

Resolving management issues leads to success

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The paper highlights the learning from the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) component of Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project (LNPDP), a project funded through IDA Credit from 1994 - 2002. The RWSS Component of the project could not get off the ground for the first four years. Analysis showed the main reason was improper design of the component and lack of attention to management and financial issues. The component was redesigned in 1999, and the management and financial issues were addressed. The RWSS Component was ultimately implemented in a proper manner. The project completion evaluation shows that the RWSS Component turned out as one of the most successful components of the project.

Background

Luang Namtha, a remote province in Lao People's Democratic Republic, has several ethnic communities, many of whom do not speak the national Lao language. This presents a formidable challenge on how to improve rural water and sanitation services.

The Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Sector Strategy initiatives in the Province have so far been supported by funds from IDA Credit, Sida, JICA and some NGOs.

The International Development Association (IDA) financed Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project (LNPDP) had a RWSS Component that was successfully implemented during 1999 - 2002. However, initially the RWSS Component was seen as problematic and could not get off the ground in the first four years during 1994 - 1998. After re-designing the component in 1998 and resolving other management and institutional issues in 1999, the RWSS initiatives began moving smoothly during 1999 - 2002. In the end, the project accomplished more than the target set in the initial project document.

The initial efforts were presented in the 28th WEDC Conference when the RWSS Component had just become functional. Now the project is completed and the final results have been assessed. This paper looks at the lessons learned from the RWSS Component of the Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project.

The initial phase

Luang Namtha Province signed a Project Agreement with the World Bank for IDA Credit, dated 18 May 1994, named as the Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project (LNPDP). The Project initially had three components (with urban and rural water supply and sanitation combined). The main components were:

- Transport access component (or road component)
- Water Supply component (including urban and rural water supply and sanitation component), and
- Institutional strengthening and capacity building in the country and abroad.

The RWSS component was meant to be implemented along with the other components, but it faced teething problems and progress was very slow between 1994-1998. In 1997, the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (commonly known as Nam Saat) had prepared and launched the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy. It was observed that the original design of the RWSS component did not match the basic principles of the Lao PDR RWSS Strategy. For example, the initial project mainly focused on drilling wells with minimum community contribution and no emphasis was given to institutional - financial - social - technological options and the community had no say in the decision-making process.

Therefore, in consultation with district and provincial counterparts and on the basis of some trial community dialogues, Nam Saat Central, with support from the Water and Sanitation Program of the World Bank (WSP), redesigned the RWSS Component to focus more on local capacity building, institutional strengthening and encouraging public-private partnership for improved RWSS services. The RWSS component was also separated in 1999 from the Urban WSS component, to allow a greater focus on these activities.

A community dialogue process was introduced to assess the demand for improved RWSS services and the willingness of the beneficiaries to pay. This helped to raise the community ownership by raising community contributions - in many cases from 10 percent to almost 65 percent for water supply and from 10 percent to 75 percent for latrines'

Table 1. Cost Contribution for Improved RWSS Services in LNPDP

Locations – type of services	IDA Contribution Per capita	Government Contribution per capita	Users' Contribution ¹ per capita
During 1994 – 1998	Focus was to install 150 wells/boreholes for 25,000 beneficiaries [offered only well or boreholes and pour-flush latrines]		
	Remaining cost	NM ²	\$ 2.3 ³
During 1999 – 2002	Focus was for RWSS services for 22 villages, 10 schools and 7 clinics and covered 30,075 beneficiaries [8 water supply options and 6 latrine options offered through community dialogue].		
Villages			
- Water Supply	\$ 3.00	\$ 0.50	\$ 6.10
- Latrine	\$ 1.80	\$ 0.40	\$ 6.70
Schools			
- Water Supply	\$ 9.20	\$ 0.60	\$ 2.50
- Latrine	\$ 9.20	\$ 0.60	\$ 2.50
Clinics	Per Unit	Per Unit	Per Unit
- Water Supply	\$ 338	\$ 23	\$ 90
- Latrine	\$ 338	\$ 23	\$ 90

construction. The community contribution included cash and in-kind labor and local materials.

