Achieving the MDGs: Only the beginning…

By Minh H. Pham

With less than 1,000 days to go before the global deadline for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Lao PDR has a number of critical areas that still require special attention, as the country’s third MDG Report clearly shows.

Persistently high rates of malnutrition (MDG 1), children under five and maternal mortality (MDGs 5), and school dropouts (MDG 2), as well as shortfalls in UXO clearance (MDG 9), continue to keep several of the MDGs in Lao PDR off-track.

As the Report highlights, taken together, the MDGs reflect the many interconnected dimensions that contribute to extreme poverty, including income poverty, hunger, disease, and exclusion. Thus, during the short time until the 2015 target date, renewed efforts by the Government and the international community alike will be essential for the country to contribute fully to the most successful global anti-poverty movement in history and meet the aspirations of the people.

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In particular, the Report’s findings starkly illustrate a priority issue emerging for Lao PDR: the silent scourge of stunting, or chronic malnutrition. Stunting affects 363,000, or 44 percent, of Lao children under 5 years old. The national stunting rate is among the highest in the region. A child who is stunted often appears normally proportioned but is actually short for his or her age. Nevertheless, the consequences of stunting are dramatic.

Critically, this is linked to the broader issue of food and nutrition security—and again, to the interconnectedness of the necessary response. It therefore will be essential to give food and nutrition security the sense of urgency that it deserves in Lao PDR. Interventions emanating primarily from the health sector, such as micronutrient supplementation and supplementary child feeding, are necessary, but require further strengthening to substantially improve the national situation. Instead, broader and complementary actions—involving improved food production and rural infrastructure along with increased awareness of nutritious dietary practices, for example—can be provided by a host of other actors in sectors such as agriculture, education, water and sanitation, and social protection.

As a signal of the Government’s commitment on this issue, the recent establishment of the National Nutrition Committee, headed at the level of Deputy Prime Minister, is most welcome, and an important signal that an integrated approach is under way. Given that a mind is a terrible thing to waste, it is imperative that nutrition issues be addressed with no delay.

All this paves the way for the post-2015 era, which demands a new vision and a responsive framework. This can start with the preparation at the end of this year of the Eighth National Socio Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) 2016-2020, which will provide the contours of the development agenda as thenational goal of Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation in 2020 approaches.

The medium-term national vision, as expressed in the Eighth NSED P 2016-2020, thus will need to begin to answer a number of key questions. For now, the Government has the opportunity to generate an inclusive debate on the post-2015 agenda through the holding of a broad-based set of national consultations. The National Assembly should be one of the critical partners; if the people also are meaningfully engaged, this will enable even broader voice and participation.

Achieving the MDGs represents an important step toward equitable and sustainable development. But this is only a first step: Lao PDR has bigger ambitions—LDC graduation, middle-income status—and for that will need to go beyond the basics. Transformative change that encourages creativity and innovation will be needed to develop interconnected, homegrown solutions to continuing challenges. With the Government’s enlightened leadership, Lao PDR can reaffirm its commitment to fundamental human development values.

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Highland children are playing and bathing in a river
Photo: Paserth Chanthavilay
Lao PDR has made steady progress towards universal primary education coverage, but low survival rates pose a risk to MDG achievement. Current enrolment is 95% in 2012 and the target is 98% by 2015. The survival rate to grade 5 has improved from just 48% in 1992 to 70% in 2012, but is still low compared to other countries in the region. The transition rate from primary to secondary education has steadily increased, but enrolment is still low with 46% attending secondary school.

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Poverty is easy to spot but hard to define. The developing world has already attained the first MDG target to cut the 1990 poverty rate in half by 2015. 21% of people lived at or below US$1.25 a day in 2010 compared to 43% in 1990.

Today 1.2 billion people are living on less than US$1.25 a day, 600 million fewer than in 1990. However, by maintaining the current rate of progress, some 1 billion people will still live in poverty in 2015. In Lao PDR, between 1992 and 2008, people living under national poverty line dropped by over 40%, with 1.55 million people living with less than US$0.82 per day.

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The poverty target of MDG 1 is largely on track, but tailored interventions are needed. However, the target to reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger is off track and remains one of the biggest challenges with a stunting rate of 44% (UN estimates) for children under 5 years old. The MDG target for 2015 is 34%.

