
COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT: CRITICAL APPROACH FOR RURAL IMPROVEMENT IN LAO PDR

***¹Thanousorn Vongpraseuth, ²Hatthachan Phimphanthavong**

¹Urban Development and Built Environment Lab, National University of Laos.

²Poverty Reduction Fund, Lao PDR.

Received: 25 November 2025

***Corresponding Author: Thanousorn Vongpraseuth**

Article Revised: 15 December 2025

Urban Development and Built Environment Lab, National University of Laos.

Published on: 05 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.4837>

ABSTRACT

Community-Driven Development (CDD) has been a proven approach to rural development, poverty reduction, and the well-being of people in poor communities. The CDD approach has been applied in several regions worldwide. In principle, the CDD approach is used to address poverty dimensions in correspondence with the local context and societal behavior. In Laos, the central government has approved various community development approaches to eradicate poverty, with distinct processes across communities. Hence, it is necessary for a study to explore further the relationship between the level of participation and the physical environmental impacts after CDD project implementation. To obtain more accurate findings, samples from three Saemaul Undong Movement (SUM) villages in Toulakhom District, Vientiane Province, were randomly collected using questionnaires as survey instruments for both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The SUM in Laos has demonstrated substantial progress and practice in the agricultural sector, including changes in mindset, leadership approaches, and ownership among villagers during implementation and management. The key findings from the SUM pilot villages are positive improvements in income generation, whereas the drawbacks concern sustainable growth due to inadequate social cohesion and appropriate land-use planning.

KEYWORDS: Community-driven development, saemaul undong movement, economic sustainability, built environment, Lao PDR.

I. INTRODUCTION

Community-Driven Development (CDD) is considered one of the proven successful approaches in rural and urban community development to eradicate poverty. The CDD

approach has been deployed in many countries, tailored to each country's context. CDD has been a trend in the crucial domain of global development since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Initially, the CDD approach developed out of crisis conditions, for instance, financial crashes, disasters, and conflicts (Wong, 2012; Wong & Guggenheim, 2018). Amid many failed efforts in centralized and hierarchical forms of development, CDD emerged as an alternative form of development. According to Wong (2012), this approach has been perceived as different from traditional approaches because it empowers local communities and institutions to lead and own the development processes voluntarily. The CDD approaches cover the key principles of community development based on public participation, prior consent, project transparency, accountability, empowerment, and building local capacity. The CDD approaches work around the needs of the community as the center of development, in consultation with local government and relevant sectors, to improve basic infrastructure, livelihoods, and the well-being of the communities as a whole. The poorest of the poor were able to participate in the development process; issues were identified solely by the villagers, and solutions were developed in collaboration with local authorities and relevant sectors.

According to the World Bank, CDD approaches and movements are critical components of poverty reduction and sustainable rural development schemes. The World Bank has been supporting governments in low- to middle-income countries around the globe in planning, implementing, and assessing CDD programs, including in countries with sensitive conflicts. These programs address needs in various areas, such as clean water, access roads, education, healthcare facilities, nutrition programs for mothers and infants, and micro-credit schemes. The programs have achieved cost-effective implementation that can be replicated in many countries (World Bank, 2009A). ASEAN member countries, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, have also deployed CDD approaches to pursue poverty eradication. Results have been mixed, depending on the country's movement and acceptance. In the case of Laos, the CDD approach has been considered a new and effective approach in rural development strategy (PRF, 2019A). For Lao rural development, the government has placed more emphasis on sustainable growth rather than a short-term approach.

The study found that the CDD in Laos has been implemented using three approaches, classified by level of authority, as shown in Table 1. Those three CDD approaches in Laos are (i) Community Force Account (CFA) and Road Management Group (RMG) under the PRF's projects; (ii) Sam Sang Directive (Three Builds) of the Lao government pilot projects;

and (iii) Saemaul Undong Movement (SUM) implemented and funded by the Republic of Korea. The funding and implementing approaches, however, the implementation on the ground would need to follow the direction outlined in the *National Growth and Poverty Eradication—Strategy* (NGPES).

