

Independent Progress Review



May 2011

Document:	Independent Progress Review
Version:	2.0 FINAL
Project:	LANGOCA
Client:	AusAID
NGOs:	CARE Oxfam Save the Children World Vision
Field team:	Paul Crawford (Team leader) Philippa Sackett (Co-team leader) Belinda Mericourt (Lead gender specialist) Somsisouk Inthavong-Sihachakr (Gender specialist) Sophie Davies (AusAID, Canberra) Dulce Simmanivong (AusAID, Vientiane) Rakounna Sisaleumsak (AusAID, Vientiane) Vanhpheng Sengmanothong (GoL, DIC) Somlith Khantivong (GoL, DIO)
Version Date:	20 July 2011

This document is the property of AusAID.

It is permissible to copy and use any of the material in this report provided that the source is appropriately acknowledged. Further information is available from:

Dulce Carandang Simmanivong

Senior Program Manager

AusAID Vientiane

Ph +856 21 353800 Ext 227

© AusAID 2011

AID ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Aid Activity Name	LANGOCA		
AidWorks initiative number	INI310		
Commencement date	July 2007	Completion date	June 12
Total Australian \$	\$14 million		
Total other \$	\$0		
Delivery organisation(s)	CARE Oxfam Save the Children World Vision		
Implementing Partner(s)	National Regulatory Authority (NRA) National Disaster Management Organisation (NDMO)		
Country/Region	Laos PDR		
Primary Sector	Disaster Management, UXO Clearance		

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Independent Progress Review was commissioned and managed for AusAID by Dulce Carandang Simmanivong and Rakounna Sisaleumsak. The IPR team appreciated the time provided by interviewees from AusAID in Canberra and Vientiane, Australia-based NGO representatives, Laos-based NGO program staff, Government of Laos representatives, a selection of civil society and donor representatives, and community members and beneficiaries from program target areas. Laos-English language interpretation was provided by Mr Ko Dethasone and variously by AusAID staff and Government of Laos representatives. Local languages were interpreted by government and program staff (En Chanthaboun and Ms. Inthavong Yommalath). Rebecca Lyngdoh Reye assisted with assimilating NGO reports. Tanya Bruning edited the draft report.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Dr Paul Crawford (Aid-IT Solutions Pty Ltd) is an independent monitoring and evaluation specialist who takes a 'soft systems' approach, drawing on experience in around 40 countries with a range of development and humanitarian organisations. pcrawford@aid-it.com.au; mobile +61 410 45 1369.

Ms Philippa Sackett works as a Project Management Advisor for the Burnet Institute in Vientiane and was the ACFID/NGO representative on the evaluation team. Philippa has over a decade of experience working with NGOs in Asia, including four years in Lao PDR. psackett@burnet.edu.au; mobile +856 20 2286 5884.

Ms Belinda Mericourt is an independent consultant based in Cambodia with experience in Southeast Asia and the Pacific in implementation and evaluation of strategies for gender equity & disability inclusion, aid effectiveness, & civil society engagement. belindamericourt@gmail.com; mobile +855 12 799249.

Ms Sophie Davies joined AusAID in 2010 as the Manager, Evaluation Support within the Program Effectiveness and Performance division. Prior to joining AusAID, she worked in the NGO international development sector with a focus on the Asia-Pacific working in programming and quality/learning roles.

Ms Somsisouk Inthavong is an independent consultant with a gender focus based in Lao PDR and with experience in project evaluations and surveys. somsisouk@hotmail.com; mobile +856 20 224 28 604.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

This is an independent progress review (IPR) of the Laos Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (LANGOCA)—comprising partnerships between AusAID and four Australian Non-Government Organisations (ANGOs): CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision.

Background

LANGOCA is a five-year program (2007-2012) with a total budget of AUD 14 million. The LANGOCA goal is: *To reduce the vulnerability of the poor (by integrating poverty reduction and crosscutting issues with disaster management and UXO approaches in Laos)*. Two substantive objectives were defined to contribute to this goal: Objective 1: *To reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters*; Objective 2: *To reduce the impact of unexploded ordnance*. LANGOCA supports five long-term activities (LTA) in five provinces of Laos (Khammouan, Saravan, Sayabouli, Sekong and Vientiane) and five related short-term activities (STA).

Methodology

The IPR team used qualitative methods: specifically, key informant interviews; focus group discussions; field observations, and; document reviews. Representatives from six broad classes of stakeholder were interviewed: AusAID, GoL, ANGO, informed third parties, implementing partners, and direct beneficiaries. Fieldwork was conducted over nine days (16 – 25 May 2011) to assimilate the perspectives of around 823 LANGOCA stakeholders (359 female or 44%). Ratings against each of eight evaluation criteria were based on AusAID's six-point ordinal quality scale.

Relevance (5/6)

LANGOCA's relevance to AusAID is demonstrated by alignment with key strategies and policies. LANGOCA remains an integral part of the Rural Development Pillar of the *Australia Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009 – 2015*. More broadly, LANGOCA is consistent with AusAID's food security and rural development strategy and is aligned with the policy commitment of AusAID to partner with Australian NGOs. Consultations with bilateral and multilateral development donors in Laos during this review affirmed the relevance of LANGOCA in the current context. Eroding the relevance of LANGOCA to the Australian Government's broad policy and strategy objectives in Laos was the limited recognition of Australian support at village and district level. From the GoL perspective, LANGOCA is aligned with national strategies as reflected in the *7th Laos National Socio-Economic and Development Plan (NSED)*. Several government interviewees noted that LANGOCA is assisting the GoL priority of elevating Laos out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2020, and halving poverty levels by 2015. Most LANGOCA projects are targeting the 47 poorest districts prioritised by the GoL. The support for disaster management is consistent with the GoL focus. UXO work supported by LANGOCA has mostly been within the GoL's 46 priority contaminated districts. The prioritisation of development crosscutting themes was considered consistent with recognised government policy. The targeting of the poorest districts by LANGOCA activities is relevant. The focus on disaster management was questioned by some given the relative low frequency of disasters compared with other countries in the region. Much of the disaster management work by NGOs under LANGOCA may be described as taking a 'rural livelihoods' approach. The focus on UXO clearance and mine risk education (MRE) is self-evident to any meaningful rural development engagement in Laos.

Effectiveness (4/6)

AusAID initiated a collaborative approach to LANGOCA's design which was considered good practice. Nevertheless, some interviewees critiqued the time/cost intensity of the design

process; and some questioned whether the rhetoric of collaborative design had translated into reality as more effective implementation and greater impact. The LANGOCA design articulated four program-level objectives—two of which were concerned with substantive development outcomes; the other two were concerned with internal program processes and structures. The IPR team noted evidence that the program is generally on track to achieve the two development objectives; although the IPR team critiqued the design logic. In general, LANGOCA activities were community-led or ‘needs driven’. This is fundamental to effective development, but paradoxically, could also erode effectiveness because in several cases the ‘bottom-up’ process of needs identification and planning spawned an array of activities—fostering a tension between breadth and depth of engagement. One factor likely to contribute to effectiveness is the long-term commitment of the NGOs within target areas. Under *Objective 1*, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision had an explicit focus on strengthening the disaster management capacity of government structures. The IPR team found evidence that this work was producing results. CARE and World Vision were both aligned under *Objective 2* with both reporting progress despite early disruptions. Both CARE and World Vision adopted an integrated approach to UXO action which is endorsed by the NRA. This approach engages communities in prioritising land for clearing, and planning community development to ensure that cleared land is used productively. A key part of integrated UXO work includes MRE. CARE’s approach was good practice in that it involved a nuanced/targeted approach to community education rather than just broadcasting generic messages about risk. Under *Objective 3*, the establishment of ‘program level’ arrangements was an explicit feature of the design and assumed that a program can be ‘more than the sum of its parts’; however, for LANGOCA, almost all interviewees agreed, that this rhetoric had not been borne out in reality. The early LANGOCA experience aligns with the wider experience with AusAID-NGO CAs showing that program-level results do not spontaneously arise, but rather require dedicated resources and clarity. Of concern to the IPR team was the seeming lack of an over-arching ‘narrative’ to meaningfully draw together the otherwise disparate project activities into a coherent body of work. A range of practical challenges were found to erode the efficacy of the ‘program-level architecture’ for LANGOCA: high workload, low technical skill, high staff turnover, remote location, and nascent trust-based peer relationships.

Efficiency (4/6)

LANGOCA is running significantly behind schedule. An extension of the MSA will be required until at least 2014 to accommodate the delayed start by World Vision, and a no-cost extension by Oxfam to achieve the agreed scope. Save the Children and CARE are still assessing their requirements for a no-cost extension. Interviewees raised a range of administrative, programmatic and contextual reasons for delays—especially the process of MoU approval. Additional delays were experienced during the course of implementation: Typhoon Ketsana in October 2009, technical partners who were unable to provide services as and when required, management and staff turnover—both within the NGOs and among local GoL counterpart staff. NGOs cited a number of external factors as contributing to delays, many of which were known/pervasive issues, which may suggest weak planning skills. The IPR team found no obvious waste or excess in LANGOCA projects. Several NGO project budgets are under-spent, in part due to exchange rate gains and interest earned while waiting for MoU approval. In implementation, NGO partners found AusAID to be flexible and supportive. The NGOs were observed to be professionally managed. In most cases NGOs were found to be working closely with GoL partners. In several cases, co-funding increased the efficiency of the program. Some NGO staff felt that their agencies provided broader expertise not directly funded by LANGOCA; and that this represented an additional efficiency. However, the IPR team formed the view that these resources could have been brought to bear more meaningfully. Several interviewees asserted that the

administrative requirements of LANGOCA were onerous. Particular questions were raised about the value of the three tiers of program governance, and the intensity of the reporting.

Impact (not rated)

A full assessment of program impact was not possible at this early stage of implementation. Nevertheless, the IPR team saw some evidence that significant and lasting changes in the lives of beneficiaries are likely to accrue. The IPR team noted cases of LANGOCA contributing to policy-level impacts. While it is unlikely that policy-level achievements are solely attributable to LANGOCA activities, interviewees considered the contribution of the LANGOCA partners in these areas to have been significant. Several stakeholders indicated disappointment that more could not be done at policy level. A stated aim of most of the LANGOCA projects was capacity building. Although not emphasised by the NGOs, the IPR team considered that an important capacity building outcome arose from the 'bottom-up' participatory processes facilitated by some NGO partners which demonstrated a model of democratic/participatory village development planning. Across the project sites, there is evidence of improvements in household food security, health, and economic well being. In those LANGOCA target districts that are contaminated by UXO, a significant amount of UXO clearance and MRE has been completed in line with the GoL's MDG 9. Some site-specific technical concerns were noted during field visits, including: poor drainage systems around the site of newly installed water systems; questionable use of latrines; significant numbers of livestock deaths, understood to be the result of inadequate quarantine and vaccination procedures; use of unsustainable hybrid seeds; lack of value-chain analysis to support commercial agricultural initiatives; insufficient targeting of MRE messages. A factor that could erode potential impact from LANGOCA arises from broad beneficiary targeting. In design and M&E convention, impact is maximised when the various components or activities of a project are integrated such that the resources invested consolidate results around a single focus. For LANGOCA, the ultimate beneficiaries have been defined broadly, which renders LANGOCA a portfolio of disparate activities rather than a coherent/focussed program.

Sustainability (4/6)

In most cases, the IPR team observed strong engagement in, and ownership of, project activities by GoL. Ownership at community and household level was less consistent than at the district and province level; and seemed predictably influenced by the extent to which project activities addressed perceived self interest. The IPR team observed that some institutional strengthening of GoL and community structures had occurred. It is anticipated that these structures will provide lasting value beyond the life of the program, but members also recognised their limited ability to absorb and fully comprehend the training. The same variable situation was noted at individual and household level. While many people could demonstrate improved knowledge arising from their participation in training, others indicated that more capacity building was required before activities could achieve sustainability. Of concern to the IPR team was that NGOs tended to equate training activities with capacity building. There was little additional 'on-the-job' mentoring or support provided. The IPR team noted an absence of exit planning by partner agencies. For some NGOs with a long-term presence in target communities this need seemed less evident. However, the IPR team contended that exit planning was important not just in terms of agency presence, but also in terms of how individual donor-funded activities transitioned to other forms of support that progressively engender independence. Locally available resources are an obvious constraint to the sustainability of most LANGOCA activities. In most cases new community structures are reliant on project funding to support their meetings and the actions that come out of their planning processes.

Gender and Inclusive Development (3/6)

The LANGOCA program design elevated the integration of ‘cross-cutting’ issues as a program objective. The IPR team recognised many constraints faced by the NGOs in implementing gender equality. Project designs generally adopted a ‘mainstreaming’ approach to gender equality and inclusion, although there were also some examples of discrete gender/ethnic approaches. Most NGOs had conducted a gender analysis as part of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) at project start-up. This work contributed baseline data and informed the design of gender-specific activities; however, there was inconsistent review/revision of the data as part of the M&E arrangements. All NGOs reported investing considerable effort in trying to recruit female field staff, particularly with ethnic language skills, but this had limited success. There was some evidence of positive impact arising from gender equality and inclusive development interventions; for example, a consequence of NGOs introducing a quota for the number of women in village governance bodies was that women’s visibility in decision-making processes increased. Also evident were positive impacts that were directly attributable to interventions—such as Oxfam’s training and equipping of midwives that was reported to have tangibly improved the pre and postnatal wellbeing of women. Nevertheless, the IPR team formed the view that more sophisticated gender equity and inclusiveness strategies were required. With the exception of CARE, there was little or no attention paid to developing strategies for disability inclusion.

Monitoring and Evaluation (4/6)

The IPR team observed appropriate internal coordination and reporting processes to enable informed decision-making. Several NGOs undertook baseline studies, but of concern was a seeming ambivalence towards extending this work as the basis for assessing change. A failure to track changes against baselines will undermine the ability to draw conclusions about program level achievements. The IPR team observed weak monitoring of changes at the project level. In particular, there was an absence of any mechanisms to assess changes in partner capacity despite this being a foundational aspect of several of the project strategies. Three tiers of governance were defined to provide oversight of the program, but there was a perception that this contributed to the program being onerous to manage. At midterm there is an opportunity to rationalise the governance and reporting arrangements without compromising the information needed for program management. NGO staff reported that the program-level MEF was both valuable and resource-intensive. Implementation of the MEF had to contend with capacity constraints. Intriguingly, NGO staff evidently found requirement for beneficiary consultations to be a ‘new process’.

Learning (3/6)

In general, the ambition embodied in the LANGOCA design for program-level learning seems not to have been fully realised. There have been some exchanges of information; however, what is missing is a mechanism of mutual accountability. It seems that the program level arrangements have relied entirely on spontaneous learning and collaboration. There appeared to be limited engagement by NGO staff in the wider body of knowledge on the various technical/sectoral areas. At the heart of organisational learning is a process of routinely identifying the impact of risks. In practice, this requires NGO staff to routinely identify deviations between what was planned and what is actually happening, and then to attribute reasons for the deviation which can later be subjected to analysis and reflection. There are several broad knowledge areas to which LANGOCA could make a significant contribution. A major contribution of LANGOCA will be learning within AusAID about the nature of NGO partnerships, and the extent to which a ‘program level architecture’ can foster outcomes beyond what a portfolio of discrete projects could otherwise achieve.

CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Partner NGOs should ensure appropriate representation of Australian Government support, including improved local language signage at project sites and consistent broader narrative concerning program origins. 7
2. AusAID should ensure that future NGO program designs articulate objectives that describe substantive beneficiary changes rather than framing objectives as sector-based funding schemes. 10
3. For the remainder of LANGOCA, AusAID and the partner NGOs should persist with the focus and arrangements outlined in the MEF and associated documents, since these should create the possibility of accruing program-level achievements... 10
4. AusAID should ensure that future NGO program designs mitigate the dissipation of impact by requiring NGO activities to focus more narrowly within a coherent theory of change. 11
5. NGO partners should negotiate with AusAID to reduce the breadth of activities to only those that have demonstrated substantive and complementary results. 11
6. AusAID should consider investing any unspent funds to support provincial government's replication of VDMCs in high risk districts. 12
7. AusAID and the partner NGOs should analyse the relative merits of an institutional strengthening approach to DRM *vis-a-vis* a livelihoods approach. 12
8. Where UXO clearance is a source of program delays, partner NGOs should work with AusAID to explore the use of unspent funds to pay for the services of private clearing agencies. 13
9. Partner NGOs should ensure that all community education messages (such as MRE) are narrowly targeted at the relevant audience. 13
10. AusAID should continue to support the PEW and AEW processes as one practical way of fostering program-level coherence. 15
11. Partner NGOs should clearly articulate a 'theory of change' with staff that links activities to the overall project and program goals. 16
12. Partner NGOs should urgently discuss any extension requirements with AusAID within the current financial planning period. Delays already experienced to date could be compounded by late negotiations with AusAID and GoL and AusAID will need to re-program unspent funds. 16
13. Partner NGOs should accommodate known externalities into detailed implementation planning. 18
14. AusAID should ensure that any future NGO program designs explicitly define the role and value to be provided by ANGO affiliates. 19
15. Partner NGOs should better utilise existing resources (both in country and in Australia) to strengthen programming, particularly in the areas of gender and inclusion, and impact and learning. 19
16. Future AusAID NGO programs should explicitly design and resource strategies to support policy dialogue rather than assume this can occur spontaneously. 21
17. During the remainder of LANGOCA, partner NGOs should consider drawing on STA funds to resource dedicated 'policy dialogue' projects. This could involve individual NGOs seeking to scale-up aspects of their work, or multiple partners working together to advocate for policy changes based on their shared experience. 21

18. Partner NGOs should systematically report changes in village participatory/inclusive planning capacity.	22
19. Partner NGOs should follow through on addressing site-specific technical/quality issues raised during the review.	23
20. Partner NGOs should consider adopting a strengths-based approach to community engagement and planning.	23
21. Partner NGOs should precisely define the criteria for who will benefit from each intervention since it is well established that broadly defined beneficiaries leads to diffuse or misplaced impact.	24
22. Partner NGOs should ensure that activity selection is accompanied by a strategy to communicate the individual and community benefits that are expected to arise from successful implementation.	25
23. Partner NGOs should develop more sophisticated frameworks for capacity building than simply providing training.	27
24. Partner NGOs should develop and communicate strategies for how each LANGOCA activity will be supported towards sustainability by program completion.	27
25. Partner NGOs should work with GoL counterparts to precisely define the ongoing resource requirements of program interventions that the government is expected to carry forward.	27
26. Partner NGOs should ensure that there is supply chain integrity for activities that will require villagers to source externally available inputs.	27
27. Partner NGOs should provide support and mentoring to field staff and GoL counterparts to develop practical strategies for gender equality and disability and ethnic inclusion. This may require use of external specialists or engagement of ANGO technical advisers.	30
28. AusAID should provide technical support to partner NGOs for the development of appropriate disability inclusion strategies that are consistent with AusAID's disability strategy, 'Development for All'.	30
29. Partner NGOs should share learning about strategies that have fostered positive impact (e.g. active participation in decision-making) for women (particularly those from small ethnic groups) and people with disabilities.	31
30. Partner NGOs should plan to utilise their baseline data to assess changes. AusAID could facilitate a joint session between the NGOs to encourage cross learning in this area and to explore possible efficiencies from coordination.	31
31. Partner NGOs should implement appropriate methods to assess changes in the capacity of project partners and structures.	32
32. AusAID should rationalise reporting requirements by: a) modifying or eliminating the 6 monthly reporting to AusAID; b) using the PIC reports to provide a 6 monthly update; and c) reducing the PCC to an annual meeting.	32
33. Partner NGOs should assess their project level M&E to ensure that it is sufficient to support the program level MEF.	33
34. Partner NGOs should put in place practical mechanisms of mutual accountability to strengthen program-level sharing, learning and adaptation.	34
35. Partner NGOs could consider engaging the ANGO affiliates in synthesising relevant thematic reports that can help the NGOs in their understanding of the context.	34

36.	AusAID should review with the partner NGOs the value of continuing with the Landscape Review as a part of the MEF.	35
37.	Partner NGOs should implement systematic risk identification processes that can inform broader reflection and learning about the drivers of success and causes of failure of the various interventions.	35
38.	Partner NGOs should compare and contrast the approaches and outcomes from the work by Save the Children and Oxfam in strengthening disaster management structures.	35
39.	At program completion AusAID and the partner NGOs should critically evaluate the value of trying to foster ‘program-level’ outcomes beyond those generated by a portfolio of discrete projects.	36

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Aid Activity Summary	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Author Details	iii
Executive Summary	iv
Consolidated Recommendations.....	viii
Table of Contents	xi
Table of Contents	xi
Table of Figures.....	xii
List of Acronyms.....	xiii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Document Purpose	1
1.2 Background	1
1.3 Overview	2
2. Methodology	2
2.1 Evaluation Objectives.....	2
2.2 Scope & Methods.....	2
2.3 Limitations.....	4
3. Findings.....	5
3.1 Evaluation Criteria Ratings.....	5
3.2 Relevance	5
3.3 Effectiveness	8
3.4 Efficiency	16
3.5 Impact	19
3.6 Sustainability.....	24
3.7 Gender Equality & Inclusive Development.....	28
3.8 Monitoring & Evaluation.....	31
3.9 Learning.....	33
4. Conclusion.....	36
Appendix A: Terms of Reference	I
Appendix B: Question Guide	X
Appendix C: Interviews	XIV
Appendix D: Aide Memoire	XVIII

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: LANGOCA target provinces	2
Figure 2: LANGOCA portfolio attributes	2
Figure 3: Signage in English with no reference to Australian Government support	6
Figure 4: Case study of SRI impact	22
Figure 5: Wheelbarrow distributed by CARE to reduce women's exertion.....	26

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACFID	Australian Council for International Development
ADP	Area Development Program
ADPC	Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre
AEW	Annual Evaluation Workshop
ANCP	AusAID NGO Cooperation Program
ANGO	Australian Non-government Organisation
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CA	Cooperation Agreement
CANGOCA	Cambodia Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
COPE	Cooperative for Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DDMC	District Disaster Management Committee
DIO	Department of International Organisations
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FSD	Swiss Foundation for Mine Action
GDG	Gender Development Group
GoL	Government of Laos
HDI	Human Development Index
HI	Handicap International
HIV and AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus, Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
IPR	Independent Progress Review
IRR	Internal Rate of Return
ISDP	Improving Socioeconomic Integration Services for People with Disabilities in Sekong Province
LANGOCA	Lao Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement
LDC	Least Developed Country
LDPA	Lao Disabled Peoples Association
LTA	Long-term Activity
LWU	Laos Women's Union
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MAG	Mines Advisory Group
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MEF	Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRE	Mine Risk Education
MSA	Memorandum Subsidiary Arrangements
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NGO	Non-government Organisation
NRA	National Regulatory Authority
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan

PCC	Program Coordinating Committee
PDD	Program Design Document
PDMC	Provincial Disaster Management Committee
PEW	Project Evaluation Workshop
PIC	Program Implementation Committee
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PSC	Provincial Steering Committee
SCA	Save the Children Australia
SINCA	Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreement
SRI	System Rice Intensification
STA	Short-term Activity
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
VANGOCA	Vietnam Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement
VDMC	Village Disaster Management Committee
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WV	World Vision

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Document Purpose

This is an independent progress review (IPR) of the Laos Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (LANGOCA)—an initiative of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic comprising partnerships with four Australian Non-Government Organisations (ANGOs): CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision.

1.2 Background

During 2003 AusAID initiated an approach to partnering with accredited ANGOs called ‘Cooperation Agreements’ (CA). CAs are a mechanism to manage the relationship between the NGO community and AusAID’s bilateral/thematic programs. CAs enable partner NGOs to contribute to AusAID’s country/sector strategies at both program and policy levels. Through CAs, AusAID seeks to engage the unique strengths of NGOs—particularly in relation to their long-term experience in particular countries, their capacity and their linkages with partner organisations and communities¹.

LANGOCA was explicitly designed to integrate the strengths of ANGOs into AusAID’s development strategy in Laos at the time (*Laos-Australia Development Cooperation Strategy 2004 – 2010*). The LANGOCA design sought to apply lessons learned from two earlier CAs in the region: the Vietnam Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (VANGOCA), and the Cambodia Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (CANGOCA). In particular, the LANGOCA design prescribed ‘program-level architecture’ to bring together the various partner NGO activities within a coherent strategy under the bilateral program. The LANGOCA Program Design Document (PDD) stated (p 7):

“Earlier AusAID NGO CAs have typically been managed as a series of discrete activities, combined under one umbrella primarily for administrative efficiency. The LANGOCA Program builds on the lessons learned from previous CAs by adopting an approach which aims to enhance the quality and impact of the individual activities so that the benefits of the overall Program exceed the benefits of the individual activities”.

In early 2006 AusAID invited capability statements from the NGO community, and subsequently reached agreements with the four NGO partners. In May 2006 AusAID, the NGO partners and the Government of Laos (GoL) undertook an ‘Analytical Mission’ to develop a framework for reducing vulnerability to unexploded ordnance (UXO) and disasters by integrating development crosscutting themes such as gender, ethnicity, HIV and AIDS and the environment. Between July and December 2006 the findings of the Analytical Mission were used to develop a detailed program design and to engage in participatory consultations about the design with the ANGOs. The partner NGOs then designed activities based on the program design, which were appraised by independent consultants and AusAID.

Following the approval of activity designs by AusAID, LANGOCA’s start-up was delayed for nearly two years by GoL approval processes. AusAID had initially assumed that LANGOCA activities would be approved by the GoL under the Memorandum of Subsidiary Arrangements (MSA) between the Australian Government and the GoL. However, it transpired that GoL would enter into Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with each NGO activity separately. The first

¹ <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/ngos/agreements.cfm> .

implementation work commenced on 10 April 2008 by CARE. The last to commence was World Vision in towards the end of 2009.

This IPR was conducted at the mid-point of the implementation phase for some activities, but in the early stages for others.

1.3 Overview

LANGOCA is a five-year program (2007-2012²) with a total budget of AUD 14 million. The LANGOCA goal is:

To reduce the vulnerability of the poor (by integrating poverty reduction and crosscutting issues with disaster management and UXO approaches in Laos).

Two substantive objectives were defined to contribute to this goal:

- **Objective 1:** To reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters.
- **Objective 2:** To reduce the impact of unexploded ordnance.

Two additional objectives were concerned with internal processes of learning/collaboration and management.

LANGOCA supports five long-term activities (LTA) in five provinces of Laos (Khammouane, Saravan, Sayabouli, Sekong and Vientiane) and five related short-term activities (STA).

The LANGOCA portfolio is summarised in the following matrix.



Figure 1: LANGOCA target provinces

	CARE	Oxfam	SCA	WVA
Province	Sekong	Sekong Saravan Vientiane	Sayabouli	Khammouane
District	Lamam (wet), Dak Chueng (dry)	Ta Oy Kalum Met	Xieng Hone Sayabouli	Ngommalath Mahaxay
LANGOCA Objective	UXO (2)	DRM (1)	DRM (1)	DRM (1) UXO (2)
LTA	Reducing UXO	Community	Sayabouli	1. Poverty and

² The MSA between the Australian Government and the GoL extends 2007 – 2012; however due to delays associated with NGO MoU approval some NGOs will require no-cost extensions up to 2014. GoL has given AusAID in-principle support to extend the MSA up to the end of 2014.

	CARE	Oxfam	SCA	WVA
	Risk and Improving Livelihoods of Ethnic Communities in Sekong Province	Based Disaster Risk Management in Upland Communities	Integrated Hazard Mitigation Project	Disaster Risk Reduction 2. Integrated UXO Action Project
STA	SPDP ISPD	N/A	Tools for disaster risk assessment Establishment of Disaster Information System Disaster Risk Education for Children	N/A
Budget	AUD3 m	AUD1.9 m	AUD 1.9 m	AUD1.9 m (DRR) AUD1.9 m (UXO)

Figure 2: LANGOCA portfolio attributes

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Evaluation Objectives

This review conformed to the standard AusAID practice of commissioning independent evaluations at the midterm of initiatives. The stated objectives of the IPR were to³:

- Assess the overall performance of LANGOCA through two levels of analysis: (a) at the level of the Program's overall objectives; and (b) at the level of the specific objectives of the funded activities;
- Recommend actions necessary to improve the performance of LANGOCA up to its completion date;
- Provide insights and lessons learned from the LANGOCA experience for consideration of future programming with NGOs, including options to strengthen the role of NGOs in the Australian development assistance program in Laos.

The evaluation team achieved the objectives by reviewing key documents and obtaining the perspectives of relevant stakeholders about the program's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), gender and inclusive development, and analysis and learning⁴.

The IPR was conducted by a team engaged by AusAID. Two field teams comprised an independent M&E Specialist, an NGO representative appointed by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), two independent gender specialists, three AusAID staff (two from Vientiane Post, one from Canberra) and two GoL representatives.

2.2 Scope & Methods

³ See Appendix A for full Terms of Reference (ToR).

⁴ These dimensions of performance were drawn from AusAID's evaluation criteria, which are based on the standard Development Assistance Committee (DAC) evaluation criteria.

In line with the requirement for a rapid evaluation, the IPR team used qualitative methods: specifically, key informant interviews; focus group discussions; field observations, and; document reviews. Documents were provided by AusAID and the NGOs as requested. Interviews were arranged by AusAID and the NGOs at locations convenient for the interviewees. A question guide (Appendix B) assisted semi-structured dialogue with interviewees and assisted consistency of data collecting between the two field teams.

Six broad classes of stakeholder were interviewed concerning the performance of LANGOCA:

- **AusAID:** program management staff and technical advisers in Canberra and Vientiane.
- **GoL:** GoL partners at national, provincial and district level.
- **ANGO:** Australia-based program management staff.
- **Informed third parties:** donor representatives and civil society representatives in Vientiane.
- **Implementing partners:** Laos-based management and technical staff from partner NGOs.
- **Direct beneficiaries:** individuals and groups involved with, and benefiting from, various aspects of program implementation.

Fieldwork was conducted over nine days (16 – 25 May 2011) to assimilate the perspectives of around 823 LANGOCA stakeholders (359 female or 44%). A list of consultations is provided in Appendix C.

Preliminary findings were presented on the final day of the mission (27 May, 2011) to relevant GoL, AusAID and NGO stakeholders for validation and feedback (see Appendix D for Aide Memoire). This report assimilates feedback on the preliminary findings with the final analysis of the primary data collected by the field teams.

2.3 Limitations

The IPR team encountered the pervasive evaluation challenges of deciphering complex and ambiguous causal linkages, balancing multiple perspectives and appreciating their own biases and limitations as outsiders.

Beyond these recognised and pervasive evaluation challenges, the depth and breadth of this review was affected by the time available. In order to review a range of program activities within the available timeframe it was necessary for two teams to work in the field concurrently. This created methodological challenges in standardising the data collection methods and interpreting the findings. The ratings required by AusAID against established evaluation criteria relied on the imperfect professional judgements of the team.

Other specific limitations included: i) it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with Australia-based representatives from Oxfam and World Vision⁵, and; ii) two stages of language interpretation were required at times (ethnic languages to Lao, then Lao to English).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the interviews and document analyses proceeded as planned and provided valuable insights. The efficacy of the evaluation method was strengthened by cross-referencing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and by internal debate within the IPR team.

⁵ Telephone interviews were carried out with nominated individuals.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Evaluation Criteria Ratings

Overall LANGOCA was found to be performing satisfactorily. The program design was of continuing relevance to rural Laos and the policy contexts of GoL and the Australian Government. The IPR team noted examples of good practice in implementation, and evidence that desirable impact should accrue over the life of the program. Of concern was that implementation was behind schedule, and several factors may erode effectiveness. Variable quality was noted in relation to work on gender equality and inclusive development. The ‘program-level architecture’ was not fully delivering on the design expectations of learning and collaboration among NGO partners.

Ratings against each of the eight evaluation criteria were based on AusAID’s six-point ordinal quality scale. Two of the eight criteria were rated less than adequate quality; five were rated satisfactory overall (one was good quality and three were adequate quality). One criteria (‘impact’) was not rated.

Evaluation Criteria	Rating (1 – 6) ⁶
Relevance	5
Effectiveness	4
Efficiency	4
Impact	N/A
Sustainability	4
Gender Equality & inclusive development	3
Monitoring & Evaluation	4
Analysis & Learning	3

3.2 Relevance

‘Relevance’ is concerned with how the objectives aligned with the priorities of the GoL and AusAID, and the extent to which the objectives addressed a recognised need. LANGOCA’s relevance was assessed as ‘good quality’ (5/6).

<p>Relative strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Aligned with AusAID development cooperation strategies in Laos <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consistent with AusAID food security and rural development strategy <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Affirms AusAID policy commitment to partner with ANGOS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Aligned with GoL’s 7th NSEDP <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recognised as assisting to meet MDGs (2015) and elevate Laos above LDC status (2020) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supports action in vulnerable districts prioritised by GoL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Emphasis on gender equality and ethnic communities consistent with GoL policy statements and international conventions <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Broad focus on rural livelihoods and UXO hazard reduction in poor communities consistent with poverty mapping/analysis <p>Relative weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Limited visibility of Australian Government at local level <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anomalous focus on disaster management in relatively low disaster-risk country
--

⁶ 1=very poor quality; 2=poor quality; 3=less than adequate quality; 4=adequate quality; 5=good quality; 6=very high quality.

Relevance to AusAID

LANGOCA's relevance to AusAID is demonstrated by alignment with key strategies and policies. The design was developed under AusAID's *Laos Australia Development Cooperation Strategy (2004 – 2010)* and was explicitly aligned under Objective 3.1 ('To reduce the impact of natural disasters'), and Objective 3.2 ('To reduce the impact of UXOs'). LANGOCA remains an integral part of the Rural Development Pillar of the *Australia Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009 – 2015*. At AUD14 million, LANGOCA has been one of AusAID's largest bilateral development assistance initiatives in Laos, but is reducing in relative terms following significant investments in education and rural infrastructure.

More broadly, LANGOCA is consistent with AusAID's food security and rural development strategy (March 2011)⁷. LANGOCA is aligned with the policy commitment of AusAID to partner with Australian NGOs, as reflected in the March 2009 Partnership Agreement with ACFID. This in turn is consistent with wider Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action articles that emphasise stronger engagement with civil society organisations to enhance aid effectiveness. According to one AusAID manager, *"LANGOCA was designed at a time when the nature of AusAID's engagement with NGOs was changing towards a stronger 'partnership approach'"*.

