

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Update on the context and situation of children

2023 marked the second year of UNICEF's Country Programme Document and the third year of the 9th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan of the Government (NSEDP) of Lao PDR. The Lao economy continued its recovery in 2023, GDP growth forecast at 3.7%, up from 2.7% in 2022, but challenges in the economic and financial sectors persisted. Inflation peaked at 41% in February and showed a yearly average above 30% while the Lao Kip experienced significant depreciation due to debt servicing payments, import costs, and limited foreign exchange. Public and publicly guaranteed debt has been estimated to have reached 112% of GDP. These pressures have both impacted household welfare and persisting low levels of Government's social investments.

To address these issues, the Government implemented policies and initiatives such as Task Force 19 and Prime Minister's Order 13. Efforts were also made to expedite learning recovery, protect the education budget from cuts, and prepare for Laos' graduation from Least Developed Country status by 2026. However, progress towards achieving certain SDGs, such as SDG 6, 7, and 15, has been slow, with others, such as SDG 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, and 17, showing some improvement. Unfortunately, some indicators have remained stagnant or regressed, while SDG 4, 8, and 12 have predominantly exhibited declining trends.

The rise in learning poverty has fueled problems such as increasing living costs which have been affected by high inflation. According to the Lao Education and Sport Management Information System (LES MIS), the Gross Enrollment Ratio for pre-primary education in 2022-2023 stood at 61.3% for children aged 3-5 years and 81.9% for those aged 5. Enrollment in primary school was high at 97.7%, but only 67.3% transition to lower secondary and 36.2% to upper secondary education. The primary school completion rate was 93.1%, while the completion rates for lower and upper secondary were 87.9% and 86.8%, respectively. All of these indicators showed a downward trend compared to previous years, reflecting the long-term effects of COVID-19 and socio-economic challenges. The government's expenditure on the education sector remains low at 11.4%, considerably below the benchmark established by the Education Law (18%). However, following a Prime Minister decree, Laos continues to make progress towards a sustainable national school lunch program.

The latest ASLO (Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes) Grade 5 assessment, which provides national learning data post COVID-19, was released in December 2023. The results raised concern as the overall learning levels were found to be low, with only 23% of students meeting the minimum proficiency levels for reading, 16% for writing, and only 1% for mathematics. High living costs resulted in 51% of households cutting back on education expenses, and the proportion of children aged 6-17 not enrolled in school rose from 6.5% in December 2022 to 11% in June 2023. The education sector also faced challenges due to a decrease in the total number of teachers.

The national healthcare system has encountered challenges in achieving universal health coverage, with the economic crisis negatively affecting government and household spending in the health sector, resulting in reduced access to healthcare services for children and a decline in healthcare quality. The cost of essential medical supplies, including vaccines, has risen considerably, contributing to regression in the immunization program. The Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Essential Service Coverage Index, which reflects SDG target 3.8.1, indicates a 50% unmet demand for key services. Geographical remoteness, language barriers, varying levels of health literacy, and disparities in service quality and availability are the main hurdles in accessing healthcare.

The country's food insecurity levels have remained relatively stable, with only slight fluctuations at the

national level. In July 2023, approximately 13.2% of households were classified as experiencing food insecurity, with households led by women, those residing in rural areas, and those with limited or no education being particularly impacted. The decrease in households' purchasing power has impacted people's nutritious diets, forcing many people to rely on coping strategies. During the 2023 lean season, less than 1 in 10 children received a minimum acceptable diet, and the number of children receiving this diet increased to 3 in 10 during the post-harvest season. This trend exacerbates the social risks to children, affecting their physical and cognitive development. The results of nutrition surveillance showed a concerning trend in malnutrition in children under 5 years, with stagnant stunting rates.

There is a growing risk of violence against women and girls, and helpline services have reported an increase in calls requesting counselling services. Lao PDR still has the highest rates of child marriage in the region. Adolescent girls in Lao PDR follow diverse pathways to adolescent pregnancy and require support at various decision points in their lives. Despite the child protection system in place, there is a shortage of qualified social service staff to provide coordination and support for adolescents. Positive developments have been made at the policy and legal level, with the country launching its first-ever National Plan of Action for Child Protection System Strengthening and enacting an amended Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children in 2023, which completely outlaws corporal punishment in all settings.

