

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2020, early in the COVID-19 outbreak, the Lao Government was swift in enacting a nationwide lockdown to contain the public health impact of the pandemic. Resultantly, the country has so far recorded a relatively limited number of confirmed cases. Despite the success in controlling the spread of the virus thus far, the pandemic created both temporary and potentially long-term setbacks to the situation of children. While the 2019 Situation Analysis of the status of children and adolescents found that Lao PDR made considerable progress in several critical areas related to children, a rapid impact assessment conducted amidst the pandemic in 2020 highlighted drastic socio-economic impact of the pandemic on children in Lao PDR, putting at risk achievements for decades. Significant disparities that were highlighted between urban and rural areas, by wealth quintiles, mothers' education level and for ethnic groups already before the pandemic could further aggravate.

In August 2020, the UN Lao PDR Socio-Economic Response Framework to COVID-19 was developed. It is built around four streams of work (based on the global UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19), constituting an essential package of support offered by the UN Development System (UNDS) in Lao PDR and contributing to Lao PDR's recovery effort and to protect the needs and rights of the most vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to cause the biggest economic slowdown in Lao PDR in nearly three decades, contributing to a worsening fiscal situation and budget cuts expected to affect delivery and quality of basic services. It puts at risk Lao PDR's development gains of the last decade and hinders progress towards the SDGs and its ambitions for middle income status. It has revealed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, with vulnerable groups disproportionately affected. Significant numbers of people lost their jobs and livelihoods. An estimated 383,000 people could fall back into poverty, translating into a five-percentage point increase in the national poverty rate. The lack of jobs is expected to widen the poverty gap between urban and rural areas. The pandemic is likely to cause more hardship for women than men in Lao PDR as its impact is concentrated in industries where women form most of the workforce, such as tourism and related services, retail trade, and manufacturing. The increase in unemployment and reduced incomes has put many young children and adolescents in low-income and poor households at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition, and the concomitant impact on protection and access to basic health and education. The impact on food security is likely to be more severe in remote and isolated areas commonly inhabited by ethnic minorities. The loss of household income caused by COVID-19 could also have knock-on effects for children and their education.

As a result of the pandemic and a related lockdown period in April and May 1.7 million children have had their education disrupted, causing learning losses in a country already facing a learning crisis. More children and young people could be pulled out of school, leading to increased rates of child labour and child marriage. In 2020, new data were published confirming the severity of the learning crisis in Lao PDR. While most children and young people are in school, they are not learning. The education system is not equipping Lao children and young people with the basic literacy and numeracy skills. Only 2.5% of Grade 5 students achieve at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and 0% achieve a minimum proficiency level in mathematics (SEA-PLM 2019). Without these essential skills, the future opportunities of children and young people in Lao PDR are limited, as is their ability to achieve their full potential and contribute to the Lao economy and society.

Recurring annual floods in 2018, 2019 and 2020 resulted in many deaths and more than 130,000 people displaced. Poor preparedness and limited response capacity affect many thousands of children in Lao PDR each year through unreliable and unsafe water and sanitation, inadequate medical services, schools that are disrupted and unsafe and unstimulating living conditions. Climate change forecasts for

Laos suggest that flooding events will become more frequent. The increased frequency and severity of these events puts further pressure on growth prospects and fiscal space. The Government is increasingly recognizing the importance of strengthening resilience, particularly in recovery efforts as demonstrated by the ‘Build Back Better’ and ‘Build to Last’ approaches adopted by the Government. The endorsement of the Disaster Management Law provides overarching legislation to build upon.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal 1: Every Child Survives and Thrive

Lao PDR has successfully responded to COVID-19 by preventing community spread of COVID-19 and limiting the number of cases to only 44. UNICEF supported the development of a multisectoral COVID-19 response plan for health and nutrition in close collaboration with MoH and partners. Support was provided to the implementation of COVID-19 prevention and control measures for the entire population, including treatment of severe pneumonia through oxygen therapy, as well as procurement of supplies and logistics. As a result, the country maintained a regular supply of vaccines for routine immunization, personal protective equipment (PPE), medical supplies and nutrition commodities and the capacity of health facilities for treatment of COVID-19 patients was strengthened. As the child immunization coverage dropped sharply during the initial lock down period, UNICEF supported additional immunization campaigns to prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles. Curative services for children suffering from acute malnutrition were strengthened through improved coordination between stakeholders, distribution of nutrition commodities such as RUTF, medical supplies and anthropometric equipment and training of health workers. UNICEF’s interventions contributed to the containment of the COVID-19 outbreak, including through Risk Communication and Community Engagement, as well as preventing the deterioration of essential child and maternal health and nutrition services.

