



A Life of Never Giving Up: *Stories from Nonghet*

Written by 9 Young Authors from Nonghet District,
Xieng Khouang Province, Lao PDR

A Life of Never Giving Up: *Stories from Nonghet*

**Written by 9 Young Authors from
Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province, Lao PDR**

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	iii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Approach and Methodology</i>	vii
<i>The Unrealised Wish</i> MS. KHAMPHIK THAMABANG	1
<i>Onhkham, a Daughter of Dindam Village</i> MS. TIET SISOMBATH	7
<i>Budding Without Blooming</i> MR. SORKONGVEU	15
<i>Overcoming Barriers and Learning Faster</i> MR. YAEYA YEUTONG	23
<i>A Life of Never Giving Up</i> MR. THONGYA	31
<i>Nang Xong, the Woman Who Fought For Her Children</i> MR. TONVA VALUE	39
<i>Like Dying and Being Reborn</i> MS. KHAMPHIK THAMABANG	49
<i>How Maiyear Decided to Send Her Children to School</i> MR. YAHA VANGSY	57
<i>Touyer's Choice</i> MR. TOUYER	71
<i>How Chickens Can Transform Lives</i> MR. KHAMNOY	79

All stories are printed with the permission of the authors.

ChildFund Laos works in partnership with children and their communities to create lasting and meaningful change by supporting long-term community development and promoting children's rights.



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



FOREWORD



These 10 stories were written by a group of young people from ChildFund’s partner communities. Community members aged 16 to 30 attended training sessions on creative writing not only to develop their Lao language skills, but also to allow them to share their experiences of ChildFund’s partnership work in their own communities.

ChildFund has not altered the content of these stories in any way and has worked to keep the translations as close as possible to the original material. These stories are based on facts taken from each of the writers’ own experiences and represent the youths’ own experiences of change in their communities. These stories provide ChildFund with an opportunity to learn more about our work in partnership with communities and local authorities, as well as providing an authentic and genuine voice to young people living in partner communities. These stories will help ChildFund learn more about the impacts of our work and provide a unique and personal insight into change in rural Laos.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Mastaglio'.

Chris Mastaglio
Country Director

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Nine young writers from ChildFund's partner communities wrote this book. They spent many days in training and weeks refining their stories to produce these insightful stories into life in their communities. In addition, each of the writers supported, listened to, and gave constructive advice to their peers, and ChildFund Laos is grateful for the contribution of all of the young writers. By helping us all better understand the challenges in their lives, they have supported the development and enrichment of both their communities and organisations like ChildFund.

The Training Team, composed of Mr. Bounthanh Phongphichid and Mr. Keobounthanh Keoprakasit, travelled to Xieng Khouang over a period of one year to facilitate writing workshops and also provided follow up support to individual writers by phone. The team has also been involved in editing the stories and providing advice for this publication. We would like to thank them for both their support to the writers and their professionalism.

We are also grateful to our colleagues at ChildFund Laos for supporting preparation and facilitation of workshops, providing follow up support for youth and for preparing the book for publication.

Marieke Charlet

Development Effectiveness and Learning Manager

APPROACH & METHODOLOGY



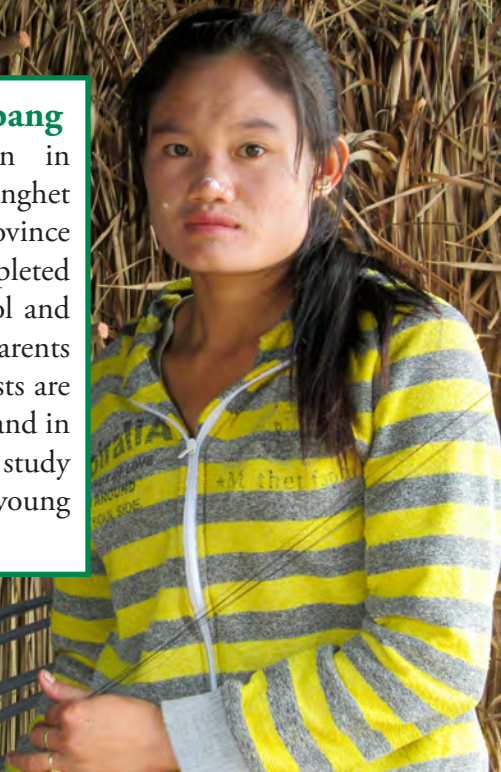
After building skills in non-fiction essay writing and interview collection over two week-long workshops, young writers were free to choose people and topics to write about. Their only constraint was that they had to depict real people's lives and illustrate changes in their district. During the third workshop, the youth refined their stories through developing their writing style, rhythm and emotion.

Timeframe	Activity
<i>November 2012</i>	Seven day workshop on essay writing. Nine short case studies were produced.
<i>June 2013</i>	Five day workshop on data collection and interviewing. The young writers edited versions of their first case studies.
<i>June-August 2013</i>	Monthly monitoring of essay writing
<i>September 2013</i>	Five day workshop on essay writing. Young writers produced a final draft of their stories to share with other participants.
<i>October 2013</i>	Participants finalised their essays and took pictures of their main characters.
<i>November-December 2013</i>	A Lao language edition cataloging the 10 stories was produced.
<i>January-February 2014</i>	Translation into English.
<i>March 2014</i>	The authors and main characters involved in the stories provided informed consent for publication.
<i>April 2014</i>	Publication.

THE UNREALISED WISH

Ms. Khamphik Thamabang

Ms. Khamphik was born in Phakkhae Tai Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 28/12/1989. She completed Grade 7 at Secondary School and currently works helping her parents with farm work. Her interests are silk weaving, sports, and art and in the future she would like to study as a teacher to help educate young Lao people.



Phakkhae Tai Village is a small village targeted for development in the Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province. An elderly man lived in Phakkae Tai named Uncle Vanh. He was renowned as being intelligent and erudite. Uncle Vanh was 56 years old, and was married to a woman named Aunt Khamphaen. They had been married for nearly 20 years, with eight children between them. Their family's principle activity was farming, and they raised some livestock to sell or eat when times were difficult.

His eldest daughter married a youth from another village, and left Phakkae Tai for the village of her husband. Uncle Vanh's new son-in-law was a mechanic, and the couple opened their own garage, making enough of an income to take care of the family and build a warm home together. Uncle Vanh, his wife, and the rest of their children remained in their old village. Sometimes, the younger children would go to stay with their oldest sister and brother-in-law, helping them with their work. During the rice planting season, they would return so as to help their parents plant crops and raise livestock as much as they could.

Although Uncle Vanh undertook many different kinds of work, he was still unable to make ends meet for his family. Uncle Vanh knew that the farming life would never make him rich, or even help him provide for his family. Therefore, he decided to apply to become a farmhand at a pig farm in Longpiao Village, in Kham District. The farm needed labour, so they accepted Uncle Vanh

to work with them. Uncle Vanh took the job at the pig farm not only for the salary, but to gain experience raising pigs, so that he could use that knowledge to help his own family. Therefore, he decided to learn from the farmer and they agreed he would learn during one week and pay 150,000 kip for the training. But at this time Uncle Vanh only had 200,000 kip. So he requested the farmer to work for him longer. He learnt when the pigs were ready for breeding, how to ensure they would breed, and correctly. He learnt how to medicate the animals, how to treat them, and even how to assist them in giving birth. Uncle Vanh spent nearly three months away from his family at the pig farm, until the rice harvesting season came, and he had to give notice to the farm and return to his home, but of course he had took all his new knowledge on pig farming with him, in his memory.

The next year, in addition to working in the rice fields and planting crops, Uncle Vanh and his children built a pig pen, divided into three sections. After that, Uncle Vanh went out to buy a sow, three piglets, and a boar. He put to use all of the methods that he'd learnt at the pig farm



to try and raise the animals. After three months, the sow began to show signs of restlessness, and Uncle Vanh knew exactly what was happening; he quickly let the boar into the sow's enclosure. Uncle Vanh monitored the breeding activities of the two pigs, and when they were done, he separated them once more. After another three months, the sow gave birth to piglets. The first

litter of piglets included eight animals, white in color, plump, and very cute. Uncle Vanh watched over the piglets vigilantly, raising them until they could be weaned off their milk, and then he gelded the little males by himself, with each of them surviving.

He sold the first few from the litter, and kept three for himself. He then moved them from piglet food onto the diet of adult pigs. When they were bigger, he would sell these pigs and use the money to invest in more pigs. Uncle Vanh continued expanding his pig farming business, receiving support funds from his daughter and son-in-law as well. His wife and children also gained valuable experience in raising the animals, so that they could continually expand their activities.

After two years, Uncle Vanh had enough money to buy a Hyundai truck to help in farmwork. When the village chief heard that Uncle Vanh was doing so well with his pigs, he called him in for a meeting, saying, "I have heard that you are breeding pigs yourself, is it true?"

However, Uncle Vanh said, "No! Who will breed pigs themselves? The only way to do it is to let the pigs breed with other pigs!" and he laughed.

The village chief replied, "I'm joking with you, Uncle. But in all seriousness, I have heard that you've been raising pigs for some time."

"Yep, I've raising them about two or three years now," said Uncle Vanh.

“And how is it to raise pigs? Is it difficult?” enquired the village chief.

“Yep, it’s tough, because I have to keep this breed of pig in its pen. I can’t let them run around the village and eat scraps willy-nilly like ordinary pigs.”

The village chief asked many more questions, finally asking, “And where did you learn how to look after these pigs? When did you learn it? Are there a lot of expenses involved?”

Uncle Vanh answered truthfully, full of pride at his own cleverness at learning without paying for any lessons. He had money for food every month, and moreover, had received an invaluable lesson allowing him to improve his lot in life and ensure a better future for his family. That day, the village chief praised Uncle Vanh for his intelligence, and was happy to see that pig farming was a new occupation for the villagers. The village chief asked Uncle Vanh to teach other villagers interested in learning how to raise the pigs, and Uncle Vanh did not complain.

After that, people would regularly come to visit Uncle Vanh. He had built his pig pen about 300 metres from his house, but Uncle Vanh didn’t keep his pig-raising methods a secret, and every day there were people coming and going from his pig pen. Some of them wanted to share experiences with Uncle Vanh, while others wanted to buy piglets, and yet others wanted to breed their sow with Uncle Vanh’s boar. Others wanted to buy the pigs for sale at the market. Uncle Vanh had taught his sons how to raise the pigs, so that all of them knew as much about pig-raising as he did himself.

Alongside raising the pigs, Uncle Vanh and his family hadn’t ignored their fields, and continued to harvest rice, corn, beans, soybeans, taro and other crops for eating and for use in animal feed. Overall, their farm’s produce allowed Uncle Vanh to stay in business raising pigs. He did not have to spend much on the pigs, as he could use the crops he harvested to feed them. The major expense was only in expanding the pig pens, expanding farming lands, purchasing a tractor to plough fields and deliver goods, purchasing some mills and a machine for making the pig food, and medicines for vaccinating and treating the animals.

Therefore, every year, Uncle Vanh’s family made a profit of many millions. They have been able to build a modern new house, the envy of all the other villages. Uncle Vanh even had enough money to marry his son to a wealthy family in Meuang Feuang, and all his other children had motorbikes to ride to school. By raising pigs alongside their other agricultural work, the family became a model family in the village, earning a higher income than anybody else.

