

country advocacy brief



Lao PDR

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION: THE WAY FORWARD

Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is a landlocked country, mountainous and forested country and became a land linked country since 1997 as member of ASEAN with estimate population of 6.8 million, including approximately 33% of youth population (Age 10 – 24) (MOH, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2013; United Nation Population Division 2015). The majority of the population is young, with 60% of the over 6 million inhabitants estimated to be under 25 years of age, with an equal number of males and females. 70% of the young population resides in rural areas with the largest number in the major provinces of Savannakhet, Vientiane and Champasak provinces (LYU & UNFPA, 2014). Lao PDR has one of the most ethnically diverse

populations in the world, with 49 officially recognised ethnic groups and over 200 different languages. Lao PDR is considered a lower-middle income economy with GNI per capita of \$1,600 in 2014, is one of the faster growing economics in the East Asia and Pacific region (World Bank 2015).

The government of Lao PDR is committed to graduating from the list of least developed countries by 2020 to achieving the Goal of the VIII Fifth Year Plan of Socio-Economic Development Plan of the Lao PDR and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To fulfil these commitments, the MOH launched the Maternal and New child Health (MNCH) strategy and Planning Framework in order to reducing maternal mortality to 100 per 100,000 live births in 2025. Through the implementation, the MMR was reduced to 197 per 100,000 live births (WHO, 2015), however, MMR remains highest among ASEAN countries. According to Lao Social indicator survey in 2012, the adolescent birth rate seemed to be high among neighboring ASEAN countries with 94/1000 adolescents, with distinct differences between rural and urban areas (114 and 44 births per 1,000 adolescents, respectively). The HIV prevalence among adults 15 – 49 years was 0.2%; however, among young people the HIV prevalence between young female (0.2%) and young male (0.10%) is different. On the other hand, the percentage of contraceptive use among young males and females (age 15-19) is 26.4% with condom usage among sexual active males is 0.7% (MOH, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2013).

The Faculty of Postgraduate Studies had conducted several researches on adolescent and youth health and sexualities and advocacy for adolescent and youth health and sexuality with Ministry of Education (MOE). In addition, the Faculty of Postgraduate Studies also provide short term training on sexuality and teaching sexual health in the curriculum of Master of Public Health.

The Vientiane Women's and Youth Centre for Health and Development (VWYC) was established since 2001, under the Lao Women's Union Vientiane Capital. It represents the government in responding to the needs of the youth through raising awareness on SRH information, and providing access to SRH youth friendly services. There are five main activities: Outreach, Adolescent SRH and Life Skills Training, Hotline Counseling, Youth Clinic, Mass media.



Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the National Context

Laos has no Laws or policies on adolescents and young people, however, recently, the Lao Youth Union did carried out “adolescent and youth situation analysis in 2015. In 2003, the Government of Lao PDR introduced a life-skills curriculum to selected primary, lower and secondary schools in seven target provinces. Life-skills education was promoted as a teaching approach to address HIV and AIDS, reproductive health, STIs and drugs. By 2010, the programme had been implemented in 74 per cent of the nation’s secondary schools, located in 11 of its 17 provinces, with support from UNFPA and UNICEF. This implementation was focused along the country’s border due to its high HIV prevalence (UNICEF, 2011). The Ministry of Education (MoE) life-skills curriculum incorporated modules on HIV and AIDS, STIs, reproductive health and drug use into core curricula subjects such as natural science, biology and geography, and co-curricula subjects such as civics education and population studies, however, there are no specific subjects for sex education. Relevant information was added to textbooks and teachers’ manuals, supported by training for teachers in schools and in teachers’ training colleges. The modules were taught in the second semesters of Grade 8 and Grade 11. From 2003 to 2009, the project reached all secondary schools in the 11 target provinces, with more than 100,000 students participating each year.

Furthermore, in 2012, new SE Teachers guideline was developed lead by Ministry of Education and Sport (MOE), cooperated with Ministry of Health (MOH), UNFPA, and Vientiane Women and Youth Centre for Health and Development (VWYCHD). Since then, this SE teacher guideline was implemented under various section of MOE namely teaching and training institution, non-formal education, technical and vocational training and secondary School. It reaches both in and out of school youth, however, currently this SE teachers guideline is implemented in 4 target provinces (Savannakhet, Luangnumtha, Oudomxay and Phongsaly) (UNFPA, 2015).

