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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH UNIONS: AN ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS ASSESSMENT IN LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

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Abstract

This study assesses the organizational effectiveness of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang Province, Laos, who play a pivotal role in local governance and community development. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research involved surveys with 120 youth members and 50 management staff, complemented by semi-structured interviews and document analysis, to evaluate program implementation and identify strengths and limitations. Findings indicate that while the programs enhance participants' knowledge and professional competencies, their overall effectiveness is hindered by several organizational challenges. These include insufficient alignment between program objectives and participant needs, limited infrastructure and resources, inadequate policy incentives, and gaps in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Notably, management staff demonstrated a higher awareness of program objectives than youth members, revealing a significant perceptual gap. The study recommends strengthening organizational structures, optimizing resource allocation, improving monitoring and evaluation practices, and developing targeted policies to enhance youth participation. This research offers evidence-based guidance for policymakers, youth organizations, and development agencies to optimize professional development initiatives and foster sustainable capacity-building in the region.

Keywords: Organizational Management, Professional Capacity Building, Youth Development, Youth Union, Laos

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Introduction

Youth unions in Laos play a critical role in the country's social, economic, and political development. As active organizations affiliated with provincial and national governance structures, youth unions serve as a platform for fostering civic engagement, leadership, and professional skills among young people (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). The Luang Prabang Provincial Youth Union, in particular, serves as a key intermediary between local authorities and youth, implementing programs to build professional capacities, promote volunteerism, and support sustainable development objectives (United Nations Development Programme, 2003). In Laos, where economic growth and modernization are accelerating, the development of competent, well-trained youth is vital for sustaining social cohesion and contributing to national development. Professional capacity-building programs within youth unions are essential in equipping members with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to address emerging societal challenges (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). These programs also enhance the capacity of youth unions to operate effectively, ensuring that organizational objectives align with national and local development priorities. Professional development and capacity-building initiatives for youth organizations not only enhance human capital but also contribute to broader sustainable development objectives. By strengthening organizational capacity, fostering leadership skills, and promoting participatory engagement, these programs align with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). In the context of Luang Prabang, such initiatives have the potential to create long-term social and institutional impacts that support both youth empowerment and community resilience.

Professional development programs for youth union members are crucial for both individual and organizational growth. Structured training and skills enhancement initiatives improve leadership abilities, professional competencies, and engagement among youth participants (International Labour Organization, 2019). In Luang Prabang, youth members often face challenges related to limited technical knowledge, lack of exposure to modern management practices, and insufficient engagement with strategic organizational processes (United Nations Development Programme, 2003). Effective professional development programs address these challenges by providing targeted training in leadership, administrative management, policy implementation, and sector-specific expertise. These programs enable youth union members to meet performance expectations, align with organizational goals, and contribute to local development initiatives. Additionally, capacity-building activities strengthen institutional governance by fostering accountability, transparency, and coordination among youth union leaders and members (United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

This study aims to assess the organizational effectiveness of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang, focusing on identifying strengths, limitations, and practical improvement solutions. Specifically, the study evaluates the organizational structure and implementation of professional development programs, identifies best practices, examines limitations affecting program effectiveness, and proposes recommendations to improve program design and management. The research addresses the following key questions: How are professional development programs for youth union members organized and implemented in Luang Prabang? What are the main strengths and successes of these programs? What are the significant challenges and barriers affecting program effectiveness? How can organizational implementation of professional development programs be improved to enhance youth capacity and engagement?

This study contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge in youth development and organizational management. Theoretically, it provides empirical evidence on the relationship between organizational structures, program implementation, and youth capacity development

within a Southeast Asian context, which remains underexplored in the literature (United Nations Development Programme, 2003; International Labour Organization, 2019). Practically, the study offers actionable insights for policymakers, local government authorities, and youth union leaders. By identifying strengths, gaps, and strategic solutions, the research provides a foundation for designing more effective professional development programs, improving youth engagement, and enhancing institutional capacity. These contributions have implications not only for the Luang Prabang Provincial Youth Union but also for youth organizations across Laos and other developing countries seeking to strengthen their human capital and governance practices.

Literature Review

Professional development and capacity building lie at the heart of organizational growth and human capital enhancement, especially within youth-serving organizations. Rather than being limited to skill acquisition, effective professional development is framed as the holistic enhancement of competencies, attitudes, organizational engagement, and adaptive capacities (Knowles et al., 2015). In the youth context, capacity-building involves deliberate strategies that strengthen not only technical knowledge and leadership skills but also the ability of young members to contribute meaningfully to their institutions and communities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016). Crucially, capacity building must align individual learning objectives with organizational goals to ensure that initiatives create dual benefits: personal development and institutional performance (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

Dinnen et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive review to identify the essential components of effective teacher professional development (PD) for school-based mental health promotion (SMHP). The authors emphasized that teachers play a crucial role in implementing SMHP programs, but often lack sufficient preparation from pre-service training. Their systematized review identified key PD elements, including interactive training, staff input, collaborative and data-driven technical assistance, and activities such as modeling, feedback, and reflection. Although empirical evidence remains limited, these components represent current best practices for building teacher capacity and guiding the design of future PD in school mental health.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation and policy relevance of this study, Peters' (1996) governance model was incorporated. This model emphasizes the structures, processes, and principles of public-sector management, highlighting how organizational capacity, policy alignment, and resource allocation shape program effectiveness. Applying this framework to youth professional development enables a structured understanding of how local organizational practices can support broader governance objectives, ensuring that interventions are not only effective locally but also aligned with recognized standards in public-sector reform.

