Learning Within and Across International Development Projects: A Case Study in the Health Sector of the Lao PDR

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Abstract

Having realized its limited capacity, the Lao PDR relies heavily on foreign assistance and concessional loans from multilateral and bilateral development agencies to support public development programs. To ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of grant fund management, the development partners impose several requirements and conditions for compliance. To satisfy the donors' requirements and achieve project goals on time, project learning is highly needed and important. The purpose of this study is to explore how the project team learns to improve the effectiveness of project implementation in response to such competing demands. To address the question, the Health Services Improvement Project supported by the World Bank was used as a case study. Findings show that the project team attempted to take lessons learned over time from the problems faced such as by creating monitoring forms and ICT tools, organizing the weekly meeting and the annual review meeting. Further, there was cross-project learning through the portfolio meeting for all projects funded by the World Bank and ADB to draw lessons learned from each other. In addition, project team members exchanged project information and lessons learned with members of other projects.

Keywords: International development projects, within-project learning, cross-project learning, project learning, lessons learned

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การเรียนรู้ภายในและข้ามโครงการพัฒนาซึ่งได้รับการสนับสนุนจากนานาชาติ: กรณีศึกษาในภาคสาธารณสุขของประเทศลาว

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บทคัดย่อ

ด้วยความตระหนักถึงศักยภาพอันจำกัด ประเทศลาวพึ่งพาความช่วยเหลือจากนานาชาติและเงินกู้แบบมีเงื่อนไขผ่อนปรนจากพหุพาคีและทวิภาคีในการสนับสนุนโครงการพัฒนาภาครัฐ ซึ่งผู้ให้ทุนได้กำหนดกฎเกณฑ์และเงื่อนไขต่างๆ ให้ปฏิบัติตามเพื่อให้มั่นใจถึงประสิทธิภาพและประสิทธิผลในการจัดการเงินทุนดังกล่าว ทั้งนี้เพื่อให้เกิดความพึงพอใจแก่ผู้ให้ทุนและเพื่อให้โครงการสำเร็จตามเวลา การเรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับโครงการจึงมีความสำคัญและจำเป็นอย่างยิ่ง การศึกษาครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจว่า บุคลากรในโครงการเรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับการปรับปรุงประสิทธิผลของการนำโครงการไปปฏิบัติมีการตอบสนองต่อความต้องการดังกล่าวอย่างไร เพื่อตอบคำถามนี้ โครงการปรับปรุงการบริการด้านสาธารณสุขซึ่งสนับสนุนโดยธนาคารโลกได้ถูกใช้เป็นกรณีศึกษา ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าสมาชิกโครงการได้มีความพยายามที่จะใช้ประโยชน์จากบทเรียนที่ผ่านมาจากปัญหาที่เคยเผชิญ อาทิ การสร้างแบบฟอร์มในการติดตามผล เทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศและการสื่อสาร การจัดประชุมประจำสัปดาห์ และการประชุมทบทวนประจำปี นอกจากนี้มีการเรียนรู้ข้ามโครงการผ่านการประชุมชุดโครงการสำหรับทุกโครงการที่ได้ทุนผ่านธนาคารโลกและธนาคารเพื่อการพัฒนาแห่งเอเชียเพื่อถอดบทเรียนร่วมซึ่งกันและกัน รวมทั้งสมาชิกโครงการมีการแลกเปลี่ยนสารสนเทศและบทเรียนของโครงการกับสมาชิกในโครงการอื่นด้วย

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Introduction

In order to promote sustainable growth and alleviate poverty, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), as a least developed country, relies on foreign assistance and concessional loans from development partners (e.g. multilateral and bilateral development agencies) that support over 60 percent of the public investment programs (UN, 2006). Public sector development projects or programs of underdeveloped countries are usually financed by development partners and they are known as international development projects (IDPs). To ensure aid effectiveness, donors regulate a number of complicated rules and procedures for the disbursement and utilization of the development funds such as setting up new and complex financial reporting system (Biesma et al., 2012). In an effort to meet the requirements, there is a need for continuous learning and improvement of project management in line with effective balance of the competing demands of scope, time, cost, quality, and resources (Peters & Homer, 1996; Disterer, 2002).

Within the project management literature, however, there is a lack of research on the influence of project sponsor on the learning process in project settings. Up to now, there is apparently only a case study of Sense (2013), whose process work investigates longitudinally the impact of project sponsor on learning within projects. The study shows that the role of project sponsor is dynamic and interactive and a dramatic influence on project learning. However, there is a need for further individual and deeper study as well as other integrative investigations of the project sponsor's interaction with various project phenomena (Sense, 2013: 271). More importantly, it appears that all of these studies view the source of project sponsorship as internally supported. This is completely different in the context of IDPs which are externally funded by international development agencies. Consequently, it is presumed that in managing IDPs, project teams will take lessons learned over time in order to meet donor requirements. Further research is required in this regard.

