

Lao People's Democratic Republic
Peace independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

Ministry of Health
National Institute of Public Health/Council of Medical Sciences

Lessons
from Health research System Analysis
for Lao PDR.

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I. Background information and basic health indicators

Laos-officially, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), located in South East Asia and became one of ASEAN member countries in 1997. The total area is 236,800sqkm, with 5,609,997 inhabitants, 2,813,589 females, and 2,796,408 males. Lao PDR has 18 provinces including one prefecture and one special zone, 141 districts, 10,553 villages, 959,595 households. 15% of the population is living in urban and 85% in rural areas. The agricultural production is low and scattered, the GDP is 402 US\$¹. Life expectancy at birth was 59 years, and 61 for females, and 57 for males, TFR was 4.9, the IMR 82/1000 live birth, the U5MR 102/1000 live birth, and the MMR was 530/100000².

II. Introduction

The MOH strategy was and implementing through six main work plans³. One of the six main work plan is health research and training management, that under responsibility of the NIOPH and the CMS. The first five year national health research master plan was developed in 1992⁴, aiming to build research capacity in the country, with technical and financial support mostly from IDRC-Canada and partly from WHO. At the end of the year 1996, the evaluation of the first five year was conducted⁵and gets basic information for the development of the second five year health research master plan (1997-2001)⁶. At the end of the year 2001, under the support from the European Commission through regional malaria control program in Lao, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the evaluation of the second five year plan⁷and development of the third five year national health research master plan (2002-2006)⁸ were conducted, with aiming to strengthen health research capacity aligned with the new paradigm declared at the international conference on health research held in Bangkok 2000. The year 2002 was the tenth years achievements of health research activities⁹at the health sector. So far the implementation of the third five year health research master plan is on going, and the year 2004, the third five year health research master plan was reviewed its midterm¹⁰to support evidence-based for the preparation for the development of long term strategic plan.

WHO Health research system analysis initiative was a product of a series of international workshops such as "National health research system in March 2001 (Chaam, Thailand)", "Health research system performance evaluation in October, 2001 (Bangkok, Thailand)", "Working group on HRS, June 2002 (BKK, Thailand), and " WHO inter-regional consultation on HRSA (KL, Malaysia, 2002)¹¹.

In order to meet WHO health research system analysis initiatives, 12 countries (Brazil, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan, Senegal, Tanzania, and Thailand) were selected to conduct a pilot testing, around 2 countries from each region, identified for developing and testing methods using 14 core indicators and 42 key descriptive variables¹².

Lao P.D.R. was one of selected countries representing WPRO to commit health research system analysis pilot with rationality (1) to develop with countries a methodology to facilitate their ability to describe and analyse respective health research system and stimulate actions (2) to understand the contribution of health research system in improving health and equity in health (3) to enable evidence-based advocacy to governments and international organisations to increase investments in health research, and (4) to provide input to decision making on policies and strategies to strengthen health research system within the context of each country¹³.

Lao P.D.R. perspectives was that the analysis of the health research system was very essential as part of promoting research activities to develop and implement a national strategy for health research in the country, as well as in the region, and global, aiming to reach a goal that using the advancement of knowledge for health development and equity in health at step by step contributing to poverty reduction¹³.

III. New from the HSRA pilot project in Lao PDR

In fact, the implementation of the pilot HSRA in Lao PDR was one mechanism of advocacy role and functions of the existing health research system in the country. During the mapping and involving of the key actors and institutions for the HSRA pilot, health research is increasingly recognized as one of the driving forces behind the development and the National Institute of Public Health/Council of Medical Sciences as national collaborating and coordinating body has established trust among national and international partners in health research for development¹⁴.

Capacity building and strengthening has been the key features and has created a number of health researchers and all research institutions in various ministries have been involved, thanks to government policy stated in the Lao Constitution to support research activities in the country. The existing National Council of Sciences, Agency of Sciences, Technology, and Environment give more support together with many stakeholders related to health research in the country and will make system stronger. The Lao Government is becoming more interested in supporting research that can contribute to socio-economic development. However, more financial support for research projects

needed from government, funds from donors need to be better match with priorities need of the country.

