

MID-TERM EVALUATION

LAO/026

Technical Assistance towards the “Soum Son Seun Jai” Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme (SSSJ)

PROJECT SUMMARY DATA

Country	Laos
Long project title	Technical Assistance towards the “Soum Son Seun Jai” Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme (SSSJ)
Short project title	TA to the SSSJ Programme
LuxDev Code	LAO/026
Version of the Report	December 2014

RATING OF THE PROJECT BY THE EVALUATION MISSION

Global rating (Effectiveness)	3 On a scale of 1 (excellent results, significantly better than expected) to 6 (the project was unsuccessful, or the situation has deteriorated on balance)
Rating using other evaluation criteria	Relevance: 2 Efficiency: 3 Sustainability: 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

A mid-term evaluation of LAO/026 was undertaken to analyse the results and the specific objectives reached at the time of the evaluation, compared to what had been anticipated in the project document and/or the inception report, specifically to analyse the results achieved in terms of capacity strengthening, the project's management and monitoring and evaluation system and the Development Aid Committee evaluation criteria, taking into account cross-cutting aspects. This LAO/026 mid-term evaluation was initially not foreseen, however, following the recommendation of the 2014 Indicative Country Programme mid-term review, it was carried out in Fall 2014. The mission was organised from 18 October to 6 November 2014 and implemented by Mrs Barbara Massler, expert in monitoring and rural development/capacity building evaluations, together with Mrs Mouthita Phonephetrath, expert in political science and capacity building. This evaluation coincided with and was integral part of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)-led mid-term evaluation of the Soum Son Seun Jai programme. Findings of this evaluation were reflected in the Aide Memoire of the mid-term evaluation presented jointly by the mission, the IFAD Country Portfolio Manager, and the Representative of the Government of Luxembourg to the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Summary description

The "Soum Son Seun Jai – Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme" ('the programme'), Lao People's Democratic Republic, is a comprehensive rural development initiative in the Provinces of Sayabouly and Oudomxay carried out jointly by the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Food Programme, and LuxDev. The Lao Ministry of Agriculture is the responsible line ministry.

The six-year Soum Son Seun Jai programme contributes to the reduction of extreme poverty and hunger in the two participating provinces by ensuring sustainable food security and income generation for the rural poor in the target villages. The programme is financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development for 13 962 500 USD, the Government of Luxembourg for 2 200 000 USD, the World Food Programme for 3 745 000 USD, the Government of Laos People's Democratic Republic for 833 500 USD and programme beneficiaries for 358 000 USD.

Soum Son Seun Jai programme targets 225 villages, where the incidence of poverty is higher than 30%, in four districts in Sayabouly Province and five districts in Oudomxay Province, to raise the incomes and quality of life of about 17 000 rural households (approximately 100 000 people). By October 2014, the programme reported that it had reached 134 of its target villages (59%), 6 600 rural households and approximately 40 000 household members (approximately 40%). The programme presence in each target village is at different stages of development maturity with some villages showing a large suite of activities and some only a few.

The three-year project LAO/026 ('the project') is implemented by LuxDev acting as Executing Agency for the Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. It provides long-term technical assistance (through advisory services) to support the Soum Son Seun Jai programme coordination and assist in technical areas for three years of the programme (2013-2015). Technical assistance of LAO/026 is delivered to Soum Son Seun Jai programme in form of long-term, institutionally embedded technical advisers to national, provincial and district partners and is focused on capacity building. LAO/026 is fully aligned with objectives, expected outcomes and outputs, activities, organisation and procedures of programme, thus contributing to its overall objectives. The project counts with its specific results management framework, which is aligned with the one of the programme.

The theory of change outlined in the LAO/026 Logical Framework is reflected in its specific project objective: *Improve organisational capacity of the Soum Son Seun Jai programme implementing agencies for efficient and effective programme management, improved performance and delivery of services, and effective knowledge management.* LAO/026 has three capacity building areas: (i) Efficient and effective programme management-capacity building for improved governance & compliance, (ii) Improved performance and effective delivery of services-capacity building for improved performance & effective delivery, and (iii) Effective knowledge management - capacity building for improved linking & learning.

The evaluation followed the hierarchical structure of LAO/026 project as defined in its Logical Framework. This Logical Framework dovetails the contribution of LAO/026 activities and outputs to the overall Soum Son Seun Jai programme development objectives. With capacity building as LAO/026 main approach its corresponding capacity building framework, as outlined during inception, was also considered.