Aside from that, Uncle Vanh has made a great contribution helping society through his efforts in training the villagers about raising pigs. Pig-raising is a pursuit in which he has become an expert and a most admired individual. People call him “the thief who didn’t break the law,” and another special title, “the cleverest man in the village.”

ONHKHAM, A DAUGHTER OF DINDAM VILLAGE

Ms. Tiet Sisombath

Ms. Tiet was born in Dindam Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 12/02/1995. She works doing upland agriculture. Her interests are sports and arts and in the future she would like to improve her knowledge to help her country in some way.



When she was young, Onh was a cute child with chubby cheeks, a fair complexion, narrow eyes, and a plump body. Her family began to call her Onh (Bamboo Rat). Later on, they began to add another nickname, Kham (Golden), onto it; so when she registered for school at age 6, she became Onhkham. She was the second of three children of Mr. Phai and Ms. Vanpheng, villagers of Dindam, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province.

Phai and his family have lived as upland farmers, growing rice and corn in order to support themselves, for a long time now. Yet, their plot of land is insufficiently sized and they cannot increase their annual income from agriculture. Each year they don't quite produce enough, which is the reason their family is a "poor family" within the village. Phai is determined to support all of his children's efforts to attend school, but simply lacks the means to make this possible. As a result, Tounkham, his oldest child, had to drop out of school in order to help support the younger siblings, Onhkham and their younger brother, to attend school as long as they possibly can. As for Tounkham, she was only able to complete her third year of elementary school. She learned just enough to be able to read and write before dropping out and helping her parents in the fields.

Onhkham says of Tounkham, "My older sister is only two years older than me, but she has a lot of responsibility. She decided to quit school in order to help our parents, enabling my brother

and I to continue our studies. My sister is a very good person.” Even though this decision was based on the family’s poverty and hardship, Phai, Vanpheng, and Tounkham were never discouraged. This helped Onhkham and her brother continue attending school.

This year, Onhkham is 15 years old. As she becomes a woman, her body has begun to change. When she was younger, she was plump. Yet, as she grows up, she feels that she has grown taller and slimmer. Another special feature that occurs every time she smiles is that dimples appear on both of her cheeks. Onhkham’s character is also special and reflects her goodness as a person, as she never talks back to her parents or older sister at all. Even though she doesn’t help her family in the fields, she is still responsible for helping out around the house whenever school is out, by feeding the pigs, ducks, and chickens, fetching water, cooking, and gathering kindling and firewood.



As for her studies, Onhkham has taken a great interest in class throughout her schooling. She has never skipped a class, pays close attention to her lessons in the classroom and takes careful notes, and always

completes her homework. Onhkham faithfully upholds the school’s regulations by providing manual upkeep. She joins in extracurricular activities, including sports, arts, and other activities that the school offers from time to time.

Mr. Khamsy and Ms. Khouvong, both administrators and teachers at the Dindam Village Elementary School, said of her, “Onhkham was a student at this school. She was a very good student with a good personality, hard working, helpful, a good role model, and a good friend to everyone.”

Presently, Onhkham doesn’t study in Dindam anymore. She has moved to study in secondary school in Nonghet District. This year, she will be in her third year of secondary school. In Nonghet, Onhkham rents a dormitory with her brother and goes to school five days per week. On the weekends, she and her brother return to their village to help their parents as much as they can, especially during the harvest season. During this period, the young people of the village have a lot of fun, as they take turns helping out on each others’ farms. Tounkham, the older sister, always takes Onhkham and their brother out to help with friends.

Onhkham, in addition to readily helping out, also has a good demeanor and speaks cordially. She has jokes to tell that leave her friends rolling on the floor - whatever it takes to make the atmosphere jovial when they are working in the fields. Ms. Maisi, a friend her age, speaks of Onhkham: “She is really quite funny. She always makes jokes and finds ways to make her friends laugh. Whenever she isn’t around to help us work, the atmosphere is quite dull.”

One weekend in Dindam Village, an officer of the ChildFund organisation came to the village to collect information on the youth, their talents, and their interests in sports. Onhkham had just returned from collecting firewood and was about to take a

shower. At that moment, the ChildFund representative arrived at her house and asked to interview her. Onhkham received her guest politely and learned of their goals in visiting the village.

“Hello there, we are from an organisation called ChildFund in Nonghet District. We would like to select some young people from this village to participate in a sport activity with us.”

“What kind of sport?” interrupted Onhkham eagerly.

“Rugby! Have you ever heard of rugby?” the ChildFund employee asked.

“No, I’ve never heard of that,” replied Onhkham.

“Are you interested in practicing with us?”

“Is this sport difficult? Is it dangerous?” asked Onhkham.

“It’s similar to other sports in that there might be some violence, but not so dangerous,” the representative responded comfortingly.

“If it’s not too dangerous, I’d like to play. Will you let me practice with you?”



When the officer saw that Onhkham was interested and excited to participate, there was no way that ChildFund could refuse her. From then on, Onhkham became a full recruiter of female youths in Dindam village to be involved with ChildFund. She was summoned to go to Nonghet District and practice for one week. Then, she was sent to compete in Phonsavan District. After the scrimmage, the rugby team of Nonghet District stayed in Phonsavan for another week to practice. Once the team came home, they dispersed to their own families.



Onhkham returned to Dindam Village full of delight that she had many sports uniforms, gifts, a certificate of completion of the rugby course, and certificates of appreciation from the district and province to show off to her family and friends. Soon, the whole village learned of her proficiency and skill. Phai and Vanpheng smiled ear to ear with pride to have such a fearless and strong daughter represent their entire village.

Onhkham’s mother said, “I have high hopes for my daughter. Her father and I fully devote all of our efforts to support her education in order to brighten her future, so that she won’t have to labour in the fields as we do now.” Onhkham’s mother spoke of her with great pride and certainty. To drive the village youth to spend their free time more productively, instead of loafing around or using drugs or alcohol, Onhkham has been authorised

by ChildFund to use the knowledge and skills acquired in her provincial training programmes to train the youths of her village in rugby. She has really put a lot of effort into her tasks and has received a great deal of participation from the village's young people, who flock to devote their time to this new activity in droves.

There is even more good news: in 2014, Onhkham was officially selected to be a sports youth leader. This great news has created even more pride for Onhkham and her family. Onhkham vows to be a good daughter and a good citizen in Dindam Village, and says that she will study as much as she possibly can, so that ChildFund's trust and efforts will have been worthwhile. The positive outcomes began with enabling good results with Onhkham, so it's fitting that she has received the accolades of being a great daughter of Dindam Village. We would like to congratulate her and wish her future success as she follows her hopes and dreams.

BUDDING WITHOUT BLOOMING



Mr. Sorkongveu

Mr. Sorkongveu was born in Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 15/05/1992. He completed Grade 3 of Secondary School and currently works doing upland farming. His interests are reading stories and listening to the news and in the future he would like to study English and become a teacher.



Every morning, a white blanket of fog would waft down and cover the tall mountains in the area, including the upland farming area of Mr. Yerveu and Mrs. Yaelor. Yerveu and Yaelor were poor villagers living in Phakkhæ Neua. During the upland farming season, they would take their two children to go and sleep at the farm site for convenience, so they could look after the crops and farming equipment.

Taking the children to live at the farm site was convenient for the parents, but tough on the children, as they had to walk along a winding road, through forests, along a river, and through fog and rain, just to get to school. The oldest of the two boys, whose name was Sorkongveu, was nine years old. The youngest boy, named Khamla, was seven years old. The family was very poor, and had a lot less than other families. Sometimes there wasn't enough food to eat. Still, the parents thought of their children's futures, wanting them to receive as good of an education as all the other children. Their father always told them, "Children! You must wake early, steam the rice and make food to bring to school. And don't dawdle on the way home; come back to our fields to help your parents."

Therefore, every day after school, Sorkongveu rushed to take his younger brother straight back to the family fields. When they arrived, they helped their parents in many ways, by feeding the chickens and ducks, feeding the pigs, collecting water,

and lighting lanterns before preparing dinner. Some days the firewood ran out and the brothers would go to cut more from the forest, carrying heavy loads home on their backs.



Despite their poverty, the two brothers were not discouraged. They patiently learned their studies as best as they could and helped their parents with full hearts, believing that one day, their family would move

out of poverty. Despite their miserable life, undertaking strenuous work in the middle of the forest, the children sometimes felt happy in their hearts, taking pleasure in the sound of birds and watching them fly around. After the harvest season, the family led a similar life to everyone else. However, in the rainy season, they would go out into the fields, weeding and building fences and rails. They would plant rice, corn, chilis, eggplant, taro, and potato as food for the future.

After five or six years, the two boys had grown into young men, and had completed primary school. Sorkongveu undertook a test to continue studying at secondary school, at fourteen or fifteen years of age. Because the school was far away, both brothers no longer slept at the fields. Instead they stayed at the house, so they could rush off to school each morning and arrive on time with their peers. At secondary school, English lessons were held for two hours a week. The teacher taught a little bit of reading, writing and speaking each day. It was very enjoyable and interesting.

The teacher said, “English is a common language around the whole world. Whoever is good at English will have an advantage over others, and will be able to find work easily because there will soon be many foreigners coming to our country. They will need people who can speak English well to exchange lessons and ideas, and to work with them.”

Sorkongveu never forgot the teacher’s words. He wanted to improve his English, so that if foreigners ever came to the village he could talk to them. If he had the chance, he could even apply to work with them. Then, his family’s prospects would surely improve, and he would be a good role model for other youths in the village. It was really a shame that Sorkongveu’s family was so poor. They worked the same fields every year without any increase in their results. In fact, in four or five months, they would be out of food to eat. Even raising chickens and ducks hadn’t really helped.

Because of their poverty, after Sorkongveu had completed only lower secondary school, his parents said, “Son! Now you have completed third grade already. You can leave school next year because it doesn’t make sense for us to send you to school to study any further. You can take work as a labourer and make money for the family. We can support your younger brother to study and that should be enough.”

“Yes, older brother!” said his younger brother, “I alone will study, because I pity our parents who work too hard to send us both to school. I will study as hard as I can so that when I’m older things won’t be so difficult and our parents can depend on me!”

That night the family discussed their future together, and Sorkongveu asked for time from his family. “Let me think of a way out first, and whether I’ll stop studying or not, because my dream is close at hand. If I leave school I’ll have wasted my studies up to third form. But if I continue, where would I find the money for study materials? There are a lot of expenses.”

After that day, Sorkongveu didn’t sleep well for many nights. He stopped eating, and didn’t feel like doing anything. One day, Sorkongveu sat under a big tree near a creek close to the rice fields, and as he looked around he saw yellow, red and green leaves falling to the ground. He thought about the leaves falling to the ground. “Oh, leaves! Your future has already come.” Immediately, the words of his father and younger brother came to mind, “Leave school! Leave school!” And tears began to roll down both his cheeks. “Is this it?

What about my dream of making something of myself in the future? Am I out of options? Earth and skies, why am I being punished so?”



“I hope in the next life I am born to a rich family,” he thought. “Then I would have the chance to study and become an English teacher or work with foreigners, as I want to. But whatever I do, I will do my best, and hope that somehow things will improve for me.”

