

# LAOS' STORY:

Unsung progress  
in rural sanitation:  
Building the  
foundations in  
Lao PDR

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**Development  
Progress**



## Unsung progress in rural sanitation:

### Building the foundations in Lao PDR

#### Key messages

1. Lao PDR has made progress in increasing access to improved sanitation in rural areas, from an extremely low base. Access to basic sanitation in rural areas rose from an estimated 10% in 1995 to 38% in 2008, which represents strong progress, even if there is still a long way to go.
2. Progress has been driven mainly by: private household investment in latrine construction linked to wider socioeconomic development; an improved policy and institutional framework; subsidised sanitation technology and construction; and donor financing to operations and capacity building.
3. Key lessons learnt include: i) development finance is needed over the long term, particularly in low-resource environments; ii) there is no blueprint for progress in sanitation; iii) equity, sustainability and behaviour change need to be tackled head on to maintain progress; iv) progress in sanitation is linked to wider political change, which takes time; and v) progress *outside* the sector can contribute to sector progress.

“Access to basic sanitation in rural areas rose from an estimated 10% in 1995 to 38% in 2008.”

## Summary

Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) faces considerable challenges in the delivery of sustainable and equitable access to sanitation in rural areas. The country is one of the poorest countries in East Asia and receives one of the highest per capita levels of aid in the world. Approximately 84% of its poor are rural inhabitants, with almost 2 million rural dwellers falling below the poverty line. More than half the population lives in upland areas with a critical lack of infrastructure, presenting huge technical, social and physical challenges to sanitation service delivery.

Nevertheless, the country has made progress since 1990 in increasing access to improved sanitation in rural areas. This is a story of rapidly increasing access to improved sanitation and of gradually improving government systems for service delivery. This progress is to an extent ‘unsung’ – Lao PDR’s current sanitation challenges tend to eclipse its positive steps forward. But progress has been made in a difficult sector from an extremely low base, even if major challenges remain.

## What has been achieved?

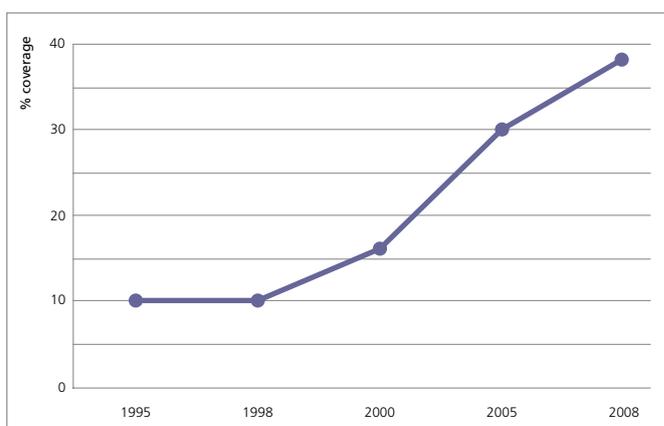
In the 1980s, structures for sanitation service delivery in Lao PDR, particularly in rural areas, were nearly non-existent. As one government official put it, *‘there was no support, no service, no strategy – we had nothing!’* In 1990, only an estimated 8% of the rural population had access to improved sanitation, with at least 80% of the population practising open defecation. This is the backdrop against which progress has been made.

### Significant increases in sanitation coverage

Access to improved sanitation in rural areas rose rapidly from an estimated 10% in 1995 to 38% in 2008 (Figure 1): between 1995 and 2008, an estimated 1,232,900 people gained access to improved sanitation in rural areas.

Lao PDR’s progress is striking when compared with other least-developed countries (LDCs) with similarly low 2000 coverage baselines (Table 1).

Figure 1: Access to improved rural sanitation in Lao PDR, 1995-2008<sup>1</sup>



Total rural and urban access increased from 18% in 1995 to 53% in 2008. By these estimates, Lao PDR was first globally in terms of relative average yearly progress in increasing access to improved sanitation from 1995 to 2006.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on increasing improved sanitation coverage to 54% in Lao PDR may already have been reached,<sup>4</sup> even though levels of open defecation remain high.

Table 1: Rural access to improved sanitation (%) in selected LDCs, 2000-2008<sup>2</sup>

Country	2000	2008	Change (+/- %)
Lao PDR	16	38	+ 22
Democratic Republic of Congo	13	23	+10
Liberia	4	4	0
Madagascar	8	10	+2
Mozambique	4	4	0
Sierra Leone	5	6	+1

1 WHO/UNICEF (2010) Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply and Sanitation: Estimates for the Use of Improved Sanitation Facilities in Lao PDR (March 2010).

2 WHO/UNICEF (2010) JMP: Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water – 2010 Update.

3 Based on JMP (2008) estimates.

4 Based on JMP (2010) estimates.



## Equity and sustainability progress and challenges

Sanitation service delivery projects have focused in the past decade on districts that the government classifies as 'poorest' and 'rural.' In spite of this, more affluent rural populations and rural villages with access to roads, as opposed to more remote and poorer villages, have made most of the gains in terms of access to improved sanitation.

As for sustainability, the government and its development partners have increasingly sought to promote hygiene awareness, create sanitation demand and change behaviour – the 'software' elements – to encourage sustainable use and operation of latrines. However, these elements still need considerable strengthening. Further, despite the progressive increase in coverage over the past two decades, current resource allocation to the sector appears insufficient to maintain this trend.

