The health and nutrition of mothers, babies and young children in remote areas of Lao PDR is receiving a major boost thanks to the launch of the Ministry of Health (MOH) and UN Joint Programme on Maternal, Neonatal, Child Health and Nutrition (MNCHN) in Savannakhet, Phongsaly, Luangnamtha and Oudomxay provinces.

Despite major socio-economic improvements in the past decade, maternal and child mortality, illness and disabilities in Lao PDR are amongst the highest in the region. This is compounded by equally high malnutrition rates. In response, the Ministry of Health has declared maternal mortality rates and malnutrition as two of the top priorities in the 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP).

This commitment is reflected in the National Strategy and Planning Framework for the Integrated Package of Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Services 2009-2015, which includes strategies to improve service delivery, reduce financial barriers to healthcare access, mobilise community participation and build government capacity. The UN Joint Programme supports MOH by working with communities, district and provincial health managers to upgrade and build demand for services.

17-year old San and her 9-month old daughter, Suvanan, attend a health centre for the first time. San says she wants Suvanan to be healthy and strong. She will receive Plumpy Doz, a peanut based paste used to prevent malnutrition.
Delivering as One

In line with the Vientiane Declaration, signed in 2006, to ensure development aid is delivered in an effective and efficient manner, the Joint MNCHN Programme combines the skills and expertise of four UN agencies: United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO).

The programme is made possible through a co-financing agreement, of more than 8-million Euros, signed between the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the Ministry of Health and the four UN agencies.

Malnutrition in women and young children, endemic diseases and lack of access to health care, medicine and medical personnel in rural health facilities all contribute to high maternal and child mortality rates. This needs to be addressed simultaneously. The four UN agencies support activities that have a direct impact on the health and nutrition of mothers and children.

UNFPA supports midwifery education and training, helping around 100 Community Midwives per year to acquire the skills needed to ensure the health of mother and child before, during and after delivery. UNFPA also provides technical and financial assistance to develop health care provider skills in basic life-saving, essential newborn care, family planning, integrated management of childhood illness and nutrition.

UNICEF supports mobilization and training strategies to increase demand for services and improve health and nutrition home care practices. UNICEF supported initiatives also reinforce others by targeting improved access to and use of safe water, basic sanitation and improved hygiene.

WFP uses its expertise in addressing malnutrition by providing specialised nutrition products to ensure children get all the nutrients they need during the critical first 1000 days of their life, from conception to two years of age. To increase attendance at health centres, especially before, during and after childbirth, WFP provides food incentives to encourage pregnant and lactating women to go for regular check-ups.

WHO is responsible for de-worming programmes to fight widespread parasitic diseases, weekly iron supplies, which improve the health and well-being of children and women, especially during pregnancy, as well as vaccination campaigns to reduce or eradicate common infectious diseases.

Making a difference

The Joint MOH-UN Programme is already having an impact. Since June 2011, WFP has been distributing rice rations and Plumpy’Doz, a peanut-based paste used to prevent malnutrition, at health facilities and villages in Nalae district, Luangnamtha Province. According to health centre staff, more than twice as many pregnant and breastfeeding women requested medical check-ups in June and July as a result.

“I’m very happy to note that our food is providing a jump-start to the lives of many children who without this assistance would risk real damage to their physical and intellectual development,” says Eri Kudo, WFP Representative in Lao PDR. “It is very encouraging to see more pregnant women use health services, as antenatal care has many benefits far beyond pregnancy,” says Esther Muia, UNFPA Representative in Lao PDR.

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Measles-Rubella vaccine to reach all

Armed with 3 million doses of measles-rubella (MR) vaccines, health centres and mobile medical teams are central to the nationwide campaign to immunize every child from nine months to 19 years old during November 2011. The campaign is coordinated by the National Centre for Mother and Child Health in cooperation with UNICEF and WHO.

“The key challenge is to ensure that every child, however remote, from every ethnic group is reached,” says Tim Schaffter, UNICEF Representative in Lao PDR. “Such efforts are critical in our aim to achieve MDG 4 on reducing child mortality.”

