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## Establishing partnerships for better management

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LUANG NAMTHA (LNT) is a province in the remote north-west of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). The provincial boundary is shared with Oudomxay and Bokeo Provinces of Lao PDR, with Muang La District of China and with Myanmar. The LNT Province, with population totalling 132,000, consists of five districts comprising 5 small towns and 432 villages. The 32 ethnic groups living in this province are mostly subsistence farmers (94%) and cultivate highland crops in an area that is 85% mountainous. Average GDP is approximately US\$ 220 per capita. The existing coverage of water supply and sanitation services in the rural areas is about 60% and 27% respectively. The Rural Water Supply and Sanitation activities are supported by a number of external support agencies as well as through World Bank International Development Assistance (IDA) Credit.

The LNT 'Provincial Development Project' (LNPDP), financed through IDA Credit, was initiated in 1994 and has four components - roads, urban water supply, rural water

supply and sanitation, and institutional development. The implementation of the road, urban water supply and institutional development components has been completed already. The RWSS Component of LNPDP was initially designed for the construction of boreholes primarily, and focused on hardware investments. From the period 1994-1998, a number of constraints were faced by the project and little progress was made. The Provincial Authority with help of the national agency Nam Saat (the National Water Supply and Environmental Health Programme within the Ministry of Health, commonly known as Nam Saat) and World Bank Water and Sanitation Program East Asia and Pacific (WSP-EAP) tried to identify the main constraints as:

- management issues (from provincial level up to village level)
- lack of capacities
- inappropriate style of technical assistance

These factors resulted in a few badly constructed WSS facilities that did not meet communities expectations and rapidly fell into disuse.

To address the management issue, the Province organized a Consultation Workshop, which led to the re-design of the whole project in line with the National RWSS Sector Strategy, launched in 1997 by Nam Saat.

The newly designed component became operational from 1999, focusing on piloting the application of the National Strategy for improved services through institutional strengthening, capacity building and improving service delivery by promoting demand responsive approaches.

This drive included establishment of a new partnership with line agencies, focus toward on-the-job demonstrations of water supply and sanitation services in villages, schools and health clinics during the period 1999-2002 through demand responsive approaches.

The Province, by implementing this project, is now developing a clearer framework for the partnership linkages, roles and responsibilities, as an overall institutional framework in the application of the Lao RWSS Sector Strategy, and the learning from Luang Namtha now begins to provide spin off effects in other provinces.

### RWSS in Luang Namtha: the past and initial constraints

The northern part of Lao PDR — a mountainous area with a large number of ethnic minority peoples — has proved to be the most difficult site for hygiene, sanitation and water

**Table 1. Lao PDR and Luang Namtha: at-a-glance**

Information	Lao PDR	Luang Namtha
Land borders (length Km.)	Cambodia (435 Km.), China (505 Km.), Myanmar (236 Km.), Thailand (1835 Km.), Vietnam (2069 Km.)	Oudomxay (145 Km.), Bokeo (122 Km.), China (138 Km.), Myanmar (149 Km)
Climate	Tropical monsoon : rainy season from May – October, dry season from November – April)	
Major Rivers	Mekong (west)	Mekong (west), Namtha, NamLong, NamHa
Capital	Vientiane	Namtha
Population	5.21 million	131,952
Male	2.579 million	64,656
Female	2.579	67,296
Ethnic Groups	Lao: 52%; Phu Thai/ Khamu, Hmong, Lue: 33%; 19 ethnic groups: 13%; 22 ethnic groups: 25	Lao Loum 37.55%, Lao Soung 36.92%, LaoTeung 26.53%
Access to safe water (Urban/Rural)	54.5% (49% / 60%)	59.78%
Access to sanitation (Urban/Rural)	53% (70% [1996]/ 36%)	26.44%

Source: LuangNamtha Provincial Namsaat and Luangphabang Provincial Namsaat

supply improvements. Physical coverage, as well as the use, sustainability and impact of water supply and sanitation facilities, remain very low in these areas. Country wide, the National Water Supply and Environmental Health Programme (Nam Saat ) is responsible for rural water supply and environmental health. Its support to communities is decentralized through the Provinces and Districts. Support is increasingly executed in partnership with line agencies, with Nam Saat fulfilling a coordinating role, and offering essential guiding and backstopping inputs. The national program is supported by several bilateral and multilateral External Support Agencies (ESAs) and NGOs, whose support reaching out to the national program as a whole, Provincial-level activities (often through integrated rural development projects), and specific Districts.