Consultations with bilateral and multilateral development donors in Laos during this review affirmed the relevance of LANGOCA in the current context. One donor representative stated: *"partnering with international NGOs [INGOs] is especially important in the Laos context given the quasi-absence of local NGOs. The importance of INGOs in Laos is underestimated"*.

Eroding the relevance of LANGOCA to the Australian Government's broad policy and strategy objectives in Laos was the limited recognition of Australian support at village and district level. While there was good awareness of Australia's support among national and provincial stakeholders, local stakeholders seemed only aware of the support of the implementing ANGO—sometimes referring to the NGO as 'the donor'. To some extent the abstraction of a bilateral donor is inevitable in low-literacy contexts; however, the IPR team noted weak signage and little effort by project staff to educate local stakeholders concerning the origins of program funding.



Figure 3: Signage in English with no reference to Australian Government support

Recommendation

⁷ In particular Pillar 3: *"Building community resilience"*.

1. Partner NGOs should ensure appropriate representation of Australian Government support, including improved local language signage at project sites and consistent broader narrative concerning program origins.

Relevance to GoL

From the GoL perspective, LANGOCA is aligned with national strategies as reflected in the 7th *Laos National Socio-Economic and Development Plan (NSED)*. During this IPR, interviews with GoL representatives in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), National Regulatory Authority (NRA) and National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) all affirmed the contribution of LANGOCA to GoL development priorities. Several government interviewees noted that LANGOCA is assisting the GoL priority of elevating Laos out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2020, and halving poverty levels by 2015. A senior representative within NRA stated: *“you cannot find better than LANGOCA for poverty reduction in Laos”*. This is reflected in the targeting of LANGOCA projects, most of which work in the 47 poorest districts prioritised by the GoL.

The support for disaster management is consistent with the GoL focus. An interviewee from NDMO stated: *“Previously the focus of the Government was on providing relief. Since 1999 the focus has turned towards preparedness and mitigation”*. One NGO representative asserted that AusAID had taken a risk in investing in disaster risk management, which had been rewarded by an increase in the profile of disaster-related issues in Laos.

UXO work supported by LANGOCA has mostly been within the GoL’s 46 priority contaminated districts and has been aligned with the government’s *Safe Path Forward II Strategy*. The Deputy Director of NRA advised the IPR team that in the first five months of 2011 there were 11 deaths from UXOs, 50% of which were children. *“We estimate that there are 80 million UXO in Laos and around 10 million have been eliminated to date. But there are still accidents every month...We have elevated UXO action to ‘MDG 9’ because it is a key step towards poverty reduction”*.

The prioritisation of development crosscutting themes by the LANGOCA design was also considered relevant. Gender and ethnic group equality in Laos is a recognised government policy articulated in the NSED, and more broadly in the GoL’s commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The GoL has ratified the ‘Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ (CEDAW), and Articles 22 and 24 of the Constitution guarantee *“equal rights in political, economic, cultural, social and family affairs”*. The Laos Women’s Union’s (LWU) mandate is to represent women of all ethnic groups and *“to protect women’s rights and interests”*.

Relevance to beneficiaries

The broad focus of LANGOCA on reducing the vulnerability of the rural poor remains relevant. According to the 2005 UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), Laos ranks 133 out of 177 countries—significantly lower than neighbouring countries. Life expectancy at birth is 56 years with 10% of the population experiencing acute malnutrition and 47% experiencing chronic malnutrition⁸—around 43% of the population are unable to satisfy minimum food requirements. Illiteracy is common

⁸ World Bank (2009) *Lao PDR Recent Economic Developments*; End Year Update, Issue 4, WB Lao PDR, Vientiane

and access to health services is limited in most rural locations⁹. The GoL has been relatively successful in raising incomes and reducing poverty levels since the early 1990s; however, the gains are unevenly distributed across regions and population groups. From this broad perspective the targeting of the poorest districts by LANGOCA activities is relevant and is supported by several studies. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)¹⁰ poverty mapping shows that poverty is higher in villages with rough terrain, higher seasonality, and that are located farther from towns and major rivers (p 83): *“agro-ecological factors and access to markets explain many of the differences in poverty of rural villages”*.

Beyond the general goal of reducing the vulnerability of the rural poor in Laos, LANGOCA focussed specifically on reducing disaster risk and UXO hazard. These domains remain broadly relevant in the rural Laos context, although in some cases more nuanced analysis led to questions about relevance. For example, the relevance of the disaster management objective was questioned by several stakeholders (both NGO and AusAID) given that Laos is less vulnerable to disasters than other countries in the region. Consequently, much of the disaster management work by NGOs under LANGOCA adopted a broad conception of disasters—arguing for recognition of ‘slow onset disasters’ which may otherwise be described as taking a ‘rural livelihoods’ or ‘household resilience’ approach. One ANGO manager stated: *“the disaster focus was imposed from a policy platform perspective by AusAID. Enhancing rural livelihoods would have been a more relevant approach”*. This more pragmatic alignment has been recognised under the more recent AusAID strategy (*Australia-Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009 – 2015*) in which LANGOCA is contributing to Objective 4 within the Rural Development Pillar: *“equitable and sustainable improvements to food security and livelihoods in targeted poor geographic areas”*. It was also tacitly recognised in the M&E Framework (p 20): *“An underlying rationale of LANGOCA and its component projects is to support effective community and livelihood development in predominantly rural communities”*.

The focus on UXO clearance and mine risk education (MRE) is self-evident to any meaningful rural development engagement in Laos. US aerial bombing records were declassified in 1976 revealing Laos to be the most heavily bombed country in history¹¹; and many of the LANGOCA target districts are among the most heavily bombed in Laos. According to the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) established by GoL in 2004 to coordinate UXO work¹²:

“All 17 provinces of the country and approximately 25% of villages suffer from various degrees of UXO contamination. Their legacy is one of continuous death and injury, disenabled communities, and disrupted socio-economic development. Tragically, UXO accidents still injure and maim approximately 300 people every year.”

3.3 Effectiveness

‘Effectiveness’ is concerned with the extent to which objectives were achieved, and the wider merit of these objectives. Effectiveness is understood to be a function of design integrity, the quality of implementation, and the presence of enabling

⁹ SNV (2010) *Survey on Civil Society Developments in the Lao PDR: Current practices and potential for future growth*, Working Paper Series No. 2, Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, Vientiane

¹⁰ IFPRI (2008) *The Geography of Poverty and Inequality in the Lao PDR*, Washington DC, USA

¹¹ According to the NGO ‘Legacies of War’ 260 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos during the Vietnam War (210 million more bombs than were dropped on Iraq in 1991, 1998 and 2006 combined); close to 78 million did not detonate. During the bombing, the equivalent of a planeload of bombs was dropped every eight minutes, 24 hours a day for nine years.

¹² <http://www.nra.gov.la/>

contextual factors. The effectiveness of LANGOCA was assessed as ‘adequate quality’ (4/6) when narrowly examined against the two substantive development objectives concerned with reducing the risks associated with disasters and UXO. Critique of the broader design is offered as learning for future designs.

Relative strengths:

- ☒ Collaborative approach to design considered good practice in NGO-donor relations
- ☒ Evident progress towards achieving disaster management and UXO program objectives
- ☒ Participatory ‘bottom-up’ approach to activity selection
- ☒ Long-term commitment by NGOs to target communities
- ☒ Integrated approach to UXO work considered good practice

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ Disjunct between design and implementation in terms of partner collaboration
- ☒ Anomalous/tenuous design logic
- ☒ Array of disparate activities likely to erode effectiveness and reduce impact
- ☒ Program progress affected by technical partner delays
- ☒ MRE strategies generally broad rather than nuanced (with the exception of CARE)
- ☒ The program-level architecture was not borne out in interagency collaboration and learning

The Design

AusAID initiated a collaborative approach to LANGOCA’s design which was considered good practice for donor-NGO partnerships at the time. In development theory, a collaborative or participatory approach to program design is widely believed to be foundational for development effectiveness. Most stakeholders appreciated this aspect of the design phase. One ANGO representative stated: *“There was a lot of trust. We felt that our inputs were taken on board”*. The approach of the AusAID manager leading the process was particularly appreciated. Nevertheless some interviewees also critiqued the time/cost intensity of the process; and some questioned whether the rhetoric of collaborative design had indeed translated into reality as more effective implementation and greater development impact. One ANGO interviewee reflected: *“What’s new after spending all of this time? It’s questionable whether this has carried through into implementation”*.

As outlined in Section 1.3, the LANGOCA design articulated four program-level objectives—two of which were concerned with substantive development outcomes; the other two being concerned with internal program processes and structure¹³. As discussed in Section 3.2 (Relevance), the focus of the program on disaster management (Objective 1) and UXO hazard reduction (Objective 2) was considered broadly relevant. The IPR team noted evidence that the program is generally on track to achieve these objectives. Some likely impacts arising from this focus are discussed in Section 3.5 (Impact).

From a design/M&E theory standpoint, the two substantive program objectives were anomalous in the sense that they prescribed sector-based funding schemes rather than temporal stages in a coherent ‘theory of change’. This was most clearly

¹³ The LANGOCA design was prepared towards the end of a period when it was common for AusAID design teams to elevate ‘program management’ and other internal processes to the level of objectives. More recently, this practice has been abandoned, with design teams instead aligning with wider design/M&E thinking that recognises that internal processes are not ‘objectives’ in the sense that they do not define a change in beneficiary circumstances to which the program will contribute.

reflected in the fact that the activities implemented by Oxfam and CARE were similar despite their alignment under different objectives—disaster management (Objective 1) and UXO clearance (Objective 2), respectively¹⁴. So from a functional perspective, what purpose did the different objectives serve?¹⁵ Further, the causality between the objectives and the goal was weak/ambiguous. In design/M&E convention, achievement of objectives is the *means* to achieving the goal (the *end*); however, in this design there is a causal relationship between the two objectives since UXO clearance (Objective 2) is a precursor to (or enabler of) other rural livelihood activities (Objective 1), which in turn may broadly reduce household vulnerability (Goal). The internal logic is even further eroded because the human actors implied in the goal are the same as those in the objectives—which is tantamount to saying that ‘the vulnerability of the rural poor to disasters and UXO hazards will be reduced *in order to* reduce the vulnerability of the rural poor’. Rather than just being purist M&E rhetoric, these issues create practical challenges in attempting performance management; as was reported in the M&E Framework¹⁶ (p 18):

“The goal...and objectives of each component activity are different and logically unrelated between the activities. They are only connected through their intention to contribute to the overall goal but the nature of that contribution is only, and separately, defined within each of the component activities.”

Arguably, more helpful design logic would have partner NGOs reporting changes in rural household vulnerability/wellbeing at the goal level, and reporting progressive changes in the capacity of partner organisations and community structures to sustain these improvements at the objective/outcome level (see Section 3.8, M&E, for a fuller discussion of this issue and a recommendation to track changes in partner capacity).

Recommendation

2. AusAID should ensure that future NGO program designs articulate objectives that describe substantive beneficiary changes rather than framing objectives as sector-based funding schemes.
3. For the remainder of LANGOCA, AusAID and the partner NGOs should persist with the focus and arrangements outlined in the MEF and associated documents, since these should create the possibility of accruing program-level achievements.

In general, LANGOCA activities were community-led or ‘needs driven’. This thinking is considered fundamental to effective development, but paradoxically, for LANGOCA this could also erode effectiveness because in several cases the ‘bottom-up’ process of needs identification and planning spawned an array of activities. This situation can complicate program management, exceed beneficiary absorptive capacity and result in a fragmented program with diffuse impact. Indeed this has been a common critique of NGO CAs in other contexts. For example, the CANGOCA completion review found that (p 13):

¹⁴ The main difference was that Oxfam did not engage directly in UXO clearance, although both agencies supported mine risk education (MRE).

¹⁵ CARE’s rationale for an array of community development and rural livelihood activities was ‘integrated UXO action’; whereas Oxfam’s rationale for essentially the same activities was ‘integrated disaster risk reduction’.

¹⁶ Farrow, D. (2010) *LANGOCA M&E Framework*, Version 4.1, 12 October, Vientiane.

“The desire for projects to seek change in too many areas compromises the absorptive capacity of communities and partners and must be avoided, as it leads to unrealistic expectations, dissipated activities and significantly compromised impacts. A truly integrated or systems approach requires careful analysis and identification of the drivers of change, as well as the flexibility to direct resources to these key areas”.

Ultimately this issue arises from a tension between drivers for breadth *versus* depth which should be addressed at the design stage. With the exception of Save the Children, the LANGOCA partners have arguably pursued breadth at the expense of depth—a case in point being Oxfam staff who are challenged by a design that targets 70 villages with dozens of loosely connected activities.

Recommendation

4. AusAID should ensure that future NGO program designs mitigate the dissipation of impact by requiring NGO activities to focus more narrowly within a coherent theory of change.
5. NGO partners should negotiate with AusAID to reduce the breadth of activities to only those that have demonstrated substantive and complementary results.

One factor likely to contribute to effectiveness is the long-term commitment of the NGOs within target areas; for example, World Vision’s Area Development Program (ADP) takes a long-term (10 – 15 years) approach to community engagement. Oxfam and Save the Children have a history of engagement in their target areas; and CARE has developed an integrated provincial program that currently involves seven projects in Sekong Province in addition to LANGOCA—many of which foster synergies with LANGOCA.

Implementation Performance: Objective 1, to reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters

Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision¹⁷ had an explicit focus on strengthening the disaster management capacity of government structures. This involved supporting established disaster management committees at provincial and district level with training, resources and coordination, and also the establishment of new Village Disaster Management Committees (VDMCs). The IPR team found evidence that this work was producing results against Objective 1. For example, the Chairman of the Saravan Provincial Disaster Management Committee (PDMC)¹⁸ reported that the 30 villages in Ta Oy District where Oxfam had supported the establishment of VDMCs were better prepared and more responsive to Typhoon Ketsana than the 26 villages that did not have VDMCs: *“Villages with no VDMC were in disarray. They did not heed warnings from authorities. Villages with VDMCs were better prepared and suffered less fatalities”*. He stated that the provincial government was committed to replicating the VDMC structure and associated processes in the most high risk districts in Saravan Province, but was constrained by available funds.

¹⁷ World Vision had activities under both disaster management and UXO clearance objectives. The IPR team did not visit any World Vision DRM work.

¹⁸ Deputy Director of Labour and Social Welfare Department.

Recommendation

6. AusAID should consider investing any unspent funds to support provincial government's replication of VDMCs in high risk districts.

Beyond the institutional strengthening of disaster management structures, Oxfam was supporting a wide range of community development activities broadly aimed at improving household/community resilience to disasters. As discussed above, such an approach can be criticised for achieving 'breadth' but not 'depth'. This issue represents a genuine dilemma for agencies. As stated by one ANGO representative:

"If you just have stand alone DRR [Disaster Risk Reduction] projects that don't connect to people's livelihoods, you just end up with a lot of structures and processes—but people never say, 'our greatest need is a committee'! Taking a livelihood lens helps to embed DRR into the thinking and practice of local communities. But the danger is that you end up doing a lot of things that are not strictly disaster management".

Understanding this dilemma in greater detail could be an important contribution by LANGOCA, and so should be a subject for further reflection and debate among the NGOs.

Recommendation

7. AusAID and the partner NGOs should analyse the relative merits of an institutional strengthening approach to DRM *vis-a-vis* a livelihoods approach.

Implementation Performance: Objective 2, to reduce the impact of unexploded ordnance

CARE and World Vision were both aligned under the UXO objective (2). In both cases, the IPR team noted evidence that the objective was being achieved despite early disruptions.

World Vision experienced significant delays in MoU approval but attributed the accelerated progress to a strong partnership with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG). A World Vision manager reported:

"Our UXO clearance was delayed by about 12 months, but we are catching up and will end ahead of schedule. This has been possible because we have competent staff and a good partnership with MAG with a well-defined approach"

The quality of the World Vision partnership was affirmed by MAG who advised the IPR team that through their engagement with World Vision they had been able to attract considerably more resources for UXO clearance in Laos and thereby expanded their operation.

In the case of CARE, the area of contaminated land (20 ha) planned for clearance was cleared despite contractor management difficulties and cost blowouts with the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) in the early months. CARE's rural livelihoods activities necessitated ongoing clearing of contaminated land, but latterly this has been carried out by engaging UXO Laos. While this collaboration has been

significantly more cost efficient than working with private clearance agencies (such as FSD), it has nonetheless imposed time inefficiencies on the program owing to UXO Laos' backlog of work. One consequence of this was evidenced in Dak Doung Village, Sekong Province, where farmers informed the IPR team of their intention to proceed with planting out coffee seedlings from their nurseries into contaminated land. They had evidently assessed the physical risk to be less (or more manageable) than the economic risk of losing seedlings¹⁹. The primary issue was that UXO Laos was unable to prioritise clearing of the proposed coffee plantations before the onset of rains which effectively delayed the fledgling coffee enterprise by up to a year, and could result in significant losses of viable coffee seedlings. This situation is consistent with a finding in the UXO sector evaluation—that cost efficiency aside, UXO Laos was the least effective partner for development projects because of an inability to guarantee when clearance would occur.