Many research studies have been done, but utilization still need to be improved. There is a need for planners, policy makers, professionals to make better use of relevant research studies (done internationally or locally), therefore, involving high rank policy makers to recognize and utilize research findings was not easy task, but it was a big challenge for research managers in order to make its results utilized in proper direction¹⁵.

Finally, Research plans need to be better supported by various sectors, including private.

IV. The most useful findings/results for strengthening of health research system in Lao PDR

According to the main results of the HRSA pilot from individual, FGD, media survey, the following recommendations have been proposed for strengthening of its HRS in Lao PDR¹³:

- National health research vision need to be revised to assure that it will be driven by equity, focused on country needs, and priorities within an interactive regional and global framework
- Research institutions as key actors of the HRS need to be strengthened their enabling for research environments in line with the creating of sustainable research culture in recognizing the need for evidence-based decision making, and the importance of health research as a vital component of health development
- Human capital (Human resources for research) need to be strengthened both quantitatively and qualitatively in addition with the enhancement of English knowledge, thus to be able to access to the world of information-communication-technology
- The internal and international research network need to be enhanced their roles at all stages of the research process from planning, involving all stakeholders in priority setting, community participation in research implementation, involving all partners in dissemination of research findings to better its utilization in terms of health benefits firstly for the marginalized groups, thus to promote national socio-economic development
- Different sectors, including private should put more investment in research in general and in particular in health research to develop research culture, which

- recognizes the value of research and of researchers, thus allows the emergence of a supportive environment for research
- The existing health research system in the country should be strengthened, in particular stewardship and financing functions. Fund allocation for health research should be available for sustaining, producing, and utilizing, and management of health research results.
 - Medical association should contribute its action to encourage and attract health professionals both quantitatively and qualitatively to health research.
 - Regulation had been proposed to be a measure for promoting research activities as well as research production, utilization, and management, thus to promote the strength of national health research system as well.
 - Incentive as token, promotion, competition, recognition, and given some power for researchers should be considered to retain them as researchers of careers.
 - All major newspapers should have special column for presenting health and health research articles regularly, to do so, health sector should have agreement with the newspapers' editors and institution concerned should committed to provide regularly articles on health and health research
 - Research findings conducted within the country should be submitted not only for specific journal but and for its publication to inform the public as key messages about the recent results to promote either the good health management and quality of health services at different level of health system to provide the access to health and health research information regularly and at large.
 - Health research results internationally conducted should also be informed to the public as large to promote, maintain and restore the population health as well as to the diseases prevention.
 - Health information and education center of the Ministry of Health should be strengthened and should work closely with the media thus to obtain commitment from them for dissemination of health and research information

V. Utilization of the results for strengthening health research system

The national workshop to develop a long term strategic plan for strengthening health research system in Lao PDR was held in August 2005 under the financial and technical support from CORHED, one of the objectives of the national workshop was to review the evidence on the Lao PDR national health research system analysis in this event, the results of the HRSA has been presented to policy makers, stakeholders, donor agencies, researchers, health care providers, and master students from the tropical medicine and international health in Vientiane attended the said workshop.

The national workshop aims to develop and strengthen the Long Terms Strategic Plan for National Health Research Systems, which will be the 4th Five-Year national health research master Plan with the specific objectives (i) to identify concrete action points that can be undertaken by stakeholders (alone or in partnership) toward strengthening national health research system so that it can be better address the MDG goals and contribute to poverty eradication and health equity; and (ii) to determine specific agreements and key issues for further action. The key main functions of the NHRS included Stewardship, Financing, Research Capacity, Research Production and utilization have been discussed in plenary and in small group, and several strategies concerning each function have been proposed for development of long term strategic plan for strengthening of HRS in Lao PDR¹⁶.