Theoretical Background

Research on project learning has gained rapid importance in the project management literature (Bakker et al., 2011: 494). Learning from projects has been considered as an essential part for effective project management. It can generally be made through two main sources: within and between projects. Therefore, project learning here is defined as encompassing both within- and cross-project learning. The following sections investigate the practices that facilitate within- and cross-project learning.

Within-Project Learning

Within-project learning – also termed "intra-project learning" – refers to the creation and sharing of knowledge within a project. This learning focuses on tasks within a single project and supports the delivery of a successful project by identifying problems and solving them during the project (Kotnour, 1999: 3; Kotnour, 2000: 395; Law & Chuah, 2004: 180). Within-project learning usually occurs through the process of drawing lessons learned for future use. Within the existing literature, the process is manifest in various terms such as experience retention, debriefing, post-project review, post-project appraisal, after action review, reflection, project postmortem review, post implementation evaluation, etc. However, the term "lessons learned" is frequently used to reflect such project review processes and practices (Disterer, 2002; Brady & Davies, 2004: 1607; Kotnour & Vergopia, 2005; Newell et al., 2006; Anbari et al., 2008).

The practices of lessons learned are taken as a formally reflective mechanism that encourages people to analyze and learn from past and ongoing projects (Carrillo, 2005: 237; Garon, 2006) or project events by measuring the objectives set at the beginning of each project against the results (Kotnour, 1999: 35). In this process, formal learning processes are developed to capture and secure knowledge and experiences of project team members, especially on what went well or wrong, by codifying it and making it available to other and future project

teams (Kotnour, 1999: 35; Kotnour, 2000; Disterer, 2002; Kotnour & Vergopia, 2005; Newell et al., 2006; Tan et al., 2006; Anbari et al., 2008; Newell & Edelman, 2008; Udeaja et al., 2008).

However, although the reviews of lessons learned at the end of the project are acknowledged as essential to the project and organization, the practices tend to be limited (Keegan & Turner, 2001; Disterer, 2002: 517; Von Zedtwitz, 2003; Newell, 2004: 16). Even though there are lessons-learned policies in place, many studies find that the post-project review is often not conducted, and even more seldom is a report written (Keegan & Turner, 2001; Disterer, 2002; Antoni et al., 2005: 887). On the other hand, although the lessons learned are taken and usually documented and stored in database (Newell et al., 2006), they are not always systematically documented or communicated for subsequent projects, and even when they are, they most often are done superficially, and go unused (Keegan & Turner, 2001; Prencipe & Tell, 2001; Disterer, 2002: 512; Bresnen et al., 2003; Newell, 2004; Newell et al., 2006; Antoni et al., 2005; Newell & Edmondson, 2008: 586; Jugdev, 2012: 13). Even though they are well documented and easy to locate, the lessons learned are not accepted as valuable knowledge by others (Schindler & Eppler, 2003: 221). All of these will result in a loss of knowledge and experiences gained by project teams (Keegan & Turner, 2001: 94). More importantly, it can result in a repetition of bad decisions and errors, and therefore increased project costs, extended schedules, considerable rework and costly mistakes (Keegan & Turner, 2001; Disterer, 2002: 513; Jugdev, 2012: 13). There is thus a need for reconsideration of the actual practices of lessons learned (Newell et al., 2006: 170).

Cross-project Learning

Cross-project learning is described as the combining and sharing of lessons learned across projects to apply and develop new knowledge. The term "inter-project learning" is generally well-known for learning across projects (Kotnour, 1999: 34, Kotnour, 2000: 395; Law & Chuah, 2004: 180). The goal is to transfer

project experiences from one project to another to continuously build the organization's capability to execute project management, product, and learning processes (Kotnour, 2000: 395).

In the context of learning across projects, project documents, in particular of a unique project, seem to have a limited value to other projects as they focus only on what was achieved (Newell, 2004: 18). Still, the past project information derived from several process areas provides critical inputs to current and future projects, such as for project plan development, scope definition, activity definition, activity duration estimating, resource planning, cost estimating, risk identification, and risk analysis (Anbari et al., 2008: 640). In addition, there will be learning from other projects' lessons that have been derived about procedures or processes that have been found to be helpful in solving particular types of problems. This is particularly the case where the existing knowledge and experiences cannot solve problems (Newell, 2004: 18). Therefore, the way in which project lessons are represented and documented is central to the extent it will be brought to bear on present or future projects (Cacciatori, 2008: 1594).