Over the period 1994-1997 a comprehensive Sector Strategy for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation has been developed by Nam Saat and its inter-agency partners, in close dialogue with Provinces and with Districts and community level inputs. This Strategy now forms the basis for improving ongoing projects and for designing all new RWSS investment.

The USD 10.18 million Luang Namtha Provincial Development Project (LNPD) became effective in February 1994. It benefits from a USD 9.67 million credit from the International Development Association of the World Bank. Aside from a rural water supply and sanitation component, the credit supports larger interventions in urban water supply and roads (both well advanced), and several institutional strengthening initiatives. The core budget for the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Component of the project was originally estimated at USD 350,000 with inputs anticipated in addition from other project budget lines including those for Technical Assistance and Institutional Strengthening.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons relating to the original design, assumptions made and institutional constraints, the component as formulated in 1993 remained stalled for nearly four years. As a consequence in December 1997 a World Bank Mission recommended that serious consideration be given to closing the component.

In 1998, however, the Province proposed to undertake a series of activities to reformulate the component and identify and effectively come to grips with the constraints. During an April 1998 workshop led by Nam Saat Central, Nam Saat Luang Namtha and partners from Nalae, Long and Nam Tha Districts began a preliminary survey and work plan process, based on Community Dialogues in nine Communities. To enhance that initial planning effort, the Luang Namtha Provincial Government requested Nam Saat Central to guide a broad inter-agency planning workshop, modelled after the preparation process used by Oudomxay and Phongsali Provinces for their RWSS Component of the Provincial Infrastructure Project.

The Luang Namtha Nam Saat re-designed the RWSS Project based on a well-prepared 5-day multi-agency, multi-level participatory and independently facilitated

workshop, held in Luang Namtha in September 1998. This workshop has led to the firm propositions set out to make a change in the management process to strengthen the institutional framework.

The major changes proposed in Luang Namtha Workshop were as follows:

- Management weaknesses need to be overcome with establishing a strong partnership with line agencies, and roles and responsibilities need to be defined.
- The terms of reference of existing adviser do not suit the current situation of the RWSS Program and therefore, a careful revision of the terms of reference has to be prepared and accordingly the existing adviser needs to be evaluated.
- Class room training activities conducted so far proved not too effective, unless on-the-job-training is also introduced to follow up on the confidence building of local staff and their partners.
- Activities planned need to be reviewed by Nam Saat Central in line with the Lao RWSS Strategy in an effort to guarantee the execution, especially with regard to subsidy and Community selection criteria.
- Clear milestones and indicators of progress, especially in the early stages of the project, need to be prepared and shared among all stakeholders.
- Adequate learning focus is needed for continuous improvements based on learning from the field.
- Detailed allocation of budget needs to be prepared including clear indications of Community and Government contributions.

### **Analysis and Solutions for Addressing Key Constraints**

By identifying the three over-arching concerns (please refer to Box 1) – lack of institutional and management capacity; lack of effective partnership and networking; and lack of adequate human resources - and the positive factors (please refer to Box 2) and then analyzing them, several urgent needs for the re-design emerged.

