

Position paper

Impacts of COVID-19 in Vulnerable
Settlements and Communities
in Lao PDR



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1. Background

Several months after the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has contained the COVID-19 outbreak to 20 cases to date, withstanding a steady daily increase in the initial days until 17 April (see the chart below). The latest was identified on July, after 103 days without reported cases, when a traveller on a 14-day compulsory quarantine at a hotel in Vientiane tested positive. All cases were either travel-related or linked to those. The first two cases were only reported on 24 March 2020 and, while some 28,100 people have been reportedly tested, the country has no fatalities confirmed as of 3 August 2020 (UNCT, 2020).



Figure 1. COVID-19 Trend in Lao PDR

Source: Government of Lao PDR (n.d.-a)

The Government introduced several measures to prevent the spread of the virus, such as closing all of its 107 traditional checkpoints and international borders with neighbouring countries and suspending both domestic and international flights and issuance of tourist visas. In addition the Prime Minister issued an order² imposing a nationwide lockdown from 1-19 April 2020, which was later extended. The order included, but was not limited to, suspension of public events such as the Lao New Year celebration, Stay-at-Home order except for essential visits to grocery stores, pharmacies and hospitals with a limit of one person per family, and Work-from-Home arrangements for all, including government officials. Since then the restrictions have been gradually eased with schools and offices opening with strict social distancing norms being followed. Inter provincial travel is being allowed and domestic flights resumed since 22nd May. Although most containment measures are withdrawn, the borders remain closed and the dates for lifting such restrictions are still unknown.

2. Impacts on Vulnerable Settlements and Communities in Lao PDR

2.1 COVID-19 Vulnerable Areas

The strategies such as 'Stay at Home' and 'Work from Home' –collectively called 'social distancing' – are scientifically proven to be effective to prevent spread of the virus and currently one of the most commonly practiced measures worldwide. However, it is also arguably a privilege enjoyed by a handful of the world's population. An increasing amount of literature and evidence indicate that many of the world's vulnerable population such as refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) living in overcrowded camps, urban poor, day labourers and migrant workers in vulnerable settlements, slums and alike, are disproportionately affected by public health emergencies such as COVID-19.³

Vulnerable settlements and camps are at high risk of transmission because of many reasons: 1) its dense and often unsanitary living environment makes it challenging to maintain social distance, which can lead to the multiplier effect in case of diseases outbreak; 2) access to proper Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and

1 WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.

2 Order No. 06/PM was issued on March 29, 2020 (Government of Lao PDR, 2020).

3 See Gully (2020), Hume (2020), Wilkinson (2020), Ramanath (2020), and Collard (2020).

health facilities is not adequate; and 3) people living in these areas are often engaged in informal economic sectors that require daily commute and interaction with hundreds of people. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, one third of urban dwellers – which translates into nearly a billion – live in informal/vulnerable settlements, slums and alike (UN-Habitat, 2020).

While Lao PDR is classified as a Lower Middle Income country with Domestic Gross Product (GDP) of \$US 17.9 million (ranked 117 out of 204 countries surveyed) (World Bank 2020c) with growth averaging at 7.7 per cent over the last decade (World Bank, n.d.), it is projected to slow down to 0.7 per cent in 2020, with an inflation forecast at 6.3 per cent, due to the impacts of COVID-19. According to the Asian Development Bank, the GDP growth for Lao PDR is projected at 3.5 per cent in 2020 (Asian Development Bank, n.d.), less than half of the average in the last ten years. As Lao PDR already records relatively high fiscal deficit as well as external debts, stagnant economic growth is likely to push the Government to make difficult fiscal adjustments and provision of basic social services and protection such as healthcare, unemployment benefit, and housing more difficult, which in turn could trigger a number of households in the country to slip below the poverty line.

In fact, under the current lockdown, livelihood of those engaged in informal economic sector are particularly under threat since the strategy of “Work from Home” is unavailable for day labourers while they are typically not covered by government benefits or rescue packages. The 2017 labour force survey indicates that approximately 35 per cent of total employment in Lao PDR took place in the informal sector, with particularly higher percentage among women. In addition, when including informal employment outside the informal sector –such as in the formal sector and in households– the total informal employment rate was 83 per cent (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare et al., 2019).

