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**Urban Research Institute
Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction
Lao PDR**

**Advanced Urban Planning and Management Programme
Terminal Report**

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Advanced Urban Planning and Management Programme Terminal Report

Background

The Lao PDR is one of the least developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Over the last decade and a half, the government of the Lao PDR has adopted a policy of economic reform that moves the economy from a centrally planned one to one with reliance on the market. At the same time, the country has opened to foreign investments. The policy has increased economic activities in the urban areas, resulted in an increased urbanization and caused the emergence of urban problems like environmental degradation and a lack of basic urban infrastructure.

In reaction to the increase in urban problems, bilateral and multilateral assistance in the urban sector has increased. Examples are the Vientiane Integrated Urban Development Project funded by the Asian Development Bank, the Secondary Towns Development Programme funded by ... and the Solid Waste Management in Urban Centres of Lao PDR Programme funded by NORAD and UNDP. While these programmes have budgets for human resources development, they did not have an integrated and comprehensive human resources development component.

For a long time, the Lao PDR has been facing a serious shortage of qualified professional staff in a wide range of areas, including urban planning and management. Donor countries are aware of the problem and have been supporting the Lao PDR with scholarships that allow Lao professionals to further their study abroad, for instance at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok, Thailand. However, due to the low quality of past education of many of the Lao students and their limited English language proficiency, many students at AIT (and presumably in other post-graduate study programmes) do not fully benefit from the opportunities offered.

The Asian Institute of Technology is offering a “bridging programme” to students with a low level of past education. The students come one term earlier to AIT than regular students and are taught courses in English, mathematics, statistics, computer literacy etc. While the “bridging programme” can help student prepare for their master degree studies in the regular programme, it also has problems. For some students, a one-term (i.e. three-month) bridging programme is simply not sufficient to raise the student’s knowledge to a level required for a master degree programme. In addition, it is difficult for the Institute to tell students that they do not qualify for the master degree programme once they have been admitted to the bridging programme of AIT.

The needs for human resources development in urban planning and management in the Lao PDR combined with the experiences with Lao students at the Asian Institute of Technology led to a proposal for an advanced urban planning and management training programme. Funding for such a programme remained an obstacle, until the government of the Lao PDR and the Asian Development Bank reached an agreement to earmark an

amount of US\$500,000 for such a programme as part of the Vientiane Integrated Urban Development Project. The Advanced Urban Planning and Management (AUPM) Programme started on 1 October 1998.

The following parties were involved in the implementation of the programme:

- the Urban Research Institute of the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction was the implementing agency for the project;
- the BBGL International, a Canadian consultancy firm was responsible for the delivery of the training courses;
- the Centre for Language and Educational Technology (CLET) of the Asian Institute of Technology was responsible for the English language component of the programme;
- Prof. Yap Kioe Sheng, initially of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), later of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) was recruited as Course Director.

Objectives

The objectives of the Advanced Urban Planning and Management Programme were three-fold:

- a. to upgrade the knowledge and skills of urban planners and managers of the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction in the broad area of urban planning and management;
- b. to prepare selected deserving participants for further, post-graduate studies in urban planning and management abroad (at the Asian Institute of Technology or elsewhere);
- c. to build the capacity of the Urban Research Institute to deliver training courses in urban planning and management and related subjects, in terms of organization, training material and instructors.

Based on these objectives, the participants to the AUPM programme can be classified into three partly overlapping categories: participants who return to their work upon completion of the course, participants who besides returning to their work become instructors in the next courses, and participants who continue their studies elsewhere.

Curriculum

When the programme was designed, a number of decisions were made that were critical for the structure and the contents of the course.

It was felt that most of the participants would have had only a limited education in urban planning and management during their undergraduate studies. Moreover, they are and will be facing many new urban challenges due to the economic reforms and the process of urbanization. Given their relatively small number in the Lao PDR, urban planners and managers have to deal with many different issues and they are frequently transferred to new positions and tasks. It was therefore decided to expose the participants to a wide range of subjects (economics, housing, urban planning, urban conservation, municipal finance etc.) over a period of nine months.