VI. Usefulness of the HRSA results for internal and international fund raising

6.1 Usefulness of HRSA results for internal support

During the implementation process, involving all key actors/institutions from several sectors to participate in the HRSA, it was build a strong awareness among researchers, users, and policy makers that health research system is not only the role of health sector, but is the role of different key actors. Thus, most of them were willingly committed to collaborate in strengthening of health research system in Lao PDR. These included the internal support from different research institutions, in particular the national statistical center and the Institute of Francophony for Tropical Medicine, which are the close partner institutions. International organizations inside the country such as the Institute for Research and Development (IRD, France), and World Wide Concern also interested and committed mostly technical, partly financial to support the national workshop as well as to research activities for the coming years.

6.2 Usefulness of HRSA results for international support

The preliminary results of HRSA were presented at the regional workshop in New Delhi, India to share experiences with other selected pilot countries supported by WHO in October 2004. The preliminary report of HRSA results attracted the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) as one of the main sponsors since 1995, thus through the consultation during a regional workshop in Bangkok and several discussion between NIOPH's Director General and COHRED's Director, and its partners, there has

been an agreement to hold national workshop to develop long term strategic plan for strengthening health research system in Lao PDR using HRSA' results as a starting point for discussion.

Through the dissemination of the health research system's results in Lao PDR, involved stakeholders as well as donors the following recommendations have been proposed for getting funding support: (1) involving all stakeholders to discuss and draft the next five years plan, (2) Research activities should be aligned with country's needs and be part of national socio-economic development plan, (3) Budget planning and resources mobilization/supports from government and then negotiation with donors and (4) Implementation of the plan by different agencies concerned.

The following strategies for strengthening of Laos NHRS in financial function have been proposed (1) Each department of MOH should allocated at least 2% of their programs' budget for health research, (2) Negotiation with international donors is needed to make sure that they support priority areas, (3) foreign assistance for health development should have certain percentage for health research, (4) Mechanism to manage and grant national budget for research need to be developed and strengthened.

VII. The major initiatives now, and in the near future for strengthening of HRS in Lao PDR

For strengthening of Health research System in Lao PDR in the future, which is a strong will of Lao Health sector, NIOPH in collaboration with the CMS as a national focal point continue to collaborate and coordinate with COHRED Board and its consultants in planning thoroughly, so far, exchanging views and ideas on the strengthening of a technical report developed from the recent national workshop afterward will be distributed to all stakeholders concerned, and to some international organizations to Lao PDR for their feedback and comments on the list of priorities, thus the strong final report will be produced with the support from CORHED.

The meeting with internal stakeholders and some international donors' agencies is expected to be held in early February 2006 supported by COHRED in order to see how to apply recommendations from the national workshop into practical actions. The meeting will aim to the synthesis of the ideas/suggestions into the draft 5-year national health research master plan among all key stakeholders. COHRED was also proposed some possibility to develop Research management capacity in Lao health sector, and the hosting annually national health research forum.

The next activity should be the priority setting workshop before developing the next 4th five year national health research master plan (2007-2011), which should be strongly focused on the strengthening of NHRS in Lao PDR.

The national conference to officially endorsed the fourth five year national health research master plan in presence and witnesses with all parties concerned (stakeholders, policymakers, researchers, and international donor agencies) be also proposed.

In addition, under the Asia link project with financial support from EU and technical support from the School of Public Health, University Libre of Brussels and the Tropical Medicine Institute of Liverpool, to develop health system research curriculum for Laos and Vietnam (2005-2006).

The NIOPH and IRD will conduct collaborative research on Urbanization changing in sanitation and disparity in health spatial in Vientiane capital (around March 2006). The World Wide Concern and NIOPH will design a research strategy and methodology to guide the design and development of a health program of the health sector through research activities. All of these mentioned activities are supporting NHRS strengthening in Lao PDR.

Furthermore the development of network to support health decision and policymaking, which hopefully would get support from WHO, will be another additional activity to support the strengthening of NHRS in Lao PDR.

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