A high percentage of informal and vulnerable employment in Lao PDR may suggest that the number of people in poverty is on a rise, as compromised income without proper social protection could directly affect multiple aspects of life such as declining food/nutrition status, housing/hygiene condition, and health/accessibility to appropriate medical treatment when required. Moreover, urban employment largely relies on areas that have experienced a significant drop as a result of the pandemic, such as travel, tourism and hospitality, causing severe unemployment. For this reason, the World Bank estimates that between 96,000 and 214,000 additional people are projected to fall into poverty (World Bank, 2020b).

The unequal impact of COVID-19 on urban poor is highly relevant in Lao context where approximately 31.4 per cent of the urban population lives in slums (World Bank, 2020a). In Lao PDR, the highest population density areas are distributed across the country and concentrate a 24 per cent of the total population, mostly in the capital city of Vientiane and the four secondary cities, namely Luang Prabang, Thakhek, Savannakhet and Pakse. Other high population density areas within the country concentrate a total of 3,372,949 people, corresponding to 48 per cent of the total population (Government of Lao PDR, n.d.-b) (see Figure 1). Social inequality increases in bigger cities, reaching the highest inequality level in Vientiane City (Bosoni, Epprecht & Hayward, 2018).

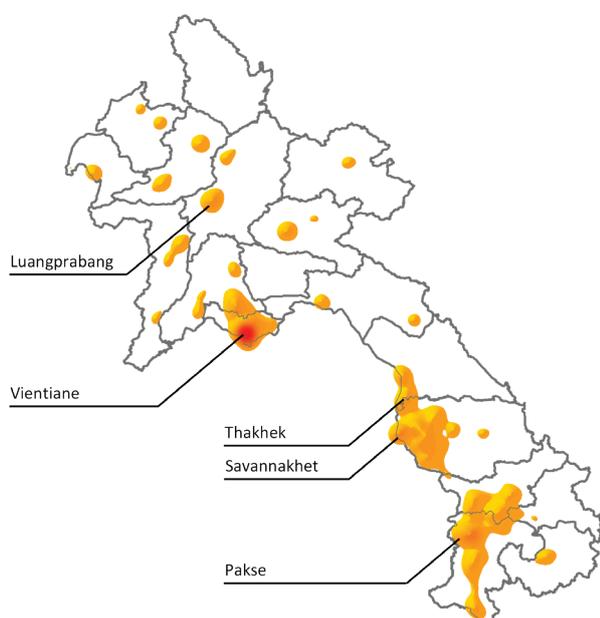


Figure 1. High population density areas in Lao PDR
Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR, based on Population and Household Census 2015

Clusters of settlements can be identified across the country (see Figure 2), mostly concentrated on peri-urban areas that can be accessed through primary roads. These areas are at higher risk, as the disease may spread faster because of the population number and connectivity conditions.

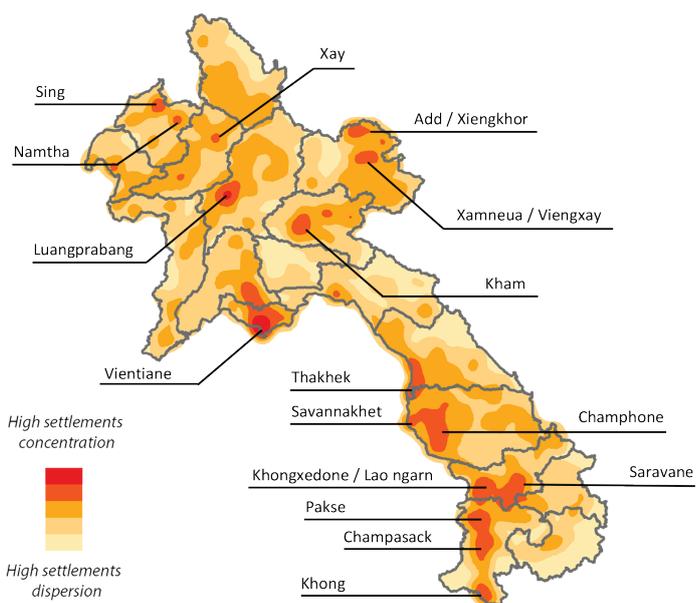


Figure 2. Settlements’ concentration in Lao PDR
 Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR, based on Population and Household Census 2015

A total of 31 districts in 12 provinces are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 considering the aforementioned analysis parameters (see Figure 3). Almost a third are concentrated in Vientiane Capital, while three other clusters are located in the southern provinces of Attapeu, Champasak, Saravane and Sekong (nine vulnerable districts), at the centre-west in Khammuane and Savannakhet provinces (six vulnerable districts), and at the south of Luang Prabang province (three districts).

