

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Update on the context and situation of children

Lao PDR's 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2021-2025 (NSEDP) was finalized during the pandemic. The NSEDP has six outcomes: *economic growth, quality human resources, enhance wellbeing, environmental protection, regional integration and public governance and administration.*[1] UNICEF played a strategic role in developing the plan via sectoral inputs, and the NSEDP's M&E framework through technical support and capacity strengthening for Ministry of Planning and Investment staff working on the plan. The new United Nations Sustainable Cooperation and Development Framework (UNSCDF) 2022-2026 and UNICEF's Country Programme Document (CPD) 2022-2026 developed jointly with the Government of Lao PDR drew its priorities, outcomes, and outputs from the NSEDP.

In April 2021, just after the Lao New Year, local transmission of COVID-19 spread throughout the country with an increase in cases from under 50 and no deaths, to over 110,000 cases and 360 deaths reported by December prompting lockdowns and restrictions for in-country travel for most part of the year. The Government immediately kickstarted the vaccination of the adult population, initially prioritizing people at risk with pre-conditions and the elderly. As of 10 January 2022, 62.7% (4.6 million people) of the population received the first dose and 50.7% are fully vaccinated, meeting the target set in August 2021 of vaccinating 50% of the total population or 70% of the eligible population above 12 years of age.[2]

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Lao PDR had experienced strong economic growth, driven primarily by natural resources and energy and tourism sectors, which enabled the country to be closer to graduating from Least Developed Country status. However, due to the pandemic its GDP growth shrunk by 0.5% in 2020 with a weakening Lao Kip fueling inflation.[3] The World Bank forecasted GDP growth to rebound to 3.6% in 2021 and medium-term growth to gradually recover supported by exports, gradual pickup in the services sector, and investment in infrastructure. The fiscal deficit was projected to decline to 4.7% of GDP in 2021, from 5.2% in 2020 as the Government cut non-essential spending. Lao PDR has heavy debt service obligations, estimated at US\$1.3 billion annually over 2021-2025. In addition, structural vulnerabilities have increased the public debt burden and caused difficulties in servicing debt, which further compounds budget constraints for social sectors serving children's needs.

The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic is being felt across sectors and has exacerbated existing disparities with increasing levels of poverty levels. An estimated 43% of households experienced a decline in household income in March 2021 relative to before lockdown, which combined with increases in food prices, is pushing households to embrace negative coping mechanisms, which could include a reduction in the quantity or quality of food for households.[4] The economic, food, and health systems disruptions resulting from the pandemic are expected to continue to exacerbate all forms of malnutrition.[5] Microeconomic model projections across countries have indicated that decreases in GNI per capita are associated with large increases in child wasting and a recent analysis published in the Lancet suggest there could be a 14.3% increase in the prevalence of moderate or severe wasting among children younger than 5 years due to COVID-19-related predicted country-specific losses in GNI per capita. This means that for Lao PDR, it is likely that up to 73,000 children under 5 could suffer from acute malnutrition each year.

Prolonged school closures due to the pandemic are projected to add learning loss, to the ongoing learning crisis in the country. It is also expected to lead to irreversible learning loss reducing the future productivity and lifetime earnings of affected students. According to the ADB, the present value of these losses is estimated at US\$1.25 trillion for developing Asia (including Lao PDR), equivalent to 5.4% of the region's 2020 GDP. A new report from the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF estimated a loss of US\$17 trillion in lifetime earnings for this generation of students whose learning

has been disrupted by the pandemic, or equivalent to 14% of today's global GDP.[6] Moreover more children and young people may not return to school, which could lead to an increase in child labor, teenage pregnancy, and child marriage.

Due to reduced coverage of essential health services during the pandemic, there is a high risk of failing to achieve some of the national targets of 11 health indicators, with early indications of lower rates of routine childhood immunizations noted. Further, the Government of Lao PDR is preparing for donor transition for vaccines in the middle of the pandemic. This poses a significant burden to health financing, including the fulfilment of co-financing commitments made with donors before the pandemic, with reduced health budget during the pandemic and expectations on declining donor support for essential health services, specifically immunization and health care for communicable diseases supported by GAVI and Global Fund, in the coming years.