Recommendation

8. Where UXO clearance is a source of program delays, partner NGOs should work with AusAID to explore the use of unspent funds to pay for the services of private clearing agencies.

Both CARE and World Vision adopted an integrated approach to UXO action which is endorsed by the NRA, and considered good practice more broadly. This approach engages communities in prioritising land for clearing, and planning community development post-clearing to ensure that cleared land is used productively. The UXO sector evaluation (p 35) noted clearance work associated with development projects had the best internal rate of return (IRR).

A key part of integrated UXO work includes MRE. This work was carried out by CARE and World Vision under Objective 2, but also by Oxfam under Objective 1—with the rationale that UXO hazards represent a form of local disaster risk. CARE's approach was good practice in that it involved a nuanced/targeted approach to community education rather than just broadcasting generic messages about risk. CARE adopted a three step process: i) identify at-risk groups within the community (e.g. young boys, farmers, scrap metal collectors); ii) isolate particular at-risk behaviours; iii) develop targeted messages and materials to influence identified high-risk behaviours.

Recommendation

9. Partner NGOs should ensure that all community education messages (such as MRE) are narrowly targeted at the relevant audience.

Implementation Performance: Objective 3, to build and promote program capacity

¹⁹ This issue highlights a challenge facing UXO work within LANGOCA, and more broadly. The choice of farmers to proceed with planting demonstrates the perceived level of risk even in areas that are rated high-risk/priority. Dak Doung is located on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and is recognised to be among the most heavily bombed parts of Laos (and the world). Nevertheless, villagers indicated that it had been more than 20 years [unverified] since the last UXO-related death. Debate on this issue contrasts current death/injury rates with escalating road injury statistics, and highlights the cost intensiveness of UXO operations.

As discussed above, the IPR team was of the view that Objective 3 should not have been an objective but rather an internal process. Nevertheless, the establishment of ‘program level’ arrangements was an explicit feature of the design which was in part driven by critique of earlier CAs. The LANGOCA program design document (PDD) stated (p 13):

“Component 3 is to build and promote Program capacity. This component includes a number of outputs which aim to enhance the quality, effectiveness, sustainability and impact of the individual activities included in Components 1 and 2, so that the benefits of the Program exceed the benefits of the individual activities.”

The notion that a program can be ‘more than the sum of its parts’ holds intuitive appeal; however, for LANGOCA, almost all interviewees agreed, that this rhetoric had not been borne out in reality. One informed third party interviewed by the IPR team observed that LANGOCA was more an NGO funding scheme than a coherent program: *“The reality doesn’t meet the rhetoric of the program level architecture. It is [made up of] just discrete activities ...it is a bag of money, rather than a well-oiled machine”*. The program’s M&E adviser reflected that *“LANGOCA is more like a ‘facility’ than a ‘program’ since it largely comprises unrelated activities”*.

This pragmatism echoes findings from other NGO CA evaluations. On this topic, the final evaluation of the Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreement (SINCA) reported:

“...stakeholders interviewed during this evaluation indicated that the expectation that a ‘program’ can foster outcomes beyond those achieved by the individual projects may be unfounded. This is particularly the case where these ‘program level’ outcomes are not well articulated, and where no dedicated resources (financial and/or human) have been made available to pursue these outcomes. The concept of ‘program level outcomes’ possibly arises from an engineering mindset that envisages an interlinking of projects to produce something with a fundamentally different character—in the way that individual stones can together be used to construct a wall”.

In a similar vein, the CANGOCA final evaluation reported:

“Program clustering provides significant opportunities for synergies, the sharing of specialists, cross visits and co-learning. These must be purposefully planned, resourced and agreed upfront. If left to informal devices, it is clear that such initiatives are seldom taken, and that an invaluable opportunity thereby goes to waste”.

At the heart of this issue is that program design teams must balance a sensitive tension. On one hand, an NGO program should be narrowly designed to align with and systematically contribute to bilateral development objectives. But on the other hand, if designed too narrowly/prescriptively, can be seen to erode the autonomy of NGOs, and compromise the spirit of partnership. The consequence has been that most CAs have ended up sitting uncomfortably between an NGO-led initiative such as the AusAID NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) which is entirely a funding scheme, and a contractor-implemented initiative entirely driven by AusAID.

Beyond this conceptual/structural issue, a range of practical challenges were found to erode the efficacy of the ‘program-level architecture’ for LANGOCA:

- **High workload:** NGO staff are overtaken with the pragmatic demands of implementation. Interviewees frequently reported that their workload to meet project targets meant that broader reflections and debate about program-level results became a lower priority.
- **Technical skill:** NGO staff tend to be practitioners within a particular technical domain, and do not necessarily possess the skills for program-level synthesis. The M&E advisers to the program reported that the process of drawing together project-level evidence to inform debate about program-level achievements was new to most NGO staff.
- **Staff turnover:** in several cases, high levels of staff turnover (especially between the design and implementation phases) meant a loss of vision and purpose. The loss of key NGO and government personnel that had been involved with crafting the ‘program level vision’ meant that new staff did not necessarily appreciate the importance of this aspect of the design, or how it could be realised.
- **Remote location:** NGO staff funded by the program are located in rural areas with limited opportunity for engaging with counterparts in other agencies. The pragmatic challenges of transport and logistics are in conflict with the reality that program-level sharing and learning are unlikely to happen spontaneously.
- **Trust-based relationships:** at the most basic level, engagement across the program requires staff to have personal relationships with counterparts in other agencies, and a level of comfort/trust to reveal challenges and shortcomings. Several interviewees indicated that it was difficult to share lessons and short-coming until a level of personal trust was developed with counterparts.

The early LANGOCA experience aligns with the wider experience with AusAID-NGO CAs showing that program-level results do not spontaneously arise. Such results require dedicated resources and clarity. In this regard LANGOCA may have achieved a little more than some other CAs due to AusAID’s investment in program-wide M&E arrangements (see Section 3.8, M&E). Specifically, the Annual Evaluation Workshops (AEW) have come to typify the ‘the program level architecture’ and have at least formally brought the LANGOCA partners to the discussion table. The LANGOCA M&E adviser reflected that: *“In the past they’ve operated in NGO silos...at least now they are interested in each others’ work, although not enough”*.

Recommendation

10. AusAID should continue to support the PEW and AEW processes as one practical way of fostering program-level coherence.

Of concern to the IPR team was the seeming lack of an over-arching ‘narrative’ to meaningfully draw together the otherwise disparate project activities into a coherent body of work. As expressed by one interviewee: *“things are happening but they are not coherent...field staff don’t understand the logic or assumptions behind the project.”* The IPR team noted that this issue was also reflected project reports which generally listed the activities planned and outputs produced but did not provide a strong link to the overall project or program outcomes—there was not a

clear sense of purpose or the causal links between the activities and the desired end of program changes.

Recommendation

11. Partner NGOs should clearly articulate a 'theory of change' with staff that links activities to the overall project and program goals.

Overall, the gap between the design rhetoric and the implementation reality concerning program-level collaboration and learning inclined the IPR team to rate the effectiveness criterion as 'less than adequate' (3/6). The rating of 'adequate quality' (4/6) was awarded at mid-term in recognition of the work 'on the ground' by discrete project teams; however, more should be done by the partner NGOs (with support from their ANGO offices) during the remainder of LANGOCA to demonstrate the value of NGO collaboration and the collective benefits of cross-program learning (see Section 3.9, Learning).

Implementation Performance: Objective 4, to manage the program effectively

Issues of program management are discussed in Section 3.4 (Efficiency).

3.4 Efficiency

'Efficiency' is concerned with implementation performance against time and budget parameters, value-for-money, and the quality and professionalism of deliverables. LANGOCA was assessed as 'adequate quality' (4/6).

Relative strengths:

- ☒ AusAID program management adequately and appropriately resourced
- ☒ AusAID adequately resourced NGOs, including provision of monitoring and evaluation support
- ☒ Meaningful engagement of GoL partners to support implementation in most projects
- ☒ Projects professionally managed by respected organisations

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ Program behind schedule for multiple reasons
- ☒ Discontinuity between design and implementation phases
- ☒ Most NGOs experienced management changes and staffing/recruitment difficulties
- ☒ Governance and reporting arrangements perceived by NGOs as excessive

Time efficiency

LANGOCA is running significantly behind schedule. An extension of the MSA will be required until at least 2014 to accommodate the delayed start by World Vision, and a no-cost extension by Oxfam to achieve the agreed scope. Save the Children and CARE are still assessing their requirements for a no-cost extension.

Recommendation

12. Partner NGOs should urgently discuss any extension requirements with AusAID within the current financial planning period. Delays already experienced to date could be compounded by late negotiations with AusAID and GoL and AusAID will need to re-program unspent funds.

Interviewees raised a range of administrative, programmatic and contextual reasons for delays. Most frequently cited were delays associated with the process of MoU approval²⁰. Interviewees from AusAID, NGOs and GoL cited multiple factors, including the fact that a key assumption of AusAID's was not borne out regarding the extent to which individual LANGOCA projects would be approved under the broader MSA signed between AusAID and the GoL²¹. The IPR team was unable to ascertain why GoL was unable to approve all LANGOCA projects as a collective²²; irrespective, GoL representatives asserted several reasons for delays with the individual approval processes—mostly concerned with verifying the appropriateness of proposed activities at all levels of government. Evidently, concerns were raised about some NGO activities, but the IPR team was not informed about the nature of these concerns. Despite obvious frustrations associated with a delayed start, one NGO representative expressed the opinion that the MoU approval process had served to engage GoL stakeholders in the project, which assisted with the transition to implementation.

Additional delays were experienced during the course of project implementation. The work of most of the NGOs was significantly disrupted by Typhoon Ketsana in October 2009, and on a smaller scale the work of Save the Children was impacted by localised flash flooding in Sayabouly in 2010. Disaster response efforts shifted the focus of the NGOs away from LANGOCA. It was observed by one NGO that, *“after Ketsana, the project essentially had to be restarted”*. Paradoxically, some interviewees noted that emergency response activities served to reinforce disaster preparedness and management components of LANGOCA, providing ‘real-life’ situations in which to test structures and systems. Further, it was argued by some that having a number of NGOs with a disaster management focus already working together under LANGOCA strengthened the national response to Typhoon Ketsana. A representative from Save the Children observed:

“The multi-agency approach generated a degree of momentum that Save probably wouldn’t have had on its own. For example, during the Ketsana response, MoFA cut short the MoU process in order to enable agencies to respond quickly. This has benefited the individual agencies, but also the country as a whole.”

Implementation delays were also experienced by some NGOs whose technical partners were unable to provide services as and when required. In 2010, Save the Children waited for six months for the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) to provide contracted deliverables that formed a core part of the project. As noted in Section 3.3, UXO clearance in CARE's project area was delayed as a result of the limited availability of UXO Laos.

Other delays experienced by the LANGOCA NGOs arose from management and staff turnover. In one case, project management changed four times during the first half of the project. Turnover of local GoL staff was also cited as an issue by both NGO a GoL district staff since this necessitated the establishment of new working relationships between the counterparts, and caused a loss of institutional memory

²⁰ Several interviewees attributed the delays in part to the untimely death of a senior GoL official that had championed LANGOCA during the design phase.

²¹ AusAID assumed that all NGO projects would receive expedited approval under the umbrella of the MSA. In practice, however, the GoL treated each project as a discrete agreement requiring individual approval.

²² There may be value in the Australian Embassy seeking official clarification about this matter to assist future design approval processes.

and momentum. This was considered to have impacted on project progress, particularly where capacity building of GoL partners was a stated objective.

Finally, NGOs cited a number of external factors as contributing to delays. These included communication difficulties with ethnic communities, the remoteness of some target villages, and reduced accessibility during the wet season. Raising these known/pervasive issues suggests that NGOs have not factored these difficulties into their planning. CARE's advance identification of 'wet-season' and 'dry-season' villages was a notable exception and provided a pragmatic response to seasonality.

Recommendation

13. Partner NGOs should accommodate known externalities into detailed implementation planning.

Resource efficiency

From a resource perspective, the IPR team found no obvious waste or excess in LANGOCA projects. Several NGO project budgets are under-spent, in part due to exchange rate gains and interest earned while waiting for MoU approval. These surplus funds will be reinvested in program activities. The IPR team appreciated that an approach that focuses on participatory processes aimed at supporting sustainability is potentially at odds with achieving fixed expenditure and outputs targets in line with a 'blue print' approach to project management.

AusAID was appreciated for resourcing the design phase, although this was considered by NGO interviewees to have been particularly resource intensive. One interviewee stated that this phase was *"both loved and hated"*. Although difficulties were experienced with the design, generally NGO partners appreciated the collaborative nature of the program-level process. One ANGO manager stated: *"The process can be criticised for being resource intensive, but I think the benefits outweigh the costs. LANGOCA can be positively contrasted with CANGOCA"*. Of concern to several interviewees was an apparent disconnect between the design and implementation phases, which ultimately eroded both the efficiency and effectiveness of the program.

In implementation, NGO partners found AusAID to be flexible and supportive. One NGO representative observed *"AusAID staff were much more engaged with LANGOCA than donors would normally be...and without that it would have been very challenging"*. NGOs broadly agreed that AusAID had adequately resourced the management of LANGOCA with 1.3 staff dedicated to the program. This compares favourably to other CAs in the region²³. Several NGO representatives appreciated AusAID providing consultants at various points to support and strengthen the program—in particular, the M&E Framework (MEF).

Several interviewees asserted that the administrative requirements of LANGOCA were onerous. One ANGO manager stated: *"The overhead from being involved with LANGOCA has been quite intensive"*. Particular questions were raised about the value of the three tiers of program governance²⁴, and the intensity of the reporting

²³ N.B. The IPR team was advised that this level of AusAID staff investment would not be able to be provided in the future within the context of an expanding aid program and increased demands on staff.

²⁴ i.e. the Program Coordination Committee or PCC, the Program Implementation Committee or PIC, and the Provincial Steering Committees or PSC.

requirements (see Section 3.8, M&E). Both AusAID and the NGOs had hoped that contracting a firm to provide secretariat services to LANGOCA would add value, but this service was universally seen as having been of limited value—only providing logistical support for events such as committee meetings, and taking minutes.

Finally, in several cases, co-funding increased the efficiency of the program. For World Vision, LANGOCA was implemented within their wider ADP; and CARE had secured funding from other donors to support LANGOCA activities—most notably European Commission funding to strengthen coffee value chains promoted under LANGOCA.

Quality at implementation

The NGOs were observed to be professionally managed (although a detailed management evaluation was beyond the scope of this review). Most had appropriately qualified staff, although difficulties with recruiting qualified women in remote areas were noted—especially recruitment of staff who speak ethnic languages (see Section 3.7, Gender Equality & Inclusive Development).

In most cases NGOs were found to be working closely with GoL partners, who in turn were supportive and strongly engaged in implementation. Positive relationships of this sort tended to be associated with higher levels of efficiency at the project level—in addition to the sustainability benefits of involving institutional actors.

Some NGO staff felt that their agencies provided broader expertise not directly funded by LANGOCA; and that this represented an additional efficiency for the program. However, the IPR team formed the view that these resources could have been brought to bear more meaningfully, particularly in the areas of gender and inclusive development and M&E. More specifically, the added value of the ANGO affiliates was uncertain beyond project design and contracting. One ANGO interviewee reflected:

“ANGOs were left out of the partnership processes which emphasised the critical relationship between AusAID Post and the in-country partners. AusAID was trying to put more onus on local partners and devolve to Post, but a degree of rigor was lost. I don’t think there were properly thought out mechanisms for Australian engagement. We could have been a third party to influence reflection and ask critical questions...This was certainly about resources... The resources for management were not foreseen at the start.”

Recommendation

14. AusAID should ensure that any future NGO program designs explicitly define the role and value to be provided by ANGO affiliates.
15. Partner NGOs should better utilise existing resources (both in country and in Australia) to strengthen programming, particularly in the areas of gender and inclusion, and impact and learning.

3.5 Impact

Impact is concerned with significant and lasting changes (both intended and unintended) fostered by the program. This dimension of LANGOCA performance was not rated since impact will be realised in coming years.

Relative strengths:

- ☑ Some evidence of policy-level impact; including GoL commitment to extend program achievements
- ☑ Some evidence of strengthened capacity
- ☑ Some significant and lasting change likely to accrue in the lives of beneficiaries
- ☑ Useful modelling of democratic/participatory village development planning
- ☑ Diffusion of innovations at some project sites (SRI, coffee, fish ponds etc.)

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ Policy dialogue not resourced; assumed to happen spontaneously
- ☒ Some site-specific technical concerns
- ☒ 'Problem-based' approach to community engagement (c.f. 'strengths-based' thinking)
- ☒ Weak/amorphous beneficiary targeting criteria

A full assessment of program impact was not possible at this early stage of implementation. Nevertheless, the IPR team saw some evidence that significant and lasting changes in the lives of beneficiaries are likely to accrue. There was also evidence of a diffusion of innovations at some project sites—which is one definition of impact. In some cases, GoL partners expressed commitment to extending program achievements beyond the life of the individual projects.