Although some progress has been made in improving access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, remote areas remain a challenge. More than 86% of villages in the country have been declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) as of November 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in efforts to encourage better hygiene practices, but their effectiveness remains unclear. It may be necessary to increase pro-poor subsidies to ensure access to basic sanitation in all households. Data indicates a significant disparity in the use of menstrual hygiene materials between girls and women living in the poorest (47%) versus the richest households (97%) in Lao. Social welfare programs are limited and underfunded, but efforts have been made to improve governance and policy implementation.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal 1: Every Child Survives and Thrive

In terms of health, there have been significant achievements in Lao PDR in line with the objectives established under the 9th National Social and Economic Development Plan (NSEDP). The year saw the development of the Primary Health Care Law, which created an enabling environment for health system strengthening.

According to the Ministry of Health (MoH), administrative coverage data for routine immunization show increased coverage compared to the previous two years, with the following: BCG 84.2%; Hep B birth dose 80.4%; DPT 1 88.8%; OPV3 86.2%; IPV1 82.7%; MR1 78.2%; and MR2 66.4%. UNICEF provided technical assistance for three rounds of Periodic Intensification of Routine Immunization (PIRI) in 70 priority districts, as well as nationwide training for health workers on cold chain and vaccine management. The timely availability and distribution of vaccines and maintenance of cold chain equipment were also ensured. Additionally, 86% of the total population has received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, with 78% receiving all recommended doses. Specific groups, such as healthcare workers and individuals over 60 years, have high levels of vaccination coverage. Efforts have also been made to vaccinate children and adolescents, with significant progress in coverage for the 12-17 age group and the 5-11 age group.

Immunization Supply Chain has been strengthened through the Cold-Chain Equipment Optimization Platform (CCEOP) project supported by GAVI. UNICEF provided technical assistance in forecasting,

procurement, and delivery of vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines. It also supported the procurement of four vaccines (HPV, PCV, Penta and MR) through World Bank funding. An Effective Vaccine Management (EVM) assessment of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in 2022 showed a composite score of 78%, and improvement plans are being implemented to address gaps in the immunization programme. UNICEF recruited national consultants to address human resource gaps in cold chain logistics management, Electronic Immunization Registry (EIR), EPI, microplanning, data management, and social and behavioral communication. UNICEF supported delivery and installation of 776 cold chain equipment in 65% primary health care (PHC) facilities in the country (698 health centers) and supported nationwide capacity building of human resources on cold chain and vaccine management, reaching over 700 vaccination centers. They also developed and scaled up training on e-learning tools for vaccination staff. Effective vaccine management enabled the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the national immunization system, leading to the development of a comprehensive improvement plan. The country also conducted its first national immunization review since 2018, and the findings will inform the development of a national immunization strategy. Also, UNICEF executed numerous Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) initiatives employing Social and Behavior Change (SBC) strategies to advance Routine Immunization, reaching 82,883 individuals in 20 districts across 6 provinces.

In line with MoH priorities, UNICEF's support extended to Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illnesses (IMNCI) services, reaching 98% of children aged 0-59 months for appropriate treatment of symptoms of pneumonia. However, the postnatal care rate within two days of birth was lower than the target (43% against 60%). Additionally, MoH embraced the Digital Health Strategy, establishing a framework for digital health governance, legislation and more, and UNICEF helped in developing an IMNCI mobile application and training material for the integrated management of neonatal and childhood illnesses. The establishment of a center of excellence for quality newborn care and the promotion of evidence-based interventions are also underway to address newborn mortality, which contributes to 50% of under-5 mortalities in the country. The engagement of Village Health Volunteers (VHV) at the community level has been facilitated through the development and extensive use of a VHV toolkit for competency-based training. Collectively, these efforts have contributed to the strengthening of the health system in Lao PDR.

In terms of nutrition, the capacity of the Government has been reinforced for the management of the national nutrition information system. Government staff received training on data collection and generating evidence and new indicators, SOPs, dashboard, and score cards were adopted and developed. The accessibility of multi-sectoral nutrition data and evidence was also enhanced through improvements to the Nutrition Information Platform for Nutrition (NIPN). The improved capacity of decision makers to understand and interpret nutrition data has ensured that decisions related to nutrition programmes and services are informed by accurate and up-to-date information. However, ensuring the quality and reliability of collected data remains a challenge, and efforts are being made to address this through feedback and continuous monitoring. Advocacy efforts have led to high-level nutrition advocacy events, which have resulted in a strong commitment from the government to improve the nutrition situation in the country.