It was felt that many new ideas and concepts would have to be introduced for which there may not be an adequate Lao translation. Moreover, most of the resources for further learning on urban planning and management would be available in English only. Given the dependence of the Lao PDR on external technical and financial assistance for development, there is a constant need for urban planners and managers to communicate with foreign experts. It was therefore decided to offer the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme in English and to integrate English language teaching in the curriculum.

It was felt that the programme should not be simply an exercise in classroom teaching, but that it was important for the participants to be faced with practical and concrete problems and to learn to talk to all stakeholders involved. It was also seen as important that the participants learn to write reports and to make presentations. It was therefore decided to include a period for field research and report writing and presenting in the curriculum. The reports were not expected to be master theses, but nevertheless a critical review and analysis of problem situation with recommendations to solve the problem studied.

The nine-month course was divided into three parts. During the first part of .. months, participants would improve their English by reading and analyzing papers and articles on urban issues, conducting small projects on urban problems and presenting these projects in the class. Included in this part of the course was also the learning of computer skills such as word processing, spreadsheets and Power Point presentations. English language teaching and learning was therefore not an isolated component in the programme, but a fully integrated part of the process of learning and studying urban planning and management. The learning of English continued during the second part (urban planning and management courses) and the third part (field research and report writing) of the programme.

During the second part of the programme, the participants were exposed to a wide range of subjects related to urban planning and management. Each subject was offered by a different instructor (from Canada or AIT or locally recruited) and take one week. In general, the morning session was used for lecturing, while exercises, discussions and field visits were organized during the afternoon. The foreign instructors that taught the course for the first batch of participants were asked to leave the lecture notes behind upon completion of the course. This allowed the Institute to build up a library of lecture notes

on different topics and made it easier for local instructors to offer the same course for following batches of students.

The third part of the programme consisted of the preparation, conduct and reporting of a small field research project. This part of the programme proved to be one of the most difficult in the programme. The participants had no experience with conducting field research, analyzing problem situation or critically reporting finding in English. It proved necessary to provide the participants with a template for a final report, to restrict the choice of topics and the scope of the research and to allow for partial presentations in Lao rather than English.

Overall, the curriculum as originally designed proved to be adequate. Very few changes had to be made and most of the changes made were caused by the unavailability of an instructor during a particular period of time. Because of the low level of English language proficiency of some participants, it became necessary to increase the English language component of the programme and to offer English language writing classes during the third part of the programme, the field research component.

Participants

In total, 76 urban planners and managers participated in the programme, more or less equally divided into four batches (Y1-4). The first batch of participants started on 1 October 1998 and because the courses were staggered, four batches of students could be accommodated over a period of two years. Participants came from the provincial capitals of all provinces of the Lao PDR, reflecting the wide coverage of the programme.

Because the courses were offered in English and some basic understanding of English was necessary to participate in the programme, it was important to be selective in the admission of participants. After the first batch, it was therefore decided that the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction would propose candidates for the programme. However, the Urban Research Institute and the representative from AIT's Centre for Language and Educational Technology would be responsible for the final selection of the participants.

Only a small number of participants proved to be unable to make a presentation in English at the end of the programme. Most participants had a basic English language proficiency at the start of the programme which they improved during the programme to a level that allowed them to make good presentations. A good indication of the commitment and interest of the participants in the programme was the total absence of drop-outs from the programme and the almost perfect level of attendance by the participants during the course.

Results

All those involved in the programme agree that the programme has been very successful. In most urban development projects with a budget for training, either the training is

limited to a small number of people who do master degree studies abroad and are not seen during the course of the project, or the training is short, but with a large number of participants. In both cases, the impact of the training is limited, either to a few people or to a few subjects. The Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme reached a large percentage of the urban planners and managers of the Lao PDR and was able to offer a wide range of courses to all of them.

