The Uses of Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) in the Planning and Monitoring Process in Saravan, Lao PDR

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Abstract

Towards its millennium development goals: significantly reduce mass poverty by 2010, and to overcome the status of LCD (Least Developed Countries) by 2020, one of the Lao PDR’s development strategies is decentralization. The social-economic development planning must be done by local authorities. Taking this responsibility, local authorities need to analyze the data more carefully before making development plan. Furthermore, the systematic monitoring of development process required more reliable and timely data.

In this connection, the CBMS pilot project in Toumlan district of Saravan has been undertaken and ended last year. It has shown more interesting method of data collection system and the important figure, which plays a very crucial role for effective development planning process. It provides more reliable data in many social sectors such as education, health care services and others. Moreover, it is a very effective tool to make impact assessment of many development programs in local areas. Even though, before using CBMS, the Lao government uses village book. We found that CBMS fits very well with the former system of community-based data collection methods. The objectives and purpose of both are very similar. Its main focus is on capacity building of local authority but with different methodologies of data collection and processing. The CBMS has more reliable, scientific method and easier for the village chief to aggregate data. It also complements the efforts of village book in poverty reduction monitoring system. However, there is a need for capacity building in order to implement CBMS in wider areas.

Currently, many types of organizations in the local areas still collect data for their own purposes by using different methods and formats. This duplications waste resources and require more work for village chiefs. Some times to much work for village chiefs results in lower quality of data. CBMS significantly reduces this burden of village chiefs by providing more appropriate data for many kinds of stakeholders.

Since the planning process in Saravan starts from village, the data collected by the CBMS is essential. First, it provides good base for analysis. Then, it shows the existing weaknesses and potentials of development paths. More importantly, CBMS is a reliable tool for monitor the progress of development programs.

The paper will also briefly introduces the former and the existing data collection methods, excluding CBMS. It also introduces poverty reduction measurement in Lao PDR in the past and compared with CBMS. After that, the process of CBMS project in Toumlan district of Saravan is explained with its outcomes, usefulness and affectivity. Some challenges or obstacles will also be mentioned at the end.
I. Introduction

The government of Lao PDR has reiterated its strong commitment to the objective of poverty eradication in order to achieve its national development goals. To this aim, in June 2004, the government has endorsed the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). NGPES emphasizes a certain number of essential linkages between the four main sectors, several supporting sectors, cross sector priorities and specific national programs. A Community-driven and access-oriented rural development strategy is a base for poor-district development. Rural development is center to the government’s poverty reduction efforts as rural poverty is prime concern and a community-based approach essential to its eradication. In this regard, the principles of participation and decentralization play an importance role in linking the planning system to the poverty reduction strategy.

Lao PDR is implementing a number of economic programmes such as to stabilize the macro economy, promote growth, and subsequently reduce poverty. The implementation of the NGPES, therefore, demands on information of the poor especially at the community level. It is necessary to have a system for monitoring and evaluation, especially for programs and policies towards poverty alleviation. The monitoring in Lao PDR has been adopted a bottom-up approach system from the community to the national level. This system is based on the data collection of the National Statistical Center through “Village book”.

To build up a system of poverty monitoring and adopting of CBMS challenges inadequate capacity at districts and village level, and the data shortfall on communities. It creates problems in designing and prioritising programs and policies that will alleviate of the rural poverty. There is a need to build up and develop the capacity at the grass root level to ensure the effectiveness of decentralisation.

During 1990s poverty analysis and monitoring have drawn heavily from Lao Expenditure Consumption Surveys (LECS), which take place every five years. It seems that the monitoring of poverty during 1990s was not progressively in place. Annual assessment did not exist at all until 2001.

In 2004 the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) was introduced by regional IDRC and CBMS coordinators in the region to National Statistics Center. Lao PDR has adopted and implemented the CBMS in 11 villages in Toumlan of Saravan province.

It was expected that in the future CBMS will be adopted nationwide. All received data information and analysis of CBMS project will be supplemental fundament of the existing “Village book” for monitoring and evaluating of socio and economic development and the poverty in the country at local level.

II. Poverty Measurement and Monitoring in Lao PDR

Poverty Monitoring and analysis in the Lao PDR has so far been mainly based on the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Surveys (LECS). The last LECS III was conducted in 2002/2003. The fourth round of LECS (LECS IV) has just started by April 2007, and will be
completed by March 2008. However to assess and monitor poverty in the Lao PDR, quantitative measures were used as well as qualitative assessments.