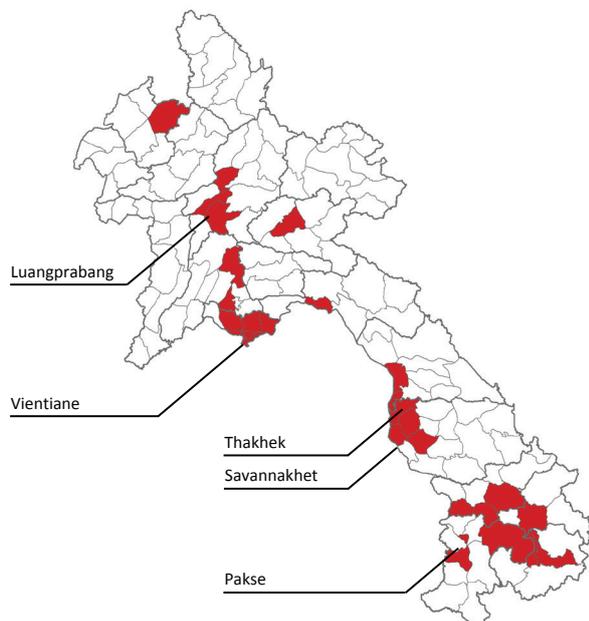


Figure 3. COVID-19 most vulnerable districts in Lao PDR
 Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR

Several communities are also at particular risk due to pre-existing causes. For instance, in Sanamxay District in Attapeu Province alone, some 6,000 people continue to live in over-crowded temporary settlements following the 2018 devastating floods. Such event destroyed 1,620 houses and partially damaged 681, displacing thousands of people that were affected by an estimated 21.1 billion Kip shelter sector damage (climate change vulnerability and its consequences are further explained under section 2.3).

In addition, an estimated 100,000 migrant workers have returned from high-risk neighbouring countries such as Thailand, China, Vietnam and Cambodia, pose a significant risk of community transmission. According to data released by the Ministry of Health, it is estimated that around 50,000 of such migrant workers have been in government quarantine shelters/camps with additional 20,000 in home quarantine by April 9. At the end of the month, less than half were in home quarantine and only 17,775 remained in camps (see Figure 4).

The projection of returnees, developed through a proxy based on the number of nationals that have left the country, shows that Oudomxay is the most vulnerable province, with 11 per cent of the total migrant population, followed closely by Luang Prabang and Savannakhet provinces. These three jurisdictions are home to nearly 30 per cent of the migrants.

