Food and Nutrition Security in Laos

P2 Combating food insecurity and malnutrition

P3 “If there is no water we cannot grow rice”

P4 Volunteering to improve food security
As the international development community focuses on the impending deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and looks towards the post-2015 agenda, a key question to address is “How will people living in poverty be protected from increased vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition?”

Alarmingly low world grain stocks, increasing food prices, rising fuel costs and rapid environmental degradation contribute to this growing risk. Rising food prices place more pressure on household expenditure, reduce available funds for education and health and further limit the choices people living in poverty have to improve their own lives.

In Lao PDR, approximately 80% of the population depend on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods. Reliable access to sufficient and adequately nutritious food is a challenge, with chronic malnutrition affecting 40% of children under five years of age. Rice production fell short of the government target in 2011-12, and the country’s dependency on neighbouring countries for food security continues to increase.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) supports projects enabling people to overcome rural poverty and achieve food and nutrition security. The ‘Soum Son Seun Jai’ project pilots the creation of integrated farming systems and links to markets. The ‘Rural Livelihoods Improvement Programme’ strengthens village institutions, develops off-farm income generation and introduces natural resource management measures.

Efforts to combat food insecurity and malnutrition must be supported by policy change at all levels. Internationally, food security and nutrition must be prioritised in future sustainable development agendas.

Approximately 80% of the population depend on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods in Lao PDR.
Meeting Mor is a humbling experience. At the age of thirty, she has already given birth to ten children, eight of whom are alive. Breastfeeding her youngest child outside her modest house, made of bamboo and straw, she talks about the life in her village, located in Bolikhan District of Bolikhamsay province.

Her household relies mostly on rice cultivation for their livelihood. Years ago, her family used to live in the upland area where 'slash and burn' agriculture is traditionally practiced. Since moving to the lowlands, they have been struggling to adapt to a different rice cultivation style, further complicated by the limited access to water in the area. To supplement her income, she also raises animals, but is still struggling to make ends meet and to support her growing family. “We find it difficult”, Mor admits, “but we don’t know what else to do”.

In relying on subsistence rice production for survival, her family is not only typical households in her village, but is also typical of the rural population in Laos as a whole.

Mor and her husband invested money in buying seeds and hiring a tractor for ploughing their field, but this was not to enough: “We spent almost three million kip but now there is no water. If there’s no water we cannot farm and our life will not be good”.

She is not alone in this issue. Lack of water is one of the biggest problems in the area. The current irrigation facilities are limited and in poor condition, having been damaged or destroyed in floods that have affected the area in recent years. As a result, most farmers are heavily dependent on natural rain patterns for irrigation and can only produce one crop of rice per year.

"The shortage of water is usually connected to various other issues: illegal logging, unsustainable shifting cultivation, land grabbing and recurrent forest fires, which in this particular region have resulted in a serious degradation of the surrounding watersheds, causing increasing variability in water availability", Yvette Lizée, Chief of the Environment Unit at United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) explains. Relying on one crop of rice per year often leads to food insecurity, which is a serious problem in Laos. It is estimated that under normal conditions over one-third of the population in Laos experiences rice shortfalls of two to six months per year.

UNDP recently launched a new project in the area designed to address some of these issues. The project, titled “Support to Integrated Irrigated Agriculture” and implemented with the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) in Bolikhamsay, aims to improve the overall livelihoods and food security of the local communities by supporting the development of irrigated agriculture and the community based management of watershed resources such as forests and fisheries.

The village where Mor and her family live is included in the project target area which focuses on two of the poorest districts in Bolikhamsay. Her community will benefit from improved irrigation schemes in the coming years. They will also be closely involved in implementing the project, which has a long-term goal of handing over the management of irrigation infrastructure and the corresponding watershed to local committees, who will be supported by the local administration.

A combined effort internationally, nationally and at community level is essential to ensure a safety net for the most vulnerable and to contribute towards sustainable human development in Lao PDR.
Putting women and children first

The Government of Lao PDR has endorsed a strategic plan to provide free delivery service for pregnant women and free consultation and treatment for children under the age of 5. This is an important step towards universal coverage, targeting the least covered and most needy group first.

