

Village-to-village: Community-based study tours

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Study tours are often convened for officials and staff, but rarely are community members the focus of such educational trips. Water and sanitation projects in remote villages require community participation for real change and sustainability. This paper presents village-to-village study tours as an effective way to increase the capacity of even the most disadvantaged villages. After visiting successful villages, communities have the information they need to choose, build, maintain, and utilize water systems and are motivated to make sanitation improvements for their health.

Statement of problem

Study tours are usually the domain of NGO staff and government officials and are an agreed method for introducing new ideas, building team spirit, and motivating participants. Faced with the challenge of fostering participation of remote ethnic minority communities in improving their access to water and sanitation, one project found that field trips can do more than any workshop or village meeting.

Rural sanitation projects in remote ethnic communities in the Lao PDR face major obstacles:

- Many communities often have no road access, and even those that do are usually inaccessible during the rainy season.
- Women are rarely literate and usually speak their native language, not Lao.
- Men and women both have little education.
- Ethnic villagers have little experience of dealing with officialdom.

Most projects in the water sector in Laos have attempted to tackle these challenges with trainings, 'campaigns', community meetings, and further surveys. While positive, these approaches rarely have major impacts in the short term, nor truly give community members the information they need to make their own informed decisions about family health and village development. One project, with the facilitation of a female ethnic minority human resources advisor, has begun a new approach, with major and immediate positive results and hugely positive community feedback—study tours for the villagers themselves.

Project background and objective

In this background, a project began in 2001 named as the Strengthening of National Water Supply and Sanitation Project by Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and

Construction (MCTPC). The Project is executed by MCTPC, with the financial and technical support from Belgian Technical Cooperation. The Project is expected to be concluded in June 2005. The project is a bilateral partnership with Nam Saat (literally 'clean water' in Lao language) as the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply is known, under the Ministry of Health.

The overall project objective is to strengthen national strategies on water supply and sanitation in the urban and rural water sectors of the Lao PDR through institutional and staff capacity building, focusing on better planning, management, and implementation of sustainable water supply and sanitation projects, including the programmes of both the rural Nam Saat and the urban water utility (Nam Papa). There are two distinct beneficiary groups in the project: (a) the staff of Nam Papa and Nam Saat, and (b) the community members in the pilot districts.

The Nam Saat aspect of the project is directed at four rural districts in Savanakheth and Salavan provinces, which were chosen for the pilot project. Each district has between 7 and 10 villages (totalling 34 villages).

This paper describes a specific project activity which primarily consists of village-to-village study tours, for the purpose of awareness-raising and capacity building of villagers. In all, 102 villagers and 6 government officials participated in a total of 4 study tours.

Capacity first approach

The project differs from typical technically-driven water projects because it prioritizes local capacity as a key constraint to long-term change and sustainability in the Lao context. Water projects in the Lao PDR continue to find inadequate community capacity as a consistent stumbling block in their efforts to help meet project objectives.

Originally, the human resources development (HRD) team began by prioritizing the strengthening of administrative, technical, and management capacity of government staff in

the pilot provinces engaged in WSS sector with numerous study tours and workshops. In the Lao PDR, these activities were strongly top-down in approach, focusing on high officials, such as, decision makers and implementers with a minimum of community involvement. The project's planned focus on government capacity building unintentionally resulted in serious overlooking of the pilot communities themselves.

The human resources gap was established from interviews and training needs assessments that confirmed that project benefits were failing to reach the communities. In late 2003, the project's HRD Advisor and Technical Advisor in consultation with communities realized that the capacity building would only be sustainable if the "capacity building" benefits were received equally by all stakeholders—starting from the villagers themselves. Enhancing the capacity of villagers helps to improve the understanding of knowledge on basic operation and maintenance of WSS services. That helps villagers to develop proper partnership with public and private sectors, which eventually supports the sustainability of the improved services.

Local context¹

Rural communities in the Lao PDR have always had to be self-reliant and resilient. Ethnic minority communities tend to be further disadvantaged with language and culture differences and inaccessible locations (1-3 days walk from nearest road). Where primary schools exist, they often offer only 2-3 years of instruction. In this project's pilot communities, 37% had never attended school and fewer than 8% had finished grade 5. Health centers are rare and incomplete. Malaria, diarrhea, and dengue are widespread and accepted as practically unavoidable. Household water must be collected and is traditionally boiled for drinking (usually women's labor).

