

Learning from working across boundaries

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The Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector is managed by the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat) under the Ministry of Health. Nam Saat prepared and launched the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy in November 1997. Since then, Nam Saat has designed a number of RWSS sub-components for a variety of multi-sectoral projects supported by different external support agencies. The RWSS Components of these multi-sectoral projects are now either completed or in the process of implementation. This paper briefly highlights the learning from these RWSS Projects on aspects related to working across boundaries.*

Background

The National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat) under the Ministry of Health is the lead sector agency to facilitate and guide the rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) Sector in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

The Centre was created in the mid-1980s to support nascent RWSS Project activities. The progressive success and effectiveness of the activities led to this Centre being the principal support to the decentralized planning and implementation of the RWSS programme throughout the country. One of the main achievements of Nam Saat is the successfully launching of the Lao PDR Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Strategy and Guideline National Framework in 1997. This Strategy is being applied into practice in provinces throughout the country with support from various External Support Agencies (ESAs), such as Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), World Bank's Water and Sanitation Program – East Asia and Pacific (WSP-EAP), World Bank, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Belgian Technical Co-operation (BTC), International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) and others.

Nam Saat initially faced a number of challenges while applying the strategy into practice, for example: -

- How to explain the strategy to local partners and how to move forward?
- What will be the cost sharing pattern between community, government and external agencies?
- How to resolve the issues of lack of human resources and their capacities?
- How to develop a supply chain?
- How to develop the indicators to measure sustainability both in terms of quantity and quality?
- A handbook to explain the Lao RWSS Strategy both in Lao and English languages.
- A Field Methodology – an annual planning cycle for RWSS Sector.
- A Subsidy Policy.
- A Gender Policy.
- Involvement of the private sector and assisting to conduct WSS Private Sector Mapping.
- Introduced capacity building as an entry point for all

Box 1: Lao PDR: RWSS at a glance (2002)^a

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Total Population | 5.5 million |
| Urban / Rural | 22 / 78 % |
| Annual Population Growth | 2.8 % |
| Life expectancy at birth | 54.5 years |
| Infant mortality rate | 87 / 1,000 live births |
| Main childhood diseases | Malaria and Diarrhea (WSS related diseases) |
| Literacy | 60.2 % |
| 2002 GNI per capita | US\$ 330 |
| Percent of population with: | |
| access to improved safe water: | 58 % |
| access to adequate sanitation: | 36 % |
| UNDP HDI rank (2003) | 135/173 Countries |
| Exchange Rate (June, 2004) | US\$ 1 = LAK 10,600 |

^a Data from 2002 unless otherwise stated.

To resolve the above constraints, Nam Saat Central (in consultation with local partners, external support agencies and INGOs), developed the following activities through a step- by- step approach during 1997 – 2004: -

activities.

- Established horizontal and vertical linkages with other organizations to bring more resources to the RWSS Programme.
- Developed indicators for measuring sustainability and impact of constructed services.

Lao PDR aims to quit once and for all the status of a least developed country by the year 2020. Achieving this goal is synonymous with eradication of mass poverty by ensuring economic growth with equity, while safeguarding the social, cultural, economic and political identity. The goal of Lao PDR is to have 90% coverage of water supply and 80% sanitation coverage by 2020.

To address the above, the Government of Lao PDR (GOL) has prepared a National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) that also addresses the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In the NGPES, six thematic areas have been identified, which are as follows: -

- Agriculture and Forestry Development
- Education and Health Development
- Infrastructure Development
- Supporting Sectors
- Cross Sector Priorities
- Selected National Programmes

As can be seen, the water supply and sanitation (WSS) sector was not identified as a separate thematic area. Instead of that, the WSS Sector was identified as sub-sector under each thematic area, which has further created the importance of Nam Saat’s involvement in all up-coming multi-sectoral projects and, hence the need for working across boundaries.

Lao WSS sector: Guideline framework

Two ministries are mainly responsible for the WSS Sector in Lao PDR. As mentioned earlier, Nam Saat is managing the RWSS Sector under the Ministry of Health (MoH). The Department of Housing and Urban Planning (DHUP) under the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction (MCTPC) is overseeing the urban water supply sector. The Government of Lao PDR has developed a policy framework to provide improved services for WSS Sector in Lao PDR through Decree No. 37/PM on Management and Development of Water Supply Sector.

Working across boundaries

When Nam Saat started its activities in the 1980s, it started as a RWSS Project supported by UNICEF. In subsequent years (and after launching of the RWSS Strategy and GOL’s new initiatives for decentralization and poverty reduction), Nam Saat’s role has been progressively changing from implementer to that of facilitator.

