



DISASTER INFORMATION PROVIDERS IN LAOS



International Development
Australian Broadcasting Corporation



Background

This report has been prepared by the International Development Unit of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABCID) based on background research, and discussions held between July and August 2014 with media organisations, disaster management authorities, and local and international non-government organisations. The overall focus of consultations was on community resilience, how citizens get information during disasters and opportunities to improve two-way communication between affected people and support providers via the media.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

As Australia's national broadcaster the ABC functions as Australia's emergency broadcaster. The ABC uses its radio, television and online services to deliver timely, accurate and relevant information to affected communities during fires, floods and other natural disasters and emergencies. The ABC also plays an important role in building community resilience and the ability to prevent, prepare, respond and recover during times of adversity. Local radio (54 stations across the country) has an estimated national penetration rate of 99.4 per cent and is often the only source of vital weather and emergency service information for regional and rural Australians.

This emergency broadcasting role is supported by agreements with all state and territory emergency services. The ABC has formal and informal arrangements allowing emergency agencies and recovery specialists to use the local radio network to deliver emergency warnings. Local radio managers are active members of most state and local emergency management committees.

The ABC provides emergency broadcast training for its local radio staff to ensure that they are adequately prepared for emergency situations. In recent years, local radio has provided emergency broadcasting for fires, cyclones, flooding, storms, tsunami warnings, heatwaves, equine flu outbreaks and locust plagues. The ABC has provided emergency broadcasting in every state and territory, on numerous occasions.

Radio and television broadcasting are very effective methods of communicating important information to large groups of people before, during and after emergency situations. Local radio services are particularly effective, as broadcasters have established relationships with local communities and detailed local knowledge that may assist listeners.

Acknowledgements

ABCID appreciates the assistance provided by Australian Aid and all organisations that shared information during consultations.

This report is not intended to be an all-encompassing exploration of the many disaster related projects that have been, and are being, conducted in Laos. We acknowledge the work of the organisations dedicated to decreasing disaster related risks within the country.

While it was not possible to consult all relevant actors, discussions were held with a range of organisations in the media, government information, disaster management and humanitarian support sectors to establish an overview of the major challenges facing the delivery of emergency information to citizens. A list of consultations is provided at the end of this report.

This report is based on the opinions and perspectives of the participants and does not reflect the views of ABCID or Australian Aid.

Acronyms

ABCID	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADPC	Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DDMCC	Department of Disaster Management and Climate Change
DM	Disaster Management
DMH	Department of Meteorology and Hydrology
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DWFAM	Division of Weather Forecast and Aeronautical Meteorology
IACP	Inter-Agency Contingency Plan
LNR	Lao National Radio
LNTV	Lao National TV
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MoWRAM	Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology
MoAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Finance
MoLSW	Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare
NDMC	National Disaster Management Committee
NGO	Non Government Organisation
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WMO	World Meteorological Organisation



Country context

Laos is a landlocked country of around 6.5 million people nestled between Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and China. The Mekong flows 1,865 kilometres across the country, supplying water to grow the food that feeds the nation. However the natural landmark also contributes to food insecurity at times, as floods destroy staple crops in the yearly monsoons.

The geographical profile of the Lao population is still characterised as rural with close to 64 per cent of the population living in rural areas. Situated mainly on the Mekong River valley or plains, rural populations rely largely on subsistence farming and on small scale agriculture for their livelihoods. In comparison, the last 10 years has seen rapid urbanisation of the capital Vientiane, including increased infrastructure and the welcoming of foreign investment, and social indicators such as mobile phone ownership and car ownership are rapidly increasing. However, with inadequate land use planning and loosely enforced building codes, new vulnerabilities are fast emerging for Laos' capital city and the people who live within it. According to the Vientiane Urban Development and Administration Authority, the main contributors to urban flooding are inadequate drainage and poor planning through failing to preserve marshes and ponds as natural water sinks.¹

Early warning and disaster information is disseminated to the public through two major methods. The warning is passed from the National Disaster Management Committee (NDMC) 'down the line' to their representatives at the provincial, district and then finally village level. This information is then broadcast on village speaker systems to alert the public, as well as via speakers on the back of a truck driven throughout the vulnerable area.