The AUPM programme offered adequate time and opportunities for the participants and the instructors to discuss urban issues in depth and to reflect on the implications for the Lao PDR. An interesting by-product of the programme was that many participants met for the first time and seized the opportunity to share experiences. Many cities and towns in the Lao PDR have similar problems of uncontrolled growth, lack of infrastructure, lack of enforcement of rules and regulations and environmental degradation. Sharing of experience helps participants to understand problems better and become aware of new solutions. Because of the broad coverage of participants, there is an impact across the country.

An in-depth impact evaluation will be undertaken by the Urban Research Institute and the Centre for Language and Educational Technology during the months of November and December 2000 and January 2001. The representatives of the two institutions will visit every provincial capital in the country to meet the participants and their superiors and to see their working environment. The impact evaluation will try to determine the effectiveness of the programme by assessing the increased productivity and responsibility of the course participants. At this stage, it is therefore not possible to provide a detailed assessment of the impact of the programme. However, some indications of the impact are available.

Selective feedback from the participants and their superiors indicates that both are very pleased with the programme. Several participants have moved to new positions with more responsibilities, or they have been given new tasks so that they can use their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Particularly visible are the higher English language proficiency, and the ability to draft reports and to present findings. Another indication of the success of the programme is the use that is being made of the research reports, both by the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction and by outsiders. The impact of the programme was strong, because most participants had several years of practical experience and could therefore better understand the issues discussed.

An impact of the programme that was immediately visible within the programme was the emergence of a group of new instructors from among the participants to a previous course. In order to increase the sustainability of the programme, it was decided after Y1 to ask some participants to serve as assistant instructors during Y2 and to become independent instructors replacing the expatriate instructors during Y3 and Y4. This proved to be an effective strategy and as a result, the objective of the programme, "the training of trainers", was met early on in the programme.

Following their graduation from the programme, a number of participants applied for admission to the master degree programmes in human settlement development and urban environmental management at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok. Because of the relatively short duration of the AUPM programme (two years), the impact is not yet clearly visible. However, 5-10 participants in the AUPM programme have been offered admission to the master degree programme of AIT with a full or partial scholarship. Not all have yet been able to seize the opportunity. The admission process was facilitated by the presence of the representative of the Asian Institute of Technology at the final presentations of Y3 and Y4.

In addition to the impact on the participants, there has been a visible impact on the Urban Research Institute and the staff of the Institute. During the two years that the programme lasted, the institute gained considerable experience in running training programmes and the staff of the Institute gained experience in the management of training courses. The Institute has collected training material that can be used in other courses and has the equipment for new courses. In addition, a pool of instructors in urban planning and management was identified from within and outside the Institute. The experience gained from conducting this AUPM programme should not be underestimated.

Broader Impact

The importance of the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme goes beyond the impact on the participants and the Urban Research Institute. The AUPM programme was innovative for the Lao PDR and for the participating organizations, BBGL International and the Asian Institute of Technology. The duration and broad scope of the programme, the number of participants, the integration of English language teaching in the urban planning and management teaching, the combination of expatriate and local instructors with the local instructors gradually replacing the expatriate instructors were all elements of the programme that were unique to AUPM. That is why the imminent impact evaluation of the programme is very important.

The objective of the programme was to reduce the serious shortage of qualified urban planners and managers in the Lao PDR. The programme has not only achieved its objective in this respect, but also educated a pool of urban planners and managers who will occupy important positions in urban planning and management in the Lao PDR in the years to come. At this moment, many of the key positions in government related to urban planning and management are not occupied by professionally trained urban planners and managers. When this current generation of government policy-makers retires, a new generation of urban planners and managers will be on standby to take over these important positions. In this respect, the AUPM programme has made a long-term impact on urban development and urban development planning and management in the Lao PDR and its cities and towns.

