

Laos Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement
(LANGOCA) Program

ING310

Final Evaluation Report

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Acknowledgments

The field work for this evaluation extended over almost a month and arrangements for its successful completion were complex. We are grateful for the work of the DFAT Rural Development team in ensuring the logistics and processes worked so well. Equally, organisation for the field visits by the NGO project teams was exemplary. We are particularly grateful for their efforts because the visits were close to the time of project closure. Assistance in the field with translation, good development thinking, understanding, transport and constant good humour was variously provided by Villakone Chansamouth, Mone Sysavath, Rakounna Sisaleumsak, Chanthaneth Phakaysone, Chanthavisouk 'Short' Sitthibouady, Khambai Mixay and Sangkhom 'Pou' Luanglath. During data collection in the twenty villages and five districts visited by the team, we were struck by the patience and commitment to our understanding that was almost always evident in those whom we had the privilege of meeting. We thank them for their indispensable contribution to this evaluation and our findings.

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Disclaimer

This report reflects the views of the Independent Evaluation Team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian aid program, the NGOs responsible for implementing LANGOCA, or those of the government partners.

Executive Summary

The Laos-Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (LANGOCA) Program was an integral part of the Australian Government's policy emphasis on partnerships in the delivery of the aid program. It commenced in 2007 with the intention of completing in 2012, with a planned budget of AUD\$14 million. Following an Independent Program Review in 2011, an extension to June 2014 was approved along with additional funding of AUD \$420,000 so that all projects could conclude at the same time after completion of exit and handover activities

The overall goal of LANGOCA was 'to reduce the vulnerability of the poor by integrating poverty reduction and cross-cutting issues with disaster management and UXO approaches in Laos.' There were four component objectives:

1. Disaster Management (DM)¹: To reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters
2. Unexploded Ordinance (UXO): To reduce the impact of unexploded ordinance(UXO)
3. Program Development: To build and promote Program capacity
4. Program Management: To manage the Program effectively

The LANGOCA Program linked NGO programs and expertise to the Lao-Australia Development Cooperation Strategy (2004-10) in order to ensure that Australian Government support in Laos effectively targeted strategic development priorities. It comprised partnerships between the Australian Aid Program and four NGOs: CARE, Oxfam, World Vision (WV) and Save the Children (SCI). Five long term projects were implemented (WV implemented two projects and the others one each) as well as six short-term activities (four implemented by Save the Children and two by CARE). Three of the long term projects addressed Component One and two projects addressed Component Two. Collectively, the five LANGOCA projects have worked in 155 villages (WV1 19, WV2 24, Oxfam 70, CARE 18, SCI 24) in nine of Lao PDR's poorer districts in five provinces.

An end of term independent evaluation was undertaken from February to April 2014. The Evaluation undertook a variety of review activities, including desk review of documents, meetings and interviews with villagers, district, provincial and national government officials, during a month-long visit to Laos. Visits to 20 villages across locations where all five projects were implemented, was the highlight of the evaluation approach, ensuring a widespread data collection process.

Progressive data analysis was undertaken, with Evaluation members identifying emerging themes and key issues during all stages of the data collection. This generated increasing clarity about projects and the overall Program over time.

Overall the Evaluation found that LANGOCA has had moderate success. While all the activities demonstrated positive outcomes and success to varying degrees, this was not uniform across the partners or the five projects. Some NGOs performed well in some aspects of project implementation, while others were challenged as a result of project design limitations and other factors. This also reflected the complexity of a Program which operated in multiple locations, through multiple organisations and in diverse sectors. There is evidence that the lives of people in villages in rural Laos have improved as a result of work undertaken through LANGOCA.

In terms of the first component of LANGOCA, focused on reducing the impacts of disasters, LANGOCA has contributed to improved capacity in two main ways. First, there has been increased awareness and understanding of the nature and impact of both natural and slow onset disasters, in both community and government contexts. Second, there is increased capacity in communities and government agencies to prepare and respond to natural disasters such as typhoons, floods and fires.

¹ For the purpose of this report, the term Disaster Management (DM) is synonymous with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). While much of the work carried out under the Program is referred to as DRR by the cooperating NGOs, the DM designation is used in the Program Design Document.

In terms of the second component of LANGOCA, focused on UXO clearance, two different models of integrated UXO clearance proved to be effective. One was more cost effective and the other more responsive to community priorities and flexible. Both models provided benefits in the release of additional agricultural land and an improved sense of safety amongst villagers. The WV UXO project identified all the areas to be cleared of UXO at the beginning of the project and all clearance work was completed within approximately eighteen months. The CARE project retained access to UXO clearance capacity and conducted clearance as required throughout the project.

The third component addressed the issue of integrating cross-cutting issues into the implementation of disaster management and UXO activities. Integrating disaster management and UXO clearance with broader livelihood objectives generated positive outcomes. This component intended to develop and apply best practice models for integrating cross-cutting issues in disaster management and UXO and assumed that NGOs funded by LANGOCA would coordinate in ways which would generate greater outcomes than could be possible through individual efforts. The two UXO projects demonstrated good evidence of, and success in, applying different models of UXO clearance, and different levels of success in their integration with cross-cutting issues such as gender and inclusive development. The Save the Children project was found to be good practice in its policy outcomes in disaster management and all three projects demonstrated effective approaches in integrating cross-cutting issues, particularly gender equity and working with vulnerable people.

Throughout the program and for this component in particular, there was an expectation that the group of NGOs would coordinate and collaborate in order to contribute to improved policy and practice by government in relation to disaster and UXO clearance. The Evaluation found that this did not occur in practice beyond limited exchange visits and sharing of information and this expectation may well have been unrealistic, unclear and insufficiently supported by the Program. Notwithstanding this conclusion, individual NGOs' projects have influenced government policy and practice in a number of ways.

The fourth component covered Program management and the idea behind this separate component was to focus attention on leadership across the Program as well as standard aspects of project delivery and administration. In the main, the program management governance structures provided for ongoing communications and engagement between stakeholders, including government agencies in terms of reporting progress, keeping NGOs and other stakeholders informed of activities and providing program leadership. However, there were indications that there was a heavy administrative burden for both DFAT and the NGOs in servicing the various mechanisms and that the different purposes of different governance mechanisms were often confused by NGO staff. The introduction of a revised M&E Framework in 2010 was found to have increased the burden on project managers when it was introduced however NGOs and DFAT all stated that it did enhance broader assessment of Program performance and provided a basis for learning.

The expectations of NGO collaboration throughout the program stated in component 3 and implicit in component 4 were not realised and not supported by the various program management structures and processes. The participating NGOs undertook projects, which were not only focused on different topics and implemented in different ways but also in widely dispersed locations. The design structure and management of the LANGOCA Program overall did not encourage effective coordination.

Beyond the design structure and the findings noted above, the Evaluation identified a number of additional inter-related themes worthy of attention. The quality and effectiveness of approaches used by NGOs for community engagement and contributing to capacity, especially in the introduction of new community processes and technology, were mixed. This reflected different approaches to training and capacity development, participatory community development and the introduction of new technologies.

The concept of inclusive development has received increasing attention and understanding since the design of LANGOCA overall and the individual projects. Changed requirements for monitoring inclusive development were introduced late in the implementation cycle. While NGOs' approaches acknowledged the importance of gender, there were mixed levels of analysis of power issues across all

projects, resulting in inconsistent achievements. Gender equity is a particularly challenging goal in Laos, however this Evaluation found positive examples of good approaches and outcomes across three of the five projects. Disability inclusive development was poorly addressed across all projects except that implemented by CARE which worked with the Lao Disabled People's Association. Other areas of inclusiveness, such as working with the extremely poor, were relatively well addressed through focusing in districts identified by Government of Lao as the poorest and through NGOs' own commitment to working with the poorest and marginalised communities.

A number of lessons learned were generated during implementation of projects under LANGOCA. The issues are diverse and varied, but interestingly most are not particularly new in the context of rural and community development. Lessons relate mainly to partnerships, community development approaches, capacity development practice and inclusive development. The first of the following lessons is specific to the approach used in LANGOCA:

- There is value in the integration of DRR and UXO clearance with livelihood activities.
- Different livelihood inputs work for different communities. Results will be improved when community consultation and engagement is afforded equal importance in project designs as the delivery of livelihood related activities and inputs. Achieving sustainable livelihood outcomes in the poorest of communities requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, where the balance between inputs and good community development processes is maintained.
- The importance of working closely with provincial administrations is important to influencing Government policy and practices.
- Formal training approaches are not effective means for skills transfer and are unlikely to achieve sustained changes in government and community capacity.
- The imperative to deliver a comprehensive range of inputs and activities in livelihoods projects can compromise the effective implementation of effective participatory community-development processes.
- Effective inclusive development requires deliberate and specific strategies and activities, and expectations of change should be moderate and realistic.
- Gender equity strategies and initiatives must also be specifically designed to accommodate and encourage women's participation, and initiatives that also engaged with men appeared to show more sustained changes in women's empowerment.
- In order to meet the expectations of collaboration and partnership accompanying programs such as LANGOCA, program designs need to be explicit about these expectations and include strategies, incentives and mechanisms to foster collaboration. Expectations of spontaneous collaboration are usually unrealistic for a variety of institutional and operational reasons.
- Assumptions about NGO capacity and their shared values are contrary to the reality that most NGOs operating in Laos are large, complex international organisations that are both internally and externally distinct.

In addition, there are lessons about the design of multi-agency NGO programs and the setting of reasonable expectations associated with diverse multi-location activities and the likelihood they will contribute to higher-level outcomes.

Overall the LANGOCA program was found to have made a significant and positive contribution to the livelihoods of a substantial number of people across Laos. The Program has positively influenced DRR and UXO policy and practice changes with the Government of Laos. Despite numerous challenges encountered by LANGOCA partners, the integration of DRR and UXO clearance with a poverty-focused livelihoods approach has achieved sustainable outcomes in all areas and is an approach worthy of further development. The Program has also contributed to the capacity of rural people and government staff, particularly at district and provincial levels. Importantly, the Program has generated

learning for future NGO programs, so benefits are likely to continue to be applied both within and beyond project locations.

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Evaluation Criteria Ratings

Evaluation Criteria	Rating (1-6)	Explanation
Relevance	5/6	The LANGOCA Program was closely aligned with GoL and the Australian Aid Program strategies for rural development and GoL's National Socio-economic Development Plan and highly relevant to the needs of the communities in which it worked.
Effectiveness	4/6	Individual projects applied effective approaches which contributed to achievements in relation to livelihoods in ways which were integrated with strengthened disaster management capacity and UXO clearance. Projects demonstrated good results in different ways. Program and project design issues, contextual challenges and limitations in capacity development and community development approaches impeded greater effectiveness.
Efficiency	4/6	At a rudimentary level, the projects demonstrated good value for money when the cost of activities is calculated on a per-village basis over 7 years. However a range of operational, administrative and programming issues caused delays and inefficiencies over the Program's life.
Monitoring and Evaluation	4/6	The introduction of the MEF in 2010 enhanced the monitoring and assessment as well as program learning, and the NGOs had established M&E processes and reporting, the lack of a program level MEF in the design reduced the rating,
Impact	4/6	There have been clear livelihood benefits for many communities and there is evidence suggesting that integration of DRR and UXO with livelihoods as a means to address poverty has achieved good results. The rating at the Program level reflects a combination of evidence of mixed impact in community livelihoods and policy influence across individual NGO projects.
Sustainability	5/6	All individual projects demonstrated evidence of sustainability, whether in terms of ownership and continuation of activities by villagers and government, new policy and practice by government or of the NGO integrating LANGOCA activities and villages into longer-term or ongoing programs.
Gender equality	4/6	Lao is a particularly challenging context to address gender empowerment, especially for projects operating in ethnic communities. Some NGO activities achieved significant success in gender equity, while others were let down by poor analysis, inadequate training and capacity approaches and limited regular monitoring beyond sex-disaggregated data.

Rating scale

Satisfactory		Less than satisfactory	
6	Very high quality	3	Less than adequate quality
5	Good quality	2	Poor quality
4	Adequate quality	1	Very poor quality

List of Acronyms

ADPC	Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre
AEW	Annual Evaluation Workshop
ACR	Activity Completion Report
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAFO	District Agriculture Offices
DHU	District Health Office
DM	Disaster Management
DDMC	District Disaster Management Committee
DREC	Disaster Risk Education for Children
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
GoL	Government of Laos
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
IPR	Independent Program Review
LANGOCA	Lao-Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement
LARLP	Lao-Australia Rural Livelihoods Program
LDPA	Lao Disabled People's Association
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LTA	Long Term Activity
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAG	Mines Advisory Group
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MEF	Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
MoNRE	Ministry of National Resources and the Environment
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NDMC	National Disaster Management Committee
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NPA	Non Profit Association
NRA	National Regulatory Authority
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PDD	Program Design Document
PDMC	Provincial Disaster Management Committee
PEW	Project Evaluation Workshop
PWD	People with Disabilities
SBA	Strengths Based Approach
SCI	Save the Children International
SRI	System of Rice Intensification
STA	Short Term Activity
UXO	Unexploded Ordinance
VDC	Village Development Committee
VDMC	Village Disaster Management Committee
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WV	World Vision

NB: For the purpose of this report, the term Disaster Management (DM) is synonymous with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). While much of the work carried out under the program is referred to as DRR by the cooperating NGOs, the DM designation is used in the Program Design Document.

1. Introduction

The Laos Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (LANGOCA) Program commenced in 2007 as an initiative of the Government of Australia and is due to complete in June 2014. The Program included funding for a small number of NGOs to undertake activities which aimed to achieve shared objectives². The Program goal was *'to reduce the vulnerability of the poor by integrating poverty reduction and cross-cutting issues with disaster management and unexploded ordnance approaches in Laos'*.

The strategy for achieving the Program goal included five independently designed long-term NGO projects to promote approaches where cross-cutting issues – especially gender, environment, HIV and disability – were integrated with disaster management (DM) and unexploded ordnance (UXO) work.

LANGOCA comprised five projects undertaken by four different NGOs in a range of locations across Lao PDR. It included separate Cooperation Agreements with four Australian NGOs: Oxfam, CARE, World Vision (WV) and Save the Children (SCI). Initially, the Program's five component projects³ were to be implemented from July 2007 until June 2012 with an overall budget of AUD 14 million. Following an Independent Program Review in 2011, an extension to June 2014 was approved along with additional funding of AUD 423,137 so that all projects could conclude at the same time (after completion of exit and handover activities). The Program also provided funding to SCI and CARE projects to implement a number of complementary short-term activities.

This report covers a Final Evaluation of the Program, undertaken as the five projects were either already completed or close to completion. The structure of the report reflects the Terms of Reference provided by DFAT. It includes analysis of findings and lessons learned which have been drawn from desk research and comprehensive consultations with stakeholders in Lao PDR in March and April 2014.

1.1 Background to design and inception

During 2003, the Australian aid program initiated an approach to partnering with accredited Australian NGOs called Cooperation Agreements (CA). CAs were considered as an effective mechanism to manage funding-based relationships between NGOs and the Australian Government's aid program and to engage the unique strengths of NGOs such as their long-term experience in particular countries, expertise in community-based activity management and strong linkages with partner organisations and communities.