**Quantitative measurement using poverty lines:** Poverty lines were constructed for use in quantitative poverty research. The Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS) data sets from 1992/1993, 1997/1998 and 2002/2003 have provided the base for the monitoring.

The establishment of the food poverty line follows the current standards used in developed countries, World Bank and other international organizations that use the figure of 2100 calories per day per person as the necessary food requirement. Those with total expenditures and consumption total less than the equivalent of 2100 calories are considered to be living below the food poverty line.

**Qualitative Assessment**

Qualitative analysis of poverty nation-wide began with the implementation of the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) in the year 2000, which made possible a comprehensive analysis of poverty in the Lao PDR that emphasized causation and perceptions of poverty throughout the multiethnic population. The PPA recorded the experiences and concerns of the people in order to initiate and identify public and private actions to reduce poverty. This was accomplished by combining different forms of knowledge on poverty (statistical, cultural, anthropological, institutional, economic, etc.) and also, by understanding the views of poor people and applying these towards the goal of poverty reduction. The goals of participatory assessment are to improve the understanding of actions that may be expected to make positive difference to the livelihoods, well-being and quality of life of poor people.

**Village Book**

To fill in the gap between LECS data collection and analysis, in mid of 2001, the Lao Government is in the process of developing a reporting system on poverty level within the country following the Prime Minister’s Instruction No.10, dated 25 June 2001. The Instruction introduced specific criteria (annex1) for defining poverty at household, village, district and provincial level and provides the following definition of poverty: “Poverty is the lack of ability to full fill basic human needs, such as: not having enough food, lack of adequate clothing, not having permanent housing, disadvantage in health, education and transportation.”

These criteria were incorporated into the data collection system, village book, as a tool for monitoring. The Village book aims to collect socio-economic information from grassroots level, which consists of data on population, housing, agriculture, labor statistics, education, health and poverty. The village chief is responsible for filling this book and report to districts, district report to provincial office and then report to NSC once a year. However, there are still some issues to be improved, particularly the capacity building at village and districts as well as provincial level.

The village Book is a main source for data collection from the grass-root level to support this Instruction No. 10/PM and help the village chief to the profile of their village. The provincial and district officials in collaboration with villages’ officials have to visit the households in order to collect information and assess the situation in each village.
The “Village Statistics Book” is a useful instrument for monitoring of the socio-economic profile of villages, especially within the context of districts being the planning and fiscal units and villages the implementing units.

III. Implementation of CBMS in Toumlan Saravan

The prime objectives were to strengthen local capacity for data capture and data analysis, particularly to supplement the existing system of data collection at the village level “Village Book”; to develop an appropriate tools for poverty monitoring for village chief, district governor with a reliable data and information. At the same time, it was intended to improve the coordination between the national statistics centre and local authority.

Before introducing CBMS in Toumlan district of Saravan, we found that current system of village book is more appropriate for data aggregation and data reporting instead of primary data collection. It consists of aggregated indicators of the village. One step of primary data collection at the household level is missing. Villagers are asked to aggregate data into village book without providing any tools to collect data.

Learning from this experience there is the need to develop a specific questionnaire to apply in the collection of primary data at the household, then compiling those indicators and aggregate in to village book. In this regards, CBMS found its important role to complement the efforts of the village book system. It gathers also other additional information/indicators relating to the poverty.

The objective and purpose of village book is very similar to CBMS. Its main focus is capacity building of local authority but different in methodology of data collection and data processing. CBMS has more reliable and scientific method and easy for the village chief to aggregate the data.

The CBMS project in Toumlan has been undertaken over the period of 24 months, from March 2004 to March 2006, divided into three phases: the first phase from March 2004 to September 2004 was preparation; the second from October 2004 to March 2005 was testing (pilot) phase and the third one went on from April 2005 to March 2006. It covered 11 villages of Toumlan district. At the beginning, the questionnaires for village and households were reviewed and developed. Then, training on data collecting and gathering to fill in the village book for village chiefs and districts officers was organized. The training has also been conducted for provincial staff on data analysis, data processing and data tabulation. At the end, the final report of findings was prepared and disseminated to the policy maker at the national and local level.