Thinking like this, Sorkongveu was able to carry on. Some days, he was hired to harvest corn, and sometimes he worked on farms. The family sometimes had enough, and sometimes went without, but they were happy to be able to save enough to support Sorkongveu’s younger brother, who by now was studying in Phonesavanh. Meanwhile, Sorkongveu worked at this person’s farm or that person’s, in this village or that, doing many different jobs. This gave him the opportunity to meet many new people, as well as a lot of different girls.

Sorkongveu met a young lady two years younger than himself, and found that she was interested in him too. Therefore, Sorkongveu went to speak to his parents one night, “Parents! I have two choices for my future. I could save money to study further, or I could stop thinking about studying and take a wife to start a family. Which do you think is best?”

His parents felt that it wasn’t a difficult decision at all, with his father answering, “I think it’s better for you to take a wife.”

His mother agreed, saying, “Yes! Take a wife. Then there will be someone to help me with the housework!”

“Oh, oh! This idea will be buried deep in her heart.” Sorkongveu had no other choice, and there was no path for him to follow his dream and become a teacher or work with foreigners. Sorkongveu continued courting the girl, until the Hmong New Year festival of 2011 had passed. Then, the marriage between Sorkonveu and his love was held in accordance with Hmong traditions. Sorkongveu thought he would be happy to have someone to help and encourage him after being married. Unfortunately, the

reality was quite the opposite: after someone new entered his life, he was unable to make decisions completely on his own.

Sometimes he had to do things he didn't like for fear of upsetting his wife. He could no longer use his money solely to support his family and his younger brother's education, as his wife would get upset. Sometimes she would get into a rage, and sometimes she would sulk and refuse to speak to him. His parents soon grew uneasy about the constant fights between Sorkongveu and his wife, and one day they decided to say something. They said they'd been watching the quarrels between the young husband and wife, and that it didn't help anything. It wasted time that could be spent bringing money to the family, especially as there now wasn't enough to send to the youngest son when he needed it. One time Sorkongveu dropped in on his parents, and heard his father saying, "I was wrong to rush young Sor into getting a wife so early. If I hadn't done so, sending money to our youngest son for study might not have been this difficult..."

Sorkongveu saw the expression of his father, and became much sadder than usual. He didn't speak, remained very quiet, and spent a lot of time on his own. The next week he decided to drink poisonous herbicide. Would it be survivable, drinking herbicide? If he passed from this world, with nobody to save him, perhaps his death would ease things. But his wife and children would suffer and miss their husband and father. What would their future be like? How would he be a pillar for his family and look after everyone?

Luckily, in 2012, an organisation from overseas came to develop villages in Nonghet, including Sorkongveu's village, which was

chosen as a target village. Sorkongveu was one of the people who went to listen to what the organisation had to say when they came to his village. That day, they said that they would build a children's club first. To his surprise, the meeting chose Sorkongkheu to be the chief of the children's club, and he didn't know what to do. But he agreed to accept the responsibility, as he saw foreigners participating in the project. He thought the heavens had blessed him, and thought he would have an opportunity to turn his dream into reality very soon.

Sorkongveu was called to attend the training with the heads of the children's clubs in two other villages. He felt he had a new experience for his life and had gained new knowledge. He felt that he had lost his loneliness and had opened his eyes and ears. He felt that if he continued to work with this project, his dream would certainly become a reality.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND LEARNING FASTER

Mr. Yeaya Yeuatong

Mr. Yeaya was born in Houaysouang Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province. He completed Grade 3 at Secondary School and currently works as a farmer. His interest is reading books for learning and in the future he would like to be a teacher and a writer.



We human beings have no choice regarding our birth, but we can make a choice about whether we will be good people or bad people. The following is the story of the life of a young girl in Houayxouang Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province, named was Nang Yangxay. She was the eldest daughter of six children belonging to Uncle Jong and Aunt Pakham. Yangxay was a cute little child, fair of skin, as H'mong people are, but unfortunately she was born less-developed than other people. Both of her arms were disabled due to polio, to the point where she was unable to feed herself or lift a glass to her own lips. Uncle Jong and Aunt Pakham loved this daughter the most. Initially they felt saddened by their daughter's disability, and were worried about her future, not knowing how she would live her life in this complex and competitive human society. But nevertheless, Uncle Jong and Aunt Pakham still had the strange feeling in their hearts that although her arms were disabled, their daughter had a very quick mind, and was intelligent and very well spoken compared to other children of the same age.

The parents thought that although their daughter might be disabled on the outside, when she grew older she might love her parents more than the other children with full use of their bodies. For these reasons, the parents were particularly dedicated, bending their backs to the sky and faces to the earth in their upland farming, and raising different types of livestock, often going without to ensure that their children would grow

well. When Yangxay was seven years old, Uncle Jong and Aunt Pakham decided to sell a pig they had raised in order to buy a uniform, books, pencil and other things for Yangxay and register her at the village schoolhouse. Yangxay was very happy that her parents loved her so much, and the school was very accomodating, allowing her to attend despite her disability. On the first day of the new school term, Yangxay woke up very early, showered and dressed in her new clothes, and her mother helped to tie her hair. She took her books, pencil, eraser and matches in her bag and rushed from the house to go to school with her friends, without wanting to eat her breakfast. She was a restless girl, eager to go to school every day, and was the furthest thing from lazy. Some days, after returning home from school, Uncle Jong and his wife looked at her schoolbooks, and saw scores of 7, 8, 9, or above. This is what made her parents content to work hard in the fields, happy that their daughter would have every opportunity to study and never go without. Yangxay's studies, from first grade, to second grade, to third grade, were never difficult or slow.

She completed third grade very easily. Her fourth year was a particularly difficult year for the children of Houayxouang, because in Houayxouang the school only went up to third grade. Anyone who wished to study further, from fourth grade or above, had to go to study in another village. They would have to go and register with the school in Namkonngoua. Namkonngoua Village was about four kilometers from Houayxouang Village. Going to study so far away created difficulties for the children, as their parents had to find money to purchase bicycles for their children to go to school. Yangxay's parents had enough money to buy a bicycle, but there was nothing they could do, as their

child was disabled and was unable to ride a bicycle like the other children.

One day Yangxay's father said to her, "This year you'll have to leave school. You can't go to school in Namkonngoua because it's too far away. If you could ride a bicycle like your friends it would be different, but your friends will go by bicycle and you will be walking. The road is long. You might be tired, or afraid."

Yangxay began to cry, tears rolling down her face in long trails. "No! I won't leave school! I'm not afraid and I won't get tired!" She cried and refused to listen to her father, as children are apt to do. She told her parents that although she was disabled and could not use her arms to hold onto a bicycle, she still had use of her legs, and could walk. She said to her parents that, although she was smart now, if she didn't go to school she would soon be stupid, without a future and unable to earn a living. She decided to tell her parents she would walk to school, no matter how difficult, and that she would pass any obstacle. Luckily, that year, there were three of her schoolmates who also didn't have a bicycle. Yangxay had some friends to walk with through sun and rain, going to school every morning and returning every evening, giving her encouragement and ensuring she was not afraid. Because of her disability, Yangxay did not have to labour in the fields with her parents and her family. Therefore, she had time to study her lessons at home.

Her father said to her, "Yangxay, you are disabled, but you never create problems for us. You always stay home and study your lessons and do the homework that your teacher gives you, and you even tirelessly help the other children."

Two years passed, and soon Yangxay had reached fifth grade at Namkonngoua Primary School. She always had higher grades than her friends, and got first place on the tests. The teachers and the other students praised her and loved her very much. Ms. Sialy, the headmistress as well as the main teacher, once said, “last school year, I heard there would be three or four students walking to school from Houayxouang Village, and I wondered how they



would manage. But in fact, those who walk to school reach school before the others every day, and one of them is the best student in the school: Ms. Yangxay!”

When Yangxay graduated from primary school, it made her parents very proud, and they forgot that they’d ever asked her to leave school. They worked as hard as they could planting rice and corn to ensure that they had enough money to buy schoolbooks and pencils for the children to continue their education in the next school year. Yangxay was preparing to enter secondary school, which meant that she had to move schools yet again. Her new school was Phakkhæ Secondary School.

September 1st 2006, was the first day of a new school year and the first day of secondary school for Yangxay. She felt happy to have the opportunity to meet many new friends, and she made friends easily, because she was a good-natured and friendly girl, witty but not arrogant, and got along easily with others. Whenever

her friends had difficulty with their studies, Yangxay would pay special attention to helping them. Ms. Lilo, one of her friends, said, “Yangxay is like my second teacher at school, because she explains the lessons so well and helps me understand every problem when I ask for help.” Nobody at the school showed any dislike toward Yangxay, and when students were divided into groups she was the most dedicated, learning as much as possible all the time. She tirelessly studied, whether at school or at home, and that made the time pass very quickly. Before long, it was time for her third year examinations. Graduating from third year wasn’t a big deal for Yangxay, as the school had a policy of exempting well-performing students from the final examinations, and Yangxay was the top student.

Her father said, “My daughter is very patient and hardworking. She has walked to school every day since primary school until graduating first form, and has never complained, never been discouraged, and never been shy of her friends or teachers.” When it was nearly time for the 2009 school year, Yangxay asked if he could sell a pig to raise funds for her to buy a school uniform and study materials, as she would need more than before to study in her fourth year. Her parents could not refuse her, and though they didn’t have the money, they went without in order to help their daughter continue her education. They hoped that she would study even further than this, so they could have a better future, and they were confident that their daughter was very studious. Yangxay didn’t disappoint her parents. Before long, four years passed and she graduated from secondary school. However, 2012 was a year that brought difficulty between Yangxay and her parents once again. After completing school, Yangxay wanted to study further in Xieng Khouang or elsewhere, but her parents

did not have money to send her to study, and they didn't have any relatives to take care of her there.

Her father said to her, "You can wait in our village for a while. The village or the district offices need employees; we could send you to work with them." But Yangxay had little hope that the village or district authorities would accept her as an employee, as she hadn't studied any profession yet. Also, she was disabled, would any of the offices accept her? This was her feeling after graduation, when she had to stay at home with nothing to do.



But in 2013, ChildFund, an international aid organisation, came to Nonghet District. Houayxouang was one of the organisation's many partner villages. The project for the development of the rights of women and children interested Yangxay greatly. She immediately rushed out to apply to be a volunteer for the project. Yangxay demonstrated her ability by working hard on the project, and by September 2013 there was very good news for the family. Yangxay had received a special scholarship to study a bachelor's degree at the Kangkhai Teacher's Training College.

"ChildFund organized the scholarship for me because they said I'm special and deserve it!" Yangxay had smiled and cried when

she heard those words from the ChildFund staff in Nonghet, and she took the news to her parents: "Mother, father! From now on, you won't have to spend your money sending me to school anymore! I got a special scholarship!"

"Does this mean you will get to study further?" asked her mother.

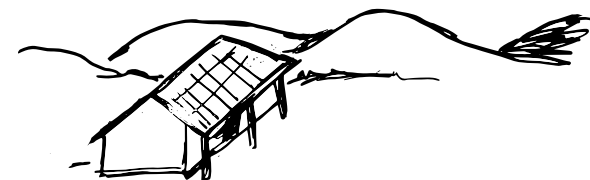
"Yes, Mother! My studies will be paid in full until I graduate!" she replied.

"Wow! This is truly the reward you deserve. Make sure you study as hard as you can. Then you can find work and you won't have to live in difficulty, as your father and mother have done." In less than a year, Yangxay's dream became a reality.