LANGOCA was explicitly designed to integrate the strengths of Australian NGOs already working in Laos into the Australian aid program's development strategy for Laos at the time (*Laos-*

² In the 2000s, Cooperation Agreements were a standard mechanism to manage funding relationships between the Australian aid agency (AusAID, now DFAT) and NGOs. Based on shared national development objectives, such Agreements were intended to deliver a variety of on-the-ground aid activities within a specific sector or location, consistent with Government-determined priorities and NGO capacity and commitments. The use of NGOs in bilateral/thematic programs is a feature of aid programs across the world, recognising their unique strengths such as long-term experience in national development processes, capacity to operate in a variety of sectors and particularly long-standing linkages with partner organisations and communities.

³ The LANGOCA Program Design Document (PDD) and subsequent NGO implementation reporting generally refer to the five interventions as Long-term Activities (LTAs). In the interests of simplicity and consistency, this report will use 'project' when referring to the five major NGO interventions, 'Program' when referring to LANGOCA as a whole and Short-term Activity (STA) when referring to the additional short-duration interventions conducted by CARE and SCI that were complementary to their main projects.

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, it sought to bring together the various partner NGO activities within a coherent strategy under the bilateral program.

'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.' (LANGOCA Program Design Document p 7)

In early 2006, the Australian Government invited capability statements from Australian NGOs and following a competitive tender process, reached agreements with four successful NGO partners. In May 2006, representatives of the Governments of Australia and Lao PDR as well as the four NGO partners undertook an 'Analytical Mission' to develop a framework for reducing vulnerability to unexploded ordnance (UXO) and disasters by integrating development cross-cutting 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 with the NGOs. Participating NGOs then independently designed projects, consistent with the overall Program Design and in ways which responded to locally-determined implementation issues and which were appraised by Independent consultants and officials of the Australian aid program.

Following the approval of the project designs, the planned commencement of LANGOCA activities in July 2007 was delayed for almost a year by GoL approval processes⁴. CARE began implementing its first project activities on 10 April 2008 while the two WV projects were delayed until late 2009. An Independent Progress Review (IPR) was conducted during the second quarter of 2011. This was the mid-point of implementation for some activities, but in the early stages for others. Following the IPR in 2011, an extension was approved to June 2014 and additional funding of AUD \$420,000 was allocated so that all projects could conclude at approximately the same time.

1.2 Outline of the LANGOCA Program

The overall goal of the LANGOCA Program was *to reduce the vulnerability of the poor by integrating poverty reduction and cross-cutting issues with disaster management and unexploded ordnance approaches in Laos.*

The strategy for achieving the goal included five NGO long-term projects. These projects were designed independently and intended to promote approaches where cross-cutting issues – especially gender, environment, HIV and disability – were integrated with disaster management (DM) and UXO work. Table 1 lists basic details of the five LANGOCA projects. There was an expectation in the Program design that interaction between NGO partners would result in program-level outcomes beyond those achieved at the individual project level. Expected high-level outcomes included effective policy dialogue with Government of Laos (GoL) on rural development, UXO clearance and disaster management.

⁴ The Government of Australia had initially assumed that LANGOCA activities would be approved by GoL under the Memorandum of Subsidiary Arrangements (MSA) between the Australian Government and the GoL. However, it transpired that GoL entered into Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with each NGO activity separately.

Table 1: LANGOCA projects

NGO	Project Title	DM or UXO focus	Provinces	Districts	Initial budget
SCI	<i>Sayaboury Integrated Hazard Mitigation</i>	DM	Sayaboury	Sayaboury Xieng Hong	\$2.32 million
Oxfam	<i>Community based disaster risk management in upland communities</i>	DM	Sekong Saravan Vientiane	Kaleum Ta Oi Met	\$2.36 million
WV	<i>Vulnerability Reduction in Khammouane Province</i>	DM	Khammouane	Ngommalath	\$1.93 million
WV	<i>Integrated UXO Action in Khammouane Province</i>	UXO	Khammouane	Mahaxay	\$1.94 million
CARE	<i>Reducing UXO Risk and Improving Livelihoods of Ethnic Communities in Sekong Province</i>	UXO	Sekong	Lamarm Dak Cheung	\$3.47 million

A proportion of Program funding was ear-marked for innovative short-term activities designed by the NGOs to complement the above projects, if sought. CARE and SCI made use of this facility. The CARE short-term activities were intended to raise awareness about disability inclusive development, reflecting emerging emphasis on this topic globally, and to strengthen the Lao Disabled People’s Association. SCI’s activities, complementing their work on integrated hazard mitigation, addressed Disaster Risk Education for Children, Tools for Disaster Risk Assessment and Establishment of a Disaster Information System.

The majority of development initiatives include an expectation that there will be some degree of behaviour change in participating communities. This introduces complexity to varying degrees, associated with the links between cultural values and behaviours. LANGOCA was no different from other programs in this sense. Critical to making sense of a complex program such as LANGOCA is considering the dynamic relationships *between* the elements as much as the elements themselves. These include the approaches and processes used by the NGOs to implement a range of activities; the external factors and context; role of government; intermediate outcomes for each project and overall Program outcomes.

LANGOCA also involves stakeholders with diverse values, interests and positions; and works with communities with different cultural practices, contexts and challenges⁵. This Evaluation Report recognises the challenges of achieving and assessing Program outcomes resulting from a range of activities undertaken independently in geographically and culturally different settings. Figure 1 illustrates the inter-relationships between the various elements of the LANGOCA Program address in this Evaluation Report.

⁵ Patton, M, 2011; ‘Development Evaluation – Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use’, The Guildford Press, New York, p9.



Figure 1: The Inter-relationships of LANGOCA elements and approaches

2. Evaluation objectives, scope and methods

This section provides a summary of the objectives of the Evaluation, the overall approach taken in meeting those objectives and the data collection and analysis activities undertaken as a result. Full details of the Evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR) and the approaches used are set out in Annexes 2 and 3 respectively.

2.1 Evaluation objectives and additional questions

This Evaluation had the following objectives:

1. Assess the overall achievements of the Program with a focus on:
 - (a) Results with respect to LANGOCA objectives and the *domains of change* indicated in the LANGOCA Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
 - (b) Policy and governance outcomes in the UXO and DM sectors.
2. Identify and assess the lessons learned from the LANGOCA Program in at least the following categories:
 - (a) Strengthening partner government and local community's capacities
 - (b) Aid effectiveness
 - (c) Inclusive development
 - (d) Gender equity and integration
 - (e) Program management – including design, planning, implementation, inter-NGO coordination, monitoring and evaluation.

In addition to these objectives, the Evaluation ToR also included the following questions⁶.

1. Program design and management

- To what extent were the July 2011 Independent Progress Review (IPR) recommendations implemented?
- When implemented, what impact did they have on the achievement of Program objectives?
- How did the various management procedures (monitoring, reporting, PIC, PCC, etc) between implementing NGOs and the Australian Embassy Rural Development Team support and/or hinder project implementation and outcomes?

2. Program effects

- What are the likely sustained outcomes from the projects in: aid effectiveness; gender equity; inclusive development; and program management?
- To what extent did LANGOCA achieve its expected results?
- Were the outcomes achieved adequate in relation to the investment?
- How have external factors affected project outcomes?
- How did the Program contribute to improving the operating environment in the UXO and disaster management/risk reduction sectors?
- Did working 'in partnership' improve the efficiency and/or effectiveness of Program implementation?

3. Sustainability

- Which beneficiaries (community members and GoL officers) have sufficient ownership, capacity and resources (including other donor funding) to maintain successful project outcomes after Australian Government funding has ceased?
- Are there actions that can be taken now that will increase the likelihood that successful outcomes will be sustainable?
- What is not sustainable? What, if any, action should be taken to address this?
- How can successful initiatives from this program be adapted to other contexts? 4.

Quantitative assessment

To the extent possible from available project data:

- What quantitative outcomes (e.g. number of families no longer experiencing rice shortages) and outputs (e.g. number of recipients reached by training, number of hectares of land cleared of UXO and released) were realised by the Program?
- How do these outcomes and outputs compare with (a) project baseline data and (b) program expectations articulated in program and project designs?

2.2 Evaluation Scope and Methods

The Evaluation process included a mix of approaches and methods (see below). Field work was undertaken between 14 March and 10 April 2014, including visits to all five project sites as well as meetings with national and provincial agencies. At the completion of in-country field work, an Aide Memoire was presented.

The Evaluation TOR specified that the following sources of data be considered:

⁶ This section represents some revision of the questions included in the ToR in Annex 3, primarily to reduce duplication, to clarify the intention of some of the questions, and to ensure that they are consonant with the data that will be available to the evaluation; that is, that it will be feasible to address them.

- NGO Activity Completion Reports, monitoring data and data and analysis from annual NGO beneficiary consultations and Project Evaluation Workshops
- Findings from the commissioned Program Outcomes Research into LANGOCA contributions to Government policy, governance and practices in the UXO and DM sectors
- Consultations during in-country evaluation field work with: participating NGOs (national and project field offices); Government partner ministries and departments (national, provincial and district); beneficiaries of five NGO projects; other relevant rural development sector informants; and DFAT.

2.2.1 Data collection activities

1. Document review

The Evaluation included a desk analysis of relevant documents, which are listed at Annex 5.

2. Field interviews and group discussions

The Evaluation for the provincial, district and village interviews consisted of a female and a male Australian evaluator as well as female and male translators/cross-cultural consultants. Data collection involved diverse discussions with many individuals and groups in multiple locations. The Evaluation worked mostly in sub-teams of two: where villages were widely separated the sub-teams visited separate villages with a male and female member in each team; and where villages were closer to each other the full team was able to visit. Where full-team visits took place, the two female team members generally worked with women and girl respondents and the male team members met with the men and boy respondents. Overall, the data collection schedule included:

a) *In Vientiane*, interviews with:

- Australian aid program staff engaged in the management of rural development activities
- Officials from the National Regulatory Authority, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Disaster Management Office, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
- Staff from NGO head offices involved with the LANGOCA Program

b) *In Sayaboury, Khammouane and Sekong Provinces*, interviews with:

- Members of the provincial disaster management Committee or other provincial officials engaged in work related to the LANGOCA Program

c) *In Sayaboury, Xienghong, Mahaxay, Ngommalath, Lamarm and Kaleum Districts*, interviews with:

- Members of the District Disaster Management Committees and other district officials engaged in work related to the LANGOCA Program
- NGO project staff responsible for implementing the project within the district.
- Villagers in four target communities from each of the five projects (a total of 20 villages)⁷.

Many of the project villages, including many of those visited by the Evaluation, were situated in remote areas entailing long travel times. Despite the adequate resources provided by DFAT for the Evaluation, this constraint precluded random sampling of villages to be visited. Rather, partner NGOs were asked to select two examples of each of 'strong' and 'not strong' villages (with respect to

⁷ Meetings were held with between three and five separate groups in each village. Separate meetings were always held with women, men and the village authorities and VDC/VDMC members. Whenever possible, the Evaluation also met (usually separately) with young men and young women from the village.

project engagement and outcomes) within their project. As far as possible, within each village group, interviews were conducted with: village leadership (village authorities/Village Development Committee (VDC) and Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC) members); women; men; female youth; male youth; and occasionally (where relevant) younger children. The team usually spent between three and five hours in each village. Group interviews with adults took between 60 and 90 minutes, usually with one-step (Lao/English), but occasionally two-step (Ethnic language/Lao/English), translation. Visits to project activities within villages were also conducted where time and distance allowed.

Interview and discussion group questions were designed to obtain information relevant to the Evaluation objectives and the additional evaluation questions listed above. The data collection topic guide is provided at Annex 2. The topic guide was the basis for formulating questions for each of the interview groups, with the specific questions tailored at the time to the nature of the group, their project and their particular context. Annex 3 contains a detailed list of the people consulted during these interviews and group discussions.

3. IPR recommendations survey

NGO project teams and DFAT rural development staff were asked to complete a questionnaire outlining their responses to the 39 recommendations included in the 2011 IPR. For each of the recommendations relevant to them, staff of NGOs and DFAT were asked to report on: the extent to which it had been implemented; an explanation of the extent of implementation; and whether the recommendation then affected project implementation or achievement of objectives.

2.2.2 Data analysis

The six completed IPR questionnaires (five NGO projects and DFAT) were mainly analysed recommendation by recommendation. Findings are reported in Section 3 of this report. Findings and lessons from the Program Outcomes Research into LANGOCA contributions to Government policy, governance and practices in the UXO and DM sectors have been summarised in Section 3.1.3.

Working in two sub-teams for the majority of interviews and discussions potentially posed problems of consistency in questioning, recording and interpretation of responses. This was accentuated by the fact that the sub-teams were expected – given the wide-ranging contextual variations across villages and districts and projects – to pursue interesting lines of inquiry as they arose. To minimise this risk during approximately three weeks of field work in the project districts, an analysis of interviews/discussions was conducted at the end of most days (or occasionally after two or three days depending on the schedule and travel arrangements for the team). The evidence and preliminary data analysis was combined into a single document addressing the key evaluation questions from the interviews as the team progressed. Revisions were made to themes, questions and strategies based on the outcomes of previous interviews. The Evaluation gradually accumulated and deepened understanding of the relative strengths, weaknesses, challenges and outcomes of each of the five projects. Additional detail is provided in the Evaluation Plan at Annex 1.

The Evaluation findings were tested and verified by participating NGOs and DFAT officials at a workshop held in Vientiane on 25 June 2014. Participants were invited to reflect on whether the findings were valid, fair and balanced as well as identified the key lessons learned from the Program that they could adopt in future in other programs. Comments and clarifications from the workshop have been incorporated into the final version of the report. The workshop schedule is at Annex 8.

2.2.3 Limitations of the evaluation

‘Fly-in, fly-out’ evaluations of complex interventions are universally considered as less than ideal because of multiple constraints associated with understanding the ‘real’ picture in another context. However, they are the dominant practice in current development and donor

approaches. Challenges include: obtaining good quality data relevant to the evaluation task; deciphering often ambiguous causal linkages; giving appropriate weight to multiple perspectives; and taking sufficient account of the biases and limitations represented in the Evaluation. Despite these challenges the Evaluation has sought to account for different perspectives (especially across village, government and project interviewees) in the analysis and findings provided in Section 3 below.

The LANGOCA Program comprised five independently designed projects implemented for almost seven years in diverse settings in the north west, central and south of Laos, means that drawing comprehensive and coherent conclusions across the Program is ambitious. While resources provided for the Evaluation were generous by many standards, the pace of data collection was relatively frenetic and inevitably, some important perspectives, nuances or ideas will have been missed and some gaps in data overlooked. Other personnel-related challenges were identified during field work. For example, gathering information about the WV UXO-related project in Mahaxay District presented some practical difficulties due to the fact that the Project Manager for most of the implementation period had resigned at the end of 2013 and both his replacement and the WV Area Coordinator for the district were unavailable during the Evaluation's visit. Notwithstanding these issues the Evaluation consider that data collection overall has been sufficiently extensive and robust to adequately support the findings reported in Section 3.