The Lao PDR is a multi-ethnic society and the pilot areas of the project are populated by numerous ethnic groups. About half the national population is Lao Lum ethnicity; nearly 50 minority groups make up the remaining half of



Photograph 1. Women collecting water at source

Table 1. Ethnicity in Pilot Districts

Ethnic Group	Percent
Lao Lum	40%
Katang	21.5%
Kado	18%
Ta-oy	9%
Pako	8%
Phoutai	1.7%

the population (see Table 1). Lao is the official language, but most minority groups speak their own native language. Though men often speak Lao as a second language, minority women are unlikely to speak Lao (see Table 2).

Due to remote location and tradition, minority villagers have relatively little exposure to other areas of the country. Women in particular are unlikely to have traveled farther than neighboring villages. Community members have often never traveled by motor vehicle. This lack of exposure makes it especially difficult to implement participatory community projects. Villagers listen to the teaching of development workers and officials, but have little outside knowledge from which to evaluate the information they receive. Recommendations to change long-standing traditions (especially regarding childcare, food preparation, and personal sanitation) can seem especially foreign and of dubious value when there is no opportunity to question or see results.

Village-to-village tours

Recognizing that national and international study tours for government staff are very appreciated but fail to ensure sustainable capacity building for water provision, the project decided to develop a new kind of 'study tour'. A select group from a few project villages would visit a village that already enjoys a water provision and sanitation facilities, so that they can see the benefits themselves and have the opportunity to discuss the issues with other villagers person-to-person. On

Table 2. Languages Spoken in Pilot Districts

Languages	Percent
Lao	45.3%
Katang	18.6%
Ta-oy	9%
Other (Okado, Phoutai, Pako, or Piko)	27%



Photograph 2. Inspecting pump in the model village

their return, these representatives would be able to describe what they saw, motivate people to contribute and participate, and give them the facts they need to make informed choices about latrines, hygiene, and their water sources.

Study tour objectives

- Build communities' confidence in their ability to improve their own lives.
- Increase community participation, including improved communication skills and more positive interaction with government authorities.
- Enhance understanding about the relationship between water and health risks and ways to reduce disease.
- Educate on the need for good management and maintenance of hand water pumps, latrines, and gravity-fed systems (GFS).
- Ensure women are active in decision making and convince the community of women's crucial role in water management for improved health.

Group composition

Three people from each village attend the study tour:

- *Village Chief.* The community's political leader is key to project success; he must understand the project thoroughly in order to mobilize the community.
- *Village Women's Union² Representative.* The official representative of women and their interests in the community. Traditionally, women participate little in political or official affairs but have strong family management roles (customs vary considerably by ethnicity; both matrilineal/local and patrilineal/local exist in Laos).
- *Village Water Volunteer.* The technician is responsible for installing and maintaining hand pumps; constructing and maintaining latrines, organizing labor assistants and health volunteers, etc.

These three representatives were chosen for their ability to increase the participation of their village in the project. They have the opportunity to learn, see, feel and experience the differences between their villages and the model villages.

After the trip, they should have better understanding about hygiene, sanitation, the decline of diseases, the differences after access to a proper water supply, and especially the maintenance of boreholes, GFS and the construction of family latrines.

Methodology

Model Village Selection

Possible model villages (where past water projects were especially successful) to visit are surveyed approximately one month before the tour. Sites are recommended by knowledgeable project staff and government water authorities. The villages can be 200 to 500 km away from pilot villages.

Model Village selection criteria:

- Good record of community participation
- Demonstrated village self-initiative
- Good record of women's participation in decision making as well as labor or monetary contribution.
- Rapid improvements – increase in agriculture and in well-being of villagers, including decrease of diseases, such as diarrhea, malaria and dengue
- Rural location with road access
- Willingness of the village to cooperate and receive visitors

Conducting the tour

All the villages on a tour are from the same district so that they learn together with their neighbors. The tour lasts two nights and one day, providing ample travel and visiting time, but also a chance for participants to build a sense of group spirit and personal connections. To that end, everyone is introduced, all meals are taken together, and time is scheduled for Q & A sessions, in addition to encouraging informal social interaction. Interaction occurs in different languages—often local languages are mixed together in efforts to communicate.