CDD approaches in Laos were implemented using various techniques and processes. It is interesting for researchers and policymakers to draw lessons learned and identify best practices for replication and scale-up. To support the Lao government's policy on social inclusion, ethnic diversity, and community empowerment in poor communities, this study will seek to identify a practical approach to implement the policy, particularly evidence-based support to improve rural livelihoods. The study also presents recent developments in the CDD approach in several pilot projects in Laos. The SUM and PRF pilot projects, located in Vientiane (SUM), have been selected as the scope of the study. The CDD could be an optimal instrument to lift poor people out of poverty because the approach is flexible and can be adopted in any context, transforming the socio-economic conditions of poor communities and creating an enabling environment for better livelihoods. This may provide useful evidence for policymakers when drafting policies and strategies to reduce poverty in rural areas.

II. Literature review

Community-Driven Development overview

Community-Driven Development (CDD) is a crucial approach used by the World Bank in implementing rural and community development projects. The CDD has been a human-centered methodology used by the World Bank. CDD is a development movement that coordinated with community groups and individuals as a group of villagers, rather than direct support from other organizations. The CDD and community participation are promising approaches in tackling poverty; they could be practical approaches in helping the World Bank achieve its goal of poverty eradication and improve the living conditions and standards of people in the least developed countries or the developing world (World Bank, 2004).

Several reports and academic papers have explained CDD elements within various dimensions and perceptions: 1) CDD has been the community emphasize because the target recipient, grantee, and the active mode of a community-based organization (CBO) pattern or representative local; 2) the community involvement in the participatory planning and design process; 3) the community manages the resources-hence ownership and accountability; 4) the

key function in the community development, community has to involve in the implementation processes, including direct supply of inputs, labor, skill, or indirectly through the management functions; 5) Many projects in CDD approach have applied the community-based participatory monitoring and evaluation to ensure downward responsibility to the pilot communities (ADB, 2016).

The CDD has evolved from the traditional movement through the root of modernization. The key modern roots of CDD for international development agencies and public authorities have been criticized. Several articles by social scientists have explained CDD within the social integrated approach (Putnam, 1993 & 2000; Coleman, 1988; White, 2018). A study on enhancing community-driven development in ASEAN member states, such as the Philippines, is required to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of convergence regarding 1) the interactions between the Conditional Cash Transfer Program (CCTP) and the Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP), which are the key assistance programs of the Philippine government's Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD); 2) the association between these DSWD programs and the interventions of other national sector agencies in development; and 3) the success instruments for poor rural communities in the Philippines should be considered (ADB, 2016). Positive governance spillovers were observed among communities, particularly the poor and women, influencing village affairs and decision-making. In the CDD treatment areas, there was also an increase in attendance at general village meetings for the community as a whole and for poor women (Voss, 2016).

The breakdown table of the supported sector in Benin, Africa, revealed that the substantial extent of development is driven by self-sufficiency in job opportunities. Job creation has been a critical initiative to empower the community. Alongside economic growth, education and basic infrastructure have been urged to be prioritized. Given the World Bank's extensive experience, the CDD would be a representative approach to poverty reduction. The CDD would be established as an initiative to achieve livelihood security, empowerment, and access to basic public services. In short, self-sufficiency and sustainable growth in poor communities should be addressed within a long-term vision.

Table 1. Breakdown and framework of CDD

Program activities	Institution-building	Asset investment
Program outputs	More responsive institutions: Accountable, cohesive, and inclusive	Better distributed assets: Physical, human, social, natural, and financial
Program objectives	Livelihood security Empowerment Service	
Outcome	Self-sufficiency Sustainable well-being	
Source: World bank, 2009A		

At the core, the CDD approach has become a holistic concept of people empowerment in poverty reduction, generating investment and fostering community decision-making. CDD functions to create opportunities, strengthen the community's voice to demand greater accountability from institutions relevant to their livelihoods, and promote sustainable development within a long-term vision. To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the CDD policies, the project's program design and implementation, the following principles have been considered (Table2):