Government capacity has also been strengthened in implementing both preventative and curative nutrition interventions. Compliance with the National Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes (BMS) has also been strengthened. 437 government officials across departments and provinces have been trained to identify and report violations, resulting in 7,284 violations recorded, a significant number. An additional 48 health care workers have graduated as breastfeeding counsellors, and 285 health workers (from 3 central hospitals, 18 provincial hospitals and 138 outpatient health facilities) have been trained to deliver quality Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) services with 3,511 SAM admissions recorded in 2023. Vitamin A supplementation and the universal salt iodization (USI) programme have also been improved through technical support and capacity reinforcement. However, challenges remain in terms of supplementation coverage and the availability

of potassium iodate and efforts are underway to find solutions to these challenges through close collaboration between UNICEF and the Government.

Government leadership to improve nutrition behaviors of women and children has been enhanced through the establishment of a national nutrition Social Behavior Change (SBC) taskforce. Trainings and workshops have improved the knowledge and understanding of taskforce members on planning, designing, and implementing SBC interventions. A multi-channel Maternal Infant and Young Child Nutrition (MIYCN) campaign has been launched to deliver messages to improve nutrition-related behaviors of parents and caregivers through mass media and digital platforms. However, challenges in conveying messages to remote or marginalized communities must be addressed in future campaigns. Efforts have also been made to improve the understanding of adolescents through consultations, which will inform future programming.

Goal 2: Every child learns

To address the learning crisis, UNICEF has engaged in evidence-based policy advocacy on learning recovery and the importance of foundational learning. As a result of Lao's first Human Capital Summit (HCS), a joint initiative with the World Bank, the National Statement of Commitment Accelerating Learning Recovery was established, ensuring high-level commitment and actionable directives. Policies and measures have been included in the recently issued Decree No.9 to address teacher shortages (including salaries for volunteer teachers), school dropouts, and equitable education finances. Back to School campaigns, parenting education, and remedial learning have been prioritized. UNICEF has played a key role in the Joint Sector Review and Midterm Review of the education sector plan, advocating for foundational learning, addressing key equity bottlenecks, and utilizing formative assessments and remedial education.

UNICEF's work on evidence generation with the Positive Deviance (PD) Study, the Dropout Study, South-East Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) and ASLOs have influenced discussions in the sector, including acknowledgment of the learning crisis and identification of key interventions to turn around the situation. UNICEF support for the participation of Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) in the regional ASEAN Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) forum in Jakarta also paved the way towards advanced policy advocacy on school readiness and resulted in drafting Laos' first national Early Childhood Education (ECE) decree.

UNICEF continued to improve and strengthen systems, most notably through support to Lao Education Management Information System (LESMIS) and the roll out of the Fundamental Quality Standards (FQS) for school assessments with an aim to advance mainstreaming into the overall school-based management (SBM). Systems have been strengthened through the enhancement of the Pedagogical Advisory (PA) system, formative assessment, and the rollout of a play-based, pre-primary curriculum. Digital innovations, such as the Learning Passport platform, or Khang Panya Lao (KPY) platform, have been used to expand access to learning and improve digital skills, with 140,000 total (50% female) registered users in 2023. UNICEF also translated and contextualised over 100 digital STEM and girls' empowerment course videos, now available in KPY, targeting adolescent girls. Efforts have also been made to reduce the digital divide and develop an ICT in Education Strategy.

Climate and the environment have emerged as priorities in the education sector. UNICEF has led the Child Climate Risk Index – Disaster Risk Management work to collect and visualize data on climate risk and child vulnerability. This Index will inform advocacy and investment in climate-resilient education systems and community-based disaster risk reduction and preparedness planning.

Goal 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

In the area of child protection, there have been significant achievements in strengthening the legal

framework and policies in Lao. The first-ever National Plan of Action for Child Protection System Strengthening in Lao PDR (CPSS 2022-2026) was launched, providing a reference for government agencies and international organizations in planning and implementing child protection measures. The Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children was amended, addressing the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the National Plan of Action (NPA) for Child Protection System Strengthening (CPSS). The amended law prohibits corporal punishment of children in all settings, which is the second country in the region to achieve full prohibition, and strengthens law enforcement, oversight, and coordination structures. National Guidelines on Alternative Care for Children and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on Child Protection Case Management were also endorsed. These provide clear definitions, guiding principles, and procedures for effective case management.

Efforts have been made to meet reporting obligations on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and two Optional Protocols. The National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers, and Children (NCAWMC) has been supported in preparing the government's 7th periodic State Party Report to the UN Committee.