Organizational frameworks for youth development programs often emphasize structured interventions incorporating planning, implementation, and evaluation phases. Eccles & Gootman (2002) argued that youth programs function most effectively when leadership roles are explicit, curricula are systematically developed, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are embedded. Beyond formal structure, effective youth professional development emphasizes mentorship, experiential learning, and participatory decision-making, thereby enabling youth participants to act as active agents rather than passive recipients (Yates & Youniss, 1998). In addition, the sustainability of youth development initiatives depends on organizational support systems, governance, resources, and coordination with external stakeholders since these determine the capacity to maintain and scale activities over time (Checkoway, 2011). Building on these principles, this study introduces an explicit conceptual framework linking organizational capacity, policy alignment, resource management, and

professional development outcomes, thereby clarifying the pathways through which organizational structures and processes support effective youth capacity building. Organizational effectiveness theories highlight governance, resource management, and capacity building as determinants of program outcomes (Checkoway, 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Within youth-serving organizations, these structural factors influence the sustainability and scalability of professional development initiatives, determining whether programs achieve intended outcomes. Clear leadership roles, systematic planning, and monitoring mechanisms are foundational to enabling organizations to implement effective capacity-building interventions.

Within the broader youth development literature, best practices emphasize regular, targeted training programs; the use of competency-based assessments; and continuous feedback loops as mechanisms for growth (Kingsbury, 2018). For instance, Jones et al. (2020) model a “community capacity-building” approach in sport-for-development contexts, showing that youth-serving organizations are more effective when they intentionally strengthen both youth and community capacities. Similarly, systematic reviews of capacity-building interventions indicate positive short-term effects on outcomes such as resilience and literacy, especially among disadvantaged youth contexts (Fu et al., 2025). These studies corroborate the notion that capacity building requires more than training modules; it demands context-sensitive design, engagement of youth voices, and enabling environments.

Nevertheless, myriad challenges persist. Across regions, youth organizations report inadequate resources, deficient infrastructure, weak policy support, and weak alignment between program objectives and youth needs (World Bank Group, 2017). The capacity-building literature also emphasizes the importance of context: cultural, social, and economic factors shape programs' uptake and effectiveness. For example, youth organizations in Finland, Norway, and Romania deployed different capacity-building strategies for media literacy, each shaped by national context (Sandberg et al., 2025). Liberato et al. (2011) provide a capacity-building framework from community health contexts, identifying nine domains, including leadership, resource mobilization, and partnership, that are also relevant to youth-serving organizations.

Although the literature on youth capacity development is extensive, gaps remain, especially regarding organizational effectiveness in smaller provincial or regional settings. Many studies focus on macro-level phenomena in large NGOs or national programs. At the same time, fewer examine how local youth unions or provincial organizations deploy professional development programs from both managerial and youth perspectives (Quinn et al., 2020). Moreover, the evaluation of control mechanisms, resource utilization, and context-specific barriers in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) settings remains underexplored (Garst et al., 2021). This gap underscores the need for research that investigates how youth professional development is organized, implemented, and evaluated within local contexts and how it aligns with broader developmental goals. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the organizational structures, processes, and outcomes of a provincial youth union's professional development programs in Lao PDR. Complementing organizational perspectives, youth development theories emphasize participatory learning, mentorship, and experiential opportunities that empower young members to act as active agents rather than passive recipients (Yates & Youniss, 1998; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016). Effective professional development programs integrate these principles to strengthen not only technical competencies but also adaptive skills, leadership abilities, and engagement within both the organization and the broader community.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate the organizational effectiveness of the LPYU professional development program. Quantitative methods included structured surveys administered to youth members and management staff to measure perceptions, participation levels, and satisfaction with program activities. Qualitative methods included semi-structured interviews with key management personnel and youth members to explore the contextual challenges and organizational processes. Additionally, document analysis was conducted to review internal reports, program plans, training curricula, and policy documents related to professional development activities. This triangulation of methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of the program's organizational dynamics and its outcomes, allowing for cross-validation of data and deeper insights into systemic strengths and weaknesses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

The target population consisted of both youth union members and management staff actively involved in professional development programs in Luang Prabang province. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants based on their involvement and experience with the program. The final sample included 120 youth members and 50 management staff from provincial and district levels. Data collection was conducted through self-administered questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and the collection of relevant program documentation. Quantitative survey responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores, to assess participant perceptions and program effectiveness. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic coding, focusing on recurring patterns related to organizational structure, program implementation, and perceived challenges (Patton, 2015). Document analysis supported the triangulation of findings, ensuring the reliability and validity of conclusions drawn.

