

Nairobi Summit on the ICPD25:
Progress Report

Lao PDR

On October 28, 2019, the government of Lao PDR made 7 commitments under the Nairobi Summit to support the full implementation of the ICPD. Lao PDR is an economy in transition, but it has been adopting important health and population policies and laws in the past 15 years, such as the National Reproductive Health Policy, the National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, and the Vision towards 2030, the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2016-2025) and the Third National Action Plan for the Gender Equality (NAPGE).

Methodology:

Both long-standing population policies and newer policies are relevant in understanding how Lao PDR's 7 commitments made pursuant to the Nairobi Summit would further the country's progress toward the goals of the ICPD and the SDGs. Starting from the most recent policies adopted, which indicate the most current and dynamic priorities of government, in 2016, Lao PDR affirmed its commitment to invest in youth, recognizing that the country is entering a youth bulge, by adopting the "Noi Framework" to guide many policies impacting youth, and especially young girls. Noi represents a girl who was 10 years old when the framework was adopted in 2016, and intends to follow her through her development by creating a framework within which to promote and direct research and policy related to adolescents, and to develop methodologies for effective interventions for adolescent girls. Each year, multi-sectoral progress and approaches are documented through the framework of Noi, keeping policies in all sectors in Lao PDR aligned with the interests and needs of adolescent girls at this critical time in the country's development.

In developing this report, Lao PDR's youth-related commitments were first viewed in light of the Noi Framework and related policies, to understand the specific role of each commitment in the current development planning of Lao PDR. Then, additional relevant laws and policies, such as the RMNCH Strategy, and the National Strategy and Action Plan for Gender Equality, were considered to provide further context for the commitments. Progress over time was also measured and reported wherever possible. The goals of the ICPD and the SDGs were also considered to provide context, targets, and progress related to each commitment as well. Finally, by understanding and analyzing how the commitments made were similar and related, recommendations were developed, both for Lao PDR in fulfilling its commitments, and for other countries to implement the best practices of Lao PDR in making and fulfilling their own commitments.

Commitment 1: By 2030, Lao PDR commits to increase investments for adolescents and youth, especially young women

Through "Noi framework" and "Noi ecosystem" and adjusting investments in order to reap the potential benefits of demographic dividend and continue to collect, analysis and use age, sex

disaggregated data for planning, monitoring national, sector and international development agenda and plan that ensuring that no one is left behind, thus considering needs of the most vulnerable, including, migrants, those with disabilities and the aged.

Lao PDR has the highest rates of early marriage in the Southeast Asia region, with almost 40% of women aged 20 reporting being married before they turned 18. The adolescent fertility rate in Lao PDR is the highest in all of Asia, around 65 births per 1,000 women age 15-19. Girls' school enrollment and attendance in remote areas drops significantly by secondary school. At least half of all women in Lao PDR have experienced violence, and many also believe there is justification for husbands to beat their wives.¹ Adolescents in Lao PDR, especially girls, also have difficulties entering the labor market. Even more, disparities exist in resources dedicated to interventions targeting adolescent girls in different regions of the country.

At the same time, the population dynamics in Lao PDR show that a youth bulge is about to occur, and Lao PDR has the opportunity to reap the demographic dividend with proper planning and strategic investments in youth. In recognition of these dynamics and this important moment in the country's development, Lao PDR adopted a unique policy framework in 2016 based on "Noi", a fictional young girl. The Noi Framework creates a cross-cutting policy theme of investing in youth and young girls. The Noi Ecosystem is a complementary framework that identifies important sectors relevant to the success of the Noi Framework, including advocacy, policy advice, reproductive health, elimination of violence against women and girls, school-based interventions, reaching girls in their communities with life skills, and prioritizing evidence and data. Specifically, the Noi Framework and Ecosystem recognize that investing in the health of adolescent girls, including their sexual and reproductive health, facilitates achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of the ICPD.

