

# Public Service Improvement: A Case study of One Door Service in Lao People Democratic Republic

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## Abstract

An analytical framework on One Door Service in this article derived from new public management that takes a coordinated, holistic approach to public service delivery. These service delivery approaches have become a famous and adaptable mode of administrative decentralization of government services in Laos, and gives strategic focus on governance and public administration reform for better service delivery. This article reviews these rationales in the conceptual introduction of One Door Service initiatives in Laos. The ODS has been justified mainly on managerial and governance grounds and viewed by government as a partial successful governance and public administration reform of early stage. The change of it is placed in public service improvement, using the collaborative customer interface model through the four sets of critical assessment challenge on governance, performance management, workforce and information sharing. The analysis assesses the performance by looking at the empirical results and draws on experiences on how One Door Service has been operating and providing services to citizens at the ground. With this knowledge of linkages with the concept of public service improvement in Laos, we can pose the question of whether the One Door Service project has achieved the aims of governance and public administration reform and benefited the majority of citizens. The overall image presented a positive and negative- a positive image is an innovative mode of service delivery which has expanded across the country in terms of establishing, but a negative image is an inadequate step for administrative reform during the design and implementation.

**Keywords:** One door service, public service management, administrative reform, decentralization, governance, service delivery, improvement.

## 1. Introduction

Several decades, most governments across the globe are aware that inefficient and ineffective delivery of services by government agencies may lead to a minimize trust in government by citizens. The complexity of government agencies has significantly raised the cost to citizens, who have to spend time and resources to get public provided services they need to improve their social and economic conditions. Thus, many governments have reorganized and restructured their public organizations in an effort to produce and provide better services and value by introducing different efficient ways to achieve better outcomes in the face of increasingly fixed budgets and scarce resources by sharing office functions in payroll, human resources and procurement. Many of them have tried to find the right agency or the right program for their circumstances or eligibility. A lot of governments have also used information and communications technology to transform the traditional way of interacting directly with citizens by adopting commercial customer service techniques.

However, not many individual government agencies have succeeded in making significant progress in effecting service improvement. Yet, public service agencies have traditionally served citizens to meet the broad range of needs within individual agencies' own narrow service boundaries and operational 'silos' which is not enough, and are seldom both confined to distinct organizational or service boundaries with any agencies control of all resources required to improve quality of life or deliver economic and social outcomes. Somehow, engaging in complex social problems frequently requires a concerted effort on the part of different agencies. Thus, to maximize public value, government and public service agencies need to look beyond organizational and service boundaries. They have to establish ways of working by focusing on how best to serve citizens and improve outcomes.

The service design and delivery innovations have been inserted in the public service improvement concept across the world: public-private partnerships, one stop service or one door service, contracting out, user pays, citizens' charters', citizens' report cards, balanced scorecard and quality management schemes have been among the many initiatives taken by the executive arms of government at all territorial levels to bring about improvements (OECD 2009, 2011, 2012; Peters et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011; Cunningham and James 2011; UNDP 2011, 2012). The one-door-service (ODS) - sometimes known as one-stop-window, single window, single table, one roof or one-stop-service (OSS)-has been one of the innovations for enhanced service delivery found in countries across the world. It is an innovation that can be recognized as a modification of decentralization for public service improvement. These innovative patterns spread to developing and transitional countries; this approach is accounted for increasing the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of local government services such as in China, Singapore, South Korea, and India, known as Government to Citizens or G2C.

In Vietnam, following a successful pilot project in two locations in 1996 and 1998, ODS was introduced across the country to offer a range of services including business registration, construction certification, in-country investment permits, land and house use rights certification, notary services, residential registration, migration and immigration documents,

social welfare and citizen complaints (UNDP 2004, SDC 2005). Recently the Government has extended the ODS approach to attracting foreign investment to industrial and export processing zones (EPZs) and to dealing more effectively with HIV-AIDS (UNAIDS 2010; VBEN 2010a, 2010b). Noteworthy ODS has been developed in Vietnam over the past decade and the approach adopted by Lao PDR is modeled on this experience. Similar ODS have also been developed in Cambodia (UNDP 2012), Mongolia (SDC 2006) and Bhutan (UNCDF 2014).

This article examines the introduction of ODS for government service delivery in Lao PDR, which pays attention to the governance and public administration reform content, context and politics of the policy and its implementation. This is carried out within an analytical framework of new public management which is derived from administrative decentralization and is guided by the question of whether the ODS project has achieved the aims of good governance and public administration reform and whether ODS has produced the benefits that are in the theory associated with public service management and identifies the potential gains in service delivery to majority of citizens that might occur. The introductory section provides a rationale for the global governments which have developed numbers of efficient approaches in an effort to produce and provide better services to improve public service value. The second section identifies a review of some relevant literature. The third section describes the research methodology used here. Fourth, the analysis section examines some key findings and empirical results by using the analytical framework to assess the ODS performance. And follow by the discussion section before moving to the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of 'New Public Management' is defined as applying private sector management techniques to planning and delivery of public services. Citizens are considered to be 'customers' and the objective is to increase the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of public services delivered to citizens. Emphasis is placed on the decentralization of services and measuring by results or outcomes rather than inputs, in order to achieve greater accountability to citizens and stakeholders (James. P. Pfiffner, 2004).

