

PROJECT BRIEF

BEYOND THE FINISH LINE-LAO PDR (2018-2022)



SNV | Accelerating Lao PDR's sanitation journey to meet the 2025 target

Supporting the Government of Lao PDR's journey towards its goal of becoming open-defecation free (ODF) by 2025, SNV and partners UTS-ISF and CBM Australia worked with the local governments of Atsaphone, Champhone, and Phalanxay in Savannakhet Province to increase access to improved sanitation and handwashing with soap. Across 140 villages, more than 139,000 people now live in open defecation free environments supported by gender and social inclusion efforts to ensure no-one is left behind.

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has made significant and progressive advances in its national development over the past two decades, with increases in economic, health, and social development indicators. Yet it still faces huge challenges in terms of increasing access to and usage of sanitation and hygiene services.

Ending open defecation and achieving safely managed sanitation services, together with the adoption of key hygiene behaviours, could deliver significant benefits to the country. These include not only health benefits (such as a reduction in diarrhoea, malnutrition, and stunting and in associated healthcare costs) but also improved well-being and increased productivity.

The Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) project was a collaboration between the Ministry of Health (MoH), SNV and the Institute of Sustainable Futures – University of Technology Sydney (UTS-

ISF), with technical support from CBM Australia. Together, we sought to strengthen capacities of the provincial and district governments in inclusive Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) governance, Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC), sanitation demand creation methodologies (adapted to local contexts), and small-scale private sector-led sanitation and hygiene supply chain amplification.

The project was implemented in Savannakhet, the country's largest and most populated province, with diverse ethnicities. It has high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure, and low demand for sanitation and handwashing practices. Heavy rainfall and resultant flooding are an annual occurrence, with the number of extreme rainfall events predicted to increase due to climate change. In 2018, less than 20% of villages in the province had achieved ODF status.

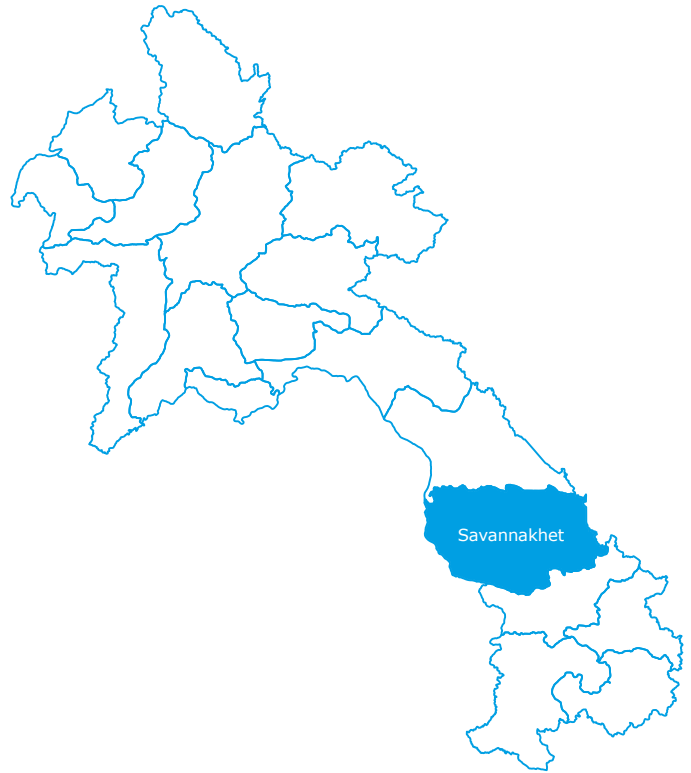
The partnership’s aim was to increase access to basic and safely managed sanitation for all. At home, at school, and in healthcare facilities, we engaged in an area-wide strategy, supported by capacity development, advocacy, and knowledge and learning to realise hygienic practices and safe management of sanitation.

To support national sanitation and hygiene objectives and contribute to the urgent need for more climate resilient systems, the partnership sought to strengthen district-level implementation of Lao PDR’s Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) programme. This meant strengthening the capacity of provincial and district authorities to perform their WASH governance duties effectively and equitably against a challenging backdrop of diminished budgets, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ending open-defecation practice at scale

Across the three districts, we witnessed a progressive increase in ODF-verified villages. Today, 60% of villages in Atsaphone (20% baseline), 80% of villages in Champhone (0% baseline), and close to 30% in Phalanxay (0% at baseline) are now ODF.