A nutritious diet is key to child development
*Photo: Vilasack Southisane*

“Improving the quality of education has long been considered one of the most effective way of helping poorer countries to develop as it ensures a better standard of living” Minister of Education and Sports, Dr Phankham Viphavanh.

Children have more opportunities to study in primary school.
*Photo: Youphalath Phethany*
Gender parity has steadily improved in all three levels of education in Lao PDR. The country is well on track to achieve parity between boys and girls in primary education.

Vulnerability of women workers exists as a result of poor education and limited access to resources and a clear wage-gap between male and female workers. However, one quarter of the national parliament is female, one of the highest proportions in South-East Asia, but the proportion of women in other decision-making institutions is still low at 5%. However, there are still challenges in the employment sector, particularly in more vulnerable sectors where women make up the largest numbers. Strategies need to start with the agriculture sector because of the amount of workers in that field.

The economic growth of 7-8% yearly should create a sufficient number of decent employment opportunities with a fair and equitable remuneration for women to effectively promote gender equality and empower women.

Lao PDR has achieved the national MDG target for under-five mortality ratios of 80 per 1000 live births, but still has one of the highest under-five mortality rates in the region. A more ambitious target can now be set for 2015, recommended at 70 per 1000 live births. Currently for every 1000 live births, 76 babies die within their first 28 days of life.

Provinces vary in terms of child mortality due to a combination of factors including maternal nutrition, education and access to healthcare. A child under 5 in Phongsaly is five times more likely to die than a child living in Vientiane City. In Phongsaly, Khammuane and Huaphanh, the infant mortality rate is above 100 per thousand live births, meaning that at least one of 10 children born in these provinces will die before their first birthday.

To achieve targets for under-five mortality that are more ambitious, Lao PDR will need to continue its current reduction rate of more than 4% a year. This will require tackling significant challenges, in particular reaching the poorer segments of the population and people living in remote areas, increasing investments in the health sector and scaling up high-impact child survival interventions nationwide, which could reduce two-thirds of child deaths.
Lao PDR has made substantial progress in recent years to improve maternal health; the maternity mortality ratio is 357 per 100,000 live births, down from 405 in 2005. This means that for every 1000 live births, four women die during pregnancy, delivery or within 42 days after termination of pregnancy. The target is 260 per 100,000 live births by 2015.

Compared to 1995, mothers in Laos are twice more likely to survive childbirth now, with half receiving antenatal care and three times more births attended by trained health personnel. Family planning, for instance, could cut maternal deaths by almost a third, making it one of the most cost-effective interventions to reduce maternal mortality.

Other interventions include providing quality healthcare services, skilled birth attendants, improved facilities with the right equipment and drugs and mobilizing communities to use the services provided.

Lao PDR remains a relatively low-prevalence country for HIV/AIDS but there is little reason for complacency, as the incidence is on the rise. There have been concerted efforts to ensure that information and prevention measures reach at risk population. Half of all new HIV infections are among young people aged 15-24.

To reach the national targets by 2015 on HIV and AIDS, Lao PDR will need to promote strategic partnerships with key affected populations and decision makers; address mother to child transmission; secure access to treatment for all, and increase the domestic financial contribution to address long term sustainability issues.

Recent years have seen steep declines in malaria mortality and incidence, but outbreaks in the South continue to threaten this progress. Since December 2011, malaria outbreaks in the five southern provinces have been associated with changes in land use and the influx of migrant workers. Further investments in health will be required to tackle the new challenges brought by rapid development.

In 2010/12, Lao PDR completed the first ever National Tuberculosis Prevalence Survey in the country conforming to international standards. The survey found higher prevalence among the males and the rural population.

However, Lao PDR has achieved the MDG target set by halving the 1990 tuberculosis burden. Both the detection and cure rates have surpassed the earlier target set for 2015. The cure rate under Direct Observed Treated Short Course (DOTS) has been over 90% since 2005.
Urbanization, deforestation and the country’s rapid economic development result in decreasing forest coverage annually. The main drivers of forest degradation are unsustainable and illegal wood harvesting, poorly regulated timber harvesting by rural households and shifting cultivation, whilst those of deforestation are agricultural expansion, hydropower, mining, and infrastructure projects and urban expansion.

