



Opening Remarks

Mr. Finn Reske-Nielsen, United Nations Resident Coordinator

National Advocacy Meeting for Nutrition

8:30am 4 May, 2006
Don Chanh Palace, Vientiane

Your Excellencies, Dr Phonmek Daralay Minister of Health, Dr. Siene Saphangthong Minister of Agriculture, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking the Government for taking the initiative to hold this important event today. It is a pleasure for me to be here and to make a few remarks on behalf of the United Nations system in the Lao PDR, . This first National Advocacy Meeting for Nutrition marks the important efforts of the Lao Government and United Nations together, to effectively address the severe problems of malnutrition in Lao PDR.

Malnutrition is a core issue at the heart of achieving all the Millennium Development Goals. Poor nutritional status perpetuates the cycle of poverty and malnutrition. It has a direct impact on losses in productivity from people's poor physical status and other losses caused by diseases linked with malnutrition. It affects the chances that a child will go to school, stay in school and perform well due to its impact on the ability to learn. And malnutrition also increases health care costs. In other words, the economic costs of malnutrition are high and hamper progress in eradicating poverty.

The situation in the Lao PDR is at a critical point and we have much work to do. Millennium Development Goal One - "Eradicating Extreme Poverty and Hunger" - targets "halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, between the years 1990 and 2015." Progress in reaching this target is measured by the "prevalence of underweight children under the age of five" and "the proportion of the population below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption." Here in the Lao PDR, only limited progress has been achieved and according to the national MDG

progress report there has been no progress between 1990 and 2000 in reducing the number of underweight children under five years of age. An alarming 40 percent of all children under five still remain underweight. Access to latest data remains a significant challenge for all of us working in the Lao PDR and we are pleased that the Multi- Indicator Cluster Survey now underway, will provide the latest data on nutrition status and we eagerly await its results.

Malnutrition is a key component affecting every country's progress towards achieving the MDGs. Not only does it limit efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1), but also achievements in Ensuring Universal Education (MDG 2), Reducing Child Mortality (MDG 4), Improving Maternal Health (MDG 5) and Combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases (MDG 6). It affects a child's school attendance and learning. Malnutrition is directly or indirectly associated with most child deaths and poor maternal health and mortality, and is the main contributor to the burden of disease in developing countries. It also increases the risk of HIV transmission and premature deaths and increases the chances of tuberculosis infections and reduces malaria survival rates. Although in Lao PDR, under nutrition is the largest problem, obesity is on the increase, particularly in urban areas. It increases the risk of diabetes, hypertension and other problems and overnutrition should therefore not be neglected. In spite of the important role of nutrition interventions in reaching the MDGs and poverty reduction goals, nutrition has been largely overlooked. In addition to the important contribution of nutrition to achieving the MDGs, it is important to keep in mind that the right to food and the right to nutrition are recognized human rights.

The causes of malnutrition are diverse and include food insecurity, improper care including inappropriate feeding practices, and poor health and sanitation. In order to effectively address these serious problems, make progress towards reducing poverty, ensuring economic development and reaching the MDGs, there is a need for urgent action. The multiple causes of malnutrition call for multiple approaches to dealing with malnutrition problems, making the task of coordination even more important.

The Ministries of Health and Agriculture and Forestry have shown strong leadership in initiating efforts to develop a National Nutrition Policy and Strategy, and each have a key role to play, ensuring that nutrition is addressed both through food and health-based nutrition interventions. Other line ministries and mass organizations also have important roles to play especially in terms of increasing the awareness of the importance of good nutrition. A number of regulations, like the one on Infant and Child Food Product Control, are in place. Ministry of Health and UNICEF already have made good progress in providing iodized salt across Lao PDR.. Ministries of Health and Education and WHO have instituted a programme to bring deworming to 100 percent of primary school children in Lao PDR. And FAO and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry have developed a successful model for Home Gardens linked with nutrition education and improved feeding practices ready for replication across Lao PDR There is a strong commitment and joint support on behalf of a number of United Nations agencies, such as FAO, WHO, UNICEF and WFP, to assist the Government of Lao PDR in developing, implementing and monitoring the impact of the National Nutrition Strategy.

In order to effectively address malnutrition, there is a need for joint action and collaboration among line ministries and development partners to ensure that the different dimensions and causes of malnutrition are effectively dealt with. We need to address overall food security, care and feeding practices and health and sanitation issues. Once developed, the National Nutrition Policy and Strategy will be critical for the Lao PDR to ensure joint action and commitment to improve the nutritional status of all Lao people.

The United Nations system and the donor community have taken a number of initiatives in recent years in an attempt to sharpen the focus of development efforts on agreed core targets, facilitate alignment of donor priorities and improve donor coordination through partnerships in the pursuit of common objectives. It is also important to continue to foster links among UN agencies, Government and international organizations at the policy level as well as to promote and strengthen actions at programme levels. This calls for collaborative working mechanisms between agencies and stakeholders in the implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy. Support from donors, international organisations and NGOs is therefore strongly urged in the development of the strategy as well as in the implementation of interventions, which is key to its success.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Joint UN-Government Working Group on Nutrition and Food Security for organizing this important event today with financial support from WHO, EC-FAO Food Security Programme and UNICEF and to give my sincere thanks to all the presenters from various line-ministries, Lao Women's Union, UNICEF, FAO, WFP and the National Institute of Nutrition in Vietnam for enhancing our awareness of the importance of good nutrition and the situation of malnutrition in Lao PDR.

I wish you all a very successful and productive meeting, and thank you all for your support in our shared efforts to reduce malnutrition and eradicate poverty in Lao PDR.