Table 2. Detailed goal in CDD (pilot project)

Goal 1	Invest in capacity building of community-based organizations (CBOs). Building the capacity of CBOs and promoting relationships with formal support institutions are productive investments in themselves, but should include explicit exit strategies.
Goal 2	Make investments responsive to informed demand. rules of program or project should facilitate informed choice so communities can select priority options and enterprises that are within their capacity and that they can afford to operate in the long run.
Goal 3	Build participatory mechanisms for community control and stakeholder involvement. Involvement of all stakeholders should be sought throughout all phases of the CDD project cycle.
Goal 4	Facilitate community access to information. Facilitating flows of information with all groups in a community in terms of program contents and rules, linkages with government and markets, and good practices of CBOs is an essential component of CDD.
Goal 5	Develop simple rules and strong incentives supported by monitoring and evaluation. Community access to resources should be governed by simple rules and procedures that are easy for communities to interpret and apply. Participatory monitoring and evaluation is an important tool for community assessment of its own performance.

Goal 6	Establish enabling institutional and policy frameworks. Fostering an enabling environment includes: (i) responsive decentralized local governments and inter-governmental arrangements; (ii) a conducive legal and regulatory framework that supports community action; and (iii) clear sector policies with clear roles and responsibilities for key players in each sector.
Goal 7	Maintain flexibility in design of arrangements and innovation. Program design should be reviewed and adjusted periodically, as necessary. Procedures should ensure direct feedback from the community on program performance that can feed into project restructuring.
Goal 8	Ensure social and gender inclusion. Explicit gender-sensitive approaches are needed to ensure that CBOs incorporate the interests of groups that are often excluded, including women, minority groups, remote communities, and the poorest women and men.
Goal 9	Design for scaling-up. In order to have a broader impact on a country's poverty, CDD needs to spread simultaneously in many communities, while respecting the unique features of specific communities. Key aspects of design for such scaling-up include mobilizing administrative and political support, adopting decentralized approval and disbursement processes, devolving responsibilities to communities, clustering activities in the program, keeping procedures simple, monitoring and evaluating both processes and outcomes, and promoting networks among CBOs.
Goal 10	Invest in an exit strategy. Exit strategies for external support are dynamic. Permanent institutional and financial arrangements are required for recurrent services, at a cost that can be supported over the medium and long term.

Source: from "Community Driven Development: Broadening Community Authority and Control Over Decisions and Resources" brochure, Social Development Department, The World Bank (2009B).

Some academic papers have analyzed and evaluated diverse lessons, problems, and advantages from community-based development projects in poverty-stricken regions worldwide, particularly emphasizing the World Bank's CDD projects in poverty-affected territories. Based on findings from these cases worldwide, the study has provided critical insights into understanding the potential of community movements for poverty reduction. The critical lessons learned from these experiences could support the idea of community-based development and help guide an effective approach to poverty reduction. On the development partner side, direct actions from multilateral partnership development techniques should yield more positive outcomes toward sustainable community development (Chebil and Haque, 2003).

Community-Driven Development in the Saemaul Undong pattern

The five-year economic development plan of the Republic of Korea since the 1960s has driven urban-sector growth, leading to an increasing gap between rural and urban incomes (1960 to 1970: 9.6% industrial growth, 3.5% agricultural growth). Massive migration of rural people to larger cities (agricultural household income was 61% of urban household income) (Kim, 2002). The Saemaul Undong Movement (SUM) has been a well-known approach in rural development in the Republic of Korea (R. Korea), which helped the country move from a low-income status to OECD membership.

What is the Saemaul Undong Movement (SUM)?

SMU has been a vital approach in community development, which gave

The power to villagers or the community to decide for themselves on their own needs.



Figure1. Meaning of Saemaul Undong.

In general understanding, the approach of SMU is the Community Movement towards the new life with a new change and development. Rural poor communities were the focus.