Prior studies on cross-project learning show that the attempts to create, share and use past project documents in subsequent projects are also a big challenge. Although lessons are learned from past projects, they are rarely shared and used during the early phase of the emerging project, and if reviewed at all, lessons learned tend to be hard to apply to subsequent projects (Bresnen et al., 2003; Von Zedtwitz, 2003; Newell, 2004; Owen et al., 2004; Newell et al., 2006; Newell & Edelman, 2008). Further, it is argued that rather than learning from past experiences of previous projects within the same organization, project teams often start solving problems anew (Scarbrough et al., 2004: 88).

The Role of ICT Infrastructure

The advanced information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure is generally considered as an important factor for managing project information effectively (Karlsen & Gottschalk, 2004; Hanisch et al., 2009; Lindner

& Wald, 2011: 886). The ICT systems are used for recognizing, documenting, storing, organizing, validating, and making available lessons learned on prior projects (Hanisch et al., 2009). Notwithstanding the advantages of ICT-infrastructure to facilitate project learning practices, this approach to capturing and sharing project learning in or across the organization is unsuccessful. Existing studies indicate that lessons learned which are conducted and stored by other projects are rarely used as guidelines for initiating new projects (Kasvi et al., 2003: 578; Newell, 2004: 16; Antoni et al., 2005: 887; Besner & Hobbs, 2006; Newell et al., 2006: 174; Newell & Edelman, 2008).

In addition, the formal methods of ICT-based infrastructure have been challenged because of their emphasis on tangible knowledge which can be codified explicitly. This approach tends to be problematic when it comes to codification of the soft process lessons which lie in the heads of individuals. The challenges are apparent when it comes to transferring learning, in particular embedded, tacit dimension, across projects (Bresnen et al., 2003). As a consequence, the informal procedures of social interactions have increasingly been opted for (Brown & Duguid, 2001). The following section will thus investigate how social capital facilitates learning in project environments.

The Role of Social Capital in Project-based Learning

The concept of social capital has been increasingly used in many disciplines of the social sciences, with varying definitions and conceptualizations (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Hitt et al., 2002; Castiglione et al., 2008: 1), and different levels of analysis (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Kang et al., 2007), in diverse social phenomena (e.g. projects, organizations, nations, and communities) (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002). However, its exact meaning is hotly disputed (Castiglione et al., 2008: 1) and hence there is no consensus on how to define social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998: 243). Nonetheless, social capital can be broadly defined as an asset that resides in social relationships (Walker et al., 1997) and that exists or emerges in social structures (like families, organizations, and

organizational networks) through interaction between members (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Put simply, social capital is defined as the resources accumulated through the relationships among people (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) or belonging to a group (Bourdieu, 1985). It is called a resource or asset because by manifesting itself in forms such as trust, norms, information benefits, and power, it can be beneficial to the structure and its members (Bhandar et al., 2007: 264).

Social interactions have been suggested as an informal strategy to promote knowledge retention and transfer due to less effectiveness of formal approaches to learning within and between projects (Brown & Duguid, 2001). The informal strategy is specifically required for the process lessons or tacit knowledge which reside in the head of individuals, and hence better shared directly with the people involved (Newell et al., 2006). To capture and store this kind of personalized knowledge and experience, different procedures are required, such as personal interaction, dialogues and workshops (Kasvi et al., 2003: 579). Put differently, tacit knowledge or experiences are only accessible and made explicit through the surrounding workgroup or informal networks (Ayas, 1996: 134; Schindler & Eppler, 2003). Without these practices, shared learning across projects is not possible (Newell, et al., 2006: 168). Hence, success in capturing tacit knowledge depends crucially on interpersonal and social aspects, rather than on technological or procedural mechanisms (Hansen et al., 1999).

Indeed, a number of conceptual and empirical studies have argued that social capital facilitates the exchange of resources among different organizational units (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Li, 2005), business units (Hansen, 1999), and projects (Bresnen et al., 2003, 2005; Huang & Newell, 2003; Kasvi et al., 2003; Newell, 2004: 16; Antoni et al., 2005; Brookes et al. 2006; Newell et al., 2006: 174; Julian, 2008: 144; Chen et al., 2008; Newell & Edelman, 2008: 579; Maurer et al., 2011). However, even though the importance of social capital to effective knowledge management has been well recognized, it is not fully explored in the project context (Brookes et al., 2006). Little is known about how social mechanisms support knowledge sharing and use across projects (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998; Bhandar et al., 2007).

Therefore, it seems appropriate to consider how the social context may enhance learning in project environments (Bartsch et al., 2013: 241).