Pregnant women, women giving birth, postpartum women (42 days after delivery) and children under 5 years of age are targeted in the hope that increased uptake in health services will reduce child mortality (MDG4) and improve maternal health (MDG5). Timely access to emergency obstetric care and much required preventive and curative health services for children is a measure for overcoming the financial barriers they face.

Women will be entitled to receive, at no costs, essential services such as: Antenatal care including blood pressure measurement, iron folate provision, de-worming, tetanus (TT) vaccination, counselling on birth preparedness and nutrition during pregnancy, weight gain monitoring and provision of mother health book.

Delivery including laboratory examination costs and consultation cost of medical staff, postnatal service including iron folate, de-worming, family planning, nutrition and child feeding advice are also part of the free service provided.

The policy focused on rural areas of 42 poor districts and 64 government focus site for development and will be expanded to urban areas. Other districts will receive financial support from development partners to implement the free delivery policy. Beside government budget, it is expected that financial support from development partners will provide coverage for children under 5.

In free delivery pilot projects initiated since November 2009 in Nong and Thapangthong districts of Savannakhet Province, there was a 300% increase in institutional deliveries compared to 40% increase in districts not covered by the programme.

By removing the financial barriers, more women will be encouraged to deliver in a health facility or with assistance from a skilled birth attendant.

Currently, there are many development partners providing a combination of free maternal health services in different provinces. The Joint UN Maternal, Neonatal and Child Program supported by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg received technical support from WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP.

By coordinating these efforts and standardizing the free services provided, duplication can be avoided and services can be extended to achieve universal coverage in the long term. Putting mothers and children first is an important step towards achieving the MDG’s 1, 4 and 5 in Lao PDR.
An innovative approach to mobilize communities to improve the health of mothers, newborn babies and children is being implemented by the Ministry of Health. A framework called Working with individuals, families and communities (IFC) to improve maternal and newborn health, or the “IFC framework”, was developed by WHO (World Health Organization) in 2003 to empower women, families and communities to improve and increase their control over maternal, newborn and child health. It also aims to increase access to and utilization of quality health services, particularly those provided by skilled attendants.

UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) started piloting the IFC approach in Borikhamxay, Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces. The process included a Participatory Community Assessment (PCA) to explore community needs, set priorities and define the IFC district plan based on these priorities. The PCA was undertaken by provincial and district level multi-sectoral teams.

“I’m happy to participate in these meetings” said Mr. Bounhak, village headman of Muangchanh village from Sepone district, Savannakhet province. “The participants identified, and prioritized their own problems on maternal, child and young people’s health in their villages and provided suggestions to solve the problems. These suggestions are based on reality and can help the mothers, babies and young people in the villages” he added.

Some of the actions proposed and implemented include training of community motivators and local school teachers on MNCH (Maternal, Newborn and Child Health) issues, mobilizing village health committees to organize transportation in case of emergencies and child birth and lending funds to families if necessary.

Volunteering to improve food security in Laos

Ilari Sohlo recently finished his three-year United Nations Volunteer (UNV) assignment working as a Natural Resource Management Advisor at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Through his work in agricultural biodiversity, natural resources and forestry-related issues, he was able to make a concrete contribution towards achieving MDG 1 – to reduce hunger by half.

“We were working on mainstreaming biodiversity into the country’s agricultural and land management policies and programmes. That involves promoting the harvesting of non-timber forest products in a sustainable manner, diversifying agricultural crop production, Farmer Field Schools, livestock variety, fish and water resource diversity, and anything else that people collect for their food and nutrition security and livelihoods.” Mr Sohlo explains.

There are currently 18 United Nations Volunteers working in Lao PDR, many of whom work directly or indirectly with issues to do with food security and nutrition.

“It’s important for the UN to work together for the same goal of reaching the MDGs, to reduce hunger, strive towards environmental sustainability and for everyone to put their concerted effort together” Ilari says. “In my volunteer assignment, I enjoyed mostly the variation. No two days were the same. I was in the field designing and implementing projects as well as developing policies at national level and meeting with delegations from different stakeholders”.