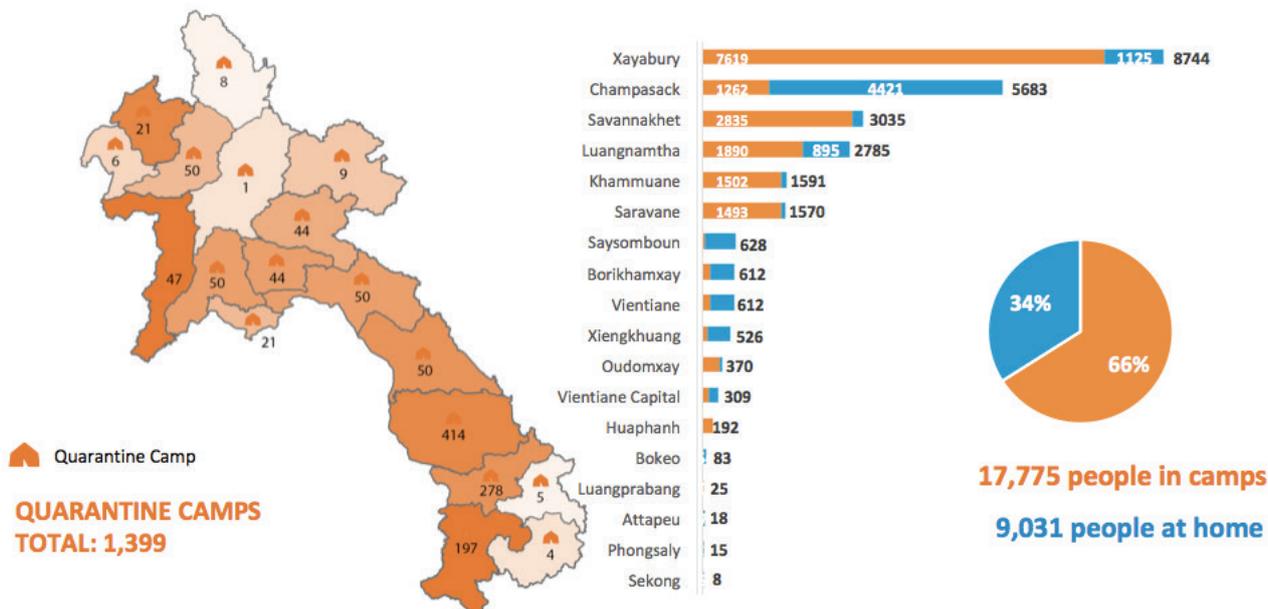


Figure 4. Returned migrants and quarantined camps per province

Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR, based on data provided by UNFPA and Ministry of Health [Dated 27-04-2020]

Regarding its health readiness, Lao PDR is ranked 73 out of 195 in the Global Health Security (GHS) Index⁴, an assessment of health security and related capabilities developed worldwide. While the rank is higher than average for indicators such as detection and reporting and rapid response, it is low in categories such as prevention and health system, exposing the country’s weakness in these areas. These low health system qualifications indicate that the country struggles mainly with the way communications with healthcare workers take place during a public health emergency, and infection control practices and availability of equipment.

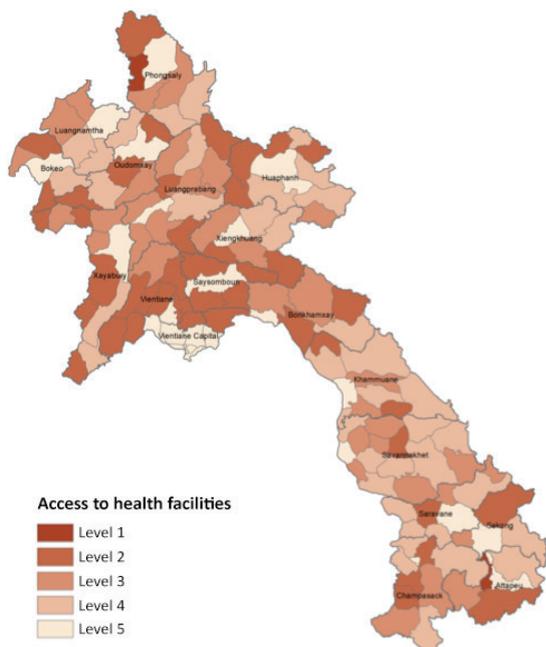


Figure 5. Access to Health Facilities in Lao PDR

Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR based on Health Facility Master List (MoH)

The health-care system is predominantly public, with government-owned and-operated health centres and district and provincial hospitals and an emerging private health sector. Administratively, the health system is

4 For more details, see Gopal Health Security (GHS) Index, available at <https://www.ghsindex.org>

divided into three levels: central (Ministry of Health, or MOH), provincial (provincial health offices, or PHOs) and district level (district health offices, or DHOs) (Akkhavong, K. et al., 2014). Access to hospitals is uneven throughout the country: while all provinces have one regional or provincial hospital, nearly a third of the hospitals in Lao PDR (9 out of 26) are located in Vientiane Capital. The distribution of community hospitals and health centres is unbalanced (see Figure 5).

2.2 Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities and Correlation with COVID-19

COVID-19 vulnerability does not affect all provinces and districts in the same way. Structural pre-existing vulnerabilities may augment the impact of stressors such as the pandemic. In that line, the national poverty headcount indicates that the greatest percentage of population living below the national poverty lines are distributed in 3 districts of Huaphanh, Luangnamtha and Saravane provinces (namely Xamneua, Nalae and Toomlarn). Coincidentally, the same provinces experience a large variation in poverty headcount among their districts, which was already noticed in the Census-Based Poverty Map (Coulombe et. al., 2016), where the authors highlighted the importance of district-level targeting.