Policy engagement

The IPR team noted cases of LANGOCA contributing to policy-level impacts. For example, staff of NDMO reported that the GoL is in the process of including a component on DRR in the 7th NSEDP. Also, both GoL and NGO stakeholders reported that DRR has been integrated into the national school curriculum, and that the work of Save the Children in Sayabouly is demonstrating how this can be operationalised. Further, NDMO expressed a commitment to rolling out DesInventar²⁵ at the national level and the Saravan Provincial Government is committed to extending Oxfam's work in establishing and supporting VDMCs in disaster-prone districts.

Within the UXO sector, the integrated approach to clearance and livelihoods being promulgated by LANGOCA agencies is supported by the NRA. The UXO sector evaluation identified LANGOCA as good practice in this regard.

While it is unlikely that policy-level achievements are solely attributable to LANGOCA activities, multiple interviewees considered the contribution of the LANGOCA partners in these areas to have been significant. One NGO representative stated: *"[The LANGOCA program approach] has been worthwhile in pushing DRR and DRM issues much higher up the Government's agenda".*

Nevertheless, several AusAID stakeholders indicated disappointment that more could not be done at policy level. One manager stated: *"The policy dialogue 'space' in LANGOCA hasn't been so strong...I feel disappointed that the policy dialogue hasn't worked".* An interviewee involved during the design phase reflected that *"the premise that the CA was an analytical framework within which NGOs could produce products and policy outcomes was not well founded".* NGO representatives in Laos largely concurred with this assessment. One manager stated: *"LANGOCA has the potential to engage with policy changes...but most of us are not resourced at the national level. Our resources are positioned at the provincial level. It's very time*

²⁵ An information system developed with support from SCA to assist with gathering historical disaster data.

consuming to engage at national level, and it needs to be resourced and managed as a project in its own right”.

Recommendation

16. Future AusAID NGO programs should explicitly design and resource strategies to support policy dialogue rather than assume this can occur spontaneously.
17. During the remainder of LANGOCA, partner NGOs should consider drawing on STA funds to resource dedicated ‘policy dialogue’ projects. This could involve individual NGOs seeking to scale-up aspects of their work, or multiple partners working together to advocate for policy changes based on their shared experience.

Capacity building

A stated aim of most of the LANGOCA projects was capacity building. This included improving the functioning of GoL structures such as District and Provincial Disaster Management Committees (DDMC and PDMC)²⁶; and strengthening village level technical, planning and governance skills through establishing and supporting structures such as Village Development Committees (VDC), VDMC, Village Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Committees etc. There was also investment in individuals’ capacity to provide community services; for example, HIV and AIDS Volunteers and Volunteer Village Midwives.

The level of active participation in these structures provides early evidence of impact, but more profoundly, there is evidence of benefits arising from their functioning. For example, GoL stakeholders consistently reported that villages where disaster management training had been conducted were better prepared for disasters. The Deputy Director of the NDMO observed that VDMCs supported by Oxfam in southern Laos were more responsive in the aftermath of Typhoon Ketsana compared to villages where no such capacity building had taken place: *“These villages were better prepared. People and animals were evacuated and there was less loss of life”.*

Although not emphasised by the NGOs, the IPR team considered that an important capacity building outcome arose from the ‘bottom-up’ participatory processes facilitated by NGO partners (most notably CARE and Oxfam) which demonstrated a model of democratic/participatory village development planning. Village focus groups confirmed that this was the first time such consultation and participation had been achieved, with several especially noting the value of structured processes that ensured the equal participation and influence of women in activity prioritisation. The NGO designs and reports understated this work, and yet if sustained it has the potential to profoundly transform power and influence in local development planning, and as such could represent an important contribution of the program.

Recommendation

²⁶ Save the Children and Oxfam.

18. Partner NGOs should systematically report changes in village participatory/inclusive planning capacity.

Household impacts

Across the project sites, there is evidence of improvements in household food security, health, and economic well being. Examples of work that has directly contributed to these impacts includes the installation of latrines, provision of clean water supplies, support for animal vaccinations, and promotion of cash crops (e.g. coffee and mulberry) and improved agricultural techniques (e.g. System Rice Intensification (SRI)).



A farmer in Dak Dong Village (Ta Oy District, Saravan) described how over three seasons he experimented with SRI. At first he was sceptical of the technique since it required him to plant one rice seed per hole, rather than the 4 – 5 seeds that farmers have planted for generations. Now he universally uses SRI techniques and has witnessed a doubling of rice yields. This has enabled him and his ten children to have sufficient rice for the entire year, as well as

selling surplus rice at periods when the price is highest. In the past month the family has moved into a new, more permanent house. Neighbours are increasingly visiting to learn from his success. *“I feel that I have become a role model”*.



Figure 4: Case study of SRI impact

Villagers in Sayabouly attributed reductions in disease, in backache (caused by carrying heavy water containers long distances), and in the working time of women to new water supply systems. Some women also noted that they felt more comfortable having a latrine at home than using the fields. In World Vision supported villages in Khammuane, community members spoke of reductions in animal disease and their hopes that this year they would have enough rice to eat. One man said, *“Our village is better than other villages in the area because we have this project.”*

In those LANGOCA target districts that are contaminated by UXO, a significant amount of UXO clearance and MRE has been completed in line with the GoL’s MDG 9. The integrated approach adopted by LANGOCA partners has seemingly had a positive effect not just on community awareness, but also on productivity. The IPR team observed beneficiaries using cleared land for productive purposes; for

example, planting with coffee seedlings on cleared hillsides; and constructing fish ponds in cleared gullies.

Some site-specific technical concerns were noted during field visits, including: poor drainage systems around the site of newly installed water systems; questionable use of latrines; significant numbers of livestock deaths, understood to be the result of inadequate quarantine and vaccination procedures; use of unsustainable hybrid seeds²⁷; lack of value-chain analysis to support commercial agricultural initiatives; insufficient targeting of MRE messages. These concerns were raised in agency-specific feedback, and it was noted that, for the most part, the NGOs concerned had independently recognised these issues and were in the process of trying to address them.

Recommendation

19. Partner NGOs should follow through on addressing site-specific technical/quality issues raised during the review.

A deeper issue identified by the IPR team that could erode program impact relates to the philosophical approach to community engagement and planning. As noted, in most cases the starting point for village development planning and activity prioritisation was a participatory analysis of key problems or constraints. While this is a logical starting point, numerous studies and evaluations have shown the merit of adopting a ‘strengths-based’ approach to community engagement and planning²⁸. Such an approach begins by analysing the endogenous resources, capacities and strengths within the community. This has the effect of positioning the community as the starting point in their own development, rather than disempowering them with the magnitude of the problems they face and engendering dependency on the NGO. Further, it recasts the NGO partner in a ‘facilitator’ role rather than a ‘saviour’ role, which in turn leads to less ‘wish listing’ by beneficiary communities.

Recommendation

20. Partner NGOs should consider adopting a strengths-based approach to community engagement and planning.

A further factor that could erode potential impact from LANGOCA arises from the broad basis for beneficiary targeting. In design and M&E convention, impact is maximised when the various components or activities of a project are integrated such that the resources invested consolidate results around a single focus. This integration of resources and effort to foster an explicit change is sometimes referred to as a unifying ‘theory of change’. The practical embodiment of a coherent theory of change is that all activities converge to foster changes in a single class of human actor—the ‘ultimate beneficiaries’. By contrast, a fragmented theory of change disperses resources and influence across an array of ultimate beneficiaries. For

²⁷ The distribution of hybrid seed varieties rather than open-pollinated varieties may pose difficulties for farmers in remote areas who attempt to retain seed for planting. Hybrid seeds tend to produce higher yields in the first year but perform poorly thereafter. Their use assumes that farmers are able to procure new seed for planting each year, rather than traditional methods of retaining a portion of the harvest as seed for planting. (<http://www.primalseeds.org/hybrid.htm>)

²⁸ AusAID has established the merits of this approach through the long-running *Australian Community Development and Civil Society Strengthening Scheme (ACCESS) Phase II* in Indonesia (www.access-indo.or.id).

LANGOCA, the ultimate beneficiaries have variously been defined as committee members, farmers, pregnant women, at-risk groups, etc. As discussed in Section 3.3, this diffuse targeting renders LANGOCA a portfolio of discrete activities rather than a coherent program. This problem was recognised in the MEF (p 18):

“The intended beneficiaries of the component activities are widely separated – especially geographically, ethnically and by ecological/environmental zone type – and the settings for each activity vary similarly on almost every variable e.g. extent and type of vulnerability; inherent ability to respond to stresses; cultural factors; access to resources; etc.”

Arguably, the impact of LANGOCA would be heightened with a clearer focus on *who* are the ultimate beneficiaries²⁹ of the changes fostered, and precisely *how* these changes could reasonably be achieved. A case in point is that despite the focus of LANGOCA on benefiting the most poor and vulnerable, some agricultural activities benefited a more economically viable class of villagers. Particular examples included SRI promoted by Oxfam which is only relevant to paddy farmers who are by definition wealthier than upland rice farmers; and coffee farming promoted by CARE which presupposes that households own viable land for plantations and can sustain themselves by other means for several years until coffee trees bear fruit. This point is not raised to criticise the merit of these activities, but rather to highlight how difficult it can be in practice to identify and systematically target activities to benefit the ‘poorest of the poor’ without a clear rationale and criteria for engagement³⁰ (see further discussion in Section 3.9). Put simply, weak targeting criteria tends to foster diffuse impact—a situation akin to the truism: ‘if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there’.

Recommendation

21. Partner NGOs should precisely define the criteria for who will benefit from each intervention since it is well established that broadly defined beneficiaries leads to diffuse or misplaced impact.

3.6 Sustainability

‘Sustainability’ concerns the likelihood that benefits will endure. This is considered a function of local ownership, capacity and committed resources. This dimension of LANGOCA performance was rated ‘adequate quality’ (4/6).

Relative strengths:

- ☒ Evidence of engagement and ownership of program activities by GoL staff, especially at district and provincial level
- ☒ Capacity building of disaster management structures should provide enduring benefits
- ☒ Some commitment by GoL to extending program achievements

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ Variable ownership of program activities at household level
- ☒ ‘Capacity building’ tended to be limited to training

²⁹ Beneficiaries should be defined as precisely as possible in terms of geographic (where) and demographic (who—defining attributes) boundaries.

³⁰ Somewhat paradoxically, the IPR team observed cases where NGOs had not responded to a genuine need because it was beyond their project focus. For example, one IPR team member met a child with a cleft palate. In cases such as this where need is beyond the scope of work it is nonetheless possible for NGOs to play a referral role to other service providers.

☒ No evidence of exit or transition planning by partner NGOs

The sustainability of program interventions cannot be determined categorically at this stage of implementation; however, the IPR team assessed the preconditions for sustainability from the standpoint of ownership, capacity and resources.

Ownership

In most cases, the IPR team observed strong engagement in, and ownership of, project activities by GoL. GoL representatives at the national level (including representatives from NDMO and NRA) were heavily involved in program design; and at provincial and district levels, GoL counterparts tended to be closely involved in site and activity selection. Beyond the design phase, engagement and ownership by GoL staff was evidenced by their detailed knowledge of activity implementation. The Acting Director of the Department of Labour and Social Welfare for Saravan Province stated:

“Provincial staff work with the DDMC to implement project activities and to monitor activities in the 30 target villages. There is coordination between the relevant departments at district and province level. Staff from Health, Public Works, Agriculture, Culture and Information all monitor progress and ensure compliance with technical standards.”

The importance of local ownership of development projects was reflected by the DDMC chairman in Ta Oy District: *“The most important thing is ownership. We’re not dependent. We can’t depend on Australian assistance”.*

Ownership at community and household level was less consistent than at the district and province level; and seemed predictably influenced by the extent to which project activities addressed perceived self interest. One district official stated: *“Sustainability will depend on whether people see benefit. For example, SRI will continue because people can see greater rice yields”.* In a similar vein, the Vice Governor of Sekong reflected: *“WASH activities will have a lasting effect because people’s lives are changed...traditional activities like pig and fish raising can only be sustained if they are scaled up to become a commercial activity”.*

Recommendation

22. Partner NGOs should ensure that activity selection is accompanied by a strategy to communicate the individual and community benefits that are expected to arise from successful implementation.

Capacity

The IPR team observed that some institutional strengthening of GoL and community structures had occurred, as in the example of the PDMCs, DDMCs and VDMCs described in Section 3.5 (Impact). It is anticipated that these structures will provide lasting value beyond the life of the program. Committees are meeting regularly and are linked into GoL reporting systems. For instance, the VDMC members in Adon Village reported that they meet two or three times every month, and provide a report to relevant district authorities. VDMC members in Dak Dong Village reflected that they had benefited from training and used the new knowledge, but also recognised their limited ability to absorb and fully comprehend the training: *“We have low education and people forget the training. The women especially are timid”.*

Nevertheless, some important progress towards sustainability was being achieved at community level, such as the regular collection of tariffs to maintain water supplies.

The same variable situation was noted in relation to capacity at individual and household level. While many people could demonstrate improved knowledge arising from their participation in training, others indicated that more capacity building was required before activities could achieve sustainability. For instance, concerning wheelbarrows provided by CARE to assist with water carting, the Assistant Chief in Dak Cheung Village stated: *“we don’t know how to make the push carts, so if they break, we’ll have to buy new ones”*. A focus group member in Sabong village cautioned: *“if the project leaves us now it will cause problems”*.



Figure 5: Wheelbarrow distributed by CARE to reduce women's exertion

Of concern to the IPR team was that NGOs tended to equate training activities with capacity building, with little additional ‘on-the-job’ mentoring or support provided, and limited efforts to appropriately monitor or evaluate actual change in capacity. With some exceptions, training tended to emphasise theoretical aspects, with engagements tending to be brief/limited, rather than protracted and developmental, and there seemed limited consideration about the ongoing support needs of beneficiaries beyond the life of training (and funding). This finding suggests that the NGOs should explore more sophisticated and integrated approaches to ‘capacity building’ that move in step with changing beneficiary perspectives and needs. One such approach considers that capacity is strengthened by facilitating beneficiaries through at least eight steps³¹:

- Appreciate strengths and weaknesses;
- Agree on objectives and capacity development needs and strategy;
- Acquire new knowledge and skills;
- Consolidate knowledge;
- Ensure adequate resources so that knowledge can be applied;
- Develop and establish procedures and systems;
- Evaluate performance; and
- Institutionalise capacity expectations.

³¹ Adapted from LGSP (2006) *Trekking the good Local Governance Terrain: the LGSP Experience in Capacity Development*, Manila, Philippines, October 2006

Recommendation

23. Partner NGOs should develop more sophisticated frameworks for capacity building than simply providing training.

The IPR team noted an absence of exit planning by partner agencies—including, for example, ‘village graduation’ criteria to guide transition arrangements as projects approach completion. For some NGOs with a long-term presence in target communities this need seemed less evident. However, the IPR team contended that exit planning was important not just in terms of agency presence, but also in terms of how individual donor-funded activities transitioned to other forms of support that progressively engender independence³². This issue was emphasised as GoL’s major concern about LANGOCA. A senior MoFA representative stated: *“The NGOs need to think more about after completion”*.

Recommendation

24. Partner NGOs should develop and communicate strategies for how each LANGOCA activity will be supported towards sustainability by program completion.
25. Partner NGOs should work with GoL counterparts to precisely define the ongoing resource requirements of program interventions that the government is expected to carry forward.

Resources

Locally available resources are an obvious constraint to the sustainability of most LANGOCA activities. This ranges from issues of supply chain such as the availability and cost of procuring hybrid rice seed to support SRI approaches at household level, to the commitment of GoL budgets to support structures and processes³³. This latter issue was most clearly reflected in comments by the PDMC Chairman in Saravan Province, who reflected: *“I can’t predict what will happen...it depends on district income and the economy.”*

Recommendation

26. Partner NGOs should ensure that there is supply chain integrity for activities that will require villagers to source externally available inputs.

That said, in most cases these structures are currently reliant on project funding to support their meetings and the actions that come out of their planning processes. Although one DDMC member in Sayabouly enthusiastically reported that *“if the project is not extended, we will ask for funds from the Government”*, the likelihood of funds forthcoming from GoL to sustain or scale up achievements is uncertain at this

³² A positive case was CARE’s securing of European Commission funding to extend and reinforce some elements of their LANGOCA project.

³³ For example, GoL budget allocations provide for some emergency response capacity, but do not adequately resource disaster preparedness.

stage. The close alignment of most LANGOCA project activities with local and national development strategies may be an asset in this regard.

3.7 Gender Equality & Inclusive Development

‘Gender equality’ concerns the extent to which the program fostered greater equality between the genders. ‘Inclusive development’ concerns the extent to which the program addressed the needs of persons with a disability, persons from smaller ethnic communities, or persons at risk (including from HIV and AIDS). LANGOCA was assessed as ‘less than adequate quality’ (3/6).