The remoteness of many LANGOCA project villages and the necessity for much of the data collection to be conducted by two sub-teams has already been noted as a limitation. The approach adopted to minimise potential consequential risks to the quality of the data collection has also been outlined above. Ratings for each of the OECD DAC evaluation criteria were determined late in the data analysis and report-writing process and they represent the professional judgement of the Evaluation on the basis of the evidence available.

Finally, the need for language translation – at times across three languages – may also have limited deep or nuanced understanding of issues in some contexts. The Evaluation was fortunate to be assisted, at different times, by four excellent translators, cross-cultural interpreters and group facilitators, all with considerable professional experience in development and in facilitating discussion within community groups.

3. Evaluation Findings

The Evaluation findings are discussed under four headings. **Section 3.1** reports on program outcomes against the LANGOCA objectives and those of the NGO projects. It includes a summary of the key findings from the LANGOCA Policy Outcomes Research which preceded this Evaluation. **Section 3.2** includes discussion of the extent and effectiveness of implementations of the 39 recommendations of the IPR. **Section 3.3** addresses the key findings and lessons learned, organised in the themes that emerged during the Evaluation. **Section 3.4** presents summary assessments against the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. This latter summary is brief given that the findings of the current Evaluation with respect to the OECD DAC criteria are in substantial agreement with those of the Independent Progress Review completed in July 2011. The Executive Summary of the Independent Progress Review addressing the OECD DAC Criteria is included for reference in Annex 6.

3.1 Program outcomes

This section includes details of outcomes against themes which emerged from analysis of the Evaluation's findings. Importantly, participants at the June workshop identified four broad areas which they considered were strengths of LANGOCA enabling the achievement of these positive outcomes. These were:

- The long-term nature of the Program and the commitment by and support from DFAT

- The integration of DRR and UXO clearance with livelihoods and a pro-poor focus
- The raised profile of DRR in the national dialogue and as well as of Laos experience in the region
- The multi-stakeholder aspect of the Program that fostered coordination, cooperation and collaboration.

Major challenges identified by June workshop participants included:

- Working effectively in collaboration with multiple partners across diverse locations
- Clarity about and application of Program monitoring and evaluation frameworks and the capacity and resources needed for applying frameworks to individual projects
- Different perspectives on the Program's initial design and the related design of separate long-term NGO projects – specifically the geographical spread of activities
- Ambitious, high-level and at times, unclear expectations vis-à-vis capacity of NGOs.

Views expressed by participants at the June workshop were largely consistent with the Evaluation findings.

3.1.1 Strengthening livelihoods

The major outcomes of the Program were in the trialling and development of livelihoods options for participating villages as part of an integration approach with either DM or UXO clearance. Other outcomes contributing to strengthening livelihoods included the provision of supporting infrastructure such as water supply and irrigation systems.

All projects trialled a number of livelihoods options with variable success – dependent on the resources, skills and commitment of farmers, the appropriateness of the enterprise in that context (e.g.. water availability), access to markets, and the quality of planning and implementation by the responsible NGO and their district partners. The need for deeper analysis (planning, appropriateness of crop/livestock, hidden costs, value-chain analysis etc) was evident for several trials. Livestock outcomes were also mixed, with disease and effective vaccination coverage remaining problematic.

The categories of livelihood initiatives and inputs included:

- New crop varieties – e.g.. rattan, banana, Job's Tears, cassava
- Intensification – e.g.. introduction of the System for Rice Intensification (SRI), upland intercropping
- Small scale infrastructure and equipment – water supply, irrigation, rice mills, wheelbarrows, water filters
- Livestock – e.g.. distribution and subsequent breeding of cattle, goats, chickens, ducks, fish, frogs
- Kitchen gardens

Each NGO's 'menu' of livelihood options was generally developed in consultation with villagers. WV formalised this process into a Village Activity Menu (VAM) used in both of their projects. Village interviews indicated that the consultation through which options were developed was not always sufficient and, at times, led to poor decision-making and inadequate planning. This was confirmed by a number of NGO staff, stating that they needed to spend more time consulting with villagers in the early stages of their projects.

The project NGOs faced significant constraints in implementation that affected both the quality and extent of the outcomes that they planned to achieve. These included:

- Limited access to and time available to spend in villages (too many villages/not enough staff/inconsistent availability of accompanying district staff/seasonal factors)
- The technical capacity of district staff and their limited familiarity with the approach and techniques of NGOs

- Limited access to external sources of timely technical expertise
- Problems arising from difficulties encountered in the timely sourcing required inputs such as seed, plant materials and livestock

In all of the villages visited by the Evaluation, there were examples of households that had experienced success with one or more of the livelihood activities introduced by the projects. Where these activities did work, people had more food on a regular basis (particularly, increased availability of rice and over longer periods), a greater variety of food, and sometimes more income.

At the same time, there were many cases where the innovations were not successful for a range of reasons, such as:

- The innovations were not appropriate to the setting such as insufficient available water for crops for example bananas and rattans
- Logistical problems such as plants being procured and provided out of season or the wrong variety provided
- Inadequate training provided

Within the design constraints of each project, activities for strengthening livelihoods were generally characterised by a flexible and opportunistic approach of responding to issues as they were encountered. This helped to facilitate the incorporation of interconnected issues such as: other constraints on the health of villagers – for example the distribution of bed nets to reduce malaria, reduction in gastro-intestinal illnesses and deaths through improved water quality and latrines; the training of village health volunteers; supporting better livestock outcomes through the training of village vets to undertake livestock vaccination; or labour-saving innovations such as improved access to water and the introduction of wheelbarrows.

Despite reasonably successful livelihoods outcomes, the implementation of the activities across the Program raises some significant questions concerning:

- The tension between the value of NGOs being innovative in introducing ‘trial’ activities and the appropriateness of NGOs using the scarce labour, land, time and financial resources of villagers in trialling untested innovations in new settings, where there is likely to be a large amount of uncertainty in results. In addition:
 - In a number of cases, insufficient work had been done on value chain analysis for products and the availability of suitable markets (e.g.. ginger, cassava) so, when villagers did produce successful crops, they were unable to sell the product
 - Some livelihood activities were compromised due to difficulties in the planning and/or management of procurement processes. For example, delays in the procurement of seeds or other plant materials meant they were not provided at the right time for planting, resulting in crop failures
- The inadequacy of the training and capacity development approaches used to introduce new activities and technology and of the ongoing support provided by project or district staff and how well this prepared and supported villagers to adopt innovations (see section 3.3)
- Continuing history of problems associated with inadequately supported livestock-based interventions which, in the LANGOCA Program, proved to be problematic for all of the projects⁸. For example:
 - The difficulty of maintaining vaccination protocols resulting in significant stock losses due to disease

⁸ It is also acknowledged however, that obtaining reliable data about livestock numbers and outcomes in a village was one of the most challenging tasks for the Evaluation. It was evident that, for many villagers, there was a perceived advantage in understating the numbers of surviving animals, a process that sometimes assumed the nature of a game between interviewers and interviewees.

- Inappropriate selection of livestock e.g. where a lack of fencing resulted in damage to village crops by goats and cattle. Unfenced livestock were also often difficult to locate and constrain for vaccination

These issues highlight the challenges of introducing new ‘technologies’⁹ into traditional farming contexts. For example, the complexity of the introduction and management of livestock activities needs to be well planned and carefully assessed before proceeding. Likewise, the appropriateness of new crops, access to markets and procurement processes should be thoroughly assessed so that opportunities are not lost or wasted due to poor timing and missed opportunities.

The livelihoods activities implemented by the LANGOCA NGOs are, overall, good examples of long-standing, community development approaches for addressing rural poverty common to many NGO approaches (and described by independent evaluator Andrew Bartlett as conventional development or ‘business-as-usual’¹⁰ based on a narrative of empowerment). While this ‘broad-spectrum’ approach forms the basis for the success of many of the initiatives in some settings, it is also a source of weakness in that it encouraged the projects (and thus staff resources) to be thinly spread. This issue is discussed further in Section 3.3.

3.1.2 The Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction and Livelihoods

DM has been a focus of the integrated livelihoods activities implemented by SCI in two districts of Sayaboury Province, WV in Gnommolath District of Khammouane Province and Oxfam in three districts in Sekong, Saravan and Vientiane Province. Similarities across the projects include working with DM committees at village, district and provincial levels, the preparation of DM plans and DM education materials and emergency relief assistance during flooding.

The objective of the DM component of the Program was to reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters on livelihoods in locations selected for project implementation. Interestingly, apart from Sayaboury (which is subject to floods and fires), villagers participating in the Evaluation did not readily identify disaster management as a priority¹¹. Community awareness about the relevance and impact of disasters varied, depending on geographic location and past experience of both slow onset disasters (e.g. drought) and rapid onset disasters (e.g. typhoons). For many communities, the term ‘disaster’ was interpreted to mean high-impact single event disasters, but many villagers, in interviews, expressed limited experience in this regard¹². The PDD and project designs incorporated consideration of slow-onset disasters such as droughts, and these were indirectly addressed through the work to strengthen livelihoods options along with the development of facilities such as village-based rice-banks and savings schemes, and hence the potential resilience of villagers.

Overall, each of the three projects has made contributions to the preparedness and resilience of communities (Section 3.1.1) and to government capacity (Section 3.3) to prepare for and respond to disasters. Government systems and strategies have been improved at village, district and provincial levels in the case of all three projects. The concentration by SCI in Sayaboury on the institutional strengthening of provincial and district Disaster Management Committees has provided an exemplar of good DM practice. This has been taken up by the NDMO for possible national implementation. In addition, all three projects successfully worked on the establishment of VDMCs and Village DM Plans in all of their target villages. Apart from these specific outcomes, it was evident from discussions with

⁹ ‘Technology’ in this and other usage in this report covers a broad range from ‘hard’ (equipment, infrastructure) to new crops and agricultural techniques to ‘soft’ technologies such as plans and planning approaches, committees and procedures for monitoring and reporting.

¹⁰ Bartlett, A., 2014 *LANGOCA Program Outcomes Research Report*, DFAT p.23-24

¹¹ Which reflects, to some extent, on a lack of congruence between community priorities and the emphasis on DM in the Program design overall.

¹² Although during the Program, three major events occurred that resulted in flooding and other damage in the north (twice) and the south. These were Typhoon Ketsana (2009), affecting southern areas and Typhoons Nock-Ten (2011) and Haiyan (2013) affecting northern provinces.

the NDMO and the various PDMCs and DDMCs, that the effect of the three projects concurrently working in the DM area had been significant in increasing government knowledge, interest and engagement in DM work across Laos. The extension of SCI's work to neighbouring provinces and the utilisation of Sayaboury government staff in DM training in other districts and provinces is evidence of the government's increasing engagement in the sector¹³.

The NDMO was strong in its praise of the work of the LANGOCA NGOs, particularly the role they played in working with geographically remote communities.

They are all working on different areas of DRR but they all work hard, doing good work, and their capacity building is effective, [and] cooperation with DDMCs is very good¹⁴.

Lesson Learned: Integration of DRR and Livelihoods

The integration of DRR with livelihoods provides a clear and meaningful link between improved disaster preparedness and risk reduction with livelihoods for communities and farmers. This has resulted in improved DRR policy and practice and reduced poverty.

Addressing DRR and livelihoods through policy influence as well as community practice are both important approaches. There remain opportunities to identify stronger synergies between the two approaches adopted in LANGOCA.

SCI worked closely with the Sayaboury Provincial Disaster Management Committees (PDMC) and the Sayaboury and Xieng Hong District Disaster Management Committees (DDMC). SCI used a sustained program of contributing to capacity, working closely with government counterparts, particularly at the provincial level. Their approach was further supported through two additional short-term activities (STA), aimed at directly supporting institutional capacity. One was the design and implementation of the *DesInventar* disaster management information system and the second was training district and provincial staff in tools and techniques for disaster risk assessment.

SCI also successfully trialled the use of Child Clubs as a means of providing disaster risk education to children and their families (the third STA). The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is using the DRR curriculum material developed through this STA and other LANGOCA projects to inform and develop national DRR curriculum material for piloting with potential adoption nationally.

All projects focused on increasing DM awareness by working with villagers to identify risks and help them to understand ways of mitigating and responding to these risks. Oxfam and WV also worked closely with government counterparts, however the primary focus of their DM related work was on village level activities to strengthen VDMCs; to increase awareness about locally prevalent disasters and their mitigation; and to work intensively with villages in strengthening livelihoods options in order to affect increases in overall resilience to disasters.

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the integration of livelihoods development with DM work has resulted in positive outcomes in both areas and warrants continued emphasis. It is also clear that the predominantly institutional strengthening approach to DM by SCI has produced highly influential outcomes in increased government DM capacity and engagement. On the other hand, the more community-focused approaches of Oxfam and WV have benefited livelihoods and underlying resilience while making smaller specific contributions to DM awareness and mitigation. The potential synergies or points of intersection between the two approaches were not explored during LANGOCA, probably due to the lack of collaboration between the three NGOs, however this is an area worth

¹³ A joint paper entitled *Guidelines for Mainstreaming DRM into Public Investment Planning in Sayaboury Province* was also recently finalised by the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC), NDMO and Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

¹⁴ Interview with NDMO Director.

exploring in future programs. The projects have illustrated the potential for further research and design approaches that can more effectively balancing the integration of strengthening livelihoods with disaster management. This is particularly relevant when addressing the different impacts of and responses to slow-impact disasters and rapid onset disasters.

3.1.3 The Integration of UXO Clearance and Livelihoods

The purpose of clearance activities in both Sekong and Khammouane was to integrate clearance with poverty reduction efforts. Integration in this sector may be more challenging than for disaster management because - as the Country Director of NPA said during an interview – UXO activities have often *'been carried out in a silo'*. Previously, achievements have been measured in terms of the total number of hectares cleared, not the benefits of subsequent land use. Consequently, as discovered during the Post Clearance Impact Assessment (PCIA) in 2011, a significant portion of the cleared land remains unused. This problem is partly due to the clearance methodology. The integration of UXO clearance with livelihoods was an attempt within LANGOCA to address this issue.

WV and CARE implemented two different approaches to integrating UXO clearance with livelihoods development. They both coordinated their clearance activities with the relevant Provincial and District Offices of Labour and Social Welfare although the practical arrangements were different. In the WV project, UXO clearance areas were identified in consultations with members of the project's target villages at the commencement of the project, consolidated into a clearance plan, which was then implemented by the clearance operator sub-contracted by the project – the Mines Advisory Group (MAG). All clearance tasks identified were completed within approximately 18 months of project commencement. From then on, the project focused mainly on the trialling and implementation of a range of livelihoods options for villagers, construction of supporting infrastructure and other ancillary activities.

In the CARE project, UXO clearance requirements were determined as the project implementation unfolded. Rather than identifying pre-determined consolidated areas for clearance, CARE maintained a clearance capability throughout the life of the project by using a number of different clearance operators: government, non-government and private. This enabled the identification, surveying and clearance of small areas as the need arose, for example, for the construction of bore holes and wells, in addition to larger areas for agricultural use such as rice paddy expansion.

Lesson Learned: Integration of UXO and Livelihoods

The integration of UXO clearance with livelihoods provides enhanced opportunities for poverty reduction through more effective use of cleared land for agricultural purposes.

The two methods used provide different benefits with similar final outcomes and are worthy of further consideration. Both methods require dedicated clearance teams.