Concept of SMU for the community development

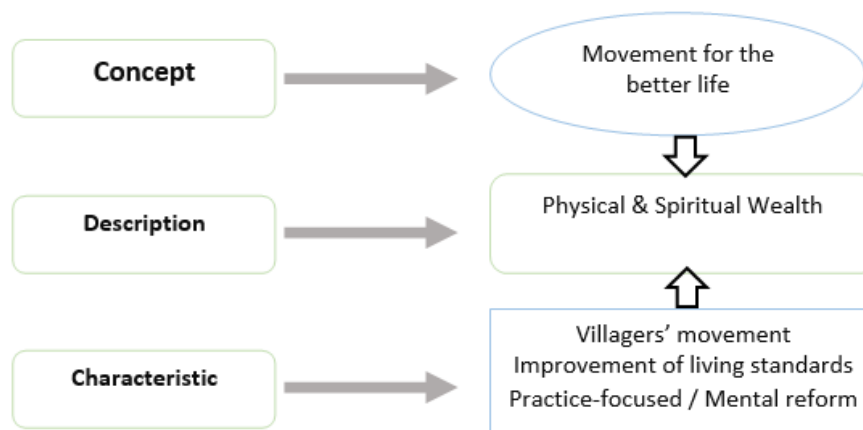


Figure 2. SUM goal.

Brief History of SMU Development

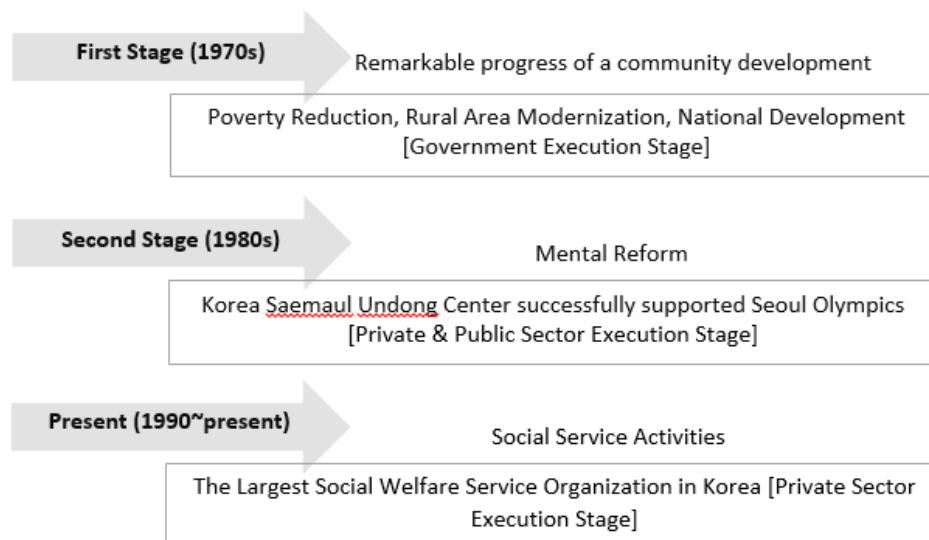


Figure 3. History of SUM.

Impact of Saemaul Undong on poverty reduction

Former approaches to community development in Korea focused on improving the livelihoods of poor villages at each level. The successful goal for village development has been classified into three consecutive levels: 1) Basic level village, 2) Self-help village, 3) Self-sufficient village. To move from the basic level to self-sufficiency, the Korean government initiated the Saemaul Undong Movement (SUM) in 1970. The SUM was identified as a significant factor in poor community development. Three key pillars considered are environmental issues, mental reform, and income development.

Table 3. Purposed projects of SUM.

Environmental Projects	Development	Mental Reform	Educational	Income Increase
Paving and expending roads in villages (Accessibility)		Practicing the Saemaul spirit with the villagers' understanding		Cooperative production (fertilizers, pesticides)
Building bridges (Accessibility)		Leadership training		Improvement of seeds and plants
Improving water systems		Saving and Helping each other		Non-agricultural income (Saemaul manufactures)
Improving roofs		Following the common development rules		Raising specialty crops
Electricity in households				
New water pipelines				
Community facilities				

III. Data collection and variable identification

SUM in Vientiane Province, Lao PDR.