WHO Representative, Dr Liu Yunguo, commented that, “The Measles campaign in 2007 drastically reduced the number of cases by more than 90% and inspired by this success, the goal of the 2011 campaign is to eliminate circulation of the virus.” After the campaign, the combined measles and rubella vaccine will be introduced as part of the country’s routine immunization services.
Floods highlight disaster preparedness needs

Extensive flooding during the May to October 2011 rainy season, affecting 12 of the country’s 17 provinces, has underlined the need to strengthen disaster management efforts. More than 300,000 people were affected and 26 died, as a result of Tropical storm Haima that struck central and northern Lao PDR on 24 June and Nock-Ten which further devastated central and southern areas of the country in late July. According to government statistics, this was the first time since 1962 that the northern province of Xieng Khouang flooded.

In response to Haima the Government requested assistance from UN agencies. A joint impact assessment with Government, UN and Development Partners was conducted in July and August to assess the damage, losses and needs. This was the first time that all the relevant partners working on disaster preparedness and response efforts came together in such an initiative. This represents a major move towards unity and better coordination in times of a national disaster.

The assessment covered all four provinces affected by Haima including, Xieng Khouang, Sayaboury, Vientiane and Bolikhamsay. The report concluded that the overall value of the medium and long-term needs amounts to 567 billion kip (USD 70,000,000). The country is in the process of finalizing its first national disaster management plan, 2012-2015, that will help mitigate the impact of future natural disasters. This is being drafted by the National Disaster Management Office, with financial and technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank.

Lao PDR hands over Presidency of Convention on Cluster Munitions

After leading the world as President of the Convention on Cluster Munitions for the treaty’s inaugural year, Lao PDR has handed over its role to Lebanon. As the world’s most cluster bombed country, the Government of Lao PDR was instrumental in the development of the international treaty that bans the production, stockpiling and use of cluster munitions.

Stanislas Brabant, Senior Technical Advisor to the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) for the UXO Sector, believes the legacy of Lao PDR’s Presidency is the formulation of the Vientiane Declaration and Action Plan that will strengthen the ability of states parties to meet their treaty obligations. This was drafted during the First Meeting of States Parties held in Vientiane in November 2010.

The NRA and UXO Lao, the national clearance operator, continue efforts to meet these obligations and those of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 9, a Lao specific MDG to reduce the impact of UXO. Clearance operations, victim support and risk reduction work in the field are all critical to achieving these goals. Pertinent to meeting the obligations under the Convention is to clear land of cluster munitions within 10 years. Mr. Bounpone Sayasen, National Programme Director, UXO Lao, confirmed that it would be impossible to remove all cluster munitions in 10 years and a more realistic plan is to clear 8,000 km² per year. Together with the NRA a 10 year work plan has been established that focuses on clearing land in the 46 poorest districts affected.

With an estimated 200,000 hectares of prime agricultural land still contaminated, risk education is also key. 14,000 villages now have risk education programmes and the Ministry of Education is mainstreaming the subject into its national curriculum. There are positive signs, casualty numbers have come down, from an average of 300 annually over the past five years to 117 in 2011.

Decades of clearance remain and the international treaty requires continued support as well as suitable policy formulation in its journey to rid the world of these indiscriminate weapons.
Meet The Young Celebrities Tackling Rising Drug Use

Lao PDR has a very young demographic profile, with half the population less than 20-years old. This group are particularly at risk of falling into a vicious cycle of unemployment, drug dependency, crime, HIV/AIDS and human trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime is implementing a context-sensitive strategy to raise awareness about these issues with the help of young Lao celebrities. UNODC meets up with some of our youth ambassadors to find out more...

Anouthar Lardsavonglao is 21-years old. She is a renowned music presenter on Lao Star television, appearing on programmes such as Music Boom, Sabaidee Mueang Lao and Sabai Sabai Pheng Lao. In addition, she presents radio shows, such as ICU and I Go Inter on 98.8 Mhz. In her spare time she studies at Rattana Business Administration College.

Why did you decide to become a youth ambassador?
NOUThA: I want to help raise awareness about drugs and their threats. I am interested in working to help the community and I hope that I can act as a source of encouragement for youth who use drugs.

What message do you give to those who use drugs or are at risk of doing so?
NOUThA: I think it’s important that young people use their free time in the right way. There are lots of extracurricular activities available. If you are facing a difficult problem don’t try to use drugs as a solution. Drugs always bring us down to the worst things in life.

When you are faced with difficulties how do you overcome them?
NOUThA: For me, when I have a serious problem, I always start off by consulting my family. My parents have had a lot of experience in life, which makes them a great help when it comes to giving advice.