Improving maternal and newborn health
Building disaster risk reduction culture in Lao PDR

A series of cyclones, tropical storms and monsoonal rains across Southeast Asia in 2011 resulted in the worst flooding in the region for more than a decade. In Lao PDR the floods heavily affected 340,000 people in 12 provinces, and 64 hectares of rice fields, leaving millions of dollars worth of economic damage.

To promote a learning culture of safety and resilience, UNESCO, in collaboration with UNICEF, has developed a Technical Guidance for integrating disaster risk reduction in the school curriculum, which will be pilot tested in different countries around the world. Along with three other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Lao PDR has been selected to pilot test this Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) tool.

Danilo Padilla, Education and Sustainable Development Programme Coordinator with UNESCO Bangkok, said: “It is recognized that impacts of disasters can be substantially reduced if we are well prepared, ready to act and are equipped with the knowledge and capacities for effective disaster management. The objective of including DRR components in the curriculum, teacher education, community learning, school management, and school infrastructure is to increase the level of preparedness and protection of education systems and the resilience and preparedness level in disaster prone-communities. This technical guidance tool – a collaborative work between UNESCO and UNICEF – is one of our contributions towards that goal.”

The tool offers technical guidance on the integration of DRR in the school curriculum and contains conceptual frameworks as well as ready-to-use planning, development, discussion, monitoring and evaluation tools. It is designed primarily for use by policy makers and curriculum developers in central and sub-national administrations, NGOs and UN agencies but also has much to offer that is of direct relevance to school principals, teachers, teacher trainers and local education officials as well as local community members committed to fostering DRR learning.

Nominated Lao PDR representatives will pilot test the tool for approximately three months, after which they would join a Feedback Workshop in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants are experienced curriculum developers, education planners and teacher educators who are familiar with the educational realities in the regions as well as the specific capacities and needs of the Lao PDR education system.

The technical guidance tool is intended to provide enabling frameworks and tools to support countries and sub-national jurisdictions to move the disaster risk reduction curricular agenda forward. The initiative falls under the mandate of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) and follows Lao PDR’s participation in the Education in Emergencies Project.

Together we can end human trafficking!

Human trafficking is one of the most prominent problems affecting not only Lao PDR, but all countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and globally.

The United Nations estimates that there are 2.5 million trafficked victims in the world at any one time. Laos is a source, and to a much lesser extent, a transit and destination country for women, children, and men who are subjected to forced prostitution and forced labor.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare reported that between 2001 and 2012, 1,981 Lao nationals were repatriated from Thailand. Of these, 95% were female and 85% were under the age of 18 years. During 2012 alone, 195 Lao nationals were repatriated; of these 87% were female and 69% were under the age of 18 years. 80% of those victims are originally from Vientiane Capital, Vientiane Province, Saravan, Savannakhet and Champasak.

Depriving someone of their liberty, exploiting them and trading them as a commodity for profit are serious human rights violations. Trafficking of human beings cannot be tolerated in any form, be it in Lao PDR or anywhere else in the world.

The Lao government is in the process of developing legislation and measures to fight trafficking of human beings. A great deal of progress has been made in recent years but we must now work as individuals, as groups, as communities and as a nation to combat this serious organized crime that affects our country and our population. This process must be undertaken in partnership with international organizations, civil society organizations, private sector and the Government so that “Together we can end human trafficking”. 
UN Lao PDR NEWS in Brief

Alexandra Bounxouei appointed UNDP’s Goodwill Ambassador

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has appointed Ms. Alexandra Bounxouei as its national Goodwill Ambassador for Lao PDR. Alexandra is a 25-year old Lao national who, despite her young age, has built an impressive career in singing and acting and is well-known in the country and even internationally.

Having already demonstrated her commitment to raising the awareness of social issues, Alexandra was selected for the honorary position to advocate UNDP’s development messages, including poverty reduction, promoting effective governance, supporting improved environmental management and reducing the impact of UXO.

Alexandra will enable UNDP to reach out particularly to the country’s youth, something that is considered particularly important given that 50% of the Lao population is currently under 24-year of age.

