"Going Digital"

Lessons learned from implementing Luxembourg Cooperation project activities through a shift to digital approaches in Lao PDR during COVID-19 (2020/2021).

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ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus
CTA	Chief Technical Adviser
DP	Development Partner
FLA	Faculty of Law and Administration, Champassak University
FLP	Faculty of Law and Political Science, National University of Laos
IT	Information Technology
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STUDY BACKGROUND

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 have been very damaging. The sanitary measures imposed by the Lao government to contain the spread of the virus made the productivity of the country drop substantially. Yet, the current world crisis also demonstrated that digital technologies can be beneficial for daily cooperation work as regards electronic communications, online teaching, e-commerce, etc., making the service delivery more efficient and cost-effective when "work from home" became "the new normal".

This study reflects the participatory harvesting, analysis and dissemination of the lessons learned, good and bad, and results of the experience that has been analysed, in this case the critical study of LuxDev's shift to digital work approaches following the COVID-19 outbreak in Lao PDR during the period 2020-2021. Critical factors are examined and, on this basis, a concept tool which can benefit other engagements by LuxDev in Laos and potentially across the global organisation is in this way developed. The ultimate aim is to improve future similar interventions by replicating successful elements, in the short and long term.

LAO/031's project team developed two versions of a survey, differentiating between two categories of people:

- those who have facilitated online/hybrid meetings and/or trainings, labelled "providers"/"facilitators";
- those who have participated in these, "recipients"/"participants".

As for distribution of the survey, LAO/031 asked its project partners and our other project teams through their Chief Technical Advisers (CTAs) to share the links with its respective counterparts, to reach as many respondents as possible, in order to ensure a representative and consolidated basis for the final analysis. The surveys were made available during a period of three weeks, in Lao and English language as preferred by each respondent. In total, 187 respondents took part in the study, 69 providers/facilitators of online meetings/trainings, and 118 participants to these events.

KEY STUDY FINDINGS

TECHNICAL FINDINGS[1]

The internet provider most often used for online meetings and trainings are the independent internet service providers available in Laos, such as Unitel, Lao Telecom, etc. The kind of device most often used by providers and participants is the computer/laptop, as compared to the smartphone. The system most often used is Windows. Zoom is the number one preferred software/platform. Most of the respondents indicated that the general quality of the internet is "good" when working online. The absolute majority of respondents were offered IT training and/or instructions before the online event(s) to be able to participate in the best possible conditions.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK[2]

Respondents, both among providers and respondents, appreciated the following elements when working digitally:

- the safety and the protection offered against COVID-19 infections;
- the feeling of inclusiveness when working online;
- the versatile nature of online meetings and trainings;
- an economic and environmental-friendly advantage;
- the new Information Technology (IT) skillset developed;
- a new social experience never encountered before;
- the convenience, the flexibility and the accessibility enjoyed;
- accelerated productivity and efficient work.

NEGATIVE FEEDBACK[3]

Respondents were also honest as to the disadvantages of working online:

- the absence of enthusiasm during online work events;
- the dilemma between organising too short or too long schedules;
- the increase in the number of meetings;
- the missing entertaining nature/character of online events;
- the low internet signal and unstable Wi-Fi connection;
- the occurrence of technical issues, other than low signal and unstable Wi-Fi;
- the absence of efficient communication between providers and participants;
- the difficulty to work rigorously, to be autonomous and to self-assess personal work.

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1   See main study document, section "3.1 Technical aspects" (page 16)
2   See main study document, section "3.2 General feedback – positive" (page 18)
3   See main study document, section "3.3 General feedback – negative" (page 21)

CHALLENGES HIGHLIGHTED[4]

Participants and providers/facilitators of online events indicated the following aspects as challenging when working digitally:

- the challenge related to the internet signal and the Wi-Fi connection;
- the absence of understanding and knowledge related to relevant IT-programmes;
- the absence of adequate IT-equipment and of access to professional versions of programmes when necessary;
- the difficulty to satisfy everyone when organising the schedule of an event (time and subject);
- the inability of facilitators to check if people are participating/paying attention;
- the inability of facilitators to know if the content/topic is understood;
- the chaotic collaboration due to general miscommunication between providers and participants;
- an inadequate choice of speakers and of the language used;
- the absence of the social aspect of learning and sharing knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS[5] AND RECOMMENDATIONS[6]

"INTERNET STABILITY, SPEED AND RELIABILITY"

Internet stability remains a persistent challenge, and one which is particularly disruptive to collaborative online work, when people lose track of what is being explained/discussed.

Recommendation:

For increased internet speed and reliability, accessible connectivity (both cabled and wireless) should be ensured in relevant institutions and made accessible to all e.g., through increased number of hotspots.

"DATA TOP-UP"

Covering the cost of data time, usually referred to as "topping up" of internet, is considered a top priority.

Recommendation:

Sufficient "top-up" of their data may be a prerequisite for active and effective participation. The rates and amounts should be systematised and graded, depending e.g., on the requirements to download materials representing large sets of data.

"IT-EQUIPMENT"

The absence of adequate IT-equipment such as modern computers and headsets is challenging, and the functionalities of the IT programmes used in the "free" versions, including Zoom, are limited, whereas the professional functions in most cases require a subscription.

Recommendation:

For access to IT equipment and software for participants especially in capacity development processes, institutions can establish pools of equipment which can be accessed on a temporary basis by their staff.

"IT TRAININGS AND INSTRUCTIONS"

The absence of sufficient understanding and knowledge related to those IT-programmes for people who want to join online work sessions is a challenge. There is still a need for further IT capacity development of both providers and participants.