There is a large literature on the concept of organizational effectiveness that is also directly relevant to issues concerning the meaning of 'improvement', the different interpretations of effectiveness are debated and analyzed into the concepts or characteristics of literature of public service improvement (George. A. 2002). The *conceptual models of effectiveness* tend to concentrate on the success or failure of single organizations however, public service improvement refers to the achievements of sets of organizations, the focus is on increasing service standards across an 'industry' rather than in an individual agency. This raises questions about if an increase in the mean performance of service providers is enough to show that improvement has occurred, regardless of variation around the mean. Can a change be labeled 'improvement' if the citizens in some areas receives poorer services? If, the mean level of performance increases, but the gap between the best and worst also grows. Is this improvement? Some government agencies have recently introduced 'floor targets' that are intended to increase service standards fastest in the poorest local communities (Wintour

2002). Most of the *empirical research on effectiveness* consists of the comparisons of the relative achievements of different organizations in a single time period; the focus is on the ‘comparative statistics’ of effectiveness. However, improvement is a dynamic phenomenon that concerns temporal shifts in service standards in relation to a baseline. This implies that it may be possible to claim improvement or deterioration in public service through the selection of a benchmark year in which performance was weak or strong. Alternatively, if the time frame for comparison is fixed, the desired impression may be created by manipulating the set of improvement criteria (Georgeboyne 2003). The *effectiveness literature* concentrates on the success of organization, while current policy debate is about the services. The difference is essential due to public services that are often provided by networks of organizations (Rhodes 1996). However organizational effectiveness and service effectiveness are conceptually distinct (Provan and Milward 2001). Some organizations may become more effective in their contribution to service provisions but the service as a whole worsens because the effectiveness of other agencies declines or because the activities of different agencies are poorly co-ordinate). Service improvement may require more than higher effectiveness by individual organizations, or even by all organizations that are involved in providing a service. In sum, public service improvement is a dynamic phenomenon that naturally raises questions of equity, and is usually concerned with the performance of multi-organizational network rather than achievement of single organizations.

Therefore the ODS initiative service design and delivery innovation have been included in the public service improvement concept across the world. They belong to the umbrella of *administrative decentralization* where authority is cascaded to different levels of government (Rondinelli 1999). The most common pattern of administrative decentralization is de-concentration where there is transfer of ‘authority over specified decision making, financial and management tasks by administrative, means to different level under the jurisdictional authority of the central government’ (Cohen and Peterson 1999; Rondinelli 1999). There are all about bureaucratic and administrative reform since it requires significant alterations to the mechanisms for accountability, transparency, delegation of functions and perform management. However, they are not representatives of *political decentralization*, the most broad and most encouraged type of decentralization as they do not entail the granting of power to citizens and their elected representatives to have greater influence and control over decision making at lower levels (Tuner 2012). The nature of these mechanisms in a change environment that requires adjustment to the status quo. These reforms typically follow one of two paths- they are either transformational or evolutionary. This does not mean that the same patterns could fit all circumstances. The *Transformational* change tends to be top-down driven, with very specific timelines and targets and those are meant to challenge existing practices. And the *Evolutionary* change is more cautious, more respectful of current organizational culture and modest in its short and mid-term goals. The recent study uncovered two approaches to evolutionary change. The first approach seeks to move toward the desired final approach by first adopting other approaches in order to help in building capacity and reducing challenges so that agencies can move on to the next stage of the change. The other approach is a more traditional structuring of the change (Accenture-IHPSV, 2009).

In the market industries, the concepts of customer service and satisfaction can be applied effectively to improve the quality of services in targeted low-income neighborhoods by setting goals needed to service improvement- to improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of service providers in target areas; link regular customer feedback to quality service improvement plans; change the power balance for customers in poor and vulnerable neighborhoods and the organizations, agencies and staff that serve them; and promote a customer base that is more informed and ready to take action in their neighborhoods and communities (CSSP, 2007).

“.....Customer satisfaction can be experienced in a variety of situations and connected to both goods and services. It is a extremely personal assessment that is greatly affected by customer expectations. In the public sector, the definition of customer satisfaction is often linked to both the personal interaction with the service provider and the outcomes experienced by service users...”