An assessment of the life skill curriculum was found that the quality of both in-service and pre-service teachers’ training was inadequate; supervision for teachers in schools and the quality and availability of books and other educational materials were also inadequate. Some teachers did not use the life-skills method to teach the curriculum, and were still using read-out methods without student participation (UNESCO, 2009).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education According to International Standards and Where Does the Country Stand

According to the international standard, CSE is a strategy that was developed from a scientific evidence base that is coherent with the needs of particular social contexts (UNESCO, 2009). It aims to empower young people to achieve greater well-being – physically, socially, and mentally. There are seven basic elements of CSE, which must be covered by curricula at all times. These are gender, SRH and HIV, sexual citizenship rights, pleasure, freedom from violence, diversity and relationships. CSE should uphold the human rights of all people, especially adolescents and young people, thus enabling them to access their sexual and reproductive rights. The approach to CSE shall affirm young people’s sexuality and be sex-positive. It shall not be a fear-based model that considers young people as asexual beings. Instead, CSE shall reiterate and emphasize human sexuality and pleasure, especially young people’s entitlement to this.

In term of the Lao content of SE, SE teachers guideline is broader than previous SE curricula. There are six sections (4 units per section) including quality of life and family: relations and rights; Self-understanding and our body; Real life: pregnancy, mother and child care, abortion; Family planning; Sexuality and gender; Drugs and alcohol issues. Compared to the components of the comprehensive sexuality education described by ARROW (ARROW, 2015), the teachers guideline only covers five components of CSE, which are Gender Equality, Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV, Violence and Relationship, with no mention of pleasure and sexual right and sexual citizenship and diversity of sexuality. Moreover, this teachers guideline also provides information on youth friendly services which are being provided by the VWYC’s Hotline counselling number and Youth clinics. However, this referral is located only in Vientiane capital, Laos. HIV education is only integrated in the curricula at secondary level, hence the students from the primary level missed out this opportunities. There are some outreach activities providing sexuality and HIV education to out-of-school adolescents and youth, but the coverage of scope of sexuality and HIV education remains a huge challenge.

The sexuality and HIV education have included in the teacher training, however, the teachers themselves did not feel confident to deliver lessons of sexuality education. Teacher training and sensitization on the new and updated curriculum is not carried out frequently and hence the effective implementation of the curriculum remains a huge challenge. HIV education is only integrated in the curriculum at secondary level, hence the students from the primary level missed out this opportunities.

Recommendations for Policy and Programmatic Action

- Need for development of a National Youth Policy that also incorporates access to comprehensive sexuality education and access to youth friendly SRH services.
- Ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people and young people's participation in all decision-making spaces in the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, LYU, LWU and LAONCAW (the National Commission for the Advance the Women in Laos) that discuss policies and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education in Lao PDR.
- Ensure adolescents are entitled access to high-quality and non-judgemental SRH education and information and services, especially ethnic groups, people living in rural areas and those with lower education levels.
- Need to revise the CSE curriculum for the in-school and out-of school youth according to the socio-cultural context, age-appropriate to respond to the need of adolescent and young people's and hence inclusion of quality comprehensive education from the primary school level needs to be prioritized. Integrate life-skills education into national core curriculum, to ensure information is delivered consistently to all primary and secondary school students nationwide, and that teachers and schools are accountable for measurable results. Be ensuring that all seven essential elements to comprehensive sexuality education include in the curriculum.
- Invest in training and sensitisation programmes on adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health for teachers in order to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver CSE to adolescents and young people's need. Improve the quality of both in-service and pre-service teacher training. Place more focus on a student-centered approach to life-skills education. Support teachers in charge of the curriculum by, for example, providing supervision by core trainers and principals, and channels of communication between teachers and pupils.
- Strengthen existing youth networks and advocate for inclusion of underserved and marginalised youth groups in existing youth networks, decision making structures at sub-national and national level.
- Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation component in relevant policies and programmes to ensure their consistent and effective implementation. Develop monitoring tools and build the capacity of staff to use them. Incorporate indicators on life-skills education in the Education Management Information System.

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About Faculty of Postgraduate Studies and the Vientiane Women's and Youth Centre for Health and Development

The Faculty of Postgraduate Studies is one of the seven Faculties located in the University of Health Sciences, Vientiane Capital City, Laos and was established in 2001. The Faculty is responsible for higher education of different fields such as Residency Program, Master Program of Public Health, and Family Medicine and has a unique leadership position in postgraduate studies in the Field of Medicine and Public Health.

The Vientiane Women's and Youth Centre for Health and Development (VWYCHD) represents the government in responding to the needs of the youth through raising awareness on SRH information, and providing comprehensive, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services to young men and women. All services are provided by trained and experienced staff in a non-judgmental manner, in complete confidence. There are five main activities: Outreach, Adolescent SRH and Life Skills Training, Hotline Counseling, Youth Clinic, Mass media.

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