Child protection services in Lao PDR are limited and fragmented due to the lack of a robust child protection system and children faced many child protection vulnerabilities such as violence against children, child marriage and human trafficking, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic also worsened the situation of at-risk girls and women. In 2021, 3,142 young people called LYU helpline services (a 93% increase from 2020) and 616 survivors of violence called LWU helpline. Cases of stigmatization of children infected with COVID-19 were reported, and children living in institutions faced difficulties in practicing physical distancing with higher risks of cluster infections. However, since capacity to deliver in-person and remote services were constrained due to COVID-19 quarantine measures, school closures, service delivery remained limited especially as sub-national level.

The 2021 annual floods were mild in impact compared to 2018-2020, however Government services were stretched in responding. Annual losses from floods are about 3% of GDP, with associated impacts on health, education, nutrition, and poverty. With climate change modelling predicting more frequent and severe flood events, there is an urgent need to strengthen Government disaster preparedness, response and long-term climate resilience, together with early warning systems and coordination mechanisms.

Major contributions and drivers of results

The response and containment of COVID-19 characterized 2021. Lao PDR has implemented an outstanding multisectoral COVID-19 preparedness and response plan for which UNICEF was a key partner. As a result, Lao maintained a regular supply of vaccines for routine immunization, personal protective equipment, medical supplies, and nutrition commodities. The capacity of health facilities for the treatment of COVID-19 patients was strengthened.

Together with WHO and other partners, UNICEF provided crucial support to the Ministry of Health (MoH) in implementing the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan (NDVP) for COVID-19 Vaccines, including the shipment of COVAX- and partner-supported vaccines to the country, vaccination campaigns, and strengthening the cold chain capacity. The original 2021 vaccination target of 21% of the total population was revised to 50% (or 70% of the eligible population 12 years and above) – a target that was met by the end of 2021 with over 3.7 million people fully vaccinated and over 4.6 million partially vaccinated. UNICEF played an essential role in Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) around COVID-19 vaccine rollout and launched the #VaccinateLaos campaign to promote vaccination across the country, producing and disseminating various campaign materials including posters, banners, radio and video spots, posters, danglers, social media content and producing a song at 260,000 views. Materials were distributed in all provinces focusing on priority districts. UNICEF also trained the MOH – Center for Communication and Education for Health (CCEH) and the Lao Front for National Development on Community Engagement to develop a CE plan and implement activities at the village level.

The U5MR is estimated at 45.5 per 1,000 live births, compared with 49.2 in 2018 and approaching the 2020 national target of 40. However, COVID-19 disrupted essential health services and routine immunization, posing a challenge for Lao children and women to access health and vaccination services. As child immunization coverage dropped sharply during the initial lockdown period, UNICEF supported campaigns to prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. Moreover, UNICEF provided technical assistance to MoH to conduct a rapid assessment of Quarantine Centers and develop COVID-19 management guidelines for maternal, newborn and child health.

UNICEF scaled up efforts towards Universal Health Coverage and increased awareness for building resilient and robust health and nutrition systems, especially for disadvantaged populations, including technical inputs to the 9th NSEDP 2021-2025 and Health Sector Development Plan 2021-2025 to ensure the integration of nutrition and inclusion of Primary Health Care (PHC) as a multisectoral approach. Leading a Luxembourg-funded UN Joint Programme with WHO and UNFPA, UNICEF supported MOH in developing an RMNCAH Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2025 and disseminating the PHC Policy nationwide. UNICEF supported the costing and finalization of the Community Health Systems Strengthening Action plan 2021-2025 (CHSS). CHSS implementation was supported in 12 districts with USAID's first-ever financial support.

A community/household baseline survey for district health system strengthening using the Lot Quality Assurance Sampling (LQAS) approach was introduced to four provinces. LQAS will strengthen sub-national capacities for evidence-based planning and monitoring to identify local priorities for annual operational work planning on RMNCAH. UNICEF helped develop a remote training and supervision tool on Early Essential Newborn Care, management of the sick and small newborn, and child death review.

The prevalence of stunting among children below five years of age reduced to 33% (LSIS 2017) from 44% (LSIS 2012). It is anticipated that the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 might negatively influence nutrition indicators. In collaboration with the European Union and others, UNICEF supported the development of the National Nutrition Strategy and National Action Plan for Nutrition (2021-2025). Services for children suffering from acute malnutrition were enhanced, and the enforcement of the national legislation on the promotion of breastmilk substitutes (BMS) was strengthened through real-time monitoring of violations at the retail level, making Lao PDR one of the strongest countries in the region for the prevention of BMS marketing. A national Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition campaign reached 5.9 million people. The National Nutrition Forum held in February 2021 saw senior members of Government and the development community come together to make commitments for nutrition. A review of multisectoral coordination mechanisms was undertaken, and an independent evaluation of the Partnership for Improved Nutrition was completed with excellent results.