UNICEF continues to support the implementation of Child Protection System modelling in Attapeu and Xiengkhouang provinces. 2,593(F1,384 M1,209) children who experienced violence were reached by health, social services and justice and law enforcement services. Social service workforce development has been supported, with the completion of the Strategic Plan for Social Workforce Development and the advocacy for strengthening the role of social work in Lao PDR and the Law on Social Work being drafted. Collaboration with the National University of Laos (NUOL) has resulted in the revision and updating of the social work curriculum, providing relevant education and training for social work students. Child protection systems have been modeled in Attapeu and Xiengkhouang provinces, with a focus on community-based child protection services and support for vulnerable children, including CWD.

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

Lao PDR has achieved remarkable progress in sanitation, with a significant reduction in open defecation rates over two decades. However, progress has been leveling off since COVID-19 due to economic challenges and reduced purchasing power of households. As a follow-up to the sanitation social mobilization assessment conducted in 2022, UNICEF provided support to the MoH for the development of a sanitation roadmap to achieve ODF status by 2025; and continued to support three target provinces to achieve district ODF status, enabling 71 villages to become ODF in Yotou, Sanamxay, Xamneua and Sepone, benefitting 40,144 people (19,387 females) exceeding the annual target for 2023 of 36 villages. Through Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) by villages, districts and provinces the number of non-ODF villages has been reduced from 2,127 in September 2022 to 1,807 non-ODF villages remaining.

UNICEF continued its support for Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) with the Department of Hygiene and Health Promotion (DHHP) under the MoH through training and post-monitoring of the deployment and operationalization of 64 sets of chlorine machines in district and provincial hospitals in 18 provinces. The situation for WASH in schools is challenged nationally, with only two out of every three schools having access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene services. The 3-star approach by the MoES has been extensively supported by UNICEF and GIZ, and work is being done towards inclusion into the LESMIS platform. 70 schools were provided with improved WASH facilities in five provinces, and 117 schools were provided with group handwashing facilities. Although improvements are being made, the overall declining national budget for Education implies that these are largely dependent on external resources.

Accelerated progress is being made on the climate resilience of WASH infrastructure partly through

sector-wide consultations and risk assessments that resulted in a climate-rationale for WASH, and partly through the demonstration of building-back-better approaches resulting in targets for basic WASH services in communities, schools and healthcare facilities being exceeded in selected provinces. After recurrent flooding episodes impacting the availability of WASH services, UNICEF supported the development of climate-resilient designs to guide future implementation and set examples for the WASH sector at large but will need to be accompanied by community-based water safety planning.

A synthesis of climate risk assessments for social service sectors including health, nutrition, education, WASH, and child protection has been providing direction to the mainstreaming of climate and disaster risk in UNICEF's programming and operations with nation-wide youth consultations leading to the formulation of a perspective document on climate action as well as the mobilization of climate financing for social services sectors building on the high-level advocacy during the 4th Mekong River Commission Summit & Conference.

Goal 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

The successful completion of the third round of the Lao Social Indicator Survey was achieved, supported by UNICEF and led by the Government, providing valuable insights into key social indicators in the country. The survey measures key social indicators to assess the progress of the NSEDP, progress towards the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The use of enumerators trained in computer-aided personal interviews and the MICS Platform tracking system has improved the efficiency and quality of data collection, ensuring real-time data availability and cost efficiency. Continuous monitoring visits by the Government, UNICEF, and development partners have further contributed to the data quality. The availability of quality data is crucial for equity, ensuring that no child is left behind in planning and budgeting.

The macroeconomic situation of the country poses challenges: high inflation, food and nutrition insecurity, and a high rate of school dropout post-pandemic are among the fiscal challenges faced by the Government. The depreciation of the Kip against the US dollar and limited access to foreign currency impact the payment of large external debts. Inflation remains high, particularly in food prices, affecting poor urban households and potentially leading to reduced food intake and meal frequency. The consequent shrinking of public expenditures in the social sector poses challenges for households and children particularly those from vulnerable groups. During 2023, the EU and UNICEF continued to generate budget analyses to inform the fiscal situation on nutrition. According to the nutrition budget analysis, although there have been improvements in spending, nutrition is highly reliant on external funding, which may decrease with LDC graduation. Moreover, the Lao delegation attended the regional exchange with share knowledge and practical measure to protect social spending during the pre-covid 19. The child disability grant initiative under the incentivized child protection system strengthening project faced delays due to limited capacity in disability-inclusive social protection design and implementation. The programme, currently active in Xiengkhouang Province, aims to reduce stigma, increase the participation of persons with disabilities in community activities, and empower households to sustain income for caring for children with disabilities.

