



Water and Sanitation Program

An international partnership to help the poor gain sustained access to improved water supply and sanitation services

The Lao Experience

Learning from a 30-month policy reform and institutional strengthening initiative in Lao PDR's RWSS sector

Water and Sanitation Program
for East Asia and the Pacific

Field Note

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March 1998
Reprint March 2000



OVERVIEW

Led throughout by Lao personnel, facilitated with backstopping from the World Bank's Regional Water and Sanitation Group for East Asia and the Pacific (RWSG-EAP)^{1/} and active participation from UNICEF and other sector partners, the work on the sector strategy has focused on maximizing national ownership of policy development. Some of the lessons learned in Lao PDR would hold interest for other countries, and for other sectors.

SECTOR IN BRIEF

Lao's turbulent history, rugged terrain, poor communications and thinly spread population, has meant that rural water and sanitation progress has been slow and difficult. While the early 90's have seen a rapid increase in improving the access of poor people to water and sanitation, this has contributed to undesirable trends in the sector in the past, requiring correction in the long term:

- *firstly*, a focus on implementation and "numbers" of installations, nominal "community coverage" and dollar investments, at the expense of other key aspects. In particular, **use** of installed facilities, **sustainability** through community-based management, and **impact** on health, socio-economics and the environment;
- *secondly*, a concentration on the better off and more accessible lowland Provinces, where coverage could be most rapid;
- *thirdly*, a tendency for the sector to be externally driven rather than Lao-led, due to still-developing Lao institutional and human resource capacities.

By late 1993, it was clear to the Lao Government that to ensure long-term viability of rural water and sanitation, the sectoral approach needed to be more equitable, sustainable and cost effective.

The answer was a new, unifying sector strategy based on responding to demand from communities. To maximize acceptance and use, the Strategy would need to be developed largely by Lao personnel themselves, with minimal low key external support.

Cambodia:

Fertile ground for a similar approach?

The Royal Cambodian Government's "First Socio-Economic Development Plan 1996-2000", in its Water Supply and Sanitation/Drainage section, lays considerable emphasis on capacity building and institutional strengthening, in parallel with pilot demonstration initiatives:

Quote: "The level of achievement during the plan period will depend on the national capacities at all levels of government, the private sector and communities. Until such capacities are strengthened, the high degree of reliance on international agencies and NGOs will continue... The rapid expansion of the coverage and usage of facilities will require that a wider core of national capacities be developed..."

As part of the Regional learning initiative, RWSG-EAP organized a working visit for a senior Lao delegation to Cambodia in December 1996, for an intensive exchange of ideas and joint field visits. This fuelled the Cambodian intention to develop a similar process of Strategy development and application, and a commitment by both countries to work together on the sector.

The Asia RWSS Workshop in Chiang Mai, Thailand in January 1998, and a proposed joint-work-planning visit by a Cambodian team to Lao PDR in mid-April 1998, are evidence that inter-country collaboration and mutual learning is now taking hold.

In 1994, with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through the UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation Program, Nam **Saat**^{2/} began work on a comprehensive and dynamic Sector Strategy. The process was based on participation at all levels: Village, District, Provincial and Central. This was the first time that such a process

^{1/} Now RWSG-EAP is known as "WSP-EAP" (Water and Sanitation Program for East Asia and the Pacific).

^{2/} Nam Saat is the Lead Government Agency for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) in Lao PDR. Nam Saat also stands for National Centre for Water Supply and Environmental Health Program.

had been tried in the sector, and meant a number of key transitions and learning experience for all involved, including RWSG-EAP as the supporting agency, and UNICEF.

A learning approach and a willingness to be open and gain from difficulties as well as successes, had to be introduced and gain acceptance. Confidence and trust in a new way of working, delivering and responding to advisory support had to be built on both sides.

THE MUTUAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

A number of key lessons have emerged, from asking not only “What went right, and why?” but also, possibly the more interesting learning, “What might we have done differently with hindsight?”



Participatory approach: Community dialogues begin with 'listening'.

On Resourcing:

- There is considerable resource, initiative and understanding of sector issues amongst professionals, at all levels: national, provincial and district. Appropriate processes and opportunities are required, for this resource to be tapped and its potential realized.
- Identification of local bilingual resource persons and facilitators is extremely important. They need not necessarily come from the water sector to be effective catalysts to process.

On Partnership, Participation and Stimulating Ownership:

- Full Acknowledgement of the national lead helps motivate key professionals. Often this yields first-time authorship and opportunities for professional fulfillment. Dual language documents help widen audiences.

On Capacity Building:

- Confidence building and skill enhancing activities, both through on-the-job and more formalized training, need to be offered.

On Output:

- Output style must be of sufficient quality to convince supporting donors of the caliber of the strategic guidance, and to attract investment. But it must also reflect local documentation style in order to enhance ownership and acceptability.

On Learning:

- Continual mutual learning and feed back, from and to implementation experience, is essential to stay relevant and up to date with the changing needs. This encourages key implementing stakeholders to apply the new guidance.

On Second Tier Support:

- A patient and like minded financial supporter is essential in delivering the type of low profile catalytic support piloted by RWSG-EAP in Lao PDR. Swedish Sida proved an ideal partner in this regard, the approach fitting very well with Sida's overall development philosophy on changing and evolving developmental roles.

Some Pitfalls...