In addition to specific goals related to reducing early marriage and adolescent fertility, the Noi Framework also highlights the importance of investing in girls' education, as staying in education is often correlated with delaying marriage and childbearing. Educated mothers also have healthier children, have access to better-paying jobs, and are more knowledgeable about how to protect the health and well-being of themselves and their children. However, the importance of the Noi Framework goes beyond the specific issues and topics it includes. The Noi Framework actually acts as a baseline for monitoring and tracking the progress of adolescent girls toward the goals of the ICPD and SDGs. The Noi Framework encourages a holistic approach to programming and interventions related to adolescent girls, and also encourages programming and interventions in other sectors to consider the potential impacts on Noi and all adolescent girls.

In the years ahead, Lao PDR is looking to adopt several key policies impacting adolescent girls, such as Youth Law and Youth Policy, which can support its commitment to invest in youth and adolescent girls. The National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health expires in 2025, and the update to that policy document could be revised to include adolescents as a distinct but related group by considering the Noi Framework. The development of a specific adolescent health policy, which often drives development and change around adolescent health and sexual and reproductive health in particular, could also be an

¹ The Noi Framework: An Adolescent Girl Situation Analysis Framework, National Institute of Public Health (NIOPH), Plan International and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), p.2-3.

aspect of promoting the health and wellbeing of adolescent girls, in line with the Noi Framework and this commitment. If and when the laws on the Development and Protection of Women and the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children are amended, they can also be amended with a view to the Noi Framework to ensure issues relevant to adolescent girls are specifically addressed. Lao PDR is also in the final stages of developing the 9th 5-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan, the key national document driving policy and development across sectors, and the Noi Framework can be used in this process to highlight issues relevant to adolescent girls.

Commitment 2: Lao PDR commits to finalize and implement National Youth and Adolescent Policy and Youth Law by 2030

Government of Lao PDR commits to finalize and implement the National Youth and Adolescent Policy and Youth Law with appropriate legal and innovative policy provisions for improving health, education, employment, social protection and participation of adolescents and young people.

In keeping with its cross-cutting policy focus on youth, Lao PDR has committed to adopting a National Youth and Adolescent Policy and Youth Law by the year 2030. In 2013, a law was adopted to support the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LPRYU), but this organization is primarily political and does not aim to identify and support the issues in youth development such as sexual and reproductive health, education, and employment. However, in line with the priorities of the 8th 5-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan, Lao PDR does have a unique opportunity to use the LPRYU and other youth networks to reach adolescents with important information and resources, as almost 100% of youth in the country are affiliated with one of the predominant youth networks in the country.

The process of development of the Youth Policy has been comprehensive, involving several years of nationwide consultations with Lao youth and youth networks to ensure the Youth Policy represents the needs and interests of Lao Youth. While participation is often one of the key themes of a Youth Policy, it is significant that the government of Lao has taken the time to build the Youth Policy out of a process of youth participation as well. As Lao PDR pursues this commitment to complete the Youth Law and Policy, representing the specific and unique needs of adolescents in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, education, and employment, in addition to participation, will be critical for the success and relevance of these instruments. Many of the priority areas identified in the Noi Ecosystem can create a framework for development and organization of the Youth Law and Policy as well, including supporting policy and advocacy supported by evidence and data, promoting reproductive health and life skills, promoting education, and promoting the elimination of violence against women and girls.

Commitment 3: Comprehensive sexuality education fully integrated in school curricula nationwide by 2030

Lao PDR commits to fully integrate comprehensive sexuality education in school curricula nationwide through age-appropriate curriculum-based teaching and learning in primary, secondary and technical and vocational education and training institutions.

Sex education has been present in Lao PDR in some form since 2001, when it primarily focused on HIV/AIDS prevention.² By 2010, it was being implemented as a life skills course in about three-quarters of secondary schools nationwide. However, quality concerns and implementation challenges, such as lack of teacher training and lack of a comprehensive course or module on sex education may have caused these efforts to be less effective than originally hoped.³ Article 3 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Child supports all children “to have the right to have access to and learn information that is suitable for the age and level of development of the child.” Article 13 of the law also obligates the State to provide health information to children. While efforts are being made to provide sexuality education to children, Lao PDR has committed to the full integration of CSE into national school curricula, which will require teacher training, as well as a continued political commitment to support CSE in schools.