Map 1: Location of Savannakhet province in Lao PDR

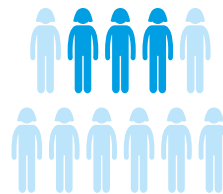


Transforming systems in numbers (2018-2022)

Strengthening professional and organisational capacity of:



17 (two women)
local government staff



11 (three women)
private sector actors



1 Leaving No-One Behind Strategy implemented across 3 districts



3 sanitation and hygiene district plans implemented, including behaviour change communication

An additional 46,510 people have access to safely managed sanitation services, including 4,230 people with disabilities; 11,160 have access to basic sanitation; and 48,470 have access to handwashing with soap facilities.¹ Notable improvements in gender equality and social inclusion were also secured, which mobilised support for the last mile and changed attitudes in the process.

How did we achieve this?

Policies

In 2019, the Government of Lao PDR launched its new National Rural Water and Sanitation Strategy 2020-2030, which included a stronger focus on gender equality and social inclusion.

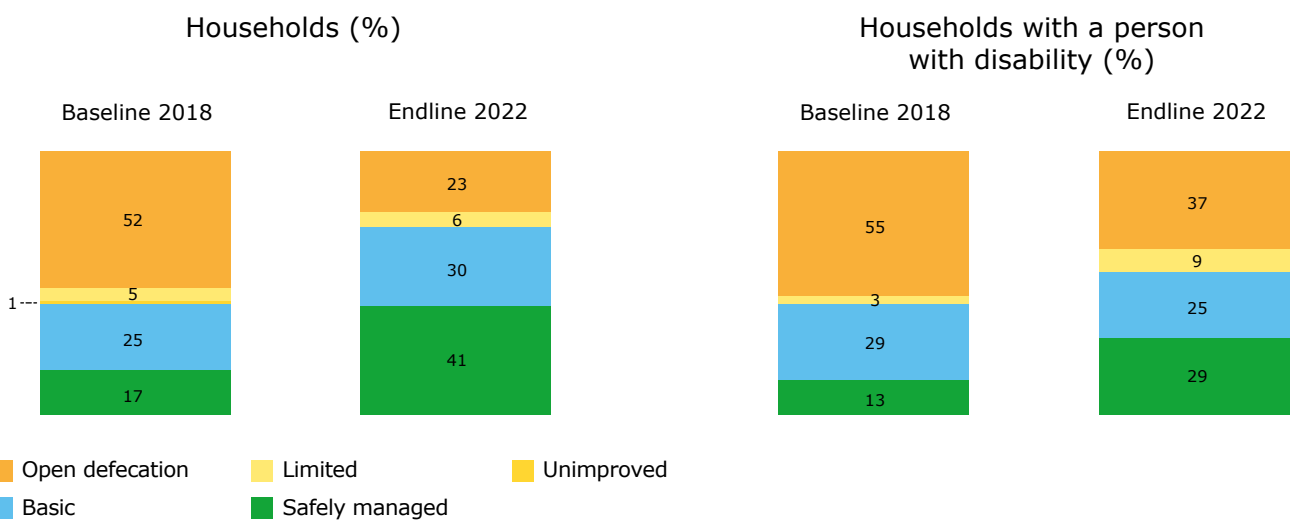
With the WASH teams of provincial and district governments, we operationalised the national government’s rural WASH strategy in the three districts. Tools, guidelines, and approaches were co-developed, tested, and tailored to reflect the situation in specific areas. These activities were then followed by a review process and shared during key stakeholder groups, including at national level. Key examples include the partnership’s work in adapting the existing CLTS process to better integrate concepts of inclusion, diversity, and climate resilience, and approaches to reaching the last-mile groups.

Practices

Together with our partners, we built the capacity and skills of sanitation implementers, including district teams and village-level CLTS committees, to effectively apply an adapted CLTS approach that responds to climate change. Our training introduced leaders to GESI and ‘Do No Harm’ methods, ensuring that CLTS implementation responded to the actual needs and challenges of diverse members of a social grouping or institution, e.g., people with disabilities. We championed practical coaching and, with local government officials, used lessons from experience to develop a strategy on how to respond to challenges faced by potentially marginalised groups.