Qualitative Data Collection and Trustworthiness

The qualitative component of this study involved semi-structured interviews with key participants, with the number of interviews determined by achieving data saturation. At that point, no new themes emerged from additional interviews. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies were applied across four dimensions: credibility (member checking and peer debriefing), transferability (detailed contextual descriptions), dependability (audit trail and methodological transparency), and confirmability (reflexive journaling and external review). Triangulation was employed by integrating multiple data sources, including interviews, organizational documents, and observational notes, to cross-validate findings and enhance the robustness of interpretations. This approach ensured that qualitative insights were both rigorous and contextually grounded.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical standards throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data were stored securely, and identifiers were removed to prevent potential privacy breaches. The study also respected participants' autonomy, allowing them to withdraw at any time without consequences. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional authorities and provincial youth union administration before data collection commenced (Resnik, 2024).

Sample Size and Representativeness

The sample size for this study was determined using the Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967) to ensure statistical representativeness:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the required sample size, NNN is the population size, and e is the margin of error (set at 5%). Based on the total population of Youth Union members in the study area, the calculated sample size ensured adequate coverage for reliable analysis. Participants were randomly selected from organizational rosters to reflect the diversity of roles, experience levels, and geographic distribution, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the study findings.

Instrument Development and Reliability

The quantitative instruments used in this study were developed through a systematic process to ensure validity and reliability. Initially, survey items were constructed through a thorough review of the existing literature and aligned with the study's conceptual framework. To establish content validity, the draft instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts in youth development and organizational management, who provided feedback on item clarity, relevance, and coverage of key constructs. Following revisions, a pilot test was conducted with a sample of participants representative of the study population. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales demonstrating acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), confirming that the instrument reliably measures the intended constructs.

Research Result

Program Structure and Operations

The professional development program for youth union members in Luang Prabang operates under a hierarchical organizational structure coordinated by the Provincial Youth Union Office and supported by local government authorities. Key operational components include a central management unit, district-level coordinators, and training facilitators who deliver content.

The program follows a structured operational workflow: planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Annual plans are formulated at the provincial level and specify training objectives, curricula, participant selection, and evaluation methods. Training sessions are conducted through a combination of lectures, workshops, group projects, and field exercises. Monitoring mechanisms include regular assessments, such as written tests, individual assignments, and group project evaluations.

Despite a clear structural framework (Figure 1), operational processes show varying degrees of efficiency. Coordination between provincial and district units ensures baseline program delivery, yet gaps exist in real-time feedback collection, participant follow-up, and responsiveness to emerging skill needs. The current organizational framework provides a functional backbone for systematic professional development, but further refinement is required to enhance responsiveness, flexibility, and operational effectiveness.

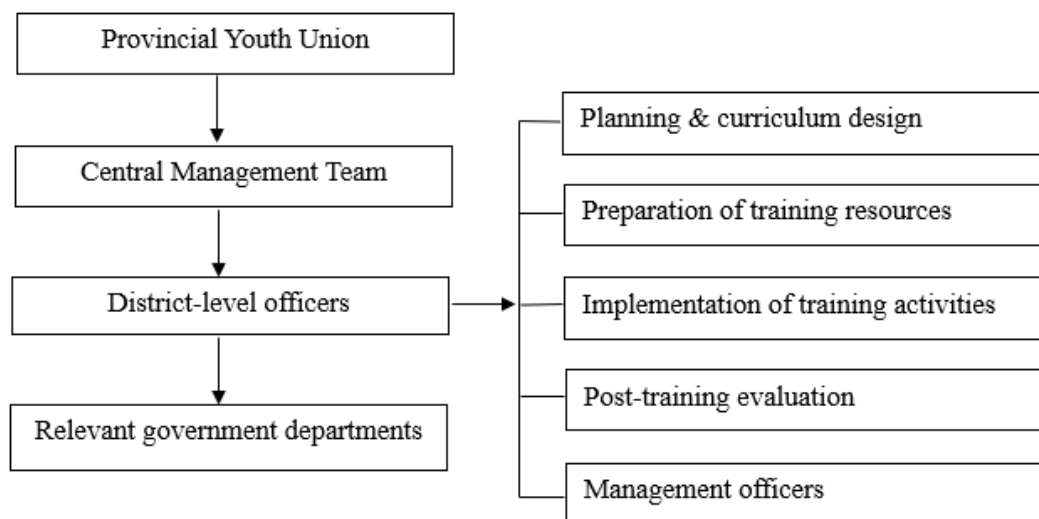


Figure 1 Current organizational structure and operational process.

