



Launch of the National MDG report

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Your Excellency Mr Bounnhang Vorachit, Prime Minister of the Lao PDR, Your Excellency Mr Somsavat Lengsavad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, distinguished members of the government, Heads of UN agencies, members of the diplomatic community, colleagues, and friends.

I am delighted to be standing here before you to congratulate the government of the Lao PDR on the launch of its national Millennium Development Goals Report. The report represents an important milestone for the Lao PDR in its efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve widespread improvement in the lives of the country's poor.

As you know, this country is one of the poorest in the Region – and indeed – the world. However some remarkable progress has been made in recent years. Since 1990, the country has developed steadily, which underlines the Lao government's commitment to helping the poor. Life expectancy has increased by more than 10 years, school enrolment is on the way up, having improved by more than 20 percent in the last 10 years, and youth literacy has improved from 70 to 78 percent in the same period. And most remarkably, poverty has declined from 48% in 1990 to approximately 30% today, demonstrating startling progress.

But we still have a long way to go – both globally and here in the Lao PDR.



In the 1990s, governments and UN agencies began to realise that despite decades of development assistance to countries around the world, like the Lao PDR, for many poor people – things were just not getting any better. In fact, in some parts of the world the poor were getting much, much poorer.

There were many reasons for this slow rate of global progress, but the main causes included insufficient and inefficient public spending, crippling debt burdens, inadequate market access in developing countries and importantly, declining foreign aid.

The Millennium Declaration signed by all members states of the United Nations in 2000 in New York, was a commitment by all countries to finally do something about this situation - to work in a unified and cohesive manner to lift people from poverty. Within the Millennium Declaration is a set of goals – the Millennium Development Goals. Let's just take a minute to think about what they actually mean.

They mean "no more broken promises".

They mean that for the first time in history – the world has agreed to work together to halve extreme poverty to set levels – within a set time period.

The Millennium Declaration and the MDGs themselves derive from international conferences and summits, where countries pledged to halve poverty, improve education, achieve gender equality, and protect the environment etc. However for the first time, governments agreed to a timeline - to the year 2015 - and accepted to be held accountable. The eight MDGs represent a reaffirmed commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter. But the goals themselves are not new to any of us, rather they capture the very essence, the very heart, of what we as development partners have



been working towards for years. But the MDGs are a new way of focusing our efforts and realigning our support.

Specifically, by the year 2015, this government, as well as all the donor governments, as well as every ASEAN partner, every country in the region, and every member state of the United Nations have agreed to:

- Halve poverty
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality
- Reduce child and maternal mortality
- Combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- And develop a global partnership for development

Four years after the Millennium Declaration, we still have a long road to travel. The MDGs will only happen if they become a national reality, embraced by governments and people alike, when there is the realisation that they hold inherent benefits.

Being a set of benchmarks for assessing progress and enabling people to hold their leaders accountable, the goals help people promote the kinds of policies and actions that will create decent jobs, improve access to schools and improve the lives of ordinary villagers.

The goals and targets that have been set for the Lao PDR are the result of extensive dialogue and consultation between the government and the UN system, and they have



been adjusted and modified for the Lao context. We believe they represent truly achievable and locally appropriate targets for our shared development efforts.

I am pleased to say that the report the Government is launching today, will be followed by a more comprehensive strategy, that focuses not on promoting the goals themselves, but on promoting behaviour change to achieve the goals.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Lao government owns this process and that the government is committed to achieving the MDGs. The National Supervisory Committee on the MDGs has led this process and continues to drive it. At top levels of government the MDGs are slowly being built into government planning and policy. This report will boost this process.

This document will reach far and wide into the community, providing a basis for broad discussion about development priorities and goals. It has been prepared in English and Lao so as to ensure widespread dissemination and "digestion". It is our hope that the report and the subsequent campaign, will reach every level of Lao society from government to village, to district or health official, and to every school. It will become a tool for educating the community as well as engaging it.

The Government has already launched its national growth and poverty eradication strategy, the NGPES, which is the national strategic framework for poverty reduction in this country. The NGPES is the Lao road map for poverty efforts and fits with the broad universal agenda that the MDGs represent. In fact, the MDGs and the NGPES are fully consistent, and in some cases, the government's poverty reduction targets are even more ambitious than the MDGs. I am aware that good progress has already been made to integrate the MDGs into the NGPES process, and that discussions continue to take



place within government about how to knit the global MDG agenda more closely into the national poverty framework of the NGPES.

Although the NGPES is the main vehicle with which the MDGs will be reached in Laos, it will also take significant efforts in all national policies and planning to ensure that the MDGs are achieved. It is extremely important that the MDGs be built into all levels of development activities, just as they are in the NGPES, to ensure that the MDGs are met across the diverse physical and social landscape of the Lao PDR.

The attainment of the MDGs thus rests heavily on the successful implementation and operationalization of the NGPES, as well as other national development efforts. And with the "MDG picture" that this report presents, the government and its partners have a monitoring tool, which will prove invaluable in assisting with assessment of the NGPES and poverty efforts in general. It is admittedly a long process, but I think that we have a good chance of achieving many of the goals in the Lao PDR by 2015.

There are some areas where this country is not on target. For example, the number of one-year-old children immunized against measles had fallen from 62 percent in 1996 to just 42 percent in 2000. Child nutrition and the number of underweight children has yet to improve over the last decade and continues to be worrying. And the report shows that significant efforts will be required in strengthening and supporting primary education for boys and girls if the education targets are to be reached by the year 2015. It will also be important for the government to ensure that its targets in relation to gender equality are set during the next all important stage of operationalizing the MDGs within the implementation of the NGPES.



Some of the challenges facing the Lao PDR to meeting its targets are well known – disparities between rural and urban areas, gender disparities, and lack of physical infrastructure to access remote communities.

The purpose and value of the MDG Report is that it provides the government and partners with an opportunity to adjust the strategies to meet shortfalls in the MDGs if it is not on track. The MDG Report will be produced every few years so together, we can assess progress and revise our approaches if necessary. In this light, the MDGs are more than just another set of UN goals, they are a tool for influencing policies and forging political will.

But this will not continue without sustained donor support – which brings me to goal eight – “create a global partnership for development.”

Although we don't yet know how much the achievement of the MDGs will translate to in Lao PDR, I can assure you that it is not something that this government will be able to afford on its own.

It needs partners in the fight.

So my final hope for this report is that it will also become a document for focussing donor attention on the MDGs.

All countries in the world – including the donors – are locked into the eight goals. If we fail to achieve them, it will be the fault of the rich countries as much as the poor ones.

Finally, I take this opportunity to heartily congratulate the government of the Lao PDR and particularly the National Supervisory Committee on the MDGs under the leadership of His Excellency the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, on the



occasion of the launch of this, the first national Millennium Development Goals Report for the Lao PDR. You have our full support and commitment in assisting you to achieve the targets and goals laid forth. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the lives of all Lao people, women and men, girls and boys across the country, and representing the richness and diversity of the Lao PDR, are improved as a result of the Millennium Development Goals process.

Thank you.

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