

HIV/AIDS in Lao PDR and USAID Involvement

Despite high rates of HIV/AIDS in neighboring countries, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) remains a low HIV prevalence country. The first case of HIV was detected in 1990. Since then, HIV/AIDS has primarily affected populations at high risk of infection, including sex workers and their clients, and mobile cross-border populations, though at very low levels. Today, the majority of Laotians with HIV live close to the border with Thailand and China, and in the capital city of Vientiane. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS):

- An estimated 1400 adults and children — or 0.05 percent of the population — had been infected with HIV by the end of 1999. This stands in contrast to higher HIV prevalences in the neighboring countries of Burma (1.99 percent), Thailand (2.15 percent), and Cambodia (4.04 percent).
- 96 percent of reported HIV/AIDS cases occur through heterosexual contact.
- Estimates suggest that women and men are equally affected by HIV.

There is very little information regarding the HIV epidemic in Lao PDR. Few data on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are available, and behavioral surveillance is not routinely conducted. Available data from the early 1990s suggests that HIV has not gained a strong foothold in groups at high risk of infection. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, HIV prevalence has either remained at very low levels (<1 percent) or has not been detected at all in most population subgroups. According to the Census Bureau:

- A study conducted in Vientiane from January 1990 through April 1993 found a prevalence level of only 1 percent among sex workers.
- HIV prevalence among refugees was 0.3 percent during 1990-94.
- HIV prevalence among pregnant women attending a government run antenatal clinic in Vientiane increased from no cases detected in 1993 to 0.5 percent in 1996.
- HIV prevalence among blood donors in Vientiane rose from 0.2 percent to nearly 1 percent from 1992 to 1993. However, in 1994, there was no evidence of infection among blood donors tested at the Central Blood Bank.



A 2000 survey conducted by the Lao PDR Ministry of Health found high levels of reported condom use in commercial sex transactions. The survey indicated that nearly 75 percent of female sex workers said they always used condoms when having sex with clients. Among active, high-risk groups of clients, two-thirds of police and soldiers and three-quarters of truck drivers said they always used condoms with paid partners.

Despite Lao PDR's relatively low rates of HIV infection, the National Committee for the Control of AIDS (NCCA) reports that there have been significant increases in domestic and cross-border population movements, which could lead to increases in prevalence. The NCCA is also concerned that Lao PDR's transitional economy, major infrastructure development, and rapid regional integration will have an impact on HIV/AIDS in Lao PDR, as it has in neighboring countries, in concert with increased consumerism, drug use, and commercial sex. In the border areas of the Mekong region, where the incidence of HIV/AIDS is high, low-fee commercial sex is readily available.

NATIONAL RESPONSE

The Lao PDR National HIV/AIDS/STI Plan (1997-2001) was endorsed by a national advocacy workshop in November 1997. Long-term objectives aim to:

- Prevent further HIV transmission;
- Reduce the impact of HIV on people who are infected; and

- Minimize the negative social and economic consequences of HIV for families, communities, provinces, and the country as a whole.

The National Committee for the Control of AIDS (NCCA), established in 1998, is comprised of representatives from ministries throughout the government. The National AIDS Program (NAP), which oversees programs in information, education, and communication; training; surveillance; and counseling, is managed under the NCCA Secretariat. The HIV/AIDS Trust, also established in 1988, coordinates and mobilizes resources and facilitates management of the NAP. It is chaired by the Vice Minister of Health and is composed of senior government officials, United Nations officials, and a donor representative.

USAID SUPPORT

Although the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) does not have a Mission in Lao PDR, its Asia/Near East regional HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Program funds HIV prevention efforts in the border areas of Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. In FY 2001, USAID allocated US \$8 million for regional HIV/AIDS activities in Asia and the Near East. Regional HIV/AIDS activities include:

- Implementing HIV/STI prevention and treatment programs to reduce HIV/STI transmission in border areas;