The pre-program includes distributing handouts with pictures of community participation in waterways, inappropriate and appropriate construction of latrines and use of completed latrines; completing and maintaining hand pumps and GFS. There is a briefing about government policies on poverty reduction.

Interaction between villagers from the model and pilot communities is the main activity. Model villagers present and explain:

- The process of getting good water
- The village's contribution
- Maintenance of hand pumps, GFS and latrines
- Impacts of having clean water supply on health and agriculture

Villagers see first-hand:

- The GFS site, including the intakes, tanks, pipes and the provision of public taps.

- The process of installing hand pumps and completed hand pumps.
- The process of choosing and constructing different types of latrines and completed latrines.
- Agriculture sites (cash crops and vegetables) now made possible.

Results

After introducing this village-to-village study tour program, the project quickly noticed major changes:

- Reduced time required to install GFS, water pumps or latrines.
- Improved interaction and sense of friendship between villagers and project staff. Previously, villagers met with the project only per official requirements. Now they greet project staff warmly and welcome them.
- Increased material contributions of sand, gravel, and wood. Before the tours, asking for the expected community contribution was a challenge. Now requested materials can be seen gathered and stored in front of most homes, ready for use.
- Increased labor contribution for digging ditches for piping laying, building the intake and water tanks for GFS.
- Interest in investing in new crops made possible by the water system. Seeds and seedlings were gathered in model villages for planting at home.

After the trip, villagers thanked project staff repeatedly – not only for the chance to learn about water and sanitation, but for the opportunity to have new experiences, visit new places, and meet others. Satisfaction with the study tour program can be measured in smiles, laughter, and a new energy for making water and sanitation improvements at home.

Difficulties encountered

Though a clear success, the study tour program is challenging, especially due to the different backgrounds of the participants:

- Many of the participant do not speak Lao, especially the women (even LWU representatives). Some speak Vietnamese (not Lao) as a second language, as they live near the border. An interpreter had to accompany the trips; sometimes only a Lao speaker can be found to interpret and interpreters are men.
- Women and men traditionally socialize with their own gender and can be somewhat reluctant to speak with each other freely (though they mix easily with those of the same gender from other villages).
- Many had never ridden a bus or car; thus car-sickness is an occasional problem.

Conclusion

In the past, Nam Saat and other projects only had study tours for government staff, often to neighboring countries or other cities in Laos. Occasionally, Village Water User Committees

participate, but only in a very limited way.

These village-to-village study tours are conducted in remote, rural places, where villagers experience road access, clean water, proper hygiene, sanitation, and government and project support. Giving villagers a chance to see, feel, question and learn for themselves has immediate impact. For instance, villagers noted that in the visited health centres of the model villages, there are no sick peoples due to the better health and hygiene practices. Much more important than technical demonstrations and theoretical lectures is the unique chance to witness the real impacts of water supply and sanitation by their own eyes. These study tours implicitly recognize that villagers are individuals with their own preferences and priorities and it respectfully gives them a chance to evaluate proposed changes to their way of life. Moreover, the villagers' ability to communicate with officials is improved through observation in the model village, and greater trust is established.

The water and sanitation projects that focus primarily on government staff capacity strengthening cannot expect meaningful impact until communities are enhanced about their capacities and understanding on improved services. Therefore, for success and sustainability, local circumstances need to be realistically addressed. The village-to-village study tour program presented in this paper is an example of a feasible and cost-effective villagers-know-best approach. By accepting that capacity building begins with confidence and communication skills, villagers feel respected by the project and long-term sustainability is born.

Notes

1. This project's targeted areas are in the districts of Samoy and Ta-oy in Salavane Province and the district of Thapangthong and Champhone in Savanakheth Province.
2. The Lao Women's Union is a 'mass organization' and is responsible for representing the interests of women and children. Over 50% of adult women are members nationally; besides the village LWU representative (who serves on her village committee), there are district, provincial, and national offices of the LWU and units within all government ministries and offices.

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