

Strengthening Environmental Management in Laos – Lessons Learned for Supporting Environmental Capacity Development

By Daniel Slunge, September, 2010

Sida has recently ended the support to Strengthening Environmental Management in Laos (SEM). The support amounted to approximately 109 million SEK divided among the project's first phase (SEM 1) 2001-2005 and the second phase (SEM II) 2005-2010. Building on a recent evaluation of the second phase of the program¹, this policy brief summarises lessons learned that may be useful for future support to environmental capacity development in other countries.

The **objective** of SEM II was to contribute to *strong environmental management to support national goals of sustainable development and poverty eradication*. SEM II was implemented by the Water Resources and Environment Administration (WREA) including Provincial Offices in nine provinces.

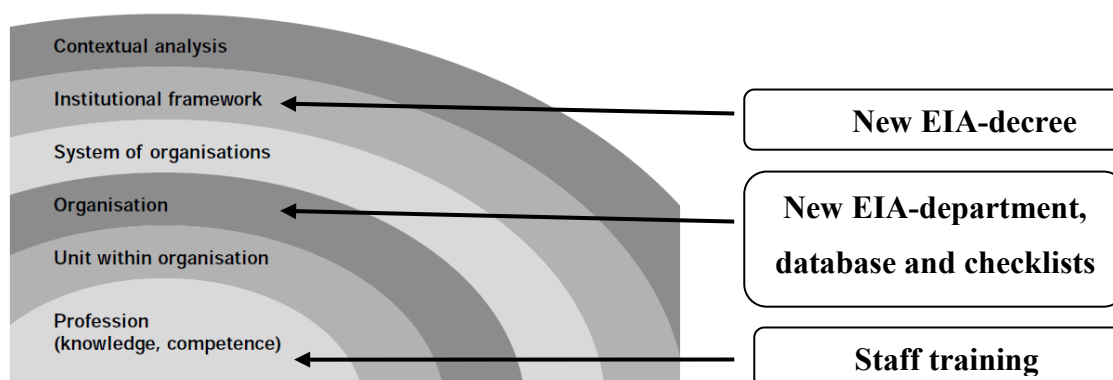
The project has contributed to several important **results**, including (i) new environmental regulations and guidelines which provide an important legal foundation for environmental management (ii) more staff with competence to review Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA); (iii) strengthened capacity of WREA staff; (iv) improved integration of environmental issues in educational curricula and campaigns for increased environmental awareness; (v) an EIA-database and other IT-related improvements within WREA; and (vi) strengthened environmental management capacity at the provincial level.

Lessons learned

Look for synergies from developing capacity at different levels. Enhancing the capacity for Environmental Impact Assessment was a key priority for SEM II. Capacity was simultaneously developed at the individual-, organizational- and institutional levels (figure 1). Just focusing on one of these levels, e.g. staff competence or legislative framework, would not have created the strong synergies found in the SEM II project.

¹ Lazarus, Kate and Slunge, Daniel. 2010. Strengthening Environmental Management Project - Phase II (SEM II) Lao PDR. Sida and WREA. Evaluation Report, 11 August 2010, available at www.handels.gu.se/eehelpdesk/

Figure 1: Capacity development at different levels to strengthen EIA-system in Laos



Focus on a few key areas. An early appraisal of the SEM II project document criticized it for being too broad and ambitious in relation to the limited absorption capacity within the central and provincial administrations. By deciding to focus SEM II on developing capacity in addressing environmental consequences of the mining and hydropower sector development, this criticism was largely accounted for. However, SEM II would have been more effective if clearer priorities had been set for the support to the provinces and environmental awareness and education.