The following measures were taken to improve the situation:

- Set up an inter-agency, non-hierarchical institutional structure. That helped to improve management and learning processes, build human resource capacity, disperse the workload, and solve management bottlenecks through team work.
- Improved both vertical and horizontal coordination and networking, from the village to the provincial level. This able to promote inter-agency resourcing for training, personnel and finances, as well as encouraging community-based management and ownership linked to improved delivery services.
- Encouraged broad partnership and participation, including with other government services, mass organizations, ESAs, NGOs, and Nam Saat Central. This helped

**Box 1. RWSS in Luang Namtha****MAJOR CONSTRAINTS  
FACED DURING 1994-1998**

- a) On Institutional and Management Issues:
  - Unclear roles and responsibilities
  - Unclear Organizational Structure to support the RWSS Program (especially for medium and large scale activities)
  - Slow progress on the use of the IDA credit due to lack of Implementation Plan
  - Low response to communities' high demand for the improved services
  - District level RWSS units weak or not yet in operation
- b) On Partnership Building and Networking:
  - Inter-agency coordination (Government, ESAs, and NGOs) remains weak
  - Miscommunication and limited coordination among inter-sectoral partners
- c) On Human Resource Issues:
  - Planning and management skills weak due to lack of guidance/training
  - Shortage of technical, managerial and hygiene promotion staff especially at district level
  - Limited technical experience in the RWSS Sector (for most of the existing staff)
  - Very limited hygiene promotion experience

**Box 2. RWSS in Luang Namtha****SOME POSITIVE FACTORS AS STARTING POINTS FOR  
IMPROVEMENT IN 1998**

- a) On Policy Guidance:
  - Government developed the guidance (the Sector Strategy) to support the RWSS Program
- b) On Funding:
  - Communities are ready to allocate their own resources (time, labor, skills, funds)
  - Government has obtained the IDA credit to support RWSS schemes
  - Some funds are available from UNICEF, NGOs and ESAs for RWSS schemes
- c) On Human Resources:
  - A series of training on water supply construction, operation and maintenance (with support from Nam Saat Central, UNICEF, NGOs, and ESAs) have already organized
  - Some trained technical staff available
- d) On Coordination:
  - Ad hoc, sporadic coordination does exist among local partners involved in RWSS
- e) Field Level Situation:
  - Initial data have been collected to support the RWSS Program
  - Some water systems have been installed through NGO, UNICEF and ESA-support

to triple the number of personnel working on RWSS and Hygiene Promotion without additional number of government staff.

- Concentrated on Capacity Building for both Nam Saat staff and their partners by setting forth an intensive training process on management, planning, technical RWSS skills, hygiene promotion and community development. This helped to develop critical skills essential for building program sustainability.
- Established management policies and regulations, including on Community Selection Criteria and Investment Subsidy Policy, which are in line with the National

Sector Strategy. This helped to place the RWSS Component firmly within the national program, so that it now becomes a learning model for the nation as a whole.

- Defined all Roles and Responsibilities of each institution involved, and assigned personnel immediately. This helped to define and diffuse responsibilities, in past which was borne by the Provincial Nam Saat service, and added human resource potential, especially in the area of Hygiene Promotion.
- Designed an appropriate package of Technical Assistance, including backstopping and guidance from Nam Saat Central, and the hiring of a long-term Resident RWSS Adviser. This helped to provide essential advisory support from a variety of sources, tailored to the needs of the new design and aimed at creating sustained Capacity.

**Actions undertaken**

Luang Namtha Nam Saat took the following actions to resolve the constraints:

**Related to organizational structure:**

The re-designed Organizational Structure for this Component aims to create both horizontal and vertical structures, inter-agency team work, bottom-up planning and management, and increased hygiene promotion activities. The model fits well with the organizational principles promoted in the Sector Strategy and currently being advocated by the Ministry of Health.

In the new institutional design, key emphasis is on developing inter-agency Provincial and District Working Units, Hygiene Promotion Teams, and Technical Teams, with critical backstopping from Nam Saat Central and a Resident Advisor. Community resources are also developed by promoting Community Management Committees, Village Health Volunteers, and integrating local teachers and health workers. ESAs, NGOs and other local Government agencies and committees serve as resource groups.