A LIFE OF NEVER GIVING UP

Mr. Thongya

Mr. Thongya was born in Ban Khamphanian and is currently an employee of the Nonghet Provincial Office of Information and Culture.



Khangphanian Village is at the edge of Route 7A, just sixteen kilometers from Nonghet District. To the north is Paserth Mountain, the Kiang River lies to the south, the Tham Seua (Tiger Cave) is in the east, and the Kha Waterfall lies to the west. The village includes 110 families, who have built their houses along both sides of Route 7A. The population is composed of Hmong people, which means that they cultivate upland rice farms more than rice paddies. The upland farming is done by those who live near dense mountain forests, and farmers continually move their fields to new areas. Most of the fields are about six to seven kilometers from the farmers' homes, and it takes about an hour for farmers to reach the fields. The crop that is usually planted in the fields is corn, which is sold and exported to other countries. Some families also plant fruit trees, including apricot, peach and pear trees. Some families plant soybeans and other vegetables as well, and raise chickens, ducks, and pigs for sale to neighbouring countries. Khangphanian Village is a central village within four village clusters, including Phaluang Village, Phaway Village, Thamseua Village and Nonglae Village. A river flows through the middle of the village from the north to the south, and mountains surround it. In the morning, birds can be heard calling, "jidjorjorjae! Khaekhaekhae!" This is a beautiful sound indeed. An interesting place for both Lao and foreign visitors in that area is the Kha Waterfall tourist site, about five kilometers from Kongphanian Village. There is also a school and

a health center, so that people do not have to travel far from the village to receive treatment.

In this village lived Mr. Jongheu, the son of Mr. Siafangya and Mrs. Deilor. Jongheu had seven siblings, including three sisters. None of the children went to school because there was no school in the village. The family was also very poor. Jongheu was the second eldest child, and was already an adult.

One morning, Jongheu went to the market, and as he was looking around, noticed a very charming girl, who was tall and had with lovely skin, long hair, and dark eyes. Her name was Nee. She was selling Chinese cabbages, apricots and peaches. Jongheu was very interested in her, and decided to speak to her. "Excuse me miss, how much do you sell your vegetables for?" he asked.

"They're 1000 for a bunch. Please buy something! I've been here since morning and haven't sold a thing today. Please help me out!" she cried. Jongheu agreed to buy one bunch.

After he had paid, he said to her, "The vegetables look very fresh, just like the seller!"

"Not so fresh, that's why nobody has bought anything!" she replied.

"Oh, you're very humble! Can I ask which village you are from?" asked Jongheu.

"My village is Phaven. Have you ever been there?" asked the girl.

"Do you really live there? I'll go to visit you one day!"

"Really? But I am a country girl. Nobody wants to visit me," she replied.

Jongheu returned to his village but really felt that he missed the girl. After two or three days, he decided that he would go and visit Miss Nee in her village, Phaven.

The two met each other and told each other of their feelings. Before leaving, Jongheu said to the girl, "When I get home I'm going to speak to my parents about asking for your hand in marriage!" And with that, Jongheu brought his parents to Nee's village to request the wedding, according to the customs of Hmong people, and the parents of the bride-to be were very happy with the arrangement.

Many years later, Jongheu and Nee had had many children together, and moved out of their parent's home to start their own house. Jongheu built his new house in Thamseua Village. People in Thamseua Village practice slash-and-burn agriculture, cultivating upland farms. Without any conservation of the forests, slash-and-burn agriculture can have negative environmental effects, including droughts causing a lack of water for the population. Because of severe droughts, a large part of Thamseua Village, including Jongheu's family, moved to Khangphanian Village. After moving there, he purchased a hectare of farmland.

Jongheu had a good head for business, which would turn him into a successful businessman in the future. His first business was purchasing cattle (cows and buffalo) for export and sale to

Vietnam, greatly and quickly improving his family income.

By mid-December 2004, which is the cold season in the Hmong villages, the traditional Hmong New Year festival was held. During that time, the youngsters of the village went out to play ball, or *yon mark khone*, in many rows, all looking at each other in their traditional four-layered outfits. They looked splendid, and they smiled, laughed, sang, and danced.

On the third morning of Hmong New Year, Jongheu got up to burn garbage outside his house, and went down to the festival to sell his goods. Jongheu placed all his belongings by the side of the road to wait for a vehicle, right by the area where he had set his garbage on fire. Around the fire were three of his children and two of his uncle's children. Jongheu's second child, named Thongya, went to wash clothes and set the clothes out to dry at the front of the house. Suddenly, there was the sound of an explosion. It came from the fire where Jongheu was burning his garbage. Thongya turned to look, and saw his father and the five children lying on the ground. There had been a UXO (unexploded ordnance) explosion.

Thongya sprinted down to see, and found that his father could still speak. However, the children were not speaking, and they were bleeding profusely, although still breathing and groaning. Nearby villagers soon appeared on the scene, finding that Jongheu had broken his arms and legs, with his wife and children crying. One person fetched a Hyundai passenger truck from the bus station, and Tongya hired it to take all the injured people to the Mongolian hospital, over 100 kilometers away. When they reached the hospital, the doctors dressed everybody's wounds.

Because Jongheu was the most severely injured, he was sent by plane to Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane Capital. The five children, who had only suffered minor injuries, were treated at Xieng Khouang Hospital.

After inspection and an x-ray, the results showed that Jongheu's left leg was broken in two places, and he suffered four damaged fingers. The doctor said that both the leg and the arm would have to be amputated, as toxic chemicals had entered his body that could not be cured. Upon hearing this, his wife pleaded with the doctor to take the arm but somehow try to save the leg. The doctor agreed, saying he would amputate the damaged arm and use metal rods to repair the broken leg. After the surgery was performed and the metal in place on the leg, the rest of the family returned to their homes in Xieng Khouang Province, with only Jongheu's wife remaining to take care of him. After three months, when the pain had begun to diminish, he was discharged from the hospital. Luckily, special policies exempted him from medical fees, as well as bills for a wheelchair, discharge fees, and other fees. He could take these bills to an organisation that covered medical costs for unexploded ordnance (UXO) victims. Jongheu returned to his village, happy to see that all his children were so happy to see their father, who had survived the explosion. After that, the entire family held a *soukhuan*, or blessing ceremony, for Jongheu, according to tradition.

The same year, after Jongheu returned from hospital, his eldest son received a scholarship to study in Vietnam. Jongheu had to borrow money to fully fund his son's education. From then on, the family met with difficult times, because Jongheu, who had been the pillar of the family, was unable to undertake his

business, and many of the children were either injured or still at school. Only Jongheu's wife was able to go out and work in order to make money and support the family. Although discouraged, she tried to be patient, buying things and selling things to find money to ensure that all of the children could go to school as normal.

The next year, however, Jongheu's arm and leg had gotten better, and he could begin to do his work. He refused to stay at home idly every day, and went out to look after his livestock and help his wife and children.



After a while, a project for the rehabilitation of disabled people came to survey Xieng Khouang Province and the surrounding districts. The employees of the project came to interview people in Jongheu's village and asked him what work he was able to do. They measured his arm so as to fit him with a prosthetic limb. Before long, the project sent a notice to Jongheu's family, asking him to attend rehabilitation training at the technical college in

Paek District, Xieng Khouang Province. The training would take ten full days. After the training was finished, the project gave him money for the purchase of chickens and pigs to raise as an occupation. When he returned to his village, Jongheu went to buy chickens and pigs to raise, and prepared food to feed them. Before long, his family's economic situation began to gradually improve, and they no longer had to live without things. The children went to study both overseas and within the country.

To this day, the family still lives in Khangphanian village. What makes the family proud is that after having a new and better life, all of the children received an education and had gone on to new occupations of their own. They were confident that in the future they would never be poor again. Jongheu and his wife are now quite old, but they still enjoy raising animals as much as they are able. They now have a large number of grandchildren as well, which brings them happiness. Jongheu says, "I have many children but they have all grown up now. I want to hug them and kiss them but they don't let me, so I hug and kiss my grandchildren instead. I've raised all my children but now I can raise my grandchildren, and I am very happy!"

NANG XONG, THE WOMAN WHO FOUGHT FOR HER CHILDREN



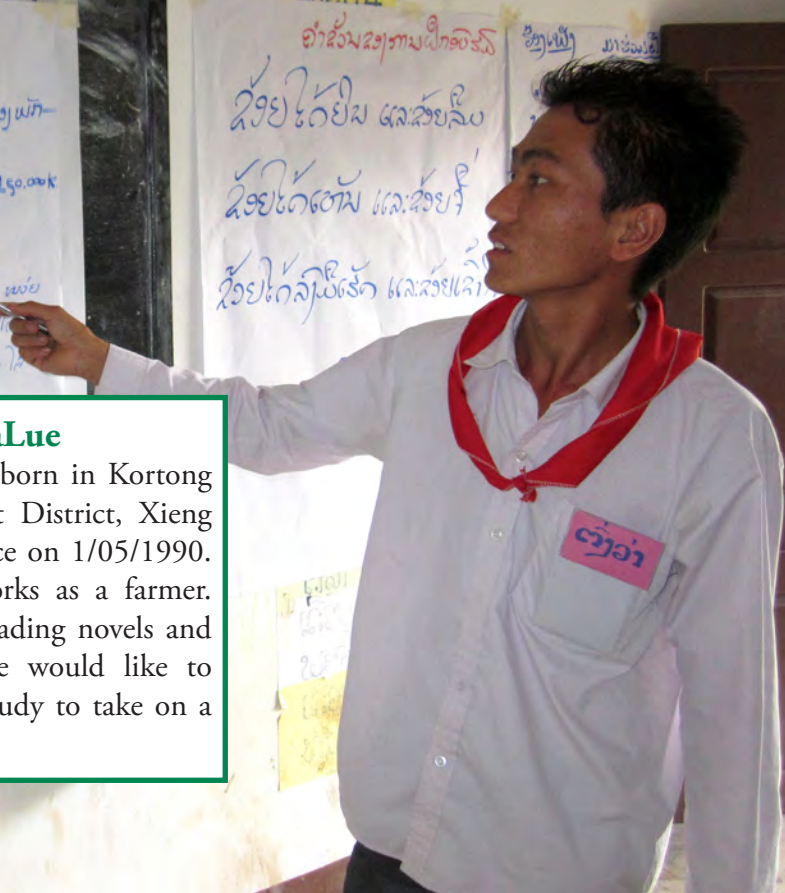
Nang Xong was a woman of Hmong ethnicity born in Vientiane Capital. She had a fair complexion, and was quite beautiful and lovely. In 1996, Nang fell in love with Mr. Xayjou, who was also Hmong. The couple married and lived together, as customary. Because neither of them had studied or had any profession, they led a difficult life in the big city. They had to work as labourers in order to make ends meet.

During their few years of life together, although they did not plan it, Nang gave birth to a child almost every year. As is normal for a large family, they faced difficulty looking after so many children. In 2005, Mr. Xayjou urged his wife and children (as by this time they had eight children) to return to his birthplace of Korthong Village, in Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province. When they returned to his home village, Xayjou's parents gave him some property to build a house and land to work in order to provide for his family. In the first year living in Korthong, Xayjou worked the land that his parents had given him, but the land was too small to provide for his large family.

The next year, Xayjou marked a piece of land that belonged to someone living far from the village. Xayjou and his wife cleared that land in order to plant rice and other crops. The couple looked after their crops well, so that the next year they could harvest more of the cultivated rice, corn and sweet potatoes.