Relative strengths:

- ☒ Program design explicitly focussed on gender equality and encouraged use of participatory approaches
- ☒ Some effective approaches for mainstreaming gender equality
- ☒ Use of positive role models for gender equality, and gender work with children
- ☒ Proactive employment of female staff and increased membership of women in village governance
- ☒ Positive engagement of the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) representatives
- ☒ Women beneficiaries reported positive impact from certain activities

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ AusAID’s prioritisation of disability inclusion post-dated the LANGOCA design
- ☒ Low female representation among NGO field staff and counterpart GoL staff; and low representation of ethnic language speakers
- ☒ Low awareness among NGO staff and GoL counterparts about how to meaningfully increase women’s participation and decision-making in village governance fora
- ☒ Interventions and activities to support gender equality and inclusive development were generally very broad rather than nuanced practical strategies
- ☒ Inadequate evaluation of strategies to improve gender awareness, small ethnic group inclusion, and HIV and MRE awareness

The LANGOCA program design elevated the integration of ‘cross-cutting’ issues as a program objective. This encouraged the NGOs to proactively address gender equality, inclusion of small ethnic communities and environmental sustainability in most key documents. Although support for UXO survivors was included as part of the UXO project designs, disability inclusion more generally was not adequately addressed. This is likely because disability inclusion was identified as a key cross-cutting issue by AusAID in November 2008 after the LANGOCA designs were completed and most projects had commenced.

The IPR team recognised the constraints faced by the NGOs in implementing gender equality such as: the difficulty of recruiting adequate numbers of female project staff or staff from smaller ethnic groups in remote rural areas; the fact that most GoL counterpart staff are men and the women are usually members of the LWU, not staff of line ministries; that there are significant language barriers for members of smaller ethnic groups who are often illiterate which precludes their membership on decision-making bodies; and finally, that cultural attitudes and behaviours take a long time to change—longer than the life of a program. Nevertheless, addressing these issues is universally considered good development practice, and there is (to some extent) an enabling policy environment in Laos.

The partner NGO project designs generally adopted a ‘mainstreaming’ approach to gender equality and inclusion, although there were also some examples of discrete

gender/ethnic approaches. For example, CARE's short-term activity (Improving Socioeconomic Integration Services for People with Disabilities (ISDP)), implemented in partnership with the Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA) and Cooperative for Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE), was significant in facilitating the development of disability inclusion strategies in that project.

All NGOs indicated that they were developing Laos-specific gender strategies, however only CARE and World Vision were able to make draft versions available to the IPR team. Most NGOs had conducted a gender analysis as part of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) at project start-up. This work contributed baseline data and informed the design of gender-specific activities; however, there was inconsistent review/revision of the data as part of the M&E arrangements, and so there were limited insights into the extent and merit of changes in gender-related issues.

In relation to internal consistency with gender and inclusion principles, all NGOs reported investing considerable effort in trying to recruit female field staff, particularly with ethnic language skills, but this had limited success. Further, a M&E consultant to the program observed that agencies that managed to recruit ethnic female staff generally accepted a lower starting capacity—a fact that presents a genuine trade-off/challenge for NGOs. CARE adopted an internal practice of monthly staff discussions on gender and disability inclusion, which reportedly increased staff capacity to develop practical strategies to deal with these issues. This practice appeared to be more effective than standalone awareness trainings or workshops.

While it is early days there was some evidence of positive impact arising from gender equality and inclusive development interventions. For example, a consequence of NGOs introducing a quota for the number of women in village governance bodies (such as VDCs, VDMCs, WASH committees, Safety Volunteers, etc.) was that women's visibility in decision-making processes increased. Of particular note was CARE and Oxfam's work in facilitating processes that systematically engaged groups of women in participatory village development planning discussions. Similarly, Save the Children's work to strengthen disaster preparedness through supporting children's groups comprising both girls and boys as active participants was attributed by stakeholders to an apparent increase in confidence and self-assurance among girls. One teacher stated:

"The girls are more confident to ask questions and get information from teachers...those parents who did not give permission for their children to attend [the children's groups] changed their minds when they saw the children had more confidence in school".

Also evident were positive impacts that were directly attributable to interventions. Notable was Oxfam's training and equipping of midwives which was reported to have tangibly improved the pre and postnatal wellbeing of women. A midwife in Ban Adon, Ta Oy District stated: *"before many women died when giving birth, but now it is safer. We have tools and clean water from the project to help with deliveries"*. Oxfam staff reported that women were now receiving at least two ante-natal visits and the births of all women were attended by a trained midwife, whereas traditionally they birthed in the forest without assistance. The Oxfam Country Director reported: *"two of the youngest girls selected for training as midwives have blossomed in terms of their confidence and have told me that they now feel they now hold a respected position in their village"*.

World Vision's use of MAG's UXO female clearance team was an opportunity that could be further exploited as a positive role model for changes in women's roles and tasks. Women in one of the villages that had recently been cleared by MAG's female clearance team told the IPR team that they would like their daughters to have such a job because *"they were respected...they had skills and a uniform and they brought additional income to their families"*.

Nevertheless, the IPR team formed the view that more sophisticated gender equity and inclusiveness strategies were required. For example, in discussions with field staff the IPR team noted that gender awareness was often limited to a focus on increasing numbers of women in village committees³⁴ and providing gender awareness training to GoL counterpart staff and committee members, often in association with LWU members. Some local training by the Gender Development Group (GDG) was experienced as somewhat limited in usefulness because it was more about increasing knowledge of women's rights in Lao society and less about providing practical ideas increasing women's participation in village governance. Whilst the IPR team frequently heard affirmations of gender equality principles, staff and community members seemed less able to articulate practical strategies for influencing power and gender relations. Several of the strategies seemed to address symptoms of gender inequality rather than causes; for example, provision of water supplies or wheelbarrows to reduce women's workload.

With the exception of CARE, there was little or no attention paid to developing strategies for disability inclusion. Save the Children sought technical advice from Handicap International (HI) about children with disabilities but had not developed strategies to actively include them³⁵. The IPR team noted that field staff either were unaware of people with disabilities in the target villages or were at a loss to know what could be done to ensure they were actively included in activities. The IPR team asked about the presence and role of people with disabilities in village life in places visited. In general, responses suggested personal knowledge of the case-histories of affected individuals. With the exception of people with severe mental disabilities, villagers asserted that people with disabilities were involved in village affairs. The relatively small number of cases reported corresponded with the small village populations in remote areas. This made the identification of any clear issues/trends difficult.

Recommendation

27. Partner NGOs should provide support and mentoring to field staff and GoL counterparts to develop practical strategies for gender equality and disability and ethnic inclusion. This may require use of external specialists or engagement of ANGO technical advisers.
28. AusAID should provide technical support to partner NGOs for the development of appropriate disability inclusion strategies that are consistent with AusAID's disability strategy, 'Development for All'.

³⁴ IPR team interviews with women indicated that sometimes there were fewer women in committees than reported by village chiefs and that increasing women's representation did not necessarily increase their participation or involvement in decision-making.

³⁵ Oxfam indicated an intention to also engage with HI.

29. Partner NGOs should share learning about strategies that have fostered positive impact (e.g. active participation in decision-making) for women (particularly those from small ethnic groups) and people with disabilities.

Partner NGOs should foster improved M&E of gender equality and inclusive development activities beyond ‘head-counting’ and disaggregation of data. For example, whilst women beneficiaries reported to the IPR team that there had been a significant reduction in time collecting water and/or firewood as the result of provision of water supply, irrigation and wheelbarrows (and this was seen as positive), overall their workloads had not decreased as time was spent on other tasks such as food production. A qualitative approach such as that developed for the Annual Effectiveness Workshops could better capture both intended and unintended impact.

3.8 Monitoring & Evaluation

‘Monitoring and evaluation’ concerns the extent to which arrangements were put in place to ensure accountability, enhance decision-making and promote learning. The M&E arrangements for LANGOCA were assessed as ‘adequate quality’ (4/6).

Relative strengths:

- ☒ Internal coordination and reporting systems were in place
- ☒ NGO staff reported benefits from the program MEF beyond internal M&E processes
- ☒ AusAID resourced capacity building which had strengthened M&E capacity

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ MEF implementation had encountered staff capacity constraints
- ☒ MEF was perceived as onerous alongside the reporting and governance requirements
- ☒ There was a limited systematic use of baseline data
- ☒ There was limited monitoring of changes at the project level

Project-level M&E

In general, the IPR team observed appropriate internal coordination and reporting processes to enable informed decision-making. All NGOs reported regularly to a central office and engaged their ANGO affiliates in project monitoring and report revision. For example, CARE implemented a structured system of monthly progress reporting and staff coordination at the provincial office level. Information from this process was assimilated into exception reports to the country office, and was foundational for reporting to AusAID and GoL by CARE Australia.

Several NGOs undertook baseline studies, but of concern was a seeming ambivalence towards extending this work as the basis for assessing change. The IPR team observed the use of baseline data for tracking change in the case of one NGO (World Vision) but this was not the norm across all agencies.

Recommendation

30. Partner NGOs should plan to utilise their baseline data to assess changes. AusAID could facilitate a joint session between the NGOs to encourage cross learning in this area and to explore possible efficiencies from coordination.

The IPR team observed weak monitoring of changes at the project level. In particular, there was an absence of any mechanisms to assess changes in partner capacity despite this being a foundational aspect of several of the project strategies. This is likely a function of the design logic shortcomings (as discussed in Section 3.3, Effectiveness) which fail to reflect the strengthening of partners/structures as a means to achieving sustainable changes in household resilience/wellbeing. Nevertheless, as a fundamental aspect of much of the work of NGO partners in LANGOCA it should be captured, both for accountability and learning purposes.

Recommendation

31. Partner NGOs should implement appropriate methods to assess changes in the capacity of project partners and structures.

An important component to the program-wide structure was the three tiers of governance: the Program Consultative Committee (PCC), Program Implementation Committee (PIC) and the Provincial Steering Committees (PSC). These are discussed further in Section 3.9 concerning joint learning; however, they were also relevant to the perception of an onerous program structure. Each of these bodies met on a six monthly basis and NGOs prepared reports for each meeting. In addition NGOs prepared six monthly and annual reports to AusAID. NGOs and AusAID felt that the PIC was an important forum for sharing information on a six monthly basis and that the PCC had been important for the initial MoU consultations. At this point in the program, there is an opportunity to rationalise the reporting without compromising the information needed for program management.

Recommendation

32. AusAID should rationalise reporting requirements by: a) modifying or eliminating the 6 monthly reporting to AusAID; b) using the PIC reports to provide a 6 monthly update; and c) reducing the PCC to an annual meeting.

Program-level M&E

NGO staff reported that the program-level MEF was both valuable and resource-intensive. Most staff appreciated the MEF in terms of the new skills gained around beneficiary consultation, the Project Evaluation Workshop (PEW) and the Annual Evaluation Workshop (AEW). This was echoed by a consultant who supported the training provided: *“There has been genuine interest in the MEF and benefits from it...people learnt about how well they were doing or not doing”*.

However many project staff appeared to agree with the view expressed in the MEF Implementation Review conducted in February 2010 (p 13), that “[while] *the overall approach of the MEF...is generally supported...some NGO concerns remain about resourcing the work required and ensuring value for effort.*” As noted by one NGO representative: *“We understand the rationale behind it but it is quite an investment of both AusAID and staff time”*.

Implementation of the MEF had to contend with capacity constraints. Intriguingly, NGO staff evidently found beneficiary consultations to be a ‘new process’. As noted by the MEF Implementation review (p4): *“Beneficiary consultation requires different*

skills than those for PRA activities, although some tools might be able to be adapted". One interviewee also observed: "Specific areas of capacity limits were around analysis, and more generally why you should bother [with beneficiary perspectives]." AusAID responded by engaging two consultants to train and mentor to the teams. These consultants also produced training materials and an implementation guide (translated into Lao), which has been widely appreciated. As expressed by one NGO representative: "The MEF has been very valuable in terms of skills and improving the quality of M&E. It has been good value in terms of combined training across the agencies".

As expressed in the MEF 2010 (v4.1, p 22): *"The Program-level annual evaluation process...is dependent upon data collection and analysis conducted during implementation of each of the...projects."* This implies that weak underlying project data and tracking against baselines undermines the ability to draw conclusions about program level progress. This is echoed in the LANGOCA Annual Report 2010, p 17: *"The quality of performance related data has been very uneven (or unavailable) among the [NGOs] and this is a matter of ongoing concern."*

Recommendation

33. Partner NGOs should assess their project level M&E to ensure that it is sufficient to support the program level MEF.

3.9 Learning

'Learning' concerns the extent to which relevant analysis of the context was carried out; lessons learned have informed the approaches taken, and; there is evidence of a culture of reflection. LANGOCA was assessed as 'less than adequate' (3/6).

Relative strengths:

- ☒ MEF and governance arrangements were valued as a whole

Relative weaknesses:

- ☒ Limited side-ways accountability: to ensure application and sharing of new knowledge
- ☒ There was lack of clarity in the overarching narrative (theory of change) to set a clear purpose
- ☒ Limited utilisation of existing body of knowledge
- ☒ Limited new insights from Landscape Review
- ☒ No systematic capture of emerging risks as the basis for learning

NGO staff and government counterparts reported some value arising from the program-wide MEF and governance arrangements. As mentioned above, the governance structure included the PCC (AusAID and MoFA), the PIC (NGOs, AusAID, and line agencies) and the Provincial Steering Committees (NGOs and line agencies at provincial level). Government counterparts and NGOs appreciated the chance to learn from each other through the PCC and PIC meetings. As mentioned by one MoFA representative: *"The LANGOCA process is good...[it provides] a trilateral meeting to discuss all issues."* A NGO representative echoed this saying: *"Three tiers of governance can be onerous but these have brought us together with government counterparts more frequently. We have understood challenges facing government and they have developed a better understanding of us."* Two NGOs (Oxfam and CARE) worked through a single Provincial Steering Committee in Sekong Province, which was seen by AusAID staff as improving efficiency and was appreciated by

government counterparts. However one NGO representative noted: *“The LANGOCA program model has led to coordination challenges. It is administratively heavy in terms of its governance structure.”*

In general, the ambition embodied in the LANGOCA design for program-level learning seems not to have been fully realised. There have been some exchanges of information such as through cross-visits to project sites (World Vision to CARE in Sekong); sharing of materials (Oxfam DRR materials to World Vision); joint training (Oxfam emergency training); understanding of different approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction (Oxfam to Save the Children in Sayaboury); and joint needs assessments (outside of LANGOCA). However, virtually all stakeholders agreed that there was little meaningful learning at the ‘program level’. The MEF Implementation Review (2010, p 17) stated: *“While people acknowledged that intentions exist to convene informal discussions...it appears that these events rarely or never take place outside of the formal PIC and PCC meetings.”*

Arguably what is missing is a mechanism of mutual accountability. It seems that the program level arrangements have relied entirely on spontaneous learning and collaboration; but there is need for mechanisms to hold NGO partners accountable to each other for how they benefit from exchanges of information. Unfortunately, in cases where examples of good practice were shared through exchange visits or other forums, NGOs were not accountable for providing feedback to each other on the value of these good practices or how they had subsequently been embraced or modified or rejected in different contexts. At the very least, NGOs involved in similar activities should be accountable for sharing technical information or strategies that they believe to be good practice and that are performing well³⁶.

Recommendation

34. Partner NGOs should put in place practical mechanisms of mutual accountability to strengthen program-level sharing, learning and adaptation.

A further concern about the ‘learning culture’ arises from limited engagement by NGO staff in the wider body of knowledge on the various technical/sectoral areas. There was little reference to broader donor, INGO or academic literature on issues affecting LANGOCA, such as the role of gender in the UXO sector, the impact of proposed mines/dams, current thinking in rural food production etc. The Landscape Review defined under the MEF had the potential to provide some of this information however, it was focussed at a broad/national level and was not widely utilised by NGO partners.

Recommendation

35. Partner NGOs could consider engaging the ANGO affiliates in synthesising relevant thematic reports that can help the NGOs in their understanding of the context.

³⁶ This could be as simple as preparing a matrix of ‘agencies x activities’, and requiring operational staff engaged in similar activities to exchange one element that they believe to be working well; and then for partner agency staff to subsequently communicate back how this information has been used (adoted/modified/rejected).

36. AusAID should review with the partner NGOs the value of continuing with the Landscape Review as a part of the MEF.

Arguably, at the heart of organisational learning is a process of routinely identifying the impact of risks³⁷. In practice, this requires NGO staff to routinely identify deviations between what was planned and what is actually happening, and then to attribute reasons for the deviation. Periodically, these brief attributions can be the subject of more robust content analysis and reflection to identify patterns and trends. These patterns and trends can then inform wider knowledge and learning within the team about the drivers of success and the causes of failure within their project. This more dynamic approach to risk identification and learning contrasts with observed practice reported by one interviewee: *“NGOs tend to list assumptions and risks in the logframe and then never look at them again. There needs to be a mechanism to encourage NGO staff to come up for air”*.

Recommendation

37. Partner NGOs should implement systematic risk identification processes that can inform broader reflection and learning about the drivers of success and causes of failure of the various interventions.

There are several broad knowledge areas to which LANGOCA could make a significant contribution. For instance, both Oxfam and Save the Children work with institutional disaster management structures; however, there are notable differences in approach. Oxfam has tended to work simultaneously at village, district and provincial level with a predominant emphasis on the VDMCs. The approach has been broad-based and ‘community-led’ such that an array of activities have been implemented under the disaster ‘banner’ such as training and equipping village midwives, installing latrines and water supply systems, etc. In contrast, Save the Children has emphasised institutional strengthening of the government structures and has adopted a sequenced ‘top down’ approach initially focussing at the provincial level. The differences between the two approaches will be worthy of closer study at program completion.

Recommendation

38. Partner NGOs should compare and contrast the approaches and outcomes from the work by Save the Children and Oxfam in strengthening disaster management structures.

