

Australian Volunteers



Expanding national youth
volunteering in Laos

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Partnering with volunteering organisations to support their existing structures, volunteer management, and activities.

Complete

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Cover image: Ms. Cheanmaly Phonesavanh, staff member at Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO), with volunteer Tran Tran, Community Education Project Development Officer at SEAMEO. Photo: Teagan Glenane.

Summary

The Australian Volunteers Program supported volunteerism in Laos by enhancing national volunteering opportunities and strengthening volunteering institutions. We worked with Huam Jai Assasamak (HJA), one of the largest volunteer-focused organisations in the country.

The project tested a new volunteering model in Laos, whereby HJA recruited volunteers from the Laos Australia National Scholarships (LANS) program to support program partner organisations. In doing so, the program also tested how well we can share our resources with other organisations responsible for mobilising volunteers.

Our objectives

- Learn how we can be more collaborative in the way resources and processes are shared.
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- Ensure that HJA benefits from improved systems, processes and structure so they are able to take a lead role in national volunteering in Laos.
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- Prepare LANS graduates for real-world professional experience.
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- Establish a better understanding of the volunteering landscape in Laos while also ensuring that partner organisations benefit from engagement with both local youth and remote Australian volunteers.

Our approach

The program recognises the value of collaboration and took a two-pronged approach to test new approaches to partnerships. The lessons learned from this project can be used to inform any future development of alternative models of volunteering.

1. Innovation Partnership

The first part of this project focused on the Australian Volunteer Program and HJA working together to learn what is required for a truly collaborative innovation partnership. We jointly aimed to develop a snapshot report that would provide insight on volunteer-sending-organisations and volunteer-related activities in Laos to inform future projects and strengthen our overall awareness and understanding of volunteering within Laos at local, provincial, and national levels.

2. Sharing Resources

The second part of this project aimed to focus on sharing resources through the co-design of a new volunteering model with HJA. We identified an opportunity to support HJA in recruiting youth volunteers from the Laos Australian National Scholarships (LANS) program, a DFAT Scholarship program, and placed them on assignments with our partner organisations.

This project took a human-centred design approach that actively involved all stakeholders in the design process. During each phase, we developed activities to test ideas with partners and potential volunteers, and feedback our learnings back into the project design, with changes made as needed. Co-design activities were run with returned and remote volunteers who had experience in Laos, which included getting their input on further design choices, refer to Appendix 1 to learn more about how we tested volunteer models with students. We also consulted industry partners in Laos to identify the skills young people would need, refer to Appendix 2 to learn more about how we engaged industry partners.

What we learned

- Testing a new volunteering model while also testing how to share resources may have added unnecessary complications. It may have been simpler to test how to share resources as its own project.
- A collaborative approach to partnerships is required within an innovation partnership.
- It's important to challenge assumptions and ensure great work practice is being shared across more parts of the organisations. This means encouraging collaboration when making decisions.
- When designing a project it's important to strategically move from concept to design, rather than focusing on implementation. This includes valuing the prototyping stage, as well as being open to pivoting in a new direction.

Appendix 1 - Testing volunteer models with students in Laos

The Australian Volunteers Program partnered with Huam Jai Asasamak (HJA), a leading youth volunteering organisation in Laos, to co-develop a model of volunteering that utilises the expertise of both organisations. This model is being developed within the program's broader innovation project to support volunteerism in Laos by expanding national youth volunteering opportunities.

The program team joined up with HJA in Luang Prabang to run a workshop with Laos Australia National Scholarships (LANS) students, who were identified as a good cohort of young people on whom to test our ideas. We collaborated with academics from Souphanouvong University to prepare a consultation workshop that would draw out their experiences and ideas, a critical element of the design process. Students were engaged in strengths-based activities, interactive surveys using new technologies, and focus group discussions and student inputs will be fed into the development of the volunteering model.

Prior to this visit, program and HJA staff had been collaborating on the project online from different locations. This week of working together helped establish the project team and how we could work together to co-develop this idea. It was a hugely successful week collaborating with our partners and stakeholders, which regenerated our enthusiasm and provided a clearer way forward for pursuing this opportunity.



The project team and students from Laos Australia National Scholarships LANS



Appendix 2 - Engaging industry partners in Laos

A consultation workshop with industry partners in Laos was conducted in November 2022. The workshop was aimed at identifying skills young people would need to increase their employment opportunities. Representatives from different industries, such as Beer Lao, recruitment companies, international NGO's and community organizations were invited as potential employers for new graduates.

The industry partners were asked about some of the challenges, as well as opportunities, they see for young people entering the employment market. One finding from the conversation was that partners consider volunteering as work experience when hiring young staff. Another was that they value soft skills, such as time management, organisational skills and communication, more than technical skills when hiring employees early in their careers. Partners were also presented with the results of the consultation workshop done with Laos Australia National Scholarships (LANS) students at Souphanouvong University.

This consultation workshop is part of the Exploring Volunteering for Development workstream under the Expanding National Youth Volunteering project in Laos. The learnings from this consultation workshop were feedback into the project and informed the broader lessons learned from this workstream.