Mr. Tongva VaLue

Mr. Tongva was born in Kortong Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 1/05/1990. He currently works as a farmer. His interest is reading novels and in the future he would like to pursue further study to take on a new profession.



Nang Xong said to her husband, “Dear, this year we probably won’t go hungry. I think we should put aside some of the harvest for sale, because I would like to buy items for the older children to go to school. Do you agree?”

The oldest child was eleven years old, and another two children were also ready for school.

“I agree,” Xayjou replied, “but how much rice will we need to sell to make enough money?”

“I think we can sell some rice, and sell some of our ducks and chickens too. If we still don’t have enough money, we could sell our pigs as well.”

The couple sold rice, taro, potatoes, pumpkins, gourds and livestock as they had agreed, and when they had enough money, they purchased clothes, books, and study materials for their three eldest children. The next year, Xayjou and Xong decided that they should expand their farming area because they had heard that a large company would be coming to the area to purchase corn. Therefore, before the next planting season, the couple had their children build a shelter in the fields and clear large trees to expand the cultivation area by at least three hectares. There was enough rain at first, between May and June, and the couple began planting, while continuing with their corn crops.

The seeds soon sprouted green leaves that swayed in the morning breeze, and the farm was beautiful in the evenings.

“Husband, if the rains are good this year we won’t want for food again!”

“I think the same as you. If we sell a lot of corn we can buy a calf to raise, and make money through cattle fighting,” he joked with his wife.

“Why buy a calf for fighting? Why not buy an adult cow right away?” said his wife.

“Yes, I think I want an adult cow, so we can fight it sooner.”

But his wife said, “Oh, no, no, no! No cow. If you raise a cow for fighting, soon you’ll never be home and you’ll neglect your duties at home.”

“Oh, my darling, you even get jealous of a cow! But raising a cow is a daytime activity, so I’ll still come home to do my nightly duties!”

Nang Xong went bright red, and punched her husband in the arm.

“Ouch!” he cried. And then the husband and wife laughed and joked as they took a walk down to the stream by the fields to bathe. As the two prepared to bathe, there was a raindrop, and as they looked to the skies above, a dark raincloud was advancing. They saw lightning and then heard a huge clap of thunder and lightning struck right in front of them.

Xong sat up and dusted herself off and said, “Oh well, we didn’t die, did we?” But then she looked around and saw her husband’s body lying three metres from her. She hurried to shake him and screamed, “Xayjou! Xayjou! Are you all right?” When she heard no reply, Nang Xong placed her ear against his chest and her fingers under his nose, but she felt no breath. She immediately understood what had happened.

“He’s dead! He’s dead! My husband is dead! My children, your father is dead!” The children heard her sobbing and ran down to her. The news of Xayjou’s death soon reached the villagers, and the village authorities took his body and arranged a funeral for him.

After her husband’s death, the difficult task of looking after the family fell upon Nang Xong alone. She was not of Korthong Village, and so she felt she had no choice but to return to Vientiane Capital, not knowing what she would do to make a living. She knew well that in the capital there was no other way to make money for her family other than as labourers. But she also knew that she couldn’t find this type of work when her children were still young, didn’t know anything, and couldn’t do anything to help her.

Therefore, she had to stay in Korthong Village, where at least she had a house, land, a farm, and the beginnings of a harvest that she and her husband had planted, which could be continued. Nang Xong had tasted life in the big city and knew it to be bitter, as life there was difficult, and now, with eight children, there was no way she could find the money to look after all of them. So, she decided to stay in the countryside.

“You bigger children have to help me to work on the farm now!” Nang Xong said to her children one night.

“Mother, I think I’ll drop out of school. Then I could help you a lot!”

“No. You don’t need to drop out. You must go to school and you can just lend a hand when you have time. You know that going to school will help you to have a better future.”

“But Mother, I don’t want you to work hard all alone,” said her son.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and onto the table as Nang Xong heard her son’s words. She quickly wiped her eyes as she didn’t want her children to see. “Xayjou! Why did you leave me like this? I am alone and it is a heavy burden for a woman to bear.” Nang Xong liked to think lovingly of her husband all the time, while making rice, or when resting her head against her pillow at the end of the day. Her fate was so miserable this year: her husband had died, and she had nobody to help with the labour, the rains had not been good, the crops did not sprout well, and pests, birds and pigs all came to nibble at the crops, eating the taro and the corn until there was almost nothing left at the end of the season.

Nang Xong and her children reaped the fields together, or what was left after the damage from pests, and they knew that the next year there would not be enough for the family to eat. In fact, the rice they harvested was only ten sacks worth, and there was no way they could sell corn to any big company because

they had not even harvested 100 kilogrammes. Therefore, Nang decided not to sell the rice or the corn, so that the next year if it came to it, they could eat boiled rice and corn just to survive. During this period, Nang Xong went into the forest to gather roots to sell, while the older boys trapped animals. At night, they would take their siblings into the forest and make traps, and in the early morning would go to check on them. Some days they were lucky, catching four or five mice, and other days they might trap squirrels or snakes. Their mother sold these to other villagers in order to get money to pay the family's expenses. Nang Xong and her eight children led a very difficult life. The older children went to school barefoot, wearing worn, tattered, clothing, while the younger children were skinny and pallid, due to malnourishment.



Every day Nang Xong carried the smaller children on her back, and took along those who could walk, into the forest to forage for ferns, banana flowers, and other edible plants that grew wild to take home and eat or sell. Things didn't improve for Nang Xong

because her little children were always in pain. Aside from that, she still had to spend money to buy medicine for the children and buy study materials for the older children. One morning, when Nang Xong was going to take the children into the forest, a very loud sound rang in her ear. "Kaleng, Kaleng!" Nang Xong knew that the sound had come from the village chief's house, where he was ringing a bell. But why? Was there an emergency meeting? She thought for a moment whether she would still go to the forest or perhaps go down to the village chief's house to have a look. At last, she decided to go to the village chief's house, because maybe the authorities had come to disseminate some information on work to be undertaken.

Nang Xong went down to the village chief's house and saw that many villagers had crowded around already. At the front of the house, she saw four or five people. From looking at the visitors' faces, it was easy to see who was lowland Lao and who was Hmong.

"Hello to all the villagers, who we love and respect," said a lowland Lao man in greeting.

A Hmong man said, "Surely I don't need to translate what he said, do I?" All the villagers laughed because, though they were H'mong, they could understand most of it.

"We have come to visit you today with the goal of giving assistance in many different areas, starting with..."

He got to this point and there was a cry from the villagers, "We don't understand! We don't understand!"

The speaker grinned and said to his colleague, “go ahead, just explain why we’re here and what the organisation wants us to tell them.” Then the colleague, who was Hmong, explained everything about the organisation, and why they had come.

After sharing the objectives with the villagers, the organisation decided to begin training on planting crops and fruit trees first. Many villagers were interested and wanted to learn about this. They wrote down their names to register themselves for the training. Nang Xong also decided she wanted to participate. The training was held the next day and ran for five days. On the final day, the organisation handed out equipment for farming and gave out seeds for various crops, including corn.

“You don’t want these seeds do you, Aunty Xong?” joked one of the employees.

“Yes I do! I will plant a lot!”

“How will you plant a lot? You don’t have anyone to help you.”

“I can do it alone. I will work all day and all evening, and some of my children could help. I fight for my children, for my eight children, so they can have as good of a life as any other villagers.”

Nang Xong, and every other villager, gave their thanks to the organisation and promised to put all their lessons into practice in the future. From that day forward, Nang Xong expanded her fields. When her children finished school each day they came to help her build fences, rails, and other things. The next year the rains came early, and whenever Nang Xong forgot any of her

lessons, she could ask the organisation staff to remind her. She didn’t leave any area bare; she planted rice, corn, beans, sesame, taro, potatoes, and anything else that she could eat, or sell. That year, the sky sent very good rains, and the crops sprouted well. Nang Xong reported back to the organisation that ever since they had come to teach her the lessons, everything in her life had improved. Based on the information collected and summarized by the village authorities, it could be seen that Nang Xong’s family had the second highest income of all the families in the village, as she sold corn worth almost 50 million kip. Not only that, she also sold other crops and had enough food left over to feed her children all year round.

“Everyone, look at Nang Xong, she farmed by herself, but got all this!” said the village chief in a meeting. Nang Xong was praised by the authorities. Before, people had been contemptuous of Nang Xong and wouldn’t lend her anything for fear that she could not repay it, but now nobody dared treat her this way. Her children were able to study at the school, and in addition, Nang Xong planned to tear down her old hut and build a cement house for herself. Good for her! Nang Xong, mother of eight children, would not surrender. She was victorious, fighting for herself and for her children.

LIKE DYING AND BEING REBORN

Ms. Khamphik Thamabang

Ms. Khamphik was born in PhakKhae Tai Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 28/12/1989. She completed Grade 7 at Secondary School and currently works helping her parents with farm work. Her interests are silk weaving, sports, and art and in the future she would like to study as a teacher to help educate young Lao people.



Because I am a resident of Nonghet district, I know everything that has happened there. Almost all of the villagers plant crops, work in paddies and upland rice fields, and raise animals. Villagers undertake both upland rice farming and paddy farming because of the topography of our village. We are partly situated in a low, flat area appropriate for paddy farming, but also partly in some mountainous areas more suited to upland rice farming methods.

Three or four years ago, a project came to one village and mobilised the villagers to plant corn for them. When they first arrived, the agents of the project requested to rent farmlands from Uncle Ta, old, abandoned fields that hadn't been cultivated for many years. The agents wanted to trial-plant corn in these fields as an example for the villagers. When planting the corn, they brought in new types of equipment and many types of chemicals, including herbicides, pesticides, and many brands of fertiliser. They took on unemployed villagers from our village, as well as those who wished to learn how to use chemicals correctly. Uncle Ta had been appointed a supervisor, and the technical experts slowly guided the workers in how to use the production equipment and each type of chemical correctly. Their objective in bringing in the equipment and chemicals was for the villagers to understand their value and the benefits they could bring. The many villagers who worked at the trial corn fields were

very interested, and concentrated hard when attending training in the use of chemicals. Before going out to spray, they had to wear protective headgear, long trousers, a rain jacket, and closed shoes. The experts also instructed in the use of fertilisers, saying that after readying the soil, the fertiliser must be spread below the surface of the soil. Only then could the crops be planted.

After that, the experts instructed that growth fertiliser must be used to ensure that crops would grow quickly, and lastly, fruit fertiliser would be used to ensure that the plants would fruit well. Many of the workers were very excited to use this new and interesting equipment. Therefore, after the training was completed, they were able to try these techniques. In less than a month's time, shoots of corn and other crops were seen in the trial field. Before three months were up, the corn began to fruit, bearing fruit that was many times larger and better than that of the native corn. It was soon time to harvest the crops, and first years' results were ten times better than any harvest Uncle Ta had seen. Everything suggested that the use of chemicals and fertilisers delivered excellent results and would help generate a good income, which was very exciting.

The next year, the project organised the villagers to plant on their own, saying they would purchase all the corn that the villagers had planted. When they disseminated this information to the villagers, everybody was very enthusiastic and wanted to start planting corn of their own. Uncle Ta and many of the village families began clearing their fields, both old and new, to make more room for the corn. It got to the point where some families began to squabble about which lands belonged to whom, as everybody wanted as much land as possible.

