

CASE STUDY

Tapping Into the Potential of Women in the Water Sector



Scholarships for female students help them prepare for a career in the water and sanitation sector. Photo credit: Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Lao PDR.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, an urban water project helped women to become water engineers through scholarships, training, and mentoring.

Overview

In areas where there is poor water supply, life is more difficult for women and girls because of their specific hygiene needs. They also usually bear the burden of collecting water for the household on top of other chores. This means they have less time for leisure or personal development.

A project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) not only improved water supply in small district towns but also improved the quality of life of women. In addition, it included an initiative to train and support women to take on jobs and leadership roles in the urban water and sanitation sector.

This case study is adapted from the summary of gender equality results and achievements of the project.

Project snapshot

Dates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 27 April 2009: Start of implementation• 30 September 2018: Completed
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• \$26.74 million: Total project cost• \$23.0 million: Grant from Asian Development Bank• \$0.5 million: Grant from the Gender and Development Cooperation Fund• \$3.23 million: from the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic• \$0.08 million: from beneficiaries
Institutions and Stakeholders	<p>Executing agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ministry of Public Works and Transport (Lao PDR) <p>Financing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Asian Development Bank</u>• Gender and Development Cooperation Fund

Challenges

With its urban population increases, the Government of the Lao PDR needed to ensure that people have access to basic services, including clean water. In areas where there was a lack or no piped water supply, residents drew water from shallow wells, ponds, and streams, which may not always be safe for drinking.

Among the challenges in improving water operations was the lack of engineers in the water and sanitation sector. Women were an untapped resource for these jobs. Only a few wanted to pursue this field after completing high school. Women account for only 13% of engineering graduates.

There are also gender gaps at both institutional and community levels in the Lao PDR as elsewhere. Across the country, the proportion of women in senior decision-making positions is 19%. Even in the water and sanitation sector, men dominated the senior staff positions.

Context

The government wants to increase safe water supply in urban areas to 80% by 2020. In particular, it needed to improve services in towns that were prioritized for development as centers of agricultural processing and marketing.

Solutions

The government started a project in 2009 to improve access, quality, and reliability of piped water supply and sanitation services in 13 priority towns in 10 provinces. This involved developing or rehabilitating piped water supply systems and enhancing the capacity of water utilities.

The project was supported by the Asian Development Bank, which developed a gender action plan as part of project design, implementation, and evaluation, and included gender mainstreaming activities. The project also had a component that was financed by the multi-donor Gender and Development Cooperation Fund. This component was designed to address the gender gaps in the water and sanitation sector in the Lao PDR and contributed to women's empowerment and gender equality. It supported improved access of female high school graduates to educational opportunities in water supply and sanitation engineering, enhanced gender awareness in provincial *nam papas* (water utilities), and improved gender knowledge management in the urban water and sanitation sector.

Set a quota for women's representation in decision-making

The project increased women's participation in key decision-making and implementing structures by setting a minimum 30% target for women's representation in the project implementation unit and village development committees.

Increase training and job opportunities for women in the water and sanitation sector

To build a future pipeline of water professionals, the project reserved at least 30% of scholarships to female staff of water utilities and offered special scholarships to female high school graduates to study environmental science and engineering.

The project also set a 40% target for women's participation in all capacity development and training activities. These included courses and on-the-job training on customer services, water quality control, waterCAD, information technology, financial reporting and management, and water utility management.

In addition, successful women from the private sector and the government were invited to serve as mentors and role models for the scholars to guide and prepare them to take up leadership positions.

Enhance gender awareness in provincial *nam papas* (water utilities)

The project supported a 10% increase in the number of qualified women in technical and leadership positions in provincial water utilities through a demand-driven and performance-based capacity

development program.

Involve women in community action and participation plans

The project conducted consultations with men and women separately and carried out awareness campaigns on safe water use and hygiene to ensure that women's concerns, needs and preferences were taken into consideration in project implementation.

A video on women's empowerment in the water supply sector was developed and broadcast on the Lao National TV.

Collect sex-disaggregated data

The implementation of the gender action plan was monitored and evaluated using data broken down by gender.

Results

The project improved access to piped water supply in the target 13 towns, benefitting more than 150,000 residents. It also provided grants for the construction of household toilets. The project targeted poor households headed by women, which on average had a lower income and educational level than those headed by men. Increased access to water and sanitation services significantly enhanced the quality of life of women, easing their work burden and improving their health.

In addition, the project reduced the gender gap by helping increase the number of female staff and training opportunities for them in the water supply sector strategy, human resource development plan for the sector, and corporate plans of the provincial water utilities.

Providing scholarships to female staff and female high school graduates to study environmental science and engineering helped change the perception that engineers and infrastructure-related professions are for men only. This and other training courses also helped promote women to higher positions in the water and sanitation sector.

The 26 female high school graduates who received engineering scholarships finished their courses. Majority landed jobs after graduation while the rest run their own businesses. Fifteen of the scholars now work for the provincial water utilities.

At the project executing agency level, the project involved more women in decision making on issues related to project administration and management. At the community level, the 30% target for women's participation in village development committees and all consultations and meetings on project implementation activities was met.

Well-lighted and secure public toilets were also built at schools, markets, and village offices with separate facilities and entrances for men and women.

The project met all its gender-related targets except for increasing female representation in the project implementation units to at least 30%. With few qualified females working in the water sector, especially at the provincial and district levels, only 22% female representation was achieved.

Lessons

The scholarship program was highly successful with 100% of the recipients obtaining bachelor's degrees. They can serve as role models for other female high school graduates and inspire them to study and to work in the water and sanitation sector.

The project identified poor and vulnerable households, including those headed by women, to give them equal access to free connection to a safe water supply. This improved sanitation, hygiene, and health of women and children.

The gender action plan included 38 actions and 10 gender-related targets, some of which were repetitive and did not include targets measuring how much women's time poverty may have been reduced. This suggests that future gender action plans should be more focused with clear gender objectives based on a practical assessment of local needs and realistic achievements.

Future projects should include monitoring and evaluation tools to collect data on women's time poverty to quantify gender benefits in the water supply and sanitation sector.

At the institutional level, in addition to supporting women's involvement in decision-making, future projects should strengthen women's capacity in specific areas, such as water quality control, leak detection and cost-benefit analysis, etc.

At the community level, the roles and responsibilities and implementation arrangements for delivering awareness on hygiene and sanitation should be clearly identified from the beginning of the project. In this case, the project should also have collaborated more closely with the health sector and village Lao Women's Union to provide awareness activities on improving sanitation and hygiene.

Resources

Asian Development Bank (ADB). [Lao People's Democratic Republic: Small Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project](#).

ADB. Small Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project-Project Completion Report. Unpublished.

ADB. 2014. [Tomorrow's Women Water Leaders in Lao PDR](#). Project Result/Case Study. 13 February.



Theonakhet Saphakdy

Senior Social Development Officer (Gender), Lao People's Democratic Republic Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank

Ms. Saphakdy has been a gender and development specialist at ADB's Lao PDR Resident Mission since July 2009. She obtained her master's in Social Science in the field of gender and development and PhD in Gender in Aquaculture and Aquatic Resources Management from Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok. She has worked for other international groups and contributed her expertise to gender and development projects since 1997. She also has years of experience in the sustainable use and community-based management of natural resources.



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