What is the key to success in life?
NOUThA: I think the best way to find success is first to find your dream. Once you’ve got that far it’s just a question of running to reach that goal. Never stop practising and always be honest with yourself and with the people around you. Also, remember the lessons that your parents have given you.

Athisack Ratanavong is 29-years old. He is the lead singer of the rock band Cells, a composer and general manager of I Radio International. In addition, he manages the production division of Indee Records, the biggest pop music label in Laos.

Why did you decide to become a youth ambassador?
SACK: I am very interested in social development activities. Seeing as drugs are one of the most serious problems in Lao society, the UNODC anti-drugs campaign is able to make a big difference.

What message do you give to those who use drugs or are at risk of doing so?
SACK: I tell youngsters that although drugs can be highly addictive and hard to give up, you can definitely manage it. For me, anyone who succeeds in quitting drugs is a real hero, both for themselves and for their family. I also say to organizations working in this field that they’re doing a really important job in helping people to realize that change is possible.

When you are faced with difficulties how do you overcome them?
SACK: When I have a difficult problem I always talk to my close friends. Whenever I feel discouraged I remind myself of all the people who are worse off and reflect on how lucky I am. Finally, I gain a lot of strength from keeping in close contact with my family whenever I can.

What is the key to success in life?
SACK: You can learn something from everyone in life. Look at the more successful to learn how to improve, and those who have less opportunity in life, to remind yourself how lucky you are. Most important of all, though knowing yourself you can learn to truly love yourself for who you are.

Methamphetamine seizures soared from 1 million tablets in 2008 to more than 24 million in 2010.

Be Smart, Don’t Use Drugs
The world’s population topped seven billion at the end of October 2011. The population of Lao PDR stands at 6.25 million and is rising at an average of 2.2% annually.

“\nI am one of 7 Billion people in the world\n"
New UN Plan Strengthens ‘Delivering as One’ Agenda

After nearly two years of preparations the final touches are being made to the new United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) Action Plan 2012 to 2015. This is the strategic and operational planning document of the UN that represents a blueprint for how the UN comes together to deliver as one.

The new plan supports the Government’s 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 and to help the country graduate from Least Developed Country status by 2020.

The UN Resident Coordinator to Lao PDR, Mr. Minh H. Pham, says the UNDAF reflects the essence of the UN’s combined support to the country. Speaking at a meeting to validate the outputs of the UNDAF, the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alounkeo Kittikhoun, stated that, “The Lao government is supportive of the UN system in delivering as one to improve its effectiveness and efficiency.” He added, “This UNDAF must be something we can implement and realize.”

During consultations six priority areas were agreed on: inclusive and sustainable economic growth; governance; investing in human development; natural resources management; unexploded ordnance (UXO); and gender. The government and UN agreed on 10 outcomes under these six priority areas.

This UNDAF comes at a critical time as it is aligned to the final 4-years to achieve the Millennium Development Goals with the Government’s 7th NSEDP, 2011 to 2015. The UNDAF Action Plan has been produced with a results based focus to strengthen the impact of development work over the coming 4-years.

Local Governance Paves Way For Poverty Reduction

The rainy season used to mean a loss of revenue for Timchai, a farmer in the southern province of Saravane. Rainfall during this five-month period would often make the road from her village to the market impassable, causing her produce to rot before she had an opportunity to sell it. But thanks to the construction of a new road, Timchai can now access the market all year round.

‘With this road I can bring more of my coconuts, watermelons and pumpkins to market,’ says 37-year old Timchai, who lives in Hor Kong village. ‘Since the road was built I’ve got more income and bought books and school uniforms for my children.’

The road project is the result of efforts of the Governance and Public Administration Reform programme, Saravane Province (GPAR SP), a four-year initiative designed to build the capacity of local district administrations. Supported jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), and the European Union (EU), GPAR SP aims to develop institutional, managerial and technical capacities among local authorities to ensure better public service delivery, and thereby alleviate poverty.

After identifying the need for a new road, Timchai and her fellow villagers voted to make construction of the road a development priority in their community. They then enlisted the help of their local administration, which secured funding for the road project through the District Development Fund, one component of GPAR SP.

Since 2006, the District Development Fund has invested in some 286 projects in Lao PDR, with average investments of US$14,000 per project.
Lao PDR is rated one of the 10 “top movers” in the world in terms of progress on human development - the non income side of poverty reduction - during the past 20 years.