However, this does not mean that the Lao PDR now has an adequate pool of well qualified urban planners and managers and that it does not need to be concerned anymore about human resources development in the area of urban planning and management.

Efforts have to continue to train middle-level professionals as well as staff of the districts and the villages in subjects related to urban development. In addition, it is important to expose the policy-makers in the Lao PDR to new urban trends and development. The importance of the AUPM is in the delivery method: language, subjects, duration, mixture of lectures and practice, mixture of local and expatriate instructors. The unique character of the programme has been recognized by other ministries and training projects in the Lao PDR.

Problems encountered

The main problem encountered during the programme was the wide-ranging quality of the students. A number of students could have entered a master degree programme in urban planning and management even without attending this programme. A few others must have learned very little from the courses due to a low level of English language proficiency and a limited understanding of the issues. This situation is not uncommon for instructors, but within the AUPM programme the disparities were sometimes rather large.

In some batches, the participants could be divided into three categories at the beginning of the programme: “good command of English”, “weak command of English, but capable of improvement”, and “no command of English”. Several participants in the latter category, nevertheless, were able to benefit from the course due to intensive English language instruction by the CLET instructors and Lao-language translation of lectures by fellow students. While there is still some impact, a better use could have been made of the energy and the efforts of the instructors, if the classes had been more homogeneous.

First-time expatriate instructors often had a problem determining the level of knowledge and understanding of the participants at the start of the one-week course. This meant that the first day of teaching had often to be spent familiarizing with the students, their interest, their language ability and their educational level. It was often difficult for the students to understand theoretical concepts until and unless they were related to the actual situation in the Lao PDR, but this was difficult for some expatriate instructors. Over time, the understanding increased among the instructors of the level of teaching appropriate to the participants.

Similarly, it took some time for the instructors to determine the most suitable type of field research projects. Initially, i.e. during Y1 and Y2, the subjects selected by the participants were often not appropriate for a small research study. Moreover, the participants were not ready to undertake a critical review of a situation and to make independent recommendations. A few stereotype conclusions emerged from those studies: “the government should pay for it”, “regulations have to be enforced” and “the people must be made aware of the regulations”. It was only after some time that a template was developed which forced the participants to come with realistic technical, financial, organizational and planning solutions.

A constraint in the programme was the limited scale of the Urban Research Institute. At the start of the programme, the Institute had no library where the participants could

consult literature. Only when the expatriate instructors brought publications with them and left these for the Institute, a collection of books and reports developed. However, the number of publications remained small and the coverage limited. From the programme funds, the Institute bought a number of computers, but the number was too small when the Institute had to accommodate two batches of participants at the same time. Repair and maintenance of the computers remained a problem. The computers were intensively used by the participants who had no prior knowledge of computers and software, and the Institute had no in-house technicians for repair and maintenance.

The quality of the computer equipment and software also resulted in the discontinuation of the course in geographical information systems (GIS). Although few offices in the provincial departments of the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction have computers for GIS, it was thought to be important for the AUPM participants to have an introduction in geographical information systems. However, the quality of the computers and the lack of software made this particular course rather cumbersome and the experiment was limited to a single batch.

Lessons Learned

The Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme was in some respects an experiment in teaching and learning. Overall, the objectives of the programme were met and the modifications that were made in the programme during its delivery were minor. However, a number of lessons can be drawn from the AUPM programme for other training programmes.

The funding available from the Asian Development Bank made it possible to train 76 participants for a period of nine months. This allowed the Urban Research Institute to provide a wide range courses in different subjects with a large number of instructors. This does not mean, however, that other courses must have the same duration and the same number of subjects. Once a target group for training has been identified, it may be possible to shorten the duration of a course and to provide more focused training that meet the particular needs of the group of participants.