Both of the models proved to be effective in clearing areas of land that were subsequently used for livelihood production. In the case of WV, it was more operationally efficient from a UXO clearance operator's point of view, while CARE was able to be more responsive and flexible to community identified needs. A total of 528 hectares were cleared of UXO (WV 414 ha in Mahaxy District of Khammouane and CARE 114 ha in Sekong) which was well in excess of the original targets of 220 and 20 ha respectively. Costs for both were relatively small in relation to benefits provided for villagers through the release of additional land, predominantly for agricultural use.

In addition to the clearance tasks completed, both projects conducted concurrent Mine Risk Education (MRE) activities which have continued until the end of the projects' life. WV's continuing MRE activities included the training of Safer Village Volunteers in each village to reinforce MRE lessons, which had been identified and taught during the UXO clearance operations. Village interviews indicated that increased feelings of safety amongst villagers were a major benefit arising from the projects. In most villages there was also evidence of increased knowledge about the

dangers of UXO and safe ways to deal with them. One notable exception was amongst women in one project village who appeared to be very poorly informed about safe procedures concerning UXO.

As Bartlett stated, *the different experience of CARE and World Vision has led to the same conclusion, which is that the integration of UXO clearance with livelihood activities requires a dedicated clearance team... that [is] willing and able to clear small areas in a timely manner*¹⁵. This lesson was documented in a report prepared by CARE in 2013 called 'Linking UXO Clearance with Livelihood Improvement: Lesson Learned'.

The National Regulatory Authority (NRA) is currently evaluating a number of new UXO survey and clearance approaches¹⁶ and the approaches used by CARE and WV have contributed to a shift in thinking about this.¹⁷ While it is possible to distinguish benefits accruing from both of the models of the integration of UXO clearance with livelihoods development demonstrated by the WV and CARE projects (primarily related to the persistent presence, and hence persistent message delivery, of the projects), it is likely that the new UXO survey and clearance methodologies – which should enable more rapid surveying and clearance of larger areas – may reshape the possible spectrum of effective approaches.

3.1.4 Government policy, practice and governance

This section is a summary of substantive research into the policy outcomes resulting from LANGOCA conducted in November 2013 by Andrew Bartlett. The report¹⁸ of this research should be read as an accompanying document to this Evaluation report and the Executive Summary is included in Annex 5 for convenience.

Policy dialogue and influence was a significant component of the LANGOCA PDD. It was envisaged that these elements would be supported through a number of NGO activities, although an overarching strategy for Program level policy dialogue was not described. The MEF identified *change in government policies, capacity and practice* as one of the three key domains of change assessed throughout the Program.

Bartlett's report described a pattern of factors which he found to affect the ability of NGOs to influence government policy and practice:

- *Presence* – staff being available in the local area over time, available for regular consultation and build trust by responding to local needs
- *Partnerships* – promoting local ownership, using national and regional networks for information sharing, cultivating government 'champions
- *Power* – finding accommodation with the Government narrative, strengthening existing structures, higher level engagement
- *Pragmatism* – addressing practical problems, using observable techniques and adapting to local conditions
- *Professionalism* – using proven methods, inputs from qualified advisors, good documentation of results.

Bartlett used a hierarchy of typical aid activity interventions to illustrate how a program such as LANGOCA can affect government policy settings (see Figure 2 below). He stated that 'interventions that have made an impact in more than one location may be accepted as a model by the

¹⁵ Bartlett, *op.cit.* p5

¹⁶ Hassall R and Farrow D, March 2014, *Independent Evaluation of Australia's Support to the UXO Sector in Laos*, DFAT.

¹⁷ Bartlett, *op.cit.*, p5

¹⁸ Bartlett, A., *op.cit.*

Government, but that these ‘best practices’ do not suddenly become so: rather they start as local innovations arising from conventional development which are subsequently scaled up.

The Evaluation confirmed the findings of the IPR and Bartlett that the LANGOCA NGOs had spread their efforts too broadly; were concerned with implementing too many dispersed activities and; that the lack of a coherent theory of change or framework in the PDD diluted their ability to affect a stronger, collective influence on government policy. Furthermore, the lack of proactive collaboration by NGOs throughout LANGOCA has possibly diluted the potential for increased policy dialogue and influence. As the IPR found, the potential for policy changes would be enhanced by multiple partners working together to advocate, based on their shared experiences.

Bartlett claims that for programs such as LANGOCA to have a positive and sustainable influence on national government policy in a country with a single-party government, a shared narrative with government is important. In the Laos context, this is challenging for NGOs whose commitment to the empowerment of people as a central driver of change for development can be at odds with the government’s narrative emphasising modernisation, development through investment and industrialisation, and moving people away from traditional practices. Government development projects (for example, dam-building, roads, new district headquarters) and the capacities of communities to manage the impact of these are significant contextual challenges for NGOs operating within the LANGOCA Program.

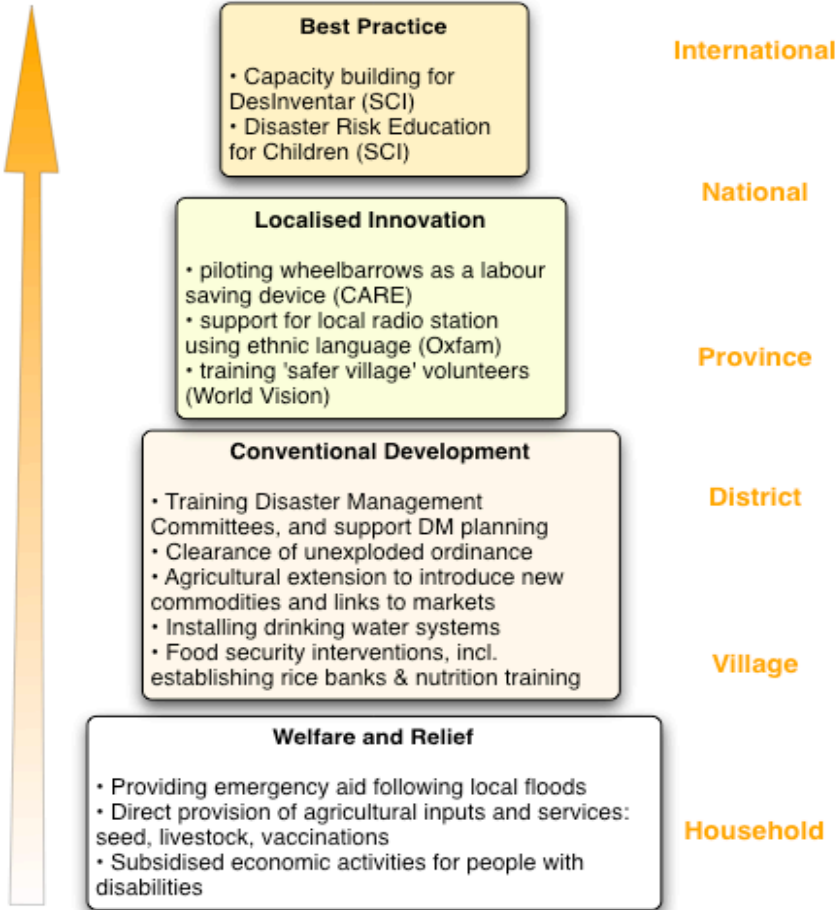


Figure 2: Hierarchy of program interventions (from Bartlett, 2014)

Bartlett states that finding common ground between the two apparently disparate narratives is critical to policy influence in Laos. While the lack of shared language and ideals was a crucial factor in

the absence of coherent and substantial policy change arising from LANGOCA, Bartlett identified that there was some common ground between the modernisation and empowerment narratives with the NGOs' introduction of new techniques and technologies. For example, as a result of DRR activities implemented such as the development of a DRR curriculum and the establishment of VDMCs, there has been a profound shift in the way people think about their relationship with the natural world and that ...hundreds of thousands of villagers, school children, district and provincial staff and national policy makers have been influenced¹⁹.

Lesson Learned: Influencing Government Policy and Practice

In the Laos context, provincial government has significant decision-making authority and key operational roles and thus significant influence at both national and district government levels. LANGOCA demonstrated that an effective component for achieving sustained policy and practice change with government is through strong and sustained relationships with provincial government counterparts.

A strong relationship with government counterparts, particularly at the provincial level, was found to be a critical factor in policy influence. A good relationship at the beginning of a project can also have a positive influence on the project activities themselves, and how effective community development processes used within villages and with local and district counterparts will be. NGOs which included significant policy dialogue outcomes in their project designs were also the ones with the strongest relationships with their provincial counterparts, particularly evidenced with SCI and CARE²⁰.

Bartlett found, there has been little evidence of direct influence on UXO policy but there has been a significant change in practice that can be attributed to LANGOCA, specifically around the integration of UXO clearance and development efforts and that this requires a dedicated clearance team.

Three NGOs implemented DM activities in three provinces using different approaches, which were all operating within the parameters of the current policy. Both Bartlett and the IPR found good evidence of the government adopting practices from LANGOCA projects and in some cases at a national level.

SCI's approach to capacity building with Provincial Disaster Management Committees (PDMC), District Disaster Management Committees (DDM) and VDMC in Sayaboury, has resulted in a model that has been adopted at a national level by the NDMO. Described as *best practice* by Bartlett, this success is attributed to a number of factors:

- emphasis on SCI's relationship with government counterparts at the provincial level
- initiation by SCI of two short-term activities (DM data-base and a methodology for hazard assessment) that positively contributed to the achievement of government policy
- SCI's innovative approach to disaster risk education with children which has resulted in disaster risk education being introduced into the national curriculum.

The majority of LANGOCA project livelihoods activities were similar to those that have been implemented by NGOs in Laos for many years, and here the evidence is clear – *'they are not having an impact on national policy'*²¹ and there are various reasons for this. As Oxfam noted in their final Activity Completion Report (ACR), *'discussions about sustainability with communities and the government has tended to focus on sustaining activities initiated by the project (continuing rice banks for example), rather than on more strategic discussions related to sustaining and improving project gains in DM, food security and health in the changing context. Food security and improved livelihoods will require broader strategies and programs for agricultural extension, research and development in the context of an opening market (ASEAN 2015) and improved access to local and international markets due to new infrastructure. Villagers currently note that they are in contact with*

¹⁹ Bartlett, *op cit*, p14

²⁰ *Ibid.* p15

²¹ Bartlett, *op.cit.*, p7

government agricultural staff, but the government's capacity is mixed particularly as it relates to new market based opportunities and risks.'

Oxfam, ACR, March 2014

3.1.5 Value for Money

Despite the limitations in capacity development effectiveness (discussed in 3.3) and variable outcomes in some of the livelihood activities within each of the projects, the Program has demonstrated many successes. Livelihoods for many people have improved, resulting in reduced rice shortages, more disposable income, and increased food variety for some beneficiaries. In addition:

- Disaster awareness and disaster preparedness and response capabilities have been strengthened, particularly at district and provincial level but also within VDMCs (and with policy and practice effects extending to national level)
- Overall village-level DM and UXO awareness has increased, particularly amongst children in the Sayaboury project villages who were part of Child Clubs
- 528 hectares of land has been cleared of UXO contamination – well in excess of the original target of 240 hectares
- Gains have been made in gender-related issues in some areas.

With respect to the original premises of the Program, i.e. *improving outcomes for villagers and government partner agencies by integrating DM and UXO clearance with livelihoods development and building of community-level resilience to shocks*, (LANGOCA PDD, Goal) there has been evidence of value in the integrated approach across the five projects. This is particularly the case across the three DM projects and less so with respect to UXO clearance. The long-term nature of the Program also provided opportunities for trialling and, in some cases, proving of techniques and approaches that are likely to make worthwhile contributions to the livelihoods and resilience of some families into the future.

In broad Program terms (assuming implementation in 155 villages over approximately six years) the budget for the program corresponds to an overall average cost of approximately AUD\$15,000 per village per year. Generally, the projects successfully resourced and implemented an impressively wide variety of activities while dealing with some significant operational challenges.

This suggests that overall Program costs, when weighed against outcomes achieved (notwithstanding that in some areas these were less than expected) represents extremely good value for money and reflects well on the diligence of project staff in carrying out their work. The Oxfam project – working in 70 villages in some of the most remote locations with limited staff resources – obtained strong results overall at an average annual cost per village of only approximately AUD5600.

3.2 Implementation of IPR recommendations

This Evaluation sought to identify the extent to which the recommendations of the IPR have been implemented since they were made in 2011 and any signs of effectiveness related to changes made. Each of the LANGOCA partner NGOs completed a questionnaire outlining the extent to which they had implemented these recommendations, relevant to their project. They were also asked to identify reasons for their implementation choices and the effects, if any, on their project of progressing implementation of the recommendations. DFAT Rural Development staff also commented on the IPR recommendations directed to them. Annex 7 includes NGO responses to the main survey questions. This section summarises findings based on analysis of the survey responses.

Overall, the response of partner NGOs and DFAT to the IPR recommendations was positive. Each group attempted to address the issues raised or suggestions proposed for the majority of the 39 IPR recommendations. Where recommendations were not acted upon by one or other of the groups (or, in some instances, only partially implemented), it was usually due to one of the following reasons:

- Logistical impediments (including the remaining time available for project implementation)
- Practical issues (e.g. government departments resisting changes in the project scope)
- Political barriers (e.g. difficulty in engaging government officials in policy dialogue on sensitive issues)
- Financial and staffing constraints (including, for example, whether staff had the capacity, without a significant amount of additional training, to take on new and unfamiliar concepts such as Theory of Change)²²
- Varying interpretations of the meaning of a recommendation amongst the project NGOs
- Lack of relevance to the project (e.g.. DRR-related recommendations for UXO-related projects)

In a small number of cases, explanations provided for recommendations not being acted upon were not clear and suggest that closer monitoring of this part of the partner NGO responses to the IPR may have been beneficial. Also, during the Evaluation's field work, there was still a tendency by the staff of some projects to see known externalities (Recommendation 13) such as seasonal access to villages as a 'risk' to the project rather than an operational variable that needed to be accounted for in design and implementation planning.

Recommendation 23²³ makes it clear that 'capacity building' had already been identified in 2011 as an area of concern for the Program. The end of term Evaluation confirms that it remains a difficult area for project implementers in Laos (as elsewhere) and the topic is discussed at length in Section 3.3 below. Survey responses of the NGOs to Recommendation 23 were generally unconvincing on this issue. Recommendation 26²⁴ addressed supply chain integrity and, again, the Evaluation found that overall value-chain assessment was problematic for some of the chosen livelihoods activities. While the majority of project NGOs appeared to have taken steps to strengthen analysis and planning in these areas, the NGO survey responses suggest that perhaps the importance of this kind of analysis may not have been sufficiently emphasised following the IPR.