Proper WASH practice is also a challenge in many communities. The World Bank data (2017) indicates that only 10.8 per cent of the rural population in Lao PDR has access to safely managed drinking water service (World Bank, 2020c). Moreover, according to UNICEF, approximately 24 per cent of the population still practice open defecation. Only 66 per cent of primary schools have both water supply and latrine facilities across the country (UNICEF, n.d.). The lack of access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities is predominant in northern and southern areas of the country, mainly across the provinces of Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane, Sekong and Champasak in the south, and the eastern districts of Phongsaly province, in the north. Needless to say, proper WASH practice is essential yet one of the most cost-effective strategies for protecting human health during infectious disease outbreaks, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. For example, WHO estimates that in 2016, poor WASH practices were responsible for 829,000 deaths from diarrheal disease – equivalent to 1.9 per cent of the global burden of disease (World Bank, 2020).

Other structural deficiencies linked to education and gender—such as adolescents out of school, marriages underage and the disproportionate girl-to-boy ratio at upper secondary school, may also be amplified by the pandemic. This is due to the fact that, under extreme circumstances, adolescents are often the first ones to provide economic support or assistance in regular household tasks, consequently dropping out of school. Adolescent girls in rural households are especially vulnerable and at a higher risk of being engaged in child labour and early marriage, subsequently interrupting their education.

The territorial footprint of a socio-economic index developed by UN-Habitat after overlapping the features described above indicates that the northern parts of the country present greater structural vulnerability, especially the east-west axe formed by the provinces of Huaphanh, Oudomxay, Luang Prabang and Bokeo. With lower values, Saravane, Sekong and Attapeu, in the south, are also exposed (See Figure 6).

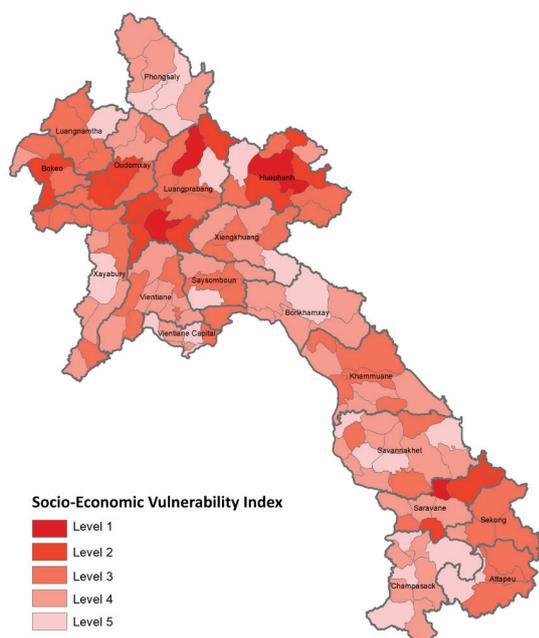


Figure 6. Socio-Economic Vulnerability Index Map
Source: UN-Habitat Lao PDR based on 2015 Census Poverty Map

2.3 Climate Change Vulnerability as a Cross-Cutting Stressor

Lao PDR is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change. Population induced eco-system alterations have exacerbated climate change-related droughts, floods and other related disaster risks. Since 1990 the population of Lao PDR has almost doubled, and this trend is expected to continue. Given that most of the landscape is forested and mountainous, there is increased population pressure on urban areas and marginal land, much of it exposed to flooding, erosion or landslides. Droughts and floods will primarily impact the poorest people in the country, including many who are members of ethnic minority groups living in mountainous areas and flood plains. With higher temperatures and intense rainfall projected to increase, these vulnerability scenarios may worsen.

For the past decade, some major climate-related events have seriously affected livelihoods and shelter, harming the economy of people in Lao PDR: typhoons Ketsana in 2009, and Haima, in 2011, threatened human development, access to basic services such as education and healthcare, and pushed people further into poverty due to major livelihoods' losses (UNDRR, 2019). Recently, in 2018, storms Son-Tinh and Bebinca had fatal consequences, including the Xe pien-Xe Nam Noy hydropower dam collapse, with damages and losses amounting to US\$ 371.1 million.