Although the National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health for 2016-2025 lacks a specific focus on adolescents, it does provide some guidance on how Lao PDR will meet its commitment to implement CSE by 2030. Strategic Objective 1.2 calls for the increase of reproductive health information and services for youth. Specifically, the Plan identifies comprehensive sexuality education as the primary channel through which to disseminate this important information to youth, which is to be incorporated into curricula at the primary and secondary levels. It also calls for youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services to be made available to youth, complementing efforts to improve CSE. Comprehensive sexuality education and access to youth-friendly services could also be supported in the upcoming Youth Policy, as recommended by the Noi Ecosystem. The National Reproductive Health Policy, adopted 15 years ago, lacks specific support for adolescents, and this policy could be amended in the future to align with the Noi Framework and Ecosystem in order to better support adolescents’ needs for comprehensive sexuality education, helping them to better protect their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Commitment 4: End GBV and harmful practices by 2030

Lao PDR commits to end GBV and harmful practices, focusing on early marriage among adolescents through the revised National Action Plan for Prevention and Elimination of VAW 2021-2025 and its implementation through the Essential Service Package for women and girls subjected to GBV.

As mentioned previously, Lao PDR has the highest rates of early marriage in the entire Southeast Asia region, with almost 40% of women aged 20 reported being married before they turned 18. Furthermore, at least half of all women in Lao PDR have experienced inter-personal violence of some kind. While the legal age of marriage is set at 18 according to the Family Law of 2008, the enforcement of this provision needs to be improved. The National Action Plan for Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) for 2016-2020 recognizes early and forced marriage as a form of violence against women, along with other forms of physical,

² Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Situation and Programmes in Laos: Challenges and Some Recommendations, Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Center for Women (2011), p.2.

³ Comprehensive Sexuality Education: The Way Forward, Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Center for Women (2017), p.2.

emotional, and sexual violence. The Action Plan also details specific forms of violence against children, and how these differ from but also overlap with violence against women. The Action Plan focuses on 3 specific action areas: review of relevant policies and legislation, prevention of VAWC, and responding to VAWC.

This commitment on GBV and harmful practices made by Lao PDR pursuant to the Nairobi Summit follows the country's specific focus on youth, especially adolescent girls, in support of the Noi Framework. Early marriage and harmful practices usually impact adolescent girls, and the country commits to specifically addressing these issues in the new National Action Plan for Prevention and Elimination of VAW, to be adopted by next year. The Noi Ecosystem also highlights the elimination of violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a key priority area, identifying: 1) the importance of adopting and supporting an essential service package for eliminating VAWG, 2) ensuring participation of men and boys in eliminating VAWG, and 3) promoting safe spaces for women and girls. These three key policy approaches of the Noi Ecosystem can provide guidance for the development of the new National Action Plan for EVAW, following this Nairobi Summit commitment. Program 4 in the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality for 2016-2020 relates to addressing VAW, and raises the need to integrate budgetary support for combating VAW at sub-national levels, as well as training law enforcement to improve their response to VAW. These priorities could be carried over into the new national action plans for gender equality and EVAW being adopted next year, and can also be applied to the specific types of VAW impacting adolescent girls, namely early marriage and other harmful practices.

Commitment 5: Lao PDR commits to end unmet need for family planning among adolescent girls by 2030

Government commits to allocation of increased resources and expand quality youth friendly services including SRH information and Family planning services women, men and unmarried young people country wide as well as in humanitarian response. Aim to increase modern Contraceptive Prevalence Rate for young people aged 15-19 years to 45% by 2025 (RMNCAH Strategy).