As discussed in Section 3.3 (Effectiveness), a major contribution of LANGOCA will be learning within AusAID about the nature of NGO partnerships, and the extent to which a ‘program level architecture’ can foster outcomes beyond what a portfolio of discrete projects could otherwise achieve. Hence, despite the critique of the

³⁷ “Learning results from being surprised: detecting a mismatch between what was expected to happen and what actually did happen. If one understands why the mismatch occurred (diagnosis) and is able to do things in a way that avoids a mismatch in the future (prescription), one has learned.” (Gharajedaghi, J. (1999) *Systems thinking: managing chaos and complexity*, Oxford).

program-level arrangements in this report there is likely to be merit LANGOCA persisting with the program arrangements as defined in the MEF.

Recommendation

39. At program completion AusAID and the partner NGOs should critically evaluate the value of trying to foster 'program-level' outcomes beyond those generated by a portfolio of discrete projects.

There could be other areas where LANGOCA partners could make a significant contribution to institutional learning. The NGO partners and AusAID should collaborate to identify possible areas for further study at program completion.

4. CONCLUSION

This independent progress review found that overall LANGOCA was performing satisfactorily—particularly when considered in the light of what individual projects are achieving. The program was evaluated against AusAID's eight evaluation criteria: two of the eight criteria were rated less than adequate quality; five were rated satisfactory overall (one was good quality and three were adequate quality). One criteria ('impact') was not rated. A total of 39 recommendations were offered for consideration by AusAID and the partner NGOs.

Several lessons learned can inform future AusAID NGO program designs, and some lessons are of relevance to the remainder the implementation phase. While the logic and rationale for the 'program-level architecture' was critiqued, the IPR team was broadly of the view that the arrangements established in the program MEF should continue. These arrangements may ultimately foster program-level achievements beyond those being achieved at project level; and they will enable meaningful critique of the original design rationale at program completion.

APPENDIX A: TERMS OF REFERENCE

LANGOCA Mid-Term Review

Terms of Reference

Revised Draft accepted by
PIC (12 October 2009)

1. BACKGROUND

The LANGOCA Program is based on Cooperation Agreements with four Australian NGOs: Oxfam, CARE, World Vision and Save the Children. The Program has an approved budget of \$AUD 14 million over a five year period, commencing in July 2007 until June 2012.

The goal of LANGOCA is to reduce the vulnerability of the poor (by integrating poverty reduction and crosscutting issues with disaster management and UXO approaches in Laos. The LANGOCA strategy for achieving this is to promote approaches where crosscutting issues (gender, environment, HIV, disability, etc) are closely integrated with disaster management and UXO work.

2. RATIONALE

AusAID wishes to review the performance of LANGOCA in order to allow it to make any necessary adjustments so as to maximize the benefits of the Program.

AusAID also wishes to use the review to commence a process that will allow it to consider the design of an NGO partnership program in Laos after LANGOCA finishes. This future program, if established, would reflect the objectives of the Australia-Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009-15, the requirements of Laos as a country aiming to get out of its LDC status and the emerging role of local associations as critical development players.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the review are to:

1. Assess the overall performance of LANGOCA through two levels of analysis:
 - a. at the level of the Program's overall objectives; and
 - b. at the level of the specific objectives of the funded activities;
2. Recommend actions necessary to improve the performance of LANGOCA up to its due completion date;
3. Provide insights and lessons learned from the LANGOCA experience for consideration of future programming with NGOs, including options to strengthen the role of NGOs in the Australian development assistance program in Laos.

4. OUTPUT & OUTCOMES

The principal product of the review will be a report that addresses the above objectives and the scoping criteria in this TOR for distribution to AusAID, INGOs, civil society organizations in Laos and Australia, and relevant GoL agencies at the central and local levels. Other outputs are listed under "Reporting Requirements".

Through the process and outputs of the LANGOCA Review, the following outcomes are expected:

- improved effectiveness of the management of the LANGOCA Program;
- strengthened partnership between AusAID and NGOs; and
- enhanced programming model for future NGO engagement in the Australian development cooperation program.

5. SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

While the Mid-Term Review is for the most part a performance audit at the program and activity levels, the process will also give due emphasis on the lessons that have developed so far to inform future programming of AusAID. The Review will address the following:

At the Program level, assess

- how flexible has the LANGOCA design been during implementation; how effective and relevant its monitoring and management mechanisms have been; and what the quality of its sustainability strategy is, drawing out lessons from the management of the LANGOCA program for other Cooperation Agreement windows in AusAID in general;
- the achievements of LANGOCA to date and contributions to achieving Australia's specific country strategy objectives, including by drawing out successes, challenges, and lessons learned for the potential future development of Australian support for NGOs and civil society organisations in Laos in the context of the new Australia-Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009-15;
- how cross cutting issues, in particular gender equity, have been addressed during program implementation;
- Lao government, civil society and community perceptions of AusAID's contribution to the partnership, and AusAID's perception of the contribution of the LANGOCA NGOs to the partnership;
- the adequacy of AusAID's support and capacity to allow delivery on Program level outcomes and the steadfastness of the LANGOCA NGOs to deliver at that level.

At the Activity level, assess

- the performance of the NGO activities;
- how flexible were the relevant activity level designs during implementation; the effectiveness of the monitoring and management mechanisms; and the quality of the relevant sustainability strategies, including any evidence of replication beyond the activities' target areas;
- the management performance of the NGOs, including in terms of their working and coordination mechanisms with partner government agencies, other LANGOCA NGOs, AusAID, local authorities and partner communities;
- what has been achieved, including the thematic linkages to other bilateral activities and contributions to achievements of the objectives of the 2009-2015 Laos-Australia Development Cooperation Strategy;
- how cross cutting issues, in particular gender equity, have been addressed during project implementation.

For Future Programming

- recommend how LANGOCA may be strengthened in the period up to its due completion date;

- assess the value that the Government of Laos gives to funding mechanisms such as LANGOCA, in the context of its policies and plans for the development of civil society organisations in Laos, and the role of international NGOs, including ANGOS, in assisting to reduce poverty in Laos;
- consider the strengths and challenges of the LANGOCA partnership model, especially by assessing how the Program's activities link to other Australian development activities in Laos, to national development programs in the relevant sectors, to community development and civil society strengthening in Laos; and by assessing key differences with more recent AusAID Cooperation Agreements;
- make recommendations on how AusAID may strengthen its partnership with NGOs based on the LANGOCA experience, including options on how to enhance their role in achieving the objectives of the Australia-Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009-15.

6. SCOPE OF SERVICES

The review will be conducted in four phases in Australia and Laos.

Phase 1: Desk review in Australia: (about 7 working days)

- review LANGOCA documentation supplied by AusAID;
- review findings and reports of recent MTRs of other AusAID NGO cooperation agreements;
- review relevant AusAID documentation, including regarding emerging consideration of policy approaches to strengthening the role of NGOs in the Australian aid program;
- draft an outline of an Issues Paper to share with ANGOS in phase 2. The Issues Paper should outline the approach, methodology and work plan for the review, including a summary of issues and major points/questions for in-country consultation and discussion and a proposed format for the Review Report. This Issue Paper needs to take into account lessons learned from previous Cooperation Agreements reviews.

Phase 2: In-Australia consultation: (approximately 5 days)

- meet with Community Partnership Section, AusAID Canberra;
- meet with ANGO representatives in Australia, facilitated through ACFID;
- finalise the Issues Paper and send to AusAID Vientiane for circulation before the in-country review.

Phase 3: In-Laos mission: (approximately 20 days)

- attend briefing by AusAID Vientiane on arrival;
- meet with LANGOCA NGOs, relevant GoL ministries; agencies and other donors;
- travel to activity sites, meet with project teams, Lao counterparts, and relevant local authorities;

- prepare a draft Aide Memoire consisting of initial findings and recommendations for discussion with AusAID;
- hold an end-of-mission workshop with relevant stakeholders to present initial findings and recommendations.

Phase 4: In-Australia report preparation: (approximately 10 days)

- conduct in-Australia debriefing with ANGO representatives facilitated through ACFID;
- prepare a draft Review Report with findings to guide AusAID's consideration of the development of a future NGO/civil society partnership mechanism to support the Laos-Australia Development Cooperation Strategy 2009-15;
- finalize the Review Report after receiving comments and feedbacks.

7. TEAM SPECIFICATION

The MTR Team will comprise of:

The team leader (an independent consultant)

The team leader is responsible for directing, coordinating and managing the assignment, including the submission of the Review Report to AusAID.

The team leader will have: (i) demonstrated experience in the monitoring, evaluation and assessment of development assistance activities, in particular NGO program assessment and performance evaluation; (ii) demonstrated understanding of the socio, political and economic situation in Laos, including in respect to the GoL's policies pertaining to civil society organizations and NGOs; (iii) strong leadership skills; and (iv) sound cross-culture knowledge.

The team leader will be responsible for:

- finalizing his or her own international travel for in-country mission;
- liaising with AusAID Canberra and/or ACFID for in-Australia consultation;
- liaising with AusAID Vientiane on the team's work program and meetings schedule prior to the mission commencing in-country;
- initial planning and review of relevant documentation as listed below;
- coordination among team members on specific tasks during the mission;
- cooperating with AusAID to present and discuss the mission's Aide Memoire at the end-of-mission workshop; and
- finalizing the review report after receiving comments and feedbacks.

The second team member (potentially an ACFID-nominated NGO representative)

The team member will have: (i) demonstrated experience in the monitoring, evaluation and assessment of development assistance activities in particular NGO program assessment and performance evaluation; (ii) demonstrated understanding of the socio, political and economic situation in Laos, including in respect to the GoL's policies pertaining to civil society organizations and NGOs; (iii) strong teamwork skills; and (V) sound cross-culture knowledge.

The team member will be responsible for:

- finalizing his or her own international travel for in-country mission;
- liaising with the team leader on the team's work program and meetings schedule prior to the mission commencing in-country;
- working with the team leader on initial planning and review of relevant documentation as listed below;
- working with other team members on specific tasks during the mission;
- cooperating with the team leader to present and discuss the mission's Aide Memoire at the end-of-mission workshop; and
- working with the team leader to finalize the review report after receiving comments and feedbacks.

Local consultant/interpreter

This member will have (i) demonstrated understanding of the socio, political and economic situation in Laos, including in respect to the GoL's policies pertaining to civil society organizations and NGOs; (ii) demonstrated strong knowledge in institutional capacity building/development and community development, particularly in terms of the role of civil society organizations in a country like Laos.

This team member will be responsible for interpretation services and assisting the team leader to undertake in-country activities leading to the final production of the review, under the direction of the team leader.

AusAID Canberra participant

An AusAID Canberra officer from the Community Partnership Section will support the review team to facilitate discussions relating to AusAID's policies and guidelines on cooperation with NGOs and feed-in lessons learned from similar reviews in other countries.

AusAID Vientiane participant/s

This officer/s will provide local knowledge and necessary support to the review team as required.

Government of Laos (GOL) participant

This government officer will most likely come from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of International Organizations.

8. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The review team will produce the following papers:

- **An Issues Paper** to be developed in phases 1 and 2, discussed with LANGOCA NGOs, and sent to AusAID Vientiane for circulation to relevant stakeholders before the in-country visit commences;
- **An Aide Memoire** for the end-of-mission workshop;

- **A draft Review Report** (electronically) in a format outlined in the Issues Paper. The draft Review Report will be marked as draft and will have the revision date on the cover. The team leader should submit the draft Review Report to AusAID Vientiane.
- **Review Report** (2 hard copies and electronically) in a format outlined previously in the Issues Paper. The team leader should submit the final report to AusAID Vientiane within five working days of receiving comments and feedback, in writing, on the draft review.

The team leader is responsible for preparing and submitting the above documents in consultation with the other team members. AusAID will have ownership of all documentation.

9. TIME LINES

Activities and Mile Stones	April 2011				May 2011				June 2011			
In-Australia Phase												
Desk review in Australia		x							x			
Issues paper draft 1 in Australia		x							x			
Consultations in Australia			x									
Issues paper draft 2 for Laos			x									
In-Laos mission												
Briefing with AusAID				x								
Vientiane-based meetings				x	x							
Field visits (at least 4 NGO activity sites)					x	x	x	x				
Aide memoire drafting								x				
End-of-mission Workshop									x			
In-Australia												
Mid-term review report writing and finalization									x	x		

10. READING DOCUMENTS

The review team should consider all relevant documentation, including the following:

LANGOCA Program documents:

- LANGOCA Funding and Application Guidelines
- LANGOCA program reports
- Recent MTRs and cluster evaluations of other AusAID NGO cooperation agreements, including those for Mekong, Solomon Islands and Africa

Documents for each of the NGO activities:

- Original designs and MOU
- Annual reports and plans
- Progress reports
- Australia-Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009-15

Government of Laos:

- Any current guidelines and decrees on the operation of (international and local) NGOs or civil society groups

Others:

- Relevant research and analyses of the role and performance of NGOs and civil society organisations in Laos

APPENDIX B: QUESTION GUIDE

1 Relevance

1.1 Relevance to GoL

1.1.1 Is the program aligned with official GoL priorities (sector, location, demographic)?

- *What is the relevance of the disaster management focus?*
 - What is the merit of a 'livelihoods' lens on DRM in Laos?
 - How are issues of diversity/breadth v coherence/focus balanced?
- *What is the perceived relevance of the UXO focus?*
 - What objective processes are used to prioritise areas for clearing? What evidence suggests clearing translates into improved productivity & livelihood?

1.2 Relevance to GoA

1.2.1 Is the program aligned with AusAID strategy?

1.2.2 What are the perceptions of GoL, partners and beneficiaries concerning AusAID's support?

1.3 Relevance to beneficiaries

1.3.1 Precisely who are the beneficiaries? Are they narrowly defined?

1.3.2 Does the program address the felt needs of beneficiaries? How?

1.3.3 To what depth/sophistication has beneficiary circumstances been analysed and informed designs/implementation?

2 Effectiveness

2.1 Logic

2.1.1 What is the merit/integrity of program and activity design logic? Is there an explicit and plausible theory of change?

2.1.2 Are the causal linkages between the activities and program logical and coherent?

2.2 Modality

2.2.1 What is the merit/value/quality of the NGO partnership modality?

- *What unique contribution to the bilateral strategy arises from NGO partnerships?*

2.2.2 Has the up-front investment in collaborative design translated into a more effective program?

2.2.3 To what extent has the program-level architecture enhanced implementation work; and vice versa?

2.2.4 Which aspects of the program level arrangements have proven most valuable and should be extended/enhanced?

2.2.5 What are the various modes used by ANGOs to engage local partners? What are the relative merits of these modes?

2.2.6 How has the program applied Paris principles such as alignment GoL priorities and donor coordination?

2.3 Achievements

2.3.1 What achievements are notable so far?

2.3.2 What innovations in approach or technology are noteworthy?

3 Efficiency

3.1 Structure

3.1.1 What is the merit of the program management & governance mechanisms?

- *Do the benefits of the program architecture justify the overhead?*

3.2 Management capacity

3.2.1 Is AusAID's management capacity/resources adequate?

3.3 Quality

3.3.1 What is the professionalism of the NGO partners (implementation quality)?

3.4 Time

3.4.1 What is the status/progress (implementation time)?

3.4.2 What systemic/pervasive factors contributed to delays? Should these factors be accommodated in future planning in Laos?

3.5 Resources

3.5.1 Is expenditure on track?

3.5.2 Are there any obvious areas of waste or inefficiency?

3.5.3 Does LANGOCA represent value-for-money compared with alternative AusAID-NGO models?

4 Impact

4.1 Merit

4.1.1 Who are the beneficiaries? How are they identified?

4.1.2 What significant and lasting changes are likely to accrue, both positive & negative?

- *What specific value has come from strengthening implementation in relation to gender and other sources of vulnerability/marginalisation?*

4.2 Magnitude

4.2.1 What is the scale/significance of any lasting changes?

4.2.2 What strategies are NGOs employing to maximise impact?

4.3 Timeframe

4.3.1 What is the likely timeframe for benefits to manifest?

4.4 Reach

4.4.1 Are benefits experienced by a broad or narrow base of beneficiaries?

- *What indirect impacts have arisen from interventions that affect relations between women and men, people with disabilities, and different ethnic groups?*

4.4.2 Is there evidence of replication or policy change beyond LANGOCA?

5 Sustainability

5.1 Approach

5.1.1 What strategies are the NGOs employing to promote sustainability?

- *How have these strategies evolved?*

5.2 Ownership

5.2.1 Is there evidence that approaches/technologies/attitudes/policies have been adopted by GoL or partners?

5.3 Capacity

5.3.1 Is there evidence that necessary skills and knowledge are in place to ensure program achievements will endure?

- *Has capacity been developed for both women and men?*

5.3.2 What approaches to capacity development have been employed beyond just training?

5.4 Resources

5.4.1 Is there evidence of local resource allocations that will enable program achievements to endure?

6 Cross-cutting themes

6.1 Disability

6.1.1 What strategies have NGOs employed to ensure that people with disabilities are able to meaningfully participate and benefit from interventions?

6.1.2 How have access and engagement been ensured for community members with mobility, hearing, sight, learning psychological impairments?