The field survey stage has emphasized the local characteristics and accessibility factor. The SUM pilot projects have been selected in Thoulakhom district, Vientiane province which located close to the Vientiane capital. The distance from Vientiane's city center to Thoulakhom District is approximately 80 km, with a travel time of about 1 hour and 40 minutes. Thoulakhom district is a high-potential area for agricultural development, and the road condition is almost entirely asphalt-paved; therefore, the SUM pilot projects have been considered with the crucial aim of reducing the gap between rural and urban areas.

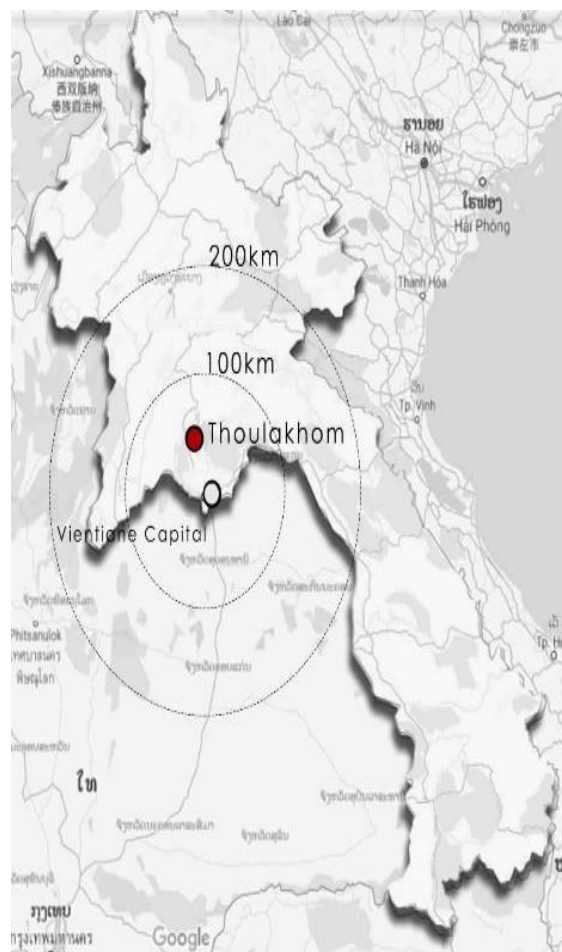


Figure 4. Location map of Thoulakhom District, Vientiane Province.

Currently, there are seven initiative SUM pilot villages in the Thoulakhom district. Within seven villages, the implementation processes have been driven based on Korean patterns; however, three distinctive villages have been considered regarding the project characteristics, level of development, and accessibility conditions.

