

PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES TO WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

**Poverty reduction fund process and perspectives
towards rural water and sanitation**

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The PRF is a government initiative delivering development resources directly to the village level. Following the “PRF Process”, villagers choose, plan, implement and manage their own sub-projects. Amongst over 910 villages surveyed, approximately 33% of villagers’ needs were related to water. Most needs were for domestic water. Depending on location of the village etc., systems requested included gravity-fed water supply, drilled and hand dug wells, but assistance was also requested for agricultural water. Generally all assistance given by PRF is for the community; no private/ household hook-ups are allowed. Perhaps because of this and other factors, few needs expressed by the people themselves related to sanitation. In the Lao PDR, sanitation is invariably linked to the availability of water, and is considered a private rather than a public matter. While public resources are important, private resources (especially those based on conservation of rainwater) ought also to be encouraged for better village well-being.

Brief Introduction to the PRF

The Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF) was legally established by a Decree of the Prime Minister of Lao PDR (No. 073 / PM on 31 May 2002). The establishment of the Fund shows the commitment of the Government of Lao PDR (GOL) in its endeavors towards social and economic development. The Government’s National Plan and development policies aim to eradicate poverty and quit the status of Least-Developed Country by the year 2020.

The Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF) is supported by the World Bank (WB) in the form of a low-interest loan, repayable over a forty-year term. The WB credit is approximately 19.5 million USD, with additional government contributions of about 1.3 million USD. The Prime Minister’s Decree allows the PRF to receive and use funds from many other sources.

While the PRF is a GOL project and part of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy, the Fund has its own Administrative Board and employs its own staff and other consultants. It also has financial structures separate from all other government projects.

The PRF has been launched for an initial five-year period starting in the fiscal year 2002 – 2003. During the first year of implementation, the PRF is covering ten districts in three provinces: Huaphanh, Savannakhet and Champasack. In the coming years, project activities will gradually expand to cover five provinces in a total of twenty four districts, or 2,700 villages. Actual expansion will depend on GOL’s directives and project capacity.

Each participating district will receive an annual allocation of funding based on the number of poor villages in that district. Poor villages have so far been identified on the basis of 5 criteria, as per the poverty indicators defined by the Prime Minister’s Instruction No. 010/PM (2001): at

least 51% of total households classified as poor; lacking a school in the village or nearby village; without a dispensary or traditional medical practitioner and/or requiring over 6 hours of travel to reach a hospital; lacking a safe water supply; without access to roads (at least trails accessible by cart during the dry season). If a village is affected by any one or more of these things, it is classified as “poor” for the purposes of the PRF .

It is planned to spend 75% of the PRF budget directly at village level. Funding is given to communities as grant assistance for approved sub-projects. To access a grant and participate in the project, the villagers themselves must initiate, plan, implement, manage and maintain their own village development sub-projects.

All sub-projects and activities proposed by the villagers must conform to the PRF objectives and to seven important principles: simplicity, menu of options, participation, ownership, transparency and accountability, wise investment, and empathy (“siding with the poor”). The menu of options gives guidelines concerning the type of sub-projects that can (or cannot; “Negative List”) be funded by the PRF, and there are also regulations on the amount of money that can be given to a village or group of villages in any one year. Transparency and accountability are encouraged through involving large numbers of people in key functions, plus the use of (village) Information Boards and a Complaints Prevention and Resolution Process.

The PRF process for implementing sub-projects

The process for implementing sub-projects starts at village level. Several meetings are held for planning.

After introducing the PRF Project to as many people in the

village as possible (Village Socialization Meeting), a simple Village Needs and Priorities Assessment (VNPA) exercise is conducted in every village of every participating district. Villagers are divided into separate men's and women's groups and asked about their problems and priorities for village development/ poverty reduction. The people are guided to choose their priorities keeping in mind the PRF objectives and principles and especially the 'Negative List'.

The women record their 3 priorities for development on a VNPA form, and the men do the same. The groups then come together as the whole village, and a decision is made on which 3 priorities will be presented on behalf of the village at the khet (group of villages, sub-district) level. Three Village Representatives are elected to present and defend their village's needs and ideas at a khet forum.

At the Khet Prioritization Meeting, the village representatives consider all of the individual village needs and priorities, and again focusing on the principles and objectives of the PRF they prioritize the needs for their khet, grouping together as many villages as possible with a similar need. Six priorities are chosen for each khet. Four Khet Representatives are elected to present and defend their khet's priorities at a combined khet/ district forum.