### 3. Research Methodology

To a large extent, in this article we have used a new method using the collaborative customer interface model through the four sets of critical assessment challenges on governance, performance management, workforce and information sharing. To collect the information, we have used primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by using questionnaires, interviews and dialogues with direct stakeholders, including the main implementing agency- Ministry of Home Affairs, the Governance and Public Administration Reform project team, Saysettha ODS teams, officials at central and local levels, particularly the survey of public opinion was done by the author in August 2014. The secondary data was collected from available documentations such as reports, government strategies, the decrees, resolutions, guidelines and academic literatures. The questionnaires were prepared in two types and distributed to both the customers and the service providers (ODS staff). The fundamental questions for evaluating the ODS project are related to the relevance of ODS and the leading development issues of Lao PDR. Identification of these issues and priorities was made through analysis of development plans and reports issued by government of Laos in particular the MoHA and GPAR.

### 4. Analysis

The aim of this article is to assess the ODS approach in Laos by using the Collaborative customer interface model. Under this model, government agencies collaborate to provide ways in which citizens can access multiple services or obtain information about those services in one place or through a single transaction. Through this model, reviews of the ODS takes place by looking at the empirical

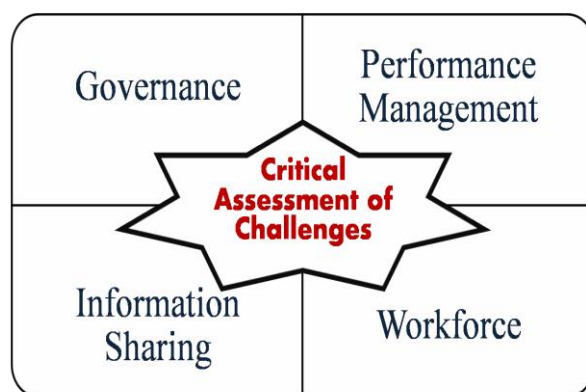


Figure 1. The ODS's Analytical Framework on Critical Assessment of the Challenges

Source: Adapted by author

results and draws on experiences on how ODS has been operating and providing services to citizens at the ground level. The empirical analysis is examined through the four sets of critical assessments of challenges approach: governance, performance management, workforce and information sharing (See Figure 1. Analytical Framework: Critical assessments of the challenges). These are linked to create the focal challenge on ODS's initiative Development and Implementation. These problems are effected to governance and administrative reform in supporting ODS initiative to deliver services. From the result, this model also identifies some concerned trends on ODS implementation, in administrative decentralization and governance, this means the government agencies require a clear vision of approach and standardize form for service delivery in question and a strong understanding of ability to overcome these challenges and manage the change that will be discussed in the next section.

#### *4.1 The ODS's Concept*

The concept of ODS's Beneficial, is provided to understand or fully appreciate the background, development or nature of ODS, while wanting to know more about the range of outcomes, structural options and alternatives that exist outside Lao PDR. It is a basic description of key features. From the diffusion of global benchmarks of OSS or ODS since 1980s to present, the global interest in ODS has been derived from a cluster of interrelated factors that promise effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery and stakeholder satisfaction (Mark Turner 2010). Other researchers stated that the ODS initiatives offer a powerful means for integrating service delivery effectively and efficiently while providing the customer experience and have potential to transform the relationship between citizens and government-moving beyond a focus on singular transactions toward a more holistic, co-productive relationship. As mention earlier ODS differ from one country to another, identified what range of services will be offered and through what modalities the public can access these services. In this part, identified the rationale of locating up services together in one location, enable government to benefit some keys improvement:

- + Improve accessing and convenience services for the customers;
- + Achieve efficiency for both government and customers;
- + Opportunity to reform the relationship between government and citizens/customers;
- + Associate with government efforts to simplify procedures for the benefit of consumers;
- + Represent an opportunity for government to respond to citizens' needs for public services those that take a coordinated, holistic approach to delivery;
- + Contribute to enhanced transparency and accountability, and hence the reduction of corruption.

ODS are generally justified on managerial grounds, providing government services through one recognizable access point. This requires clearly laid out procedures and processes and often results in increased efficiency, with procedures being simplified and processes being

condensed; thereby saving time and money and improving the quality and transparency of the customer experience; and improving the relationship between government and citizens and responding more to citizens' needs for public services.

In Lao PDR, public administration reform is firmly viewed as a means to an end – it is regarded as a necessary condition to deliver more equitable and people-centered services, and in a more effective way. Re-enforcing Strategy (NGPES) adopted by the National Assembly in 2003, recognized that poverty eradication requires local level, community-based planning and public service delivery favoring the poor. People-responsive socio-economic development is now firmly a key element of government policy to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the goals of the National Socio-Economic Development Plans (NSEDPP). It is one of the main reasons behind the ongoing public administration reform in Laos. The government's Governance and Public Administration Reform Programme (GPAR) is an initiative aimed to strengthen the functioning performance of public administration at national, provincial and district levels. The main focus of the Lao government's policy and its national GPAR program is to achieve more people-responsive service delivery, especially at the local level. The objective is to achieve this goal through increased capacity and long term reform at local administration level, leading to better delivery of services that will improve the lives of the poor, especially in the rural areas of Laos. GPAR has moved more from institutional reform towards improving public administration practices and capacities in support of better service delivery. These include piloting decentralized service delivery, supporting a number of projects at the national and sub-national levels. These projects helped to the formulation of a series of policies, laws and regulations, and introduced initiatives and guidelines to improve service delivery (Chantha. O. and Shukui. T. 2014).