The second way to deliver emergency information to the public is via the media. Television and radio play an important role in disseminating early warning and recovery information to the public however, with limited funding and skills, content delivery is often unplanned and inconsistent.

Laos has a newly developing media sector compared to other nations in the region. The government maintains strict control by owning all newspapers and a significant proportion of broadcast media.

The government estimates that Laos loses 1.7 per cent of GDP every year because of disasters that impact on development gains and infrastructure. There is a clear argument for disaster risk reduction for the economic health of the state and wellbeing of citizens.

¹ Vientiane Times, Sep 5 2014
http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeContent_Mayor.html

Major disaster risks

Floods are the major natural disaster threat for Laos. Most flooding occurs during May to September when monsoon rains accumulate in the upper Mekong river basin. In August 2008, torrential rains generated severe flooding which killed 12 people and affected more than 220,000. The situation was compounded by tropical storm Kammuri and flooding was widely reported to be the worst in a century in some areas, with river levels reaching a high of 13.7 meters on August 14. The state-run Vientiane Times reported that the floods would cost Luang Prabang province alone some 100 billion kip (US\$11.6 million). Other major disasters to affect the country are tropical storms, cyclones, landslides and droughts.

According to an Asian Development Bank (ADB) Study in 2012, more than 22 per cent of the country's population lives in an area at risk of natural disasters, and natural disasters cost the economy an average of US\$14 million a year.²

Summarised Table of Natural Disasters in Laos from 1900 to 2014

		# OF EVENTS	KILLED	TOTAL AFFECTED	DAMAGE (000 US\$)
Drought	Drought	5	–	4250000	1000
Flood	Unspecified	10	76	1878600	2480
	Flash flood	1	34	430000	–
	Riverine flood	12	395	2181743	158128
Storm	Unspecified	2	8	38435	302301
	Tropical cyclone	3	64	1397764	103650

Source: "EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, www.em-dat.net - Université Catholique de Louvain - Brussels - Belgium"

In 2011 Laos was hit by five tropical storms, the most serious of which were Haima and Nock-ten. More than 300,000 people were affected and 26 died, with the two storms resulting in more than US\$100 million in damage, according to the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). Also in 2011, heavy flooding during the northern summer affected 10 of the country's 17 provinces. In 2012 they were again affected by flooding in the northern and central provinces.

² Asian Development Bank (2012) ADB's Response to Natural Disasters & Disaster Risks <http://www.adb.org/documents/special-evaluation-study-adbs-response-natural-disasters-and-disaster-risks>



Media consumption

Nearly all of Laos' 32 television stations and 44 radio stations are government run, though companies are increasingly permitted to buy airtime and run privately produced content.

Accordingly, local news closely reflects government policy. There are a few privately owned media sources in Laos belonging to well-connected families, sometimes relatives of government officials who manage the formal mass media.

Around 50 per cent of households in Laos have access to a television and ownership is rapidly growing. Listenership of radio is decreasing along with newspaper circulation figures.

While the government controls the majority of media, licensing has relaxed in recent years allowing some privately owned TV channels to operate out of the capital Vientiane, and cable ownership is increasing. Newspaper and other print media circulation figures remain extremely weak due to low literacy rates and an insufficient distribution of infrastructure outside the capital Vientiane.

