

## **Institutional challenges to water and sanitation promotion in rural Laos<sup>1</sup>**

Lack of safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) causes widespread illness and death worldwide, but can be prevented effectively and efficiently through well-known and simple countermeasures. Yet, in Lao PDR and other countries investments and interest in such measures have been inadequate.

A qualitative case study was carried out in September/October 2013 to investigate institutional and organizational challenges to WASH implementation in rural areas of Lao PDR. The study focussed on identifying measures to strengthen the institutional capacity and readiness to carry out WASH initiatives. Information was gathered on multiple stakeholders' perceptions of existing challenges and potential improvements. The methods used were literature reviews, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and transect walks. Triangulation and template analysis were used to analyse different dimensions of institutional capacity building.

The study was carried out in cooperation with the Bolikhmxy Livelihood Improvement and Governance Project (LAO/021), which supports many aspects of rural development in 60 target villages in three districts of Bolikhmxy Province. The project support to WASH is primarily through water supply schemes and latrines, while capacity building in planning, monitoring and information management strengthens WASH activities indirectly. The practical implementation is carried out by government agencies, service providers and the involved communities, while the LAO/021 project facilitates, funds and monitors the work.



The stakeholder study identified five main challenges to WASH implementation, namely inadequate:

1. Coordination and leadership;
2. Concern for ethnicity and gender issues;
3. Promotion of stakeholder ownership and prioritization of WASH;
4. Training and awareness of hygiene, operations and maintenance;
5. Monitoring for decision making and accountability.

Specific examples of these problems suggested that WASH projects need to strengthen governance practices; institute better monitoring and evaluation systems; and adopt measures that promote national and local ownership and reduce aid dependency. Based on the stakeholder perception and on literature reviews, the following practical recommendations were identified:

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Marianne Hansen (2014): "Analysis of the institutional challenge of strengthening WASH initiatives in rural provinces of Lao PDR", Faculty of Health and Medical Science, University of Copenhagen, 58 pp.

- Governance
  - Promote principles of transparency, accountability, autonomy, inclusion, and fund delegation.
  - Promote government coordination of donor projects and district wide approaches, initially through piloting and testing of the capacity and commitment of government agencies to manage such approaches.
- Monitoring
  - Establish an independent national monitoring entity (or strengthen existing institutions), that can give objective information based on unambiguous indicators.
  - Pilot mobile phone solutions for village-level data collection, reporting and monitoring to increase validity and timeliness of WASH data collection and implementation.
- Ownership
  - Promote autonomy and aid independence through pilot projects that acknowledge the need and capacity of the key stakeholders, and focus on actual learning and behavioural change.
  - Incorporate principles of systemic capacity building and sustainability beyond the period of external support to cover the entire lifecycle of an intervention.
  - Prioritize information-sharing to ensure that involved agencies and beneficiaries have adequate access to relevant information.

The study showed that while technical problems indeed exist, more fundamental and widespread challenges pertain to institutional and organizational issues of WASH projects in Lao PDR. It also showed that while the LAO/021 Project has adopted the above principles to a large extent, some of the public service providers and partner institutions have refrained from fully adopting and benefitting from the same recommended practices. Moreover, key government strategies remained underutilized, such as the Community-Lead Total Sanitation approach and the 7-Step WASH Implementation Process.



Consequently, much could be achieved by closer adherence to existing policies, strategies and good practices. Hence, national execution and ownership could be promoted further through improved delegation, if combined with effective accountability measures, including independent national monitoring and evaluation.

A small case study can give only preliminary ideas to institutional capacity development. Nevertheless, it identified practical recommendations to strengthening institutional capacity building and improvement of implementation of WASH initiatives in rural Lao PDR. These recommendations are also likely to be relevant for settings in other sectors and countries.

Methodologically, the study showed that a systematic assessment combining academic and practical methods can give new insight into complex problems.