The acknowledgement of Governance modernization initiative in Lao PDR is to be recognized by the creation of the GPAR as its mission is to assist the government to upgrade the capacity of public administration and implement governance reformation programmes (In 2011, GPAR is recalled in the new phase to National Governance and Public Administration Programme (NGPAR). One of its sub-projects – Support for Better Service Delivery (GPASBSD) is located in Public Administration and Civil Service Authority 'PACSA' (PACSA is upgraded to Ministry level in 2011, called Ministry of Home Affairs 'MoHA'). It aims “*to strengthen capacity for strategic planning, management and monitoring of governance reform for more effectiveness, accountable and transparent delivery of services*”. This initiative is trying to improve public service delivery by introducing the One Door Service Center concept (ODS). The ODS initiative was formally approved by the government of Lao PDR in 2006, with an established ODS pilot project in Saysettha District, Vientiane Capital. Following the success of this pilot, the Prime Minister approved the expansion of ODS in 2007 and MoHA issued an ODS' operational manual in 2008. The total now are 17 ODS: 11 ODS are located at District level, slightly growth from 1 in 2006 to 11 in 2014 of the 148 districts in the country; 5 cover Provincial functions; and 1 covers Ministry of Planning and Investment functions. The Governance Public Administration Reform programme has provided support to establish 10 of the ODS.

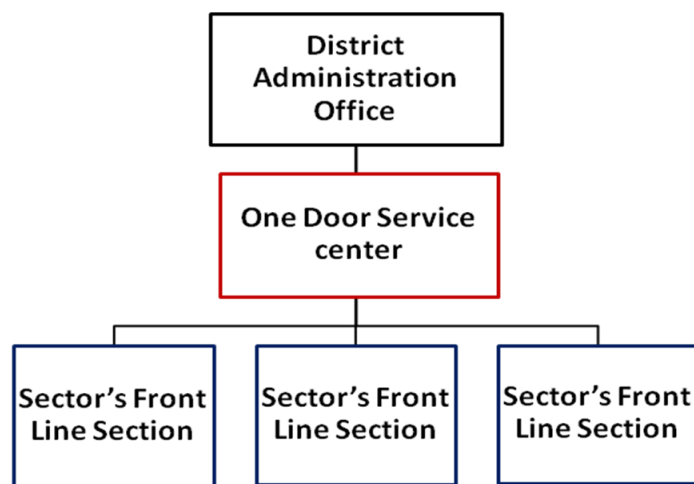
The typical services being offered in ODS are “supply driven”. When Lao government decided to initiate these centers the services were determined centrally. This was the suitable approach at the early stage – helping to launch methods and processes that were quite unique and ambitious. The key benefit of the ODS modality is increased efficiency of service delivery, with processing times having been dramatically reduced (by up to 75%) and customer satisfaction being high.

#### 4.2 Analytical Framework

The change and challenge of ODS is placed in public service improvement, using the collaborative customer interface model through the four sets of critical assessment challenge: governance, performance management, workforce and information sharing to assess the ODS performance by looking at the empirical results and draws on experiences on how ODS has been operating and providing services to citizens at the ground.

##### 4.2.1 Critical Challenge on Governance

Most of ODSs’ offices were located in the existing front reception area of provincial and district buildings using space allocated by that level of government, so in terms of access the citizens find it easy to reach them. Opening hours were normal office hours, closed during the lunch hour (12 – 1:30 p.m.) and weekend. The Steering Committees have been formed in each ODS, to oversee ODS’s operations, present and meet up regularly for most part thus they are constrained by administrative routine and spend little time on strategy while their decisions are not posted or explained –raising accountability and transparency concern. The manager, normally a chief of district’s cabinet at district and chief of provincial’s cabinet at provincial; and staff for the service desks for ODS were