In the current pandemic context, the ripple effects of a climate-driven disaster on the poor are likely to have severe impacts, leading to displacements and affecting food security, employment opportunities and school enrolment (UNDRR, 2019), which particularly alter the development and wellbeing of children and women. These consequences threaten the capacity of rural households to withstand the effects of health shocks as it was observed that they often respond with intensifying natural resource extraction (Nguyen, Do & Grote, 2018).

3. Challenges and gaps in response

3.1. Response by the Government

On 3 February 2020, following the declaration of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern, the Government established the Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 under the chairmanship of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance with support of the Vice Minister of Health to oversee the preparedness and response to COVID-19. The Government is also currently finalising a comprehensive Strategic Response Plan that incorporates key components of public health emergency response as well as food insecurity and socio-economic impacts. The Plan is also aligned with the Ninth Socio-economic Development Plan and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in order to protect the hard-won development gains.

However, like many other countries, the Government of Lao PDR is challenged by insufficient resources such as test kits, medical equipment and professionals. This leads to under-testing to properly gauge the scope of the pandemic in the country and respond in a timely manner appropriately. The Government also needs to consider introducing a fiscal stimulus package like some other countries of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is essential to compensate for the significant revenue loss in certain industrial sectors -including tourism- and to support both employers/employees of these sectors as well as poor households that rely on daily earnings and wages.

2.2. Response by the UN

On 31 March 2020, The UN Secretary-General launched the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (COVID-19 MPTF) as an inter-agency funding mechanism to support low and middle-income programme countries to respond to the current crisis and recover from its socioeconomic shocks. The Fund aims to finance initiatives that enable governments and communities to: (a) tackle the health emergency; (b) address social impacts and implement economic response measures; and (c) recover better by building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies. The total financial requirements are projected at US\$2 billion, with US\$1 billion required for the first nine months of operation.

The United Nations in Lao PDR, under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator, has been engaged in discussions with the UN Country Team (UNCT) to coordinate a system-wide response in alignment with the Government's priorities such as food security, social protection for the unemployed, essential health services and strengthened border surveillance and monitoring, as stipulated in the Government's Strategic Plan. The

UN in Lao PDR will also seek ways to support the Government to access the COVID-19 MPTF described above, while at the same time developing the multi-sectoral proposal to assist the Government's efforts to respond to the situation in the country.

In parallel, the UN agencies are respectively mobilizing resources vis-à-vis donors, implementing new programmes and activities, and re-programming existing ones to respond to COVID-19 some of which include various assessments – on socio-economic impacts, gender, child protection, education, food supply chains, and movements of migrants – to tackle the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic. While the lack of data and full-fledged assessments pose a challenge to accurately determine the appropriate responses, initial rapid assessments and feedback from vulnerable settlements indicate that poor communities need assistance with WASH kits, water supply, medical consultations and medicines, food and Non-Food Items (NFIs) and/or cash transfers to maintain a minimum standard of living to contain the further spread of the virus.

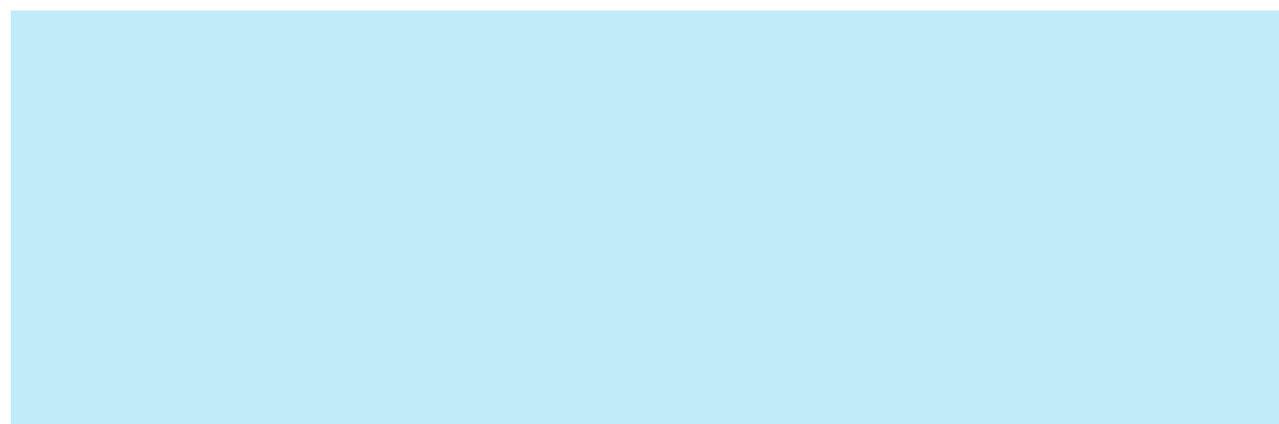
4. Intervention by UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat in Lao PDR currently has two programmes directly linked to WASH, Shelter and Emergency Response. Re-programming to include COVID-19 response activities is under development and discussion with donors. At the same time, UN-Habitat is in consultations with other UN agencies and international organisations to collaborate, one of which includes a joint proposal with UNFPA and IOM. In this joint proposal, UN-Habitat plans to focus on strengthening the capacity of local authorities on preparedness and response to COVID-19 on WASH education in urban and rural settlements, safe mobility in urban areas, and community mobilization in vulnerable settlements to reduce transmission, community tracing and treatment.