Capacity-building and pre-budget hearing meetings on child-friendly budget oversight and tracking have led to changes in the operations of the National Assembly. Data collection from constituencies has been incorporated into budget discussions during ordinary sessions. Training and technical support from UNICEF have influenced discussions on social sector spending to mitigate the impact of macroeconomic and inflation challenges on poor households. Decrees addressing human resource difficulties in education, health insurance, and social protection have been issued by the National Assembly to guide the government's actions and policies after pre-budget conversations. The climate change and child poverty-sensitive vulnerability assessment report has provided evidence for climate-sensitive social policies, humanitarian preparedness and response plans. The report has gained

recognition and may serve as a planning document for other countries.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Partnerships

2023 was a landmark year for UNICEF and Lao PDR, marking the 50th anniversary of our partnership with the Government, which resulted in a series of sectoral events and culminating in a High-Level Celebration Chaired by the Prime Minister. This crucial juncture has offered an opportunity to reflect and act together with the Government and several stakeholders on the Sustainable Development Goals and the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan, and the future of children's right in the country. During the year, UNICEF had continued good partnership and its cooperation with the National Assembly, mass organizations, including the Lao Women Union and Lao Youth Union, and it will engage in stronger dialogue and partnership with religious leaders and community.

UNICEF Lao PDR's key donors for 2023 include Australia, the European Union, GAVI, the Global Partnership for Education, Nutrition International, Japan, Republic of Korea, China, National Committees for UNICEF, France and USA/USAID. The EU is the biggest donor to LCO programmatic activities (more than \$16M active funding in 2023) and provides funding for a range of activities across Nutrition through the EU-UNICEF Strengthening Institutional Capacities for Nutrition in the Health and Education Sectors in Lao PDR (SICAN), Public Finance for Children through EU-UNICEF Public Finance Facility, Education through the 'Partnership to Strengthen Education System' (PSES) and has contributed to the LSIS III.

The country programme has also benefited from significant support from global funds including Thematic Humanitarian Response, Health, Education, Child Protection, WASH and PSFR - consolidated pool funding. The LCO has also formed new collaborations with Civil Society Organizations, signing four new programme documents, and fostering partnership with private sector organizations to secure funds for vaccine purchases to increase private sector support for the national vaccination programme.

Looking forward, UNICEF Laos will expand its engagement with the private sector and ensure that its partnerships and engagement with Government is aimed beyond the social sectors. The partnerships will also further engage with new development partners, especially from the ASEAN region, and build on the experience generated through the UN Joint Programmes.

United Nations collaboration

Under the United Nations Cooperation Framework (UNDSCEF), UNICEF co-leads two of four outcomes, namely 'People's well-being' and 'Inclusive prosperity' and led the development of respective joint work plans. UNICEF also chairs the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Group (MELG), coordinating the UN Country Team's annual reporting process, and consolidating inputs for the Common Country Analysis from UNDSCEF's Outcome 1 and Outcome 2, and assisting UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP in contributing to the Midterm Review (MTR) of the NSEDP report and development of the 10th NSEDP structure. Interagency collaboration helped UNICEF to take stock of key lessons learned to address HACT issues, improve data evidence generation, and enhance its sectoral programme strategies.

In 2023, the UNJP on High Frequency data produced three bulletins and a policy brief on the impact of the current crisis in Lao PDR on vulnerable groups, food security and livelihoods, and the macroeconomic state, using high-frequency data from surveys and secondary sources. The bulletins

and policy brief presented disaggregated information that sensitized policymakers and proposed policy options for stakeholders. The JP also enhanced the capacity of the main implementing partner, MRI LASES, to collect, produce, analyze, and disseminate socioeconomic data for national policy development, and provide policy recommendations based on the evidence collected and analyzed. It is important for UNRCO to sustain the initiative and explore alternative funding sources.