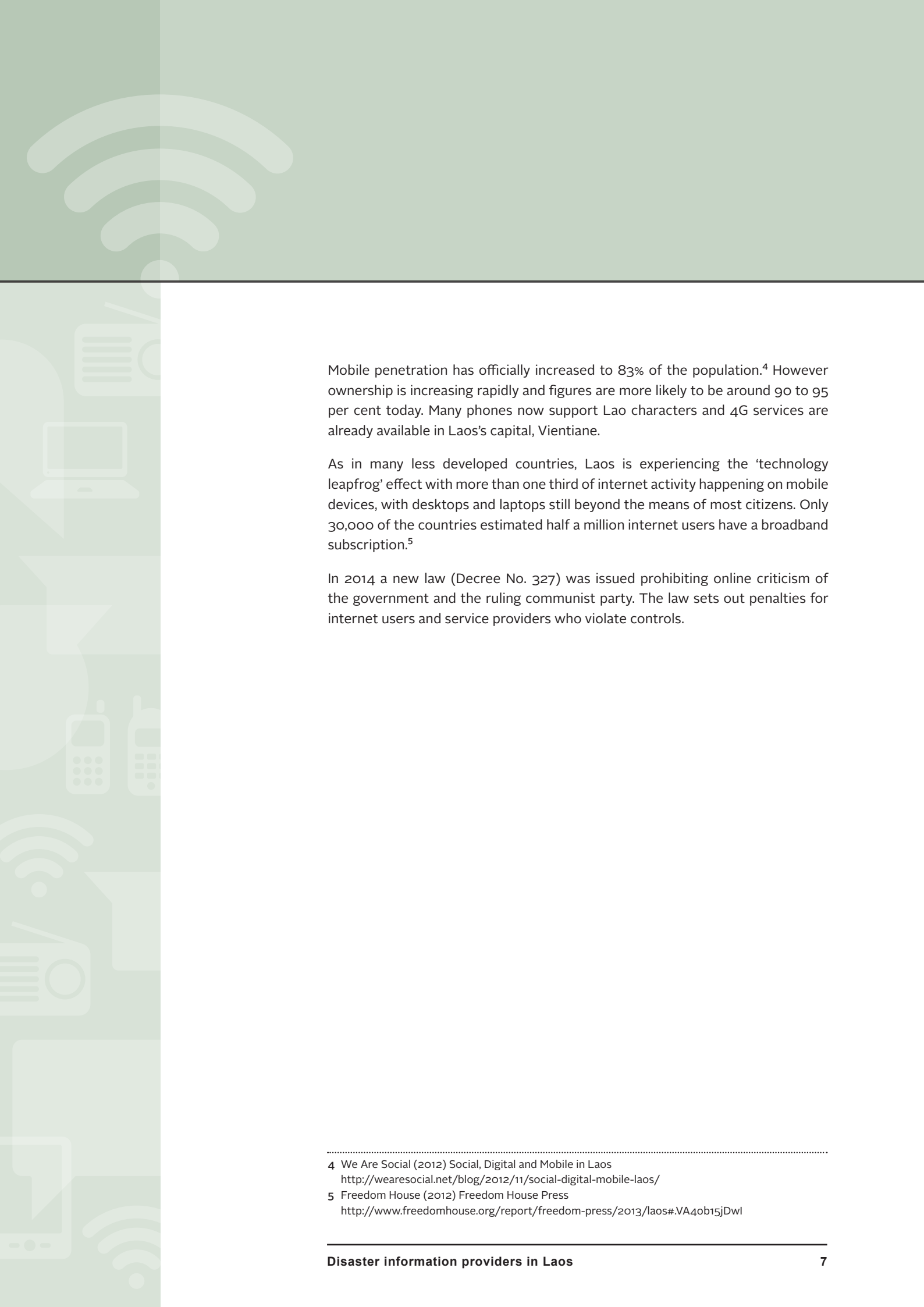
Access to higher educational training for journalists is uncommon and many learn on the job.

The two national broadcasters, Lao National Television (LNTV) and Lao National Radio (LNR), sit within the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. Their revenue is gained from government grants and commercial advertising. Since 2000 commercial investors have been permitted to engage in joint ventures with state owned media enterprises.³ Both broadcasters maintain a headquarters in the capital, Vientiane, and are supported by a network of regional broadcasters spread around the country.

Nhân Dân (The People) and the Xinhua News Agency from China are the only foreign media organisations permitted so far to open offices in Laos. Both opened bureaus in Vientiane in 2011.

The government plans to launch its first satellite in 2015 to relay data for television and telephone services. This development should increase access to additional television stations from the region.