The pandemic resulted in unprecedented setbacks to the education sector, with schools closed for a prolonged period and a decreased education budget. UNICEF continued to be the Ministry of Education and Sports' (MoES) main partner in responding to COVID-19, delivering critical solutions, and mobilizing partnerships. To mitigate learning loss from school closures and contribute to learning outcomes, the first ever online and offline learning platform was launched with UNICEF support in partnership with the EU and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). MoES' Khang Panya Lao has reached close to 70,000 users and has been used for remote teaching and as a supplemental learning resource with thousands of learning resources. Training for teachers and Khang Panya's reach in remote areas will continue in 2022.

Since the new school year, most schools (70%) have been open throughout the country, with 90% of teachers vaccinated thanks to the UNICEF-supported #VaccinateLaos campaign. UNICEF facilitated coordination between MoES, MoH and WHO to support reopening and safe operations of schools. Printed learning materials have reached 1,389,623 children in public schools nationwide, covering 96% of all students in the country. New episodes of My House, a TV show for young children and their families, aired nationwide. Guidance on remote/hybrid learning and remedial education was

developed. Training on psychosocial support for students and teachers during the pandemic has been rolled out, and schools have been provided COVID-19 prevention supplies.

2021 marked the first year of implementing the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021-25, developed with UNICEF support. This was marred by further cuts to the education budget, prompting MoES to review its priorities. UNICEF continued to influence education sector prioritization and planning through evidence generation, direct support to MoES and working with key education partners like Australia-DFAT, the EU, USAID and the World Bank. A study on school drop-outs and research on effective schools was undertaken, resulting in MoES and partners' commitment to addressing the learning crisis by investing in early childhood education and primary education.

National and sub-national capacities on monitoring and data utilization for planning and decision-making were strengthened by developing the Lao Education and Sports Management Information System (LES MIS), the first-ever consolidated MoES MIS with advanced GIS tracking, data visualization, and mapping features accessible in real-time. School development planning was strengthened by introducing the fundamental quality standards (FQS) for schools, which linked to student learning outcomes, allowing authorities to monitor student learning, provide tailored support to schools, and engage communities to support schools. While there have been delays in testing the FQS due to school closures, MoES is committed to moving this forward in early 2022.

2021 saw achievements in evidence-informed strategic planning for child protection system strengthening. UNICEF's work resulted in the launch of the Assessment Report and recommendations for Strengthening the Child Protection System. The accompanying National Plan of Action for Child Protection System Strengthening (2022-2026) is in final approval. Momentous progress was made towards implementing the CRC and CEDAW Concluding Observations to Lao PDR with the launching of the new NPAs on Mothers and Children (2021-2025) and the Elimination and Prevention of Violence against Women and Violence against Children (2021-2025).

Continuous workforce professionalization efforts were made to strengthen the system with the promulgation of the Strategic Guidelines for the Social Service Workforce Development 2022-2026 and the review of the National University of Laos' B.A. in Social Work. A comprehensive standard job aid tool package was developed to capacitate and operationalize the Child Protection Network and para-social workers at sub-national levels, including the code of conduct, child case recording book and referral pathways. A total of 684 (F331/M353) social welfare, justice actors and allied workforce members were trained on several topics, including Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), child-friendly juvenile proceedings, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), GBV, and violence against children. UNICEF continued implementing the Action Plan on PSEA/CS (2020-2021). CSO partners have been assessed, and three orientation sessions on PSEA for key government partners, including the media professionals, were conducted. Safe and accessible reporting channels exist for PSEA cases, including hotline services by Lao Women's Union (LWU) and Police. UNICEF is currently developing a joint SOP on PSEA with other UN agencies.

