New roadmap for development in Lao PDR

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic stands at an historic juncture, facing a unique opportunity for its people to embrace a future of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental sustainability. The United Nations Country Team and the Government of Lao PDR pledge to work closely together to support the fulfilment of the country’s development priorities.

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Investing in nutrition makes economic sense.

Malnutrition undermines economic growth and reduces the productivity of the working population. Adults who were malnourished as children earn at least 20% less on average than those who weren’t. Better nutrition in early childhood leads to sustainable growth in GDP – the benefits in terms of increased health, schooling, and productivity are invaluable.

The United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2012-2015 outlines UN support to the Lao Government’s development goals and marks the strong commitment of the United Nations Country Team to the Lao people and the Lao Government, and to a prosperous Lao PDR in which all segments of the population are able to equally enjoy development gains. The UNDAF Action Plan defines ten concrete and measurable improvements for the people of Lao PDR by the year 2015.

The collective aspiration under this UNDAF Action Plan will be to move toward greater collaboration, focus, transparency, efficiency and coherence, and to enhance the impact of United Nations support as we seek to improve the quality of life for all people in Lao PDR. The UNDAF Action Plan also embodies a critical part of the United Nations Country Team’s commitment to work together and strive towards delivering as one.

OUTCOME 1 By 2015, the government promotes more equitable and sustainable growth for poor people in the Lao PDR

OUTCOME 2 By 2015, the poor and vulnerable benefit from the improved delivery of public services, an effective protection of their rights and greater participation in transparent decision making

OUTCOME 3 By 2015, under-serviced communities and people in education priority areas benefit from equitable quality education and training that is relevant to the labour market

OUTCOME 4 By 2015, people in the Lao PDR benefit from more equitable promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative health and social welfare services

OUTCOME 5 By 2015, vulnerable people are more food secure and have better nutrition

OUTCOME 6 By 2015, key populations at higher risk of HIV infection benefit from increased coverage and quality of integrated prevention and treatment, care and support services

OUTCOME 7 By 2015, the government ensures sustainable natural resources management through improved governance and community participation

OUTCOME 8 By 2015, the government and communities better adapt to and mitigate climate change and reduce natural disaster vulnerabilities in priority sectors

OUTCOME 9 By 2015, national and local governments and communities have reduced the impact of unexploded ordnance on people in the Lao PDR

OUTCOME 10 By 2015, people in the Lao PDR benefit from policies and programmes which more effectively promote gender equality and increased participation and representation of women in formal and informal decision making
Bringing family planning to remote areas of Laos

In Laos more than 70 per cent of the land is mountainous, and a third of the villages are not easily reached by road. This makes providing health care a big challenge, compounded by linguistic diversity and a national shortage of medical staff.

One measure of this challenge is the nearly 30 percent of married women who want to avoid getting pregnant but are not using contraception. To address this gap, a new community-based effort to distribute contraceptives has been started by the Ministry of Health with support from UNFPA in several provinces. The initiative is testing whether low-skilled villagers can effectively provide family planning services in areas health professionals are not reaching. Initial results from Ta Oy District in Salavan Province indicate they can.

Feeding their family is a full-time effort for Reuy and her husband Rye, members of the Pako ethnic group in their early 30s. They agree that their five children are enough. They lost two others in infancy. Previously, people from Reuy’s village had to go to a health centre if they wanted contraceptives. With the next facility a day’s walk away, few did.

Reuy appreciates the access to contraception that the new programme has given her. “Now that I don’t have to care for more babies, I’m not so tired, and I have more time to help bring food to my family.” “I am glad my wife can help me in the fields. Thanks to the programme has given her. “Now that I don’t have to care for more babies, I’m not so tired, and I have more time to help bring food to my family.”

Well-fed mothers have healthy babies.

Ensuring a nutritious diet for mothers can substantially reduce the risk of maternal and neonatal mortality. Pregnant women and mothers should receive nutrition information at every visit to a health centre.

Health Centres get busy thanks to joint UN work

D r Boun Leuk is a busy man. His health centre in Nam O village in the remote north of Lao PDR is seeing many more patients than it used to just a few months ago. “Before the programme started, pregnant women or young mothers used to come only when they or their children were sick. Now, women come every day, also from villages far away.”