Research Method

Case Description

The World Bank lends money to low and middle-income countries to support development and change. Development projects are implemented by borrowing countries following certain rules and procedures to guarantee that the money reaches its intended target (World Bank, 2011b). The Lao PDR, like other least developed countries, has been supported by the World Bank in several sectors, one of which is the health sector. In fact, the World Bank is one of the main development partners of the Ministry of Health (MOH). The Health Services Improvement Project or HSIP, coded "P074027," was supported by the World Bank from 2006 to 2011 through the MOH for the implementation of the project, with a total amount of US$ 15 million. The Project development objective was to assist the Lao PDR to improve the health status of its population, particularly the poor and rural population, in Project Provinces (namely Attapu, Bolikhamxai, Champasak, Khammouane, Salavan, Savanakhet, Special Region Xaisomboun and Xekong) (De La Pena & Lourdes, 2005; World Bank, 2004).

In May 2011, the Project objective was further revised to provide free services to pregnant women and children under five and thereby resulted in additional financing. The Project objective was to "assist the Lao PDR to increase utilization and quality of health services for poor women and children, in particular in rural areas in Project Provinces." The aim was generally to expand the scope of the free delivery pilot, while also introducing financing for child health services and continuing support to human resource development and service delivery capacity (World Bank, 2011a; 2011b). Project support was re-focused and centered on 42 Districts in five southern Provinces: Savanakhet, Champasack, Salavan, Xekong, and Attapeu (World Bank, 2011a). The original Grant was extended by 36 months in line with the closing date proposed for the additional financing (World Bank, 2011b);

that is from June 30, 2011 to June 30, 2014. The Project received an additional financing from the World Bank amounting to US$ 10,000,000 (Levesque, 2011).

The Department of Planning and International Cooperation (DPIC) was responsible for overall coordination and management as well as implementing activities in the work plan supported by the additional financing (World Bank, 2011a: 29). The National Project Coordinating Office (NPCO) was managed by a Project Manager as an Assistant to the Project Director appointed by MOH together with the Project Director. Also, there was an Assistant to the Project Manager who was contract staff. The Project Manager directly supervised the heads of three Units: Procurement, Finance, and Administration. The Procurement Unit was headed by a Procurement Specialist, supported by an Assistant to Procurement and a supporting staff to assist both procurement and Administration, while the Financial Unit was composed of three staff (under financial consulting firm) including the Chief of Finance, an accountant and assistant to the accountant. The Administrative Unit was composed of three staff including Chief of Administration, an Assistant to Administration and cashier, and one driver (National Project Coordination Office, 2013: 23).

Notably, the contracted full-time Project Manager and the Procurement specialist were DPIC officials. From past experience, fiduciary capacity at the MOH is limited. Financing had been contracted to a consulting firm to assist and build capacity of the MOH to monitor and report on implementation as needed. Therefore, the three experienced finance staff from the previous project were retained to work on the project. During the initial 18- month period, there were Project Assistants to support the Departments concerned.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to gain a deep understanding, data were collected from a number of different sources using various methods for triangulation (Bailey, 2007: 77; Gray, 2009: 252; Yin, 2009). This study employed three of the most common sources of evidence, namely reviews of documents and archival records, in-depth

interviews, and participant-observations. The data collection first commenced with a review of documents and records such as the Program Grant Agreement, project progress reports, and minutes of meetings. Following this, in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions were conducted with nine project team members who were directly involved in the management of IDPs. These included the project manager, project coordinator, and technical staff of such units as financial, procurement, monitoring and evaluation, and administrative. The interviews were mostly conducted face-to-face, lasting for approximately 45-60 minutes. Each interview was transcribed and coded by the ATLAS.ti Program, which facilitates analysis of qualitative data specifically because it contains the essential processes of coding, memo writing, data retrieval, building networks and creating reports (Friese, 2013: 9). Lastly, participant-observations were made through the weekly meeting and annual review meeting.

Findings

Within-Project Learning

Within the project, the project team attempted to take lessons learned over time in one endeavor to complete the project work-plan on time and meet the donor's requirements. The project learning practices were specifically evident in the development of guidelines and reporting tools to monitor the project progress from the bottom up. For example, for effective implementation of the project work-plan, Free Delivery Guidelines had been developed in September 2012. However, during project implementation, several issues emerged from the Guidelines' application since April 2013, and thereby led to revisions of the Guidelines in 2014. The guidelines detail the operational procedures specific to the free maternal and child health component. To ensure the timely submission of the reports from the bottom-up, the guidelines detail who should submit what to whom and when. Also, there was a use of the Microsoft Excel as the project database to collect the services data at each level. However, it seems to be less effective, in particular for the on-time submission of the report. Thus, a web-based

platform called DHIS-2 has been developed for more effective reporting systems. During 2014, the project database (up till then in Microsoft Excel) as well as the health management of information system of the MOH as a whole will be transferred to this platform. As the DHIS-2 is a web-based database, meaning that all data are stored on the Internet, there is no need to send data to the provincial health office/provincial coordinator unit or the NPCO. The provincial health office/ provincial coordinator unit and NPCO are able to access the data immediately after they have been entered (MOH, 2014: 27).