Over the period of CBMS project in Toumlan (2004-2006), local government has also spent 40 millions Kip (nearly 4,000 USD) budget for similar trainings/workshops in other districts with the purpose of transferring know ledges and methods of CBMS. Selected participants were sent to Toumlan for field study. After the end of CBMS in Toumlan, the fiscal year 2006-2007 we allocated same amount of budget for expanding know ledges learned mostly for trainings of other districts. However, due to this very limited funding, only few people were able to be trained and put into practice. Up to now there is no other international organization or NGO supporting village level statistics in Saravan.
The summery of the main information gathered in Toumlan are as follows:

- Characteristics of village:
  - access to electricity
  - availability of clean water
  - road access
  - market access
  - access to basic health care services
  - access to basic education

- Population
- Characteristics of housing
- Income generating activities
- Health care
- Education
- Income earning and expenditure
- Poverty reduction

IV. The Uses of CBMS in the Planning and Monitoring Process

The Lao government continues its decentralization policy by emphasizing “villages as implementation unit, districts as planning and fiscal unit, and provinces as strategic unit”. The link of planning, implementation and monitoring are fundamental of this initiative. While capacity building at national level is very important, provincial and district level is a major concern. Increasing the capacity at the district level will be the factor enables village participation in the planning process and enhances the interaction between district official and villagers for data collection, planning and monitoring process.

First, reliable systematic data and information from the villages is essential for analyzing the past development pattern. In this connection, CBMS in Toumlan provided us with most valuable and reliable base to start with the social-economic development planning. By answering important questions such as: what are the strengths and potentials of particular area; what programs have been implemented with what outcomes and effects; what are the weaknesses of past public investment programs addressing the need of the poor, we found CBMS with village book very useful. For example, micro finance scheme in some villages did not have success as intended because lack of market access, while most of the other villages received remarkable progress. Some areas did not call for public investment but they have much potentials for private investment.

After that, the information from the CBMS or village book is used for improved targeting of projects for poverty alleviation and for allocation of resources in public investment planning.
At the same time, private investment and NGOs and donors found that the data sources from CBMS-based village book very comprehensive, so that they don’t need to conduct extra survey for their own purposes as it was in the past. For example data on gender issue, beneficiaries from local health care center, etc.

Then, CBMS and village book also found its strengths for local poverty monitoring. It not only identifies the poor household, poor villages and poor districts in combination with other data source mainly the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS) data, but also shows, from time to time, data on the progress and development of each households, village as well as district. Interestingly, we found at first year one village has high increase of income, but at the end of second year poverty level did not decline. They spent most of income for alcohol and satellite TV. This kind of information could not be seen by using periodic survey.

In addition, various organizations such as NGOs, private investors or line ministries have collected many types of statistics at the village level, which were duplicated. The village chief has to provide all required data. This activity has happened quite often during a year. Most of the work is ad hoc. This makes village chief difficult and get work overload. This could have negative impact on data quality.

In the past there is no system for local authority to control and monitor their owned community. In most of village the village chief only fill in the form without reference and there is no system keeping the records at the village. Since the village book with CBMS system, the burden work for the local people has been reduced. It also assists them to make data base available at village. In line with this, the technical capacity and the sense of ownership of local people have increased.

To summarized, most important benefits of CBMS to the local authorities are as follows:

- Increasing awareness of the importance and quality of data and the use of data
- Strengthening village’s capacity in data collection, compilation methodology, checking and validation of data, preparation the villages and district profiles
- Strengthening processional skills of district and provincial officer in data processing and data analysis
- Increasing the participation of local people in poverty monitoring and poverty reduction
- Increasing the participation in community ownership planning and decision making.

V. Challenges and Obstacles

Even though CBMS with village book provides most valuable and appropriate tool for poverty planning and monitoring, in order to widely use the experiences, we found some challenges to the process:

Village Book/CBMS focuses on household as the unit for target implementation and should cover all units in the village. For this purpose it requires strong governance, qualified staff and
financial resources. Lack of capacity and facility at the local office, they could not deliver on time with full coverage.