The KOICA-supported child protection system modelling continued in Attapeu Province and was replicated in Xiengkhouang Province, linking with the disability cash transfers funded by the Australian Government. UNICEF supported the expansion of Lao Youth Union (LYU) and LWU helplines in five provinces. Toll-Free helpline services are now available in Lao and three ethnic languages. The LYU and LWU helpline reached 3,142 young people with MHPSS services (a 93% increase from 2020) and 616 survivors of violence, respectively. UNICEF supported the development of the Manual on Youth and Adolescents Counselling for LYU Helpline Volunteers and operationalized LWU protection shelters in Vientiane Capital and Luang Namtha province to enhance responsive services for survivors of violence and human trafficking. UNICEF-MOLSW's pioneering Psychological First Aid and MHPSS training module was replicated by the Education Sector. More COVID-19 support included the provision of ICT equipment for social workers, hygiene/recreational kits for nearly 1,000 children in temples and institutions, family emergency materials, case management, and vocational training through the partnership with Friends International and MOLSW.

Under the Parenting Education Programme, 190 parents and caregivers (F164/M26) benefitted from financial empowerment through a “Saving for Change” programme, resilience building, gender equality and positive parenting activities. Social and life skills training orientated 172 adolescents (F98/M74) in leadership building, online safety, and peer support. Community-based MHPSS messaging reached 70,247 people.

Lao PDR was involved in three regional studies on child marriage, migration, and social service workforce integration into social protection. The recently published UNICEF-Lao Government documentation report on the “Strengthening Community Based Child-Protection Services for Vulnerable Children Project” captures lessons learned and best practices to support children with disabilities. At the 2nd Regional INSPIRE Conference, Lao PDR shared its knowledge and promising practices on parenting education and social workforce development with the region.

COVID-19 presented challenges and opportunities to provide safe and clean environment for Lao children. The first open defecation free (ODF) district in Saravane Province was an indication of increased sanitation coverage and reducing disease risks. The national rollout of the 3-Star monitoring tool is enabling Government to recognize and encourage improvements of school WinS programmes.

The lockdown and subsequent restrictions on gatherings and travel caused delays to most programmes, despite Government prioritizing strategies to reduce pandemic risks. UNICEF ensured that the Government could provide appropriate and accurate information to the population with consistent messages on hygiene practices. As a result, more than two and a half million people were reached on social media with hygiene messages, 1.4 million schoolchildren were provided accessible hygiene messages to enable a second safe return to school, and over 690,000 children in the higher-risk areas were provided with soap for safer hygiene practices. However, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for further system strengthening, remote working, in-country production of WASH supplies, and managing emergency supplies, facilities, and storage.

UNICEF supported the Government to further scale-up household water connections for rural supplies, building capacity in Savannakhet Province, as Government has adopted this approach nationally. While this approach provides an incremental step over handpumps, the much higher costs present challenges if the current progress towards universal coverage is maintained. UNICEF will work with the Government to seek to improve equitable cost-recovery.

UNICEF’s response to the longer-term impacts of COVID-19, such as increased poverty and challenges to gains made in social service delivery, included supporting cost-effective and transformative approaches to scaling up strategies to provide a safe, clean environment for children, 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, particularly amongst the poorest households. 2021 saw significant progress towards universal coverage under the national social mobilization approach. The first district in Saravane Province declared ODF, and considerable strides in declaring Vientiane Capital ODF, which UNICEF will seek to build in 2022 with the development of a Roadmap to achieve national ODF.

Hygiene challenges were exacerbated by the limited use of soap when handwashing. While most Lao households have handwashing facilities (90 percent), less than two-thirds of these households (60 percent) use soap. Significant effort will be made going forward to consolidate gains made due to the hygiene communication campaign in response to COVID-19.

The Government recognized the need for national climate strategies and actions to reflect better the needs of children and the importance of engaging children in climate action, voiced by the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment at the Global Child and Youth Forum.

Under the UN Joint Program on Social Protection, UNICEF supported the Government to develop a remote rollout strategy that allowed the pilot to enroll and deliver cash to approximately 1,400

pregnant women and children under 12 months of age (940 pregnant women, 230 boys/225 girls). Following the Vice Governor's commitment to reduce child poverty by 25% by 2025, UNICEF strengthened the capacity of more than 40 statisticians from Lao PDR, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Mongolia on child poverty measurement. The Lao Statistics Bureau developed and validated a national child poverty report based on the 2019/2020 Lao expenditure and consumption survey; the final report will be published in 2022. In September, Lao PDR's combined efforts on child poverty were presented at a side event at the 76th UNGA. Co-hosted by the Government of Lao PDR and UNICEF, the event attracted over 300 participants and featured presentations from Ireland, South Africa, Montenegro, and the World Bank. At the 13th Round table meeting, UNICEF engaged in policy dialogue on human capital development and the 9th NSEDP. The meeting focused on investing in child health, nutrition, and education for strong economic growth.