Professional Development Activities (2020-2022)

Between 2020 and 2022, the professional development program for youth union members in Luang Prabang exhibited a consistent upward trend in activity levels, reflecting increasing engagement and institutional effort (Figure 2).

Communication Activities: Sessions dedicated to communicating the project increased from 121 in 2020 to 156 in 2021 and reached 197 in 2022. Likewise, the distribution of banners and slogans, as part of outreach efforts, grew steadily from 150 sheets in 2020 to 185 sheets in 2022. These trends indicate a progressively stronger emphasis on program visibility and public engagement.

Coordination Activities: Structured coordination for implementing the professional development project remained stable at five classes in 2020 and 2021, then increased to seven classes in 2022. This gradual expansion demonstrates the organization's enhanced capacity to deliver training effectively.

Monitoring and Supervision: Oversight sessions increased from 12 sessions in 2020 and 2021 to 14 in 2022, indicating a strengthening of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure program effectiveness.

Overall, these trends reveal that the Provincial Youth Union has progressively expanded its communication, coordination, and monitoring mechanisms over the three years, reflecting both quantitative growth and a commitment to enhancing the quality of professional development activities for youth union members.

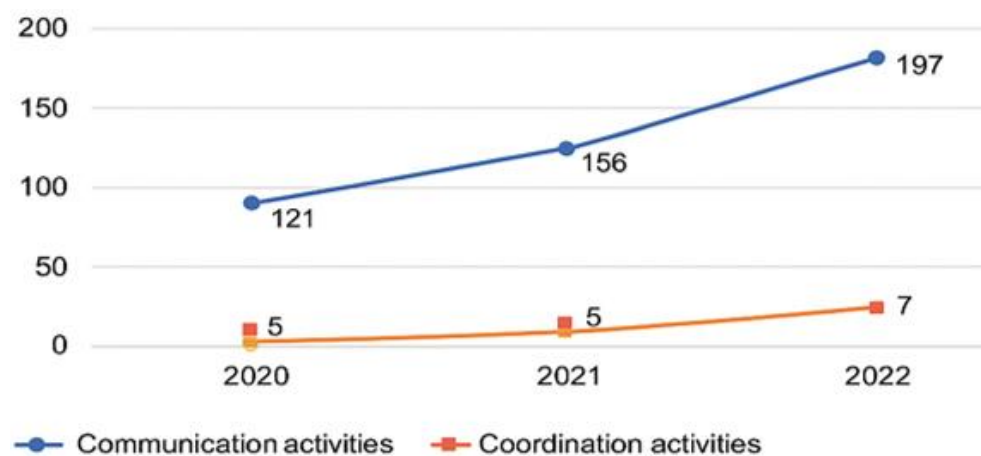


Figure 2 Professional Development Activities (2020-2022)

Assessment of Program Objectives and Outcomes

Evaluation of program objectives indicates partial alignment with both organizational goals and participants' professional needs. Key objectives include:

- 1) Strengthening and expanding professional knowledge and pedagogical skills among youth members.
- 2) Ensuring compliance with professional standards for youth union roles.
- 3) Enhancing overall competency beyond baseline requirements.
- 4) Promoting self-directed learning and professional responsibility.
- 5) Encouraging positive professional attitudes and commitment.

Survey results show that 63-64% of management staff and youth members recognize the achievement of knowledge and skill enhancement objectives (Figure 3). However, objectives related to exceeding baseline competency levels and fostering autonomous learning exhibit lower recognition (23-31%), suggesting gaps in program reach and participant engagement.

Assessment outcomes indicate that while the program successfully consolidates foundational skills and knowledge, its capacity to elevate participants to higher competency levels or instill self-directed professional development behaviors remains limited. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to align training content, methodology, and incentives with both participant expectations and organizational standards.