UNICEF continued to scale up efforts towards Universal Health Coverage and building strong and resilient health and nutrition systems, especially for the disadvantaged population. Key highlights include UNICEF technical inputs to the development of the 9th National Social Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) and Health Sector Development Plan (2021-2025), to ensure the integration of nutrition and inclusion of Primary Health Care (PHC) as a multi-sectoral approach for achieving Universal Health Care. UNICEF continued to lead a Luxembourg-funded UN Joint Programme in collaboration with WHO and UNFPA and in this context supported the Ministry of Health in the development of the updated Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) Strategy and Action Plan for 2021-2025. UNICEF also facilitated the dissemination of the PHC Policy nationwide and the implementation of the Community Health Systems Strengthening (CHSS) Action Plan. CHSS implementation started in 12 districts with financial support from USAID. Special attention is given to increased community engagement and participation of all ethnic groups, by strengthening the Village Health Volunteer workforce to deliver the 12 PHC components.

UNICEF supported the successful introduction of the Human Papilloma Virus vaccine, to protect women against cervical cancer. 280,000 adolescent girls 10-14 years (78% coverage) have been vaccinated in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information and Culture, local authorities and communities. UNICEF, in collaboration with the European Union and other key partners, led support for the implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan. A major milestone for young child nutrition has been achieved with the development of guidelines for the implementation of the National Decree on Breastmilk Substitutes and Designated Products. A Social and Behaviour Change Communication campaign for maternal, infant and young child nutrition promoted key nutritional services and behaviors.

Goal 2: Every child learns

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, efforts were made to minimize learning loss and avert deepening the learning crisis. School closures were mitigated with the extension of the school calendar and distance learning options, including production of education TV programmes and a special ECD series. A key priority was to open schools with safety of students and education staff. Even before the first COVID-19 cases were detected in Laos, UNICEF supported MoES in drafting the COVID-19 Education Response Plan; worked with partners to adapt the global Framework for Reopening Schools; and supported MoES in the development of the Safe Schools Operations Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control, using global guidance. A phased reopening of schools began in May after 2.5 months of closure. UNICEF played a key role in facilitating coordination between MoES and the Ministry of Health in developing clear guidelines and communication materials for safe return to schools. Partnerships with development partners led to two successful Back to School campaigns for the reopening of schools after the lockdown, and the start of school year 2020-21. The Global Partnership for Education COVID-19 grant managed by UNICEF, additional funding from EU and other partners enabled procurement of hygiene materials for schools, printing of textbooks and other take-home materials, and setting-up a digital platform based on UNICEF's Learning Passport for blended learning of students, teachers and education staff with careful consideration of the digital divide.

Despite challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021-25 was endorsed. Education was the first sector to achieve this. UNICEF played a key role in shaping the plan, providing technical inputs, facilitating comments from partners, and managing the plan's independent appraisal. The ESSDP clearly prioritizes addressing poor learning outcomes, expansion of quality ECE and equity issues. UNICEF used evidence-based advocacy for prioritizing improving primary education quality using Grade 9 and SEA-PLM learning assessment results, with the aim of catalyzing a concerted response to the learning crisis.

Amidst the challenges of 2020, UNICEF did not waiver in its continued support to MoES to strengthen M&E, planning and budgeting. The development of a Lao Education and Sports Management Information System (LES MIS) data visualization and aggregation platform is underway with an assessment of the MoES ICT infrastructure and HR capacity undertaken. A MoES e inter-departmental Research Committee has been established. Studies on student drop out; positive deviant schools; and cost-effectiveness analysis of interventions in education are ongoing. Advocacy to safeguard the education budget was undertaken with a joint UNICEF-EU budget brief shared with Parliament. In 2021, UNICEF will accelerate implementation of expanding access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE), institutionalizing a pedagogical support system for teacher continuous professional development, enhanced school development planning; and using ICT to improve monitoring, and blended learning for students and teachers. The ongoing work on emergency preparedness at the national level will be rolled out at the local level.

Goal 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

COVID-19 heightened child protection risks and added constraints as conventional child protection services were provided in-person. Hence, UNICEF identified new opportunities for its Child Protection System Strengthening (CPSS) approach, responding flexibly and using blended approaches to reach target groups: Lao Women's Union helpline received 621 calls in 2020, representing a 197% increase compared to 315 in 2019. A total of 3.4 million people was reached by UNICEF and the Ministry of information and Culture's (MICT) messages on GBV, mental health and parenting developed in Lao, sign language and two ethnic minority languages, disseminated via community loudspeakers, TV, radio, social media and in-person sessions.