6.2 Gender

6.2.1 How are the particular needs of women, men, girls & boys identified and addressed?

6.2.2 How have the unique needs of women from ethnic groups been identified and addressed within the program?

6.3 Environment

6.3.1 What strategies are employed to maximise ecological sustainability?

6.4 HIV/AIDS

6.4.1 What strategies are employed to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS?

- *Are there notable innovations?*

7 M&E

7.1 Impact

7.1.1 How do we know that the program is addressing the felt needs of beneficiaries?

- *What approaches do NGOs employ beyond disaggregation to assess qualitative changes for women/men, girls/boys, people with disabilities, members of ethnic groups?*

7.1.2 How will impact be assessed given long causal linkages between UXO clearance/DRM capacity, and changes in household vulnerability?

7.2 Outcomes

7.2.1 How do we know that the program is working appropriately with partners?

7.3 Outputs

7.3.1 How do we know that the program is managed professionally and on track?

7.4 Risk and adaptation

7.4.1 How do delivery teams identify and respond to emerging issues and risks?

7.5 Reporting

7.5.1 How do people perceive the program-wide MEF and reporting arrangements?

8 Learning

8.1 Is there evidence of a performance culture; learning-oriented?

8.2 What examples of change/adaptation in response to new knowledge/evidence?

8.2.1 In what ways have inclusion strategies led to changed attitudes and behaviours in NGO staff, GoL or beneficiaries?

8.3 What social processes are in place for using M&E?

8.4 How have AusAID and the ANGOs been influenced by the LANGOCA experience?

8.4.1 What lessons may inform the development of rural development delivery strategy?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS

In-Australia

Date	Organisation	Interviewee	Gender
2 May	AusAID, Canberra	Rob McGregor, Program Manager	1M
2 May	AusAID, Canberra	Sophie Davies, Manager Evaluations Support, PPS Unit	1F
3 May	AusAID, Canberra	Bernie Wyler, Rural Development Adviser	1M
3 May	AusAID, Canberra	Gillian Brown, Gender Adviser	1F
3 May	AusAID, Canberra	Anna Clancy, NGO Policy Unit	1F
3 May	CARE, Canberra	Michelle Lettie Jenny Clement, Manager Country Programs	2F
4 May	SCA, Melbourne	Bianca Collier, Program Manager, Asia	1F
5 May	WVA, Melbourne	Catherine Johnston, Asia Team Manager Phearak Svay, Program Manager	1F, 1M
9 May	Oxfam, Sydney	Wayne Gum, Regional Program Impact Coordinator	1M
11 May	M&E Consultant	David Farrow	1M

6/12

In-Laos

Date	Organisation	Interviewee	Gender
16-05-11	MOFA DIO	Mr. Saleumxay Kommasith, Director General DIO Mr. Somlith Khantivong, Director, NGO Division Mr. Sengkeo, Dep. Dir. NGO Div Ms. Vadsana, Dep Mr. Vanpheng Sengmanothong, Director, APA Div, MPI	4 M; 1 F
16-05-11	NRA	Mr. Phetsavang Sounnalath, Director	1 M
16-05-11	NDMO	Mr. Vilayphong Sisavong, Deputy Director Mr. Phonesavanh Saysompheng, Technical Officer Ms. Vilaykham Vadsa Ard, Technical Officer	2 M; 1 F
16-05-11	CARE, Oxfam, SCA, WV	LANGOCA NGO Managers	2 M; 4 F
17-05-11	INGOs/NPA	Ms. Rio Pals, INGO Network Coordinator Mr. Khammouane Siphonesay, NPA Network Mr. Luc Delneuveville, Handicap International Mr. David Boisson, French Red Cross Mr. Phouthasinh Vongphommachanh, Helvetas/CLICK Mr. Phanthanmith Sengpanya, LNP+	5 M; 1 F
17-05-11	Donors	Mr. Dirk Wagener, UNDP Ms. Saara Frestadius Mr. Vilaykham Lasasimma Mr. Stefan Lock, European Commission Mr. Remy Duiven, SDC Mr. Satoshi Ishihara, World Bank	5 M; 1 F
17-05-11	LANGOCA M&E consultant	Ms. Suzie Albone	1 F
Team 1 Field Visit			
18-05-11	CARE Sekong	CARE Provincial Program Coordinator & Assistant Coordinator	1M; 1F
18-05-11	District Government	Governor; Vice Governor	1M; 1F
19-05-11	District Department of Labour & Social Welfare	Director; Project Coordinator	2M
19-05-11	Dak Seng	Assistant Chief (3 rd); Assistant Chief (4 th) Coffee farmer Fish pond farmer Focus Group Discussion	2M 1M 1M ~4M; 12F
19-05-11	Dak Doung	Village Focus Group Discussion (evening)	11M; 12F
20-05-11	Dak Doung	Assistant Chief	1M
21-05-11	Kanglounang	Village Focus Group Discussion (classroom) Wheelbarrow beneficiaries Mushroom farmer	3M; 5F 2F 1M
21-05-11	Pakpoun	Mulberry farmers	2M
21-05-11	Ta Oy	Oxfam staff	2M; 2F
22-05-11	Ta Oy	DDMC	4M; 1F
22-05-11	Dak Dang	VDMC SRI farmers	4M; 3F 3M
23-05-11	Adon	VDMC Model household HIV Volunteers	18M; 2F 2M; 3F 1M; 1F
24-05-11	Sabong	Village Focus Group Discussion (house)	10M; 7F
24-05-11	Saravan	PDMC	2M
Team 2 Field Visit¹⁵⁶			
18-05-11	SCA Project Team	Ms. Emma Aguinot, Director for Emergencies Ms. Souksamone Khantry, Deputy Director for Emergencies Ms. Soukmalay Venisavet, Program Manager Mr. Sengathit Vangvilachit, Program Officer	2 M ; 4 F

		Mr. Lalongkhone Chanthamaly, Program Officer Ms. Somphit Sittiphone, Program Assistant	
19-05-11	Xieng Hong District Governor	Mr. Douangta Xayvouth	1 M
19-05-11	SCA	DDMC and PDMC members	16 M ; 1 F
19-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of emergency relief in Houameang village	22 M ; 8 F
19-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of infrastructure activities in Samakhyay village	Approx. 40 M ; 50 F
19-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of DREC children's activities	Approx. 40 M; 60 F
19-05-11	SCA	Teachers involved in DREC	12 M ; 5 F
20-05-11	Sayabouly Province Vice-Governor	Mr. Phongsavanh Sithavong	1 M
20-05-11	Sayabouly District Governor	Ms. Bounphat Inthapanya	1 F
20-05-11	SCA	DDMC and PDMC members	21 M ; 8 F
21-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of early warning system, irrigation and latrines in Naxam village	Approx. 25 M ; 45 F
21-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of activities in Phaxang village	Approx. 35 M ; 15 F
21-05-11	SCA	Beneficiaries of activities in Houykeng village	Approx. 40 M; 5 F
22-05-11	WV Project Team	Mr. Grant Power, WV Operations Director Mr. Eddy Sianipar, WV Khammuane Team Leader Mr. Somsack Duangpanya, WV UXO Project Manager Mr. Khuntanom Vanthanouvong, WV DRR Project Manager Ms. Tickham Phachanthone, UXO Project Assistant Mr. Haidy, WV Khammuane Finance	5 M; 1 F
23-05-11	WV	Project Counterparts (WV, MAG, DLSW)	4 M; 2 F
23-05-11	WV	Beneficiaries of activities in Song village	Approx. 50 M; 50 F
24-05-11	WV	Beneficiaries of activities in Dongmakfai village	Approx. 50 M; 50 F
24-05-11	WV	GoL counterparts (District Administration Cabinet, Department of Labour and Social Affairs, Department of Agriculture)	4 M
25-05-11	AusAID	Ms. Dulce Simmanivong, Senior Prog Mgr Ms. Rakounna Sisaleumsak, Senior Prog Officer	2 F
25-05-11	SCA, CARE	Ms. Emma Aguinot, SCA Mr. Matthew Pickard, SCA Ms. Mona Girgis, CARE	1 M; 2 F
25-05-11	AusAID	Raine Dixon, First Secretary	1 F

APPENDIX D: AIDE MEMOIRE

Background

This document briefly summarises the preliminary findings of a midterm review (MTR) team engaged by the Australian Agency for international development (AusAID) to evaluate the *Laos Australia Non-government Organisation Cooperation Agreement (LANGOCA)*. LANGOCA is a five-year program comprising four Australian NGO (ANGO) partners³⁸ implementing five long-term projects and five short-term projects in five provinces of Laos.

Methodology

This MTR involved four phases:

- **Phase 1:** a review of all relevant documents including contextual analyses, LANGOCA program-level documents, and LANGOCA project/agency documents³⁹;
- **Phase 2:** fieldwork in Laos⁴⁰ involving two teams⁴¹ visiting project sites in four of the target provinces⁴² and a range of Vientiane-based stakeholders;
- **Phase 3:** analysis and synthesis of findings from document reviews and fieldwork;
- **Phase 4:** reporting.

Findings

MTR findings were analysed and reported on the basis of AusAID's eight standard evaluation criteria—which are discussed below. Questions remain concerning the efficacy of the NGO partnership modality in relation to 'program-level outcomes'. Overall, the program was found to be a relevant initiative supporting valuable activities in rural Laos—frequently in remote and challenging contexts.

Relevance

LANGOCA is aligned with, and contributes to, a range of key AusAID strategies and policies:

- The Rural Development Pillar of the *Australia Laos Development Cooperation Strategy 2009 – 2015*⁴³;
- The Building Community Resilience Pillar of AusAID's *Food Security & Rural Development Strategy, March 2011*⁴⁴;
- AusAID's policy commitment to partner with Australian NGOs as reflected in the March 2009 Partnership Agreement between AusAID and the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID);

³⁸ CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision

³⁹ In addition to document reviews, Phase 1 also involved interviews with in-Australia stakeholders (AusAID and ANGOS).

⁴⁰ Key informant interviews, focus group discussions and field observations.

⁴¹ Dr Paul Crawford (Team leader), Ms Philippa Sackett (NGO representative), Ms Belinda Mericourt (Gender specialist), Ms Somsisouk Inthavong-Sihachakr (Gender specialist), Ms Sophie Davies (AusAID, Canberra); supported by AusAID Vientiane staff (Ms Dulce Simmanivong and Ms Rakounna Sisaleumsak) and GoL representatives Mr Somlith Khantivong (DIO) and Mr Vanhpheng Sengmanothong (DIC).

⁴² Sekong, Saravan, Sayaboury, Khammouane.

⁴³ LANGOCA was designed under the previous strategy, the *Laos Australia Development Cooperation Strategy (2004 – 2010)*, Objective 3.1 (to reduce the impact of natural disasters) and Objective 3.2 (to reduce the impact of UXOs).

⁴⁴ Specific outcomes: "an increase in the rate of productivity growth for food crops, livestock and fisheries using environmentally sustainable approaches; reduction in the use of coping strategies with food insecurity, which entrench poverty".

- Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action articles that emphasise stronger engagement with civil society organisations and strengthening of government systems to enhance aid effectiveness.

During this MTR, Government of Laos (GoL) representatives at all levels and informed third parties such as bilateral and multilateral donor representatives affirmed the relevance of donor partnerships with NGOs in the Laos rural development context.

LANGOCA is aligned with the GoL's *The Seventh National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED)*; and the *Safe Path Forward Strategy II*. Most LANGOCA activities are implemented in target villages within the 47 poorest districts prioritised by the GoL; and also some of the 46 priority districts for unexploded Ordnance (UXO) work. The MTR team observed strong partnerships between NGO staff and GoL staff at district and provincial levels. LANGOCA has also strengthened GoL functions at village level—most notably the establishment and support of Village Disaster Management Committees (VDMCs).

Effectiveness

Foundational to the effectiveness of LANGOCA was an extensive and collaborative design phase involving AusAID, GoL, NGOs and community. In implementation, an assumption that significant program-level outcomes will arise from the NGO partnerships has largely not been borne out. Nevertheless, the MTR noted progress towards achievement of the two substantive LANGOCA objectives concerned with improved disaster management capacity (with a rural livelihoods emphasis), and reduced risk of UXO impacts. There were notable examples of good practice at the various NGO project sites visited. Further, development effectiveness is likely to be enhanced by long-term engagements by NGOs with target communities, and by effective partnerships with GoL staff. In conflict with established development effectiveness thinking was ambiguous causality in some aspects of the program design, and the implementation of an array of somewhat unrelated activities which raises concerns about breadth *versus* depth of engagement.

Efficiency

The program is behind schedule for a number of administrative, contextual and programmatic reasons. Of significance, implementation work by several NGOs was disrupted by Typhoon Ketsana. In some cases management and staff turnover, both within the NGOs and at local government level was reported to have negatively impacted progress. AusAID is broadly considered to have adequately resourced the administration of the program. NGO partners widely appreciated resources to strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E). However, from an efficiency standpoint there were some questions about the merit of three tiers of program governance, and the intensity of the reporting regime. NGOs were observed to be professional in their work with appropriately qualified staff; although difficulties associated with recruiting qualified women in remote areas was noted.

Impact

A full assessment of program impact is not possible at this early stage of implementation. Nevertheless the MTR team observed evidence that significant and lasting changes among beneficiaries are likely to accrue. Further, there is evidence of

a diffusion of innovations at some project sites. In some cases GoL partners expressed commitment to extending program achievements. Examples of particular note included:

- VDMCs established and operational—evidenced by improved preparedness and responsiveness to Typhoon Ketsana;
- Integration of disaster risk reduction into national school curricula;
- National Regulatory Authority (NRA) endorsement of an integrated approach to UXO work;
- Significant UXO clearance and mine risk education (MRE) delivered—and a increase in productive agricultural land;
- Improvements in household food security, health and economic wellbeing.

Some site-specific technical issues were observed—most of which were recognised and were being addressed by agencies.

Sustainability

The sustainability of program interventions cannot be categorically determined at this time; nevertheless evidence of sustainability was assessed from the standpoint of local and GoL ownership, capacity and resources. The MTR team observed strong engagement in and ownership of program activities among district and provincial GoL partners in most cases. The team was also advised of valuable contributions to GoL strengthening work at district and provincial level with indications that structures and processes initiated by LANGOCA projects will endure. However, some project activities are unlikely to be sustainable due to resource or capacity constraints. In some cases, the commitment of requisite GoL resources remains uncertain. There is a notable absence of exit planning by partner agencies—including for example ‘village graduation’ criteria to guide transition arrangements as projects approach completion.

Gender Equality

Gender equality is an overarching development principle of AusAID. Gender equality, along with other development ‘crosscutting themes’ (HIV and AIDS prevention, environmental protection etc.) were an integral part of the LANGOCA design. More recently, AusAID has promoted disability inclusion as a development priority. The MTR appreciated many challenging contextual and programmatic constraints in relation to integrating these themes within implementation—most notably language barriers in remote rural contexts and cultural attitudes. Some projects imposed a quota for female participation. LWU representatives were observed to be important stakeholders in many project activities. Several activities have had a direct impact on women: provision of wheelbarrows, installation of water supply systems, training and equipping of village midwives. Limited work has been done in relation to analysing and addressing the particular needs of people with disabilities. CARE’s work through COPE and LDPA in this regard was commendable. In general, more could be done to incorporate strategies to promote inclusive development—recognising that this was not a design requirement.

Monitoring & Evaluation

In general, the MTR team observed appropriate internal coordination and reporting processes with NGO teams to enable informed decision-making. The program-level

M&E Framework (MEF) was experienced both as valuable and onerous/resource-intensive by NGO staff. AusAID's support for capacity building in this regard was widely appreciated. Several NGOs had undertaken valuable baseline studies, but of concern, was a seeming ambivalence towards extending this work as the basis for assessing change. There was a notable absence of any mechanisms to assess changes in partner capacity despite this being a foundational aspect of several of the project strategies. There were no examples of systematic risk identification incorporated into M&E arrangements to enable the capture of meaningful lessons.

Analysis & Learning

In general, the ambition embodied in the LANGOCA design for program-level learning seems not to have been fully realised. Of greatest concern was a seeming lack of an over-arching 'narrative' to meaningfully draw together the otherwise disparate project activities into a coherent 'theory of change'.

NGO staff report some value arising from the MEF—in particular beneficiary consultations and the Annual Evaluation Workshops (AEW). However, there is an absence of meaningful 'sideways' accountability between NGO partners to review and incorporate good practice elements from work by partners. Workloads associated with ambitious project designs seem to preclude engagement in the wider body of knowledge on the various technical/sectoral areas. Intriguingly, several NGOs cite pervasive/know factors in progress delays (e.g. remoteness, wet season access and language barriers) that should otherwise be known and factored into workplans.

Recommendations

Some preliminary recommendations emerging from the analysis of the fieldwork data include:

- Employ more comprehensive capacity building approaches
- Consider implementing a short-term activity to facilitate policy dialogue concerning relevant project outcomes
- Plan to utilise baseline data to assess changes
- Assess changes in partner capacity
- Articulate a 'theory of change' that links activities
- Rationalise reporting requirements
- Pursue practical strategies to expand gender equality disability inclusion
- Carry out Value-chain analyses for cash crops
- Explore strengths-based rather than problem-based approaches
- Explore practical mechanisms to foster program-level benefits (e.g. defining points of mutual accountability)
- Clarify exit strategies