To implement this village book the local government has to find own resources to conduct data collection and report. In combination of lack of funding in statistics area in the local government and lack of skilled staff working at the village and district level causes the village book system not effective. The village chief was chosen for data provider, and it will be elected in every 2 to 3 years. Therefore, the sustainability issue is a big concern. The experience in Toumlan, shows that in order to secure sustainability the following condition must be met:

- Firstly, the tool for CBMS must be appropriate to the village data collector and the results must meet the needs of local authority.
- Secondly, the personnel should be well trained and they must be committed to work in the village for a long period, at least 3 years.
- Thirdly, sustainability requires some amount of budget for the work over a long period.
- Fourthly, the local government must pay attention to and be committed to the implementation of the CBMS and use it for their decision making and planning process.
- Finally, the technical assistance from the central government and outsource funding is need to build the fundamental for setup a sustain system of CBMS in country.
Annex 1: Poverty definition and Poverty Criteria  
(Prime Minister Instruction No. 10/PM 25/2001)

The definition of poverty: “Poverty is the lack of ability to fulfil basic human needs, such as: not having enough food [i.e. less than 2,100 calories per day/capita], lack of adequate clothing, not having permanent housing, not capable of meeting expenses for health care, not capable of meeting educational expenses for one’s self and other family members, and lack of access to transport routes”.

Instruction 10 specifies that “there is to be a systematic accounting of village and district poverty levels. Thereafter, these findings must be incorporated into the poverty eradication planning.

Criteria have been developed in order to assist local authorities in monitoring changes in poverty, especially in poor households and districts, and to help the district and provincial authorities themselves to better understand the poverty situation at the grassroots level. These officially used criteria are divided into three levels as follows:

Household level:
Households considered as poor are households with an income (or the equivalent in kind) of less than kip 85,000 kip (100,000 kip for urban and 82,000 kip for rural) per person per month (at 2001 prices). This sum allows the purchase of about 16 kilograms of milled rice per person per month; the balance is insufficient to cover other necessities, such as clothing, shelter, schooling and medical costs.

Village level: Villages considered as poor villages are:
Villages where at least 51% of the total households are poor.
Villages without schools or schools in nearby and accessible villages.
Villages without dispensaries, traditional medical practitioners or villages requiring over 6 hours of travel to reach a hospital.
Villages without safe water supply.
Villages without access to roads (at least trails accessible by cart during the dry season).

District level: Poor districts are:
Districts where over 51% of the villages are poor.
Districts where over 40% of the villages do not have local or nearby schools.
Districts where over 40% of the villages do not have a dispensary or pharmacy.
Districts where over 60% of the villages without an access road.
Districts where over 40% of the villages do not have safe water.

At the provincial and national levels:
The measurement of poverty at provincial and national levels is a compilation of poverty at the district level. It may then be combined with poverty analysis based on household consumption and expenditure surveys performed by the National Statistical Centre.
CBMS key person at the district level is mainly required to prepare a summary situation report where all villages’ views, problems, comments or any recommendations will be integrated and compiled. The report at the district level will address the situation of the users of CBMS data, the problems in the villages and recommendation on how the problems will be solved.

CBMS key person at the province level is mainly required to prepare the administrative and a statistical report as input for CBMS. Provincial supervisor will take the lead in proceeding discussion with local authority. The issues of using the CBMS result as well as how to expand CBMS approach will also require to discuss in the provincial report.

Base on input report from villages, districts and provinces the NSC’s research team will take responsibility in investigating the data from CBMS sites with the participation of local supervisors and write analytical report of the project. The report will be presented at local and national level.

Dissemination

Local Level: The CBMS finding will be disseminated first through a consultative meeting with local authorities. While ownership of the survey by specific village authority, it is expected that the outcome of the project, the CBMS results will be disseminated beyond the selected village, districts and province. It is expected that the provincial authorities will further disseminate the pilot CBMS to other villages and districts for consideration and potential adoption through their regular working and contribute resources for future continuing CBMS.

Results from the CBMS will produce poverty monitoring report system, which will be a main tool for district and provincial authorities to better monitor and evaluate the impacts of development policies and programmes undertaken in their locales and to inform decisions about allocation of resources to reduce/eradicate the poverty. A combination of CBMS will feed into the national data collection on socio-economic and poverty monitoring system for the country. NSC is hoping that this CBMS project would help the current existing Village Book of Laos with an appropriate tools and suitable with the local authority needs.

National Level: The CBMS results will be disseminated through a national workshop for all partners of the project and relevant government agencies so that they will continue to expand the CBMS. NSC would encourage all the users and policy makers to use the CBMS data for analytical study of the poverty situation in the selected Villages. The information would help design policy interventions and target the vulnerable groups including the poorest of the poor in the district.