A number of recommendations were directed at one of the main weaknesses of the Program identified by the IPR, i.e. the extent to which Program-level outcomes, successes and lessons were being shared between projects. Although this was an intention of the LANGOCA design and some processes and resources were built into the Program to facilitate cross-project communication, the issue remains challenging. A Program-level MEF was introduced in 2010 and included an annual cycle of project and program-level evaluation workshops, intended to strengthen this process. However, collaboration and shared lessons remained a major weakness and this was reflected in the non-committal or absent NGO responses to the relevant IPR recommendations. This is further discussed in Section 3.3

In the case of the recommendations directed to DFAT, Recommendations 2 and 4²⁵ have been incorporated into the design of DFAT's follow-up rural development program – the Laos Australia Rural Livelihoods Program (LARLP). Several other recommendations depended on available capacity in the existing NGO projects and NGO requests for the suggested additional support were mostly not forthcoming. In some cases this was because there would have been insufficient time remaining to

²² The introduction of the Program-level MEF during 2010-11 had already imposed a large learning load on project staff, a process which was still in progress through the final PEWs in 2013.

²³ [IPR Recommendation 23](#): Partner NGOs should develop more sophisticated frameworks for capacity building than simply providing training.

²⁴ [IPR Recommendation 26](#): Partner NGOs should ensure that there is supply chain integrity for activities that will require villagers to source externally available inputs.

²⁵ [IPR 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. [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.

incorporate the suggested changes (e.g. support to government to replicate the establishment of VDMCs in additional villages outside the original project scope). In the case of some recommendations (for example, Recommendations 26-28 and 30²⁶), it is arguable that DFAT staff could have taken a more proactive role in encouraging and possibly providing additional support for NGOs.

Where participating NGOs have been able to implement IPR recommendations, the effects on project outcomes were almost always reported as positive. For example CARE's strengthened their approach to gender in response to IPR Recommendations 15 and 27. Details are provided in the various themes identified in Section 3.3 below.

Those recommendations which were not addressed or only partially implemented were, for the most part, those that may have: reduced the resources available to the projects; created problems with partner government agencies; or been unsuccessful due to insufficient time remaining for implementation prior to the end of a project. For example, Recommendation 5 suggested that NGOs reduce the breadth of activities and this was not implemented as project activities had already been agreed with partner government agencies and in the process of being implemented.

One lesson learned about the overall approach to LANGOCA relates to the significant emphasis given to the IPR event. The large number of recommendations arising from the IPR, the fact that some were specific to particular projects, and the inherent complexity of implementation for some, suggests the consideration of a *Developmental Evaluation*²⁷ approach for future programs of a similar scale and nature, might be appropriate. This approach differs from the model used in LANGOCA of holding an IPR after several years of implementation when practices – whether the most effective or not – have been well established and the direction of the project 'ship' is more difficult to adjust. Broadly, a Developmental Evaluation approach embeds continuous evaluative procedures (and resources) within an intervention from at least inception and preferably during design. In effect, continuous evaluative oversight as a program and its components develop sits on top of, and helps to shape and strengthen routine program monitoring and reporting. It will also strengthen the design, implementation, analysis and utilisation of baseline surveys, a point of weakness for most of the LANGOCA projects.

3.3 Program lessons

3.3.1 Capacity Development

Overall, using a broad definition of capacity, the Evaluation found that LANGOCA has contributed to strengthening capacity at household, community and organisational levels in a variety of ways and from diverse starting points. However, the range of approaches used to contribute to capacity within LANGOCA-funded projects was relatively limited and those used had mixed results. In particular, there was an over-emphasis on the provision of training courses (known in the literature to have limited value in achieving sustainable change) as a means of contributing to capacity. The use of a 'train-the-trainer' approach, while common to many development programs, also appears to have had limitations, not unlike those found in the general literature.

²⁶ IPR 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. Recommendation 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'. 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.

²⁷ Patton M Q, *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Guilford Press 2010.

The extent to which communities were involved in determining the focus, pitch and delivery approaches for training was limited by insufficient allocation of resources for community engagement. To maximise success, partners in development programs should participate in processes (facilitated by culturally-attuned outsiders where appropriate) which identify their existing capacity to address agreed development outcomes, identify their capacity priorities and then access a range of supported processes (e.g. planning by experienced leaders; on-the-task learning and reflection; mentoring from more experienced communities) or events (e.g. training courses; seminars; workshops). In programs such as LANGOCA, time and effort is needed to understand existing capacity and priorities for capacity development in each context, recognising that they are likely to vary from community to community. In the case of LANGOCA, where NGOs operated in multiple locations and with limited staff resources, it was difficult to gain this understanding and without it, NGOs had difficulty in setting the right pitch and identifying effective delivery approaches. A mix of mutually-reinforcing and context-specific approaches is generally regarded as essential to bring about sustainable change, but in LANGOCA, the emphasis has largely been on the provision of centrally developed training courses. While this is understandable given resource constraints, it is not likely to achieve sustainable change.

The lesson learned from this is that project designs need to be realistic about what can be achieved in terms of capacity changes given resource limitations. Deeper early analysis may have resulted in fewer planned activities, particularly when villages are remote and dispersed.

Training approaches and follow-up In all of the LANGOCA projects, successful ‘training’ was deemed to be crucial to achieving successful introduction of new technologies (be they crop-raising methods, use of wheelbarrows, village plans, village development committees or village volunteers). From discussions with community members however, it was clear that many people who attended various kinds and levels of training did not fully understand or could not remember the content. Many factors contributed to this situation: lack of understanding of and diversity of existing capacity; lack of understanding among trainers of preferred learning styles; lack of time for generating skills rather than simply raising awareness and insufficient parallel support for embedding learning. High quality training – as one component of capacity development – must be attuned to the context and capabilities of participants. In village meetings, the Evaluation recorded numerous examples of people who stated they had attended training activities but were unable to record the content of the training or indicate how they were applying it. This was particularly so for women.

The demands of adequate design and quality in training course implementation are even more stringent where participants are illiterate or semi-literate, or when engagement is through a language other than the participants’ own. Persistent follow-up with complementary learning strategies was clearly necessary but inconsistently applied across the Program. The following comment by a Village Development Committee member is indicative of many of the views expressed during Evaluation meetings within communities:

The three-day training was more like a lecture and theory but it was difficult to sit and listen – our education is not high. We can’t train others – we received a document but it is hard to read and bring back the knowledge. We only got 10-15% so it is hard to bring back and teach others. People should teach us in the village – we learn by doing not by theory.

Village Authority/VDC member

Training of trainers Some LANGOCA training of trainers activities reflected a widely held belief that knowledge can be passed on through several levels (e.g. district staff to village authorities to villagers). However, this approach can only be successful if the training and the trainers are of consistently high quality. The Evaluation found examples of effective and ineffective application of this kind of training in each of the five projects. Reasons for variable quality include: unreasonable assumptions that people will spontaneously share information and transfer skills to others; inadequate time dedicated to supporting the training process; or poor design of the training

approach in the first place. The above quote from the VDC member, who was expected to transfer information and skills to other village members, highlights the challenges in implementing this approach.

While there are clear examples of increased skills, knowledge and confidence in a number of areas (described below), the overall results suggest that some LANGOCA training approaches gave relatively greater emphasis to the content of training courses than the assessment of existing capacity and identification of appropriate learning approaches. Effective work in training of trainers requires at least as much time and emphasis on skills in peer education, communication and working with groups as on training in technical content²⁸. The implementation of training for village workers – from district officers to VDC and VDMC members and various categories of village volunteers – varied in the extent to which these requirements were taken into account.

a) Capacity development for provincial and district staff

Capacity development for government staff is a crucial factor in the potential sustainability of most development interventions, more especially in a context such as Laos where government agencies are directly engaged right down to village level. Each of the five LANGOCA projects included this as an objective and – to the credit of the LANGOCA implementing NGOs – the Evaluation found almost unanimously positive responses to the new skills, knowledge and experience gained by district and provincial government informants through their work in the projects. The main contributions noted were:

- (a) projects provided resources to allow government officers more consistent access to villages, providing opportunities for broadening and deepening their experience in community engagement and increasing their confidence and skill in working with villagers
- (b) learning about and gaining experience in the application of structured approaches to disaster preparation and response (for the three DM-related projects)
- (c) strengthening of planning, monitoring, assessment and reporting skills
- (d) skills in technical areas e.g. gender, nutrition, cultivation and harvesting of a range of crop varieties (Job's Tears, rattan, bananas, mushroom propagation, etc), and as trainers
- (e) increased understanding of the complexities in capacity development for villagers and community development in general. In a few cases, informants noted that their work in a LANGOCA project had influenced their understanding of the nature of 'development'.

There were wide variations across projects in how capacity contributions were made to Government partner agency staff. In Sayaboury, in addition to training in the DM systems and techniques introduced by the project, staff maintained close working relationships with provincial and district Disaster Management Committees, regularly attending PDMC and DDMC meetings and generally giving primacy to the institutional strengthening aspects of the project²⁹. The effectiveness of this approach was tested in the floods resulting from Tropical Storms Nock-ten in 2011 and Haiyan in 2013, after which government staff reported on their greatly improved capacity to undertake disaster response work rather than – as in previous practice – simply reporting on what had happened.

In Sekong, CARE seconded two district officials to work full-time on their project as part of the implementing team. This strategy worked admirably in maximising learning and experience from the project and in ensuring their availability for project activities. A complication has arisen however, on

²⁸ For example, Living for Tomorrow, a European NGO, has six objectives for its Training of Trainers program, only one of which relates to the technical content to be passed on, and more than 80% of its six-day Training of Trainers course is about training skills, especially communication and peer education skills.

²⁹ In fact, SCI are planning to continue attending PDMC and DDMC meetings in Sayaboury Province as much as resources allow while they are engaged in similar work in neighbouring Luang Prabang and Bolikhamxay Provinces.

the reintegration of the two staff members back into government where they have now lost seniority and their original roles. Ironically, the loss of their proactive village-level roles prior to and during the project means that they now have only limited opportunities to effectively apply much of the learning and experience gained during their work on the project.

In the cases of the Oxfam and WV projects, district and provincial staff gave the impression that capacity development tended to occur more as a by-product of activity implementation rather than a conscious strategy to strengthen their understanding and experience related to project activities. In Oxfam's case, this was probably exacerbated by the somewhat unrealistic scale of the project (70 villages dispersed over three provinces and districts). Further, district officers usually had responsibilities beyond those of the LANGOCA projects so that competition for their available time was also a persistent factor affecting training and the timely and effective implementation of some project activities.

In project areas where some support for district administrations and LANGOCA target villages will continue, there may be sufficient additional resources (beyond limited government resources available at district level) to retain the capacity gains of district staff and their continuing application in target villages. Where this is not the case, and where government staff rotations occur, maintenance of the capacity development gains and the level of engagement with villages are likely to be difficult to sustain.

It is difficult to suggest a standardised strategy to sustain capacity changes in government staff, associated with working with NGO projects given that LANGOCA operated across diverse locations, sectors and levels of government. Ideally, shared assessment of existing capacity strengths and identification of capacity strengthening priorities should underpin funded project activities, but in a Program with a focus on communities rather than government agencies, and with as many partnering officials as LANGOCA, this is probably unrealistic. In terms of lessons learned, the most reasonable suggestion is that a moderate set of expectations or objectives is included in this regard.

Lesson Learned: Contributing to Capacity

NGO approaches to contributing to government and community capacity that emphasised formal training, while cost-effective in the short-term, were not effective in transferring skills or enhancing knowledge.

The Evaluation confirms research findings that an integrated approach which includes a range of complementary learning strategies and community processes is necessary to successfully introduce new skills and technologies and achieve sustained capacity, particularly in remote and ethnic communities where literacy is limited.

The 'train-the-trainer' approaches such as those employed by LANGOCA NGOs also require an integrated approach, highly skilled trainers and sound understanding of community dynamics if knowledge and information is to be effectively shared among peers.

b) Community Capacity Development³⁰

The level of effectiveness of various community capacity-focused activities deployed by LANGOCA project implementers relates to a number of important factors. They include: the difficulty of taking account of cultural differences across communities and their effects on activity implementation; the

³⁰ Some material related to community capacity has been presented in (a) above. Other aspects will be discussed in the sections on Community Development, Inclusive Development and Gender Equity.

need to focus on systemic demands related to introduction of new technologies; and the quality of the community development process required to support these changes. Community development processes are discussed in Section 3.3.2.

Cultural values (such as ideas about power and leadership, individualism and collectivism, task and relationship, risk taking, performance and gender equity) have a major influence on perceptions about capacity, the distribution of capacity across different groups within communities and how capacity changes over time. While occasionally highlighted in situation analyses, these issues are often neglected in design and implementation, for example when suitable ethnic staff, cultural ‘ambassadors’ or language speakers are not available.

All of the LANGOCA projects working with the more remote, non-Lao-speaking communities had to deal with this difficult dimension of interaction, some more successfully than others but none easily or with complete success. Generally, projects took a problem-focused approach to working with communities – greater emphasis on strengths-based approaches being constrained by limits to both project and district staff and resources in working across many communities. However if a project is intended to work in remote areas with different ethnic groups and languages it has to be designed, resourced and implemented so that this can be accomplished.

The LANGOCA projects used a range of strategies to contribute to local capacities. These included:

- establishing Village Development Committees (VDCs) or Village Disaster Management Committees (VDMCs), as a way of contributing to local leadership and determination of community capacity priorities
- offering a ‘menu’ of potential livelihood choices to various sub-groups of people within a village.

While there will always be variation in the extent to which people are interested in or capable of implementing new ideas, some farmers and families have been able to benefit from many of the ideas introduced through LANGOCA. New ideas introduced by LANGOCA projects include new crops (bananas, rattan, mushroom), new ways of organising through VDCs, changes in gender roles through workload negotiation training, Child clubs and kitchen gardens. That success notwithstanding, villagers and members of village authorities frequently commented on difficulties with training. Evidence of knowledge being routinely passed on to others was limited, probably reflecting cultural values about the connection between knowledge and power, which are different between low and hierarchical cultural contexts. Training for these organisational and livelihoods technologies tended to be instrumentally focused, of short duration, often outside the village and often only provided for a small group of trainers for each village. This was partly an effect of the number of villages and activities in which some projects worked, stretching limited resources and creating pressure for ‘efficiency dividends’ in training.

*Introduction of new ‘technologies’*³¹ LANGOCA projects introduced new technologies as a means of improving livelihoods. The successful adoption of new technologies requires understanding and adoption of at least minimal support within the environment or ‘ecosystem’ for the technology. This usually requires effective, persistent capacity-focused approaches attuned to the idiosyncrasies of particular cultural and environmental contexts.

A technology in the context of this type of Program is rarely a self-contained thing in itself but forms part of a network of practical support mechanisms and social relations. In addition to basic knowledge, a technology requires the concurrent acceptance of essential supporting structures and processes. For example, in the LANGOCA context, the provision of animals means that fodder, fencing and vaccinations also need to be considered; the provision of equipment means that access to maintenance and spare parts need to be factored in; new ways of working requires that suitable community processes and values are introduced; and new crops requires consideration of market and environmental factors. Where these were identified and adequately incorporated from the

³¹ Refer to Footnote 6 for an explanation of the use of the term ‘technologies’ in this Report.

start, project innovations were able to flourish. Examples include: Job's Tears in Sayaboury; bananas and rattan in some suitable sites in Khammouane; and wheelbarrows and kitchen gardens in Sekong.

