

Community-Based Disaster Management Project in Champasack District

Location:	Champasack District, Champasack Province, southern part of Lao PDR, between Mekong River and Thai border
Date:	April 2001-March 2004
Sector focus:	Natural hazards preparedness and mitigation
Spatial focus:	District and community level

Bibliographical reference

Kindavong Luangraz et al., *Empowering the Community for Disaster Risk Reduction through a Community-Based Disaster Management Project in Champasack District, Champasack Province, Lao PDR*. In: Asian Disaster Reduction Center, ed., *Total Disaster Risk Management: Good Practice*, pp. 76-78 (Chapter 3.3.5). Kobe, Japan: ADRC, 2005; also available on CD available from ISDR-Geneva and its regional offices, *Disaster Risk Reduction, 1994-2004*. 3 CD set, January 2005.

Abstract

In a project partnership between the National Disaster Management Office and a national level NGO, World Vision Laos, a three year project used participatory methods to prepare for and mitigate flood and drought risk by: (1) building governmental institutional capacity at provincial and district level; (2) creating and strengthening village level organizations for risk management (Village Disaster Protection Units); (3) development of a flood early warning system; (4) building a system of weirs (small dams) to impound seasonal water for drought mitigation; (5) developing a more diverse agricultural system better adapted to recurrent flood and drought.

The training component was focused on government and village leaders and professionals, totaling more than 4,000, half of them women. The project also held awareness raising workshops with school children and general sessions in villages. Other activities in the 39 project villages was hazard mapping

The project catalyzed considerable institutional development, creating a series of village committees: (1) Village Disaster Protection Units; (2) Farmers' Groups; (3) Weir Management Committees; (4) Village Health Workers' Groups.

This project will be of interest because of the very close cooperation between national and other levels of government, an NGO, and the villagers. Its rural focus and integrated, multi-hazard approach will make it useful for those working in similarly neglected rural areas.

Technical description

Hazard/risk type: Flood, drought, flash flood

Type of assessment: Hazard, vulnerability, and capacity assessment, action planning.

CRA process

Liaison with local officials and training of facilitators; village based process; implementation; monitoring of progress.

CRA process was conducted in stages: (1) training of officials and village leaders in CRA methods and in pre-disaster planning and drought and flood mitigation methods; (2) village level meeting to raise awareness and to engage in village level hazard, vulnerability, and resource (capacity) mapping; (3) action planning; (4) implementation of the plan.

Methods used: Skills training (e.g. measurement of precipitation, water level gauging and recording, first aid, weir management, dry season cultivation methods); Group discussion; Participatory mapping. Maps were produced showing hazards as well as low lying areas, families highly vulnerable to flood, and safe areas for evacuation and shelter. The maps were displayed on a wall of the village temple (*wat*) in 38 of the villages and in the village head's house in one.

Was livelihood analysis used? Yes, to the extent that there was a thorough understanding of the agricultural production systems in the zones nearer and farther from the Mekong, the seasonality of their management, and how their lack of resilience created food insecurity.

Was external specialist knowledge introduced? Yes, in the form of suggestions about flood early warning, weir management, and dry season/ drought cultivation practices and drought resistant crops.

Vulnerability analysis

Vulnerability assessment was carried out, not analysis. Vulnerability seems to have been implicitly defined as exposure to flood hazard. There does not appear to have been analysis of the causes of people living in exposed areas, nor the socio-economic reasons why some rather than other households suffer more food insecurity during drought.

Capacity analysis

Resources available: *Financial resources:* Funding by Australian international development assistance (AusAID); *Human resources:* Professional staff of World Vision Laos and the National Disaster Management Office, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. *Local resources:* considerable pre-existing social organization; intimate knowledge of the agro-ecosystems.

Limitations to Capacity: N.A.

Action planning and implementation

What actions were actually planned? (1) Flood early warning system; (2) Weir construction. The *warning system* comprised precipitation and river flow measurements by trained district workers, who report approaching flood hazards to media and, through the district, to the Village Disaster Protection Units. The VDPU's spread the warning (reinforcing the message of the media) and organize evacuation. Prior village mapping had identified safe areas to which to evacuate.

Were all actions actually carried out? Yes. The early warning system was put in place, and weirs were constructed in 29 or 30 of the 39 villages involved.

Have these actions turned out to be sustainable? Yes, construction of the weirs has been completed and the villagers are using them for planting of dry season cash crops. The weirs' condition up to now (September 2005) is good. The project formally closed down from in March 2005, and project activities were handed over to the District (local government). Maintenance costs will be the responsibility by the District governor and village in the future.

Were there any unanticipated additional benefits of the actions? It is likely that the new village organizations created have benefited the farmers and villagers by making agriculture more productive and by enhancing the visibility and effectiveness of health workers. Note that not only village disaster management committees were formed, but also other non-disaster related ones such as farmers' groups and groups of health workers.

Were there any unanticipated negative consequences of the actions? N.A.

Indicators

None are mentioned, but given that the Mekong floods annually, one could easily compare the extent of damage and economic loss before and after the project. Similarly, the use of weirs for irrigation and drought resistant crops should have a measurable impact on the amount of food surplus, one should be able to measure the increase of food security (e.g. data on the height for age, weight for age, etc. of children under 5).

Contextual notes

Existence/ role of prior or contemporaneous conflict? During the 1960s and 1970s Laos suffered violent conflict as part of the regional Indo China wars. As in Vietnam and Cambodia, reconstruction and recovery is an on going process even 30 years since the end of the war (1975).

Role of displacement/ relocation? No.

Role of prior disaster & prior recovery attempts? There is a history of recurrent flood and drought. Every few years the eastern half of the district is inundated with destructive flooding while the western half suffers short periods of drought and flash flood.

Significant historical, geographic, economic, political, or cultural issues that influenced this instance of CRA and its consequences? The Lao PDR has a commandist, modernizing, developmentalist national state government. The people are encouraged to organize themselves and to participate in development projects. This can have a coercive side and create backlash and passive resistance (e.g. use of "weapons of the weak"¹) or it can work from the "top down and the bottom up" and empower villagers.

Strategic notes

How has this practice of CRA influenced change in policy and practice at the national level? As the national government was involved over a period of three years in a project that was very successful, it is likely that it has influenced national policy and practice.

How has this practice of CRA influenced change in policy and practice at local level? Virtually all district level officials from many ministries were trained and involved. It is likely to have had a lasting effect.

How has this practice of CRA influenced the level of organization and solidarity in the locality where it was carried out? Many village level organizations were formed grouping farmers and health workers. This increased the level of organization.

Less divided along class, gender, age, ethnic lines? Women were trained in equal numbers. There was no ethnic division as the entire population was made up of ethnic lowland Lao. Children were also involved in the project.

Have new civil society organizations been created directly or indirectly because of this practice of CRA? Village Disaster Protection Units (VDPU), farmers' groups, and groups of health workers. VDPUs are an integral part of the structure of the villages. They also continue (September 2005) to work at village level, especially in rainy season, when they digest information they get from the Meteorology Station and District Agriculture Department and hold village meeting to discuss flood preparedness.

Lessons learned

- ♦ A great deal can be achieved if an integrated approach is taken and livelihood enhancement is a focal point.
- ♦ Involving multiple levels of government, NGOs, and the people can produce the unity necessary for rapid risk reduction progress.

Keywords

Flood, drought, flash flood, socially appropriate warning, structural drought mitigation (weirs), drought resistant agriculture, benefits of flooding, village level organization.

Resource person(s)

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¹ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.