- A tendency to over-focus at all stages on reorganization as a cure-all for sector reform. In Lao PDR, delaying financial, human resource and organizational decisions until the goals, objectives, strategies and action plans became clearer proved one of the most difficult change processes for national staff.
- The heritage of product and output based measurement of performance gives a constant

temptation to both national agencies and external supporters to push ahead for quick and visible output rather than instruments and processes leading to lasting change.

- Above all, building national ownership of a strategy takes time, in order to develop appropriate confidence, capacity and consensus building processes.

Next Steps:

Leveraging Sectoral Change:

The Sida-supported RWSG-EAP work in Lao PDR and Cambodia has helped initiate an evolving process of change, the scaling up and better “tailoring” of sectoral investment, and facilitation of appropriate new investment.

The Process

A step-by-step process to develop the Sector Strategy and Framework Action Plan began in late 1994, spanning 30 months

<p>Stage 1</p> <p>Developing consensus on what a strategy was, and why it was necessary. Whose strategy would it be? How would it be used? How would it be developed? These fundamental questions were addressed early in the process. A bilingual “Concept Paper” was prepared to help fuel this discussion, followed by a national level workshop.</p>	<p>Stage 5</p> <p>To develop a 5 year Framework Action Plan, based on the Strategy. Nam Saat and its principal supporters have jointly planned the shape of the national program and its support needs in coming years. As part of this continuing process, two long term planning workshops were initiated in October 1996 and March 1997, with the combined support of UNICEF and the UNDP World Bank Water and Sanitation Program.</p>
<p>Stage 2</p> <p>Forming and briefing four interagency working groups, made up of some of the Lao professionals. A key activity was to train the groups in team work, and help them acquire analysis, consensus building, facilitation and drafting skills.</p>	<p>Stage 6</p> <p>To develop and bring to fruition a series of “second generation” projects -a new project pipeline -to apply and demonstrate the new strategic principles. These projects will also provide piloting and learning opportunities. Such a pipeline is now developing, with Sida, World Bank-supported and other projects now coming forward, fully based on the Strategy. Within the same framework, there is strong potential new support from Belgium, as well as the possibility of ASEAN-linked learning and information sharing activities.</p>
<p>Stage 3</p> <p>To further determine the current sector position and identify key issues, positive and negative, affecting sector progress.</p>	<p>Stage 7</p> <p>A seventh step, is to use the insights from the Sector Strategy and Framework Action Plan, supported by further detailed studies, to develop: (1) a long-range Investment Plan (supported by an historic investment profile) (2) a Human Resources Development Plan (based on an audit of existing resources and potentials, and an analysis of needs), and (3) a Proposed Model Nam Saat Organizational Structure, based on the demands of the new strategic directions.</p>
<p>Stage 4</p> <p>This stage was the most intense and time-consuming. Having agreed where the sector was now and what challenges faced it, consensus had to be built on future goals and objectives and how to reach them. Key agreements were reached on a desirable future position, and what changes would be necessary to bring this about. A full draft “Strategic Outline” was widely distributed for comment in June 1996. The final draft was presented for review, update and formal approval, leading to launch in November 1997.</p>	

Continuing aspects of this long-term change process include:

- **Ensuring the strategy is dynamic:** A new Lao strategy has been developed. National ownership and commitment at professional and political level is high, substantive content is forward-looking and the process used to develop the guidance, participatory. But the Strategy will need to evolve, absorb new learning, and be further adapted and marketed.
- **Nurturing a “second generation” of projects** based on the Lao Strategy. The most important of these will be the proposed Phase II of Sida support to Nam Saat 1998-2002 (to be channeled through Nam Saat itself as well as UNICEF, with RWSG-EAP backstopping) and the World Bank financed HASWAS (Hygiene Awareness, Sanitation and Water Supply) sub-project in the remote Northern Provinces of Oudomxai and Phongsali.
- **Building on inter-country potential:** Based on the Lao experience, Cambodia has expressed strong interest to follow a similar process, to build its institutional capacity, develop sectoral guidance, ad pilot and demonstrate improved approaches within mainstream projects. There is growing sense of Lao PDR/Cambodia synergy and partnership.
- **Sharing learning with other sectors:** Because of the integrated and participatory way in which the strategy work was carried out, there is good potential to apply similar concepts within the wider development “families” of water resources management, urban environment, and integrated rural development.
- **Further promoting change processes:** Many change processes are now under way, not only within national agencies at all levels, but also within the support community. In particular the way a number of supporting donors work, the substantive focus of their support to rural water supply and sanitation development, and the way

development support is successfully managed by the national agencies, have all shifted. These and other desired processes of change will need further careful nurturing if the benefits of the work so far are to be fully realized.



Training workshop in progress

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A publication of:

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Lao PDR at a glance

Total population:	4.6 million
Rural/urban population:	85% / 15%
Coverage for water supply (rural & urban combined) 1997:	under 47%
Coverage for sanitation (rural & urban combined) 1997:	under 32%
Infant mortality rate (IMR):	113/1000 live births
Life expectancy at birth (1993):	51.3 years
Main morbidity/mortality causes:	malaria/diarrhoeal disease/respiratory infection
Adult literacy rate:	58% (male 64%, female 42%)
Human development ranking:	138 (of 174)
Real GDP per capita:	\$1,458
GNP per capita:	\$280