In this way, the structure fosters a two-way learning and feedback process to improve management process, and a two-way linkage for resourcing, backstopping and oversight of the RWSS Component.

**Roles, responsibilities, and personnel assignments**

Following an intensive brainstorming, the Planning Team constructed a list of Roles and Responsibilities for each major unit. Roles and Responsibilities for Community Management Committees, Village Health Volunteers and Nam Saat Central were also developed.

**Project management regulations**

The Planning Team developed the Project Management Regulations which should form the basis of monitoring indicators, standards for performance quality and quantity, and Annual Review processes.

## How management was improved

The difficulties experienced by the Provincial Nam Saat management were analyzed in a consultation workshop with full participation of district and provincial partners. To get the RWSS activities under way, a much flatter, more team-based approach was developed. Previously, 2-3 Nam Saat staff were responsible for whole RWSS activities, they were then replaced by a Provincial Working (coordination) team consisting of Provincial Nam Saat and full time representations from Provincial Lao Women's Union, Youth Union, Rural Development Committee and others, with Provincial Nam Saat acting mainly as Managing Secretariat. With this modification, the main responsibility for planning and implementation goes to a multi-sectoral Provincial Coordination Unit. That helps Nam Saat to bring a new skill mix to support the demand responsive approach in RWSS activities in Luang Namtha, a completely new initiatives in line with Lao RWSS Sector Strategy.

In a related development, District Coordination Units were also formed. The emphasis was given to inter-agency teamwork rather than on individuals. A new skill on how to cross resourcing between agencies were introduced. The focus on gender balance and preparation for a gender promotion plan helped the district and provincial team to progressively increase the gender balance in the team, which added extra values and skills, especially during hygiene promotional and community dialogue activities.

Once the District and Provincial Coordination Team was formed, a detailed personnel and team skill assessment was conducted, and it was learned that continuity of personnel involved with planning and budget-making, and annual review is extremely important for quality of output and building capacity. It was observed that 75% of participants were changed during the re-designing phase of the Project in 1998-1999. As an immediate step, it was discussed and agreed that the district and provincial senior management will develop a permanent member for Provincial and District Coordination Team. The district and Provincial Authorities honored the agreement and no change has taken place so far among members of the district and provincial coordination team. That resulted in an immediate positive impact on the development of the management skills of the district and provincial team members. In addition, the terms of reference of the provincial adviser were fully reviewed and revised and a new technical adviser was recruited by the province to focus more on management area rather than on technical issues.

## Key lessons learned

**Building a critical mass:** The main challenge faced by the RWSS Program in Luang Namtha was to establish an initial team of critical mass who can move the new transitional agenda on demand responsive approach forward. It took more than 18 months to establish this initial critical mass so that they will fully understand the process and lead the district and village volunteers. The number of critical mass

in Luang Namtha though is increasing, and so is a main issue: what will be the incentives?. In line with Lao Sector Strategy, the Provincial Nam Saat developed a set of criteria for offering professional incentives. However, this needs to be further explored, which Nam Saat would like to address in the near future.

**Transparency and team-based approach can make a big difference:** The RWSS Luang Namtha activities failed to take off during 1994-1998, although two international advisers were recruited during that phase. However, after addressing the management issues, sharing of responsibilities within a core team has shown that Luang Namtha RWSS activities can be planned and implemented successfully. That requires good overall guidance from the senior management, sharing of responsibilities and transparencies, especially in financial management and professional incentive process.

## Conclusion

By re-designing and making the necessary changes on institutional and management aspects, and setting up the guiding principles, Luang Namtha Nam Saat began implementing the water supply, sanitation and hygiene activities effectively. As a result, other ESAs also provided additional funds to pilot the application of the Lao strategy in the province of Luang Namtha. A big challenge facing by Luang Namtha is to demonstrate how to scale-up this demand responsive approach through the new team-based management models in their upcoming projects funded through different External Support Agencies and NGOs.

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