**Figure 2. The ODS Structure Hierarchy**  
Source: ODS Manual, PACSA 2008

locally appointed by chief of District and Governor who were from the district and provincial administration. ODS have between 3-9 staff, they were usually from the administration office but some are representatives from line ministries, although not always located within the ODS itself (See Figure 2. The ODS Structure Hierarchy). Commitment and coordination is lacked by Sector Ministries at all levels. For instance, Planning and Investment knows potential clients have to interact with the Ministry of Finance. When these two sectors got together to work out a decent process, each thought their Ministry’s legislation should supersede the others where there was conflict (the result is that clients have to deal with each Ministry separately – hardly in the spirit of an ODS). Provinces and Districts have requested



delegation on business registration but, they say, it is being stonewalled by the sector. Some provinces claimed to witness a lack of cooperation and stonewalling from some sectors, even when there were written agreements. For ODSs, administrative delegations loom large on their agenda. Clear and direct policy here might alleviate the problems. The popularity of ODS could be severely constrained without some methodology to get around these issues. The ODS's reporting versus to traditional hierarchy organization structures system or a regular pattern – sector/product based sub-units reporting to a manager who is either a member of the Steering Committee or reports to it. Thus, ODS's staff live under a dual command structure: they are expected to embrace the purpose and leadership of their ODS while being aware they are, in reality, employees of their loaning agency – the agency which controls the technicalities of their work, their career path and future security. It is the latter situation which typically retains an employee's focus.

#### 4.2.2 Critical Challenge on Performance management

The actual services delivered in the ODSs differ depending on the local administration and line ministries such as availability and physical space. All ODSs performed certain core functions involving the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. In some cases, there involve is the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Ministry of Education and Sport, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning and Investment.

The character of the services delivered can be classified into two modes. First, there was full service where ODS staff receive customers' requests, process them and provide the customer with the desired end product in the ODS. Second, there was partial service whereby ODS staff received, perhaps check and record a customer's request or document that it is administratively complete, and then pass it to the relevant sector department for checking and processing. In some cases, the staff returns the required documents

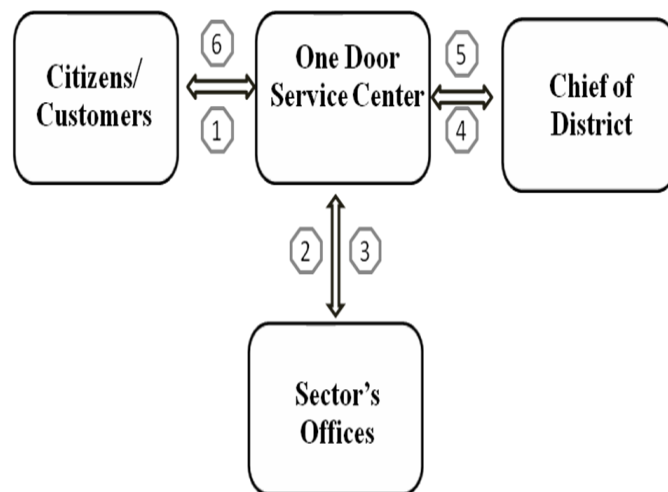


Figure 3. ODS's Document Process  
Source: ODS Manual, PACSA 2008

(e.g. a registration document) to the customer once it had been processed in the relevant service-providing department by themselves (See Figure 3. ODS's Document Process). At the time of the study in August 2014, found that few of the core services at the District level seem to fall under the categories labeled "Governance" (birth and marriage certificates, migration permits, name changes etc) and Land Management (e.g. registration, divisions, mergers); Sector services for functions such as tourism licenses, live event permits, land fill

approvals etc. are not universally available. Nevertheless, most of the ODS services in business licenses were partial or not universally available such as public work and transport, investment, tax and commercial and trade because these issues usually are approved at provincial level. For instance, ODS- Saysettha used to offer services in relation to Planning and Investment. Recently, the service was discontinued at district level and is only offered as a service at provincial level, in part due to the service being considered to be too complex for ODS administrative staff to handle.

Some ODS provide a range of administrative services to customers who live in the area. Thus, service standards, in terms of target standard response times for completing customer enquiries are not in place. Therefore customers do not know when to expect their enquiries to be completed and cannot hold officials to account when delays are experienced. For instance, the administrative and management enquiries are generally resolved within 3 days but the response completion time for customer enquiries is not recorded. For other sector enquiries, wait times can take weeks or months, but the data is not recorded to enable an analysis of average response times. The number of enquiries handled per week, month, and year are recorded so that the ODS can assess how well their services are used. However the data is not used as management information to identify areas where usage could be improved. Disaggregated data about the profile of users e.g. age, gender, ethnic group etc. is also not recorded. In this point, some managers reported that service standards are in place but performance is not monitored: data is not gathered in terms of completion times for each enquiry. Customer satisfaction is also neither monitored in general, nor disaggregated by gender. Transactional processes are followed when handling a customer's request for service, which is displayed publicly at ODS. Managers informed that staff explained service processes to customers, who then know which supporting papers to present; thereby making the administration of those services more efficient as a result. This demonstrates that some ODS were seeking to be transparent and efficient in their service delivery to customers.

