching and learning experiences which engage and motivate children;
- planning lessons which take into account their current levels of development and set them challenging targets to achieve;
- seeing each child as an individual with their own individual strengths and needs.

In this sense, pre-service training for IE needs to be seen not as an add-on to the existing curriculum but as a way of re-vitalising and renewing it.

In all the discussions about teacher training, it should not be forgotten that we cannot make the same assumptions about teachers in Western countries in South East Asian countries. We have found in Vietnam, Lao PRD and Cambodia that many teachers receive a low salary. Many teachers have several other jobs besides teaching to support their family’s livelihood. When changes take longer to implement or when teachers do not always seems motivated to attend trainings or other activities, project workers and researchers should not make conclusions too fast.

**Quality – Access**

In all three countries governments have made concerted efforts to improve access to education for all. In the three projects, there is a high enrolment rate in the pilot schools. Whilst it is important to recognise that data collection is challenging in the three countries, as will be described in the following section of this paper ‘school-based data’, the overall enrolment rates in primary education are high. The UNDP (2010) describes in the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals the following enrolment rates: Vietnam: 94.5% in 2001, Lao PDR: 82.4% in 2008 and Cambodia: 88.6% in 2008.

Once children are enrolled in school however, questions need to be raised about the quality of education for all children. Le (2000) argues for example that in Vietnam children with special educational needs are included in mainstream schools, but almost no additions are made or support given to facilitate the learning and participation of the children with disabilities at school. In the three projects we notice the children with disabilities in particular, repeat grades often and drop out before finalizing primary education. In the project in Vietnam for example, there were instances where children with disabilities had to repeat Grade 1 up to 8 times and finally dropped out when they reached the age at which education is no longer compulsory in Vietnam. The high dropout rates are confirmed through an examination of UNDP figures in the MDG report (2010). Of all the children enrolled in primary schools in Cambodia, only 54.4%
reached the last grade. In Laos PDR only 66.8% of the children who are enrolled in the first grade reach the last grade of primary education. Vietnam seems to do better with 92.1% of the children enrolled in grade 1 reaching the last grade. However, it should be noted that the experience of the Vietnam IE project shows that children with disabilities are often not included in school based statistics, as discussed later.

High levels of absenteeism also raise questions about the validity of the high enrolment rates. In the projects in Vietnam and Cambodia we see that children who are coming from poor families or living in remote villages tend to be absent from school quite often, especially during the raining season when the roads are less accessible. In the remote areas in Cambodia and Vietnam the schools lack infrastructure to accommodate all the children. It happens that children only attend half day schooling in these challenging areas. Often the children from primary school go in the morning to school and the secondary school uses the buildings in the afternoon.

The schools principals and teachers in the school of the 3 projects were teaching in a traditional way, with little or no support to the participation and achievements of children with special educational needs. In the Lao PDR IE Project, schools where teachers had received IE training or refresher courses in IE relatively recently were more likely to be aware of developments in child centred teaching pedagogy. They were also more likely to be aware of guidance against using corporal punishments and the implications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This process had been supported by the publication of UNESCO’s ‘Embracing Diversity Toolkit’ (UNESCO 2004, 2009). Although the content of the UNESCO toolkit had not been directly included in the IE training materials, it had influenced the ways in which IE trainers had developed their course content. Significantly, the Lao PDR project found that training alone had little impact unless it was supported by a number of other factors.

- School Principals who had a good understanding of how to develop inclusive practices in school which would support all children
- Support from local education advisors who could act as a ‘critical friend’ (Swaffield 2004) offering both support and challenge, based on the aims of the project;
- Developing a community of practice (Wenger 1998) through local learning networks between schools
- Close partnership working with parents and local community

School based data

We have already noted above, the challenges in collecting reliable school based data about children with disabilities in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. There are a number of significant issues. One is the of the definitions concerning ‘special educational needs’, ‘disadvantaged children’ and ‘disabilities’. The definitions used in policies at national level do not always fit with the internationally used definitions. For example, in the Vietnamese law, disability is defined as:

‘Persons with disabilities by definition of this Law are those who have impairment of one or more parts of their body, which are shown in different forms of disability, and may cause difficulties in work, daily life and learning’ (Socialistic Republic of Vietnam, 2010, p1)
This doesn’t reflect the social model and rights-based perspective as in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where disability is defined as:

‘Disability is an evolving concept ... (resulting) from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (UN, 2007)

The differences in definitions make it difficult to collect and compare data. Experiences from identification activities in the 3 projects show that the people at the local level who collect data about children with disabilities do not always have a shared understanding of what constitutes a disability. Additionally, the concepts of ‘disability’ and ‘disease’ are often confused.

