
INGO KEY-MESSAGES FOR THE 2014 ROUND-TABLE IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

14th November, 2014

Governance, people's participation and enabling environment

The INGO community congratulates the government of Lao PDR for efforts to **consult regularly** its civil society partners on the content of the **draft INGO guidelines and the draft NPA decree**. The recent INGO forum organized by MOFA on the 28th October was a much appreciated opportunity for an honest and constructive dialogue with an aim to further improve cooperation between the Government of Lao PDR and INGOs.

The new INGO guidelines and NPA decree provide more clarity on procedures and may translate to improved coordination but this will be dependent on **how the guidelines are interpreted and implemented at Provincial and District levels**. We would welcome a review of the implementation of the new INGO guidelines in late 2015.

We acknowledge the increased recognition of the role of civil society organizations to contribute to development goals. The **Scaling-Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA) and the Land Issue** working group have been recognized as valuable interlocutors by government partners and are invited to contribute in their respective sectors discussions. The **INGO network**, though not officially recognised, has been invited to take part in dialogue through its chairperson, and has been coordinating the member NGOs to support MoFA and other line ministries to utilize NGO resources and experience.

Despite these efforts, the environment for civil society to contribute fully to development efforts and to engage in positive dialogue with government is still fragile.

While the Government of Laos invited Civil Society Organizations to participate in the UPR process, a limited number of organizations within Lao PDR felt confident to engage in this exercise. We look forward to **concrete assurances that CSOs can play their full role**, in line with international obligations, through the various international conventions that will be reviewed in the next year.

We encourage the Government of Laos to maintain its commitment to build an enabling environment for CSOs to fully support national development. INGOs are committed to continued collaboration with the government of Lao PDR in a spirit of mutual accountability, to support development goals moving towards 2020 and beyond, and to support the government to ensure that all citizens can play their full role in contributing to the formulation of the 8th NSEDP.

Agriculture / Food Security / Human assets

We believe that a **balanced agriculture** would greatly contribute to a sustainable, equitable and healthy rural population. A balanced agriculture would consist of production for self-consumption, production for local markets, and production for export commodities, with attention to environmental sustainability. In

this manner, farmers would be more **resilient to external shocks**, such as volatile markets, over which they have no control. This would both satisfy food security and economic goals.

Increasing use of **harmful pesticides is reportedly having a negative impact on the health** and well-being of people, including children. We hear that attendance at health centres is increasing due to the harmful effects of pesticides. This has an impact on household income, negatively impacts the work-load of health centres, displacing some of their important preventative and primary health care work. We encourage further analysis to ensure policies and legislation are developed and implemented to protect the health of people, and ensure sustainable agriculture.

There is great potential in the rural areas. To unleash this requires an **investment in people and people's organizations**. Farmers can contribute more than their labour, but also their knowledge and innovations. If supported with access to relevant information, practical and quality education, appropriate technology, access to credit, and land tenure security, organized men and women farmers can become agents for development. If farmers can decide to whom they want to sell their produce, they can then get the best deal under fair contracts. This is why we think it is important to support farmers' organisations.

Nutrition

The iNGO community is encouraged by the synergy and commitment between the Government of Laos, Donors and Civil Society to strengthen collaboration in our collective efforts to achieve MDGs related to nutrition. The **inclusion of the SUN Civil Society Alliance in government efforts** to scale up nutrition is positive and, we anticipate, will lead towards faster and more sustainable attainment of improved nutrition goals for the country.

We are optimistic that the multi-sectoral convergent approach will reduce chronic child malnutrition and urge the Government of Lao to encourage ownership and mobilize resources at the Provincial, District and Village Level. Given the significant **role of community and the importance of gender** throughout the Health, Education and Agriculture Convergent interventions, CSOs remains ready to support planning and implementation. We acknowledge that several CSOs were part of the Convergence Approach micro planning in the 3 pilot provinces.

We note strong **links between food and nutrition security and land tenure**. A recent study revealed that an increase in land ownership in Bangladesh lead to a reduction in severe malnutrition;¹ while the risk of being underweight increased by 50 percent for children in households without access to land in Tajikistan.²

We also highlight the importance of ensuring **ethnic and rural families have access to clean water and sanitation**.

Finally, we confirm our commitment to **keep people at the centre of the Multi-Sectoral Convergent approach**. That means consulting the people we serve as we create and implement plans; crafting messages that reflect the ethnicity and educational levels of the people we serve, and measuring success by the changes in their lives, not by the money that is spent or the buildings that are constructed. Civil society has expertise working in some of the most remote and difficult to reach villages therefore we

¹ Choudhury, K.K., M.A. Hanifi, S. Rasheed, and A. Bhuiya. 2011. Gender inequality and severe malnutrition among children in a remote rural area of Bangladesh. *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition (JHPN)*, 18(3), 123–30

² Baschieri, A. and J. Falkingham. 2007. Child poverty in Tajikistan. New York: UNICEF.

encourage the Government of Laos to continue to see civil society as trusted partners in our joint pursuit towards improved health and nutrition.