Address driving forces of environmental degradation. SEM II was implemented during a period of unprecedented investments in the mining, hydropower and agricultural sectors, resulting in strong economic growth but also large negative environmental impacts. In this context the strong focus of SEM II on developing capacity for EIA has clearly been relevant. However, since EIA tend to come in late in decision-making processes it is important to also influence decision-making at more strategic levels. SEM II has made several efforts in this direction, such as including environmental aspects in concession agreements, pilot activities with integrated spatial planning, study tours involving ministers and governors and workshops on strategic environmental assessments. Possibly SEM II could have made greater efforts to frame environmental problems in economic language (e.g. natural resource curse, cost of environmental degradation) and portray the need for improved environmental and natural resources management as a prerequisite for sustained economic growth.

Find levers for awareness raising activities. Campaigns, celebration of Environment Day and other activities aiming at increasing environmental awareness played an important part of SEM II. Linking of awareness raising activities to the Ministry of Education and mass-media has been more successful than broader campaigns. Through these channels the costly “one-off” nature of campaigns can be avoided and impacts sustained.

Consider how the project can strengthen organisational and financial sustainability. The ten-year period of the combined SEM I and II projects has allowed for both capacity and strong ownership too evolve. Aligning the project components in SEM II with existing administrative structures at WREA’s Department of Environment also enhanced ownership and facilitated implementation. However, SEM II was only one of over 30 donor-supported projects managed by WREA. In order to avoid sub-optimization, WREA’s capacity for systematic coordination of different donor funded projects needs to be strengthened. Otherwise there is a risk that WREA executes individually strong projects without developing

its overall financial and organisational capacity. If WREA had one overall strategy which all donors could support transaction costs would be greatly reduced.

Assure that systems developed with input from technical advisors are actually used in practice. A number of systems or tools were developed, with strong input from technical advisors, aiming at strengthening WREA's organizational capacity. Examples include a Personal Management and Information System for keeping track of staff competence etc., an EIA-database, checklists for environmental monitoring and rather advanced GIS based tools for Integrated Spatial Planning. A key challenge seems to be to put these systems and tools into practical use. One lesson learned is that systems and tools should not be designed to perfection before being used. A more efficient approach is to develop draft systems and tools, begin to use them and then, if necessary, make revisions.

Don't underestimate the importance of language skills. Lack of proficiency in English and Lao has been a key challenge for the efficient use of international technical advisors, especially in the provinces. When provincial advisors from other countries were replaced by Lao technical advisors, this led to a marked improvement in the interaction with the provincial offices.

Combine formal and informal fora for dialogue on project implementation and follow-up. The annual reports and meetings constituted important occasions to make formal decisions on modifications in the project. Many times these decisions were discussed informally between WREA and Sida prior to the formal decisions. The importance of informal fora for dialogue and information sharing was stressed by WREA management.

Report on outcomes, not just activities and outputs. SEM II has generated a vast amount of reports on activities and outputs but there have been surprisingly few attempts to measure outcomes or impacts. While long term impacts usually are difficult to assess and attribute to specific project interventions, methodologies for assessing outcomes (short and medium term effects) such as changes in attitudes or behaviour of different target groups do exist and are used in other similar projects. One lesson learned is that more efforts need to be placed into thinking about outcomes and impacts already during project design, including conducting baseline studies. This would facilitate monitoring and evaluation of outcomes of environmental capacity development projects.

Assure that external reviews and evaluations create learning among stakeholders. During the SEM I and II projects a number of external reviews were undertaken. These reports contain a number of important observations and recommendations, such as the need to focus SEM II on a few key environmental priorities. The external reviews were perceived as important injections of new perspectives into SEM I and II. However, some of the reviews were alleged to have been conducted too rapidly generating recommendations that were not considered appropriate or feasible to implement by Sida and WREA. This may be one important explanation to the seemingly limited influence of the external reviews on SEM design and implementation. A lesson learned is that the learning among stakeholders that results from the process of conducting an external review or evaluation may be as important as the actual recommendations put forward. The participatory evaluation workshop which formed part of the final evaluation of SEM II is an example of how learning can be enhanced as part of an evaluation.

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See also Water Resources and Environmental Administration Lao PDR: www.wrea.gov.la