The District Prioritization Meeting further prioritizes the needs of all khets in the district and then provisionally selects sub-projects based on a rough calculation of costs, to try to best utilize the funding available for the district in the current year.

After provisional selection of sub-projects, further consultations with the beneficiary/ affected communities take place and a formal proposal is made (Sub-project Proposal Form) combining the outputs of proper appraisal, costing and design, as well as procurement method and unexploded ordnance and environmental assessments.

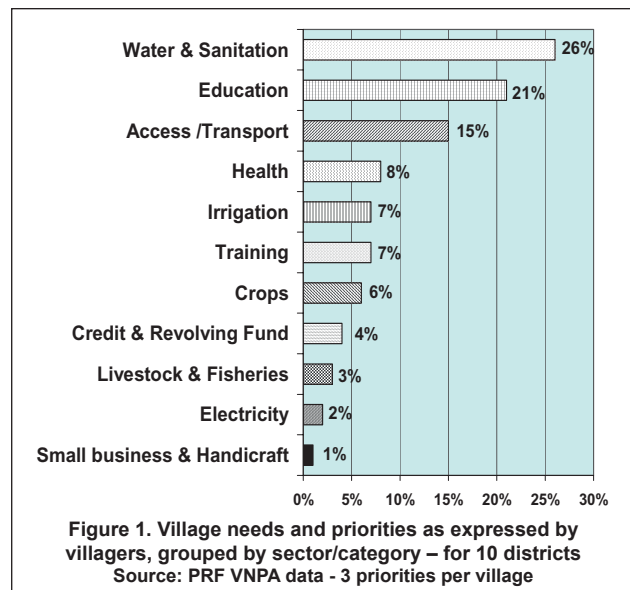
More meetings are held at the khet level to ensure that the people understand the proposal/s and accept the budget, etc. To complete the initial planning process, a meeting is held again at District level (District Decision Meeting) where allocation of funding is finalized for the successful sub-projects.

Once a sub-project is approved, further preparations for implementation must be made before funds can flow. These preparations include: training for community financial management and community procurement; training for technical aspects of construction and contract management; opening of a khet bank account; and planning for use of each (advance) progress payment.

Two main types of procurement are used at the community level; "community force account" where communities perform all of the necessary work themselves, and "small works" where communities may contract out part or all of the work to a (sub-)contractor.

The importance of water

When conducting the VNPA exercises in all 913 villages of 10 districts in the 3 active provinces, water and water-



related needs were amongst the most frequently mentioned priorities for the villagers. 653 villages (71.5%) named clean/ domestic water (alone) as one of the 3 priorities for their village. Figure 1 shows the relative percentages by sector based on the 3 priorities per village.

If water and sanitation systems (26% of needs) are added to irrigation systems (7%), total water-related needs are 33%, and this percentage is higher than for any other sector.

Deeper analysis of the VNPA data shows that 50 of 913 villages (5.5%) specifically requested assistance with latrines as one of their 3 village priorities. None of these villages were in Savannakhet (SVK). The districts where PRF is working in SVK are amongst the poorest of the 10 active PRF districts (Ref. to NSC/NPEP data; 2003).

Types of water supply requested by communities not surprisingly varied, mainly according to the local topography and the systems already tried and tested in a particular area. In the hilly north (Huaphanh; HUA) gravity-fed systems (nam lin) were the most popular, whereas in the central and southern provinces of SVK and Champassack (CPS) drilled wells (nam badan) and/or hand-dug wells (nam sang) were most frequently requested. One village in Mounlapamok (CPS) requested assistance to collect rainwater.

In most cases local opinion/ experience was helpful in determining the type of water system sub-project. However 2 proposed gravity-fed systems (1 in Nong (SVK) for 8 villages and 1 in Sobbao (HUA) for 1 village) were found to be not feasible after technical appraisal. For Sobbao, an infiltration gallery built into the bank of the nearby Nam Ma River might allow a solution, but no solution has yet been found for Nong because of cost and the steep terrain.

Amongst a total of 247 sub-projects approved for implementation in the 2003-2004 PRF funding round across the 10 active PRF districts, 93 (37.7%) are for domestic water supplies, and 24 (9.7%) are related to irrigation. None are for sanitation.