³ UNESCO, Media Regulation in the Mekong and Opportunities for the Development of Public Service and Community Broadcasting, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002255/225571e.pdf>



Mobile penetration has officially increased to 83% of the population.⁴ However ownership is increasing rapidly and figures are more likely to be around 90 to 95 per cent today. Many phones now support Lao characters and 4G services are already available in Laos's capital, Vientiane.

As in many less developed countries, Laos is experiencing the 'technology leapfrog' effect with more than one third of internet activity happening on mobile devices, with desktops and laptops still beyond the means of most citizens. Only 30,000 of the countries estimated half a million internet users have a broadband subscription.⁵

In 2014 a new law (Decree No. 327) was issued prohibiting online criticism of the government and the ruling communist party. The law sets out penalties for internet users and service providers who violate controls.

4 We Are Social (2012) Social, Digital and Mobile in Laos
<http://wearesocial.net/blog/2012/11/social-digital-mobile-laos/>

5 Freedom House (2012) Freedom House Press
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/laos#.VA4ob15jDwI>



Observations on media as disaster information providers

Broadcasters in Laos face a variety of challenges in the delivery of emergency information to citizens. While both LNR and LNTV act as the official emergency broadcasters in the country, they are under resourced and lack organisational structure and processes to deliver effective emergency broadcasting. They require support to build staff and technical capacity.

While television is increasing in popularity amongst citizens, there is a notable challenge to engage the local population with content from the national broadcaster, LNTV. Anecdotally both LNTV and LNR have a loyal following from academia and government and play an important role in influencing the 'big players' in government and business. However, Thai TV stations, and their popular soap operas, are community favourites. There is an argument for media development projects to devise methods to work more closely with these information providers to play an increased role in DRR and early warning messaging.

Media laws approved by the Laos General Assembly in 2008, state that the media must 'contribute to the country's strategy of national defense and development'. However these laws have been subject to continual debate and are yet to pass through the National Assembly.

Broadcasters also play a role in running donation appeals to support the relief and recovery effort post disaster. For example, in 2013, severe flooding affected seven provinces and a tropical storm ripped through Oudomxay killing 17 people and causing landslides and widespread destruction. Both disasters affected more than 80,000 people. LNTV held a donation campaign and within one week managed to raise more than 600 million kip, approximately \$US75,000, for the affected population in cash donations, food, water, roof tiles and clothing. These appeals are also used as a community social responsibility (CSR) promotional opportunity and news stories are generated when the relief items are distributed to the public.



Media coverage of disasters

Emergency information in Laos is centralised, with the government acting as the main information provider during a disaster. This information is then disseminated to the public by the two major state owned broadcasters.

There is no history of planned disaster broadcasting for warnings and advice. Messages are slotted into programming as they are received and repeated unsystematically. Neither organisation has developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) to dictate how the organisation will operate when there is a disaster and they tend to react on case-by-case basis using previous experience as a guide.

First information about a threat is also often delivered to the national broadcasters via one of their affiliated provincial level or local station. However, provincial reporters are often slow to react and less skilled than capital city reporters. Also, LNTV noted that the equipment available to these reporters is very basic and unreliable.

LNR said that as soon as a warning is received from a provincial station or DMH, generally via fax, email or phone call, normal radio programming would be abandoned and the message would be broadcast. Similar procedures exist at LNTV although neither broadcaster has pre-recorded messages or graphics that would alert the public about an important message about a potential threat.

Both broadcasters mentioned facing difficulty accessing government officials in a timely manner to provide further information. In some circumstances, reporters are asked to submit a letter from their organisation's editorial board, which can take up to a week to process.

Laos is mountainous in some areas limiting television or radio signals. Reporters often have difficulty accessing disaster affected areas due to lack of transport and then face technological challenges relaying information back to the studio as mobile phone services are often affected by the disaster. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare will occasionally assist the broadcasters by providing transport.

As information is centralised, and the media is largely government owned, the media plays a minimal role in exploring the causes and response to disasters. Local and international NGO's are rarely interviewed before, during or after a disaster, so coverage lacks some of the deep analysis that could assist citizens in learning from the causes and response to disasters. Additionally, some INGO's noted the possibility of government inflating or deflating assessments of damage and response.