The project in Vietnam had made concerted attempts to identify all the children with disabilities in the project area. It was especially difficult to identify children with more complex disabilities. Due to cultural beliefs parents sometimes feel ashamed of having a child with disabilities, and tend to keep the children inside the house. There are also geographical factors creating barriers to collection of data. In the project area there are very remote villages that can only be reached after a long walk through the mountains and across rivers on small mud paths and bamboo bridges. For parents it is very hard to bring their children with more complex disabilities to the local health centres or schools were screenings are being held. Despite a significant investment in time and energy, the best estimate the Vietnam project could make concerning numbers of children with disabilities only amounted to 2% of the estimated number of school aged children, still far below World Health Organisation estimates which give a benchmark of 10% of the population likely to have a disability.

To improve the knowledge of the teachers and local community members on how many children with disabilities there are in their community and where they live, the project started mapping exercises with the local stakeholders. During the discussions to set up the mapping exercises it became clear that some of the data was collected ‘from behind the desk’ and teachers did not visit the remote places. Although the teachers said all children are enrolled in school, the mapping exercise revealed that this was not the case.

The same issues could be seen in the Laos project. All school Principals and District Advisors confirmed that all children living locally were enrolled in school, but this did not correlate with other sources of data which were collected through the end of project evaluation. Reports from community health teams and other NGOs working in Lao PDR, such as Handicap International and Catholic Relief Service who had been conducting small scale house-to-house surveys in villages, indicated that there were significant numbers of disabled students who were ‘hidden’ statistics – they might not be registered officially with the village committee and not considered to be eligible to attend school. The Lao IE Projects’ conservative estimate was that there were between 40,000 – 50,000 children with more complex disabilities, who were not included in official statistics and not attending school.

Conclusions

Comparative research on disability in education in South East Asia is a relatively undeveloped area of academic interest. Perhaps this reflects the way in which academic researchers and development workers have tended to lead separate existences. We hope that in this paper we
have been able to break down some of these historical barriers by beginning to explore the findings from development projects in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia and using these as vehicles to problematise an important area of education. It is significant that the rhetoric from governments often seeks to cover over areas of challenge – pressure from UN, development agencies and the World Bank together with significant funding packages tends to encourage an overly positive outlook. As we write this paper, the draft of the latest UN MDG report is being debated in New York and is already being criticised (OXFAM 2010) for lacking detail and being overly optimistic. The research from the three projects presented here raises many important issues, but in the context of achieving the MDGs, perhaps the most sobering thought is that it is clear that neither Cambodia, Lao PDR or Vietnam are able to make a convincing estimate of how many children of school age have disabilities, nor how many of these children are out of school. Current government estimates in all 3 countries do not match the experience of the 3 Projects or relate to World Bank estimates. In the light of this, it seems reasonable to conclude that access to education for children with disabilities in these countries has a long way to go before we can conclude it is not a significant problem. In regard to the quality of education for children with disabilities who are in school, it also seems clear from the experience of the 3 projects, that there is much that needs to be done if traditional pedagogy is to develop into more child centred approaches which provide a meaningful and supportive environment for all children. However, it also seems appropriate to note that there are positive examples of more inclusive practice being developed in all three countries. Perhaps the most useful way of interpreting these findings would be to acknowledge that change takes time. The EFA/MDG agenda does not allow for this. In the rush to meet a set of artificial deadlines imposed by the international community it may be that some groups of children will get left behind as governments and development agencies ignore the findings which are beginning to emerge from research. Sustainable change requires a grassroots, community based approach, as well as policy development and systems change. This takes time and a concentration of funding into communities and school based projects. It also requires that more attention is paid to the assumptions made about the way in which teachers develop their practice and communities change their attitudes.

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