

The Lao National Institute of Tourism and Hospitality (LANITH) - A new approach to overseas aid

Luxembourg Development Cooperation's (LuxDev) most important foreign project in the tourism sector – the Lao National Institute of Tourism and Hospitality, or LANITH – stands to revolutionise an industry that is vital to the future economic growth of one of Southeast Asia's poorest nations.

Set up in 2008 LANITH is helping to transform a sector that lags well behind that of neighbouring Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia or Myanmar. In 2012 tourism in Laos earned US\$500 million in export revenues – behind only mining and hydropower. Yet Cambodia earned US\$3.5 billion for a similar number of tourists. On average, Laos earns just US\$50 per visitor – the lowest in Asia.

LANITH aims to change this by educating and training the people who'll determine the industry's future success – tourism and hospitality operators, staff and students – and in doing so help turn the industry around and bring vital revenue into Laos. Raising the industry's service capacity and quality is imperative to raise its fortunes.

LANITH has two key arms. The Passport to Success industry training program, begun in 2011, gives vocational training to existing hospitality and tourism employees. In fact it has been so successful it is now the biggest industry training program in Laos, offering short vocational courses in areas such as customer service, kitchen management and food production. Participants come from a cross-section of the industry. For example, 28 staff from Lao Airlines – flight attendants, check-in staff and ticket sellers – completed training in conflict management, communications and problem solving.

LANITH's other arm is its two-year Diploma in Tourism and Hospitality, which began as a pilot program for around 300 students in June 2012. More recently LANITH opened its new college facility in Vientiane with 60 full-time students, none of whom had previous industry experience. With scholarships from Luxembourg all are undertaking a two-year Diploma to give them skills and knowledge to work in a range of tourism and hospitality ventures. The college is staffed by young Lao teachers who, with overseas scholarships, completed their own studies and training in Singapore, Luxembourg, France and Ireland.

LANITH is determined to spread the benefits of its training and education throughout Laos. A training centre – with guest rooms, restaurant, kitchen and other facilities – has been set up in the northern city of Luang Prabang. Following a social enterprise model, all income earned is reinvested in training. Elements of the LANITH Diploma are also taught at the Luang Prabang centre and the adjacent vocational school.

LuxDev's investment in educating and training Lao tourism and hospitality staff began with a grant to launch LANITH in 2008. Since then 25 LANITH staff have been educated, coached and employed to write and teach the curriculum for the LANITH Diploma and Passport to Success. LANITH is committed to the inclusion of minority groups in its programs. In 2013 professional development was given to members of disability organisations. Other LANITH students come from impoverished and remote communities which lack access to modern schooling.

In five years LANITH's education, training and symposia have directly benefited the lives of almost 2000 people from a wide cross section of Lao society. Most of these have been industry participants in the Passport to Success program – which has given them new professional skills, better career prospects and higher incomes. Others are students enrolled in the LANITH Diploma. About 300 more people from Laos' broader service sector have taken part in professional development training during LANITH's curriculum pilot phase. All such benefits have arguably flowed through to the families of LANITH participants.

LANITH is above all about people, as both the drivers and beneficiaries of change. Since it began in 2008 this joint private-public partnership (PPP) between the Luxembourg and Lao Governments and the tourism industry has changed the lives of hundreds of people – from new students and raw recruits to hospitality and tourism staff, hotel and restaurant owners and tourism operators.

Laos is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, with an average gross national income in 2012 of just US\$1,010. But with LANITH's intervention the hospitality and tourism industry – one of the country's key growth sectors – has the potential to bring enormous benefits to Lao society, in the form of education, skills training, jobs and income. It is estimated tourism has the potential to earn US\$1 billion in export revenues per year. Currently this revenue is only US\$500 million. The key to filling that gap is improving the quality of services in the industry.

Soon after its inception LANITH employed an 18-member core team to develop and teach its two-year Diploma course and run the Passport to Success industry training program. All 18 recruits were given a first class international education at hospitality and tourism colleges around the world. After three months of preliminary training in Vientiane 12 of the core team were fast-tracked into an intensive three-month work-study program at the Lycee Technique Hotelier (Alexis Heck) in Luxembourg. Two continued their studies in the school's cookery program and 15 went on to Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore. Another student pursued a Masters Degree at l'Ecole de Management de Normandie France. More recently two new recruits have been granted scholarships to Ireland where they are enrolled in a 12-month course at the Dublin Institute of Technology and four are studying for one year at Brussels Business Institute in Wiltz, Luxembourg.

Since returning to Vientiane in 2011, the core team members have played an important 'multiplier' role – by using the skills and training they have acquired overseas to teach both new students and those already in the industry. In doing so they are promulgating international standards and practice to the tourism sector and improving the quality of education and training in Laos.

As noted in a recent visit of Dr Taleb Rifai, Secretary General of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), until now Laos has seriously lacked quality education and training in hospitality and tourism, whereas Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have dozens of schools between them.

In September 2013 LANITH opened its doors to the first 60 Diploma students at its new tourism and hospitality college at Pakpasak, Vientiane. The course offers three study streams – food and beverage service, accommodation operations and travel and tourism. The students represent a diverse mix of the Lao population – including many from poor, underprivileged, rural and remote communities. Most have completed basic schooling and some tertiary study. All are united by their goal to work in a vital and burgeoning industry.

The LANITH Diploma has been developed specifically to respond to the needs of the tourism and hospitality industry in Laos. The curriculum and course content were written after close consultation with key stakeholder groups in the public and private sectors – including development partners, the Lao government, hospitality and tourism operators, industry associations and education and training providers.