UNICEF Lao PDR was the first country office globally to advocate for the release of children in detention to reduce the risk of COVID-19, resulting in the Government's decision not to arrest child offenders with minor crimes during the pandemic. Moreover, UNICEF played a critical role in identifying service and supply gaps and provided Persona Protective Equipment (PPE) and ICT supplies to social workers as essential workforce in the face of COVID-19, which not only helped to

raise visibility of their lifesaving work and continuity of services, but also set a solid foundation for CPSS in the longer term.

2020 saw significant achievements in strategic shifting towards Lao PDR's child protection system strengthening, from an issue-based approach. A National Vision for Child Protection was formulated based on the mapping of existing child protection system component. The Vision was supported by a National Plan of Action for Child Protection 2021-2025 and the National Strategy for the Social Service Workforce Development. UNICEF also supported the development of the National Action Plans on Mothers and Children and on Violence against Women and Children. Moreover, UNICEF's upstream work resulted in the launch of the National Guideline on Protection, Assistance and Referrals for Victims of Trafficking and the National Manual on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Children at Secondary Schools.

Developing social service workforce is critical to strengthen the child protection system. Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and GBV risk mitigation was integrated in the standard Child Protection Network (CPN) training modules. 720 CPN were established in 144 villages in Attapeu Province, where the child protection system model is being piloted. Online psychological first aid and mental health training was organized, allowing continuous learning for sub-national social service workforce despite COVID-19.

Normative child protection services continued, including legal aid to 37 children in contact with the law; regular home visits and medical check-up for 102 children with disabilities; life skills training for 126 adolescents; mobile birth registration for 2,435 from Internally Displaced People (IDP) shelters; and emergency support to 1,245 children. To amplify the impact of the parenting education programme, six "Saving for Change" groups were established in Attapeu, enabling poor families to manage family financial hardships through savings and practice positive parenting and gender norms within the family. 491

Goal 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

COVID-19 presented both challenges and opportunities to improve safe and clean environment of children in Laos in 2020. The declaration of the first open defecation free (ODF) province (Borikhamxay) was an indication of growing momentum to increase sanitation coverage and reducing disease risks. The approval of national WASH in Schools (WinS) standards and the development of the 3-Star monitoring tool to recognize and encourage incremental improvements of school WinS programmes provided clear direction on improving the school environment for children.

The COVID-19 lockdown period and the subsequent restrictions on gatherings caused delays to most elements of all programmes, despite Government prioritization of strategies to reduce pandemic risks. UNICEF ensured that the Government was able to provide accessible, appropriate and accurate information to inform the general population with clear consistent messages on hygiene practices. As a result of this support, more than four million people were reached on social media with hygiene messages, and 1.4 million schoolchildren were provided with accessible hygiene messages to enable a safe return to school.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the limitations of Government systems, capacity to work remotely and production capacity in-country of critical WASH supplies. The impacts of the annual floods exacerbated these challenges in southern provinces, reflecting the critical need to mainstream climate sensitive disaster risk reduction strategies into programming.

The successful demonstration of household water connections for rural supplies has led the Government to further scale-up this approach nationally. Whilst this approach provides an incremental step over handpumps, the much higher costs present challenges if the current rate of progress towards universal coverage is to be maintained. UNICEF will work with the Government to seek to improve equitable cost-recovery in 2021, to enable progress to be maintained.

UNICEF's response to the longer-term socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, including increased poverty and challenges to gains made in social service delivery in an extremely tight fiscal space, included supporting cost-effective and transformative approaches to scaling up strategies to provide a safe clean environment for children, including community led total sanitation (CLTS), water safety

planning and behavior change communication on handwashing with soap.

Sanitation continues to be the greatest challenge to providing a clean environment in the country.

Whilst access to basic sanitation continues to improve, with three of four Lao households accessing basic sanitation, critically progress amongst the poorest indicates that a further 40 years would be required to achieve ODF status. 2020 saw significant progress under the national social mobilization approach, with the first province declared ODF, which UNICEF will seek to build on in 2021 with the development of a Roadmap to achieve national ODF.

Hygiene challenges were exacerbated by the limited use of soap when handwashing. Whilst most Lao households having handwashing facilities (90 per cent), less than two thirds of these households (60 per cent) use soap. Significant effort will be made going forward to consolidate gains potentially made as a result of the hygiene communication campaign in response to COVID-19.