Also, to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of the District Grant Allocation component, it was necessary to closely monitor the project progress. However, given there were no specific forms to follow up the progress, the project assistant responsible had developed several forms such as (1) summary of fund transfers to the provinces; (2) a technical report form from local areas; (3) a district financial report form; and (4) a weekly progress report.

At the central level, the NPCO initially monitored project progress every three months. However, it appeared that some activities had made no progress, while others were unable to follow up and identify the root cause of problems. Consequently, a weekly meeting was held every Monday morning to monitor progress and also to solve problems in a timely fashion. Importantly, a number of monitoring forms had been created to follow up the project progress. These included (1) a weekly progress report from implementing agencies to NPCO; (2) Project Progress Monitoring sheet of NPCO for documenting the project progress during the meeting; (3) a weekly report in Lao and English distributed to the Department concerned as well as to the Administration Division of the DPIC; (4) Monitoring schedules; (5) Minutes of the Annual Review Meeting. Furthermore, the minutes were not only submitted to the Developments concerned in hard copies, but also to the Department Project Assistants via e-mails to update the progress in the following week. The forms provided detailed information such as who was responsible for what (the responsible Department), when to be completed (deadlines), what the issues were (challenges), what should be done (next steps)

and by whom (responsible persons). The forms enabled the NPCO to effectively monitor the progress of the project.

As annual review meeting was held to review the lessons that had been learned. The annual review meeting on December 17-18, 2013 was attended by representatives from all sectors involved in the Project execution such as NPCO, the World Bank, the Ministry of Finance, Departments concerned, Health colleges and universities, and the Provincial Health Offices, with altogether 67 participants. The meeting was held to review the project performance and to take lessons learned as well as plan for the following year, and was attended by all organizations concerned. The reports on project performance covered such main points as project progress, challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and next steps. For example, the Project Manager reported in detail and very specifically which province performed well on what, which province had no progress reports, etc. Thus, provinces were questioned why there were no progress reports, why there were more services at the provincial hospitals than the district hospitals and health centers, and what the problems were. Following each presentation, a question and answer session was open for all involved to share their opinions or lessons learned.

In response to those questions, representatives of the provinces concerned pointed out the causes of problems raised by the Project Manager. For instance, the Savanakhet health official pointed out the reasons of late reports, being that it was a big province while they had many things to do. The Savanakhet officials were not able to manage the whole project effectively, and hence needed to improve further. The explanation seems to be quite general, and not point out in detail exactly what the main causes of problems at the local level were. Salavan Province explained that although there were more services at the provincial hospital, some health services were in temporary facilities, the trained staff moved to new positions, the lack of female health staff, and unavailability of the information for ethnic groups. The Champasak Province raised such problems as unacceptance by the community for the services at district hospitals and health

centers, lack of confidence of trained staff, and mistakes in form filling leading to delay of disbursement and reports. The Attapu Province also faced the same problems as the other two provinces, but the causes were seemingly different. Although there were better conditions at the provincial hospital, there was a lack of health staff at the health centers who were sometimes assisted by the village volunteers, lack of specific delivery rooms (all in one room for patients, drug distribution, and injections), transportation difficulties, and provision of services by untrained staff instead of trained ones. The identification of specific causes would enable more effective problem-solving. Further, Salavan Province, which was able to achieve its goals and submit the report on time, shared its management techniques to others. These included close attention of the provincial supervisors; a teamwork approach by building close relationships with each sector involved and supporting one another; planning the work together within each week/month; and monitoring and supervising all tasks to solve the problems in a timely fashion.