As part of the high-level national nutrition forum, which brought together stakeholders from the Government, National Assembly, donors, CSOs and the private sector, a review of the costed National Plan of Action on Nutrition was launched with the support of the EU-UNICEF Public Finance Facility. Of the 34% of nutrition expenditures between 2016 and 2020, the Government contributed only 10%. On the final day of the forum, the Prime Minister emphasized the importance of increased investment to improve nutrition for children. This has also influenced the formulation of the NPAN 2021–2025.

UNICEF actively promoted evidence generation, dissemination, and advocacy events. Several studies were conducted in 2021 using secondary analyses, including the economic consequences of malnutrition, determinants of wasting and stunting among children under five years in Lao PDR. The dashboard and data repository of the National Information Platforms for Nutrition was launched in February, addressing malnutrition on the social and economic fronts in a user-friendly format accessible to Government, universities, and researchers. The 3rd Lao Social Indicator Cluster Survey process has started and is planned for 2022.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2021, the LCO consulted a wide range of partners for the new Government of Lao PDR – UNICEF country programme 2022-2026, including traditional donors (Australia, Team Europe, Japan, Korea, UK, US), non-traditional donors (ASEAN member states, China, Turkey), international financial institutions (ADB, World Bank), NGOs and the private sector. A partner launch was organized to mobilize a broad base of support for the new country programme, with partners' commitments reflected in numerous high-level statements of support.

The LCO worked closely with GAVI board member countries represented in Laos (Australia, Canada, EU, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Switzerland, UK, US) in support of increasing COVID-19 vaccine supply and roll-out. In close collaboration with WHO, the LCO supported the establishment and regular convening of a high-level COVAX partner forum, facilitating information sharing and joint advocacy for increased support to Lao PDR. Substantial financial contributions were mobilized from Australia and the US for UNICEF to provide in-country delivery support. The LCO also built new partnerships with private sector entities to leverage financing for vaccine procurement with the longer-term vision of increased support for the national immunization programme.

In 2021, the LCO held several strategic partnership reviews at country-level (EU, UNICEF Australia) and participated in global strategic partnership consultations (JICA, Luxembourg). Building on initial engagement in 2020, the LCO submitted a concept note within the context of the China South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF). Regional level partnerships were developed through outreach and engagement with non-resident strategic partners mainly focusing on the COVID-19 response in Lao PDR (Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden).

In 2021, UNICEF continued to leverage partnerships, coordinate and foster networks within the Government, the UN and other partners. UNICEF actively engaged in the development of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022 – 2026 of the Government of Lao PDR and

the United Nations and in the development of the 9th NSEDP, including the M&E Framework for both key documents.

As chair of the UN Partnership Framework Result Group 4, UNICEF also worked closely with other UN agencies – WFP, UNFPA, ILO, UNESCO, and IOM – on Education, including the development of the Education output for the UNSDCF 2022-26. UNICEF continued to play a leading role in education sector coordination as a coordinating agency for GPE and as co-chair of the Education Sector Working Group focal groups on ECE and general education. UNICEF also continued to co-lead the Education Emergency Cluster and supported MoES update the COVID-19 Education Response Plan, and the integration of education component into the Inter-agency Contingency Plan.

UNICEF continued to engage in UN joint programming in the areas of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) and Social Protection. As Convening and Administrative Agent, UNICEF led efforts to mobilize support for the 2021-2025 UN joint RMNCAH programme's next phase. UNICEF led the development partners group for nutrition in Lao PDR, the SUN UN network in-country, and is the main partner supporting the Government on multisectoral coordination for nutrition in Lao PDR.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

In 2021, the COVID-19 response highlighted the importance of using adaptive and risk management strategies, both for UNICEF's programmes and operational support to programmes. The need to maintain and further upscale programme delivery within particularly challenging conditions highlighted that UNICEF's programmatic effectiveness and efficiency was critically dependent on the support provided by its operations. Operational readiness allowed UNICEF to bring in PPE and other COVID-19 related supplies in a timely manner, which was appreciated by Government and partners. Moreover, the COVID-19 response was designed to take into consideration UNICEF's longer-term commitment to building resilient systems for delivering essential services to children and women.