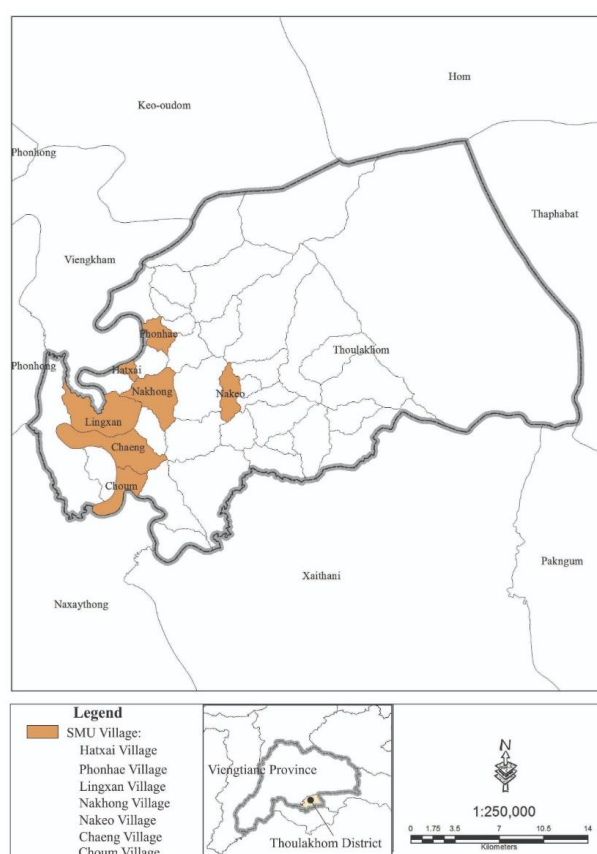


Figure 5. Saemaul Undong Villages in Vientiane Province.

Built environmental development:

In general, the SUM project has supported the physical development of poor environment villages. In Vientiane province, Toulakhom district, basic infrastructure projects have been a key priority in village development. The road construction projects have been implemented in Choum and Chaeng village. In a similar vein, a village office construction project has been implemented in Nakhong village instead of road construction. The environmental improvement projects have been designated based on villagers' preferences.

The representatives from the Korean and Lao sides have structured road construction development in the SUM project. The project has been considered in two dimensions: the participation group and construction materials. The project has voluntarily encouraged all citizens in those villages to join the construction project. Regarding the construction budget, the village would receive materials for road construction rather than financial support. Through this movement, within 5 years, connecting roads and alleyways in the community have been developed due to the SUM implementation approach. The key to the success of the SUM or CDD in the SUM pattern would be presented through the leadership mindset in the

community. The community empowerment approach is a key to rural development in this case.

Job creation and income supports:

This type of SUM has focused on income generation through agricultural development approaches. This project has been opened to some active groups in those villages. The project has set up an initiative market chain framework to support villagers' income. In the initial step, it has launched the greenhouse project with different types of vegetation. Recently, eight families have participated in this project with 32 greenhouses. On average, their income is 2-3 million kip per month (PRF, 2019B).

Table 4. Project participatory in the SUM villages.

No.	Village	Involving in agricultural activity (family)	Percentage of agricultural activity involved	Built environmental aspect (family representative)		Micro-finance (family per year)
				Involving in activity	Involving with financial support *	
1	Choum	8	4.42	181	181	47
2	Chaeng	12	3.49	343	0	0
3	Nakhong	8	4.65	172	0	0

* 50,000 kip/project

Table 5. Built environment development project.

No.	Village	Village office project		Concrete road construction		
		Quantity	Size (m)	Length (m)	Width (m)	Total area (m2)
1	Choum	1	6x12	1200	5.5*	6,600
				600**	3.5	2,100
2	Chaeng	0	0	1700	3.5	5,950
3	Nakhong	1	6x10	0	0	0

*Community budget for 1,5m along 1200m, ** Community budget for 300m

IV. Data analysis

Data analysis process has been conducted in Vientiane province, which is driving the SUM approach. Analysis processes are presented as follows: key findings.

Economic factor and community-driven perception for SUM

In the Thoulakhom district, the CDD approach under SUM was applied in three selected villages, and respondents were randomly selected. In this analysis, the logit model showed a

strong fit, with a pseudo-R-squared of 0.63. Age and sense of locality were statistically significant predictors of respondents' understanding of SUM's projects. The main variables examined before and after SUM's implementation were job creation, land provision for agricultural activities, income improvement, and the microfinance initiative.

Factors related to economic development, understanding of SUM in pilot-selected villages, job creation or improvement, land provision for agricultural activities, income levels, and microfinance variables have important implications for SUM village development. These results indicate that after SUM was implemented, the economy grew in the direction of job creation.

Table 6. Understanding of SUM and economic factor.

