



Improving Vientiane's Urban Infrastructure through Community-Driven Development Interventions

For the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), freeing the country from the status of least-developed country by 2020 is its most significant goal.¹ One of the challenges to its economic growth is the need for physical infrastructure, particularly in terms of road and drainage network development, along with the management of solid waste. Population growth, urbanization, and income growth are taking their toll on infrastructure, and the gap between demand and supply is ever widening. Significant achievements have been made in urban areas through a number of large-scale infrastructure development. However, inadequate institutional, legal, and regulatory frameworks hinder the efficient provision and management of urban services. The poor state of Lao PDR urban infrastructure development is nowhere more pronounced than in Vientiane, its capital city.

Vientiane, the capital and largest city of Lao PDR, with a population of 746,000 (2007), is essentially a market town servicing an extensive agricultural hinterland, and is the conduit through which a considerable quantity of imported goods finds their way to customers from the city and the surrounding area. Current development trends have spurred the urbanization process because of expanded industry and tourism sectors,

combined with rural to urban migration. Of the approximately 300 kilometers (km) of roads within the Vientiane urban area, less than one third are paved. The remaining roads are mainly earth or gravel and are in poor condition. Tertiary roads, which account for almost half of the road network, are usually impassable to vehicles after heavy rainfall. There is no sewerage system, and sanitation is primarily through on-site facilities. While 74% of the urban households have access to on-site sanitation facilities, these facilities are generally poorly designed and constructed, and perform inadequately.

Despite previous investments in roads, drainage, and water supply facilities, the city's deficient urban infrastructure and services hinder economic growth and social development. Inadequate community infrastructure and services have adverse impact on the lives of the poor, majority of whom live in low-lying land, flooded for most of the year. Flooding and stagnant polluted wastewater continued to occur in open roadside channels because the primary network was incomplete and the secondary and tertiary networks were largely unimproved.

Review and experience of previous interventions in urban infrastructure development indicated the need for a more consultative and demand-led approach in project design, planning, and implementation to ensure that the stakeholders feel a sense of project ownership, better target the poor, derive sustained benefits from physical improvements, and solicit community support for reforms. Thus, focus needs to be shifted to community-based infrastructures and services, with mechanisms for operations and

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maintenance. It is now widely accepted that a response to local demands and involvement of local people is more likely to lead to local ownership and sustained maintenance of infrastructure.

Rousing Community Participation for Infrastructure Development

Before 2000, the benefits of physical interventions in Vientiane were compromised by the absence of parallel interventions at the tertiary or village level to complement citywide infrastructure and service improvements. The village area improvement component of the Vientiane Urban Infrastructure and Services Project (VUISP)² sought to address this through a demand-led, village-by-village approach to tertiary-level infrastructure improvement.³

VUISP (Loan 1834-LAO) aimed to support urban governance reforms to provide sustainable services and address needed infrastructure investments in Vientiane. The target was to construct new infrastructures in 50 of the 100 villages administered by the Vientiane Urban Development Administration Authority (VUDAA) and was designed to benefit about 162,000 urban residents, of which roughly 30,000 or 18% comprised low-income households. The project had three major components: citywide infrastructure and services village area improvement (VAI), and capacity building. The project was approved in August 2000¹ with an estimated cost of \$37 million.

The citywide infrastructure and services were intended to provide missing links in the primary and secondary road and drainage networks, along with improvements in solid waste and traffic management. The capacity-building component was to strengthen the planning, management, and budgeting capacity of VUDAA. The VAI component on the other hand sought to address the need to improve community infrastructure, such as access roads, drainage/flood protection, sanitation, and solid waste collection using demand-led participatory development procedures. Under VAI, the villages contribute 10% of the cost of the works, the project loan covers 62%, and the Government meets the remaining 28%.

VAI covered 50 villages (with a total population of 81,000) in phases: the first phase with six villages, 20 in the second phase, and 24 in the third. The project during the first phase was met with skepticism, if not reluctance, by beneficiary communities. No one in the area has ever heard of community-driven development⁴ (CDD) or had the experience of having communities decide, plan, and implement development projects. Projects were earlier perceived as “government” activities, hence the reluctance of the communities to pay their counterpart contributions. But with community consultations and mobilization efforts facilitated by the Lao Women’s Union (LWU), community participation in the project began to take shape and the villagers were able to voice their opinions and initial misgivings. LWU was also closely involved in setting up VAI committees in each village and in ensuring that women and the poor were appropriately represented on these committees. A CDD implementation manual was developed by LWU to guide project management and implementation.

The use of the CDD approach allowed the community to be involved in all facets of project management and implementation. This greatly helped the engineers on the project team to communicate more effectively with the residents, which resulted in the engineers adopting a more flexible approach to infrastructure design.

In collecting village contributions, village chiefs and their committees have been pragmatic in determining the amount to be paid by individual households. Most have adopted a sliding scale based on the ability to pay, with the poorest households being exempt. Where there were relatively wealthy businesses or households in a village, they were asked to pay, or have voluntarily paid, many times the average payments.⁵ Communities contributed 10% of the total project cost.