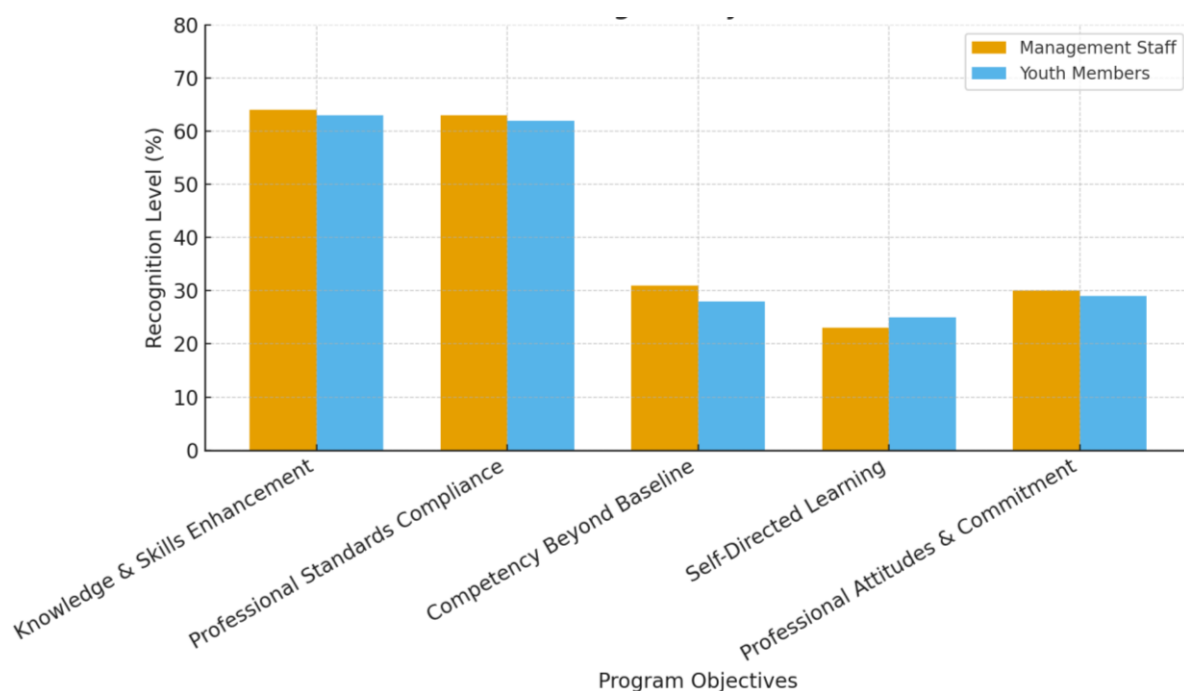


Figure 3 Assessment of Achievement Levels for Program Objectives Among Management Staff and Youth Members

Strengths in Organizational Implementation

The implementation of the professional development program for youth union members in Luang Prabang exhibits several notable strengths that underpin its relative success.

- 1) **Institutional Support:** The program benefits from strong commitment at both provincial and local government levels. This support ensures adequate allocation of resources, coordination among departments, and administrative oversight, which are essential for sustaining program operations and aligning them with broader organizational objectives.
- 2) **Participant Awareness and Motivation:** Surveys indicate that over 97% of youth union members and management staff acknowledge the importance of the program for professional

development. This high level of awareness and motivation reflects the perceived relevance of the training in advancing both individual competencies and the strategic goals of the Youth Union.

3) **Structured and Comprehensive Curriculum:** The program offers a systematically designed curriculum encompassing professional skills, policy knowledge, management techniques, and practical exercises. This structured approach provides participants with both theoretical knowledge and opportunities for applied learning, thereby enhancing skill acquisition and professional competence.

4) **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:** Program effectiveness is reinforced through regular assessments, including individual assignments, written examinations, group project evaluations, and experience-sharing reports. These monitoring mechanisms allow for timely feedback, ensure active participant engagement, and facilitate measurable tracking of knowledge acquisition and skill development.

Collectively, these strengths demonstrate that the program has a well-defined organizational framework, motivated participants, a structured curriculum, and effective monitoring mechanisms, which together provide a strong foundation for systematic and sustainable professional development of youth union members.

Limitations and Barriers Affecting Program Effectiveness

Despite its strengths, the professional development program for youth union members in Luang Prabang faces several limitations that constrain its overall effectiveness.

1) **Limited Motivation Among Participants:** A subset of youth members exhibits complacency regarding existing skills, demonstrating low intrinsic motivation to pursue further professional development. Socioeconomic pressures, demanding daily workloads, and insufficient incentives reduce engagement and limit participation in training activities.

2) **Misalignment of Program Planning with Participant Needs:** Survey data indicate that 100% of management staff and 85% of youth members perceive the program's planning as inadequately aligned with the actual professional development needs of participants. Needs assessments and consultation processes are either insufficient or absent, resulting in training objectives that do not fully reflect the priorities or aspirations of youth members.

3) **Gaps in Oversight and Management:** Effective organizational oversight is inconsistent. While 93% of management staff acknowledge the importance of leadership involvement, regulatory frameworks lack precise enforcement mechanisms for addressing underperformance. Consequently, monitoring and follow-up for participants who fail to meet program expectations remain inadequate.

4) **Curriculum and Instructional Limitations:** The content, methodology, and delivery of training are perceived as largely theoretical and didactic. Approximately 95% of management staff and 82% of youth members report that teaching methods do not adequately foster active learning or critical thinking. Redundant or outdated content, coupled with limited adaptation to contextual needs, reduces program relevance and the ability to translate learning into practical outcomes.

5) **Insufficient Infrastructure and Resources:** Physical facilities, instructional tools, and learning materials remain inadequate. Survey responses indicate that 74% of management staff and over 96% of youth members consider resource constraints a significant barrier, which limits the pace of knowledge acquisition and reduces opportunities for experiential learning.

