

Ministries join forces to achieve nutrition goals

Xayxana Leukai

The ministries of Health, Agriculture and Forestry, and Education and Sports will team up to promote nutrition schemes in support of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No. 1.

This development goal focuses on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.

Director General of the Hygiene and Health Promotion Department of the Ministry of Health, Dr Phath Keungsaneth, told *Vientiane Times* last week that Laos will not achieve MDG 1 this year as targeted.

But by working in groups from the sectors involved under a specific action plan, it is believed that concerted efforts will improve the health of Lao children.

"If we strictly follow the plan and have enough funding, we can reduce the number of stunted children by at least 4 percent annually. The figure now stands at 44.2 percent, but if we can fulfil our plan, by 2020 the percentage of stunted children should be down to 24.2 percent," Dr Phath said.

The three ministries have allocated duties and roles in support of the nutrition scheme. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has been charged with producing a sufficient quantity of nutritious food while the Ministry of Health will encourage parents to feed

their children nutritious food on a daily basis.

The Ministry of Education and Sports has been assigned to promote health and nutrition in schools and ensure that all schoolchildren eat nutritious food when in school. This includes teaching children about the value of nutritious food.

World Health Organisation Representative to Laos Dr Juliet Fleischl said that despite the overwhelming evidence of the importance of a healthy diet from the day we are born - starting with initiation of breastfeeding in the first hour of life - the nutrition agenda remains unfinished.

"Good nutrition also drives economic prosperity, as a strong and healthy workforce is the engine of development," she said.

Laos is in the midst of a "nutrition transition" from a situation in which undernutrition was the only nutrition concern for the country to one in which overnutrition and obesity and other nutrition related non-communicable diseases are becoming equally important.

The prevalence of chronic undernutrition, also called stunting, in children under the age of five years remains high at 44.2 percent.

This means that almost every second child in Laos is not getting the food it needs

to grow and develop healthily. On the other hand, rates of overweight and obesity are growing quickly. Recent data indicate that already over 25 percent of women of reproductive age are overweight.

There is a lot that can and should be done to address the double burden of malnutrition in Laos.

Food and nutrition security is determined by a number of factors, which includes access, availability, use and utilisation.

Malnutrition is not only about not having enough to eat, but when a diet lacks certain nutrients, undernutrition can occur. Poor access and availability to food of adequate nutritional quality led to many young children and adolescents being undernourished, with poor vitamin or mineral status.

The Lao Social Indicator Survey (2011-2012) shows that chronic malnutrition in children under five is linked to the education level of mothers. Some 58 percent of malnourished children are raised by mothers with no education, while 43 percent are raised by mothers with primary education.

"To enable all children to grow up healthily, we need the right policies and investment in place, so as to make dramatic progress and reduce the number of stunted children in the country in this generation," said Dr Fleischl.