Community involvement in promoting education and culture-based sustainable development in the Lao PDR

By Carolyn Dean

As part of an integrated community development project in Phongsaly, the northern-most province in Laos, community members are developing materials and activities used both within the classroom and the community to promote learning and to address some of the main barriers to education. These barriers include lack of clean water, basic health, nutrition and livelihood needs, gender inequality, lack of knowledge of the national language, as well as a lack of trained teachers who speak Ershi-Loma, a Hani-Akha-related language spoken in these communities. With these challenges in mind, we began learning from the community through holding an ethno-arts workshop, developing a cultural calendar, collecting folktales, and researching their language. We recruited four young people from the community who have since developed several video projects including dramas about opium addiction and gambling, pesticide usage, and traditional games, songs, and dances. To inspire the community, they also made a video documenting the variety of activities in the preschool classes, showcasing what the children are learning. Furthermore, in collaboration with young and old in the community, they developed more than 20 stories which they illustrated and developed into booklets. In addition, they are leading activities which help the children to learn Lao language, math, and other content, while expanding their knowledge of their own language and culture through traditional musical instruments, games, and daily life. This process of community involvement is directly contributing to the quality of education and the reduction of inequalities.