The AUPM programme had a rather rigid schedule of successive one-week courses with each course offered by another instructor. This made the organization of the programme easier and more efficient, since all instructors would be recruited for one week. However, some subjects have a greater importance than others, and some subjects are more difficult to understand and require more explanation than others. With the experience gained in the AUPM programme, it will be easier to schedule a next programme better and give each subject the time and the attention that it deserves.

Participants in the AUPM programme generally saw English as an important subject in the course, not only to understand the teaching better, but also because good English proficiency would allow them to study further and communicate better. In other words, English is a critical subject in any training programme; it must be an integral part of the professional training programme. As explained earlier, it is also important that newly

introduced concepts are well understood and this may be easier in English. However, for some groups that require training, it may not be possible to deliver English language teaching over an extended period of time. Teaching in a mixture of English and Lao may therefore be an appropriate solution.

Thanks to the approaches developed by AIT's CLET, the (English-language) writing skills of many of the participants improved considerably. What is important in these writing skills is not so much the correct spelling of words and grammar of sentences (the word processor can correct many of those), but the ability of the participants to organize a report or a paper. Feed back from the offices of the participants indicates that the participants have developed a skill which is in short supply in the government offices of the Lao PDR. It may therefore be useful to focus new training courses on such skills as report writing and presentations.

One of the weaknesses of the urban planners and managers in the Lao PDR is that they have a standard solution to all urban problems they encounter in their work. A reference was made earlier to the standard answers "the government will pay", "the people don't understand" and "regulations need to be enforced". While the participants had extensive field experience, the field research component of the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme forced them to look more critically at the problem under study. They were forced to talk to the people and to look at a problem from different perspectives. They had to come up with financial and organizational plans. It is therefore felt that the research part of the programme is an important component that should receive adequate attention in any training course.

Financial situation

Recommendations

One of the objectives of the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme was to build the capacity of the Urban Research Institute to deliver training courses in urban planning and management and related subjects. As has been explained above, this objective has been met: the Urban Research Institute now has the experience and the capacity to deliver training courses in urban planning and management and related subjects. It is crucial for the Institute that this capacity is not lost in the coming years due to a lack of follow-up training courses. There are several non-exclusive options to ensure the continuity of the delivery of training by the Institute.

The most attractive option for the Institute is obviously to reach an agreement with a major donor agency like the Asian Development Bank to deliver training as part of some large project similar to the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme. This would guarantee continued work for the staff of the Institute and the pool of instructors

and the upgrading of available facilities over time. Such an agreement cannot be expected in the short term, but it is an option that needs to be explored constantly.

The Urban Research Institute can also approach international development agencies currently operating in the Lao PDR with the offer to organize training courses for their own and counterpart staff. The international development agency would have to bear the costs of the training, but since the Institute already has core funding from the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction, overhead costs can remain relatively low. The problem for the Institute will be to meet the demand for training in all sorts of subjects and to gather a sufficient number of trainees to make the training course financially worthwhile.

A third option for the Institute is to assess the training needs of the Ministry of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction (and possibly other ministries) in the area of urban planning and management and related areas. The target groups could range from high-level policy- and decision-making officials in the Ministry and the provinces to staff at the district and village level. Most, if not all, of the courses would have to be delivered in Lao and the subject matter would have to be adjusted to the specific needs and interests of the participants. However, the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme will only have a long-term impact if the middle-level staff that has been trained by AUPM can operate in a conducive environment.

As the Lao PDR is further integrated into the global society and economy, national and urban conditions will change rapidly and professionals will have to learn all their life. It is therefore recommended that the 76 participants of the Advanced Urban Planning and Management programme be invited for one-week refresher courses on a regular basis. Such a refresher course would have a three-fold objective:

- a) it would be an opportunity for the Institute to upgrade the knowledge and skills of the participants;
- b) it would provide an opportunity for the participants to share experiences and learn from each other; and
- c) it would be an opportunity for the Institute to assess the training needs of the staff in the provinces.