In 2014, the small village of Nator Ngai in Xayabury Province witnessed the rapid response from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza team (FAO-HPAI) to contain the highly contagious and potentially fatal H5N1 virus or bird flu – a strain of avian flu which swept through parts of Asia 10 years ago.

The virus was identified after some 1,000 ducks and chickens imported from China were dying in transit. The team rapidly took preventive measures, putting 5,000 suspect poultry in quarantine and culling the infected population. Villagers were supplied with protective equipment and the FAO HPAI team held educational supply chain risk and poultry management meetings with the poultry company’s staff as well as local authorities.

Every year, hundreds of Lao women, men and children are misled or coerced into situations of severe exploitation. They may work in difficult, exhausting jobs, often in foreign countries, with little or no pay. Human trafficking is a highly complex crime requiring concerted efforts by various stakeholders, both within and between countries.

UN-ACT serves as the Secretariat to COMMIT, an inter-governmental process between the six greater Mekong sub region countries to jointly counter human trafficking. By working in close partnerships with a wide range of different stakeholders, such as Government counterparts and international organisations, UN-ACT focuses on strategic coordination and cooperation in the region.

Over the years, Lao PDR has seen significant progress in its counter trafficking efforts. Anti-trafficking agreements have been developed, cross-borders cooperation with neighboring countries has been enhanced and assistance services, such as shelters and vocational training, have been developed to better suit the needs of repatriated victims.

Drawing on the expertise of different stakeholders, UN-ACT aims at ensuring a partnership approach to more effectively counter human trafficking.

BREAKING DOWN LEARNING BARRIERS

Equivalency programmes are creating previously non-existent learning opportunities for tens of thousands of the most marginalized and disadvantaged learners in Lao PDR. These programmes aim to increase access to education by offering short, flexible life skills-focused alternative learning programmes, mostly through non-formal education channels. Over the past six years, UNESCO has collaborated with the Ministry of Education and Sports’ Department of Non-Formal Education to develop and strengthen equivalency programmes in the country.

The project showcases the potential benefits of collaboration between the UN, education officials and international development partners. Funding for equivalency programmes is generously provided by the Japanese Funds-In-Trust (JFIT) programme.

In Lao PDR, equal access to education remains the most daunting obstacle to the Education for All Goals. Approximately 112,000 adolescents do not attend school and although universal literacy has already been achieved among the country’s richest young women, for example, the poorest may not realise this goal for another 70 years.

Poverty and marginalisation creates barriers to education, especially for young women, preventing them from realizing their educational potential. For children in rural and remote communities in Lao PDR, educational opportunities can be limited and the same is true of other marginalized groups. Building a foundation for an alternative pathway to help these children is the goal of UNESCO’s equivalency programme in Lao PDR.

Since 2008, UNESCO Bangkok has been working with the Lao Government to develop equivalency programmes for lower secondary school aged students. Following a needs assessment as well as the development of curriculum and teaching materials, the equivalency programme was piloted in 17 provinces during the 2013-2014 school year.

Upon completion of the programme, learners receive a certificate equivalent to formal lower secondary education and have the option of continuing on in formal education or entering the workforce with increased knowledge and skills.

Most recently, the JFIT has agreed to support the next phase of the project, which will take place over the next 18 months aimed at assisting the Lao government in drafting a five-year Equivalency Programme Strategic Plan. This will serve as the main planning and management instrument for the government to scale up the programme during that timeframe in line with the country’s Education Sector Development Plan.

Further strengthening the collaborative nature of the program, a proposal has been submitted that would see the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) join UNESCO to strengthen the food and nutritional aspects of the primary equivalency programme curriculum, with a view to increasing agricultural productivity in Lao PDR.

Visit www.unescobkk.org for more information.
NATIONWIDE MEASLES AND RUBELLA CAMPAIGN

In one of the largest Measles and Rubella Immunization campaign in the history of Lao People’s Democratic Republic an estimated 1.6 million children aged nine months to below ten years were vaccinated as part of an effort to eliminate measles and accelerate rubella disease control between the periods of 17-30 November 2014.

The sharing of the vaccine and operational costs for this campaign demonstrated a joint commitment by development partners and donors to support the Government of Lao PDR. United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO) and Measles Rubella Initiative together with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Sports mobilize support from other international agencies like Lux Development, USCDC, KOICA, KOFIH, JICA, World Bank, Care International, Plan, Save the Children and Medicins Du Monde to deploy staff to the field to monitor the quality of the immunization service delivery.

Immunization is a cost-effective way of reducing child morbidity and mortality. 330 children still die of Measles every day globally accounting for 14 children every hour.

Beside the nationwide campaign, it is equally important for a country to have a comprehensive plan to improve routine immunization and a communication strategy to reach all community especially the high risk priority ethnic communities in order to ensure equity in service delivery thereby saving the children from the scourge of these dreadful killer diseases. It is also pivotal that Lao PDR maintains high population immunity, and a strong disease surveillance system in order to minimize the risk and consequences of any re-infection in future.
Advocating for sustainable and equitable development through promoting the Human Development concept is one of UNDP’s key mandates. The concept is used in international development circles and looks at issues such as inequality and progress. While the concept is largely understood at Government level, the understanding among the general public, especially the young, is considered relatively limited.

Realizing needs to ensure that younger generations think about the future of the country’s development, UNDP in collaboration with the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) and the National University of Laos (NUOL) has produced a textbook on Human Development, launched November 2014.