6) **Inadequate Incentive and Policy Support:** Existing policies for recognition, reward, and career progression tied to professional development are limited or inconsistently applied. This weakens participant motivation and diminishes sustained engagement in program activities.

Collectively, these barriers highlight structural, motivational, and resource-related challenges that constrain the program's effectiveness. Addressing these limitations is critical to optimizing

professional development outcomes and ensuring the program's long-term impact on youth union capacity in Luang Prabang.

Stakeholder Perceptions: Management vs. Youth Members

Stakeholder perceptions reveal significant differences between management staff and youth union members in their evaluation of program effectiveness (Figure 4).

Management Perspective: Management staff consistently emphasize the program's strategic importance, with over 97% considering professional development essential to organizational goals. They prioritize structured curricula, regular monitoring, and alignment with provincial policy objectives. Management respondents also express concern regarding underperforming participants and stress the need for precise accountability mechanisms.

Youth Member Perspective: Youth members generally recognize the value of professional development, but practical constraints, including workload, limited incentives, and the perceived relevance of the content, temper their engagement and motivation. While 71-86% acknowledge the benefits of training, fewer participants (28-32%) perceive activities as critical to exceeding baseline professional standards or enhancing self-directed learning skills.

These contrasting perspectives highlight the tension between organizational expectations and participant realities. Management staff focus on strategic outcomes and compliance, whereas youth members prioritize immediate relevance, practical applicability, and personal incentives. Addressing these perceptual gaps is essential to enhance engagement, optimize learning outcomes, and ensure sustainable program impact.

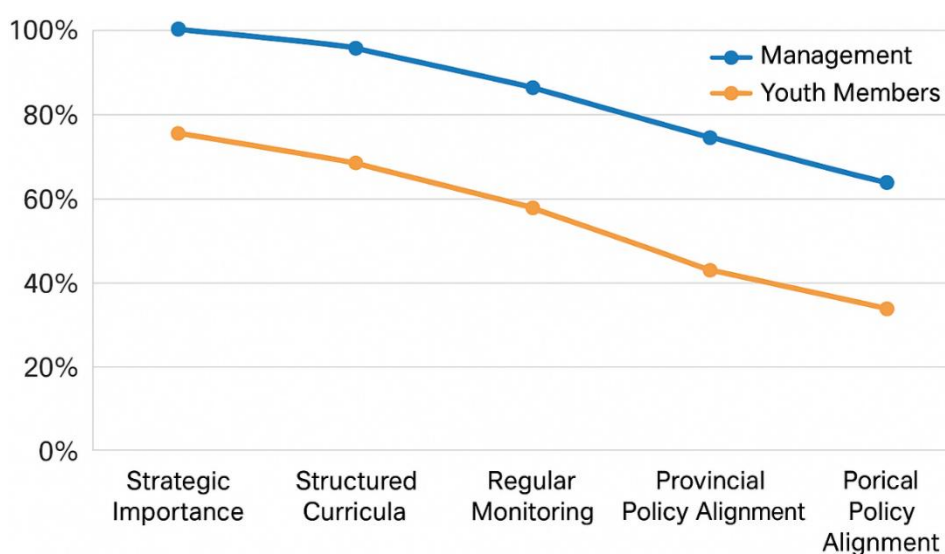


Figure 4 Comparison of Stakeholder Perceptions: Management vs. Youth Members.

The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) results, as depicted in Figure 4, illustrate the comparative perceptions of Management and Youth Members regarding key program dimensions. Notably, both groups perceive Strategic Importance and Structured Curricula as high-priority areas, with management consistently rating performance across all metrics significantly higher than that of Youth Members. The most significant discrepancies are observed in the program's alignment with Provincial Policy and Policy Alignment, suggesting a perceived lack of transparency or integration by youth. The corrected IPA Matrix clearly identifies the critical gaps where the program is deemed highly important (i.e., Structured Curricula) but where performance monitoring and policy integration are reported as low, signaling priority areas for management intervention to bridge the perception gap and improve overall program delivery.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate a complex interplay among organizational structures, capacity-building processes, and youth outcomes within the promotion and professional development program for youth union members in Luang Prabang Province. They also highlight key areas for improvement, aligning with extant literature on youth development and organizational capacity in youth-serving contexts. In line with the findings of Dinnen et al. (2024), effective teacher professional development (PD) is critical to enhancing the implementation of school-based mental health promotion (SMHP) programs. Their review highlighted that while teachers are central to the success of SMHP initiatives, many feel underprepared due to limited pre-service training in this area. The study identified several essential PD components that contribute to improving teacher competence and confidence, including interactive and collaborative training, incorporation of staff input, and data-driven technical assistance supported by activities such as modeling, performance feedback, and reflective practice. Despite the limited empirical evidence available, these components represent emerging best practices and provide a valuable framework for strengthening teacher capacity and informing future PD strategies to promote student mental health and well-being. Integrating these perspectives, the study's conceptual framework posits that professional development outcomes are maximized when organizational capacity and policy alignment support youth engagement, skill acquisition, and adaptive competencies. The findings of this study corroborate this framework: organizations with clearer governance structures, adequate resources, and participatory practices demonstrated higher PD effectiveness. This highlights the interplay between structural factors and youth development outcomes, illustrating how theory informs the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional development initiatives.