Fiscal support varies have been found that some centers are completely reliant on the provincial or district administrative expenditure budgets, while others relied on revenues. There has been no management accounting to help establish satisfactory funding and expenditure benchmarks. Revenue is the most important dynamic in the operation of any ODS. While each center is not a business unit in the commercial sense, revenue indicates activity and usage and often used to offset regular operating costs. Each center sets its fees for public posting within their office. However, it found that a great deal of similarity in fees, likely the result of centrally issued decrees, but this was not unanimous. Some districts charged more or less than others. Most charged the client extra to get copies of required forms although some (especially the Vientiane Governor's Office) build this minor cost into the overall fee. The different charges among ODS have been found, and typical for ODS to return 70% of their fee revenue to "the government", retaining the balance for local purposes. These local purposes varied from replenishing office supplies to providing "bonus" payments to staff. Most offices complained about the lack of funds for full operations. But it seems that the 70% did not find its way into the national treasury but was, rather, dispersed within the various sector ministries to compensate for their participation in delivering ODS.

During the field study, discussion with key stakeholders such as the GPAR team and MoHA officials as policy makers including the chief of district, managers and staff of Saysettha ODS as policy implementation. They identified a variety of ways service delivery could be improved; including the factors that have made some sectors to re-centralize their services. Their suggestions confirm the findings of the GPAR review in 2011, to address problems and challenges, should consider to increase the range of services offered; set and monitor service standards; train staff in customer service; improve facilities in customer waiting areas e.g. provision of drinking water; undertake customer satisfaction activities such as a suggestion box, and customer surveys; improve efficient document management system; and increase coordination between line departments.

#### 4.2.3 Critical Challenge on Workforce

Staff is *appointed* to work in the centers, usually by the organization which is decentralizing the service. In this case, a formal recruitment process has not been occurred. Center management assumed that these staff would be fully competent to represent a ministry, region etc. However, there is evidence that appointments were not based on common selection criteria such as a service-oriented attitude, soft/hardware awareness, merit etc. nor were any kinds of tests administered to increase the chances of job-employee compatibility. There is no formal training plan for ODS centers. To provide service in times of staff absences, some ever centers set aside time for staff to become familiar with other services– but this approach is certainly not widespread.

Notable, Saysettha ODS has 7 staff, 75% of which are female. 4 staff manages the front office reception area at any one time, with 3 undertaking back-office duties, such as processing enquiries and referring to sector departments. All staff undertakes front and back office duties in rotation. Staffs were trained on an annual basis in each relevant ministry's administrative procedures. However, managers consider that the training received is insufficient and should be supplemented by more in-depth training. Some staff report that they had never received training in ODS processes and system management. In addition as staff leave, new staff are not trained immediately, due to the infrequency of the training.

A 2005 review of the Vietnam experience uncovered similar results in this area where “almost all...staff expressed an urgent need for better professional training, soft skills related to education and computer knowledge.” As a very likely reason for the success of Vietnam's ODSs may be its funding levels. In a SDC report 2005 it was noted that urban district officials “ensured the payment of operational costs...and costs related to upgrading the range of services provided. In some cases, they provide financial incentives and uniforms for ODS staff...in most cases ODS costs are adequately covered”. This is not the case in Laos. It is in the interests of all ODS stakeholders to develop an adequate and sustainable funding model.

Performance Management- regular monitoring and evaluation of ODSs is non-existent. Reports are filed with MoHA without a common template to permit comparisons. Reports of widespread client satisfaction and support, while consistent across ODSs, are anecdotal in nature which prevents management getting timely intelligence on trends, issues as well as opportunities. There are poor reporting, monitoring & control systems-without a clear

regulatory framework and without an adequate reporting, monitoring and control system, it is virtually impossible for the central ministries to really manage, monitor and steer the policy implementation in the whole country.

The physical surroundings of each ODS, some were small, crowded and untidy looking. All had complementary water available and adequate seating. Most had television for those waiting. Most had ‘suggestion boxes’. And all centers visited posted their fee schedules – some in English for visitors and investors. A few even posted the process for approvals including approximate timing. Almost all centers mentioned ‘ODS awareness’ as an obstacle to fuller use. While some centers have produced brochures there is often no way to distribute them due to budget constraints. The normal information tactics of posters, newspaper notices, public service TV and radio spots remain a distant dream. They all relied on mentions of ODSs in villages by Governors and other senior officials, or through correspondence.

#### 4.2.4 Critical Challenge on Information sharing

The likelihood of better service delivery is increased exponentially with the application of information technology. Lao PDR has recognized the transformational nature of modern technology by commencing construction of a nation-wide fiber optic cable network with the potential to bring high speed access to local and international resources, to permit businesses to compete globally, to remove educational constraints. There exists a major, and expensive, donor-supported E-Government project underway. A National E-Government Project of Lao PDR established in 2006 in the National Authority of Science and Technology ‘NAST’ (2011, NAST is upgraded to be Ministry level, called Ministry of Science and Technology ‘MST’) have been mandated to take the project forward. Its first tasks are to establish e-infrastructure, equipment and facilities, e-government application, and training and human resource development. A national E-Government Centre is to be established in Vientiane and in each of the 16 provinces. Citizens can access the national portal through a telecentre, and will, be closer to their government. Challenges to achieving E-Governance include: poor telecommunications infrastructure; electricity; IT equipment; capacity development needs of middle managers; and absence of IT skills at district. When the UNDP have agreed to support ODSs, they provided each office with a computer and print facilities.