The programme Dr Boun Leuk refers to is a joint UN and the Lao Government initiative to improve the health and nutrition of mothers, newborns and children. Undernutrition in women and young children, endemic diseases, and lack of access to health care, medicine and medical personnel in rural areas all contribute to high maternal and child mortality rates in Lao PDR. The joint programme addresses them simultaneously by improving education and skills of health care providers; upgrading infrastructure of health centres and enhancing services they provide; increasing demand for services in communities; and raising awareness on nutrition and hygiene practices at home.

The Nam O health centre shows where these joint efforts can lead. The women are attracted by the quality healthcare services offered and a rice ration provided as part of the joint programme to compensate for the expense and time reaching the health centre. Dr Boun Leuk, trained with support of the programme, checks the woman and her baby’s health, counsels her on the importance of good nutrition practices for herself and her baby, such as early and exclusive breastfeeding, and informs her on the benefits of completing all vaccinations after her child is born. Before leaving, he provides her with iron supplements helping ensure the good progress of pregnancy. Both pregnant and lactating women also receive micro-nutrient supplements.

For many women, it is the first time they experience such care, but now they have benefited from it they are more likely to come back. Mangeun Pineyalath, 28, has three children, but only the youngest was born at the health centre. “This latest birth was the best,” she says. “The doctor took good care of me and gave me a lot of advice on what to eat and how to care for myself and my baby.”

This story represents one part of a joint UN Programme which supports Ministry of Health’s Implementation of Integrated MNCH Services Package to reduce maternal, newborn and child mortality and morbidity and the high levels of malnutrition in women and children. The joint UN MNCH programme is being implemented by UNFPA, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.
Building back better after a flood

When his village got flooded following the Tropical Strom Nock Ten in 2011, 80-year old Sot probably didn’t think that anything positive would possibly come out of it. Many families in the surrounding area of his village in Sebangfai District, Khammouane Province, suffered serious damages to their houses and other personal effects and had their water and sanitation infrastructure affected. The long term effects experienced by his family as well as his fellow villagers included food shortages resulting from damages to their rice fields. Unsurprisingly, the impact was most severe on the less well-off members of the community as they struggled to recover from what some described as the worst flooding the District had experienced in a long time.

When daily survival is the priority, repairing houses as well as the water and sanitation infrastructure to a safe and sustainable standard can seem less important. However, they should not be overlooked especially in areas prone to recurring disasters.

Sot was one of the villagers who benefited from UN-HABITAT’s post-disaster recovery project in Sebangfai District, Khammouane province. “My latrine got totally blocked by sand brought about by the floodwater, and whereas before I could’ve tried to fix it by myself, I’m not able to do such work anymore because of my age. Now it’s much better than before, and if the village floods again, there’s a good chance it will not be blocked”.

The project, funded by the European Commission, utilised an approach known as Build Back Better, which aims for greater disaster resilience. All latrines and dug wells that were repaired were upgraded according to the principles of the methodology, previously little utilized in Lao PDR in post-disaster recovery projects. Simple adjustments such as building water and sanitation structures on a raised platform can make a real difference and prevent damages in future floods. The approach is also valuable in housing and particularly relevant to the Lao context, where houses are often built from naturally occurring and low-cost materials, which can leave dwellings vulnerable to damage during storms. However, a lot can be done at the building stage, which is why the project also provided village carpenters training to enable them to ‘Build Back Better’.

Sot was one of the lucky villagers who were selected to receive a new, disaster resilient demonstration house: “When I heard about it I got so excited, I kept dreaming about it in my sleep. Having a house that was straight and didn’t leak was something that had previously been beyond his dreams. Now Sot, his wife and his two young foster children have just that. During this year’s wet season, this family can enjoy better sleep in their new, dry and storm-resistant home.

Responding to HIV by people living with HIV

Involving people living with HIV in the national HIV response is not just a question of moral responsibility, it is a highly effective way to improve national policies, strengthen HIV prevention, and support the scale-up of AIDS treatment and care programmes.

This is exactly what the more than 800 members of the People Living with HIV Network have been doing and in recognition of its many achievements, the network has now been granted the status of not-for-profit association.

What this means is that the network has become the “Association of People living with HIV”, with an executive and supervisory board, and the development of a specific action plan. This increased capacity means the Association is now effectively recognized as an important partner in raising awareness and reducing stigma or discrimination toward people living with HIV.