Organizational Structure and Capacity for Implementation

Our results show that while the Provincial Youth Union has established a leadership structure (i.e., Secretary, Deputy Secretaries, and supporting departments) to implement the program, gaps remain in aligning the organization's structure with the demands of effective professional development. The literature emphasizes that organizational capacity, including staff competencies, monitoring systems, and resource infrastructure, is critical for sustainable youth development programming (Garst et al., 2021; Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange, 2016). In particular, the finding that 100% of managers perceive planning misalignment (and 85% of youth members agree) indicates a structural weakness in demand-responsive design. This echoes the view that "programs must be strategically managed to build and sustain capacity" (Jones et al., 2020).

The study's findings can be interpreted through Peters' governance model, providing a lens for policy and generalizability. Organizational structures, resource management, and participatory practices observed in Luang Prabang align with the model's principles, suggesting that effective youth professional development can inform broader public-sector reform strategies. Recommendations derived from this study, such as enhancing governance mechanisms, aligning policy with organizational capacity, and institutionalizing participatory processes, are therefore grounded in a recognized framework, enhancing their applicability beyond the local context and offering guidance for similar initiatives in other regional or national settings.

Alignment of Training Content and Youth Needs

The survey data indicate that although managers and youth members recognise the high importance of the training (84.3% of managers rated "very necessary"), more profound awareness of specific objectives, such as "raising qualifications above standard," remains low among both groups (23.7% of managers, 28.6% of youth). The literature on positive youth development (PYD) argues that effectiveness is bolstered when programs engage youth in meaningful, tailored experiences that promote agency and skill development (Arnold &

Silliman, 2017). The fact that many respondents reported lecture-based training methods, passive involvement, and inadequate relevance suggests that youth motivation and engagement may be undermined. Indeed, effective professional development centres on experiential, reflective, and participatory modalities (Dinnen et al., 2024).

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Control Mechanisms

The findings on monitoring and evaluation mechanisms indicate a moderate but insufficient level of control (e.g., 3 monitoring events for objectives in 2022; limited written evaluation methods). Youth development research highlights the importance of robust evaluation capacity for improving program quality and organizational learning (Norze & Cater, 2020). In this study context, the lack of formal follow-up mechanisms, inadequate incentive systems for non-compliant participants, and the predominance of one-directional planning hinder adaptive learning. As supported by Garst et al. (2021), youth-serving organizations benefit from advisory boards or structured evaluation frameworks to build data-driven capacity, which appears to be lacking in Luang Prabang.

Resource and Incentive Constraints

Resource constraints were salient: 74.2% of managers and 96.3% of youth reported that inadequate facilities/equipment significantly impacted training effectiveness. Additionally, 89.6% of managers and 87.7% of youth noted that policy/incentive deficiencies impaired training engagement. This aligns with research showing that organizational capacity is not just about training content and structure, but also about the enabling environment, including tools, infrastructure, and motivational mechanisms (International Youth Federation, n.d.). Without such support, even well-conceived programs struggle to deliver intended outcomes.

Strengths, but Conditional Sustainability

The findings of this study demonstrate that professional development programs, when implemented with transparent governance, adequate resources, and participatory practices, contribute to sustainable outcomes in the Luang Prabang context. By enhancing organizational effectiveness and youth engagement, these initiatives support local capacity-building, strengthen social cohesion, and promote community development, thereby reflecting tangible contributions to SDGs 4, 8, and 17. These results underscore the broader sustainability relevance of youth-focused capacity-building programs, highlighting their role in fostering enduring social and institutional benefits beyond immediate skill acquisition.

A notable strength of the Luang Prabang program is the recognition and buy-in of senior management and youth members: 100% of managers and 97.7% of youth see the evaluation and professional development program as a core mission of the Youth Union. This is a valuable foundation for sustainability. However, the literature cautions that strong intent must be matched by structural supports, responsiveness to youth needs, and continuous learning systems to yield sustained impact (Ignatowski et al., 2021). In other words, the “hardware” (structure, planning, resources) must be matched to the “software” (engaged youth, relevant content, dynamic delivery) for actual impact.

National & International Connections

The findings of this study have important implications not only for Luang Prabang but also for broader regional contexts, including Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. Similar to youth development programs in Thailand, the results highlight the critical role of organizational capacity, participatory practices, and resource management in achieving effective professional development outcomes (Dinnen et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2020). Comparative analysis with regional literature reveals both common challenges, such as limited resources and policy alignment, and context-specific strategies, such as culturally tailored mentorship programs and community engagement approaches. By situating the study within this regional perspective, the findings contribute to cross-country knowledge sharing, providing lessons that can inform the design and implementation of youth capacity-building initiatives across Southeast Asia.