The project staff came to distribute seeds and fertilisers, the cost of which would be deducted from the sale price of the produce once it was harvested. That season, the villagers and other nearby villages received a very good income from the sale of their corn. Many people made enough money to buy bicycles and motorbikes for their children, and others built or repaired their homes. The livelihoods of everyone in the village had changed for the better.

The next year, in early March, the villagers rushed to their fields, expanding their farming areas. Uncle Ta's farm was doing very well. He resigned from the company so he could grow his own produce. Still, the people from the project continued to rent Uncle Ta's field for use as a trial field, and kept their employee housing and equipment storage on his land. Although Uncle Ta was no longer their employee, the people from the project still asked him to help them by watching over their warehouse, and by taking care of their materials and equipment when they were away.

That year Uncle Ta was able to expand his fields by about two hectares. Like the other villagers, when Uncle Ta began to expand his farming areas, some problems arose. The forest was destroyed, and a lot of the wildlife fled to other areas. It also became clear that with all of this expansion, people had to invest a lot more money at the beginning of the season in purchasing herbicides, pesticides and production equipment. Some villagers even thought about purchasing their own tractors for ploughing the fields. Many people had new ideas and had to borrow money from the bank in order to realise them. They soon began to write

letters of request to the Nayobay bank in the district to request loans for investment.

The bank sent a representative to the village to collect information and saw that the villagers had real requirements. They went and gave out the loans as appropriate. The loan period was for one year, with an interest rate of ten percent per year. If the loan was not repaid on schedule, the interest rate would double. Uncle Ta's family secured a loan from the bank and used the money to purchase a tractor, as their friends had done. After buying the tractor, Uncle Ta ploughed all of his land so that he could plant corn.



In that year's planting season the rains were sufficient, and everybody's crops grew well. After the harvest, many families were able to sell their produce at ten to twenty million kip and Uncle Ta was able to sell his at even more than that. After selling produce from his own farm and his upland fields, Uncle Ta also received rent for the lands he leased to the project. His family's income was more than fifty million kip. After seeing such excellent results, the villagers paid their debts to the bank and their other expenses as well. Because the previous year's corn season had been so profitable, many people had hopes that they could make even more in the next year and receive an even higher profit.

Some people took it too far, deluding themselves. They didn't think about how the chemicals they were using to grow corn had affected their bodies or how the soil absorbed fertiliser chemicals and lost nutrients. Some people began to use their money on luxury items, began betting on chicken or bull fights, or drank alcohol until they were completely drunk.

As for Uncle Ta, the hardworking man who had made more than anyone else, he had become an individual with quite the reputation. He was being invited to this event or that ceremony, and was making many new friends, young or old, male or female. All of this began to go to Uncle Ta's head, and he began to forget himself. He soon became vain and self-important, an old 'snake head.'

One day, at a wedding, Uncle Ta got to know a young divorcee who was young enough to be his daughter. But due to Uncle Ta's witty speech, and the encouragement of everybody else, the young divorcee gave in to his advances. When Uncle Ta went back to his village and relayed everything that happened to his wife and children, they expressed their disdain. But Uncle Ta railed about his importance to the family, saying that nobody could prevent him from doing as he wished.

The villagers continued to go to the bank and request loans for investment, and the bank happily obliged. But now things began to affect corn planting in the village. This year the sky did not send rain at the right time. It rained early, damaging many of the newly planted crops. Many of the villagers were troubled because they could not find the money to repay their loans to the bank. Because of this situation, many villagers went to the bank and

requested installment plans to slowly pay back their loans. The bank agreed.

When the rainy season came again, the villagers planted more corn and other vegetables for market sale in order to find the funds to repay their bank loans for the next year. Some people didn't dare go and ask for new loans and instead decided to borrow money from rich people and loan sharks to buy whatever fertilisers they could. The

majority of the villagers worked hard and planted as much as they could, but the next year, the rains came at the wrong time, just like the year before. Because of this,



although there was an adequate yield in the harvest season, it was not sufficient for people to fully repay their loans. What had made them so poor, people wondered? Why were they poorer even than before?

The next year, the project moved its operations elsewhere, leaving the villagers complaining about their poverty. “Oh! What has happened to us? Before we planted the corn, nobody was in debt to the bank, and nobody owed money to rich people. The corn has brought us nothing but difficulty! When will it stop getting worse?” It was a good thing indeed that the bank refused to issue any further loans. Some people blamed themselves, saying,

“Because we used so many chemicals in our fields, our soil lost its quality.” Uncle Ta was the worst off, as he had borrowed the most from the bank. He sold his truck, his mill and all the equipment left to him by the project so that he could find the funds to repay the bank. His mistress couldn't stand it and returned to her old village. Luckily, his children were now older and were able to help Uncle Ta's wife make money, and his daughters returned to their old occupation of weaving.

Uncle Ta regretted what he had done when he had money. “I feel sorry that I became proud and self-important, and acted as if I was rich. I wound up bankrupt in the end.”

Luckily, his wife and children did not punish him further; they just left him alone, and without drinking, his body began to regain strength. Soon the village authorities made Uncle Ta the village senior advisor. By the year 2013, Uncle Ta was able to rebuild his wealth by raising farm animals on a piece of land in the village, but this is a story I will tell you later.

HOW MAIYEAR DECIDED TO SEND HER CHILDREN TO SCHOOL

Mr. Yaha Vangsy

Mr. Yaha was born in Houaysouang Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 15/11/1980. He completed Grade 3 at Secondary School and currently works as a farmer. He likes reading interesting books, and hopes to become an author well-known by society in the future.



Thirty-three kilometers away from Nonghet District, to the west, is a small village called Houayxouang. Houayxouang Village has a total population of 49 families, mostly Hmong who settled here almost 40 years ago. The main occupation of the villagers is upland rice farming, as well as planting vegetables and fruit trees, and raising piglets and chickens for family food, and sometimes for sale when necessary. Most of the families have a sufficient economic status, so they enjoy their livelihoods. However, in recent years, there are a number of families that are still poor.

One of these families is that of a widow named Maiyear. This year, she is 38 years old. Her husband died four years ago of tuberculosis. He left her alone with her children, together with poverty, difficulty, and sadness. Her four children are very young; the oldest is 8 years old, followed by the second and the third, and the youngest is only 4 years old. The 4 children can be compared to a chain tied around her neck, so that she cannot even smile at the other villagers. In order to survive and to have food for herself and her children every day, she has to go into the deep forest with her children to collect vegetables, bamboo, wild potatoes and fruit for food. On a lucky day, she can find a lot of food and sell a portion of it to other villagers in order to save some money in case of illness.

One morning, while Maiyear is cooking rice and food, and preparing to go into the forest as usual, she sees her younger brother and sister-in-law walking past her house. The sister-in-law is carrying a basket full of clothes, and the brother is carrying a basket of soap, shampoo, and detergent. They are heading to a water tap located about 30 metres away from her house. While they are walking past her house, they talk to each other:

“My love! Tonight please prepare food for me; I am going to sleep at the upland rice paddy, so that early tomorrow morning I can immediately start cleaning the paddy. Please prepare for a few days because I want to finish the paddy cleaning quickly, and I don’t want to go back and forth.”

The wife answers, “I will prepare enough food for you for today first because our polished rice is finished, but in the afternoon I will prepare more polished rice, so tomorrow I will bring it to you and help you clear the paddy too.”

“...And stay overnight with me too?” the husband jokes.

“You’re crazy! I will bring you food only,” the wife replies.

“Okay! You know that the weather is cool. If I have to sleep alone, it’s going to be too cool!” the husband says.

The chat that expresses love and affection between her brother and sister-in-law sounds in the ears of Maiyear. Each word makes her sad, thinking of her beloved husband. “My love Songlao! When I see our brother and sister chatting to each other with affection and understanding, I cannot resist thinking about our

previous life. You died so early. When you were here, our family was very joyful; the kids had things to eat and a happy life. Now they are skinny with dirty faces, not clean faces like before. Myself too, if you saw me now, you might run away because my body shape is very different from what you used to say was beautiful. My love Songlao! Even though I am alone and poor, I will try hard to raise our children until I die.” She thinks about her best moments with her husband, and her tears fall down her cheeks, and drop onto her feet without her realising. When she looks back at the stove, the fire has gone out.

This morning, Maiyear also plans to go to clean her paddy land. She tells her children, who are sleeping under an old cover in the cold, to wake up and go to the field with her.



The oldest brother wakes up first, then he wakes the others up. They gather around the fire for relief from the cool, and wait for food, which is cabbage soup as usual. But the taste today is better, because their mother sold bamboo shoots and so she had some money to buy fatty pork for the soup. The mother says, “today you go to the field to clean the land because the planting season is starting. You are now grown up enough to help me to work. The youngest should not cry, do you understand?” The children are so obedient. Once finished their breakfast, they head to the field, which they inherited from their father.

When they arrive at the field, the mother puts the youngest child down from her back and prepares a hut for her children. She stands up and looks around the field. "Oh, this is very overgrown, full of weeds and shrubs." Then she starts to clean the overgrown field; she cuts one shrub after another, and after a bigger shrub, she sits down for a while to regain energy. When she sits down, she thinks about her husband. "My love Maiyear! Come here and massage my back, it's so painful!" Maiyear was also tired but she was still able to give her husband a massage; sometimes her husband fell asleep while she was giving a massage. In the past, the couple helped each other to clean this field. When they were tired, they sat down to regain their energy and have a meal, they used leaves to fan themselves and chase insects, they gave shoulder massages to each other as a couple does.

"My love Songlao! When I think of the past, when we lived together, I feel a pain like a knife punched into my heart. Do you know that I am now so sad? I do not know how long my life will be. I feel so lonely when you are not here with me." Maiyear sits down and lets her soul travel into the past. Her tears fall down her cheeks and she cannot stop them. She falls asleep, due to a mild breeze. A couple of birds standing on the branch of a tree sing and wake her up. "Is my husband asking them to wake me up because the children haven't had lunch yet?" She rushes to go to the hut where her children are playing. The older children are finding mushrooms, vegetables and bamboo shoots. The youngest child is sleeping. When the mother sees her children coming back, she makes a fire to prepare food. Then she wakes the children up for lunch, with rice and whatever food they have found. After lunch, she takes a small nap to regain her energy, then she continues her work in the afternoon. When the sun is

going down and shines little light, Maiyear brings her children back home; they are very tired. Even though Maiyear's life is very difficult, she continues, and fights for food for her children, who are her heart and soul, so that they will grow up in the future.

Maiyear always tells her children, "You all have to listen to what I tell you. You have to love each other. Don't be naughty. Don't do bad things, because other villagers may look down on us."

Time passes, and Maiyear's children grow up. The oldest brother is now ten years old, and the second is eight years old. They can now help their mom collect water and firewood. However, it is a pity for them that the children haven't gone to school yet. Maiyear is getting better, because her children can help her with part of her work.

Normally, at the end of August each year, the primary school of Houayxouang Village enrolls school-aged children. People bring their children for registration at school. Only Maiyear's family does not bring children to school for registration. This is a major problem for her because she doesn't have enough money to buy clothes and learning materials for her children.