Nam Saat participated in many multi-sectoral activities in

the period between 1997 and 2004. These are highlighted in Table 1.

| Table 1. Examples of Nam Saat’s participation in multi-sectoral activities during 1997 - 2004. | |
|---|---|
| Year | Multi-sectoral Activity |
| 1997 | RWSS Component under Provincial Infrastructure Project (supported by IDA Credit). |
| 1999 | Re-design of RWSS Component of Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project (supported by IDA Credit). |
| 2001 | WSS Small Town Study: assisting main partners from DHUP, WASA and URI. |
| | Participating in the Environment and Poverty Nexus Study. |
| | Assessing Past RWSS Services in collaboration with WASA, URI, MoE, local partners, ESAs and NGOs. |
| 2002 | WSS Private Sector Mapping in collaboration with WASA, URI, local partners and ESAs. |
| | Sanitation Study: assisting main partners from URI and WASA. |
| 2003 | Participating in the preparation of National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy. |
| | RWSS Component under Agricultural Development Project (supported by IDA Credit). |
| 2004 | Participating in the preparation of the Millennium Development Goals for Lao PDR in consultation with partners. |
| | RWSS Component of Provincial and Rural Infrastructure Project (under preparation). |
| | RWSS Component of Rural Livelihood Project, with support from IDA Credit (under preparation). |

Nam Saat’s basic features for working across boundaries are as follows:

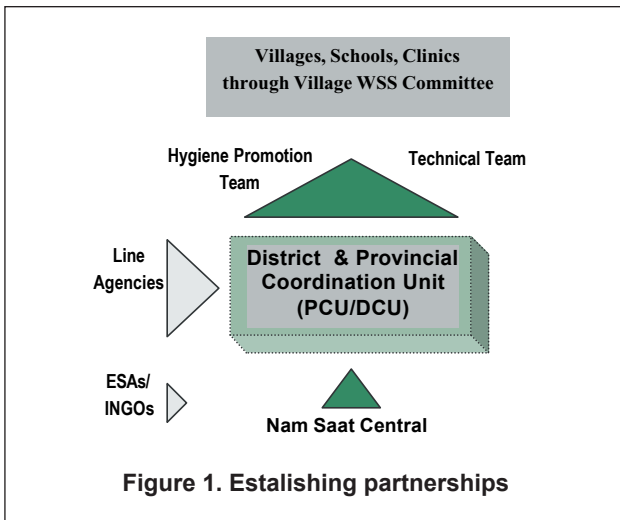
Nam Saat’s guiding principles

Nam Saat supports a set of guiding principles in all its recent activities. These can be summarized as: -

- Following the Dublin Principles
- Supporting demand responsive approach
- Promoting community-based development and ownership
- Enhancing institutional strengthening, capacity and confidence building
- Reinforcing innovative vertical and horizontal linkages
- Bringing private sector involvement
- Offering informed choice
- Instituting learning

Institutional mechanisms

Nam Saat has established a new institutional mechanism for all its new generation projects. This involves developing vertical and horizontal linkages with Lao Women’s Union (LWU), Lao Youth Union (LYU), Nam Papa (State-owned



water supply utilities) and others at all levels. Figure 1 shows the new institutional arrangement for Nam Saat’s activities, which has been built-up on the basis of consensus building and participatory approaches.

In this new institutional arrangement, communities play the role of implementers with support from the private sector; district staff act as back-up support for planning; provincial staff provides the strategic vision; and Nam Saat Central’s role is to supervise the technical assistance and look after the overall implementation of the strategic principles.

Management principles for RWSS Components of multi-sector projects

- Ensure a bottom-up, Lao-led, Lao-owned process from village to central level.
- Reach poor ethnic minorities previously under-served.
- Scale-up the application of the Lao PDR RWSS Sector strategy.
- Base investments on:
 - economic demand and willingness-to-pay.
 - prospects for successful community-based management.
 - community motivation to make hygiene improvements.
 - wider frameworks of basic needs and provincial and district priorities.
- Establishing gender and culturally-balanced inter-sectoral support teams.
- Piloting an equitable subsidy scheme to benefit the poorest.
- Offering affordable, maintainable, sustainable investment choices.
- Helping communities understand roles and responsibilities associated with different water and sanitation options, through a process of dialogue-based Informed Choice.
- Prefacing the main investment phase with community dialogue, socio-economic surveys, hygiene-related attitude and behavioural studies, and hygiene dialogue and promotion.