Where basic knowledge and analysis of the supporting 'ecosystem' were deficient, innovations faltered and in many cases failed, resulting in wasted resources for both the intended beneficiaries and the project. Wheelbarrows were less successful in Khammouane where their 'ecosystem' appeared to have been less clearly articulated. On the other hand, in Sekong, shared ownership of wheelbarrows affected social relations and led to disagreements over repairs. *'There were only three hand carts left working – most were damaged and because they were shared no-one took responsibility for them'* (village member, CARE project). In hindsight, the issue of distributing items in a shared ownership context could have been considered through discussions with local communities in advance. In some districts new crop varieties were introduced to areas where soil quality and water were inadequate. Watering plants (and carrying water) became a major daily task – again affecting social relations and work-loads – and in some cases leading to the abandonment of plantings. The relevance of micro-level context for each project activity is clearly critical.

c) The challenges and complexity of capacity development

LANGOCA activities are not unique in their difficulties associated with contributing to strengthened capacity across diverse communities and in diverse topics. The concept of 'capacity' and the processes inherent in 'capacity development' have been variously understood and widely interpreted throughout decades of development practice. A simplistic conceptualisation of the processes associated with strengthening organisational, community or sectoral capacity has often led to disappointing long-term outcomes, because skills-based efforts are never sufficient on their own to bring about systemic change³². More integrated approaches have begun to distinguish between the inter-connected elements of capacity (such as leadership, relationships with others, ability to balance coherence and diversity) and recognise the uneven progression that is inherent in the development of capacity in different settings.

There is no shared international definition of the meaning or 'content' of capacity.³³ As capacity as a concept is not clear, then it is not surprising that efforts to strengthen 'it' require levels of analysis, planning, resources and implementation that have only occasionally been attained in development interventions. LANGOCA partners may have benefited from facilitated discussions about the capacity aspects of this Program and what approaches were possible and effective in the context. Capacity includes elements of empowerment, identity and collective ability, all of which are relevant to community development in rural Laos, but do not appear to have been considered in the approaches used.

Overall, while there were some good examples of integrated and nuanced approaches to capacity development in the five LANGOCA projects, there was also a shared but unreasonable expectation that formal training will result in participants acquiring sufficient new skills and knowledge along with the capacity to apply them in novel situations.

3.3.2 Community Development Processes

NGOs participating in LANGOCA applied a range of proven approaches to community development, including a commitment to participatory, inclusive and empowering approaches. The community development processes referred to in this Evaluation are based on Participatory Rural Appraisal

³² Morgan P and Baser H, 2008, *Capacity, Performance and Change*, ECDPM May 2008 provides a detailed, systems-based analysis of capacity and capacity development and their dependence on a diverse range of personal and organisational, internal and external factors.

³³ See for example Rhodes D, *Capacity Across Cultures: Global Lessons from Pacific Experiences*, Inkshed Press 2014, Ch 3.

(PRA), first described by Robert Chambers in 1981³⁴ and further described in his seminal work on working with the rural poor.³⁵ The Evaluation also discusses the role of NGO and partner staff in implementing such processes as community development practitioners. This role requires special skills to facilitate processes that ensure the voices of people in rural areas are not only heard and understood but also responded to respectfully and appropriately. The intention of such work is to support people and communities to determine their own futures. Kaplan³⁶ describes the art of the development practitioner as a subtle and sensitive one ... *which lies primarily in interventions which leave people better able to take control of their own lived circumstances.... Development facilitation as a professional discipline is an art rather than a science.*'

The IPR (p21) found that *although not emphasised by the NGOs, an important capacity building outcome arose from the bottom-up, participatory processes facilitated by NGO partners (most notable 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.* This Evaluation found similar evidence and agrees with the IPR assessment that NGO designs and reports understated their capacity and efforts in implementing participatory community development processes, and the importance of it to project implementation.

However, the Evaluation also found that fundamental community development processes were being compromised by a variety of factors, both within and outside of the control of the NGOs. With limited time and resources to complete activities, evidence from some villages indicated too strong an emphasis on completing the implementation of the project log-frame rather than allowing the time and sufficient focus on process for bringing a community (or a significant section of it) together to a commitment to the project and its activities.

A key reason for inadequate community development processes was the requirement of NGOs to deliver a large number of activities in a large number of villages with limited resources and difficult access. The NGOs had varying degrees of influence over the determination of project sites and some projects were planned with extensive log-frames emphasising the delivery of inputs and activities. Constrained planning processes and GoL requirements for project implementation focusing on the delivery of inputs and activities were also key contributing factors. All the projects were under significant pressure to deliver according to the project schedule, putting staff time and resources under stress, which compromised the ability of project staff to conduct sound community development processes.

NGO staff also referred to inadequate consultation with villagers and district staff earlier in the design. One NGO staff member said that *'we wanted better initial engagement with village participants about activities and more time in villages.'* Another said *'we weren't there enough and we needed more time on follow up in target villages – the effects are that the right things are not being paid attention to during consultations and visits.'*

Other factors found to have contributed to poor community development processes include:

- Pressures on field staff to deliver, resulting in high workloads, and challenges retaining technically qualified staff in remote locations, particularly in projects working with ethnic groups.

³⁴ Chambers, R, 1981, 'Rapid Rural Appraisal: Rationale and Repertoire', Public Administration and Development, v 1, pp95-106

³⁵ Chambers, R, 1983, 'Rural Development. Putting the Last First.' Pearson Prentice Hall, England.

³⁶ Kaplan, Allan, 1996, 'The Development Practitioners' Handbook', Pluto Press, London and Kaplan, Allan, 2002, 'Development Practitioners and Social Process: Artists of the Invisible' Pluto Press, London.

- High workloads of district counterparts – responsible for multiple projects in addition to LANGOCA – resulted in their limited availability and capacity to participate in and facilitate community engagement.
- An emphasis on training (rather than mentoring), which villagers often identified as inadequate in its frequency and approach (see capacity development above) and a factor in their inability to achieve better outcomes with various livelihoods activities.
- Project staff and government counterparts were usually qualified in specific technical skills or disciplines, such as agricultural extension, health, and education. Many of them commented that they were not confident in their facilitation skills, and had been required to develop these skills on the job with only limited professional development.
- A focus in the LANGOCA PDD on livelihood outcomes without a coherent pathway or theory of change describing the behaviour changes and other outcomes expected to be achieved by program participants (beneficiaries, government counterparts). This is also noted in the IPR (p10).

As noted in section 3.3.1, NGOs generally took a problem-focused approach to working with communities and, like the IPR (p23) the Evaluation considered that a different philosophical approach to community engagement and planning could have strengthened program outcomes.

‘A strengths-based approach seeks to find ways that a community can contribute towards its own development by exploring and mobilising its own capacities and assets and building its own ability to manage the change process through modifying and improving its existing organisational structures³⁷.

Lesson Learned: Community Development

The Evaluation confirmed long-standing research that achieving sustainable, positive changes when working with rural, ethnically diverse and poor communities requires a well integrated community development process. This means that project designs must:

- include engagement with communities and government counterparts at the early stages of planning
- include realistic allocations for the time and ‘space’ required for authentic community engagement
- achieve a realistic balance between inputs and activities and the accompanying community and capacity processes required to deliver them effectively
- must factor in contextual factors such as ethnicity, language, remoteness, seasonal access etc. (rather than consider them as risks) to ensure sufficient time and resources for consultation and engagement
- include community development processes as deliberate and planned component of project activities, rather than assume they will occur naturally as a consequence of community engagement or other inputs and activities.

Project results and expectations must be realistic in recognition of difficult and diverse operating contexts and need for repeated community engagement.

³⁷ Dureau, C (2009) *Applying a Strength Based Approach to Community Development and Civil Society Strengthening*, Matrix International Consulting (unpublished).

The IPR recommended that NGOs consider adopting a more deliberate strengths-based approach to community engagement and planning (Recommendation 20) but the NGOs were relatively non-committal in their response to the IPR recommendation (Annex 7). While acknowledging that the introduction of a new approach may seem challenging during the implementation phase of LANGOCA, it is disappointing that the benefits of strengths-based approaches were not considered more deliberately, given the challenges that many NGO staff interviewed during the Evaluation identified with respect to the quality and effectiveness of their community development processes.

3.3.3 Inclusive Development

The focus of the LANGOCA Program was intended to be on the most vulnerable families in communities already designated as poor according to government ranking data.

Inclusive development in the context of LANGOCA concerns the extent to which the Program addressed the needs of people with a disability, people otherwise identified as poor – often from more remote ethnic communities – or people at risk. The Evaluation considered strategies and approaches used by NGOs to ensure these people were included in project activities in order to contribute to the achievement of the LANGOCA Program goal. Challenges identified by the Evaluation in addressing inclusive development were consistent with many of the findings of the ANCP Thematic Review³⁸, including encountering multiple barriers to working with the most vulnerable, the need to address immediate priorities and the importance of adopting explicit strategies tailored to the living reality of the poorest.

The NGO projects were implemented in districts included in the Government of Lao PDR's list of the 47 poorest districts. In particular, CARE and Oxfam worked with remote ethnic communities, conducting three-tier poverty assessments in each target village as part of their project methodology, to identify the poorest people. One NGO project manager commented that ... *'We worked very hard to make sure that we did not exclude them [from the project]'*.

In another NGO, the Project manager stated that ... *'Working in ethnic communities was a key strategy for working with the poorest of the poor. ... However, attempts to work with the most marginalised or poorest was almost too hard, as they were too poor. ... All [of our] villagers are already in the poorest district so identifying the poorest within that village, working with the most vulnerable is very difficult. ... But it is very helpful to involve the middle level of poor as they bring many changes to the whole community'*.

This raised an important question not able to be addressed in this Evaluation about how best to achieve improved livelihoods for communities. Given the very real obstacles faced by the poorest and most vulnerable people to maintaining sustained participation in livelihoods activities, would better community outcomes be achieved by working with the so-called middle? Previous research³⁹ found that addressing the immediate needs of the poorest is needed in order to facilitate their longer-term participation in development.

Specifically working with people with disabilities was not addressed in project designs, largely because the Australian Government had not prioritised disability-inclusive approaches at the time of the LANGOCA design. The *Development for All* strategy⁴⁰ was introduced after the LANGOCA project designs were completed and activities were being implemented (IPR p28). Despite this, participating NGOs did make some efforts to more actively involve people with disabilities. CARE was the most strategic in their approach, implementing a STA focused on people with disabilities and working with the Laos Disabled Peoples Association (LDPA). This has resulted in an ongoing relationship with LDPA

³⁸ AusAID (now DFAT), 2012, AusAID NGO Cooperation Program 2011 Thematic Review *'How do ANCP activities engage with the poorest and most marginalised people'*, September 2012

³⁹ *Ibid.* The ANCP Thematic Review report provides a more detailed analysis of these issues

⁴⁰ AusAID (now DFAT) 2008, *Development for All. Towards a disability inclusive Australian Aid Program, 2009-2014.*

beyond the life of LANGOCA which will enable CARE to continue to support institutional strengthening for LDPA. The activity has also contributed to the provincial government starting to address disability inclusiveness in its work.

LANGOCA projects incorporated more general inclusive development approaches to varying degrees, such as working with the elderly and widows. However very few activities deliberately included or targeted young people and most young people were not able to describe project activities beyond examples of providing their labour. The notable exception to this was the SCI Child Clubs (see Sections 3.1.1) where DM awareness was delivered through a Child Club curriculum and children played an important role in raising community awareness about disasters and their mitigation.

As noted elsewhere in this report, improvements in food security and livelihood options occurred for some beneficiaries in all five projects. However evidence of positive, sustainable change in the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people, including people with disabilities, was inconsistent. The most common approach to assisting the poor was the provision of livestock – typically a cow or some goats or chickens. However, livestock management in villages encountered numerous problems and while some recipients were able to successfully ‘grow’ their new enterprise, many were not able to do so, with lack of land, labour and skills often being limiting factors. When vulnerable people did have some success, good family support was found to be a critical success factor. The common constraints to achieving inclusive development included:

- Extreme poverty and the need to meet immediate basic needs took priority over project activities, especially those which required continued involvement over time;
- Moving out of poverty requires land and access to labour, which the poorest and people with disabilities mostly do not have;
- Training and capacity building approaches did not always accommodate the needs of the vulnerable, people with disabilities, those who did not speak Lao or were illiterate. Training opportunities often exclude marginalised people because they can’t move out of the village or are not invited, and special effort needs to be made to include them.

As poor people and those with disabilities are often without land and labour, it was more difficult to involve them in many of the livelihood activities. For example, CARE’s efforts to support disabled women with micro-enterprise shops was often compromised by the immediate basic needs of the family which saw them eating the food for sale in the shop, and therefore negating any financial gain and the success of the shop. All projects had some examples of expanding access to rice paddy to improve food security, however extremely poor or vulnerable people were most often those without access to land to benefit from these activities, and disabled people could not provide the necessary labour required to produce food.

Some disabled people interviewed said they were not invited to training, others said they were not able to attend due to physical or transport limitations and illiterate people or non-Laos speakers said they could not understand. NGOs acknowledged that they needed to better plan and identify specific activities for these groups, including providing access to appropriate training opportunities. Further, in interviews with government officers it was acknowledged several times that working with people with disabilities was currently a significant challenge in Laos.

‘There is a national policy, and it is addressed in Education Law but there are not the resources or skills to implement the policy in any meaningful way – we don’t have even the resources to train teachers to work with the disabled’. (MoES representative)

Lesson Learned: Inclusive Development

There can be no formulaic response to working with the most vulnerable people.

The experience of the NGOs in LANGOCA was that working with people with disabilities and the extremely poor requires specific strategies, inputs, activities and capacity strengthening approaches designed to accommodate their situation and priorities.

When the most vulnerable could successfully participate in LANGOCA projects, critical success factors were found to be good family support, access to land and availability of labour.

Expectations of change must be realistic and moderate.

Given the very real obstacles the most vulnerable people face in actively participating in projects such as LANGOCA, there remains a question whether targeting the 'middle' poorest would achieve better community outcomes.

3.3.4 Gender Equity

The LANGOCA project designs all included analysis and inclusion of gender equity as a cross-cutting issue at the planning stages. The Evaluation acknowledged a shared commitment to this goal in all NGO projects, but also numerous constraints hindering gender equality approaches and activities.

As reported in the 2009-10 LANGOCA Annual Report, NGOs have expended considerable effort in ensuring the participation of women, however the results have remained uneven. There were good examples of NGOs identifying ways to address genuine barriers to women's participation and empowerment, for example through Child Clubs (SCI) or gender negotiation/equity training with couples (CARE). Evaluation discussions with NGO field staff largely focused on the participation of women in committees and gender equity training as evidence of their efforts. However, some NGO reports revealed a superficial approach to monitoring and reporting on gender outcomes. Challenges NGOs faced in monitoring and reporting on gender outcomes were described in the MEF Training Report.⁴¹ This report noted that gender awareness at head office level was not always readily translated to field experience and staff required strengthened capacity in this area. This was reflected in the quality of gender analysis found in project reports and suggests that project staff require more ongoing support to assist them translate conceptual gender equity concepts to the reality of their field work.

In all village interviews conducted for this Evaluation, women were interviewed as a separate group, and, in most cases, could identify and describe project activities and ascribe their broad benefits, although their active engagement in and detailed understanding of activities varied significantly. The NGOs used a mix of targeted strategies including: ensuring that women were involved in community development processes and planning; women representatives on village committees; and training and livelihood activities specifically targeting women.