The curriculum was formally accredited by the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports in August 2013 – becoming the first such course of its kind in Laos. Indeed, so well regarded is the LANITH Diploma that elements of it have since been approved for introduction into technical vocational schools in several of Laos' 17 provinces. It is anticipated the LANITH campus will expand – in both student numbers and facilities – as demand grows. On 16 December 2013, LANITH was established as an independent, not for profit technical college under the Ministry of Education and Sports.

LANITH's other main stream of training is through its Passport to Success program, which targets workers already employed in the industry. To date nearly 1,000 hospitality and tourism staff have collectively completed almost 2,000 ASEAN competency based modules – of 3-4 days training each – on subjects as diverse as customer service, food and beverage operations, management and communications. Passport to Success has helped to consolidate LANITH's direct connection with the hospitality and tourism industry, by giving paid training to employees from hotels, restaurants and other tourism ventures.

Efforts to transfer international good practice have also been underway in Luang Prabang. A separate stand-alone training centre was built there in 2012 and includes four guest rooms, a functioning restaurant and bar ('The Balcony'), training kitchens and a meeting room. The centre has a dual function – to train people in hospitality and tourism using the Passport to Success and also to operate as a social enterprise to generate revenue that can be directly reinvested into these facilities. Six-month internships at the Rembrandt Hotel in Bangkok were also introduced to provide on-the-job training in kitchen and restaurant operations for LANITH employees at The Balcony.

LANITH's longer term sustainability is assured – thanks to the on-going revenue from the Passport to Success program (a user-pays industry program), income from the Balcony Restaurant in Luang Prabang, plans for a similar training restaurant at the Pakpasak site in Vientiane and tuition fees for the LANITH Diploma. All incomes are reinvested in LANITH and will fund scholarships for under-privileged Lao people.

LANITH has also offered professional development training to industries outside hospitality and tourism. Twenty staff from disability organisations, supported by Handicap International, spent two-weeks learning the 'Principles of Management'. Similar training has been given to professional staff in the retail, health and telecommunications industries.

Since 2008 LANITH has become an industry leader in Laos' hospitality and tourism sector, providing state-of-the-art education and training across the board that directly responds to the industry's needs for Lao people with skills and knowledge, and which reflects good international practice.

LANITH has also taken steps to promote its education, training and industry credentials throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. Since 2010, LANITH has organized 10 regular tourism symposia to bring together private and public sector leaders from across the region to discuss the industry's changing trends and needs with Lao stakeholders.

LANITH's **website** (www.lanith.com),

Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Lanith.Vientiane> and more mainstream media coverage also reflect its on-going role in the tourism and hospitality sector.

We are number one in Luang Prabang! Please see **Trip Advisor** for links to the Balcony at LANITH Luang Prabang training centre:

http://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g295415-d5494210-Reviews-The_balcony_by_Lanith-Luang_Prabang_Luang_Prabang_Province.html

In 2012 Lanith's best practice and sustainable tourism principles earned it the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Grand Award for Education and Training.

<http://www.pata.org/press/pata-announces-the-grand-and-gold-award-winners>

In 2014 LANITH won the prestigious World Travel and Tourism Council Tourism for Tomorrow Award for best practice and investment in people.

<http://www.wttc.org/tourismfortomorrow/winners-finalists/2014-winners-finalists/>

In 2014, one of our LANITH teachers was crowned the 'PATA – Face of the Future'.

<http://www.pata.org/press/academic-soulinnara-ratanavong-wins-2014-pata-face-of-the-future1>

Since 2008 LANITH has become a regional leader: rather than following an established template for tourism employment and education in developing nations, LANITH has set its own international benchmarks in its curriculum and teaching standards. It was the realisation of a need for distinct education and skills training in Laos that led to the LANITH Diploma for career-minded students and the Passport to Success program for established tourism and hospitality staff. Both programs place weight on industry involvement and consultation, to ensure their needs are met and the skills and infrastructure are in place for future growth.

This capacity building began by providing LANITH's Lao teaching team with a quality overseas education and practical experience. LANITH teachers are now transferring their knowledge to

other Lao educators who teach university, vocational and high school students. LANITH teachers have audited the curriculum at Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang.

Since its inception LANITH's innovations have benefited the upcoming generation of industry leaders and staff as well as the travellers they serve. LANITH has also provided a proven, sustainable pathway from poverty while contributing to cultural preservation and community development by re-greening initiatives and tree planting.

To achieve best practices in sustainable tourism, LANITH is working with development agencies (the Asian Development Bank and International Labour Organisation); partnering with Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management, Macao's Institute for Tourism Studies, and the Dublin Institute of Technology; and obtaining recognition through accreditation from organisations such as the International Centre for Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality.

LANITH's cooperative agreement with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation makes the Luang Prabang training centre Laos' only CIEH-accredited program, allowing it to function as an operating body for the "Safe and Green Tourism Mark, Luang Prabang", a campaign for ecologically sound tourism.

As a community leader, LANITH launched its Quarterly Symposia in 2010, featuring presentations by international tourism and hospitality experts, such as UNWTO award winner Professor Kaye Chon; Cornell University Hotel School's former Associate Dean Dr Thomas Cullen; and Myanmar Tourism Federation Secretary Kyi Thein Ko. The symposia represent a forum for public and private sector leaders to debate key issues in Laos' travel trade. These symposia - along with the curriculum and Passport to Success programs - all promote international good practice including the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's principles and criteria, and host activities of the PATA Laos Chapter. Environmental and economic sustainability are principles enshrined in the LANITH curriculum to benefit future generations.

LANITH stands at the forefront of branding, marketing and demystifying development projects, which it does via a communications campaign and merchandising LANITH branded food products and souvenirs. The campaign also includes the LANITH website, an active Facebook page and regular coverage in in-flight magazines and mainstream media, including numerous front-page articles in the Vientiane Times and a multi-page spread in Laos' premier employment publication.