With the 70% of the total population now has access to improved sources of drinking water, more than a two-fold increase since 1990. The target to halve the proportion without improved drinking water and sanitation is on track for urban areas but more needs to be done to accelerate progress in the rural areas to achieve the 2015 target.

The coverage by improved sanitation has increased three-fold since the 1990s, and if the current trend continues, Laos will achieve the MDG target of 60% since it is now at 57%. The urban sanitation coverage has already achieved 88% and but rural areas lag behind, where coverage is less than under half of the population.

Lao PDR was heavily bombed during the Indo-China War (1964-1973). 1000kg of bombs were dropped for every man, woman and child at the time, making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world. More than 30% of these bombs failed to detonate and remain dangerous as Unexploded Ordnance (UXO). They continue to pose a significant obstacle to development in the country.

On MDG 9, effective risk education and the clearance of high-risk areas have helped to reduce the number of UXO casualties by 78% from 1999. However, the most daunting challenge remains the magnitude of the UXO problem in the Lao PDR.

The Lao Government has set a clearance target of 20,000 hectares a year. In 2012, a total of 4400 hectares were cleared. Overall, meeting the national UXO clearance targets will require a significant scaling up of resources and capacities. In addition, more needs to be done in providing support to the 20,000 survivors of the UXO casualties in the country.
54-year old Somphong Khaovong, or Goi to his friends, leans back in his chair considering how Lao PDR has changed since the early 1990s. The MDG targets cover 1990 to 2015 and for Goi, the biggest impact has been education. In fact, his daughter, Malitha is a good example.

“Malitha was born in 1990 and although she still lives at home, because houses are expensive, she had a good education,” says Goi. He goes on to talk about how education has improved in recent years, particularly with the increased number of schools and higher number of enrolled students. When Malitha was born 23 years ago, children would have only around a 66% chance of experiencing a primary education. Today, children have a 95% chance – a dramatic rise in line with the MDG targets.

“Malitha is now working in a bank,” says Goi. “There are better opportunities to find jobs today, because the education and economy have improved. I think younger people are studying subjects like economics more, as well as English and Chinese language.”

Goi has been a teacher since the late 1970s and education is close to his heart. At 15, he left home to start working, and only started higher education later in life. He says he wants all of his five children to go to University.

He feels that health problems are better tackled today, thanks to improved health coverage. In 1990, a child under-five had a 44% of being undernourished. Today, the prevalence of underweight children under-five years of age is down to 27%, but this is still too high. “Food is very expensive these days, and this can be a problem for people,” says Goi.

The chances of survival for a child under the age of 5 has also greatly increased, although Lao PDR still has one of the highest under-5 mortality rates in the region. A child born 20 years ago would have had a 15% chance of dying before their fifth birthday; today, it is down to around 4%.

“I think life is better now. People have a better education, and that brings more opportunities,” Goi concluded. Thinking about his daughter’s first 23 years, who started school at five and went all the way through University to working in a bank, Lao PDR certainly feels to Goi like a country moving forward.

The MDGs have helped lay down the roadmap towards the changes witnessed by Goi and others like him. However, there is still much to be done – the challenge has just begun.
More than 150 photos were submitted by Lao photographers to a photo contest organized by the UN in Lao PDR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with support from Beeline. Titled “Laos in Focus – picturing the MDGs”, the competition asked the contestants to reflect on some of the causes, solutions and achievements made in recent years in various areas of development in the country. The contest also included a special mobile photography category for young people, the first of its kind in Laos.

The winning photo, chosen by a panel of judges, was taken by Mr. Siththisak Phaninhuan from Luang Namtha. In the mobile photo category the winner was voted by the public on the social media website Facebook, and the mobile snap that received the most votes was taken by 22-year-old Dethnaphone Xanphonepakdee from Vientiane. A selection of photos submitted to the contest will be exhibited during the Round Table Meeting at the National Convention Centre on 18-19 November and on the following week at the i-Cat gallery in Vientiane. All photographs featured in this newsletter are from the “Laos in Focus - picturing the MDGs” competition. www.bitly.com/laosinfocus

The UN in Lao PDR has launched a new website, complete with a new look, functionality as well as a new address.

The new website features an improved design, cleaner outlook of page content and is designed to be also accessible through mobile devices. The upgrade project was managed by the UN Communications Group. The website is now live and can be explored at: www.la.one.un.org

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