All NGOs included gender-disaggregated information in their activity reports however, power structures and processes affecting the active participation of women in decision-making were inconsistently reported and often poorly analysed. The projects used a quota to ensure that women were represented on village committees, often through the Laos Women's Union (LWU). However, when women were interviewed, the Evaluation found that women's presence on village committees did not necessarily correlate with their active participation in and influence on decision-making. Where a participatory community development process was supported and facilitated by the NGOs, for example, by CARE and Oxfam, women's visibility and engagement in decision-making was more evident.

⁴¹ Albone, *op. cit.*, page 6

Involvement of women more generally in village meetings varied and there were only a few examples where the majority of women said they actively participated in village affairs. Some women said they did not attend meetings about village affairs but were represented by the LWU representative, while others said they were invited to attend meetings, although their participation in community decision-making was consistently described according to traditional gender roles – that is, *‘we offer opinions when we are invited to do so but the men make the big decisions’*.

There were numerous instances where women were not able to participate in training or community capacity building activities, either because they were not informed about them, or they were conducted at times or locations that precluded their attendance. Sometimes, one representative (usually the LWU official) had attended training but did not necessarily share knowledge gained, or was unable to do so because they had not understood or could not remember the training (see Section 3.3.1). Some women said they would participate more if they were specifically invited to do so or if they understood the activities better.

‘All the women attend the DM training for awareness-raising but they didn’t understand anything so weren’t sure and haven’t continued their participation except for one woman who understood Lao-language. We wanted to do the training but wanted a translator and to have the materials in Hmong-language’. (Village women’s discussion group)

Notably, there was limited analysis of these issues in NGO reports. Literacy and language were significant barriers to women’s genuine engagement in training and capacity development, particularly for women in ethnic group communities who do not speak Lao-language, but there were very few examples of the projects actively addressing this important and obvious issue. However, addressing gender equity issues in ethnic groups requires more than overcoming language barriers. Each ethnic group is unique and gender inclusive development requires a different cultural and power analysis that is comprehensive for each ethnic group.

CARE showed a constructive response to the IPR recommendations regarding their approach to gender empowerment, introducing a new gender-related component and a gender specialist to their project. This had the effect of shifting the focus from an instrumental approach to gender (e.g. the provision of hand carts to assist women’s workloads) to a focus on attitudes and behaviour change. This was accomplished through gender training developed in collaboration with the LWU, and deliberately including men by conducting the training with couples. The aim of the training was to strengthen their capacity to negotiate and share household work, increase their mutual understanding of roles around the home, and reduce women’s workloads while pregnant. The Evaluation found good evidence of behaviour change in both men and women where the training had been implemented, particularly in awareness of and shared responsibility for work around the home, with many women reporting reduced workloads. Men who had been actively engaged in gender-focused activities, such as the workload training, more explicitly described awareness of gender empowerment and equity issues than those who had not participated. CARE documented these lessons for their own and collective learning with other NGOs and demonstrated good analysis:

‘We haven’t stopped [sic] workload entirely but the women use their time to do productive tasks for income generation rather than collecting water or firewood – and when women have more income, the power dynamic in the household has changed significantly.’ (CARE Sekong Project staff)

A positive example of gender empowerment outcomes, albeit unintended, was found in Save the Children’s Child Clubs. There was significant and observable difference in the confidence and self-expression of young women and men who had participated in the Child Clubs compared with those who had not participated. Furthermore, women’s engagement was observed to be better when they were included in activities via the participation of their children in the Child Clubs. While the purpose of the Child Clubs was not primarily to address gender empowerment, gender equity is addressed in the curriculum (as part of the rights-based approach), and the Evaluation considered the observed

and potential gender outcomes arising from the implementation of Child Clubs worthy of further analysis and consideration from a gender equity perspective.

Gender outcomes for livelihood activities were mixed, with some good positive examples. The kitchen gardens and some crops contributed to positive and lasting changes, and actively involved women. The introduction of livestock was more mixed, depending on the animals and whether they were perceived to be 'men's business' as well as whether women had access to related training, which was inconsistent at best. Oxfam included a gender-focus in all villages, with specific attention to training and supporting traditional birth attendants in remote, ethnic communities, and LWU implemented gender equity training addressing sharing workloads. Both men and women reported behaviour change with regard to gender relations: *'Lazy men don't help with the work and their families are poorer – where the husband helps the family, life and livelihood is better'* (Male village discussion group). Many women also reported definite benefits and reduced infant deaths as a result of access to better information and support for family planning and childbirth.

Lesson Learned: Gender Equity

Good gender inclusive development requires comprehensive cultural and power analysis specific for each ethnic group.

Initiatives aimed at empowering women and addressing gender inequity, particularly training and capacity-focused approaches, must be specifically designed to accommodate women's practical needs such as language, location, timing and child-care.

Changes to women's empowerment occur best when fundamental issues such as food-security, health, WASH and access to education are addressed and when both men and women are actively engaged in behavior change.

Women's representation on committees does not automatically lead to their ability to influence decision-making, especially when this is counter to traditional gender roles.

Capacity to monitor and assess gender inclusive development requires practical and ongoing support to assist project staff 'make sense' of conceptual issues in the context of the reality at the field level.

Children will readily embrace gender equity, empowerment and human/gender rights concepts if introduced in appropriate educational settings.

3.3.5 Program Management

The Evaluation considered Program management and structures from the perspective of their influence on overall Program outcomes and lessons, and any changes implemented in response to IPR recommendations.

a) Planning and Design

The planning and design for LANGOCA was addressed in detail in the IPR and will not be revisited in detail in this report. As identified in that review, the NGOs described the design process as resource intensive but greatly appreciated the collaborative and participatory approach (IPR, p9-10). Two key issues relevant to this Evaluation do relate back to the effectiveness of the original design and associated processes:

1. The inherent tension created by the 'bottom up' process of needs identification and planning resulting in a large array of activities which have ultimately diminished overall effectiveness (IPR, pv), a lack of a coherent theory of change tying the program together, and that LANGOCA partners have arguably pursued breadth at the expense of depth (IPR, p11).

2. The expectation of NGO collaboration which some stated was implicit in the design and design process, but which ultimately did not result in enhanced collaboration or combined efforts.

As a program, LANGOCA was planned to deliver a set of discrete activities, with hopes that the sum of the parts would add up to a greater whole. However in practice, this was not realised to the extent anticipated. The IPR found that the lack of a theory of change meant there was not a shared framework to tie the disparate parts of the Program together, a finding reinforced by Bartlett.

This lack of coherent framework is one of the factors contributing to the Program not meeting expectations of NGO collaboration expressed by DFAT officials and inferred in the Program design. The IPR found that the lack of a coherent Program framework was particularly weak with regard to policy dialogue, finding that the cooperation agreement framework did not provide the analytical framework within which NGOs could contribute to policy outcomes, and that most NGOs had dedicated their resources at the provincial and district rather than national level, where policy engagement needed to be targeted.

b) Breadth versus Depth of Project Activities

Consistent with IPR findings, the Evaluation found that on the whole, NGOs were focused on delivering a broad range of inputs and activities. In most projects, there were too many activities and in some cases, particularly Oxfam, there were also too many villages to allow consistently strong implementation. This was exacerbated by the often 'far-flung' location of villages, difficulties in retaining appropriately qualified staff with the skills to work with ethnic groups, particularly in remote locations, and for some NGOs, insufficient staff. NGO project staff agreed that these were significant challenges for them, and indicated that this was partly a consequence of general Government requirements regulating the proportion of project funding to be directed to activity resources and implementation regardless of the context and methodology of the project. The inclusion of new villages (Oxfam) and new activities in the last two years of project implementation was of questionable value.

The IPR recommended that the NGOs negotiate with DFAT to reduce the breadth of activities (Recommendation 5) and the NGO responses to the survey (see Annex 7) show a mixed response. The Evaluation concluded that this could be partially explained by government policy but was also a result of internal NGO practice and approaches to project design. Regardless, the breadth of activities had a negative effect on community development and capacity building processes, and therefore to some extent, the sustainability and ownership of outcomes.

c) Monitoring and Evaluation

The LANGOCA Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF) was introduced after the inception of the Program when it was recognised that a more comprehensive MEF than that included in the Program Design was required. The lack of this early comprehensive framework compromised the systematic collection and analysis of program-level change occurring over time. The MEF (2010) was designed to facilitate a Program level M&E process focused on both learning and accountability. It introduced mechanisms for collaborative critique and learning, double-loop learning and opportunities for all stakeholders, including project beneficiaries, to contribute to project judgements. It was structured around annual Project Evaluation Workshops (PEW) conducted by each NGO, the results of which fed into an Annual Evaluation Workshop (AEW). The AEW was a facilitated, 3-day workshop involving all LANGOCA project teams, other NGO staff, project partners organisations and other stakeholders (MEF, p13-14).

The introduction of the MEF was identified as a strength for the NGOs who engaged in it as a learning process and as a 'missed opportunity' by those who did not. *'The PEW process was helpful – when we do monitoring we tend to focus on information from the log-frame and meet those indicators and*

activities – PEW helped us to think about whether what we are doing is actually making changes in villages’ (CARE Sekong staff member).

The MEF was described as being useful but also resource intensive for the NGOs, and in practice, was more challenging to implement than had been anticipated and that there were different M&E capacities within and across the NGOs. Interviews with NGO staff, DFAT officials and MEF consultants indicated a number of reasons for this:

- A lack of NGO M&E skills and capacity, particularly in collecting qualitative information from beneficiaries in a meaningful and valid way that the MEF relied upon to demonstrate Program outcomes.⁴²
- Poor quality data being fed up from the PEW into the AEW, which was ultimately addressed by the provision of intensive capacity building support for each NGO, along with external assistance to facilitate their PEW
- A lack of trust on the part of Government counterparts in using qualitative information to measure program outcomes and a persistent tendency of NGO and government staff to only trust quantitative data

Interviewees also stated that the PEW did not always work according to the idea outlined in the MEF, where district counterparts were considered project beneficiaries to be interviewed and included in project judgements. In practice, the PEW was a difficult forum in which to openly discuss Program and project challenges, or to interview their district and provincial counterparts, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between the various levels of government with the NGOs throughout the Program.

The NGOs and the M&E consultants for the MEF acknowledged DFAT officials sustained commitment to the MEF process, including providing additional capacity building support to the NGOs and an MEF implementation guide⁴³ to assist NGO prepare for the program level AEW. All interviewees agreed that the process improved over time and provided important opportunities for learning and reflection about Program outcomes and approaches as well as the M&E processes themselves. For some NGO staff, the AEWs did not live up to expectations:

‘The whole purpose of that was as an exchange of ideas but it ends up being presentation of what has happened in the past year. There was also confusion about the clarity of purpose of the different coordination meetings.’ (NGO Staff member)

Lesson Learned: Monitoring and Evaluation

Programs with program objectives to which a range of projects or activities are contributing require a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework implemented from the start of the project. This framework should not address specific project M&E but rather how the various components will contribute to the achievement of program objectives and the program goal.

⁴² Suzie Albone, August 2010, ‘Training Report on Technical Support to Implementation of LANGOCA MEF’

⁴³ LANGOCA M&E Framework Implementation Guide October 2010 by Suzie Albone

The Evaluation found that varying levels of capacity remained amongst the NGOs, particularly among field-based NGO staff, and that while the support provided by DFAT was acknowledged, more sustained or ongoing capacity development in M&E was required. The experiences of NGO staff in implementing the sometimes complex and overlapping requirements of project and Program level M&E processes highlighted the challenges facing DFAT and NGOs in effectively managing complex programs, and the requirement for different skills. Many NGO staff stated that they were recruited because of their technical skills (for example, health, agriculture, education) and did not feel they had the appropriate facilitation and analytical skills required of them more broadly, confirming earlier findings of the IPR (p15).

d) *NGO Staff*

The Evaluation confirmed the findings of the IPR in relation to NGO staff (p15). Recruiting and retaining appropriately qualified staff was a significant challenge for NGOs, particularly CARE and Oxfam, which required staff with indigenous language and cultural skills suitable for working with remote ethnic communities in upland locations. All NGOs experienced challenges with staff turnover, and in the case of WV and Oxfam, insufficient staff to manage the number of activities planned as intended.

e) *NGO Coordination and Partnership*

There is overall agreement that LANGOCA did not live up to expectations for NGO collaboration and the Evaluation found a number of reasons for this. The IPR discusses challenges associated with achieving effective coordination at the Program level, stating that *'the notion that a program can be more than the sum of its parts holds intuitive appeal; however, for LANGOCA, this rhetoric had not been borne out in reality.... [and] the reality doesn't meet the rhetoric of the program level architecture.'* (p14)

The Evaluation found that little had changed since the IPR assessment, most likely because the NGOs were well established on a pathway of independent project implementation and the Program operations were embedded. This does not diminish the fact that the lack of collaboration remains a disappointment to DFAT officials and NGO staff alike. DFAT officials considered they had done everything possible to support and encourage NGO collaboration as an integral expectation of the design process.

'During the design process we encouraged and created opportunities for our NGO partners to work collaboratively to identify activities that complemented each other, built synergies, provided utility to the entire program, and operated in non-traditional areas such as being specifically focussed on the provision of policy advice and technical assistance. We also asked NGOs to consider partnership between themselves in activity implementation to increase scale and influence. The intention was to build a program, not a funding mechanism. The multi-stage design process (analytical framework mission, initial activity ideas, concept notes, program design and activity design phases) was designed to support this ambition as was setting 14% of the budget aside to be programmed on additional activities over the life of LANGOCA.' (DFAT official)

NGOs reported appreciation for the collaborative and participatory design process. However, the NGOs also found the combination of a competitive process at one point, followed by expectations of subsequent close collaboration, inconsistent and unclear in terms of expectations. The PDD implicitly refers to expectations of collaboration and synergies emerging through the Program, but nowhere does it clearly outline the incentives, framework or basis of collaboration. Bartlett states that *'although funding was available for policy research and dialogue, there was a shortfall in the clarity of intent at the outset of the Program. Some efforts were made to put this right during implementation, albeit with limited effect.'* (p12). In reality, the Evaluation found that the partnership approach of LANGOCA varied between traditional partnering and a partnership approach, as

described in the Australia Mekong-NGO Engagement Platform (AM-NEP) design⁴⁴ document (page 18).

NGOs felt that the relationship with DFAT throughout the Program has been strong, with one NGO manager stating that *'we felt we have been more of a partner with [DFAT] through LANGOCA than through other windows'*.

Lesson Learned: Partnership and Coordination

Collaboration and coordination require explicit structures, incentives and resources to be clearly articulated in key documents such as program design documents.

Partnership and cooperation are complex processes and will operate best when understood and analysed as such rather than treated as an administrative function.

NGOs are not internally or externally homogenous organisations and have different capacities that must be properly understood within any partnership framework. Demonstrated NGO capacity of the Australian partner for example, does not automatically correlate to equivalent capacity in a provincial field office and expectations must be realistic.