One early evening, Maiyear sees a man in a brownish-yellow uniform heading to her house. "Who is this? Is that a young man who wants to talk with me? If yes, this will be good because it has been a long time since I spoke to an unknown man," she thinks. She still wants to be in a good mood and hear the sweet words of a man. But she is disappointed, because the man heading to her house is not a young man who has taken the wrong way. This

man is a teacher, Heutoua, who is also the school principal of the primary school of Houayxouang Village.

“Sabaidee sister Maiyear!” Maiyear is surprised at first, then she adjusts herself to the situation.

“Sabaidee teacher, how are you today?” Maiyear says, and gives the teacher an old wooden chair to sit on.

“Thank you, sister.” After he seats himself comfortably, he starts telling her about his objectives, “I am here today to tell you that the new academic year is opening soon. I note that you did not bring your children to school for registration. All villagers, as well as the village authorities, think about your children. They want your children to go to school because now the Lao Government is encouraging all people to go to school. This is for them to have bright future.”

After letting teacher Heutoua talk for a long time, Maiyear interrupts and says, “Teacher Heutoua, I also want my children to go to school, but my family is in a very difficult situation. If my children go to school, there will be no one to help me. Also, I do not have sufficient money to buy clothes, notebooks, and other items for them.”

After listening to Maiyear, Heutoua says, “Sister Maiyear, what you said has reason, but if we do not decide this year, and just say that this year is difficult, and next year is difficult, and so on, how can your children go to school like other children? I would like you to think about this again. At least one child should go to school this year. When you are ready, you can bring your

children to see me anytime. The school also can provide some assistance if you choose to bring your children to school.”

“Okay, teacher. I will try to talk to my children first.”

A few days after that, Maiyear has still not brought her children for registration. Maiyear lets the time go by as usual, without attention to the village’s worries.

A year goes by; a new year arrives. After one year, it becomes two, five, and six year, when someone asks her the reason why she does not bring her children to school, the answer remains the same: no labour force, no money to buy learning materials, and so on. This year, her oldest child has become a young man, and knows how to escape from the house during the night; he starts learning about loving a girl. The girl he loves is not an outsider, but a girl of the same village. They work in paddy fields adjacent to each other and often go to the fields together. Sometimes, they help each other with their work. Finally, they fall in love, which leads to a simple marriage in accordance with their family status and wealth.

Later, the authorities bring compulsory non-formal education to Houayxouang Village. The village is instructed to conduct a survey of villagers aged between 15 and 35 who are illiterate, and mobilise them to study a short-term course. This short-term course takes only 30 days and is organised during the dry season, when there is no activity in the fields. Students of the compulsory non-formal education include the son and the daughter-in-law of Maiyear. During the course, there are also other activities, which make the learning environment friendly and interesting.

In the year 2012, the villagers are happy to receive news that Nonghet District authority announces a foreign aid organisation is coming to develop Houayxouang Village. This news becomes reality one morning. That day is a Sunday, with clear skies, no clouds, and a warm breeze blowing slowly. The bell is rung at the house of the village chief, meaning that there is some good or bad news. This is a call for all families to participate in a meeting. So Maiyear cannot find any reason not to go.

Many people come to the house of the village chief this morning, because the district authority is bringing in staff from one organisation to train the villagers on child rights.

Maiyear is on the list of trainees. During the training course, many trainees are anxious and noisy. Someone says, “*Chi pao lu yee kor si heoualeuya yong doua.*”

The village chief translates to the trainers, “They say that they do not understand, it’s a waste of time; it’s better to do other work.” That is true, because most of the villagers are Hmong; they speak their local language to each other. There are only some people who can understand the Lao language a little bit, which are those who used to do business or those who went to school. Soon after the trainers realise the problem, they arrange Hmong trainers to conduct the training course. After that, the training goes smoothly and everyone understands better.

Maiyear comments, “Today I am very happy being here to learn about child rights. This helps me to understand problems in society, especially underage child labour, child abuse, gender inequality, domestic violence, and child labour abuse.”

Mrs. Yearlee and other women in the village also say, “We have never heard about child rights before, so we follow our traditions.”



The feedback from this training course shows that they have now received new knowledge and have a better understanding. In the past, they did not pay attention to the rights of children at all. Mostly they follow traditional practices, meaning parents have the role of raising their children. When they grow up, parents ask them to do harder and harder work, such as field cleaning, garden planting, rice planting, corn planting, hunting, and collecting forest products. When they are 14 to 15 years old, they marry someone. Parents do not pay attention to the rights of schooling when they are six or seven years old. For example, Maiyear’s family has 4 children, but none of them went to school.

Following the training course, Maiyear regrets a lot. She feels she should not be so selfish and raise children just for their ability to work. In fact, she should think about their future. So, after the training course, Maiyear promises herself, “next academic year, I will bring my two youngest children to school.” When the school year starts, Maiyear brings her youngest son and youngest daughter to school for registration, which is a wonderful surprise for teacher Heutoua, the school principal.

“Dear teacher, my son is 14 years old and my daughter is 12 years old. I would like to register them for school, is it still possible?” she asks the teacher, as she worries that her children will not be accepted.

The teacher replies to Maiyear, “Actually, children admitted to primary school grade 1 are only 6 to 7 years old, but your children are already of secondary school age. But it’s okay, if you want them to come to school, I’ll give you permission. However, I worry that they may not want to study with other small children.”

Maiyear interrupts, “I have already talked to them about this. They are okay to study with other small children.”

Teacher Heutoua replies, “That’s good! Tell them to prepare themselves and come to school on the opening day.”

On the school’s opening day, the first of September 2013, Maiyear’s son and daughter wake up early. They take a bath and dress up in their new school uniforms.

Their mother calls them for breakfast and says, “You have to study hard and gain a lot of knowledge, so that in the future you will have good work.”

Their older brother and sister-in-law also help to teach their younger brother and sister, “Be a good student, do not be naughty, do not misbehave.” Then, the two leave the house and head to school, with such big smiles on their faces.

When they arrive at school, the school principal and a teacher welcome them. The youngest son and his younger sister are the oldest in the classroom, but they are not shy at all. In contrast, they are good role models in the class, and help friends. They are assigned the roles of classroom head to assist the teacher in looking after things in the classroom.

One week passes, and the school of Houayxouang Village receives a visit from the organisation. During this visit, they distribute a lot of things to students, such as notebooks, students’ books, bags, pens, pencils, and other materials for school. The organisation also provides ten bicycles to disadvantaged students. Maiyear’s two children receive one bicycle. At the end of that day, the sister and brother push their new bicycle back home because they do not know how to ride it. At a short distance from their house, the youngest brother says to his sister, “Let me try to ride this bicycle, you hold it tight please!” The youngest brother tries to ride the bicycle; he rides it unstably. His sister helps to hold the bicycle but she cannot hold it anymore when it is on a slope. She pulls the back of the bicycle, but finally it falls down the side of the road. It is a good luck that a shrub stops him, so he is only slightly injured.

When they arrive home, the mother sees that they have a new bicycle, so she tells them to learn how to ride. “Slowly. Be careful. Do not break it. If it’s broken, you will not have a bicycle to go to school.”

Following the bicycle distribution, it is observed that most of the disadvantaged students arrive to school early. Rarely is someone absent without reason. “Now, I am very happy to participate in many events in our village. In the past, I only worked in the field for food. I did not allow my children to go to school. Furthermore, I forced them to do work that overloaded them. I thought only about food day by day. I did not think about the future. For my daughters too, I thought that study was not important for them, because when they grow up they will marry a man. I thought that their future would depend on their husband.”

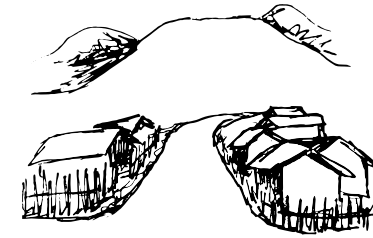
After that, the head of the village women’s union says, “There is not only you, Maiyear. Since a long time ago, most of our Hmong people have had this tradition. Our ancestors taught us to follow this way. Women should know not only how to work at the field or to raise children, but should also receive an education. This is to help them to gain more knowledge and to open their eyes to society. Therefore, parents should give opportunities to their children. When they reach school age, they should be allowed to go to school to gain higher and higher knowledge. Is that correct, Mr. Village Chief?”

“That is very correct,” replies the chief of the village, who is sitting nearby and listening to them. “I agree with everything you are talking about.”

TOUYER'S CHOICE

Mr. Touyer

Mr. Touyer was born in Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 23/03/1992. He completed Grade 3 at Secondary School and currently works farming and cultivating rice. He is interested in reading for personal development and in the future he would like to become a teacher.



This is the story of a 19 year-old Hmong man called Touyer, from Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province. Touyer's family is one of the poorest in the village and worse than that, Touyer is an orphan. His mother died before he had even reached one year of age. Luckily, his aunt (on his father's side) had a young baby at the same time he was born.

To save the life of this young boy, his aunt shared her breast milk with her nephew Touyer, alongside her own daughter. When he reached two years of age, his father decided to take a new wife to help look after him and help look after the family farm. Touyer's father consulted his brother.

"Brother! I have been alone for nearly a year and would like to find a new wife. What do you think?"

Upon hearing this, his brother asked him, "Who will you have? Have you spoken to anyone?"

"I've been speaking with a divorcée who doesn't have any children," answered Touyer's father.

"But you are a widower, with a small child. Will she accept you?"

“She knows about this already. She said that if she marries me, she’ll get a husband and a child at the same time, and it’s less painful than bearing a child of her own.”

Touyer’s uncle laughed, and then asked, “but little brother, do you have enough money for the marriage ceremony?”

“I have enough, but not much. Can you and our older sister help me out a little?”

Three months later, Touyer’s father wed his new wife and she came to live with him. When the new wife first arrived in the house, she was very good. She cooked for Touyer and his father, collected firewood, worked picking corn and clearing rice fields, and did other work as well. But before long, not even one year later, she began to change. She became quarrelsome, refusing to work as before, saying that Touyer’s father had caused them to live in poverty, and that she even had to look after a child that was not her own. Sometimes she would secretly hit Touyer, or hide food or do other terrible things that caused disputes. In the end, both she and Touyer’s father decided to separate. By this time Touyer was just over two years old, and his father took him everywhere. When Touyer grew tired, his father carried him on his back. Sometimes his father would shoot birds for Touyer to eat.

About five or six months later, Touyer’s father took a third wife. The third wife was also a divorcée; however, she had a young child of her own, about seven or eight months younger than Touyer. The two children ate together, played together, and sometimes fought together, as children do. Later, when Touyer was

about four or five years old, something unthinkable happened to the family.

One day, Touyer’s father set an explosive to trap a wild pig that had been eating his sweet potato crops. That afternoon, before the sun set, there was the sound of an explosion around the area where Touyer’s father had set the bomb. Upon hearing the explosion, Touyer’s father rushed off, thinking that he may have caught a pig. But what he saw was the body of a boy of sixteen or seventeen lying in a pool of blood.

That day the boy had been watching over some cows, and somehow the cows got loose. The boy returned and went off in search of the missing cow. He searched and searched until he came upon the area where Touyer’s father had set the explosives, stepped upon the trigger, and was killed by the explosion. When the incident occurred, village authorities immediately arrested Touyer’s father, and he was sent to the district police investigation office and was sentenced to prison for manslaughter. After Touyer’s father was imprisoned, Touyer lived with his stepmother and stepsibling under difficult circumstances. When there was not enough to eat, Touyer felt very unfortunate because his stepmother did not love him as much as her own child. She served much smaller portions of food to Touyer during meals, giving him only tiny amounts to keep him alive. Worse than that, whenever his stepsibling cried, Touyer was always blamed, and his stepmother would scold him or hit him in punishment.