Nevertheless, we noted there is a significant lack of modern technology within most centers. ODSs computers, if still existing, were often confined to the District Head’s office. Never did we find any internet hook-up. Most had printers. Fax capability existed but was not connected. Only the Business Registration office in Vientiane seemed to have a data base which it could “mine” for information.

When discussing training needs, all centers mentioned the need for computer training. In the rural areas, much of this desire focused on the basics (saving and copying documents, setting up file systems, print options etc) whereas in urban centers emphasized the use of standard programs (Excel Spreadsheet, PowerPoint etc). Ministries want even more such as data base use and maintenance, networking etc. Properly designed data bases and related systems permit business and citizens to enter common information only once yet shareable with the entire bureaucracy. Of all the technology readily available today, none is as important as

internet connectivity. With connectivity documents can be circulated and digitally signed, they can be tagged and catalogued and made instantly retrievable. Correspondence with government can be speeded up and tracked. Facts and data can be more easily verified. In many countries with low technology penetration, especially in rural areas, an internet connection at the local ODS creates the likelihood of more locally-delivered services while being an information portal or ‘kiosk’ for government programs and services – a “citizen information center” similar to what exists in many countries. A major “side-benefit” of public access could be its use as an additional learning channel for those unfamiliar with web basics – i.e. those potential customers on the government’s soon-to-be fiber optic information highway.

## 5. Discussion

The question of whether the ODS project has achieved the aims of governance and public administration reform and whether ODS has benefited to majority of citizens. We found that the ODSs have certainly led to some improvements in service access and do indicate that public administrative reforms for service delivery are possible. But the journey has just begun and it is prudent to make some adjustments to improve overall efficiency and effectiveness and eventually achieve the ambitious goals of GPAR ‘to *strengthen capacity for strategic planning, management and monitoring of governance reform for more effective, accountable and transparent delivery of services*’. While there are individual islands of great service it was evident from study the ‘system’ surrounding the ODS concept is fractured. Differences abound – in fees, office layout, revenue splitting, services provided, information available, marketing. Basing on a major lesson of Laos’s ODS experience is that unless ODSs are accompanied by reforms to procedures and the allocation of tasks and responsibilities, then we cannot expect significant gains for citizens.

The analysis shown that the ODS initiative assess the challenges that face and the facility for change within the partner agencies and determine the most expeditious journey. The critical challenges facing to ODS are immense due to the scale of need for services without a standardized and comprehensive management, as described in the analysis and discussion above. To manage changes and challenges successfully, government agencies need to be clear on the level of challenge they face and the facility to manage change they have is crucial. The government agencies require capabilities to manage change and challenge by adopting a systematic approach to good governance, which is required to improve as the cross-dimensional conditions in responsiveness, accessibility, quality and efficiency of service delivery which may could improve the ODS working system in the mid and long term in Lao PDR.

Notable, since the ODS initiative have been implemented in Lao PDR, they were undertaken to evaluate the implementation performance by GPAR in 2011, they found that some sectors have re-centralized their services. There are several factors related to unclear in service provision and procedures; neither standardized nor comprehensive; fee levels are inconsistent; service response times are not monitored; weak local inter-office or sector coordination and compounded by vertical service line working; management support and administrative budget

are limited for ODSs' operating; and some staff operating the centers are not trained. Despite the difficulties in responsiveness, quality and efficiency in the operation of ODS, a 2013 PM Ordinance mandated MoHA to expand them nationwide by leading in responsible for ODS coordination issues, development of associated policy and procedures, oversight of the operational aspects of ODC at district level, broad training for managers and staff to improve the delivery of public services. MoHA and NGPAR agreed that implement ODSs should be strengthened in some keys improvement. First, increase coordination between central and sub-national authorities, on the other hand across sectors by establishing appropriate mechanisms and processes. By doing so, MoHA will be responsible in taking the lead. Second, improve the implementation of ODSs by raising awareness and understanding of policy framework, strategy, providing clear delegation of roles, functions and responsibilities among the various stakeholders and developing clear procedures and regulations on service fees and charges, etc.