Conclusions

Applying the Development Aid Committee criteria and the LuxDev evaluation scoring matrix, the following assessment is obtained:

Relevance, Score 2 (Above average results, performance in certain areas better than expected)

The Soum Son Seun Jai Programme Design was ambitious, complex and highly demanding in terms of expected roles of implementing agencies and communities. Delivery capacity of the implementing agencies and absorption capacities of the communities were low. LAO/026 was, and remains, the right thing to do when unpacking and responding to the complexities of the poverty settings in poor food-insecure remote ethnic villages found in Sayabouly and Oudomxay Provinces.

Effectiveness, Score 3 (Expected results, but there is scope for improvement)

LAO/026 with its intervention modality in form of long-term embedded technical advisers to national, provincial and district partners contributed to the performance of Soum Son Seun Jai programme, which is considered moderate by the IFAD mid-term evaluation.

After 22 months of implementation, LAO/026 support to programme is commencing to show initial results with regard to efficient and effective programme management, improved performance and delivery of services, but to a lesser extent to effective knowledge management. The advisory mandate of LAO/026, focusing on facilitation and the capacity building of the programme team and implementing stakeholders, has demonstrated limitations.

LAO/026 was effective in enhancing programme management to implement the complex design of the programme which demands on delivery outstrips capacities of the Ministry of Agriculture staff at all levels (national, provincial, district). A major shortcoming is the non-functionality of the monitoring and evaluation system, which needs to be modified to inform a result-based management system and derive hands-on, user-friendly Annual Work Plan and Budget from.

Programme implementation agencies are enabled to provide demand-oriented, quality technical services to rural agricultural households using participatory methods. However, the quality and outreach of services is still below standards. The types of programme services offered are relatively uniform across all districts, are not always well targeted to the needs of rural poor households, nor do they specifically address women. Space for delivery of services by non-conventional actors, i.e. Farmers Organisations and Associations, Non-Governmental Organisation and private sector, remains difficult to conquer in a context of a monopoly of state-run services.

However, valuable lessons are emerging in thematic issues as well as in innovative capacity building approaches, facilitated by LAO/026. The challenge is to combine these, e.g. using peer-to-peer learning or Knowledge Champions for new thematic areas such as in the 'pass-the-gift' approach in livestock development for women.

Another major lesson being learned is how to best bring service delivery down to the farmer group level ('the last mile') as currently the lowest tier of services stops at the village level. The community agricultural development plans may offer more local ownership and reflection of farmer needs and opportunities than the current district-led village development plans, which have proven hard to change ('advise resistant').

Imposed as an unforeseen externality, the concession system enacted by the Government of Laos around contract farming and value chain development actually deprives farmers to be equal partners in negotiating prices for their goods. LAO/026 and the Soum Son Seun Jai programme are developing valuable insights, e.g. around practical improvements at farm gate level in the tea value chain, to undo this strait-jacket that turns farmers into passive price-takers.

Pro-active knowledge management is still in its infancy and it is high time that early experiences with innovations (e.g. service delivery through the Beekeeping Association) are documented. It is obvious that the non-functionality of the monitoring and evaluation system did not exactly foster a knowledge management and learning culture.

Efficiency, score 3

Efficiency is expressed in this context as: (i) leverage of LuxDev resource allocations at political level, (ii) leverage of resources by LAO/026 staff, (iii) human resource efficiencies, and (iv) other elements including delays in and low levels of disbursement of LAO/026 and Soum Son Seun Jai programme, as well as friction losses around the delivery model (technical assistance versus technical advisory services). LuxDev leverages other financial partners' contributions in a 10:1 ratio, an extremely high ratio (2 200 000 USD/ 21 000 000 USD), which indicates excellent 'value for money'. Leverage is translated in a focused contribution of the LuxDev's 2 200 000 USD to project coordination and knowledge management. These positive elements are partly offset by pronounced delays of delivery of LAO/026 services (12 months) combined with low performance of financial management of Soum Son Seun Jai programme as documented by the IFAD. These effects were exacerbated by the strict adherence by LAO/026 to technical advisory services without pronounced effects on Soum Son Seun Jai programme budgetary decision-making.

Sustainability, score 4 (below average results, clear need for improvement)

In line with the design considerations around low institutional capacities and restricted likelihood of achieving institutional 'embrace' after solely 22 months of project duration, sustainability prospects of the innovative capacity building approach in terms of institutional preparedness and readiness for mainstreaming are still insufficiently owned and incorporated in Soum Son Seun Jai programme and post-project involved service delivery institutions.