The old and new matrices for cost-sharing that were applied prior to and post 1999 in the project are highlighted in Table 1. These show how the project moved from a supply-driven approach (with enforced cash contributions from communities and no technology choice – only wells/boreholes and a single latrine design were offered) to a demand-responsive approach based on negotiated contributions from communities (including cash and in-kind local materials and labour) and informed choice for many water supply and latrine options.

In addition, attention was focused on resolving the existing management and institutional issues including clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each partner from the user to the central level.

Major findings

The RWSS Component of LNPDP can be divided into two phases:

- Initial Phase during 1994–1998: The RWSS Component

tried to implement the Project as per initial design of the LNPDP.

- Phase – II: The RWSS Component was redesigned in 1998 and then implementation of the project during 1999 – 2002 was in line with the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy.

The major findings from the Initial Phase of the RWSS Component are as follows:

- The project initially focused on drilling wells in selected districts as there was no technology options provided in the Project Appraisal Document. However, since the terrain in the province is mountainous it was often not possible to use the drilling rigs in the project areas. This created a major constraint for implementation of the plan. In addition, the focus on imported hand pumps and spare parts was identified as an issue. Finally, it was noted that other options such as gravity-fed systems, spring protection, dug wells, protected dug wells, etc., were not available in the initial design. Therefore, lack of technological options restricted people’s choice.
- Management and financial issues at village and local government level were neglected. No measures were taken for operation and maintenance leading to confusion about who was responsible for looking after the services.
- The capacity of district and provincial staff was low and no clear roles and responsibilities were assigned for developing the capacities of local partners. This led to difficulties in planning and implementation of the project.

The major findings from Phase – II of the RWSS Component are as follows:

Though Nam Saat, with support from other partners, stepped in and helped the province and its local partners to re-design the project in 1998, it still could not be implemented as planned due to various management hurdles. There was a further evaluation and the following constraints were revealed:

- There was little support for the participatory planning process since each member /institution was busy with its own work.
- The administrative procedures to request funds were time consuming. These procedures delayed project implementation.
- The project management at all levels failed to understand the scope of the project leading to confusion about management and coordination as well as delayed procurement for the construction.
- A strong leader and political champion was required as Head of the Provincial Health Department to drive the process forward.

The positive findings were:

- There was a strategy available in 1997 from Nam Saat and Ministry of Health for implementation.
- The quarterly and yearly work plan had been developed with staff members for project management, supplies and equipment at all levels.
- The project was getting close support from the Provincial Administration, Nam Saat Central and the Ministry of Health to support the districts and communities.
- The targeted communities were beginning to benefit from the project and there were improvements in hygiene and sanitation as well as behavioural changes.

Therefore, further attention was given to resolve the above issues in 1999 and the following steps were taken:

- Once the identification of the positives and the negative findings were made, provincial and district coordination teams were established with representatives from various line agencies. On-the-job-training was undertaken while actual planning and implementation took place. As a result the performance of the project improved perceptibly.
- The introduction of the private sector for construction of RWSS services speeded up the implementation process and helped Nam Saat at the province level to step into their role of facilitators.

Due to these steps, the RWSS Component was able to fulfill the proposed objectives in its last three-and-half-years to supply improved water supply and sanitation services to more than 30,000 people.

Summary of results

The RWSS component started almost four years behind schedule but was ultimately able to attain its target. The summary of results are highlighted below.

Direct outputs

- The RWSS services reached several inaccessible and remote areas.
- A sizeable rural population was given access to clean water supply and sanitation. The total population that benefited through this RWSS Component was more than 30,000 including over 3,000 students by improving services in 22 villages, 10 schools and 7 clinics in 3.5 years.
- Additional support of RWSS institutional infrastructure (office buildings and equipment) helped the province and districts to provide better quality services during planning and implementation.
- Institutional strengthening and capacity building was provided for both province and district level staff to understand the application of the Lao PDR RWSS Sector Strategy.
- Focus on institutional – financial – social – technical and

environmental aspects through participatory approaches helped to build ownership and effective use of the improved RWSS services.

- The Project helped broaden the perspectives of participants since none of the officials and advisers were restricted to only that part of the project financed through IDA Credit. In reality, they also provided support to the Provincial RWSS Program in districts that were funded by other ESAs or NGOs to create a broader base for improvement of RWSS services in the province.

