



Lao People's Democratic Republic  
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

Ministry of Health  
National Institute of Public Health

The current status  
of health research capacity  
in LAO P.D.R.

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# The current status of health research capacity in Lao P.D.R.

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## 1. Background and rationale

The history of the Lao nation is the history of a long struggle for peace, independence, friendship, cooperation and development of the nation, many decades of ravages by war in the past resulted in the burden of infectious and parasitic diseases, thus the precarious of the health status of the Lao People.

Indeed, in Lao P.D.R. before 1992 research activities were not considered as high priority at all because most of socio-economic and cultural activities were focusing to the wounds war healing. Therefore, the communities were lacked of scientific knowledge, and lacked of health information in particular on health status of Lao people. Some technical staffs who knows about research, were very limited in quantity as well as their research capability; without any funds to support research activities; those who did research (especially clinical research were volunteers motivated by their own interests). The clinical research's results were not widely disseminated either across the country or into abroad, and unfortunately they were not utilized for health benefits.

According to the context of the Lao government policy, the improvement of the heath service delivery is a top priority of the public health investment program not only to improve social conditions for Lao People of all ethnic groups, but also to provide a basic for the long term sustainable economic growth of the nation.

In order to solve the above-mentioned problem as well as to implement the Lao government policy, the first five-year national health research master plan (1992-1996) has been developed with the technical support from the faculty of Public health Mahidol University, under the financial support of IDRC CANADA, and WHO. The main strategy of the first five-year national health research master plan was to build the research capacity in Lao P.D.R.

The second five-year national health research master plan (1997-2001) developed after the evaluation of the first five-year health research master plan implementation. Thus, the main strategy of the second five-year health research master plan is the strengthening of health research capacity in the country. Fortunately, since 1992 health research became one of the nine-work plans and one of the six main work plans of the Ministry of health at the present time.

## **2. The main activities related to the strengthening of health research capacity in Lao P.D.R. during the past five years are as follows:**

- Development of human resources for research (HRFR) that have been systematically implemented through various related training workshops such as (training of health research design and methodology, research projects management, data processing and analysis, management of health information system, health system / health policy research, participatory action research, and training of trainers for health research).
- Inclusion of Health research training curriculum program in the Faculty of Medical Sciences, National University of Laos.
- Conducting of some small pilot health system research projects and dissemination of the results through dissemination workshops.
- Collaborative research study between some countries in the region (Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Japan, and Sweden).
- Attending of research seminars, workshops, and conferences in the region and in other countries around the world.
- Regularly writing research articles, abstracts and reports in sciences and technology bulleting to promote research process and health.
- Very recently the promotion of ENHR mechanism in Lao P.D.R. supported by CORHED, subsequent the development of the first national health survey in Lao P.D.R. (Supported by various international donors agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, COHRED, GTZ, WFP, JICA, Lao-EU malaria program). Indeed it is a big promotion for the strengthening of health research capacity in Lao P.D.R.

Despite of the activities done in terms of health research capacity strengthening in the country, we do still confront to many constraints.

### 3. Main constraints of health research capacity strengthening in Lao P.D.R.

- Still lack of human resources for research both in quantity and quality;
- Low institutional capacity in both skills and equipment;
- Lack of research culture, including unstable of researchers, most of researchers considered research as difficult extra work;
- Lack of incentive system for researchers;
- Still high turn over rate among senior managers;
- Weak linkage between senior managers and researchers;
- Weak research network;
- Lack of documentation, references and publications;
- Lack of community awareness about the importance of research;
- Limited of financial support from both national and international donors agencies;
- No involvement of private sector;
- Foreign languages barrier of technical staffs.

### 4. Some lessons learned

1. Health research should be integrated at different level of health system as management tools.
2. Institutions and individuals should keep research activities as part of their own routine work in order to have commitments towards research activities, sustainability and gender issue should be also considered.
3. Health institutions at different level as well as policy and decision-makers should have participatory action in fostering, facilitating, and conducting research activities.
4. Incentive system should be developed in terms of researcher's benefits and research should be one of criteria for promoting researchers to higher level of administrative or technical position.

## 5. Challenges

Based on the health policy from now to the year 2020, it was clearly stated that health service should overcome less developed status and shift to civilization, and equity in health. When people are sick, they should receive an equal and quality health service. Health service network should then comprehensive extended to nationwide, for the benefit of all people, of all economic strata under the state governance in order to improve health standard of Lao people all minority ethnic groups.

Therefore, research is not only vital to understanding the distribution, and causes of public health problems, but also to determining the action to be taken, and to realizing the expected health gain. As Lao P.D.R. is being in the early phase of health transition, thus the constraints that have been discussed earlier and below present the big challenges for achieving health sector reform in the immediate future. The challenges for our country are:

- To find the best answer to the question " What are the best schemes for the strengthening of health research capacity in areas of health promotion and disease prevention, and the quality of health service? " within Lao national context.
- To strengthen and sustain international solidarity in supporting national research process.
- To improve health organization and management, and to develop health standard for Lao people, on evidence- based.
- To assure the equity in health and the quality of life of Lao people of all minority ethnic group as well.

## 6. Future needs

In order to meet a big challenge, and overcome all the above mentioned constraints, there are some needs in health research capacity strengthening in Lao P.D.R.; they include:

- Evaluation of the second five year national health research master plan, in general, and in particular to setting up the third five year national health research master plan according to a new paradigm.

- Re-training of health research design and methodology, and supporting research funding for new researchers under the supervision of senior researchers, ideally plus external technical assistance.
- Training course in specific areas ( epidemiology research, health system and policy research, health economic research, and behavioral research).
- Training of trainers for specific public health disciplines.
- Supporting postgraduate fellowship, and training.
- Development of incentive system for researchers.
- Formation of national research network.
- Effective research coordination, including research training curriculum program for all medical schools.
- Leadership development.
- Partnership and collaboration in research capacity strengthening both intra- and inter-countries.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

In order to enhance the strengthening of health system in Lao P.D.R. with more efficiency and efficacy, it is a pivotal task to strengthen institutional capacity. Therefore, it is necessary to put our great efforts in addition to the contribution both in technical and financial supports from international donor agencies, in particular the distinctive WHO role in helping research capacity strengthening effort, according to the above-mentioned future needs, and in cooperation with German government through GTZ, COHRED, and others concerned organizations. These will strengthen health research capacity in Lao P.D.R. more specifically in terms of health benefit of the Lao people of all minority ethnic groups, as well as integrating health research into the organization and management at different levels of the health system scientifically, systematically, strongly, and dynamically at the policy and operational levels nation wide.