The sub-projects group together as many villages as possible within the khet that need exactly the same kind of water

Table 1. Numbers of sites or units (and numbers of beneficiary villages) to be constructed for different types of domestic water systems – PRF 2003-2004 Funding Cycle

<i>Province & District</i> (Total No. of villages in the District)	No. of Gravity- fed sites (Villages)	No. of Drilled Well units (Villages)	No. of Dug Well units (Villages)
<i>Huaphanh</i>			
Sobbao (75)	13 (13)	0	0
Xiengkhor (63)	15 (15)	0	1 (1)
Add (77)	12 (12)	0	0
<i>Savannakhet</i>			
Sepone (159)	1 (4)	45 (28)	49 (30)
Vialbury (101)	0	5 (5)	9 (9)
Nong (79)	0	0	0
<i>Champassack</i>			
Mounlapamok (66)	0	81 (29)	0
Phathoumphone (93)	0	57 (36)	0
Sukuma (63)	0	68 (34)	0
Khong (136)	0	85 (49)	0
Totals (913)	41 (44)	341 (181)	59 (40)

supply. Thus, the numbers of sites or units required for each of the three main types of water system is typically much greater than the number of sub-projects. Data concerning the numbers of units/sites for each of the main systems that will be constructed during the 2003-2004 funding round is shown in Table 1. The numbers in parentheses in Table 1 seek to add information concerning the numbers of villages benefiting from the various schemes. All gravity-feed systems except one (in Sepone, SVK) will serve one village (approximately 200-500 people per system), whereas for bores with a hand pump or dug wells several units may be needed for just one village, depending on the total population of the village.

While 653 villages requested assistance with water supply, 265 (39.4%) will actually get help in the current funding round. The systems mentioned in Table 1 are based on the people's own prioritization of sub-projects, according to the amount funding available in the PRF's first year of implementation, and within the funding limits allowed by the project. It is most likely that more water resources will be provided in future PRF funding cycles. The VNPA exercise will be conducted again in each year to ensure that the people's needs and priorities continue to form the basis for all planning.

It should be noted that Nong District did require more assistance with water besides the gravity-fed system that was found to be not feasible; some of this district's needs (drilled wells) will be met by a Belgian bilateral project.

Technical guidelines for water supply systems

Because the PRF process is dependent on community implementation of the sub-projects, clear and detailed specifications and technical documents need to be provided to guide the village people, the great majority of whom have never before undertaken any kind of water system project. Whereas many projects in Lao PDR engage the people at

the level of providing labour and sand and stones, etc. the PRF insists that, if the villagers require outside inputs, they must themselves manage all procurement of contractors and the like.

To enable the villagers to do this, PRF technical staff have prepared documents and guidelines which draw heavily on the experience and advice of other agencies. Standard well designs and the recently instituted water quality standards have been obtained from the National Centre for Environmental Sanitation and Water Supply (Nam Saat). Guidelines for the preparation of contract documents were gleaned from various sources including the Nam Saat and the WB Social Fund in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Specifications for the Tara (low lift) and Afridev hand pumps advocated by both Nam Saat and UNICEF were obtained from the Internet.

There is concern about the quality of the Tara hand pumps in particular, as copies of the Indian-origin pumps are being manufactured in Vientiane. Some of the copy pumps installed by Action Nord Sud and other agencies are reported to have quickly failed in the field. PRF staff are trying to ensure that the commercial well drilling companies contracted by the communities will take responsibility to import good quality pumps. Tight specifications have been included in the contract documents, including the need to provide proof of importation. It is hoped that these will be adequate safeguards to ensure that genuine Tara pumps are installed.

To assist the communities further in their implementation and management of the sub-projects, the requirement for a community-hired technical adviser to oversee the community water contracts has been written into each relevant sub-project proposal. The PRF staff themselves also endeavour to provide on-going supervision and monitoring of all sub-projects.

The poor place of sanitation

Although sanitation is important and often lacking in the rural Lao context, it is commonly observed that villagers themselves place more importance on other things; sanitation resources are often amongst the last types of infrastructure to be developed in a village, and only better-off villages seem ready for sanitation. General poverty is surely a factor in this.

It was mentioned above that comparatively little sanitation assistance was requested by the villagers in the VNPA exercise, and no sub-projects providing latrines are included in the current PRF funding cycle. It must be acknowledged that all assistance given by PRF is intended for the poorest people and/or for the community as a whole. Private/household hook-ups are negatively indicated according to the PRF Operations Manual (2003). This may have inadvertently discouraged/prevented some villages from making requests specifically for sanitation.