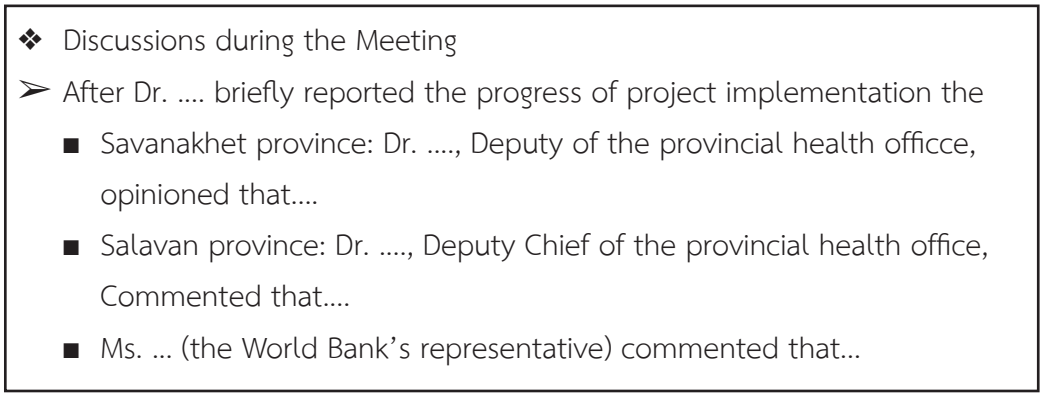
To solve the problems effectively, the Project Manager raised common issues for discussions and sharing of lessons learned. These were the issues of higher rate of services at provincial hospitals than at lower levels (e.g. district and health centers), ineffectiveness of the internal verification committee, issues of referring patients to higher-level health facilities which were not specified in the guidelines, etc. Indeed, several participants provided their opinions and recommendations, while some shared their lessons learned. For example, the Savanakhet representative shared the lesson that the district health department had to arrange vehicle transportation to refer patients to the provincial hospital, and if there was no vehicle, a transportation fee was paid to patients. Following this, a department representative cited guidelines to explain the issue. For example, pregnant women should use the services at the health centers where they live. Referring to higher levels was only for complicated deliveries, and the transportation fee would be collected at the service destination. To determine the distance for fee calculation, although the internal verification committee had already made the determination, but since it relates to mother and child, there should

be technical health staff or department to check this. In response to this, the representative from the Mother and Child Health Center opined that, (1) there needs detailed specifications in the guidelines such as how much for the transportation fee from this village to health center. If the patient uses the services at the provincial hospital, not the health center, payment should cover only from village to health center; (2) to be used as references for patient-referring, the conditions of complicated cases should be defined in details in the guidelines. The transportation fee should be covered from where the patient was referred to like the case of the Numthern Project which is responsible for all payment because there were only 20 percent for serious cases; and (3) for the late internal verification, there should be external sectors as committee and work in collaboration with the health insurance for sustainable management. Likewise, the Champasak representative also suggested external verification despite the present of internal verification committees from various sectors. The issues raised and recommendations provided would certainly be helpful for improvement of unclear and incomplete guidelines. For more effectiveness, further revision of the guidelines would thus be proposed to the World Bank and experts.

In addition to the discussion session, there was an arrangement of group discussions on specific work areas by using SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) as a tool for analysis. There were five group discussions on such topics as: (1) overall supervision at the implementing agencies, (2) coordinating and reporting, (3) financial management, (4) procurement, and (5) monitoring and technical assistance. Each group consisted of at least ten participants from the department concerned and provincial representatives. The discussion was led by a facilitator who was a specialist in that area. The discussions in each group were conducted based on the questions provided. The results of individual group discussions were then presented to the meeting. Also, there were discussions on the issues of particular topics identified by the group and participants. By sharing the individual experiences and opinions in project meetings and reviews, project teams could achieve an improved level of

understanding and learning; that is learning by discussing and learning by confronting (Prencipe & Tell, 2001: 1378). In the meantime, when individuals or teams made a collective effort to enhance their understanding of the causal links between actions and outcomes, project learning was articulated (Zollo & Winter, 2002: 341; Newell & Edelman, 2008: 570).

The meeting minutes distributed to all involved could be a good source of lessons learned not only for the project, but other projects as well. In reviewing the minute recorded in the table format, in which the researcher was allowed to access, it appears that the minute contained all important contents such as title of the meeting, date, time, location, reporter, objectives, participants, contents of the meeting, agenda of the meeting, discussions during the meeting, conclusion and future plan. The most important thing is that agenda of the meeting was documented in detail how the meeting was processed, who presented what, what the participants' opinions and comments were, what the response from those concerned were, etc. (see Figure 1 for the sample of the format and contents recorded in the minutes).


❖ Discussions during the Meeting

➢ After Dr. .... briefly reported the progress of project implementation the

- Savanakhet province: Dr. ...., Deputy of the provincial health officce, opinioned that....
- Salavan province: Dr. ...., Deputy Chief of the provincial health office, Commented that....
- Ms. ... (the World Bank's representative) commented that...

Figure 1. A Sample of the Format and Contents Recorded in the Minutes

Documented in such detail, the minutes enabled all involved and also other personnel involved in present and future projects to understand what had happened to the project in general, what were the project challenges in each province and area in particular, what issues were raised for discussions, what were the solutions proposed, and how they were solved. Due to the detailed records, the minutes consisted of seven pages.