In Lao PDR, UN-Habitat response will be formulated around two goals:

- Goal 1: Advisory capacity to city, district, provincial and national authorities on emergency preparedness, response and recovery
- Goal 2: Community mobilisation on preparedness, response and recovery in poor and vulnerable settlements. In particular, in the short term (within the next three months), UN-Habitat plans to provide technical support and build on its existing projects and programmes in 110 settlements in 10 provinces and build capacity to assist the Ministry of Public Works and Transport (MPWT) and Ministry of Health (MoH) with COVID-19 response. The scope also includes providing support to some of the vulnerable communities with Information Education Communication (IEC) and hygiene materials, NFIs, and food items. Most importantly, UN-Habitat plans to develop a comprehensive COVID-19 Vulnerability Assessment Model (VAM) to support its and other UN agencies response to the pandemic and ensure effective and efficient allocation of scarce resources.

In the medium (four to twelve months) and long-term (one year to two-three years), the interventions will continue to develop and maintain the COVID-19 Vulnerability Mapping Model and support the implementation of community-based approaches in order to identify and strengthen geographical areas and communities that have specific needs, such as WASH infrastructure or housing. Where necessary, UN-Habitat will also provide technical and infrastructure support for establishing temporary water points, latrines and/or other WASH facilities, thereby contributing to the improvement of hygiene standards among communities.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIC APPROACHES

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

- Positioning UN-Habitat Laos in line with global and regional strategies for COVID-19, and supporting a broader COVID-19 approach in urban areas, including emergency response to outbreaks in vulnerable settlements, while looking ahead at recovery (medium-term) and longer-term impact at the different scales (i.e. national, city and neighbourhood scale).

Strategic approach

- Supporting provincial, district and city governments, civil society and the urban poor as frontline responders and in the delivery of services, without losing the importance of the national/central government dimension particularly in terms of policy advice;
- Coordinating with national government and the UN system at the country level in support of Crisis Management Team, Humanitarian Response Plans and Socio-economic Impact Assessments, and making a clear linkage between the outbreak and the overall urbanisation process to deliver a more integrated response;
- Establishing key partnerships with donors and implementers;
- Considering the multiple, intersecting hazards and risks that affect much of the countries in the region including those from climate change, which should be addressed to build long-term resilience; and
- Contributing towards the achievement of SDG Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, particularly indicators 11.1.1, 11.5.1, 11.5.2, 11.a.1, 11.b.1 and 11.b.2; SDG Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, specially indicators 6.1.1 and 6.2.1; and SDG Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, mainly indicators 1.4.1, 1.5.1 and 1.5.2.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

- Recognising that human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and are thus inherent to all human beings regardless of race, gender, nationality or migration status ethnicity, language, religion or any other status;
- Recognising the specific roles, needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, elderly persons, children, youth, and persons with disabilities and ensuring representation of these vulnerable groups in decision-making processes;
- Recognising all other cross-cutting principles of human rights and social inclusion; and
- Contributing towards the achievement of SDG Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, particularly indicator 1.3.1.

