



Resilient Urban Centres and Surrounds (RUCaS)

MISSION SUMMARY REPORT – LAO PDR (2–8 DECEMBER 2022)

Background

Resilient Urban Centres and Surrounds (RUCaS) is a three-year program (2022-2024) supported by the Australian Government – with country specific projects (case studies and scaling strategies) in each of the four countries of the lower Mekong region. RUCaS provides awareness raising, knowledge exchange and technical assistance; and is delivered by Monash University's Water Sensitive Cities Australia (WSCA) along with the in-region expertise of the International Centre for Environmental Management (ICEM). The program's vision is to improve the value generated by investment in urban infrastructure by better integrating conventional large 'grey' infrastructure (e.g., levee banks, pipelines, treatment plants, roads, railways) with nature-based solutions (e.g., wetlands, mangroves, catchment protection, green walls, multifunctional parks and transport corridors). RUCaS program outputs will include case studies demonstrating application in different urban contexts and scales, as well as training in the tools and principles applied, and strategies to upscale NbS.

Purpose

Collaboration, together with national and international knowledge exchange, is at the core of the RUCaS approach. A team from project partners Water Sensitive Cities Australia (WSCA) and the International Centre for Environmental Management (ICEM) led the mission. This mission had 4 objectives:

- Engage with stakeholders to build relationships – the focus was on engaging with key government ministries, multilateral actors, universities and civil society.
- Identify potential sites for case studies.
- Build capacity and project understanding through an onboarding process with the national team.
- Identify next steps for project roll out and upscaling with stakeholders, including the Australian and Lao PDR government representatives in Vientiane.

Activities

The mission included meetings with government agencies and development partners, site visits and a Knowledge Exchange event. Altogether, we met with around 85 people via 9 meetings, 4 site visits and the Knowledge Exchange event.

Meetings

The team met with the following agencies and representatives:

- National Ministries in Vientiane – Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), and Ministry of Planning and Investment. – These government agencies have interests and responsibilities regarding urban development, nature protection, and infrastructure investment and management.



- Government representatives from Luang Prabang's Governor's office, including MONRE, and provincial staff from Departments of Public Works and Transport (DPWT) and Planning and Investment (DPI).
- United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) – Our discussions covered possible connections with UNEP's 5-year Global Climate Fund (GCF)-supported project. UNEP is working with the MONRE and the National University of Laos (NUOL) to build a knowledge hub and capacity on ecosystem-based adaptation, and with case study work in 4 cities.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP) – Our discussions covered UNDP's new Global Environment Fund (GEF)-supported program on Integrated Water River-basin Management and Ecosystem-Based Services. This work includes flood mapping, livelihood adaptation and gender action planning.
- World Bank – Our discussions covered possible alignment with the Bank's work on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), including work on water management, climate change adaptation and ecosystem-based adaptation.
- Global Green Growth Initiative (GGGI) – Our discussions covered complementary approaches and possible collaboration with the NZ Aid-supported Nature-Based Solutions in Urban Adaptation Program. We discussed complementary approaches to developing pilots with local stakeholders, impacting codes and regulations, and how to attract necessary investment at scale.
- Asian Development Bank – Our discussion was around the cost of NbS, especially maintenance costs.

These meetings were opportunities to explore the current issues and pressure points affecting urban development in Lao cities, especially increased vulnerabilities created by extreme weather events (exacerbated by climate change) and wider catchment level developments. There was considerable interest in how NbS could contribute to Lao PDR's response to climate change, from project through to policy level. Mission outcomes and collaboration opportunities were also discussed with the World Bank on 6 January 2023.

Site visits

Site visits were an important mechanism for identifying locations for case studies. They also informed our understanding of broader issues affecting Lao PDR's development, and allowed for gathering perspectives from local stakeholders, including:

- rapid private sector-led development and urbanisation, especially commercial sites and their impact on the natural and built environment
- cumulative pressures on natural systems and waterways as a result of rapid development
- wider catchment pressures and system-level impacts are affecting communities and society. These pressures and impacts are the result of increased extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change.

Site visits included:

- Hong Ke canal and Mak Hiao River, and the wider drainage basin leading to That Luong Marsh in the Chantabouly district of Vientiane City
- Vientiane's Mekong hard infrastructure dyke, especially between the night market and Mekong River Commission office river frontage
- Road 13 between the airport and Crowne Plaza Hotel, that suffers from flooding in downpours
- Ponds and wetlands in Luang Prabang world heritage city and wider flood prone roads and districts on the old city outskirts.



Wetlands, Luang Prabang



Flood prone road, Luang Prabang



Hong Kiem Canal, Vientiane



Drain and canal, Vientiane Centre, Vientiane

Knowledge Exchange event

At the end of the mission, the team facilitated a hybrid Knowledge Exchange event at the Muong Thanh Hotel, involving 41 stakeholders (25 in person, 16 online; 11 females, 30 males). Attendees represented national and provincial governments (in Savannakhet and Luang Prabang), multilateral and bilateral development partners, and academia.



