



IMPACT OF COVID-19 ADOLESCENT WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS



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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of adolescents and young people, worsening their prospects for social and economic advancement. The adverse impacts on education, employment, physical and mental health, and wellbeing of populations are unfolding rapidly and in an unpredictable manner. Urgent action is necessary to mitigate the severe and long-lasting impacts from the pandemic and secure the future of young adults.

IMPACT

Global findings highlight that the impact on young people is systemic, deep and disproportionate. Youth, and young women in particular, in lower-income countries are bound to suffer intensely.¹

Education

- » Keeping girls in school has been recognised as an essential pathway to tackle early marriages. School closures coupled with the economic burden and uncertainty for poor and vulnerable households run the risk of reversing decades of improvements in this regard.
- » A global survey among young people and adolescents highlights that despite the best efforts of educational institutions to provide continuity through online delivery, 65 per cent of young people report having learnt less since the pandemic began, and 51 per cent believe their education will be delayed.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

Employment

- » The pandemic has created tremendous pressure on the labour market, as businesses shut down and the global economy comes to a standstill. The impact of the crisis on the labour market has hit young people harder than adults.
- » Young adults aged 18-24 years are already at greater risk of unemployment, which affects their ability to have stable livelihoods and incomes. COVID-19 worsens these challenges as the supply of quality opportunities is shrinking rapidly and significantly. As unemployment rises, young adults' prospects of finding decent jobs will become increasingly more difficult in the short to medium term. Over the long term, it risks the loss of productivity and growth from a significant section of the working age population.

Child Marriage

- » Data on child marriage from Lao PDR is not available. However, organisations working on and monitoring child marriages have estimated that globally, additional 4 million girls are at risk of child marriage in the next two years due to the COVID-19 crisis.²
- » Unmarried adolescent girls and women typically experience challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health care (SRH) services. Although these services are currently operating at normal levels, Ministry of Health (MoH) data show a decline in the uptake of new contraception users by (15%) between January and April this year, compared to 2018 and 2019.³ Consultations with development partners working with adolescents reveal that gender and social norms put SRH services at high risk of being deprioritised, which could lead to an increase in unplanned pregnancies, child marriages, and unsafe abortions.
- » In Lao PDR, COVID-19 risks increasing levels of the traditional practices of child and forced marriages for labour or money as a way to combat the economic distress resulting from the pandemic.⁴ Child marriages are more common in families with ethnic groups backgrounds, from rural areas and with mothers and caregivers with lower education levels. In these communities, caregivers often believe that girls are ready for marriage at around age 14.⁵

Sexual and reproductive health

- » The microsimulation model predicts a reduction of contraception prevalence from the baseline of 59.92 per cent to 55.77 per cent in a high-impact scenario.
- » Unplanned pregnancies increase the chances of child marriage and consequently, lead to higher school dropout rates. Girls from low-income families, rural areas, and non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups are at highest risk of getting married before the age of 15.
- » Due to COVID-19, UNFPA estimates an increase in the number of unintended pregnancies by 15.46 per cent (44,322) in the best-case scenario, and potentially by up to 23.9 per cent (68,541) in 2020-2021 based on the extrapolation of administrative data. Of these unintended pregnancies, 35 per cent are expected to occur among females 15 to 24 years of age.

² Batha, Coronavirus could put 4 million girls at risk of child marriage, 2020

³ MoH, 2015

⁴ Girls Not Brides, 2018

⁵ Rigby, 2013



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Child abuse and gender-based violence

- » Instances of child sexual abuse have increased amidst COVID-19 due to the associated lockdown measures. The number of reported rape cases has increased as have the counselling requests for girls under the age of 18 who have been sexually exploited, mainly by family members. Victims often display feelings of depression, trauma, fear and anxiety.
- » Discussions with hotline counsellors revealed that many women and young girls experience various forms of violence in Lao PDR. For married women, the primary source of conflict that leads to physical and emotional abuse is the distribution of household income. As financial insecurity increases, spousal tensions are likely to increase in many households across Lao PDR, increasing the risk of experiencing emotional and physical abuse.

Psychosocial Health

- » The needs of adolescents differ from those of children or adults; the emotional impact of the crisis and lockdown measures are likely to be far greater on them.⁶ Adolescence is about developing social skills, empathy and a sense of identity – all of which result from interactions with peers. The COVID-19 crisis places young adults under tremendous psychosocial stress from isolation and is poised to set adolescents back in these critically important social and emotional dimensions of development.
- » Adolescents suffer from forced social isolation in powerful ways, both in the short and long-term. Short-term loneliness may encourage adolescents to engage in risky behaviour and resort to substance abuse. Protracted loneliness can generate mental health issues and increase the long-term risk of depression, obesity and high blood pressure.
- » Young people whose education or work is disrupted are almost twice as likely to have anxiety or depression as those who did not experience such disruptions. This underscores the interlinkages that exist between mental well-being, educational success, and labour market integration.

⁶ Volkin, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS



National government

- Ensure the sustained financing for the delivery of psychosocial support throughout the country, including the training of social workers and counsellors and provision of shelters for victims of abuse.
- Expand social protection programmes to enhance livelihood resilience and mitigate the psychosocial burden on caregivers.
- Ensure equitable financing of psychosocial health care at the provincial and district levels to expand the availability of these services across Lao PDR.
- Ensure investments in communications regarding protection against COVID-19, the risks to the psychosocial wellbeing of children and adolescents, and accessing counselling services for all ethnolinguistic groups, as well as those who are illiterate or have low levels of development maturity.



Regional government

- Support the development and dissemination of communication materials on psychosocial support services.
- Facilitate engagement with communities to identify and protect vulnerable population groups.
- Support the training and sensitization of counsellors providing psychosocial counselling, both online and at health care facilities and protection shelters.
- Provide the necessary financial support for training social workers, building protection shelters, and ensuring health care centres have the required rehabilitation services (e.g., medicine and therapy) to support the resilience of children and adolescents.



Development partners

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