

Aide Memoire of Communications Mission, September 2, 2002

Communications and Nam Theun 2: Transparency, Ease of Access, Interaction.

A mission comprising Peter Stephens, Regional Communications Manager, and Melissa Fossberg, Communications Officer, accompanied by Enrique Crousillat, Country Manager for Lao PDR, met with Mme. Khempheng Pholsena, Vice President of the Committee for Planning and Cooperation, and members of the Government's Communications Committee for Nam Theun 2, Mr. Xaypaseuth Phomsoupha of the Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts and Mrs. Malayvieng Sakonniyom of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the third condition of support for the Nam Theun 2 hydroelectric project as laid out in the August 2001 aide memoire. The third item concerns the issue of building broader support for Nam Theun 2 and the development framework: *"It would be important to develop greater understanding and wider support for the project among the international donor community and global and local civil society."*

The World Bank team would like to record its gratitude to Mme Khempheng and her team for their constructive and open nature of the discussion and looks forward to working with the Communications Team on implementation of the various recommendations outlined below.

Introduction: Why communications matters

Mme Khempheng began the discussion with a review of the progress made since the last communications mission, including a Government website for the project and the July symposium on NT2 in Vientiane. She noted the importance of "maintaining a regular flow of information on Nam Theun 2" and said the website would facilitate this, as well as providing a means for questions, comments and feedback. She and Mr. Xaypaseuth also briefed the mission on the progress on the other two conditions for World Bank support, the development framework and the progress on safeguards. They reported no problems in either area.

Mr. Stephens, on behalf of the mission, explained the significance of communications in a high-profile project such as Nam Theun 2. He said that:

- A lack of information will allow extreme critics of the project to control the discussion on NT2. An informed debate is in the best interests of the GOL and the Bank. Dissemination of information, quickly and broadly, is the best way of ensuring that this happens.
- World Bank Board support will depend on improved understanding and broader support for the project and the overall development framework. The Bank is owned by 184 member nations, whose elected officials directly affect not just Bank policy but approve specific projects. Those elected officials, in turn, are often influenced by their home parliaments, media, business communities and civil society organizations.
- Improved understanding and knowledge of the project by beneficiaries will improve local ownership of the project. Support by project beneficiaries increases the likelihood of success, according to the World Bank's study on aid effectiveness. "In a sample of donor-financed rural water supply projects, the success rate was 68 percent for projects with high beneficiary participation, but only 12 percent for projects with low participation. More important, donor efforts to promote beneficiary participation helped the adoption of this approach to service provision," according to *Assessing Aid*.

- Building support for the project will improve international investor perceptions of the project and of the country. This will have immediate beneficial effects, in building support for project cofinancing (including grant financing) and more broadly as the business environment in Lao PDR is seen as more transparent and certain.

He noted further that, “everything we do communicates and will affect the level of support for this project.” To confirm confidence in Nam Theun 2 as

- A technically sound project
- That is good for the country, especially the poor
- And satisfies the safeguards of the World Bank,
- Executed by a responsible government
- With strong support based on sound knowledge
- And a fair sharing of benefits between the private sector, the people of Lao PDR, the local people in the project area, and also between Thailand and Lao PDR.

It is important to encourage people to visit the country and the project site; to make information readily available; to share news of the reforms under way; to post information on the new website regarding compliance with safeguards and other technical aspects of the project. By ensuring that people can readily visit the project site, and that there is a quick and thorough supply of information about it, we would be sending a message that this is a good project, and one of which we are proud, and one in which we have great confidence. People tend to assume that lack of information, lack of access (even if it is just perceived as such) indicates a lack of confidence, or something to hide.

The Bank team recommended the following five key actions. (Responses as noted.):

1. the strengthening of the communications team, to include regular meetings with at senior government level – either Prime Minister or Deputy PM. -- to review comments, questions and feedback (Agreed, with details to be worked out);
2. further building on the process of ensuring that villagers and affected people have full and easy access to information, including negative reports, and an anonymous mechanism for voicing concerns and questions. This will involve translating more information (and more quickly) into Lao languages (Agreed, specific details to be worked out.);
3. a process of providing easier access to the dam site, plateau etc., to media, NGOs and others, so they can report on what they see and find. This could be done proactively, and for logistical reasons could involve a few groups at first. The important thing, though, is that the visits be assisted but not managed (Agreed, concern expressed about possible overload of visitors to the villages; details on timing and logistics to be worked out.);
4. the interactive website, which would need quick, up-to-date information, with links to all documents and reports, as well as a mechanism for receiving inquiries (Agreed, already under way.);
5. a decision to engage a reputable international communications firm which can support a transparent approach to the project and the related development framework, and support

continued strengthening of the GOL's own capacity in managing information and communications (Agreed, with details on funding, terms of reference, etc., to be resolved).

Further supporting information

The Bank team left the Communications Team the following supporting information on the five recommendations.