General Recommendations:

The mission recommends LAO/026 technical assistance be made available to Soum Son Seun Jai programme and corresponding stakeholders till the end of the programme, currently scheduled for December 2017.

The mission further recommends that the delivery modalities and scope of LAO/026 be modified in the course of 2015 to support Soum Son Seun Jai programme in key aspects defined in the following paragraphs.

A. Modified capacity building in key thematic areas and innovative learning approaches

- The thematic focus should strengthen promising on-going activities/initiatives, inter alia, participatory market-oriented village-based planning/participatory rural appraisal (community agricultural development plans), the pilot project on strengthening of farmer organisations in business development, contract farming facilitation training and advocacy, and development of tea value chains;
- Synergies should be built by combination of non-conventional capacity building approaches such as peer-to-peer learning and the use of Knowledge Champions in innovative learning;
- Piloting should be explored of channelling seed money directly to selected village development planning committees and/or farmer groups (e.g. tea producers, bee keepers) thus capitalising experiences of LAO/021 Bolikhamxay Livelihood Improvement and Governance project;
- The three planned innovative learning models should be implemented as foreseen in the annual work plan and budget 2014/2015: (i) Farmer field schools, (ii) Learning Routes and strengthening knowledge champions, (iii) Green Digital technology;
- The monitoring and evaluation system should be supported for participatory data collection, analysis of data, compilation of knowledge documents;
- An appropriate incentive system (preferably result-based) and hardship allowances will need to be in place to enhance commitment and counter high turn-over of involved ministerial district and provincial agricultural and forestry office and staff. Such system shall be carefully monitored for effectiveness and efficiency.

B. Modified technical assistance modality

- Terms of Reference of LAO/026 technical advisers at all levels (national, province, district) will be modified to reflect their function as a pro-active catalyser of change and provider of thematic and methodological expertise, in both cases predominantly at provincial and district levels;
- LAO/026 technical assistance (at district level) need to have a small operational budget allocated by LAO/026 and Soum Son Seun Jai programme (IFAD) for direct support to villages or farmers groups in the prioritised thematic capacity building areas mentioned in paragraph A;
- LAO/026 technical assistance should facilitate that farmers, district agricultural and forestry offices and private sector enterprises involved in contract farming arrangements respect rights and obligations of parties (enhanced brokerage and advocacy role) while safeguarding overall household food and nutrition security concerns;
- The district agricultural and forestry office sector officers and their LAO/026 district technical assistance should form district teams to address village needs expressed in corresponding community agricultural development plans in a concerted way by jointly scheduling visits/meetings in the delivery of services for change. Aspects related to the multi-sector Nutrition Initiative should be anchored in the community agricultural development plans as well as in higher level commitments;
- LAO/026 should pilot an annual award and incentive system for the newly formed district agricultural and forestry office - LAO/026 technical assistance district teams, which is to be based on the satisfaction of the beneficiaries, the impact achieved, the learning potential for other beneficiaries (replication factor) and the visibility (learning material produced, a tangible outcome for the knowledge management component). Such award and incentive system may be funded by Soum Son Seun Jai programme or other governmental sources (but under no circumstance funded or co-funded by LAO/026).

C. Changes in staffing

- The LAO/026 international project advisers will be reassigned from their current national duty station at the Ministry of Agriculture, Vientiane, and will be based at provincial agricultural and forestry office at provincial level, while keeping the link with the national project coordinator based at the Ministry of Agriculture (national level);
- The national project coordinator should be supported by a national operational manager appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture thus liberating capacities to focus on strategic issues;
- The current number of nine LAO/026 funded district development facilitators will be reduced to five and their roles modified to functional development advisers at district level. For these functional development advisers, LAO/026 intends to mobilise partners with clear competencies as native speakers of ethnic minority languages and Lai-Tai, and reinforce Soum Son Seun Jai programme efforts to engage female staff (short-term, long-term);
- One LAO/026 international project adviser for Sayabouly Province will support the Soum Son Seun Jai programme monitoring and evaluation team (30%) and function as team leader for the Sayabouly technical assistance team (70%) composed of one national technical adviser and two functional development advisers at district level;
- One LAO/026 international project adviser will lead the Oudomxay Province technical assistance team (70%) composed of one national technical adviser and three functional development advisers at district level. The international project adviser will furthermore take responsibility for the Soum Son Seun Jai programme Knowledge Management component (30%).