Observations on disaster managers as information providers

The National Disaster Management Committee (NDMC), established in 1999, is the peak disaster management body in the country. The NDMC includes representatives from ministries, technical agencies and the Lao Red Cross, and is supported by representative bodies at the Provincial (PDMC), District (DDMC) and Village Protection Disaster Units (VPDU).

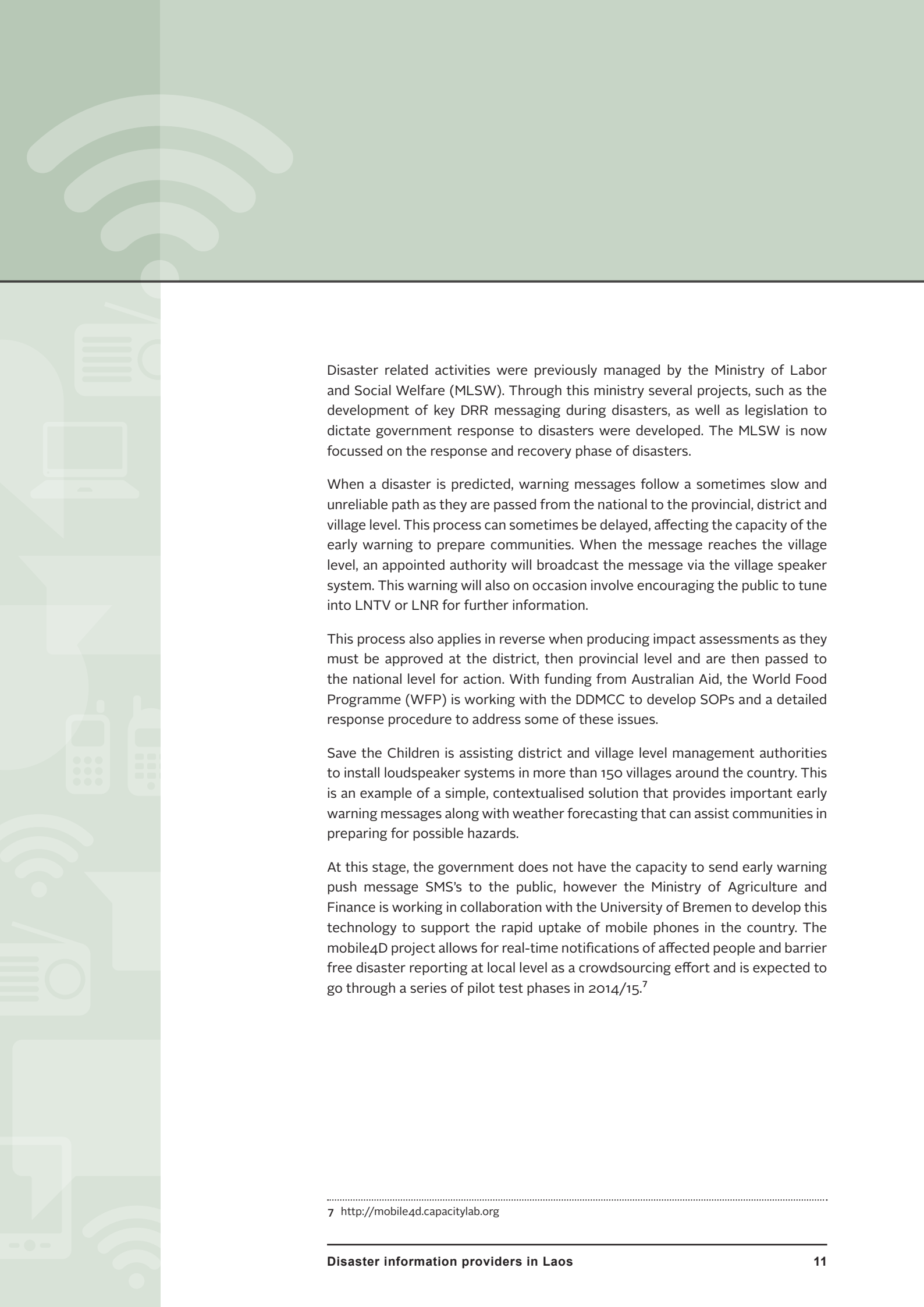
An Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was established to support the national disaster management platform multi-sectoral preparedness and response coordination body for Laos. There are over 50 entities comprised of the Government, UN, INGOs and other development partners who participate in IASC with the view to enhance coordinated response and support to NDMC/ NDMO in disaster management.