Sanitation in Laos is a private rather than a public matter. However, perhaps more than these factors however, sanitation in Laos is invariably linked to the availability of water. Water trap toilets are the most common type of latrine seen

around the country and the most popular type advocated by public health agencies and authorities. Often, therefore, without water there can/ will be no latrines.

Given the high levels of continuing need for even the most basic supply of water (as evidenced by the PRF data shown above), success in encouraging sanitation seems doomed if it is linked to the provision of community water systems. It is very unlikely that water systems such as those being installed under the auspices of PRF and many other projects and agencies will ever lead to widespread use of latrines. Some other approaches are felt to be needed.

Discussion

Availability of water is an essential part of good health and hygiene. Water is not necessarily essential for sanitation.

With increasing numbers of ground water-based supply systems (as opposed to surface water) being installed throughout Laos, is there really no risk that concomitant installation of water-linked sanitation systems could jeopardize the very water systems that the people so much need and are coming to depend upon?

Many soils in the Lao PDR are quite sandy. Villages tend to be concentrated in one area, rather than being spread out. Many bores installed throughout Lao PDR are not technically “closed” or fully protected wells. - These and other factors point to a high risk of contamination of groundwater resources, especially if full minimum separation distances are not strictly observed.

Increasing problems of water supply throughout the world demand wise and conservative approaches. Laos is actually well placed to harvest and conserve its abundant wet season rainfall. Rainfall in only 6 months of the year would require a well-sealed storage capacity of approximately 6,000 liters to provide drinking water (only) throughout the long dry season for a typical family of 5 or 6 persons. Many rural house roofs are being converted from grass thatch to galvanized iron or cement tile, yet very little if any guttering is ever installed to collect rainwater and direct it into worthwhile storage tanks. The Lao Women’s Union (a Mass Organisation; MO), UNICEF and others have tried to encourage households to construct 2,000 liter ferro-cement water jars. More of this and similar efforts need to be encouraged. The PRF is willing to do whatever it can to stimulate changes in local behavior, but the PRF itself is not able to invest in provision of either water or sanitation structures at the household or family level. Could not a broader, concerted effort and clear policy for all rural development agencies encourage villagers to make their own provisions for collection of rainwater and the installation of a family/household latrine? Costs may be a deterrent, but as with other extension work, clear, consistent messages will eventually have an impact.

So what kind of latrine would be best in the Lao context? Rather than extending the water-hungry water trap design, more attention needs to be given to non-water type latrines such as well-ventilated dry pits and composting units.

Few government or private water supply authorities

anywhere in the world can or do provide water and sanitation for all citizens living in rural areas. The costs of doing this are prohibitive. Rather, rural people in many countries – developed and undeveloped – must themselves harness and develop all local resources. Lao people need to know that their situation is not different from other countries. MOs and schools may be best placed in Laos to help extend the necessary messages and understanding.

Learning points

- The PRF is active in hundreds of villages and could be considered potentially able to provide both water and sanitation resources. Community water supplies are the present focus of PRF. Since private hook-ups are negatively indicated for the PRF, little sanitation work may be possible, unless there is linkage with partners (such as MOs, UNICEF et al) working at other levels.
- Community water systems are unlikely to be widely used for sanitation purposes because of convenience and privacy considerations. While sanitation at the household or family level is most practical, school sanitation and hygiene education would likely greatly assist to bring about behavior change. PRF involvement in school sanitation is possible, and could be enhanced if both villagers’ requests and other partners exist.
- When agencies are providing community water supplies, attention should also be given to encouraging the high potential for households / families to construct their own rainwater harvest and storage systems. This would stimulate introduction of private latrines.
- Presently in Laos, sanitation is strongly linked to the availability of water. This could put pressure on groundwater supplies in particular. Efforts to construct, demonstrate and more vigorously extend latrines which do not require water need to be strengthened/ rekindled.

References

- Instruction of the Prime Minister on the Development of Poverty Eradication Programs (010/PM); 25 June 2001.
National Statistics Centre – NSC/NPEP data; 2003.
PRF Operations Manual; February 2003

Notes

1. PRF allocations may be based on other criteria in future, as more poverty data becomes available.
2. Sanitation proposals received lower priority when the community representatives considered the many other needs and requests for assistance.

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