Apparently, the ICT infrastructure had been used to capture, store and share project information. ICT tools were indeed a necessary precondition for project learning practices as noted by Lindner and Wald (2011: 881). They were used for communication and sharing of project data and information such as the use of telephone and e-mail. Further, there was use of advanced ICT systems (such as intranet, website within the organization, or on-line systems, and etc.) for management of project data and information. For instance, to store and share project data and information, the project had specifically established a website (e.g. www.dhis2.com).The ICT programs were accessible by those involved whenever needed, and hence had been acceptable as convenient and effective by the users. In this regard, proper and systematic management of project information facilitated accessibility to past and present project documents, either hard or soft files, whenever needed.

Cross-Project Learning

Project team took lessons learned not only within their project, but also with other IDPs. For example, the portfolio meeting held by the World Bank and ADB was deliberately arranged to facilitate the cross-project learning to occur. That is to exchange and take lessons learned between the development partners and recipients, as well as among all projects assisted by the two development partners. The main purpose is to continuously improve the effectiveness and efficiency of project implementation.

Not only did sharing information and lessons learned take place during the meeting, there were else ongoing exchanges after the meeting. Within the organization, all projects of the organization had exchanged the information and lessons learned with each other after the weekly meetings to improve project performance and meet organizational goals as a whole. This internal structure and relations give the collectivity cohesiveness and thereby facilitate the pursuit of collective goals (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 21).

In the same manner, the cross-project meetings had provided opportunities to share the project lessons learned during and after the meeting. After the meeting, there had been ongoing sharing of the information and lessons learned across projects and organizations. This resulted from the cross-project meetings where personal and social networks had been developed and strengthened and hence facilitated the exchange of resources later. The relations had provided all project team members the opportunities to access and share resources of one another through face-to-face meetings, phone calls and e-mails. This practice obviously reflects what Adler and Kwon (2002: 24) contend, external social ties with others give actors the opportunity to leverage their contacts' resources. In this regard, it could be said that the project itself has facilitated personal and social ties to occur. And in turn, these ties have provided opportunities for the project teams and organizations to continuously exchange the lessons and information later, be it individual, collective, project, or organizational level.

In addition, to obtain the resources needed from other organizations, some had made use of personal connections from colleagues working in other organizations, and from the past project team members who moved to a new organization. That is, there had been uses of bridging person(s) to access the resources of other organizations. More importantly, some members had even deliberately established a relationship with members of other organizations to obtain the information needed and to get the job done. In this case, the relationship was built through a project team member. For instance, socialization with other Departments was bridged through a Department Project Assistant. Thus, the resources were obtained through indirect personal relations with others (Adler and

Kwon, 2002: 19); that is through individuals who play a brokerage role in bridging across divided communities (Bhandar et al., 2007).

It is apparent that the lessons learned and information needed from other projects and/or organizations were obtained from both formal and informal approaches. The formal mechanisms were through the meetings held at various levels such as the project, organization, and development partners. The informal mechanisms were normally approaches through the use of personal and social connections. These included the past project team members, project team members of other IDPs, friends from other organizations, etc. In addition, ICT tools were used to support the process and practices of within- and cross-project learning. Standard communication tools such as the use of telephone and e-mail were frequently used to share resources. Figure 2 illustrates the mechanisms of cross-project learning.