Touyer felt so upset that sometimes he would run to his room and cry by himself, “Father! Where are you? If only you were here, things wouldn’t be so difficult.” Touyer waited patiently

with his stepmother, eating meals in tears, bearing bruises on his skin, for three years, until his uncle could afford to bail his father out of jail.

During the time his father was in prison, Touyer did not neglect his lessons, and when his father came out of jail he attended school until fifth grade, at twelve years of age. Touyer's was not a wealthy family, they were poor and didn't have enough food, and he had only one pair of trousers and shirt to wear to school each day. But Touyer was never ashamed, and he never missed school. When he completed primary school, Touyer went on to Touya Secondary School many kilometers away, and in 2011, he completed third grade.

After completing third grade, Touyer told his father that he wanted to continue studying to complete seventh grade, so as to have knowledge and be able to find better work in order to take care of his family and make a positive change. But his father responded, "Child! I think your mother doesn't love you much. I have enough land to share with you, so it would be better if you could get married and grow corn. After one or two years you would have enough money to build your own house. I think it is not comfortable for you to stay with us."

Upon hearing his father's words, Touyer felt as if something were stabbing his heart. Touyer was in tears as he said to his father, "I don't want a wife yet, I want to study more to have a job before getting married!"

But his father replied, "You're not young. You're sixteen or seventeen. Your mother and I will clear some land to grow corn.

If you and your wife help with this work, you'll soon have enough money for a house of your own." His father said that if he took a wife, his future would be better. But Touyer didn't agree. He felt that if he had a wife and started a family of his own at such a young age, his child might be stunted. And if he had too many children, he might not be able to look after them all; they would be malnourished and in poor health, and the cycle of poverty would continue.

Touyer didn't want to cause problems for his parents, but at the same time he wanted to find a solution. "How about this, father? I will help this year but I will do it myself, without a wife. I will do it all on my own, and I will put aside some money that I can use to finish school later." The bargain was struck between Touyer and his parents, and they had to accept that Touyer did not want a wife yet, and wanted to study further.



Therefore, before the opening of the 2012 school year, Touyer wrote a letter to the District Department of Education explaining his circumstances and his poverty, and requesting that he be allowed to take a break from studies in order to cultivate the fields and earn enough money to purchase clothing and equipment for study the following year. The authorities were understanding of his problem and approved Touyer's request.

In 2012, Touyer worked very hard farming corn, tirelessly building fences, weeding, fertilizing, and spraying the crops with pesticides. When the season came for harvesting the corn, Touyer was able to collect a lot and made a profit of seven million kip, after paying for fertiliser and pesticides. Touyer gave some to his parents to look after the family, and kept some for himself.

One friend asked Touyer, “how is your corn farming? Will you have enough money to go to school next year?”

“This year I made over seven million kip, but I think it’s still not enough,” he said. “Next year I will plant more, over two hectares, and if there’s enough rain I might ask to go back to school in 2015.”

His friend was interested in some of the other problems in Touyer’s life, asking him, “What about your father’s wish for you to take a wife? What happened?”

“Oh! I think I absolutely will not take a wife until I’ve studied to improve myself.”

“Oh, oh! I really hope that everything will work out for you!”

HOW CHICKENS CAN TRANSFORM LIVES



Traveling from Phakkhay Village to the northwest, about 1.5km past the protected forest of the Phakkhay Neua Primary School, some houses of people living by a dirt road can be seen. This is Korthong Village, whose residents are of Hmong ethnicity. Korthong Village has 41 houses, and a population of 379 people, most of whom are farmers. They plant rice and corn and raise livestock, such as pigs and cows.

In Korthong Village, there is one family that I would like to mention, the family of Uncle Jai Lao. Uncle Jai Lao originally lived in Yordhuay Village, where he married Mrs. Xong Lee over twenty years ago. Another special thing about Uncle Jai is that he was a mute, although everything else functioned properly. Uncle Jai Lao and Aunty Xong Lee had four children together, one girl and three boys. The eldest child was a boy, called Va Lao. I would like to talk more about this family during the time they were still living in Yordhuay, their old village, where they lived in a very small hut made of reeds, covered by old cogon grass. They did not work in rice fields, as they did not have any land of their own, so this family was very poor. Every day the older children went to work for wealthier families to get a little extra money. Later, when the eldest boy, Va Lao, was older, he had the feeling that he wanted to start his own family. During Hmong New Year, or *kin jiang*, Va Lao went to celebrate the festival in Korthong Village.

Mr. Khamnoy

Mr. Khamnoy was born in Korthong Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province on 15/06/1984. He currently works as a primary school teacher in Korthong. His goal is to study further and move into a higher profession.

It was there that he met and fell in love with a girl from Korthong, who was named Yiava. Both of them spoke and exchanged their feelings, and Va Lao said that if Yiava was agreeable, he would ask his parents to begin wedding negotiations with her parents. After that, Va Lao returned to his village with happiness and spoke of his newfound love to his parents. They asked their son, “The girl’s parents, they don’t abhor us? If they knew that we were very poor...”

“Her parents will not oppose anything,” said Va Lao, “although we are poor, we are hard workers.” As quickly as possible, Va Lao’s parents went to Korthong to ask for the bride on their son’s behalf. Soon, a wedding was held in accordance with the traditions and customs of the Hmong people.

After the wedding, Va Lao took his new wife to her old village of Korthong, and they tried very hard to bring themselves out of poverty. They were diligent, and they worked hard. Their effort brought food for their family, and they did better and better every day. When they saw their family’s status increasing like this, Va Lao did not forget his parents and brothers and sister, who were still living in poverty in Yordhuay Village. One day, Va Lao said to his wife, “we live our life together in happiness, but I do miss my parents a lot. I would like to bring them to live in Korthong Village with us. What do you think?”

His wife replied, “Va Lao, you’re right. I agree with you. I think of your parents as my own parents, so how can we be happy if we see your parents still living in difficulty?”

When Va Lao heard his wife’s reply, he decided that they should leave at once for his parents’ village to explain to them their intentions. He invited his parents and three younger siblings to come and live in Korthong.

When his parents agreed and moved to Korthong, Va Lao helped his father and brothers to build a house for themselves, so that they would have a place to live. He divided a piece of land to give part to his parents so that they could work it for themselves. Shortly after moving to Korthong, it was time for planting crops. Uncle Jai Lao didn’t wait, he rushed out into the fields. He built fences and railings and made all the preparations for the first year of planting rice, corn and other crops, so that he’d be ready for the season. Aside from spending most of his time caring for his fields, he also took a job as a cleaner at the Phakkhæ market. Working at the market, Uncle Jai Lao received a salary and made extra money selling glass and bottles that he collected. Because he was used to a life of poverty, Uncle Jai Lao worked without tiring, and was slowly able to lift himself out of poverty. His three youngest children were able to go to school with the other children in the village. Although the principal occupation of Va Lao’s family was to work the fields, they were still able to buy a cow and raise many calves, raising pigs, ducks, and chickens as well.

Although they were still considered a new family, they now had two cute little children of their own. They all would say, “before long our children will be old enough to go to school, and we will have to make sure we have enough money so that they will not have to go without, as we did.” In 2010, an international aid organisation came to assist development in Korthong Village.

The organisation came and collected information in the village over a number of days to ascertain what the requirements of the villagers were, so they could begin to bring them assistance.

There was a project for training in planting vegetables, planting fruit trees, and for raising chickens. The project on raising chickens for meat was something new for the villagers, and only three families volunteered for the training.



The project began a week later, and the organisation ran the training on how to properly raise meat chickens: how to prepare an enclosure, how to feed them, and how to take care of them. Va Lao and two other

villagers underwent the training and soon understood. After the training, Va Lao spoke about it to his wife. She said, “this will be very difficult work. How much we would have to invest? I don’t know. We’d need to buy the chickens, materials for making the coop, the chicken feed. They might get diseases or die and we’d have to pay for that.”

But Va Lao tried to make his wife understand. “Wife! You needn’t worry because they will give us chicken-wire to make the enclosure, they will give us a feeding trough. They will help us to vaccinate the animals as well. All we have to do is cut the wood

to make the enclosure, and after that just feed the chickens. That’s it!”

“But the food,” his wife replied, “what will we feed them?”

Va Lao answered his wife, “that’s easy. I have learned how to make the food in the training. We have lots of corn, and we just mince it up with rice bran for them to eat. It won’t be difficult.” The day after they spoke together, Va Lao asked his father and brothers to help cut the wood from the forest and they built a chicken enclosure together behind Va Lao’s house.

A week later, there was another event in the village, and this time the organisation gave various items to the villagers, according to each project. For the chicken project, they held a training session on how to feed the chickens and properly take care of them. It took all day, and then there was a ceremony for handing over the chickens, 95 in total, to the families and the equipment for raising chickens. That night Va Lao was very happy. He put all the chickens and equipment in a box and skipped back to his house like a giddy drunk. His wife, in the house, turned and saw him and ran up to help him bring everything into the house. His wife said, “The chickens are so small! Where are the meat chickens? Will they grow big?”

Her husband said, “Hey! All we need is to raise them well and before long you will be surprised. They will grow big very fast!” So the couple released the little chickens into their enclosure, dividing the small ones from the big ones so they wouldn’t fight.

From that day onward, the couple had a lot of extra work. Every day they had to wake early to mince the corn and mix it with rice bran and feed it to the chickens with care. They divided the work, with the wife looking after the coop, cleaning it and ensuring there was food and water at all times. The husband went out into the fields to plant rice and corn in time for the season. Everyone had more responsibility and worked hard, with the new task of raising the chickens falling upon the wife, who also had to look after the household and the children. She did her best to look after the chickens, with encouragement from her husband every day.



Before a month had passed, the little chickens became much bigger, and were much heavier. Every day traders came and asked to buy the chickens, but they were not for sale. After three months, when the chickens were the right weight, they would all be sold at once. The couple made a good income from the sale of the chickens and they divided it to use one portion to re-invest in more chickens, and another portion to buy clothes and study materials for the children. Va Lao's family was doing better and better, because the couple loved each other and were a harmonious family who worked together in all things, despite their poverty. They worked the fields and raised chickens, as well as other animals, like pigs and cows. Va Lao said to me, "Raising chickens is a new occupation for me. It's not that difficult and

they're easy to sell. This way I can make a better living for my family than other occupations. I think I will expand my operation and will raise even more chickens in the future..."

The good things that have come to Va Lao are because he dared to try something new, as well as his own diligence and his loving and harmonious family. Another thing about Va Lao is that he is a son who thought of his parents, and looked after them, for which he should be rewarded. Now his family lives well, has enough to eat, and doesn't have to worry, and they have supported their children to go through school along with the other village children, which is a true demonstration of their triumph.

A Life of Never Giving Up is a collection of 10 true stories written by young persons from Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province in the Lao PDR. In these stories, they take us to their villages, introducing us to extraordinary people who have fought for their lives, their children and the development of their community. These 10 stories not only give us a glimpse of what is life like in this part of Laos, but also show us the impacts of civil society organisations and others working to support sustainable poverty alleviation.



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