Goal 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

The COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on the socio-economic situation of the country. The World Bank's economic outlook for Lao PDR, projected a decline or shrinking of the economy for 2020/2021. Understanding this, UNICEF, in partnership with the Government and development partners, commissioned a rapid assessment exercise to understand the social and economic impact of COVID-19 on children and women. The report shows that the economic shocks will put significant strain on the Government's budget, thus limiting the relief or duration of social protection interventions. On the social aspect, children who are already impacted by structural inequalities are affected more than others.

UNICEF partnered with ILO and UNCDF to develop a UN position paper on a shock responsive social protection approach to support the Government in articulating interventions to help reduce the impact of the pandemic on the population, forming the basis for discussions on developing a shock responsive social protection system. Child grants are one of the short-term measures identified to help pregnant women reduce negative coping mechanisms due to the pandemic. The other and Early Child Grant (MECG) pilot – a component of the UN joint programme 'Leaving no one behind' – was designed as an integrated cash transfer programme to increase access to and use of social services, including child protection services in Attapeau Province, with a future possibility of scaling up to other provinces. To support the next National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN) for 2021 – 2026, UNICEF through a joint PFM facility with the European Union reviewed the costed NPAN 2016 -2020. The review identified some critical budget-related interventions that need to be considered for the next NPAN, for instance, the need for a detailed breakdown of cost is covered by the different tiers of the Government. Through the National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN), in collaboration with CDR and NIER, UNICEF contributed to increased research and policy capacity of the Government partners and developed a Nutrition Dashboard and repository, housed at the Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB), targeted at improving evidence-based decision making on nutrition and related indicators.

The child poverty discourse gained momentum with the set-up of a child poverty technical working group. The group supported the provincial Vice Governors in renewing their commitments to reducing multi-dimensional child poverty in their respective provinces by a quarter by 2025 through focused interventions, including setting targets and mechanisms for better budgeting, monitoring and reporting on child related indicators. This resulted in a high-level meeting of the Vice Governors of all 18 provinces in November 2020, as a follow up to the commitments made to Lao Generation 2030 as part of the 30th anniversary celebrations of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) a year earlier.

UNICEF contributed to the development of the draft 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED), by providing strategic guidance and policy recommendations to the Government, at technical and higher levels, jointly with the Government and United Nations Country Team (UNCT). UNICEF is the lead agency providing technical support for the development of the Monitoring and Evaluation framework of the 9th NSED.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Important development partners for UNICEF Lao PDR are Australia, the European Commission, GAVI, the Global Partnership for Education, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, and USAID. The country programme also benefits from the support of National Committees for UNICEF, including Australia, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Korea, and Singapore.

In addition to nurturing these existing highly valued partnerships, efforts were intensified in 2020 to engage with international financial institutions (primarily the World Bank and Asian Development Bank), non-traditional donors (including the Russian Federation and Turkey) and opportunities were explored for South-South collaboration with Lao PDR (including China, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam).

UNICEF initiated a structured approach to expanding strategic partnerships and mobilize support for the implementation of UNICEF's COVID-19 preparedness and response plan and for the country programme. The vision guiding this effort is to mobilize strategic investments in the country programme covering cross-sectoral work and under-funded areas. The resource mobilization strategy for Lao PDR (2019-2021) is being updated; a process which paves the way for the development of a strategic resource mobilization strategy for the new country programme. The annual Lao Generation 2030 high-level event provided an opportunity to mobilize a wide range of partners, including the private sector, for child rights and strengthen strategic partnerships.

UNICEF continued to engage in UN joint programming in the areas of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) and Social Protection and participated in the development of new joint UN programmes on Disability and Nutrition. UNICEF also engaged in various other UN collaboration modalities, including the Joint SDG Fund on SDG financing and the COVID-19 Multi Partner Trust Fund.

The country office seized the opportunity of the momentum around COVAX to raise the awareness of UNICEF's role in immunization in Lao PDR with the aim of mobilizing support for COVID-19 vaccine introduction as well as for the national immunization programme in general. In collaboration with WHO, UNICEF has been pro-actively reaching out to resource, policy, and programme partners to provide information on needs and funding requirements.