Recommendation:

For training on the functionalities of relevant software and online tools, guides and tutorials should be developed and rolled out for providers and participants.

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4 See main study document, section "3.4 Challenges highlighted by survey respondents" (page 25)
5 See main study document, section "4. Overall conclusions and lessons learned" (page 33)
6 See main study document, section "5. Recommendations: key points for reflection and caveats for consideration" (page 39)

"PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY"

It is notable that the providers overall rated the effectiveness on online working significantly lower than participants, reflecting a personal element of appreciation. Participants have addressed the difficulty of working rigorously, to be autonomous and to self-assess personal work.

Recommendations:

For all online events, provide opportunities as follows:

- before the event, access to relevant materials for prior study and preparation;
- during the event, provide opportunity for discussion including giving the space for participants to take the stage and express their opinion, and maintain a strong focus on listening to what is being contributed by participants as well as being explained by facilitators. This includes attention paid to the interaction between online and face to face participants in hybrid events;
- after the event, enable continued discussion and sharing, e.g., through WhatsApp groups and, when relevant, provide the possibility for participants to re-watch the screen-recording of the event.

Provide meaningful structures for assessment and self-assessment, both for providers and for participants (e.g., feedback loops from participants and reflection among providers, pre- and post-testing methodology, including when relevant the impact of learning on practice).

"COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND PROVIDERS/FACILITATORS"

- the absence of "control" regarding the efficient participation and concentration of people makes it hard to assess if the online event was even fruitful at all;
- participants specifically reflect a wish for a better assessment of their understanding in order to really actively gain new knowledge and not simply participate to participate;
- collaboration is often chaotic and leads to unsatisfying work/professional results;
- depending on the meeting or training, providers do not always share, in advance of the event, information on the subject/content of the event. Therefore, participants are at times left in doubt of what is going to be discussed;
- the choice of language spoken is crucial, specifically in Lao PDR as not enough Lao people yet speak English well enough to smoothly follow an event in English language;
- the number of individuals participating may be relevant, insofar as a large number of individuals may hamper constructive discussions and debate.

Recommendations:

- ensure that communication and dialogue between providers/ facilitators and participants is built into the course methodology (e.g., use of polls and questions/response processes in chat). The use of break-out rooms is encouraged, and the agenda for an event must allow sufficient time for this;
- ensure that e.g., facilitators language is appropriate to the recipient target group, and that interpretation is provided as required, both for presentations and for dialogue between facilitators and participants.

"ENTHUSIASM AND ATTENTION"

Remote meetings and/or trainings may be less entertaining than events happening in-person, leading to the absence of enthusiasm of the participants to meetings and/or trainings. However, this can also be a question of cultural bias and mannerisms, but what may be interpreted as an absence of liveliness and interest in a subject/event by extraverted people who come from other cultural backgrounds might not be viewed as such by people who are more introverted.

Recommendation:

Facilitators should draw inspiration from in-person social experiences to integrate during remote meetings and workshops to offer a semblance of social normalcy. Utilising breaks and break-out rooms as opportunities for social interaction and including "ice breakers" and physical activity as means to ensure that attention is preserved is encouraged to ensure motivation and maintaining attention by participants.

"VERSATILITY AND CONVENIENCE"

The versatility of online platforms/apps constitutes is agreed on as being one of the biggest strengths of remote methods of work. The convenience and flexibility of online meetings and training are advantages that can hardly be fulfilled with in-person events, and easily facilitated by the large selection of platforms and functions available.

Recommendations:

- make use of the wide range of platforms, apps and functions available;
- reconsider traditional face to face training formats and utilise the opportunities provided by the online modalities and their asynchronous nature. Utilise the opportunity to draw on key resource persons irrespective of geographical distance and without the requirement of travel and physical presence to stagger learning processes over longer periods, with built-in reflection and "practice" which can then be brought back to and shared in subsequent sessions.

"CLARITY AND PLANNING"

Especially participants need clear explanation of topic(s) that will be discussed, the sharing of related material to deepen the understanding and the preparation of the elements in advance of the event, and possibly the creation of a WhatsApp group for major meetings/trainings in order to give people the opportunity to collaborate. Furthermore, in terms of planning, the dilemma between organising too short or too long schedules is an issue, and only rarely does the duration a meeting or training match the amount of time scheduled.

Recommendations:

- facilitators selected by providers must adapt delivery style and format, including length of presentations, to the online format. As a general rule, online sessions should not extend beyond 45 minutes without break;
- at best, the specific topics that will be discussed and related material should be shared with the participants in advance.

"RULES"

Guidelines and rules to follow during the events ("do's and don'ts") regarding behaviour and efficient participation provide a more productive work setting.

Recommendation:

Develop guidelines and outlines of "ground rules" to follow during an event.

"PURELY ONLINE VERSUS HYBRID"

Hybrid meetings/trainings (as compared to purely online work events) have their own challenges and these need to be understood and addressed properly. The real value of hybrid lies in the flexibility offered to participants and providers to choose to be present in person or to join online, depending on the situation at the given time.

Recommendation:

Make use of the flexibility in planning of hybrid events and the possibility to have the most important actors to a meeting be physically present, when necessary.

"COLLABORATION BETWEEN PROVIDERS/FACILITATORS"

The overall collaboration between providers/facilitators organising online events tends to be chaotic when they choose to use different methods and of work and material.

Recommendations:

- to facilitate effective and efficient planning and execution, develop standard support material with agreed platforms, templates, participants' list, feedback sheet, etc., from which providers can draw;
- collaboration between providers to ensure that lessons learned and e.g., materials developed are shared so that gradually a communal body of experience and support is developed and made easily accessible.