WHO and UNICEF receive the President’s Medal for Measles Achievements

WHO and UNICEF have been awarded the President’s Medal of Labour in appreciation of their outstanding efforts to eliminate measles in Lao PDR. “This is indeed a great honour for the World Health Organization as in recent years, the number of confirmed measles cases has decreased substantially from 1 651 cases in 2007 when we had the first Measles campaign to 32 cases in 2012 and the country is getting closer to achieving the elimination goal,” commented Dr. Liu Yunguo, WHO Representative.

Timothy Schaffter, UNICEF Representative to Lao PDR, said: “We are especially pleased to see the Government’s own contributions to these achievements. The fact that the Government is beginning to fund routine immunization programmes is an excellent demonstration of true commitment and leadership.” In December 2011, national measles rubella (MR) campaign, combined with oral polio vaccines, vitamin A and deworming tablets, reached 97% of the targeted 2.8 million infants, children and youth aged between 9 months and 19 years of age. The country is planning to conduct an additional nationwide MR Supplementary Immunization Activities in 2014 or 2015 which will be important to achieve the final goal of Measles elimination.

Journalists explore Food and Nutrition Security issues in the South

Providing nutritious snacks to school children, training midwives to advise expectant mothers on correct nutrition and screening children for signs of malnutrition are some of the ways the UN is supporting the Government of Lao PDR to improve food and nutrition security in the country. These actions were among those observed by a group of journalists from Vientiane Times, Vientiane Mai and Lao Star Channel on a recent media visit to Sekong and Saravan provinces where they visited various UN-funded projects.

During the two-day trip, the media representatives had a chance to meet local officials, health workers and residents and learn how nutrition and food-related issues affect the people in Laos. They also visited a community-run radio station to learn how health and agricultural news can be effectively disseminated in remote areas.

“The assistance being provided by the United Nations will help the children in Laos to have a better future by being healthy and strong”, said Mr Khamphone Syvongxay, one of the reporters who joined the field visit.

The aim of the field visit, hosted by the UN Communications Group, was to increase the interest of the media in food and nutrition security-related issues.
Youth discuss how to end Violence against Women

"I feel afraid when I see what happens in my neighbor’s house. The husband always hits his wife when he gets drunk and no one has tried to stop him. The villagers think this is normal in that house and I feel really scared to see this situation”. These are the sentiments of a female student at Phongam Secondary School, Champasak, as expressed in a school dialogue session on ‘Ending Violence against Women’ in December 2012.

Violence against women (VAW) is one of the most pervasive and systematic human rights violations in the world and Lao PDR suffers from this like any other country. In recent years however, policymakers and advocates have made headway in facilitating a discussion on these issues. Work is also being done with regard to legal reform and research.

Silence is VAW’s best friend, as violence thrives when not discussed. Exposure and frank conversation is therefore one of the most powerful tools for its prevention and elimination. This is why UN Women, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Sports, has been engaging with youth on these issues.

In December 2012, UN Women facilitated dialogues in schools in three provinces in Lao PDR. The students who participated discussed human rights, violence against women and how to eliminate this violence from Lao society.

Haruethai Buakhiao and Sommai Sibounheung are two young women working tirelessly to raise awareness on VAW and to promote its prevention and elimination. They travelled between the schools and facilitated the discussion among the youth. “I was very happy to hear the students’ experiences and to share with them. They participated actively and spoke of incidences of VAW that occur in their communities. They would like to end VAW by starting with themselves and their friends. Hearing that made me very happy”, said Haruethai.

Hopefully these are just the first steps towards engaging with a new generation of Laotians that does not shy away from discussions on VAW and has a zero tolerance attitude towards it.

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

Resident agencies: FAO, IFAD, UNAIDS, UNCDF, UNDP, UNEP, UNFPA, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNODC, UNV, UNWomen, WFP and WHO
Non-resident agencies: ILO, ITC, OCHA, OHCHR, UNCRD, UNCTAD, UNIAP (UNRC), UNESCO and UNHCR
Close collaboration: Asian Development Bank, UNESCAP, IMF, World Bank

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Cover/page 1 photos: Khumnani (33) is working in a vegetable field, Pakse, Laos. (Large cover photo); Yia Ya (40) is working on her poultry farm, Luang Prabang, Laos. (Small cover photo) © IFAD/GMB Akash