UNICEF is actively engaged in the development of the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), by providing strategic guidance and policy recommendations to the Government, including a policy brief on 'Lao Generation 2030: Building Human Capital in the 21st Century Lao PDR'. Moreover, UNICEF has been the technical lead for the development of the Monitoring and Evaluation framework of the 9th NSEDP and is one of the key agencies involved in the development of the new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026. With its convening power in the areas of Education and Nutrition, UNICEF played an important role in steering policy advocacy and providing technical assistance to sector budget support and has served as lead agency for the UNCF education results group. UNICEF has provided data and technical inputs for various partners' policy and programming processes, including the development of the multi-annual indicative programmes of the EU and Luxembourg. With the EU Delegation in Lao PDR, UNICEF maintains a strategic dialogue on policy and programmes for advancing child rights.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

2020 has been one of the most unusual years of our lifetime, with the COVID-19 pandemic changing lives like never. In Lao PDR, the Government took swift action to contain the virus and although no deaths have been reported, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic has been felt particularly among the most vulnerable children and their families pushing the organization to design and

implement innovative approaches to respond to the urgent needs of a population at risk. The pandemic has also affected UNICEF's working modalities in Lao PDR which shifted drastically, from a traditional culture promoting physical presence to an online presence, affecting also the way UNICEF's partners work.

Programme innovation/lessons learned:

During the initial lockdown in Laos, life came to a complete halt. Schools were closed, and about 1.7 million children were affected. UNICEF Lao PDR worked hand in hand with the Government (MoES) to prioritize the safe reopening of schools and learning continuity after a three months' closure. For all students in the country, from pre-primary to secondary, a new television station was quickly set up, serving about two million children below 18. For those who did not have television, radio and online options were also available, benefiting from an estimated 92 per cent of households with access to mobile phones and 20 per cent with access to radio.

UNICEF launched the 'Safely Back To School Campaign' with key messages on COVID-19 prevention, reaching out to 3 million people with access to internet. Guidance was shared on social media as part of the campaign, and platforms like WhatsApp were used to get key messages across among teachers. In addition, media throughout the country were engaged and shared trustworthy information on COVID-19 for children, parents and teachers. Safe school operational guidelines, including information on water and hygiene, cleaning schools, mental health and psychological support; and a framework for reopening schools were disseminated.

In addition, before the reopening of schools, the Ministry of Education and Sports reviewed the curriculum and prioritized what should be taught when students returned. The school calendar was extended by two months to make up for the weeks lost during the lockdown. These measures helped minimize the disruption in their learning path.

A second campaign for the start of the school year 2020-21 was launched at the end of August and had over 8 million impressions and reached over 3.5 million people via social media platforms. Messages around parenting, mental health and psychosocial support were integrated to ensure that all children return to school. UNICEF mobilized the support of key partners, such as USAID, EU, DFAT/BEQUAL, UNESCO, WFP, ChildFund Laos and Save the Children, to help the MoES mount and execute the national campaigns. Key messages were complemented with practical tools, such as the provision of posters to schools. Surveys targeting students, teachers and parents were launched as part of the #SafelyBackToSchool campaign and used to inform other COVID-19 education interventions. Lao PDR's first 'Back to School Campaign' for the reopening of schools after the lockdown was globally recognized by UNICEF as "inspirational" and "compelling" for its evidence-based and participatory design and nationwide reach. A case story was published online to showcase how Lao PDR has ensured the safe reopening schools during COVID-19, and how Lao children were "Heading back to school in the pandemic."

Innovations in working modalities:

Following the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown, UNICEF Lao PDR activated its Business Continuity Plan (BCP) from March until August. Working from home arrangements were the preferred work modality, with enhanced messages on the importance of continuation of preventive practices conveyed to all staff, and with the office accessible for critical staff. To support the UNICEF team during these challenging times, the office gave utmost attention to staff wellbeing, including daily virtual all staff meetings during the first weeks of the BCP activation, and later two to three virtual all staff meetings per week. Moreover, virtual tea/coffee hours with the Representative a.i. two to three times per week for colleagues to call in and touch base on a voluntary basis, or to raise any issues of concern were organized. The office also developed internal UNICEF Laos COVID-19 guidelines and produced and disseminated daily internal bulletins for all staff. In addition, regular updates for internal staff on IP specific issues, like transnational teleworking for colleagues in need were provided. Senior management had regular consultations with the staff association to assess the situation and wellbeing of staff and to discuss the expansion of Peer Support Volunteers (PSV) pool as well as

virtual training for new PSV by the regional staff counselor. Staff was encouraged to maintain work live balance by exercising leave, flexible working arrangements and flexible UN holiday options. Furthermore, the office provided accelerated ICT support and equipment to all staff in support of teleworking arrangements. A key lesson learned is that team communication and transparency are crucial at all times, but even more so in times of crisis. Staying connected while practicing physical distancing and the continuous availability of the Representative and management team to address any potential issue proved to be critical for a successful programme implementation and staff wellbeing.