

# Strengthening the health system in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a mountainous, largely rural, country in South-East Asia with an average gross national income per capita of less than US\$ 600 in 2007. Nearly 40 per cent of the population in this ethnically diverse nation – which comprises nearly 50 different ethnic groups – lives below the poverty line. Although the country is on track to meet Millennium Development Goal 4, having managed to reduce its under-five mortality rate by 57 per cent between 1990 and 2007, significant health challenges remain for mothers and newborns.

Chief among them are undernutrition, improving feeding and hygiene practices, immunization, environmental health and ensuring adequate skilled health personnel to deliver quality health services. More than 1 in 7 newborns suffer from low birthweight, a condition that is often associated with poor maternal nutrition. Exclusive breastfeeding, at 23 per cent according to the latest estimates, is far below the regional average of 43 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific. Only 60 per cent of the population have access to improved drinking-water supplies, and just 48 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities. Access to both of these critical services is far lower still in rural areas. In 2007, only 40 per cent of infants under age one were immunized against measles and just 47 per cent of pregnant women were immunized against neonatal tetanus. With maternal mortality standing at 660 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2005, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has the highest rate of maternal deaths in the region. The lifetime risk of maternal death stood at 1 in 33 in 2005.

Notwithstanding these challenges, advances are steadily being made to expand health services to the country's large rural population. One such programme involves Save the Children Australia, which has worked with the Provincial Health Office and other partners in Sayaboury to expand and enhance primary-health-care infrastructure in four three-year phases. Their goals are:

- **Phase I:** Strengthen the provincial management team responsible for training district teams and village health volunteers and traditional birth attendants, develop fixed and mobile maternal and child health clinics and provide essential equipment.
- **Phase II:** Integrate primary health care at all levels – provincial, district and village.
- **Phase III:** Expand programmes into four remote districts.
- **Phase IV:** Strengthen the skills of health workers through adoption of the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness framework.

The programme also prioritizes education for women in improved nutrition practices, including breastfeeding and complementary foods, since studies have shown strong linkages between inappropriate feeding practices and child undernutrition in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The dissemination of other health information, including clinical care and immunization, is also an important component of the programme.

The Sayaboury programme has shown significant success, at a highly affordable cost of around US\$4 million over a 12-year period, representing a per capita expenditure of just US\$ 1 per year. The district's maternal mortality ratio fell from 218 per 100,000 live births to 110 per 100,000 live births between 1998 and 2003. The median age at which infants received complementary foods increased from 2.8 months in 1999 to 3.7 months in 2001, while the rate of exclusive breastfeeding for the first four months rose from 28 per cent in 1999 to 66.2 per cent in 2004. Vaccination coverage remained inadequate, however, with only 50 per cent of children under age one receiving three or more doses of diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus vaccine – the benchmark indicator for routine immunization coverage – in 2007.

Complementing efforts to improve maternal and newborn health, the Caring Dads communication campaign encourages fathers to support pregnant women and mothers in caring for themselves and their babies. The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with UNICEF and the Lao Trade Union, has collaborated on comprehensive methods to advocate for greater involvement by men in family care. These campaigns are aimed primarily at wage-earning fathers, who have been identified as the group most likely to engage in commercial sex, the source of the growing HIV prevalence within the country. While the Lao People's Democratic Republic has a lower adult HIV prevalence rate than some of its neighbouring countries, poverty and cross-border migration are contributing to the spread of the virus. Posters and booklets on themes such as the Caring Dad in Pregnancy have been reprinted because of unexpectedly high demand.

Such programmes aimed at community initiatives in health, together with expanded immunization and supplementation campaigns supported by UNICEF in 2007 and health infrastructure-building, are steadily beginning to help reduce the still high burden of maternal and newborn deaths in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

*See References, page 111.*