

# Capacity Development for a Disaster Management Agency: NDMO in Lao PDR<sup>1</sup>

**Core Issue:** *CD for Disaster Risk Reduction/Disaster Management, and Institutional Reform and Incentive Mechanisms*

**Allied Issues:** *Leadership, Human Resources, Physical Resources, Financial Resources, Multi-Stakeholder Engagement, Knowledge Management*

## In a nutshell

In Asia, UNDP has been engaged in providing capacity development (CD) support for agencies and sectoral bodies in the area of Crisis Prevention and Recovery. This includes strengthening the capacities of disaster management offices. UNDP has engaged with the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), the focal office for Disaster Risk Management (DRM) in Lao PDR. Support to NDMO entails strengthening NDMO's capacity to take the lead role in planning the National Strategic Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)/Disaster Risk Management (DRM), coordinating among different stakeholders mandated with disaster management, as well as implement and monitoring disaster risk reduction and management projects and programmes.

CD support for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management must respond to country-specific challenges and contexts, as well as regional and international DRR and DM challenges and opportunities. *How then can a CD approach fit both bills- responding to unique circumstances at the country level, while offering opportunities and lessons for adaptation in other countries and regions?* The story of NDMO in Lao PDR, where UNDP is partnering with the government on a change management exercise to improve capacities to reduce and manage disasters, may offer some answers to this question.

## The Story

With the spate of natural disasters striking the Asia region, there has been increasing awareness that there must be concerted efforts at the local, national, regional, and international level to strengthen capacities to reduce the risk of disasters and also manage them. Coordination and information sharing among stakeholders is crucial in the case of forecasting natural disasters and preparing adequately. Stakeholder engagement in the aftermath of a disaster is just as imperative. In Lao PDR, there is a National Disaster Management Committee (NDMC), consisting of eleven member agencies that oversees the DRR/DRM. NDMC has initiated a process of strengthening the capacities of the NDMO, the focal office for DRR and DM in the country. In this connection, UNDP has partnered with the NDMO and its partners, specifically International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and related ministries, on a capacity development programme for DRR and DM.

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The CD intervention began with a Capacity Assessment (CA) mission primarily focused on assessing the capacities of the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). This mission found evidence fairly early in the day that NDMO's ability to fulfill its mandate would remain unrealized unless it is re-positioned to command more authority and decision-making ability. Some other early findings were: Firstly, the mission learned that NDMO is positioned in a manner that creates a self-fulfilling cycle of lack of capacity: because NDMO lacks authority, it is not granted the resources (broadly defined) to fulfill its duties, which in turn erodes further the authority and credibility of the organization. Second, to have more authority, it must also be positioned such that the requisite financial resources will flow to allow the organization to address capacity needs and undertake the activities necessary to fulfilling its mandate. Last, but not least, an opportunity presented itself in that NDMC was tasked with creating a National DM Plan. It was evident that NDMO should be an active consultative partner in the design as well as implementation stages of any such national plan.

Based on the analysis of the findings the CD strategy shaped along the following lines:

- Involving NDMO squarely in the National Strategic Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction/Disaster Management Plan.
- Forging a sectoral approach to DRR/DM: There is growing evidence of a sectoral approach to DM coalescing in Lao PDR. The NDMC and the Inter Agency Steering Committee ( IASc...for DRM) both represent a convening of actors in the government and among partners around the issue of DRR/DM.
- Strengthening NDMO's internal capacities incrementally: NDMO's internal capacities are hampered by staffing and financial constraints. It is therefore sensible to adapt the incremental repositioning of NDMO and in the process, make a conscious push towards staffing and resource augmentation.
- Dialoguing for clarity: In the medium term, a multi-stakeholder dialogue was proposed that discusses the issue of NDMO role and mandate and queries the feasibility of NDMO becoming the equivalent of a Ministry, Department, or a National Authority.
- Achieving quick wins in capacity development: NDMO is clearly doing well on coordination of information and linking up with stakeholders. On these two counts, it needs to be supported with the capacity to convene stakeholders on a regular basis and where necessary, standing working groups for specific aspects of disaster management – such as preparedness – could also be envisioned.
- Leveraging current opportunity: The time was opportune to revisit the issue and conduct the exercises described above. A combination of internal factors (e.g. political will) and external circumstances ( Laos signed up to International Conventions on DRR/DRM) deemed it fortuitous to review the DRR/DM sector, set in place new operating mechanisms and within that, reposition NDMO.

## **Results and Critical Factors**

The approach taken here can be analysed to reveal the following key steps and findings:

- Identifying the status of relationships and coordination efforts among relevant stakeholders in the DRR and DRM sectors was important;
- Identifying both national external opportunities that could be used to leverage and sustain a change momentum was important
- A capacity assessment of the focal agency with an emphasis on its 'relational' capacities with actors mentioned was a key step;
- Recommending measures to strengthen the capacities of the focal agency, including its role as coordinator; instituting a clear communication chain and accountability chain were all key steps to be addressed.
- A strong focus on process facilitation and an incremental approach to developing capacity are two other important hallmarks of this intervention.

The following factors have also contributed to the early optimism that NDMO can be strengthened to deliver on DRR and DRM.

- A systematic approach to capacity development has been taken by the UN, external partners and the government of Lao PDR: a thorough analysis of the context and issues, a capacity assessment exercise, development of CD strategies and recommendations, and the eventual piloting and roll-out of the change management strategy
- An important part of the approach falls largely within one specific CD strategy: *Institutional Reform and Incentive Mechanisms*. That is, in tandem with the capacity assessment of the NDMO, the CD approach includes recommendations that account for aspects of change within NDMO but also locates it in relation to the wider institutional architecture viz. how NDMO is located and what mandate and authority it has.
- The approach emphasizes the streamlining of functional coordination mechanisms within the wider institutional framework; there is a focus on achieving efficiency gains-through sector-wide approaches, and through the establishment of unified operating procedures at various levels.