- Building grassroots capacity in the districts and provinces to improve service delivery and promote hygiene.
- Supporting step-by-step growth in the ability of communities to sustain and benefit from improved water and sanitation services, and the capacity of government agencies to assist them.
- Promoting a continual Learning Process that offers models for other projects.

Human resource development

Implementation of the bottom-up, community-based, participatory approaches and improvement of service delivery requires intensive and continual strengthening of local capacity and institutions. Nam Saat therefore provides on-the-job training and special class room training to develop the knowledge and skills of local partners during implementation of the strategic principles. In all these activities Nam Saat tries to demonstrate the nationally-led process, hence progressively reducing the dependency on expatriates and advisers.

Fund flow mechanism

Nam Saat observed that in the absence of clear guidelines for a fund flow mechanism, the RWSS component could not perform effectively. Nam Saat’s experience in Oudomxay Province for the RWSS Component under the Provincial Infrastructure Project is noteworthy. In this project, IDA Credit followed the Government’s fund flow mechanism. The work plan is being prepared by the Provincial Nam Saat each year in consultation with district and communities. The work plan is then approved by the Department of Provincial Health and the World Bank. Thereafter, the Provincial Administration integrates this work plan with the overall work plan of the Department of Public Health for resourcing from government funds. Once the expenditure is made, the Provincial Administration gets the amount reimbursed from the Special Account of the IDA-financed Project.

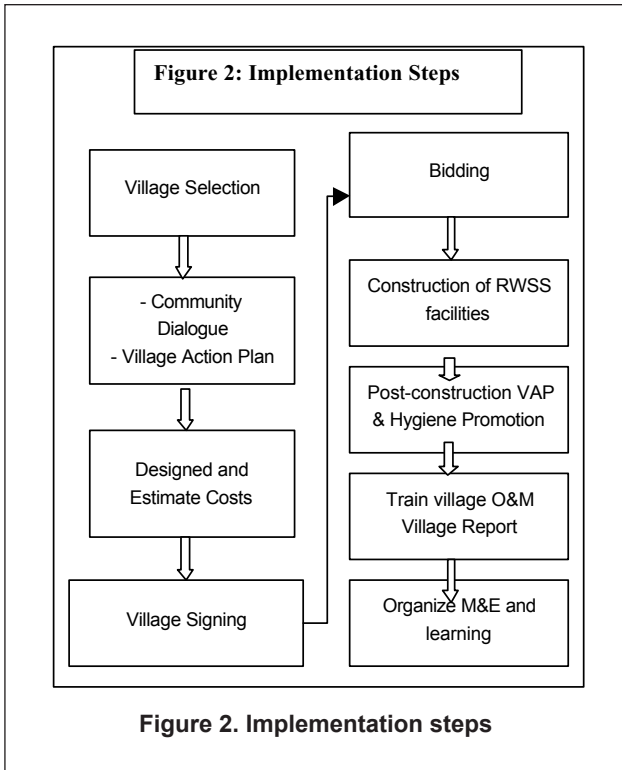
Implementation steps

Nam Saat’s implementation steps for any RWSS Projects are shown in Figure 2.

Learning and steps forward

Lessons learned by Nam Saat from multi-sectoral activities are as follows:

- In order to strengthen the collaboration and partnership, the key factor is the leadership of the management by local and central Nam Saat.
- Participatory approaches and consultation should start from the initial stage – from the identification of the project.
- The fund flow mechanism and procurement process plays an important role for any project, especially for multi-sectoral ones. Procurement should be done at the lowest possible level. The fund flow mechanism should



follow the national fund flow system and needs to be integrated within the overall provincial budget.

- Informed choice with different technology options should be undertaken with communities and fit with local conditions.
- The experience shows that an official signature on Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is essential between Nam Saat Central and the partner agency/ ministry, especially for multi-sectoral projects. This MOU needs to clearly explain the roles, responsibilities, fund flow mechanisms and project guidelines. In absence of this MOU, the project implementation can be hindered in every step.

Nam Saat Central is therefore playing a catalytic role in the preparation and implementation of RWSS components in various multi-sectoral projects.

Nam Saat Central also could become involved for designing multi-sectoral projects in other sectors, such as:

- Social funds
- Poverty reduction
- Rural electrification
- Education

Therefore, a challenge is further ahead for Nam Saat Central on how to bring all the partners on board in applying the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy for the delivery of improved RWSS services to achieve the NGPES and MDGs.

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