The country relies on forecasting provided by Division of Weather Forecast and Aeronautical Meteorology (DWFAM) and supporting information provided by a variety of information channels, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Severe Weather Forecasting Demonstration Project⁶ developed by the World Meteorological Organisation, and ASEAN's Humanitarian Assistance Centre to accurately predict disasters.

The MRC provides the government with daily river level readings from a series of data collection points as well as generating a seven day river forecast. The Centre does not at this stage provide flash flood warnings. The MRC and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) have implemented a project called Flood Emergency Management Strengthening. This has focused on community and public awareness, and initiated various engagement campaigns such as the School Flood Safety Program. Through this, 40 schools in Nongbok and Xebangfai areas used role-playing and games to engage students, parents and community members.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE) was established by presidential decree in 2010. In early 2014, the Department of Disaster Management and Climate Change (DDMCC), was formed and tasked with disaster preparedness and response. As such, the department is working to establish the mandate of the DDMCC, improve staffing shortages and determine future planning, including for information provision.

⁶ SWFDP - <http://www.wmo.int/swfdp/>



Disaster related activities were previously managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MLSW). Through this ministry several projects, such as the development of key DRR messaging during disasters, as well as legislation to dictate government response to disasters were developed. The MLSW is now focussed on the response and recovery phase of disasters.

When a disaster is predicted, warning messages follow a sometimes slow and unreliable path as they are passed from the national to the provincial, district and village level. This process can sometimes be delayed, affecting the capacity of the early warning to prepare communities. When the message reaches the village level, an appointed authority will broadcast the message via the village speaker system. This warning will also on occasion involve encouraging the public to tune into LNTV or LNR for further information.

This process also applies in reverse when producing impact assessments as they must be approved at the district, then provincial level and are then passed to the national level for action. With funding from Australian Aid, the World Food Programme (WFP) is working with the DDMCC to develop SOPs and a detailed response procedure to address some of these issues.

Save the Children is assisting district and village level management authorities to install loudspeaker systems in more than 150 villages around the country. This is an example of a simple, contextualised solution that provides important early warning messages along with weather forecasting that can assist communities in preparing for possible hazards.

At this stage, the government does not have the capacity to send early warning push message SMS's to the public, however the Ministry of Agriculture and Finance is working in collaboration with the University of Bremen to develop this technology to support the rapid uptake of mobile phones in the country. The mobile4D project allows for real-time notifications of affected people and barrier free disaster reporting at local level as a crowdsourcing effort and is expected to go through a series of pilot test phases in 2014/15.⁷

⁷ <http://mobile4d.capacitylab.org>



Observations on international actors

While many international humanitarian agencies are actively involved in disaster risk management at a local and national scale, engagement with media both in terms of capacity development and as information providers is limited. Many NGO's and UN agencies predominantly work to support the government in generating development gains rather than running broader projects.

NGO's and UN agencies rarely provide interviews and commentary to the media on disaster related issues and very few have relationships linked to other interest areas. UNICEF for example has a long running project working with LNR to produce a youth radio show. This successful show discusses issues relevant to young people but it does not often discuss disaster related issues. The program did play a role in educating listeners about Avian Influenza during the 2008 outbreak, indicating the potential of media to inform citizens about other potential threats such as natural disasters.



Summary

There are opportunities to increase community resilience, improve how citizens get information during disasters and enhance two-way communication between affected people and support providers via the media. This can be achieved by improving strategic connections between all information providers, and remembering that disaster prevention is as important as response and recovery phases.

Laos has limited donor support for building the linkages between media, disaster managers, NGOs and citizens. There is opportunity to establish a strategic emergency broadcasting role for media and to make it part of a planned, coordinated disaster communications approach, under the government's new mandate for disaster management.



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