Building on the analysis of the ODS approach in Laos, we discover how government agencies can begin their journey toward citizen-centric delivery. The analysis shown that the ODS initiative assess the challenges that face and the facility for change within the partner agencies and determine the most expeditious journey. To manage changes and challenges successfully, government agencies need to be clear on the level of challenge they face and the facility to manage change they have - the level of challenge and the level of facility to manage change, the sound of solving interaction, the match between the capacity of the agency and the nature of the challenges is crucial. The specific nature of the journey depends on two factors: the nature and scale of the challenges faced in the particular context in which the service is place and the level of capacity within the system to address these challenges. The critical issues to be considered relate to four main implementation challenges: governance, performance management, workforce and information sharing. The government agencies have required capabilities to manage change and challenge by adopting a systematic approach to good governance, which is required to improve as the cross-dimensional conditions in responsiveness, accessibility, quality and efficiency of service delivery.

However, base on the concept of ODS's beneficial has includes the anti-corruption effects and superior governance for service delivery. To enhanced political capital should cultivate from politicians and bureaucrats to demonstrating their commitment to service improvement particularly at the medium management level, assuming that the ODS are popular with the public. The legitimacy of governments and concerned political parties responsible for ODS innovation will be strengthened by communicating the merits of ODS to citizens and making sure that the latter associate the innovation, assuming that it is successful with the government and political will. In contrast to the positive potential of ODS to governments, they may also expose the political limitations of government action. In civil services where there is little tradition of accountability to the citizenry and where public officials are used to determining the nature and content of services rather than responding to public needs and engaging in partnerships with societal actors, there is likely to be opposition to ODS. Due to the changes involved in ODSs, they are perceived by the bureaucrats as threats to their authority over particular functions. Nevertheless, once ODS activities require co-ordination

between agencies then this raises questions about how far are the organizations' authorities being ceded or shared with others. In circumstances where individual technical agencies take exception to trespassers into their functional territories the idea of co-ordination may take on a menacing character. This feeling will be intensified where ODSs entail the delegation of authority from an organization to the ODS or even to its own officials working at lower territorial levels. Such practical politics can undermine attainment of the promised managerial benefits of ODSs as reluctantly participating organizations work to undermine ODSs or seek to minimize their effects on the status quo.

According to the modernized 'New Public Management' theories, governance is about society and values, and therefore any improvements in this area require long-term vision and strategy and the need to ensure an ongoing and adapting capacity to balance and rebalance the dynamics of a rapidly changing society. ODS are generally justified on managerial grounds, providing government services through one recognizable access point. This requires clearly laid out procedures and processes and often results in increased efficiency, with procedures being simplified and processes being condensed; thereby saving time and money and improving the quality and transparency of the customer experience; and improving the relationship between government and citizens and responding more to citizens' needs for public services.

## **6. Conclusion**

The introduction of ODSs into Lao PDR has elements of both progress and challenge. On the positive side, an innovative mode of service delivery was expanded across the country with the support of high-ranking national and local politicians. Citizens/customers have initially reported overall satisfaction with the ODSs while staff have added their voices of approval. However, there are often be negatives. These derive from the challenge and failure to undertake adequate steps for administrative reform during the design and implementation of ODSs. Despite the changes, much has remained the same of ineffective and inefficiency to deliver services by government agencies.

In terms of the type of decentralization, ODSs in Laos qualify is still a weak form of administrative decentralization or deconcentration. There has not been the slightest mention of the evolution mode. Little or no authority has been transferred to the ODSs from the government agencies represented there. There have been gains in accessibility for citizens through the clustering of selected services, although not necessarily interrelate ones, in central locations. But very little decision-making authority has been passed down to the ODS staff. The other benefits that could accrue from deconcentration have simply not appeared. Co-ordination among government agencies has remained at lacking or weak levels as each central government agency assiduously guards its area of functional control. Supporting from the centre, supposedly relieved of routine administration when deconcentration is introduced in Lao PDR, has been of a compliance rather than developmental character. Popular participation in influencing the design and delivery of services has been missing. Citizens' voices are generally not encouraged. Most probably their suggestions could challenge the status quo. There has been no evident motivational improvement to staff of the ODSs because

their decision-making authority has not increased and there are few if any incentives for working in ODSs.

As the analytical result, weak administrative decentralization reflects the desire of central government agencies to maintain strong control from the top. Decentralization is recognized as terrorizing this control. Hence, while the government agencies is providing service that make up the ODSs are obliged to conform to general ODS' policy directives from central government concerned leaders, these giving organizations have been able to make certain that in policy implementation the degree of administrative decentralization is kept very low. This has been obvious, for instance, in the lack of change to the processes involved in supplying services to the public. These are often extensive and unreasonably complex and their bureaucratic guardians have successfully resisted any efforts to reform them either through active opposition or indifference. Government agencies involved in service delivery have demonstrated that they have the political resources and strategies to nullify changes to their areas of functional authority and their way within them. They have obstructed administrative decentralization and the potential it has for the reform and improvement of service delivery. ODSs in their present form do not represent any threat to their authority as ODSs are mainly concerned with the provision of information or partial services. There is only little decentralization or co-ordination with other government agencies. Furthermore, the government agencies provider service remain in the driving seat in terms of determining the nature of services.

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