Against this background, the UNICEF Laos Country Office (LCO) response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to many innovations. Key examples include the rapid expansion of UNICEF's cold chain support to facilitate appropriate storage and delivery of COVID-19 and regular vaccines through online supervision of pre-installation components at subnational levels, coupled with new private sector engagement for quality control of cold chain equipment, or the expansion of online and digital learning in education.

Following the April 2021 lockdown, many aspects of life came to a complete halt, including education. The 2020 lockdown had enabled a range of options to maintain learning, and these were expanded in 2021, including television, radio, and online options, benefiting from an estimated 92% of households with access to mobile phones and television. The worsening of the COVID-19 situation in 2021 necessitated a re-prioritization of key interventions and intensifying the focus on mitigating learning loss and ensuring schools can open and operate safely. This required maintenance of UNICEF's regular programming whilst ensuring COVID-19 response interventions fit into the humanitarian-development nexus, so investments were sustained.

As more children have learned remotely, digital technology has become an essential feature of learning and yet children from the poorest families, in the most rural/remote locations, with disabilities and from ethnic minorities are far less likely to have access to digital technologies. The introduction of the MoES Khang Panya Lao digital learning platform, for example, while seen as a COVID-19 response was also designed as a long-term solution to provide learning resources, blended learning options and improve the digital literacy of students and teachers. Khang Panya Lao, based on the global Learning Passport initiative, has enormous potential to expand access to quality learning materials and increase digital literacy skills among Lao children and teachers. Its growth from 0 to close to 70,000 users

across all provinces in a matter of months demonstrated strong interest in digital learning. Key to expanding its reach beyond urban centres was partnership, including with internet service providers and/or other private sector players bringing learning innovation to areas without internet and/or electricity. UNICEF has been exploring partnerships with the private sector and sources various IT-related solutions, including offline hub technology, opportunities for solar powered IT equipment, and partnership with internet services providers to zero-rate Khang Panya Lao learning content or reduce internet fees. There were promising signs of inter-ministerial commitment and support from partners like the World Bank, ADB, UNDP, etc. linking this to the broader digital transformation for Lao PDR. A key learning was that partnering with the Government, the private sector and development partners has been essential to the long-term sustainability of digital learning and to reducing the digital divide across the country.

During the COVID pandemic, innovative digital technologies also flourished in the health sector. The IMNCI application and computerized module was rolled out in Lao language across the University of Health Sciences, Public Schools, Technical Nursing School, Department of Healthcare and Rehabilitation, Health Vocational Training Center, Department of Health Professional Education, Pharmacy Faculty of University of Health Science, and Health Facilities. The modeling of the remote supervision on Early Essential Newborn Care and Kangaroo Mother Care was completed in provincial and district hospitals and included weekly virtual meetings between the health facility team and the central supervisors. Feedback was gathered from participants to provide a proposed model which could be scaled to other hospitals. Monthly online webinars for peripheral hospitals focusing on essential topics including neonatal sepsis facilitated by national and international experts, including the Pediatric Teaching Department of the University of Melbourne.

Responding to the rapid calls of various programmes requests and building on previous emergency response to the pandemic, the Operations section of UNICEF Lao PDR had to actively explore and implement efforts in simplification and adaptation to the context allowing for increased quality results and organizational performance. Many of these operations efforts were employed and innovated in a learning-by-doing style, adjusting operations to the emergency response.

The pandemic has also affected UNICEF's working modalities which shifted drastically, from a traditional culture of promoting physical presence to remote functioning, affecting the way UNICEF and partners work together. As teleworking was the way to deliver results, the ICT unit ensured business continuity by providing all ICT services for users working from home. The experience of lockdown and related working from home has demonstrated the potential for further efficiencies, such as increasing offsite support to staff and decreasing travel, event management, and logistics transactions. Maintaining the IT infrastructures and the online platforms such as the Enterprise Content Management (ECM)/SharePoint, MS TEAMS, Zoom and Docu-Sign continued to be effective in teleworking.

The proactiveness and efficiency of the supply and admin teams in the procurement and implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures were vital for the office to equip and create a safe working space. The office swiftly procured PPE materials which were regularly distributed to all staff. Further streamlining of UNICEF Lao PDR's operational response will be explored in the areas of supply, IT, logistics, finance, human resources and administration, to positively impact the programme delivery of results for children and women. Within the new thinking of development-humanitarian nexus, it will be vital to further establish organizational guidance for operations teams on how to better link and integrate with the programme side.