Assumptions were made about the NGOs' capacity and willingness to collaborate: assumptions that do not take account of the fact that NGOs are not an instinctively harmonized group. Furthermore, the international NGOs operating in Laos are often large, complex organisations that are not always internally harmonised or cohesive in their capacity and willingness to collaborate, even within Laos. For example, interviews with NGO staff found that while management staff in Vientiane may be enthusiastic about and see the value in collaboration, provincial or district staff were sometimes less so due to the lack of opportunity, physical remoteness, work load or a lack of perceived benefit in doing so. The fact that project staff were typically located in field offices with limited opportunities to travel and that the five projects were dispersed across the country, made cooperation challenging at a basic practical level.

Ramalingam et al⁴⁵ argue that one of the challenges facing development agencies and practitioners is how to address complexity in the design and planning of interventions, and the collaboration of multiple actors such as anticipated in LANGOCA is complex. It requires an understanding of internal and external organisational complexity across the program as well as the ability to plan, implement and monitor complex processes and relationships. Partnership and cooperation will not spontaneously occur, regardless of the best intentions and expectations.

LANGOCA was designed to avoid problems experienced in its sister programs, CANGOCA and VANGOCA, which essentially ceased to function as coherent programs during implementation. However, the experience of LANGOCA confirms that despite the best intentions, a number of factors limited collaboration in practice. These include the lack of explicit incentives, mechanisms and accountability for proactive collaboration; assumptions about NGOs and their willingness and capacity; a lack of a framework to understand and address the inherent complexities of collaboration; and practical, operational limitations due to the dispersed location of activities.

⁴⁴ AusAID (now DFAT) 2012, *Australia Mekong-Non-Government Organisation Engagement Platform Final Design Document*, June 2012. In this document, the shift from 'traditional partnering' and emerging partnership approaches describes the various ways that NGOs engage with DFAT and other donor programs. One example (of the 11 listed) describes the traditional approach of competitive selection based on concept notes, where a partnership approach would see selection based on the degree of shared objectives, capacity to implement and willingness to adopt a partnership approach.

⁴⁵ Ramalingam, B; Miguel Laric and John Primrose, 2014, *'From Best Practice to Best Fit: Understanding and navigating wicked problems in international development.'* ODI Working Paper (Draft).

3.4 Findings against OECD DAC evaluation criteria

As noted above, the Independent Progress Review (mid-2011) focused on assessment against the OECD DAC evaluation criteria and made 39 recommendations⁴⁶. The focus of this Evaluation has been on the lessons that can be learned from LANGOCA's implementation (Section 3.3). It has also included an analysis of the extent of implementation of the IPR's recommendations and the effects of those recommendations (Section 3.2). This Evaluation remains in substantial agreement with the earlier OECD DAC criteria assessments so this section provides a brief update of those earlier assessments, highlighting some points of difference or changes that have occurred during the ensuing three years of implementation⁴⁷. The IPR ratings are provided in parenthesis for reference for each criterion.

3.4.1 Relevance

Rating: 5/6 (IPR: 5/6)

The IPR found that the LANGOCA Program was congruent with the main GoL and GoA strategies for strengthening rural development and reducing the incidence and impact of poverty. Three years later, the LANGOCA Program remains closely aligned with GoL's National Socio-economic Development Plan. On the GoA side, lessons from LANGOCA have been important to the development of the *Australia Laos Rural Development Delivery Strategy 2012-2016*, which is DFAT's current framework underpinning its aid program in this sector. The issues of UXO, rural development, community development, gender equity, social inclusion and environmental management all remain high priorities in the Lao PDR context. Sustained contributions by donor agencies and NGOs in these areas of work will be important for the foreseeable future. Collaboration between aid and development organisations is a perennial challenge but is also critical to the achievement of sustainable outcomes.

3.4.2 Effectiveness

Rating: 4/6 (IPR: 4/6)

At the completion of LANGOCA, the Evaluation confirmed the findings of the IPR in relation to effectiveness. Individual projects implemented under Component 1 demonstrated achievements in relation to strengthened disaster management capacity at community and government levels. Projects related to Component 2 adopted different approaches to integrating livelihoods and UXO clearance which both demonstrated good results in different ways.

The IPR noted that limitations in the Program design and the mixed quality of project designs had an influence on overall effectiveness. The Evaluation particularly confirmed that Component 3 was poorly conceptualised as it assumed that spontaneous collaboration among participating NGOs would occur and would contribute to enhanced policy outcomes as well as overall Program effectiveness. In practice, as has been learned elsewhere, such outcomes require dedicated resources, mechanisms and incentives. Beyond the lack of coordination architecture in the Program, the Evaluation also noted fundamental practical challenges constraining effective collaboration such as the design of 5 stand-alone projects, drawing on the experiences and established relationships of five large, separate organisations in Laos. This resulted in geographic disbursement of activities across the country. In addition, as the IPR found, working in remote locations and retaining qualified technical and culturally competent staff in these contexts, as well as the implementation of a wide variety of projects across multiple locations and high staff turnover, remained challenges in the final years of the Program.

⁴⁶ Section 3.2 discusses the effects of those recommendations and the extent to which they were able to be implemented by the LANGOCA project partners.

⁴⁷ A summary of the assessments against the DAC criteria made by the IPR is at Annex 7.

3.4.3 Efficiency

Rating: 4/6 (IPR: 4/6)

The IPR noted a range of issues related to Program-wide and project specific resources and systems which influenced efficiency. For example, it noted delays to project implementation caused by late signing of MOUs, Typhoon Ketsana and poor planning to address known factors such as the annual wet season. Delays caused by administrative, programmatic and contextual reasons identified in the IPR were addressed through extensions to both the overall Program and the individual projects to June 2014 and allocation of additional funding. Design issues continued to play out in the last three years of the Program. Questions about the efficiency of the three levels of Program governance remained and further concerns about additional resources required for monitoring and evaluation processes also remained, the benefits notwithstanding.

3.4.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Rating: 4/6 (IPR rated as 'Learning': 3/6)

Program level Monitoring and Evaluation was compromised by the lack of a comprehensive M&E framework in the program design document, hence the poor IPR rating. The introduction of the MEF in 2010 contributed to enhanced monitoring, assessment and overall Program learning. Participating NGOs made various efforts to strengthen M&E and reporting processes at project level over the life of the Program. See Section 3.3.5 for a more detailed analysis of M&E.

3.4.5 Impact

Rating: 4/6 (IPR: not rated⁴⁸)

At the end of the Program, it is clear that there have been clear livelihood benefits for many communities. As can be reasonably expected in a diverse program such as this, some project components have had greater positive impact than others, with clear benefits for communities in several areas of change. There is also good evidence to suggest that the integration of DRR and UXO approaches with livelihoods activities as a means to address poverty has achieved good results and is worthy of ongoing consideration.

The overall rating at the Program level reflects a combination of evidence of mixed impact in community livelihoods and policy influence across the individual NGO projects. A higher rating would have been achieved if Program and NGO project design issues had not constrained the generation of benefits. If there had been greater collaboration, learning and synergy across the Program, greater overall impact could have been possible.

Examples of good impact from individual NGO projects include:

- Improved government capacity, policy and practice in disaster management
- Demonstration of integrated livelihood and UXO clearance models
- Improved capacity to prepare for and respond to disasters
- Increased food security through expanded access to land for agricultural purposes
- Women's workloads reduced through introduction of new technologies and effective contributions to community capacity
- Sustained village leadership systems for ongoing development
- Development of a comprehensive development program in Sekong Province based on lessons learned from the LANGOCA experience.

3.4.6 Sustainability

Rating: 5/6 (IPR: 4/6)

⁴⁸ As the IPR was undertaken mid-term, it did not rate LANGOCA's performance in relation to this criterion.

All individual projects included elements of evidence of sustainability of the benefits associated with LANGOCA. For example:

- World Vision will continue to operate and support community livelihoods through the integration of lessons learned from its LANGOCA programs into long-term (15 year) development programs
- CARE has built on practices and lessons from LANGOCA to develop a broader provincial program in rural livelihoods and community development in Sekong
- Approaches used by Save the Children in Sayaboury to influence government policy, programs and practices are being replicated in neighbouring provinces
- Curriculum for disaster awareness used in Save the Children's Child Clubs is being integrated into the national curriculum by the Ministry of Education
- Village level committees, where they had worked well during project implementation, are expected to continue to play key roles in village decision-making and planning.

The Evaluation found a number of weaknesses in sustainability. They were directly related to ineffective contributions to capacity and therefore acquisition of new knowledge and skills, particularly related to introduction of new technologies. Some projects were not effective in engaging government officials in improving policy, programs and practice, particularly at the provincial level. Design challenges noted above, which led to a breadth of activities across too many villages, have resulted in lower levels of ownership and thus sustainability of a number of interventions, for example, in relation to some livestock and crops.

As a project manager from CARE stated:

Even though we have many different approaches to contribute to sustainability, in the context of ethnic communities, people are not used to things that take a long time – they are more concerned about getting food on the table so planning for the long term is very challenging. Also, government plans are not always well connected with what has already been done in communities, and so do not always continue on.

3.4.7 Gender Equality

Rating: 4/6 (IPR: 3/6)

All projects supported by LANGOCA included efforts to address gender equality, with some performing at much higher levels than others and in ways that considered cultural values about the respective roles and responsibilities of women and men. Overall progress towards equality was achieved to varying degrees, using a variety of approaches. Notwithstanding the particularly challenging context for addressing gender inequality identified by the IPR, most participating NGOs failed to undertake adequate and regular analysis of gender issues in the contexts of their projects.

Examples of good progress include:

- CARE's response to a weak assessment by the IPR of their project was to recruit a gender specialist and develop (in conjunction with the Lao Women's Union), workload negotiation training for couples – interviewees consistently reflected that this had changed behaviour and reduced women's workloads
- Oxfam's focus on supporting training for traditional birth attendants resulted in reduced infant mortality and this was generally perceived to save women's and babies' lives
- In villages where Child Clubs were conducted by Save the Children, the Evaluation found strong evidence of improved knowledge, confidence, participation and engagement by adult women and children in gender equity concepts. This suggests the potential for long-term gender benefits, particularly if the children maintain school attendance through high school.

On the other hand, while NGOs undertook gender analysis at the project design stage, there was little evidence of ongoing or robust monitoring and analysis of gender issues during implementation.

A common strategy was the use of quotas to ensure women were included on village committees. While the Evaluation found evidence that women were members of these committees and were attending meetings, there was also evidence they were not actively participating in and influencing decision-making, and were more commonly playing the role of ‘messenger.’ There was little analysis by NGOs of the reasons for or strategies to address this in culturally appropriate ways.

4. Conclusions

Across the five LANGOCA projects, most planned project activities were able to be implemented (after some adjustment of expectations following the 2011 IPR) and output-level targets were generally achieved or exceeded over the five to six years of implementation (with MOU delays affecting the commencement of the two WV projects). Successful outcomes were obtained in many of the livelihoods options trialled during the projects and, in most villages participating in the projects, food security was improved. This was reflected in reporting by villagers of increased rice availability, diversity of food sources and increased incomes. Overall effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes however was mixed. Potentially strong results were often limited by NGO and district staff resources and experience available to projects. These resource limitations and other project design and logistical constraints meant that community and capacity development approaches were often not sufficiently robust and some of the livelihood options proved unsuitable in some locations, suggesting the need for better prior research.

Outcomes of the integration of DM work with village livelihoods development were positive with respect to both village awareness and strategies for dealing with disasters and in the increased resilience resulting from the livelihoods development work and the establishment of ‘insurance’ mechanisms such as rice banks and savings schemes. The institutional strengthening work carried out by SCI in Sayaboury Province and its subsequent adoption by the NDMO was exemplary and will have continuing benefits as the DM methodologies introduced are extended to additional provinces.

The outcomes resulting from the integration of UXO survey and clearance with livelihoods development were also effective in their execution (and highly appreciated by people in the target villages). Owing to changes that are likely to occur in approaches to UXO work in the near future, it is considered unlikely that these kinds of approaches will be taken up by the Government.

The main lessons gained from this review of the LANGOCA Program were:

- There is value in the integration of DRR and UXO clearance with livelihood activities.
- Different livelihood inputs work for different communities. Results will be improved when community consultation and engagement is afforded equal importance in project designs as the delivery of livelihood related activities and inputs. Achieving sustainable livelihood outcomes in the poorest of communities requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, where the balance between inputs and good community development processes is maintained.
- Emphasising relationships and working closely with provincial administrations is likely to be a major factor in being able to influence Government policy and practices.
- Formal training approaches, including Train the Trainer, are not, on their own, effective means for skills transfer and are unlikely to achieve sustained changes in government and community capacity. Integrated approaches that include a range of complementary learning strategies are more effective, particularly in settings where education and literacy can be low. They require effective design and adequate resourcing.
- There is an inherent tension between the imperative to deliver a comprehensive range of inputs and activities, and the implementation of effective participatory community-development processes over time. New initiatives or ‘technologies’ are less likely to be

adopted and sustained if they are not introduced through an ongoing and robust community and technical development approach.

- Efforts to include people with disabilities, the most marginalised and poorest and otherwise vulnerable and excluded people require deliberate and specific strategies and activities, which accommodate their reality and needs.
- Critical success factors for inclusive development in rural Laos are family support, access to land and availability of labour. Activity designs need to take these parameters into account and expectations of change should be moderate and realistic.
- Gender equity strategies and initiatives must also be specifically designed to accommodate and encourage women's participation, especially in the provision of capacity development opportunities. Initiatives, wherever possible, should also engage with men. Issues of gender equity and women's empowerment are more likely to be understood and therefore changes sustained if men have similar opportunities to strengthen their understanding about gender, gender issues and power.
- In order to meet the expectations of collaboration and partnership accompanying programs such as LANGOCA, program designs need to be explicit about these expectations and include strategies, incentives and mechanisms to foster collaboration. Expectations of spontaneous collaboration are usually unrealistic for a variety of institutional and operational reasons.
- Programs such as LANGOCA with multiple projects or components all contributing to shared objectives and goals require a clear and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to be implemented at the start of the program.
- Assumptions about NGO capacity and their shared values are contrary to the reality that most NGOs operating in Laos are large, complex international organisations that are both internally and externally distinct.

Overall the LANGOCA program was found to have made a significant and positive contribution to the livelihoods of a substantial number of rural people, households and communities across Laos. The Program has positively influenced DM and UXO policy and practice changes with the Government of Laos. Despite the numerous challenges encountered by LANGOCA partners, the integration of DRR and UXO clearance with a poverty-focused livelihoods approach has achieved sustainable outcomes in all areas and is an approach worthy of further development. The Program has also contributed to the capacity of rural people and government staff, particularly at district and provincial levels. Importantly, the Program has generated learning for future NGO programs, so the benefits are likely to continue to be applied both within and beyond project locations.

Annexes

Annex 1: Evaluation Plan

Annex 2: Data Collection Topic Matrix

Annex 3: People Consulted

Annex 4: Documents reviewed

Annex 5: Executive Summary LANGOCA Program Outcomes Research Report, 2014

Annex 6: Executive Summary, LANGOCA Independent Program Review, 2011

Annex 7: Summary of NGO Responses to IPR Recommendations

Annex 8: LANGOCA Evaluation Lessons Learned Workshop program