Variable		Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	z	Sig
Age*Age		0.999	0.000	-1.890	0.059*
Gender (male)		0.642	0.649	-0.440	0.661
Family head (yes)		0.464	0.462	-0.770	0.440
Household size		0.745	0.164	-1.340	0.181
Local organization (yes)		0.038	0.057	-2.180	0.029**
Housing type (Wooden)	Half-wooden	0.129	0.206	-1.280	0.199
	Villa	0.101	0.161	-1.440	0.151
Job_BF		0.313	0.326	-1.110	0.265
Job_AF		1.040	1.063	0.040	0.970
Job_improvement_BF		0.031	0.055	-1.950	0.051*
Job_improvement_AF		26.999	40.253	2.210	0.027**
Providing_land_BF		23.824	30.854	2.450	0.014**
Providing_land_AF		0.125	0.151	-1.720	0.086*
Income_BF		0.030	0.035	-2.960	0.003***
Income_AF		19.588	18.642	3.130	0.002***
Microfinance_BF		26.434	39.117	2.210	0.027**
Microfinance_AF		1.201	0.704	0.310	0.754
_cons		0.143	0.618	-0.450	0.653
N		106			
Pseudo R-sq		0.63			

Built environment factor and community-driven perception for SUM

SUM has a long history of implementation in the R. Korea context. SUM has demonstrated success in many villages in R. Korea and in other least-developed regions (LDRs). In Laos, both KOICA and the Central SUM agencies have implemented CDD to improve living conditions and to test the Korean CDD approach in the Lao context. The physical environment has been prioritized in the SUM village development.

Table 7. Understanding on SUM and environmental factor.

Variable		Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	z	Sig
Age*Age		1.000	0.001	-1.210	0.226
Gender (male)		1.038	1.056	0.040	0.971
Family head (yes)		0.456	0.472	-0.760	0.448
Household size		0.843	0.239	-0.600	0.548
Local organization (yes)		0.091	0.092	-2.370	0.018**
Housing type (wooden)	Half-wooden	0.038	0.077	-1.630	0.103
	Villa	0.312	0.480	-0.760	0.449
Road_BF		0.934	0.987	-0.060	0.948
Road_AF		0.990	1.005	-0.010	0.992
Streetscape_BF		5.018	5.152	1.570	0.116
Streetscape_AF		11.685	11.400	2.520	0.012**
Housing_BF		1.026	1.087	0.020	0.981
Housing_AF		11.866	13.560	2.160	0.030**
Safety_BF		0.172	0.186	-1.630	0.104
Safety_AF		3.483	3.682	1.180	0.238
Water_BF		3.171	3.391	1.080	0.280
Water_AF		11.926	16.019	1.850	0.065*
_cons		0.000	0.000	-2.640	0.008
N		106			
Pseudo R_sq		0.62			

V. DISCUSSIONS

SUM in the Vientiane province context

This study has been focused on three pilot villages in Vientiane province; the key criterion for selecting the three villages was based on the prior pilot village in Thoulakhom district.

Table 8. Summary of development factor in SUM.

Village	Population		Household	Environmental development activities	Economic growth activities	Job creation activities
	Total	Female				
Choum	994	500	181	√	√	
Chaeng	2,044	1003	343	√	√	
Nakhong	879	434	172	√	√	
Source: Village reports of Choum, Chaeng, and Nakhong village, 2019						

SUM in economic sustainability

SUM has been identified as an instrument in Korea's rural development approach. This approach has been applied across many institutions in Laos. As in the pilot projects in this study, the critical hope of this project will be emphasized: self-sufficiency. Villages have

participated in this project based on their agricultural activities. Regarding the interview stage, the village chief addressed this.

“Due to the potential of this village, the poor status has been tackled. Economic development will be the key challenge for our community in achieving long-term sustainable growth. The perception of self-sufficiency of villagers would take into account the crucial action rather than policy.”

People-centered SUM in the built environment aspect

Within the urban and rural development framework, two directions have been considered: the top-down (TD) and bottom-up (BU) approaches. These approaches have been applied at the village, district, and provincial levels. In the early stages of poor and rural development, the BU approach has played an essential role in community-based project decision-making. Public voice is a crucial tool in community movements. To ensure a smooth process, education should be provided. As in the case of SUM, educational reform would be the first step in a community-driven movement. The understanding of the community would be drawn from the.