UNICEF leads the UN Joint Programme (UNJP) on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health in Lao PDR 2022-2025, implemented together with WHO, and UNFPA. With a focus on improving maternal and child health outcomes, UNICEF is collaborating with UN and implementing partners to advocate for the deployment of trained Village Health Volunteers (VHVs) within communities. A digital database of VHVs will be created to help deploy them based on the population of each village. VHVs will conduct home visits for RMNCAH and their performance will be assessed to inform improvement plans. Additionally, they will work collaboratively with healthcare facilities to ensure seamless delivery of care between households, communities, and health facilities

In response to government's interest, UNICEF collaborated with UNFPA on resource mobilization and advocacy for ending child marriage. Two studies on child marriage have been conducted and adolescent pregnancy, which are currently in the final stages. These studies provide valuable evidence that can be used to develop strategies and plans of action to address the issue of child marriage. The two agencies also developed a joint application for Lao PDR to join the Global Programme as a 'rising star' country to access resources and support their efforts to address child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF's role as a knowledge leader in transformative sector reforms has been instrumental in developing evidence-based advocacy and strategic partnerships. An example is the new Primary Health Care Law, developed through a consultative process and based on sound data analysis, that will provide an enabling policy environment for planning, priority setting, and coordination of multi-sectors to bridge critical gaps in health service delivery. Another is the amendment of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children, which added a provision for the Fund for Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children. This clearly indicates that the Fund for Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children is a state fund established to mobilize and accumulate funds from various sources, aimed at ensuring sufficient and sustainable budgets for the effective and efficient implementation of a child protection system. As evidenced by several engagements, the national assembly remains a crucial partner in advocating for increased investment in child-related initiatives.

To address the learning crisis, UNICEF, in collaboration with the World Bank, exercised powerful evidence-based advocacy and strategic partnerships through the Human Capital Summit in directing the national priorities to education, particularly focusing on foundational learning. UNICEF also took a central role in leading the use of data and evidence in the education Joint Sector Review (JSR) and the sector plan's Midterm Review (MTR) consultations, that has further cultivated the institutional culture of data-driven decision-making. Going forward, continued capacity building support for the Government on evidence generation and use alongside is key to maintaining focus on this subject.

Innovations have been key to support health and nutrition outcomes; recognizing the critical role of high-quality vaccine management practices, the Government, and stakeholders have agreed to strengthen the Laos Management Information System, based on DHIS2. Additionally, simplified data collection and reporting tools have been effective in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of reporting in health facilities, a significant step towards ensuring sustainable and data-driven planning of health programmes. Also, developing mobile phone services such as hotline centers for providing

Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) counseling services could play a pivotal role in reaching remote communities. In order to intensify community mobilization and sensitization efforts, partnerships with agricultural extension workers and other community workers not traditionally supporting this agenda will be explored.

In 2023, UNICEF Lao PDR achieved significant strides in youth engagement, commencing participation in the Youth-led action Initiative, social media and traditional media engagement, and cultural advocacy. A key highlight was the involvement of over 100 young individuals during UNICEF's 50th anniversary celebration, including a three-day consultation focusing on climate, child marriage and online safety, demonstrating the immense value of integrating youth perspectives into our programmes for sustainable development. Social media played a crucial role in expanding UNICEF's reach, although slowing engagement rates suggest room for improvement in 2024. This insight prompted a shift in our strategy, emphasizing quality and relevance to ensure more impactful and meaningful engagement.

Laos is ranked as the sixth most vulnerable country globally for flooding, in response UNICEF leads the Child Climate Risk Index - Disaster Risk Management work to provide data and evidence on climate risks and child vulnerability, a significant first step in ensuring climate-resilient systems, reducing the impact of climate change, and supporting vulnerable groups, including women and girls.

Lao PDR's progress towards gender equality is reflected in the increase of the Global Gender Gap Index value from 0.713 in 2015 to 0.733 in 2023, placing Lao PDR in the 54th position globally and 3rd in the ASEAN region, nevertheless persistent gender disparities remain in key areas of education, health, protection, participation and employment. In response, UNICEF has undertaken a Gender Programmatic Review (GPR). The office identified three gender priorities to advance adolescent girls' well-being and leadership: reducing child marriage and early unions; promoting their health and nutrition, including preventing adolescent pregnancy; and paving the way for their education, learning, and skills. The GPR's implementation will feature strategic recommendations, strengthening gender results and systems to achieve transformative gender outcomes.

Next year UNICEF together with the Government of Lao PDR and key stakeholders, will embark on a Mid-Term Review of the CPD. These lessons learned and innovations in climate change, gender and digital transformation will be pivotal to promoting reflection and to understand which necessary programme adjustments should continue working in order to achieve tangible development outcomes.