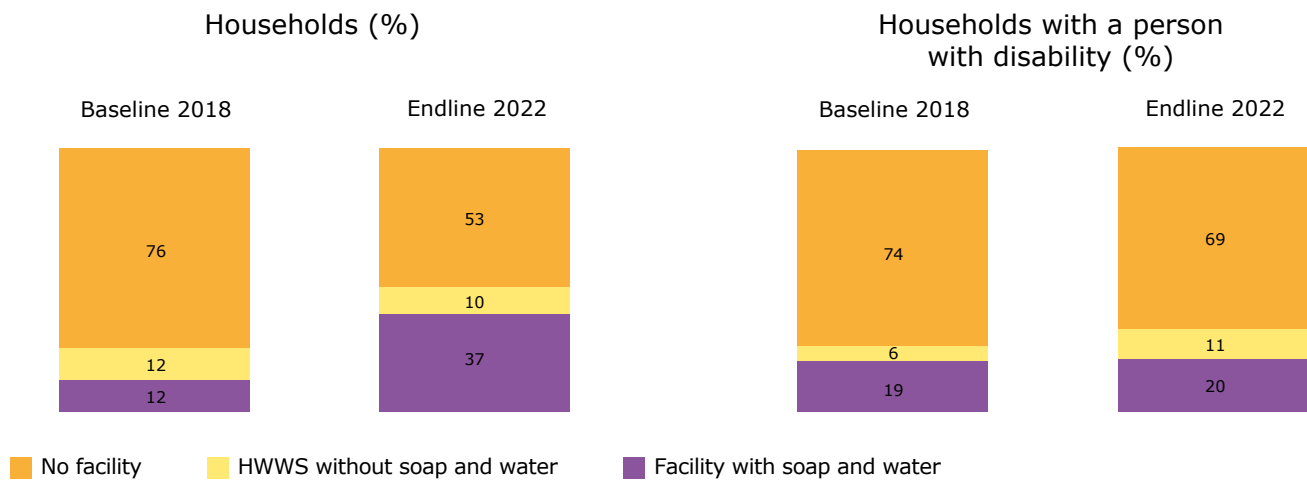
With a better understanding of diversity within and across groups, district teams began engaging in a more systematic process of understanding vulnerability to develop multiple strategies to encourage the building of toilets. As district teams became more confident to take lead roles, village-level committees took stronger ownership of sanitation mapping and developing ODF action plans for their respective villages.

Figure 1: Results of four-year programming in sanitation access (2018-22)*



¹ Figures in body text are rounded up to the nearest ten.

Figure 2: Results of four-year programming in handwashing with soap access and practice (2018-22)*



* N.B. Data from SNV’s Beyond the Finish Line project performance monitoring indicator survey, as per the JMP.

Social norms, values, behaviours, and attitudes

Several formative research studies informed our strategies to influence social norms, values, behaviours, and attitudes that have an impact on WASH access and services.² For example, research findings pointed to the effectiveness of using the emotional driver of nurture to promote proper handwashing with soap behaviour. Local government teams who received training from the partnership are now more involved in evidence-based, inclusive, and accessible hygiene SBCC initiatives.

Village authorities have become key drivers of local transformation processes, leading by example and influencing positive behaviour changes within their communities. Training workshops enabled participants to gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to respond as village leaders. The workshops also broadened their understanding of GESI, leading to incremental changes in their gender-biased views, attitudes, and mindsets.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we also made a significant contribution to the national communication campaign, producing materials to reach people living in remote rural areas without electricity, internet, or access to mainstream media. Initially intended for the three focus districts, these more accessible materials were later rolled out nationwide. We secured radio spots and produced video messages that were circulated online and used on national TV with an estimated reach of around 1 million people.

Village authorities lead local transformation



More village authorities are starting to embrace their role as key drivers of local transformation thanks to the skills and knowledge imparted to them by GESI-trained government officials and representatives from the Lao Women’s Union. So far, over 80 villages have been introduced to GESI concepts and processes, which is enabling them to govern in more inclusive ways.

Village authorities now know how to facilitate more participatory and inclusive village meetings, how to encourage people to speak up, and how to navigate the sensitivities of challenging some gender-based traditions and attitudes without causing harm or raising conflict.

Today, meetings are more accessible and centrally located, women have gained the confidence to ask questions, and young people are co-facilitating workshops. Village authorities have become active members of CLTS committees, joining household door-to-door visits to dialogue with diverse members – including people with disabilities or long-term illness – to understand their specific barriers to better sanitation practice.

² These include a women’s leadership study with CARE and research on the barriers to WASH access by people with disabilities, conducted with the Ministries of Health (MOH), Education and Sports (MOES) and Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW), and the Lao Disabled People’s Association (LDPA), with technical support from Humanity and Inclusion and CBM Australia.

Inspiring ‘Climate Heroes’

The impacts of climate change are real and yet for local governments this reality can seem disconnected, intangible, and overwhelming. In Lao PDR, research by SNV and UTS-ISF together with the National University of Laos aimed to inspire local governments to overcome the barriers to addressing climate change impacts within their jobs and become champions of climate action for inclusive WASH.



Our research revealed that local government officials often have low confidence in addressing climate impacts on WASH or may see it as a more distant problem – not an immediate concern.

Following this, experts from the National University of Laos delivered a series of training on climate change, GEDSI and WASH to raise awareness and to encourage officials to champion climate as a key area of focus. SNV and UTS-ISF are using these insights to build the confidence and awareness of local government officials, integrating climate risks into government CLTS programming, and seeking to further build their capacity.