Strengthen the communications team

In order to get information out, to monitor and manage the whole information flow and to oversee the continuing need for communications around the development framework of various projects, the Communications Team needs to be well organized with high level access in Government, particularly because of the project's size and budget. Communications around the project need to be taken seriously and need to be seen to be taken seriously. The team should be a link between the Government, the World Bank, the developers, other donors and the rest of the world. It should not be seen as a public relations team or a bureaucratic bottleneck to getting out information. The communications team should meet regularly to review questions and comments being made, progress on issues, and review perceptions of support and opposition. The team members should meet regularly – every 2 weeks – with the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister to brief him on progress and to show that concerns, questions, and comments are being raised at the highest levels.

Do more to ensure that villagers and affected people have full and easy access to information

As you know, the Bank's Operational Policy 4.12 on Involuntary Resettlement requires that "Displaced persons and their communities, and any host communities receiving them, are provided timely and relevant information, consulted on resettlement options, and offered opportunities to participate in planning, implementing, and monitoring of resettlement. Appropriate and accessible grievance mechanisms are established for these groups." This is a theme echoed throughout World Bank operational policies. In the case of Nam Theun 2, we know that there has been a considerable amount of engagement with villagers and affected people, and we are not suggesting a process ignorant of this history. To underscore the open nature of the consultation and participation process, we would envisage a balanced presentation of available information as well as a chance to ask questions and express views free from fear of missing out on project benefits or other retribution – as would be the case in any country.

What specifically does that mean? People need information in a form they can understand – namely in the local language, with presentations of materials in pictorial or oral forms, if necessary, including materials on both the benefits and the potential negative impacts of the project. Tape-recorded information, illustrated posters, for example, could be effective. Regular information meetings could be held where there could be a discussion of negative articles and to invite and answer questions and comments. The purpose of this is to give affected people a realistic picture of the dam, its benefits and risks to ensure that they can have an informed view and feel free to express it.

The World Commission on Dams, in talking about dams in the pipeline, speaks of providing “support to vulnerable and disadvantaged stakeholder groups to participate in an informed manner” and that “demonstrated public acceptance exists for the recommended options,” options that are confirmed by stakeholders not just ones that are proposed by the developers. The GOL and developers are, of course, aware of this, and have taken steps in this direction. It is our view, however, that this area of information supply, transparency and consultation will emerge as a decisive factor in shaping international support for the project. This implies that we should consider ways to do more in this direction, and to continue testing our actions against the standards of Bank policy and the WCD recommendations.

Facilitate easier access to the dam site, plateau etc., for media, NGOs and others

International donors are influenced by comments and analysis from their NGOs and media. At the moment the most common complaint from international media is that there are often barriers to either getting into the country as a journalist or that they are minded during their visits by a representative of the government. This sends a strong message – intentional or otherwise – that the real story is something that the government wants to hide. **Giving journalists and NGOs access to the people who would be affected by Nam Theun 2 in itself would produce a mix of stories but would also send a strong message that the GOL is not hiding anything and that the government is proud of this project.** The Government should assist in these visits but not manage them. Groups of journalists and NGOs could be organized so that the time and resources of the government and developers would not be overtaxed nor would the villagers be burdened with visit after visit. This should not be seen as an all-or-nothing proposal. Many people and groups have visited the dam site and surrounding areas over many years. It is worth repeating that the message sent externally by encouraging people to visit, and allowing them to set their own agendas is that the GOL is proud of the project and the process underpinning it. This message will be important in building support, and can be phased in or handled in a series of visits initially. We are happy to assist in advising on this aspect of the proposal, with names and groups of possible visitors.

Construct an interactive website

To ensure that information is available internationally, immediately, and easily – and that opinions and comments could be heard from all quarters, there is no better mechanism than a good website. There is one operated by NTEC, and we understand that the GOL has also made initial steps in this direction. But what is needed is not a static website, but an interactive, comprehensive one, which is maintained and monitored in terms of feedback. This would be overseen by the Communications Team. A cabinet minister or NGO in Canada or the Netherlands or Japan should be able easily to access the environmental action plans, resettlement plans, maps of the site, and to send emails to ask questions or provide comments. There is a wealth of information on NT2 and the broader development agenda which could easily be adapted to a website. Information needs to be available in Lao and English – the same information that should be made available to the villagers.

Engage a communications firm

A reputable communications firm should be engaged to assist the Communications Team in this effort and in the equally important task of increasing domestic capacity to manage information and communications. This firm would be useful in helping strengthen the government’s capacity (regarding NT2, the development agenda more broadly), provide timely advice, help develop a

communications and transparency strategy, assist in replying to criticism and building international support for Laos and the project. We would propose that such a firm be hired from a short-list of reputable organizations with an international base, and play a linking role between the Communications Team, the developers, the World Bank, and other donors/interested parties. Since funding will be an issue, it may be prudent to seek bilateral assistance at an early stage. We are happy to suggest a number of firms and work with the GOL and developers to prepare terms of reference, to move ahead expeditiously.