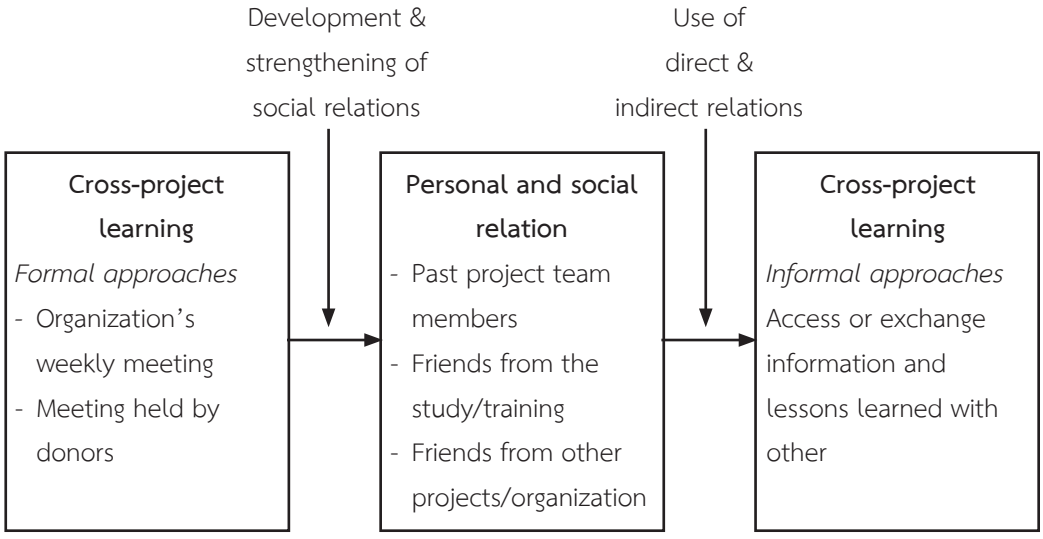


Figure 2. Mechanisms Facilitaing Cross-Project Learning

Conclusion

To achieve the project goals on time and also to satisfy the donors' requirements, the project team had attempted to learn within and across the project. Within-project learning, the lessons learned practices took the form of formal approaches via such meetings as the weekly meeting held specifically for

the project teams and the annual review meeting for all concerned. The meetings indeed provided project teams the opportunities to draw and share lessons learned for the future. These lessons learned were usually documented in the minutes which could be used for improvement of project performance in the future. The most important thing is the content being recorded to enable follow-up and monitoring of project progress and challenges in a timely fashion. The minutes provided quite detailed and useful information which could be effective lessons learned for other and future projects. This is because the minutes recorded not only the events that occurred within and to the project, but also the management actions taken as a result and the reasons for those actions.

For effective management of project data and information, there had been use of the ICT systems. Standard communication tools (e.g. telephone and e-mail) were primarily used as the main channel for project communication and coordination. In addition, the advanced ICT was specifically set up for sharing of project data and information (e.g. www.dhis2.com). The ICT infrastructure had indeed facilitated sharing of project data and information within the project. These tools were more likely helpful for tangible knowledge, but less likely for the individual expertise, which is largely intangible, is not easy to codify and store explicitly as noted by Cacciatori (2008: 1592). According to Schindler & Eppler (2003: 219-220), individual knowledge and experiences are accessible only through informal or social networks. Project team members learned through conversations with those who are able to help them solve particular problems. These people are normally in their personal or social networks (Newell, 2004: 19).

Not only within-project learning, there were lessons learned practices for cross-project learning. The formal practices were those meetings held by donors where participants from different organizations and ministries attended and exchanged lessons learned with each other. More importantly, such meetings had provided participants the opportunities to develop or strengthen personal connections, which had in turn enabled ongoing exchange of information and lessons learned with each other later. Furthermore, to access other organizations'

information, there were uses of personal ties with past project team members, project team members of other IDPs, colleagues from other organizations, friends of a friend, etc. In addition, some had even intentionally developed connections to obtain resources needed. In short, there were uses of the direct and indirect relations to access the resources needed. Certainly, the ICT infrastructure was also used to facilitate the process and practices of cross-project learning as well as within-project learning.

Implications for Future Research

Despite remarkable findings, there are several limitations to this study that may indicate fruitful opportunities for future research. Firstly, this study results are generalized based on the case study of IDP-based learning in three health public organizations of Lao PDR. Yin (2009) suggests that case study findings may not be generalizable. Limitations exist in terms of the generalization of case study findings, and thereby there is a need for research in other IDP-based sectors to examine whether the findings are in the same context or not. Also, the study only examined the project-based learning of public organizations in the Lao health sector. Project-based learning in other public organizations may be different. Further, the study is concluded based upon only an IDP supported by the World Bank. The requirements and conditions of other development partners may be distinct, especially the operating procedures which are most likely different. This is owing to the fact that each donor has its own way of doing things. To enable generalization of the study, future research may thus study the projects funded by other types of donors of other public organizations. In addition, future study may attempt to conduct a comparative study between the IDPs of public organizations and NGOs which have also been supported by international development agencies.

The study is consistent with the findings of several scholars that social connections facilitate project-based learning to occur. The connections through personal interactions indeed provide channels for information flows and certain advantages that are unevenly distributed within and across organizations (Burt,

1992; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). However, the study mainly focuses on the pattern of relationships between actors – 'that is who you reach and how you reach them' (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998: 244). Thus, it is unknown for the nature or quality of personal relationships (such as strengths of ties, closeness, trust, etc.) that facilitate the resources. Thus, it might be useful to examine the dimensions of social capital which the project teams used to obtain resources needed from other people outside the projects.

Finally, future research on this topic may examine further the effectiveness of project learning and its contribution to the success of project implementation. Future study may focus more on such questions as which learning mechanisms are most effective for improving the effectiveness of project implementation; how project team's learning contributes to the achievement in project provinces; to what extent is their contribution, and what are the outcomes. In addition, it may be more useful for future research to study from the project sponsor's position rather than from the project team position.

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