

## MIGIP closing event

After 8 years of supporting sustainable tourism in Southern Laos, Swisscontact held a project closing event on December 23, 2020 in Pakse city, Champasak Province, with the Champasak Province Department of Information, Culture, and Tourism. The event was chaired by the Provincial Vice-Governor Mr. Malaythong Kommasith and Swisscontact Country Director, Richard Rose. Over 45 stakeholders from the local and national government and members of the business community were in attendance to celebrate the achievements across the southern provinces over the years.

Institutions, structures, and processes in destination management have been strengthened through the support of Swisscontact. One of the most notable achievements is the uptake of the Southern Laos destination branding strategy which includes not only the main tourism sites in Champasak province, but also has brought attention to lesser-known neighboring provinces of Salavan, Sekong, and Attapeu. Showcasing interactive experiences with the natural and cultural assets of the destination and highlighting the warmth and charm of the people, the Southern Laos brand and tagline: 'Charming by Nature' has been adopted by attraction owners and businesses across the four provinces, on signs, water refill stations, shirts, maps, billboards, and even a selfie frame! The Southern Laos destination website ([www.southern-laos.com](http://www.southern-laos.com)) continues to promote the destination to potential visitors in multiple languages, encouraging them to spend more time in the south and giving information how they can interact more with local communities.



Swisscontact also developed tourism 'visitor flows' in order to help local businesses offer products and services better targeted to the demand of specific visitor segments. This resulted in experiential tourism products being offered to explore the Mekong river, coffee production and processing, and cycling which are attractive to higher-spending travelers. Many of these have been picked up and promoted by social media influencers. This destination development approach using visitor flow analysis has been included in the new Destination Management Plan for Southern Laos and also has been adopted by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICT) to inform several other provinces across Laos.

The capacity of local institutions has been a focus in order that they continue to drive activities to support the destination. Key players in the local tourism sector have been supported, including the establishment of a Marketing Task Force - a public-private working group mandated by the local government, which coordinates tourism marketing efforts in Southern Laos. The task force is chaired by the Champasak Provincial Department of Information, Culture, and Tourism and co-chaired by business associations the Champasak Hotel and Restaurant Association and the Champasak Provincial Association of Travel Agents. This group includes a website management team of six private sector representatives and two DICT officers, who can maintain Southern Laos' print and digital media outputs.

141 businesses operating in remote areas benefited from 'mobile training' initiatives led by the local business associations in hospitality, English for tourism, tour-guiding, and social media marketing skills. MIGIP also supported the MICT to establish the National Tour Guide group and assisted in developing the professional tour guide training handout that was piloted at Champasak province where 31 local tour guides joined.

At national level improved tour guide training modules have been integrated into the national training course provided by the Institute of Mass Media, Culture, and Tourism. These modules focus on tour guides' communication, leadership, rapport-building and other 'soft' skills to improve the experience of visitors. The national training course has now reached over 175 tour guides throughout Laos.

A particularly successful activity initiated by the task force has been to raise awareness about Laos' growing plastic problem through a plastic-reduction campaign to "Refill Not Landfill" plastic bottles. The group invited local businesses to offer maintain water refill stations and offer branded aluminum bottles as souvenirs to visitors. Some 66 private-sector managed refill stations have been established across the four southern provinces, reducing over 600,000 bottles from entering the environment. The initiative also inspired local businesses and youth groups to volunteer in cleaning up tourism sites across the destination – including Wat Phu Salao.

The last year of the project was impacted by the COVID-19 and through fast collaborative measures, a business mentor programme was conceptualized and implemented to support MSMEs cope with the pandemic and to build their staff's capacity for when there are tourists again. "MIGIP has made significant contribution to the SMEs in Southern Laos by building our capacity holistically in cooking, marketing, basic English, and other tools that are beneficial for our business," Ms. Bobby of Saithong restaurant said, "tourism in Southern Laos has grown rapidly over the years with more hotels and restaurants than before, the businesses need to keep up!"

The MTF hopes that by building on MIGIP's legacy to represent Southern Laos through high quality targeted marketing efforts for the destination as a whole, then they can continue to work towards being a competitive sub-national tourism destination in Laos.