The 20 villages in the second phase were more cooperative and the contribution targets were easily achieved. In the remaining 24 villages, implementation proceeded either on or ahead of schedule.⁶ The success of the earlier projects in other villages and the continuous dialogue and feedback with residents helped pave the way to vigorous project involvement. Even after project completion, VUDAA continued to receive requests from other communities to be included in the VAI program.

Improved Urban Infrastructure: Results and Impacts

Upon VUISP’s conclusion, the total length of roads completed and upgraded (including those built under the VAI component) was 82.8 km or 29% of the total 279 km of Vientiane’s road network, 16.1 km of new drains (6.6 km of primary and 9.5 km of secondary channels) were built, 10% more than the target. The coverage of waste collection services in the VUDAA area increased to almost 70,000 households (an increase of 466%) in 204 villages, 117 of these

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covered by VUDAA and the remaining 87 by five private sector companies. The increase in coverage was possible because of the public awareness campaigns undertaken, the six compactor trucks procured for VUISP, and the road improvements, which greatly expanded access and collection capacity.⁷

The improved infrastructure increased accessibility, smoothened traffic flow, increased land values along the roads built and/or upgraded, and mitigated perennial flooding in the city by almost 90%.

The VAI component was able to construct a total of 39.60 km roads and roadside drains. Village contribution amounted to \$398,547. Guided by community-driven development processes, improvements made under the VAI component (\$4 million) were achieved at a relatively low average cost of \$75,000 per village, making the return on investment for this component substantial. Most villages now have community funds to maintain access roads, drains, and solid waste collection, and these funds are being managed by village committees. In addition, VUISP's positive impact on community health has been significant. The incidence of waterborne diseases and some related health hazards, has decreased. The Ministry of Health noted a considerably reduced number of cases of dengue fever during the 2006 wet season.⁸

Another positive impact that VAI had was on village-level governance (e.g., transparency, accountability) and the development of trust between communities and local authorities. This was greatly facilitated by outreach efforts made by the project management unit, with LWU assistance. Leadership was also a crucial factor—made possible by the dynamic leadership of the project coordinating unit director.

Lessons in Community-Driven Development

Spirited community participation is stimulated by openness, trust, and proof. The consultations facilitated by LWU greatly aided in establishing rapport and trust between and among key project stakeholders. Trust didn't come easily—it required time and outreach to convince communities that their investments were worthwhile. These participatory mechanisms provided the communities the voice and helped initiate community ownership over the project, resulting to better use and maintenance of the facilities.

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Apart from stoking community participation, applying CDD in VUISP promoted good governance by supporting decentralization of urban government, and by empowering village communities in project planning, design, implementation, and operation and maintenance. The transparency and accountability of transactions throughout project implementation had ingrained in the communities a level of trust in their dealings with the Government. The interaction and sharing of responsibilities, reinforced by the presence of LWU and community development field workers, eventually evolved into effective partnerships and improved governance. The project demonstrated that development cooperation is possible between the state and the communities, particularly in providing vital urban infrastructure.

VUISP has been a learning process for all project stakeholders, with CDD being an innovative approach in urban infrastructure development in Lao PDR. VUISP's accomplishments were cited in the Lao PDR National Assembly as an example of good participatory planning.⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2004. *National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy*. Available: www.undplao.org/newsroom/publication/Ngpes/Lao%20PDR%20-%20NGPES%20-%20Main%20Document.pdf; and Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2006. *Sixth National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006–2010)*. Vientiane, Committee for Planning and Investment (October 2006).
- ² The project was implemented from August 2001 to August 2007 at a cost of \$37 million, which comprised an Asian Development Bank loan of \$27 million, a parallel Agence Française de Développement grant of \$5 million and government and community contributions of about \$7 million. Approval Date: August 2001. Actual Completion Date: June 2007. Executing Agency: Vientiane Capital City Administration.
- ³ Mabitt, Richard. 2006. Chapter 8: Lao People's Democratic Republic. *Urbanization and Sustainability in Asia*. Philippines
- ⁴ Community-driven development (CDD) is an approach to operations that seeks to increase community groups' control over local development resources. Defined as "an approach that gives control over planning decisions and investment resources over local development projects to community groups." (World Bank)
- ⁵ Mabitt, Richard. 2006. Chapter 8: Lao People's Democratic Republic. *Urbanization and Sustainability in Asia*. Philippines
- ⁶ ADB. 2008. *Project Completion Report–LAO-1834: Vientiane Urban Infrastructure and Services Project*. Manila.
- ⁷ ADB. 2008. *Project Completion Report–LAO-1834: Vientiane Urban Infrastructure and Services Project*. Manila.
- ⁸ ADB. 2008. *Community Participation: A Key to Improving Vientiane's Urban Infrastructure*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/urbandev
- ⁹ Mabitt, Richard. 2006. Chapter 8: Lao People's Democratic Republic. *Urbanization and Sustainability in Asia*. Philippines

Disclaimer

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