Implications

The results of this study have several practical and policy-relevant implications for the effective implementation of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang:

- 1) Needs-Responsive Planning: Program planning should be closely aligned with the actual needs and aspirations of youth participants. This can be achieved through systematic needs assessments, participatory program design, and differentiated training tracks that accommodate varying skill levels and career objectives. Such approaches enhance relevance, engagement, and the likelihood of skill transfer into practice.
- 2) Strengthening Organizational Capacity: Effective implementation requires dedicated staff units with clearly defined roles and accountability mechanisms for program outcomes. Organizational capacity can be further reinforced through structured incentive systems that reward participation, encourage the application of skills post-training, and recognize achievements. Strengthening internal structures ensures sustainable program delivery and responsiveness to emerging challenges.
- 3) Enhanced Monitoring and Evaluation: Current evaluation practices, which focus primarily on compliance, should evolve toward a learning-oriented framework. Integrating formative assessments, regular feedback loops, and participatory evaluation processes incorporating youth voices can improve program quality, adaptability, and the alignment of outcomes with both organizational objectives and participant expectations (Seymour et al., 2017).
- 4) Resource Investment and Modernized Training Approaches: Adequate investment in facilities, technology, and instructional materials is essential to support effective professional development. Modernized training methods, such as blended learning, project-based activities, and experiential exercises, coupled with recognition and reward mechanisms, can foster motivation, engagement, and active skill acquisition. Aligning these measures with broader frameworks of positive youth development (PYD) promotes youth agency, competence, and sustained motivation (Renninger & Hidi, 2019).

Collectively, these strategies provide a roadmap for enhancing the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of professional development initiatives within youth-serving organizations in Luang Prabang and similar contexts.

Contribution to Practices

This study provides practical insights into the implementation, management, and evaluation of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang, with implications for both policymakers and organizational leaders. First, the findings highlight the critical role of structured training programs in enhancing the professional competencies, knowledge, and skills of youth members, emphasizing that well-designed curricula and systematic follow-up can significantly improve both individual performance and organizational outcomes.

Second, the study underscores the importance of aligning training content, methods, and objectives with the specific needs, aspirations, and cultural context of youth participants. By identifying gaps in planning, resource allocation, and instructional methods, the research offers concrete guidance for tailoring professional development programs to ensure relevance, engagement, and effectiveness.

Third, the analysis of organizational strengths and weaknesses provides actionable recommendations to improve management practices, including establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, strengthening mentorship systems, and enhancing coordination between provincial and local youth unions. These insights can help practitioners create sustainable professional development frameworks that foster active participation, accountability, and skill development among youth members.

Finally, this research demonstrates that integrating continuous feedback, targeted capacity-building, and incentives can increase youth participants' motivation and engagement. For policymakers and youth union leaders, these findings offer evidence-based strategies to optimize human resource development, reinforce organizational performance, and contribute to broader socio-economic development objectives in the region.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the implementation of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses exclusively on a single provincial Youth Union, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other provinces or national contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design relies primarily on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to response biases and does not capture longitudinal changes in skills, knowledge, or professional behavior.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to track the outcomes of training programs over time, including measurable behavioral changes such as enhanced job performance, leadership capacity, and career progression among youth members. Comparative studies across multiple provinces, or even cross-national studies in Southeast Asia, would allow evaluation of contextual differences and broader generalizability. Furthermore, in-depth qualitative research exploring youth perceptions of training relevance, cultural influences on engagement, and organizational dynamics would provide richer insights into the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of professional development initiatives. Such investigations could inform evidence-based strategies to optimize program design, delivery, and evaluation.

Conclusion

This study examined the organization, implementation, and effectiveness of professional development programs for youth union members in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. The findings reveal that while the provincial Youth Union has made significant strides in promoting professional competency, several challenges limit the effectiveness of these initiatives. Key challenges include insufficient alignment between training programs and the actual needs of youth members, inadequate resource allocation, limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and gaps in instructional methods that reduce participant engagement and skill application.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights important strengths, including strong institutional support from local authorities, clear recognition of professional development as a strategic priority, and motivated youth members. These factors provide a foundation for improving program design, resource planning, and implementation strategies.

The study underscores the importance of adopting a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach to professional development. Effective programs should integrate needs assessments, participatory planning, continuous evaluation, and culturally appropriate instructional methods to maximize engagement, skill acquisition, and long-term impact. By addressing these areas, provincial Youth Unions can enhance the professional capacity of youth members, strengthen organizational effectiveness, and contribute to broader socio-economic development objectives.

In conclusion, this research provides evidence-based insights that can inform policy and practice, offering guidance to provincial and local youth organizations seeking to optimize professional development programs and foster the growth of skilled, competent, and engaged young leaders in Lao PDR.

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