“It’s important that the next generation, as the future leaders of the country, understands the importance of people-centered development as an element of good governance and policy-making”, said Ms. Azusa Kubota, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative at the launch. The textbook aims to be an innovative tool for advocating human development awareness for students to understand the concept and key dimensions of human development. During the launching ceremony, the textbook was well received by students who were actively questioning and sharing their perspectives over the definition and nature of ‘development’.

“It is important to recognize that everybody should have the same access to basic needs and that everybody gets the same opportunity despite their difference in status, family and educational background. I want to see the gap narrowing between people living in rural and urban areas, only then we can say there has been proper development”, said Phimmavong, a student at NUOL, when asked about his hopes for the future of Lao PDR.

Not only will the textbook provide a basic understanding of the Human Development concept, but it is also expected to provide a platform to promote dialogue among young people on Lao PDR’s development, and how the concept can be applied and acted upon. In addition, through the textbook production, this has enabled UNDP to enter into a new partnership with the National University of Laos, the country’s premier academic resource center and “think tank”.

The textbook will initially be used to support one module of the Economic and Development Course at the Faculty of Economic and Business Management at NUOL, with a possible expansion to other faculties and more academic institutions in the coming year.

For more information please visit www.la.undp.org.
CREATING LAO ‘SUPERKIDS’

Young children in southern provinces are now receiving better nutrition thanks to an initiative led by the Lao Government with support from UNICEF and mining company MMG to help mothers fortify child food with a micro-nutrient powder known as SuperKid.

The initiative aims to dramatically reduce iron-deficiency anaemia and other nutrition issues affecting young children by providing a powder full of vitamins and minerals to sprinkle over food. SuperKid has been used in Saravan and Savannakhet in 2014, and will soon move to Attapeu and Sekong provinces in 2015.

“The development of our country depends on giving children a healthy start in the early stages of life,” said Dr Inlavanh Keobounphan, Vice Minister of Health. “This initiative is absolutely critical in helping the Lao PDR meet Millennium Development Goals for childhood survival and nutrition. It will bring better health and other opportunities to Lao children and future generations.”

Micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia result in a variety of cognitive and physical problems. More than 40 per cent of children aged six months to five years old suffer from anaemia and in infants six months to one year old more, than two-thirds of all children are affected. These are some of the highest rates in South East Asia.

Anaemia is essentially a lack of red blood cells, meaning not enough oxygen is being carried around the body, making people feel weak, tired and often unable to concentrate. For children, this has far-reaching impacts both at home and in school and inhibits them from developing to their full potential. Anemia is strongly linked to under-nutrition.

Superkid is full of vitamins, iron, zinc and other nutrients that, when mixed into a daily meal, fortify a child’s diet to sufficiently prevent and reduce anaemia and similar illnesses.

Under the initiative, public health professionals, community volunteers, and private-sector pharmacists are distributing approximately 4 million sachets of SuperKid integrated into part of a wider Government effort to promote good child feeding and hygiene practices. “Good nutrition can bring powerful benefits to communities. Children who are well nourished, especially in the first 1,000 days of life, are more likely to be healthy and able to learn,” said Dr Viorica Berdaga, Chief of Health and Nutrition, UNICEF Lao PDR.

Mining company MMG, which operates in Savannakhet, partnered with UNICEF and the Lao Government by pledging USD 1.38 million to the project. Since then, the Lao Ministry of Health, UNICEF, Population Services International (PSI), and the University of British Columbia have worked together to research, develop and implement the initiative.
DEVELOPING SKILLED BIRTH ATTENDANTS

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in close collaboration with WHO has provided financial and technical support to the Ministry of Health in evaluating its Skilled Birth Attendant (SBA) Development Plan 2008-2012 with the goal to reduce maternal and newborn mortalities in Lao PDR.

Recent evaluation of the plan found that significant progress has been made in terms of increasing the number of midwives, however there is an urgent need to improve the quality of teaching and the competencies of trained midwives significantly.

The plan aimed to improve the capacity of health workers, specifically midwives to deliver culturally appropriate and accessible health services during pregnancy and childbirth as well as postnatal care of mothers and their newborns.

The evaluation was carried out to assess the progress and achievements of the plan, focusing on education, training and capacity building among midwives. The evaluation identified lessons learned and developed actionable recommendations to inform and support the development of the next national SBA Development Plan 2015-2020.

The evaluation process included document reviews, data gathering and analysis, interviews, a quick survey, and two case studies in LuangPrabang and Savannakhet provinces.

For more information please visit http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/lao/

MESSAGE FROM THE UN LAO PDR RESIDENT COORDINATOR

During the past year, new and creative partnerships have been established to promote effective development results.

For instance, in order to accelerate progress on the most off-track Millennium Development Goals target - reducing malnutrition - the United Nations and the World Bank have joined forces, and have also included contributions from other development partners. A team of technical experts and strategic leaders has been established, bringing to the table the comparative advantage and expertise of different agencies in order to frame a multi-sectoral response to this complex issue. Important issues of livelihoods, gender integration, climate change adaptation, agricultural diversity, health and education are taken into account. This team will support the provision of more integrated nutrition solutions, ensuring universal access to nutritious food, strengthening nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems, increasing sustainability and reducing rural poverty.

To bring development to remote areas and reach out to the population at large, including minorities, UNDP has partnered with Lao Telecom, volunteers and civil society to provide radio broadcasting services and programmes in eight different ethnic languages, covering most provinces.

In this spirit, I am looking forward to enhance our partnerships in 2015.