In developing its commitment to improve access to family planning resources and information, Lao PDR has again put the focus on adolescent girls to ensure they are given the resources and information necessary to prevent unwanted pregnancies. The focus on family planning in this commitment is in support of the Noi Framework's goal of keeping girls in school longer and breaking the cycle of poverty many Lao girls find themselves in. Estimates show that approximately 54% of all married and unmarried women are using contraceptives (41% of whom are using modern methods). As recorded by the last Demographic and Health Survey completed in Lao PDR, only 26% of married adolescents were using contraceptives. Adolescent fertility is also high in Lao PDR, at 65 per 1,000 live birth, with the highest rates shown among rural youth, less educated youth, and lower-income youth.⁴ The latest estimates do show improvements to the adolescent fertility rate, and setting a specific and ambitious goal of improving the contraceptive prevalence rate among adolescents to 45% by the end of the current RMNCH Strategy will

⁴ National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2016-2025, p.2.

highlight the issue of contraceptive use among adolescents as many other health policies and strategies are being developed and revised.

The Noi Framework links the importance of family planning with comprehensive sexuality education and access to adolescent-friendly health services, without which it would be difficult for adolescent girls to actually obtain family planning supplies. The National Strategy and Action Plan for RMNCH also calls for the strengthening of comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring that it is made available at both primary and secondary levels of education. In addition, the Strategy prioritizes the improvement of adolescent-friendly health services, not only in improving access to services, but also with specific attention to the quality of services through improved supervision. While many countries face challenges in ensuring adolescents have access to family planning supplies and information, ensuring that the government sets a policy to encourage the use of family planning through curriculum for comprehensive sexuality education, adolescent-friendly health services, and ensuring the quality of adolescent-focused services and education, is vital to addressing the high adolescent fertility rate.

Commitment 6: Lao PDR commits to end Maternal Mortality by 2030

Through quality of care and the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategies and policies and ensure provision of health services based on availability, affordability and high quality services. Accelerate the health sector reform in particular the development of human resources in terms of quantity and competencies. Improve the governance and the comprehensive health information system in line with the health financing which aiming to achieve the universal health coverage, in order to eradicate poverty. As included in the RMNCAH Strategy, increase proportion of pregnant women delivering with trained Skilled Birth Attendance to 90% by 2025; increase delivery in health facilities to 70% by 2025; increase modern Contraceptive Prevalence Rate to 70% by 2025; and that all health centres should have at least one midwife by 2025.

The maternal mortality rate in Lao PDR has been dropping significantly, from 544 per 100,000 live births in the year 2000, to 185 in 2017. However, the predominant causes of maternal death are post-partum hemorrhage, eclampsia, sepsis, and unsafe abortions. The 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan identified several specific issues related to maternal mortality that could help Lao achieve the goal of ending preventable maternal deaths: low levels of births in the presence of skilled attendants, low levels of ante-natal care, low contraceptive prevalence rates, and low immunization levels. Some of these causes of maternal death are reflected in Lao's commitment made above. The 8th Plan also indicates a higher risk of maternal death for mothers delivering in rural areas, and for mothers who have lower educational attainment. The cesarean section rate is also extremely low in Lao PDR, suggesting that some mothers who needed c-sections were not able to get them and might have had their lives saved by the procedure.⁵

In its commitment on maternal deaths, Lao PDR sets forth several specific approaches to reducing the maternal mortality rate: 1) improving quality of care; 2) improving access to care; 3) accelerating health sector reform (specifically by investing in human resource availability and skill); 4) improving health sector governance; 5) improving health information systems in line with

⁵ 8th National Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020), p.52.

available financing; 6) continuing to work toward universal coverage; and 7) setting specific numeric targets for increasing births in the presence of a skilled attendant, births taking place in health facilities, contraceptive prevalence rate, and enhanced midwifery services. In this commitment, Lao PDR has essentially detailed a short action plan for lowering the maternal death rate. The National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on RMNCH also identifies practical approaches to ending maternal deaths, specifically through improving the maternal death review process. The RMNCH Strategy details the development and improvement of the Maternal Death Review System through more specific governing policies and procedures, training, and improved technical capabilities.⁶ Lao PDR's commitment on maternal mortality includes both institutional commitments in prioritizing universal coverage, structural improvements to the health system overall, and specific numerical targets on some of the key causes of maternal death (no skilled attendant, births occurring at home, and lack of family planning).