Health

We commend the government on the implementation of the **National Skilled Birth Attendance Plan**, noting that a new cadre of midwives is planned. We note that INGOs have been active to contribute funds, for midwifery courses and individual scholarships, and remain committed to improve the quality of Skilled Birth Attendants.

We commend the government for the new decree 2/3 PM, 19 August 2014 for free maternal and under-five child health services. The success of this Decree will be seen when the most vulnerable are able to access health services.

Recognizing the cost savings in health prevention rather than curative measures, we encourage the government to **expand primary health care services to rural and remote communities**. This includes (1) a nationally costed plan for consistent and integrated outreach across the country and (2) investing in building, staffing and supervising more health clinics in remote areas. This will increase “access to health for all” in alignment with the National Health Sector Reform process.

We support the Government’s efforts to streamline different health financing mechanisms, and for these to include “whole of system” financing for preventative and promotional health services, as well as hospital-based curative services. We note the **majority of the nutrition-specific actions in the National FNSAP are community-based**, not facility-based, therefore districts needs to have budgets available to deliver these services.

INGOs recognize that some of the biggest health and nutrition gains are made through low-cost interventions like vaccination, infant and young child feeding and community health outreach. While the material costs for these interventions are low, the human resources inputs are high; and the financing and incentive systems needs to encourage district and **health centre health staff to “go the final mile”** to some of Laos’ most remote and malnourished villages.

Education

INGOs working in Education sector congratulate the GoL on achieving the national target on the net enrolment ratio for both girls and boys and for being on track to realize parity between boys and girls at primary and secondary education. We note that **gender parity remains elusive** in upper secondary, vocational (TVET) and university levels of education, for example: for every 100 boys enrolled in upper secondary school, there are 85 girls. For every 100 boys in vocational training there are 60 girls.

While gender parity in education is vital in order to achieve Laos education goals and to secure Lao’s position given AEC integration, international research also confirms the **link between mother’s education level and nutrition**. For these reasons, INGOs encourage the GoL to continue to prioritize interventions that will increase the number of girls completing their education.

Growth with equity

INGOs congratulate the GoL for consistent economic growth over the last five years. We commend the Lao Government for setting high goals to eradicate poverty and graduate from the LDC list by 2020. Yet despite this encouraging economic expansion, there is **rising inequalities within Lao society**³. The poorest are excluded from economic opportunities and have limited access to services.

As INGOs we offer our support to the Lao Government to develop indicators for the future **Sustainable Development Goals**; and to continue partnering with civil society in the implementation of such programs.

Looking ahead and with particular reference to the 8th NSEDP, it would be encouraging to see the plan incorporate meaningful commitments and actions for **universal access to education and health services**; access to financial services; achieving **gender equality** in decision making and representation; **good governance** and improving infrastructure a priority on infrastructure servicing health and education for the most vulnerable.

People-centre development / children's participation / 8th NSEDP

Children's participation in development processes that affect them is supported by the Lao Government through accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. It is critical, more so than ever with the upcoming state party report, that effective mechanisms are identified to allow the full participation of children in contributing to the reporting process. Civil society actors have strong experience in this area and look forward to working concretely with our government partners to support the realisation of this commitment in the Lao PDR.

Central to children's full participation, will be **addressing the issue of violence**, which according to recent information from the Government's Lao Socio-Economic Indicators Survey, affects more than 76% of children aged 2 to 14. We have seen this most acutely in the tragic suicides of more than a dozen children. Again, civil society actors have strong experience in the areas of child protection and look forward to concretely working with government partners to ensure that policy and laws are transferred into consistent practice at the community level.

With the 8th NSEDP process underway, civil society actors would welcome the opportunity to support the government with their international experience and expertise to **ensure that children and other vulnerable groups can play a full role in the planning process at all levels**, particularly at village and district level

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a future potential path towards all of these development goals and consideration of how to integrate the SDGs into Laos' development planning and specifically the 8th NSEDP is something that the INGO community would certainly recommend be considered by the GoL.

We are thrilled that the 8th NSEDP will be more outcome-based and we would like to encourage the government to consider **people-centre indicators**. This will provide the political impetus to ensure that we have created programs that serve the most vulnerable – including women, children and those from different ethnic groups.

³ UNDP & World Bank reports