Laos Knowledge Exchange event

The Hon. Dan Heldon, Deputy Ambassador for Australia, opened the event, highlighting an increasing awareness that by protecting and restoring nature we are more likely to build sustainable development. Ben Furnage, WSCA CEO, examined this premise, outlining Australian Government supported experience of advancing a new hybrid approach to infrastructure, as the way to increase the benefits from urban infrastructure investment and resilience to climate change. He identified 5 steps for introducing NbS:



5 steps for introducing nature-based solutions

RUCAS Program Manager, Michael Simon facilitated a roundtable discussion that drew out wider experience and current program investments that are being made through other agencies and multilateral partnerships. This discussion also helped identify complementary approaches and possible collaborations.

Lessons learned

The following insights will help shape the rest of the program:

- Implementing NbS at the catchment scale could support localised (downstream) urban responses.
- Building resilience in ecosystems and helping communities adapt is an important contribution to Lao PDR's climate change response. Incorporating NbS into the urban context can provide multiple benefits in the face of cumulative pressures.
- NbS is a relatively new term in Lao PDR, and aligns closely with investments in ecosystem-based adaptation and green infrastructure.
- While there is interest in wider application of NbS, current regulations and the capacity of departments and institutions is limiting application.
- The capital and secondary cities are very different urban systems. Our approach to each will need to be sensitive to these differences.

Next steps in Lao PDR

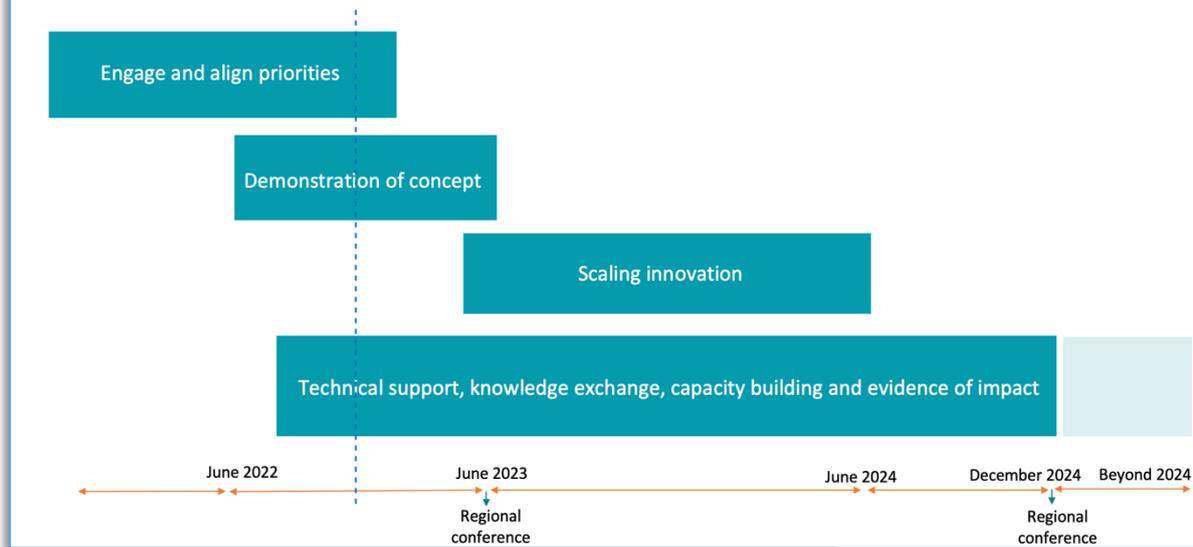
The mission provided valuable information to inform the detailed design of future activities and clarity around the processes to support securing permission to undertake these activities.

Bringing our knowledge and expertise to extend and add value to other programs and institutions working on NbS, or climate adaptation and mitigation projects, in Lao PDR will be valuable in developing consistent strategies and guidance - enhancing the development contribution. .

The following activities and timelines will be submitted to the relevant authorities and institutions.

Action	Timing
Establish working relationships and coordinating mechanisms for the project; confirmed with government counterparts, multilateral and university partners.	End of February
Case Study proposals completed and submitted.	End of February
Organise Lao technical group meeting to review project activities and case study proposals.	March
Develop case studies and early stage recommendations on scaling for consultation	June
Regional Knowledge Exchange	July

RUCAS Program timing



Emerging regional themes

While nationally focused, RUCaS will also provide opportunities for sharing information and experiences at a regional level. With missions now completed in 4 countries some early themes are already emerging:

- Maintenance of natural systems before loss or degradation is ever more important in rapidly urbanising context, and ultimately more efficient.
- It is important to understand place and history when developing strategies for the future.
- Placing gender equity, disability and social inclusion into each stage of project implementation - case studies, scaling strategies, processes and guidance - will help highlight opportunities, identify gaps and inform action.
- Be clear, realistic and transparent about the intended legacy of the project - clarifying what will happen after the project is complete.
- Capital cities are complex, sensitive and dynamic urban systems and secondary cities can sometimes provide a 'testing ground' for innovations and new approaches that could be later scaled up in capital cities.
- It is important to work with other influencing development partners, civil society and government agencies to update codes and regulations to support and guide rollout of NbS rather than acting as blockages.