Commitment 7: Use of Population Data for the 9th National Social Economic Development Plan

Lao PDR commits to use the Lao 2030 study on population dynamics to ensure responsiveness to the emerging needs of the population.

As the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan is being prepared for 2021-2025, Lao PDR has made an important and significant commitment to base the analysis and recommendations of the Plan on data collected through a national population survey. The “Lao 2030 Survey” was launched in September 2019 and aims to drive policy and development as Lao PDR seeks to benefit from the country's upcoming youth bulge. Lao PDR also hopes that the data collected through the survey will help in the country's graduation from least-developed country (LDC) status, and further improve the national capacity for the collection of high-quality, disaggregated population data.⁷ This focus on data is a key lesson learned from Lao PDR's approach to meeting the goals of the ICPD and the SDGs. High-quality data ensures that policies and laws are carefully designed to meet the needs of the population, are able to be implemented effectively, and can be monitored for effectiveness throughout the implementation process. As many of Lao PDR's key population policies and national policies and strategies are being revised and updated in the coming few years, this focus on data will provide the grounds for their success into the future.

Recommendations:

1. Making youth and adolescent girls a cross-cutting policy theme.

Lao PDR has prioritized youth in its commitments under the Nairobi Summit at this critical time in the country's development. The commitments also show the understanding that adolescent girls face unique challenges that require specific responses through law and policy. Adopting the Noi

⁶ National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Services on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health 2016-2025, P.32.

⁷ Government, UNFPA Launch Lao PDR 2030 Study, Sept. 18, 2019, Lao News Agency, <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=48248>.

Framework has made investing in youth and adolescent girls a cross-cutting theme that can drive policy and development in many sectors.

2. Youth laws and policies set priorities for youth development and well-being.

Lao PDR has taken several years to develop a Youth Law and Youth Policy through a country-wide participatory process. This process shows that Lao PDR recognizes the importance an updated Youth Law and Youth Policy, developed through youth participation, can play in setting the direction for all policies and interventions related to youth, and for reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend.

3. CSE, AFHS, and family planning for adolescent health.

Lao PDR's commitments show the country believes in comprehensive sexuality education, adolescent-friendly health services, and access to contraceptives for young people. The Noi Framework reaffirms these interventions and approaches as essential to any efforts to benefit the health and well-being of adolescents. While the evidence supports all of these approaches, and policies are shifting in recognition of the evidence, strong political will is necessary to implement many of the policies and programs related to adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

4. Recognizing the impact of harmful practices on adolescent girls.

Lao PDR has recognized that many young women in the country still face threats of violence through harmful practices such as GBV and early marriage. In response, it has committed to ensuring that early marriage and other harmful practices are addressed in the new National Action Plan for Prevention and Elimination of VAW. Other policy documents recognize the importance of providing a budget to fight VAW and harmful practices at sub-national levels, where enforcement and implementation of these policies will be most relevant.

5. Strengthening health systems and addressing causes of maternal mortality.

In addition to specific goals like strengthening the Maternal Death Review System, increasing births in the presence of skilled attendants and at health facilities, and decreasing the unmet need for family planning, Lao PDR has recognized the importance of overall health system strengthening to end preventable maternal deaths. Improving access to care, quality of care, health workforce resources and skills, health sector governance, and health information systems, as well as achieving universal coverage, will all be part of its approach to ending maternal deaths.

6. Prioritizing high-quality data in the development of population policies.

Effective laws and policies are based on accurate, high-quality, disaggregated data. Looking ahead to its 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan, Lao PDR has committed to collecting, analyzing, and using high-quality population data. Because this Plan is one of the foundational policy documents for the country, aligning it with accurate, high-quality data will also ensure that other national policies, strategies, and plans are aligned with data and can be more effective in achieving Lao PDR's ambitious development goals.