The new association will be able to play an even more significant role in joint projects such as the Lao-TACHIN (Lao PDR-Thailand–Australian Collaboration in HIV nutrition) project, works to support the nutrition status of people living with HIV (PLHIV). The project conducts nutrition assessment, education and counselling, and nutrition screening and education into monthly support group meetings. A poor nutritional status, including low body weight and macro and micro nutrition deficiencies, impairs the immune system, decreasing the body’s ability to fight HIV and opportunistic infections.

This increased vulnerability to infection further increases the nutritional needs of the body, and is moreover compounded by HIV increased morbidity and mortality. Evidence shows that PLHIV who are undernourished when they start antiretroviral therapies are 2-6 times more likely to die within the first six months of treatment than their peers who are well nourished.

There have already been significant successes. Group discussions between PLHIV who received nutritional services and Lao partners have led to an increased knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet, an improved health status as well as an increased confidence and well-being as a result of improvements in personal appearance.

Photo: UN-HABITAT/Eeva Nyyssonen
Ki Her, the head of Kioutaloun village, in northern Laos, has noticed a change in the weather over the past five years, with shorter but more intense rainy seasons, followed by longer dry seasons. For 95 percent of the population in the mountainous north who grow rice, this presents significant challenges. “When the farmer starts planting upland rice he needs rain for fast growth. If there is no rain within a month, then it’s not good,” said Ki Her.

Farmers are now struggling to figure out when is the best time to plant. Increasing numbers of landslides, land erosion and severe flooding are also further affecting the crop that is grown on the slopes of the northern uplands. So the community is increasingly looking to alternative crops that in recent years have been found to be more profitable and reliable than rice.

Tai On and his family started planting alternative crops on their farm in Kioutaloun after a trip to Thailand three years ago, where he saw farmers earning money from lemons. He now has a lemon orchard on more than half his land. “The lemon trees now have fruit all year round. I use the lemons for cooking and to sell at the market,” he said. He can get 25 US cents per kilogramme for his lemons during the rainy season and three times as much in the dry season, when lemon production in the lowlands drops. He is also planting sweet bamboo, which he discovered grows easily, prevents soil erosion and, like lemons, can be sold at the market all year round.

Villagers now refer to Tai On’s family as model farmers and are looking to replicate their alternative crop success. To help achieve this, the community, along with three other villages, received US$50,000 in 2011 from the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme, implemented by UNDP, to plant non-rice crops to cope with the changing weather patterns. The project builds on the villager’s local knowledge about the best crops to plant and farmers receive support in purchasing seedlings and training on land preparation and planting techniques. The community led project also conducts workshops with their own model farmer family.

According to Ki Her, the average income a household can earn from alternative crops, including lemons, cucumbers and sweet bamboo, is about US$375. This is a significant amount in a country where the GDP per capita is about US$1,200.

Manfred Staab, of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), who is advising the National Agricultural Forestry Research Institute of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, on a four-year programme to improve the resilience of the agriculture sector to climate change (IRAS), says crop diversification is the key to countering erratic rains. “If you have more options than one, then, if something happens to you, you are not as easily derailed from your main source of income, or your food security is not as easily in danger.”

The four-year IRAS project aims to produce 10 to 15 successful intervention models that farmers can draw on to make them more resilient in the face of changing environmental conditions.
Improving Maternal Health and Nutrition in Laos through Volunteerism

Ms Neena Irshad, is a UN Volunteer from India. Since 2010, she has been working with UNFPA in Khammouan province as a Midwife/Nurse Clinical Teaching Advisor providing technical assistance to training institutions to improve maternal health in Lao PDR.

1. What motivated you to come to Lao PDR as a volunteer?
As a UN Volunteer, I am able to share my experiences and apply my skills and knowledge to contribute to reducing the high rates of maternal and neonatal mortality in the country. I am fully committed and dedicated to help improving maternal health as a whole.

2. How can you and midwives contribute to improve maternal health?
As a Midwife/Nurse Clinical Teaching Advisor, I educate and provide advice to the midwife teachers and students to work in remote villages where maternal and infant mortality rates are very high. By raising the skills and awareness of those closest to the mother, everybody can contribute to help pregnant women have safe deliveries and healthy babies.

3. How does nutrition affect mothers and their babies?
Poor nutrition leads to anaemia in women, poor development of the foetus and eventually low birth weight and associated problems in babies. It also causes slow brain development and stunting. This affects the milestones of the baby so that there is delay at all steps of growth. Good quality and quantity of nutritious food is key to healthy, prosperous, and happy mothers and babies.