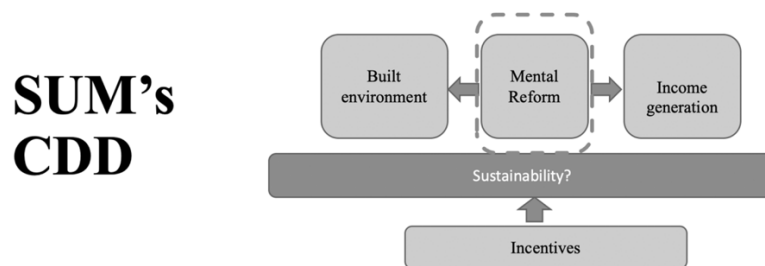


Figure 6. Lessons of CDD in Laos (SUM).

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the CDD approach, various CDD patterns emerge based on regional context and the characteristics of the implementing group. The CDD in Laos has been implemented with considerable success. Recently, the pattern of CDD in Laos has expanded to include diverse forms, reflecting dynamic growth and national development policies. This study has emphasized critical patterns, such as SUM's CDD, to explain the initial expectations and dilemmas in pilot cases. From a general perspective, SUM has been considered a development in agricultural contexts, emphasizing the key interplay between villagers' mindsets and their tasks. SUM has made significant progress in the improved village

conditions stage. Therefore, in the context of rural areas with high development potential, these areas have been considered pilot model villages.

Several key factors drive the success of those projects. Villagers would find bright hope if the central government could secure stable support for them. However, because they prefer to be involved in those projects and because constant government support is lacking, their hope could soon become a dilemma. In short, 1) the poor communities in Laos have been developed within diverse CDD patterns (SUM, Sam Sang, and so forth); however, the appropriate approach should be considered based on their needs and context. 2) Stable funding considerations should be provided to match demand and supply (according to the interviews, villagers showed strong interest in the existing project, whereas funding limitations have been generated); 3) the participatory level should be expanded to the entire community rather than only a few households; 4) a long-term learning approach would help them improve their jobs and income. To identify opportunities for CDD in Laos, limitations in implemented targeting, additional costs, participation in practice, sub-project cycles that are too short to ensure sufficient empowerment, and decentralized management factors should be regularly rechecked.

REFERENCES

1. ADB. (2016). Enhancing community-driven development through convergence: a case study of household- and community-based initiatives in Philippine villages, Manila, Philippines.
2. Chebil, S and Haque, I. (2003). Community Driven Development Programs for Poverty Reduction: Experiences, Issues, and Lessons. *Scientific Journal of Administrative Development*. Vol. 1(1):112-141.
3. Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 95-120.
4. PRF. (2019A). Community Development in Laos. Vientiane, Laos.
5. PRF. (2019B). Lesson of Community Force Account, Vientiane, Laos.
6. Putnam, R. (1993). *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
7. Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

8. Voss, J. (2016). Lao Poverty Reduction Fund Phase II Impact Evaluation: Final Report. Laos: World Bank.
9. White, H., Menon, R and Waddington, H. (2018). Community-driven development: does it build social cohesion or infrastructure? A mixed-method evidence synthesis, 3ie working paper 30. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie).
10. Wong, S and Guggenheim, S. (2018). Community-Driven Development Myths and Realities, Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice, World Bank Group.
11. Wong, S. (2012). What Have Been the Impacts of World Bank Community-Driven Development Programs? CDD Impact Evaluation Review and Operational and Research Implications. Social Development Department Report. Washington, DC: World Bank.
12. World Bank. (2004). World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People. Washington, DC: World Bank.
13. World Bank. (2009A). IDA at Work Community-Driven Development: Delivering the Results People Need from <http://www.worldbank.org/ida>.
14. World Bank. (2009B). Community Driven Development: Broadening Community Authority and Control Over Decisions and Resources" brochure, Social Development Department.