UN Lao PDR in Brief

Jessica Watson supports WFP in Lao PDR

Record-breaking sailor and Young Australian of the Year Jessica Watson visited Lao PDR from 4 to 9 September 2011 and announced her support for the United Nations World Food Programme’s (WFP) School Meals Programme. In her role as Youth Representative for WFP, Jessica will raise awareness and funding for WFP school meals back home in Australia.

In May 2010, at the age of 16, Jessica became the youngest person to sail around the world non-stop and unassisted. Through her journey, Jessica showed to the world that dreams can become a reality if pursued with hard work and determination, and she now wants to help children in Lao PDR to achieve their dreams of getting an education. During her week-long stay, Jessica visited schools and communities in the southern province of Saravane.

Human Development Report 2011 shows progress

Lao PDR’s Human Development Index (HDI) value has risen again from 0.520 in 2010 to 0.524 in 2011, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report 2011, Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All. Lao PDR has seen a 39 percent increase in its HDI since the first HDR was published in 1990.

The report was launched in Vientiane, 15 November 2011. Mr. Minh H. Pham, UNDP Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator handed the HDR to Dr. Bounthavy Sisouphanthong, Vice Minister, Ministry of Planning and Investment. Despite the gain in value the Report warns that environmental degradation and damage threaten progress in Least Developed Countries, such as Lao PDR. The large majority of Lao people still live and work in rural areas. “Their dependence on natural resources for food and incomes further raises the stakes in enforcing environmental preservation,” said Mr. Pham at the launch.

International Year of Volunteers +10

Celebrating IYV+10 in 2011 offered a unique opportunity for governments, volunteer organizations, the UN, civil society and all stakeholders to further advance the recognition and promotion of volunteerism. This will help to enhance the role of volunteers, intensify existing networks and to create new ones.

With 2015, the target date for the achievement of the MDGs, only four years away, IYV+10 offers the opportunity to further the role of volunteerism in social and human development and to harness the power of volunteerism to deepen the contributions of volunteers worldwide for the achievement of the MDGs.

On 29 September 2011 the UN House hosted the first meeting of the Lao National Committee for IYV+10 chaired by the Deputy Chief of Cabinet of the Lao Youth Revolutionary Union, Mr. Alounxai.

The UN Volunteers programme, IYV+10 UN’s focal point, supported the event. The meeting was an opportunity for representatives from different organizations such the Lao Red Cross, French Red Cross, JICA, KOICA, Cus-VSO and Lao Ministries to start planning future collective initiatives in the spirit of volunteerism to contribute to the socio economic development of Lao PDR.
The United Nations Country Team commitment to the Lao PDR

“The United Nations in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic supports the Government in its achievement of national development goals, including the eradication of poverty. The UN’s strategy is to tackle it at the policy making and community levels, ensuring a rights based approach to development, supporting the sustainable use of natural resources and preservation of cultural heritage, and promoting gender equality and good governance.”

Code of Conduct of the UN Country Team in Lao PDR 2012-2015

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The MDG 7 target to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water is on track in urban areas but off track for rural areas.

Water is Women’s Business too

Who collects the water and brings it to the house? Who is responsible for cooking, cleaning and the health of family members? In most parts of the world, the answer would be “women”. This is also the same for Lao PDR. According to a survey conducted by UN-HABITAT, only 7% of adult males in Lao PDR are responsible for fetching water for the household.

However, when it comes to water management, development and policy-making, it is largely a man’s world. The same survey confirmed that women’s awareness of the role and function of water management is very limited, and they do not see themselves as playing a part in water management decision making. Similarly, male stakeholders have limited perception of the relevance of women’s involvement in water related activities.

Women and their concerns remain mostly invisible in decision-making and governance structures, planning, policy-making, and infrastructure development as well as in the institutions that control and manage water and sanitation across the line ministries.

This is why gender matters when it comes to water. In Lao PDR, where almost half of the population still lacks access to an improved water source and an improved sanitation facility, women are particularly affected. For a number of years now, UN-HABITAT has been working on mainstreaming a gender perspective into an integrated water resources management policy in Lao PDR.

Sustainable development will only succeed if the needs of all water users, both men and women, are addressed. Empowering women to have their voices heard will result in better use of time, money and resources and is critical for effective water management.

Published by the UN Communications Group, Vientiane, Lao PDR, January 2012

Front cover photos: Main - WFP Lao PDR/Annika Harald, Bottom left (top): UNV LaoPDR/Philippe Pernet, Bottom left: UNV LaoPDR/Philippe Pernet

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