Key Population, Health, and Socioeconomic Indicators		
Population	5.5 million	U.S. Census Bureau 2000*
Growth Rate	2.5%	U.S. Census Bureau 2000
Life Expectancy	Males: 51 Females: 55	U.S. Census Bureau 2000
Total Fertility Rate	5.2	U.S. Census Bureau 2000
Infant Mortality Rate	95 (per 1,000 live births)	U.S. Census Bureau 2000
Maternal Mortality Rate	650 (per 100,000 live births)	UNICEF 1999
GNP per capita (US\$)	\$280	World Bank 1999
Govt. health expenditure as % GDP	1.3%	World Bank 1997
Adult Literacy (% of people 15 and above)	Males: 74% Females: 48%	UNICEF 1999

* From U.S. Census Bureau 2000 HIV/AIDS country profiles, which include data from U.S. Census Bureau, Population Reference Bureau, UNAIDS and WHO.

- Strengthening and improving HIV/AIDS surveillance systems, and increasing the capacity of local governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to undertake behavioral and epidemiological surveillance;
- Bolstering capacity of communities and NGOs to provide HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support services to target populations, including truck drivers, seafarers, migrant workers and injecting drug users; and
- Supporting regional HIV/AIDS training and research efforts.

Since 1997, USAID has supported a range of activities through the **Family Health International (FHI)/IMPACT** regional Asia program, including direct support to non-USAID presence countries such as Lao PDR. Recent FHI/IMPACT activities in Lao PDR include:

- Conducting STI prevalence surveys and Behavioral Surveillance Surveys;
- Providing technical and capacity building assistance for surveillance activities to the National HIV/AIDS Program;
- Through CARE International, implementing the Border Areas HIV/AIDS Prevention Project (BAHAP) to reach high risk groups living along the Lao – Vietnam border;
- With UNDP, supporting a workshop on mobility and HIV to increase collaboration on HIV prevention for mobile populations in the region; and
- Supporting media training for enhanced HIV/AIDS reporting.

Prior to the 1998 initiation of **Population Services International's** (PSI) condom social marketing program in Lao PDR, all condoms in the country had to be imported from China, Vietnam, and Thailand. The primary objective of the PSI's program in Lao PDR is to ensure that affordable, branded condoms, with instructional inserts in the Lao language, are distributed widely in traditional (pharmacies, gen-

eral stores, kiosks, and street vendors) and non-traditional (discos, bars, hotels, and truck stops) outlets. PSI also carries out HIV/AIDS information and education campaigns through both mass and interpersonal media channels, such as video, radio, print, theater, music, and village-based awareness training.

Specific support for FHI and PSI activities in Lao under the USAID Asia/Near East regional program totaled \$320,000 in FY2001.

Other donors actively engaged in HIV/AIDS activities in Lao PDR include UNAIDS; the United Kingdom; the European Union; the United Nations Development Program; Japan; Australia; the Ford Foundation; Germany; the World Health Organization; and the World Bank.

CHALLENGES

Major constraints to HIV/AIDS prevention in Lao PDR include:

- UNAIDS and the U.S. Census Bureau report that there are almost no data on HIV in Laos. Few data on STIs are available, and behavioral surveillance is not routinely conducted.
- Almost all HIV/AIDS prevention activities are dependent on external financing and technical assistance.
- The majority of Laotians live in areas with little or no access to television, radio, or print media. There are no sustained HIV/AIDS education campaigns on television, radio, billboards, or in newspapers in the urban and peri-urban areas.
- According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is insufficient training of local staff in routine HIV/AIDS data collection. Patient counseling and education are also lacking.
- WHO also emphasizes that national support is needed in Lao PDR to facilitate sharing of HIV/AIDS information with neighboring countries.

SELECTED LINKS AND CONTACTS

1. National Committee for the Control of AIDS. Ministry of Health, Vientiane, Laos. Tel/Fax: (856) 21-214003.
2. UNAIDS/Laos. Khamlag Manivong, Country Programme Advisor. C/o UNDP Resident Representative, P.O. Box 345, Vientiane, Laos. Tel: (856) 21-213390/95, Fax: (856) 21-214819/20/21
3. Lao Red Cross. Bounlu Vongsavang, Health Division. B.P. 650, Vientiane, Lao PDR. Tel: (856) 21-222398/216610, Fax: (856) 21-212128.

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