## What has driven change?

### Policy and institutional change

Lao PDR's policy and institutional development can be considered both an outcome of and a contributor to the progress made. There have been three major interrelated reform processes: i) development (1997), revision (2004) and implementation of a national strategy for rural water supply and sanitation; ii) creation and capacity building of the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (Nam Saat) to lead on rural service delivery; and iii) progressive institutionalisation of 'improved' approaches to service delivery, including an increased focus on demand responsiveness, community participation and hygiene promotion. Such reforms created a good foundation for addressing the MDGs. More recently, Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) has been piloted in some areas to serve remote and poorest communities. Challenges remain, including the very limited resources allocated to hygiene promotion and social mobilisation. Nam Saat also lacks the capacity to ensure policies are effectively implemented.

## Household investment and wider socioeconomic change

According to estimates, private household investment in latrine construction accounts for the bulk of the coverage increases in Lao PDR. This investment was largely unsubsidised and was driven, most probably, by non-poor rural households living close to roads and markets. This is 'Lao PDR people themselves driving improved sanitation.'<sup>5</sup>

Likely explanations for this investment include: the government requirement, in some areas, for people to build latrines in order to receive a water supply; exposure of some households to hygiene messages; and, rising incomes and increasing rural-urban linkages driven by broader socioeconomic change.

## Hardware, technology and infrastructure

Subsidised sanitation hardware, technology and infrastructure – from government and development partners – have also contributed to progress. Service delivery has focused largely on rapid construction, which has contributed to the fast-paced coverage expansion. The dominant technology has been pour-flush latrines, because they are odour-free and more hygienic. Getting large numbers of people on the sanitation ladder is arguably good progress; the challenge now is whether Lao PDR can ensure that households remain on their 'rung' of the sanitation ladder, using and maintaining their latrines over time.

## Development finance

Development finance has played a role, where sanitation programmes were present. External assistance has contributed significantly to policy processes and capacity building, and also has enabled Nam Saat actually to implement operations, as Nam Saat has little or no government budget for this. However, donor financing to the sector (particularly since the mid-2000s) has declined, stalling further potential progress. Progress should also be attributed to the hard work of Nam Saat staff, and to the government for financing staff salaries and administration: '*Nam Saat staff is doing all the hard work on the ground.*'<sup>6</sup>

5 Bajwa, Mahboob Ahmed (2010), Chief of WASH Section, UNICEF Lao PDR, Interview with the author, July 20.

6 Vongkhamsoo, Viengsamay (2010), Team Leader World Bank WSP Lao PDR, interview with the author, July 22.

# "There is no one blueprint for progress in sanitation delivery."

## Government ownership and the politics of sanitation

Small steps have been taken towards increasing national ownership of – and political commitment to – sanitation in Lao PDR. The government is relatively open to sanitation ideas and investment. In March 2008, it established a National Steering Committee for Sanitation to oversee International Year of Sanitation activities, which marked a step forward. There is some way to go, however.

Lao's political system is one-party and rather closed, which explains why service delivery reform processes (such as citizen responsiveness and decentralisation) have been relatively slow to institutionalise. In this context, the country's steps towards more demand-responsive service delivery represent quite significant achievements.

## Lessons learnt

- Development finance and technical support need to be sustained over the long term, especially in countries like Lao PDR, with very limited financial resources and a low starting base in service delivery. Building institutions and changing paradigms take time.
- There is no one blueprint for progress in sanitation delivery. Services can be delivered in different ways – e.g. household investment or direct programmatic efforts – and due attention should be given to leveraging the most appropriate mode of delivery and to selecting the most appropriate type of technology. Debates will continue about how appropriate subsidies are for getting people onto, and moving them up, the sanitation ladder (and in what sequence). In a low-resource environment, CLTS looks promising, although this needs to be adapted to the country context and requires investment.
- Changes in behaviour and culture are needed. Relatively limited promotion of sanitation and hygiene education and social mobilisation in Lao PDR has slowed progress towards the provision of more sustainable sanitation systems. Changing cultural practices is complex, however, often requiring considerable time, resources and effort.
- The wider political context matters. Allocation of public resources to sanitation and transition to a system that is more responsive to citizen demands are inevitably political processes. Service delivery reform is likely to be linked to broader reforms in governance and public administration – such reforms take time and need to be understood when trying to effect change. 'Progress' might best be judged against historical political and institutional change, rather than against some ideal-type conception of 'good sanitation governance.'
- Progress outside the sector can contribute to sector progress. Wider socioeconomic progress and levels of inequality may have a significant impact on access to basic sanitation. In Lao PDR, household investment in latrines has been connected in part to rising incomes for some groups.
- In Lao PDR, coverage targets, such as those in the MDGs, are cited as one reason for the rapid latrine construction. However, such targets risk drawing attention away from sustainability and equity outcomes.
- Where there is limited high-level political support, government bureaucrats and technocrats, such as Nam Saat staff, may be key allies in efforts to drive reforms.
- Long-term measures need to be taken to reduce aid dependency. Donor funding to sanitation has arguably created disincentives for the Lao PDR government to allocate resources to the sector. Mechanisms should also be put in place to ensure donors are held accountable for their long-term impact.



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