Indirect outputs

- The technology options and contribution by the local communities showed that even with a small investment the province would be able to continue the ongoing activities. This would lead to less dependency on donors in the field of RWSS services in Luang Namtha.
- Focusing on gender issues helped each WATSAN Committee to have a minimum of three women in each WATSAN Committee at village level. This progressively help to hear more voices of women in the operation and maintenance of the RWSS services.
- Following the Lao RWSS Sector Strategy and Gender Policy, the Provincial Nam Saat prepared a Gender Development Plan for the Nam Saat Program. Luang Namtha Provincial Nam Saat is the first Provincial Nam Saat in Lao PDR to have a woman to lead the Provincial Nam Saat Office, making a role model for other Provincial Nam Saat's to follow.

Lessons learned

The selection of project management staff, building their confidence and providing appropriate incentives (professional incentives, such as, participating in study tours, training programmes, attending international conferences and being a co-author for writing professional papers) were some of the key measures in revamping the RWSS component. This ultimately paved the way for the success of the RWSS Component of LNPDP.

The nationally-led supervision process, led by Nam Saat Central, helped to progressively build confidence at both the central and local level. The World Bank's back-up support role in the supervision of the RWSS Component was a new experience for the province and helped to achieve the goals of the project.

RWSS is one of the components, like other infrastructure development, which also needs external investment for implementation especially to help build the capacities of local partners to run the project effectively. There are several inaccessible areas in the province where it is difficult to provide back-up support to district staff and locals partners unless they are properly equipped with necessary office facilities such as vehicles, phone, fax, internet etc. The RWSS Component of LNPDP provided these facilities, which helped to improve the performance of the overall management of provincial and district management team including the partners from

Table 2. Learning on Technology Mix for water supply in Luang Namtha

Technology Options applied in Luang Namtha	Assumption on Tech. Mix in 1994	Assumption on Tech. Mix in 1998	Actual Tech. Mix in 2002 (end of project)
Improved Traditional Practice	-	5%	-
Infiltration Gallery	-	5%	-
Gravity Feed System	-	20%	52%
Spring Protection	-	20%	-
Rain Water Jar	-	10%	4%
Bore holes	100%	15%	-
Dug well / Hand pump	-	10%	44%
Protected Dug well	-	15%	-

Lao Women's Union, Youth Union and others.

The project illustrated the importance of local knowledge of culture, tradition and ethnicity. For example, in Luang Namtha there are 32 ethnic minority groups who have different dialects and traditions. Therefore, the Nam Saat staff members were trained to acquire knowledge about these groups in order to communicate effectively with them. In addition, opportunities were created to enable the villages to participate in the project by establishing Water Supply and Sanitation (WATSAN) Committees and recruiting village volunteers.

Informed choices were developed with different technology options that suited the local conditions. It was observed that even the revamped project did not get everything right, especially the potential technology mix. The assumptions on the technology mix for water supply in 1994, 1998 and at the end of the project in 2002 are illustrated in Table 2.

The detailed quarterly and yearly work plans and budgets were prepared with the participation of the district and provincial Nam Saat. However, there is further scope remaining to improve the performance of both provincial and district teams, especially with relation to monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems for the RWSS Programme.

The sanitation ladder of technical options was well accepted in the target areas. However, the latrine options for high water level areas are yet to be addressed. Nam Saat Central and its supporting agencies need to work on this specific issue.

A way forward

The successful implementation of the RWSS Component of LNPDP had important consequences at both provincial and national level.

Provincial level:

A dialogue has been initiated on how to scale-up the existing efforts through partnership with other external support agencies. One multi-lateral agency has already shown interest in supporting similar efforts for scaling-up the process in remaining districts of Luang Namtha. A dialogue is currently on with this agency.

The hygiene indicators that were developed through this project are now being used throughout the province for all on-going activities.

The toolkits on community dialogue for demand assessment that were modified by the Provincial staff are also being used for the provincial RWSS Program.

National level

The Community Dialogue Manual and Village Monitoring Manual that were revised and up-graded by the Provincial Nam Saat now have been translated into English language and are being reviewed by external support agencies. Efforts are on to use this manual for the RWSS Programme nationwide.

References

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