4. What are you doing to try and overcome the nutrition challenges related to pregnancy and newborns?
I help community midwifery students and their teachers in the provincial midwife schools with hands on training on obstetric care and nutritional advice in hospitals. I also directly work with women and their newborns at health centres and homes on the same. This involves the community as a whole, to help them understand the impact of good nutrition on the health of pregnant women and new-borns, and also helps to change people's attitudes.

5. How would you like your contribution to be remembered?
I work in a team with international and national staff, who collectively contribute to this challenging task, vision and mission. Therefore, I would like to be remembered not as an individual contributor but as a part of team who worked together tirelessly to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates.

Teaching midwifery skills to students in Khammouane Province

Photos: UNV Lao PDR/Neena Irshad; UNFPA Lao PDR Archive
Lack of protection, limited journalism training and uncertainty about media laws were some of the key issues affecting Lao media that came out of a panel discussion held at the UN House in Vientiane to mark World Press Freedom Day in May 2012. The event, organized jointly by UNESCO Bangkok and the United Nations Communications Group, in close collaboration with the Lao Journalists Association, brought together representatives from a wide range of Lao media outlets to discuss the media landscape in Lao PDR.

Speaking at the event, the UN Resident Coordinator Minh Pham urged journalists to adhere to “openness for debate, exchange of views and opinions.” He also emphasized how a “strong and effective media is at the heart of equitable development and is a right for all Lao people.”

Many journalists and other stakeholders shared their experiences during the ensuing question and answer session with the panelists. Discussions ranged from the current media laws, media practices and access to information, to the opportunities affecting media development. It was suggested that the current media landscape can make it difficult for the press to accurately portray issues affecting the Lao people.

It was the first time such a discussion has been held here. Lao PDR is currently on place 165 out of 179 countries in the internationally used Press Freedom Index.

Ms Vannaphone Sitthirath presenting on Media Landscape in Lao PDR at the event.

Photo: UNDP/Toby Fricker
Migration from Lao PDR to Thailand is inevitable given the economic disparities between the two countries, as well as the close social, cultural and linguistic ties. However, human trafficking and labour exploitation are a serious danger for prospective Lao migrants. Lao PDR is primarily a source country for transnational migrants, who originate predominately from rural areas and travel to urban centres, within Laos, or across borders, in search of better economic opportunities. Many Lao people already have existing social networks in Thailand and look to connect with friends and family upon arrival. Even if potential migrants have heard stories of labour exploitation abroad, witnessing successful migrants return with increased prosperity, convinces many people to take the risk of leaving home. But it doesn't always work out as planned.

Tet* was 14 when she was promised a job in a Thai restaurant. “My friend said we should go but when we got there they took us to a factory to make gloves,” she said. For the next two years Tet was forced to work in dire conditions. “If I failed to reach the day's production quota I would receive no food or drink and was sometimes beaten.” It was only until another girl managed to run away that the authorities were informed.

While formal labour recruitment channels exist between Lao PDR and Thailand, demand for Lao workers is unmet through this avenue. Migrants also often bypass official procedures to save time and money, and Thailand’s long and porous borders create opportunities for undocumented Lao migrants to enter the country. Using these unregulated methods, migrants often fall into smuggling-related debts before or during transport to Thailand, and brokers and employers use such debt to hold migrants in place. Documents may be seized; wages withheld; and in some cases violence or intimidation may be used to prevent migrants from returning home or contacting Thai authorities.

To make migration safer, the Lao government, UN agencies and NGOs are raising awareness about safe migration practices within the Lao community. By educating potential migrants about the risks involved, particularly travelling without legal documents, they are working together to prevent voluntary travel or work from turning into human trafficking cases. A year-long radio program, targeting vulnerable populations throughout the country, is currently being produced by a number of partners for Lao National Radio. Listeners can engage with the hosts and program guests to ask questions about migration, human trafficking and how to recognize and report potential cases. The hope is that people will be more aware of the risks of human trafficking and will learn about available assistance for trafficking survivors and their families.

Promoting safe migration

Invest in nutrition – invest in the future of Laos.

The UN in Lao PDR is promoting awareness of the various issues of the main nutrition problems in Lao PDR and their impact on the country’s development. On top of each page of this newsletter you will see examples of how nutrition issues are multi-sectoral and require a multi-sectoral approach to solve them.