Strategic approach

- Aligning our response with UN Framework for immediate socio-economic response and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its central promise as 'leave no one behind';
- Targeting the protection of people and planet and preserving development gains across all SDGs, while ensuring equity, promoting transparency, and placing the voice, rights and people at the centre of all efforts; and
- Ensuring that governments and national actors are in the lead.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE

- Positioning response in alignment with Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19

Strategic approach

- Promoting two-way communication, engagement with, and support to capacities of local actors and community-based groups in the design and implementation of the response, using appropriate technology and means to account for mobility restrictions and social distancing;
- Promoting preparedness, early action and flexibility to adjust the responses and targets to the fast-evolving situation and needs;
- Ensuring safeguard, maintaining and restoring the health and wellbeing of communities; and
- Aligning the country approach as outlined in clusters and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP)s, etc.

5. Conclusion

It is of paramount importance to assist communities in vulnerable settlements and to provide people with adequate social protection and compensation to restore livelihoods, health and well-being. As this COVID-19 pandemic experience has demonstrated, the vulnerability of those engaged in informal economic sectors and/or living in temporary shelters, camps and alike is likely to be further exacerbated during emergencies due to challenging living conditions with an absence of good hygiene practices, inadequate food and nutrition and limited medical facilities.

Moreover, challenges linked to structural deficiencies and climate change vulnerability threaten the achievement of development targets in Lao PDR. With its urbanization rate among the highest in the region and population growth rates significantly increasing in urban areas, it is imperative to work on long-term solutions and plans that diminish risk linked to environmental conflicts, poor sanitation and health related concerns. A business-as-usual approach will not be enough to alleviate the consequences of the current pandemic and build resilience against the future shocks. In this respect, local and national governments must provide some strategic and rigorous approach that will build the resilient communities to withstand the impact of the pandemic or natural disasters in their daily lives.

In summary, current and planned actions/interventions by UN-Habitat include:

- Support on COVID-19 Vulnerability Mapping Model in partnership with UNFPA and other UN agencies concerned;
- Provide community-based IEC support and hygiene materials for 110 settlements in 10 provinces (Attapeu, Sekong, Saravane, Champassak, Savannakhet, Khammouane, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang and Oudomxay) in partnership with DPWT and MoH. This is to be scaled up to 220 settlements in the mid to long term, focusing on the high population density areas, including Vientiane Capital and 4 secondary cities;
- Provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) materials to provincial and district level hospitals in some of the target provinces; and
- Provide NFI and food items to households in transitional shelters in Sanamxay district in Attapeu and Pakbeng district in Oudomxay.

Action points:

- Internally: Continued resource mobilization efforts and engagement with donors to provide immediate response to vulnerable communities such as delivering WASH and PPE kits, upgrading temporary shelters, providing water supplies, tracking hotspots and distributing IEC materials to raise awareness on good WASH practice.
- Among UN: Explore more opportunities to collaboratively work with other UN agencies and international organisations to synergise available resources. The potential thematic areas include WASH, cash transfer, gender, migration, disaster-risk management with UNFPA, IOM, WFP, UNICEF, UNDP and World Bank.
- Vis-à-vis the Government: Strengthen coordination and partnership with national, provincial and district-level governments by actively exchanging information, exploring areas of collaboration, and providing assistance where it is most needed. In parallel, advocate for more long-term strategic solutions to fundamentally build resilience among vulnerable communities, such as introducing an income compensation package, ensuring universal healthcare coverage, and improving the living conditions of those in vulnerable settlements, prioritizing actions such as infrastructure provision.

Overall, this work is expected to feed into policy making in the area, particularly the Lao 9th National Socio Economic Development Plan (NSED 2021-2025), which objective is to optimize competitive advantages as a cornerstone for socio-economic development, LDC graduation and SDG implementation by further strengthening quality, sustainable, inclusive and green growth. This plan is currently being developed and targets, among others, the Improvement of living conditions to raise the wellbeing at individual and social level. This outcome particularly targets some key related aspects, such as (i) poverty reduction, rural development and poverty gap reduction, (ii) living standard increase, and (iii) equality promotion.

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UN-HABITAT LAO PDR

3rd Floor, UN House, Lane Xang Avenue
P.O. Box 345, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Tel: +856 (0)21 26771

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