Our recommendations

During the four-year programme, our work with government and partners in Lao PDR made an impact on the lives of over 139,000 people, including almost 10,500 people with disabilities. Government capacities to lead, monitor, and implement sanitation and hygiene programmes were strengthened, resulting in 140 villages attaining ODF status. Within the province, all three districts have developed plans to achieve their district wide ODF goals.

However, climate change risks may undermine these gains and impact on water security in the low-lying Mekong plains of these districts in rural Lao PDR. These risks are compounding existing WASH sector challenges and vulnerabilities, including local governments’ capacity, the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainability of WASH technologies in flood-prone areas, and inequalities in access to basic and safely managed sanitation services and water quality.

There remains a stark contrast between the richest and poorest groups regarding access and quality of WASH facilities. Over 80% of the poorest wealth quintile did not have access to a toilet at baseline, while this was less than 10% for those in the richest quintile.

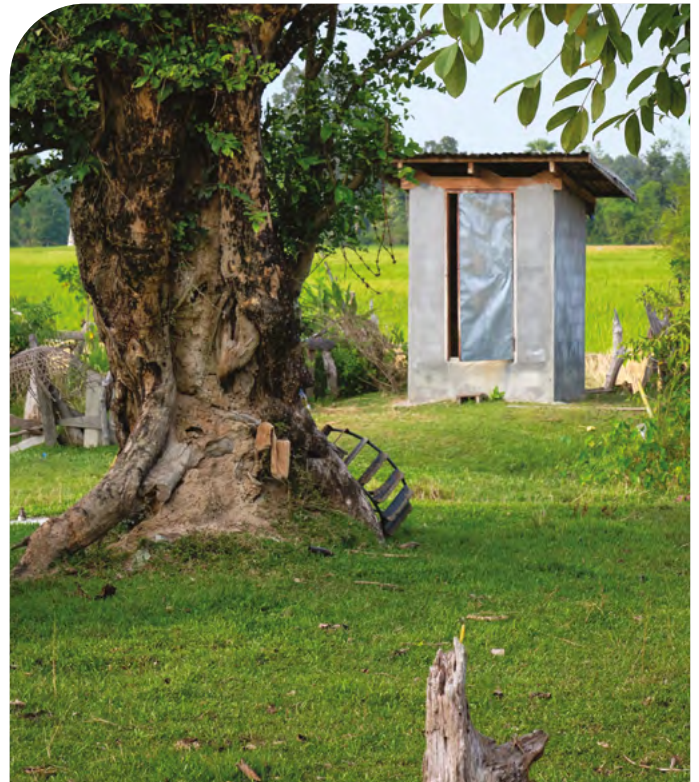
To accelerate the pace to eradicating open defecation by 2025 and build communities’ resilience to climate change – including their sanitation facilities – our recommendations are as follows:

Focus on last-mile households

Explore further options to make toilets more affordable and sustainable. Engagement is needed at the national government level to further harmonise scalable approaches together with development partners and to support local governments in addressing these challenges.

Encourage investment for scaling up

Scalability of these approaches and support for the poorest are severely restricted by the lack of budget allocation to Nam Saat by the ministries. Without the allocation of suitable budgets, these approaches are difficult to implement to provide the required support to the poorest quintile and achieve provincial-level targets. Additional budget



Rural toilet in one village in Savannakhet next to agricultural land. Photo credit: SNV/Bart Verweij.

is urgently needed by the province to provide inclusive, climate resilient sanitation (and reach ODF status targets) by early 2025.

Build climate resilience

Strengthen the capacity of local governments and private sector actors to support adaptation and integrate climate change resilience within inclusive area-wide rural WASH services and systems that respond to climate risks and hazards. This includes consolidating approaches, understanding the costs of climate-resilient WASH services, innovating flood resilient toilet designs, protecting water quality, and improving sector alignment with disaster risk reduction.

Beyond the Finish Line - Lao PDR

Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) - Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All in Lao PDR is a four-year project that progressed equitable and universal access to safely managed sanitation and hygiene for 46,510 people across three districts in the Savannakhet province of Lao PDR. Supported by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund, the project was implemented by SNV in partnership with the Government of Lao PDR, UTS-ISF, and CBM Australia.

SNV

SNV is a mission-driven global development partner working across Africa and Asia. Our mission is to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems, which enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

Cover photo

Handwashing with soap after toilet use. Photo credit: SNV/Bart Verweij.



SNV, 'Accelerating Lao PDR's sanitation journey to meet the 2025 target', *Project Brief, Beyond the Finish Line-Lao PDR (2018-2022)*, The Hague, SNV, 2023.

For more information

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