

Lao children not receiving adequate nutrition

Times reporters

Overall Laos isn't lacking in food but many children aren't getting enough nutrients because of poor eating habits and attitudes, according to a leading official.

While some countries in Africa suffer from inadequate nutrition caused by a lack of food, that's not the case in Laos where there is sufficient.

Deputy Director of the Nutrition Centre under the Ministry of Health, Dr Latthiphone Oula, told *Vientiane Times* on Monday that children were not receiving proper nutrition because parents were choosing the wrong sorts of food to feed them.

"As a result some children are below international standards when it comes to height and weight," she said.

Statistics for Lao children on the whole show they fall below international standards alongside other regional nations like Timor Leste and Cambodia, while in other countries like Vietnam and Thailand children's growth rates are improving.

Based on the centre's figures, 44 percent of children in Laos do not receive sufficient nutrients and 27 percent are underweight by international standards.

However, these statistics were compiled three years ago and up-to-date data are not available until next year's survey, which is undertaken every four years.

The Ministry of Health will work with four or five other ministries in carrying out the survey.

Dr Latthiphone expects the results will show a reduction in the number of Lao children who are underweight and below international standards for height as many parents are becoming more aware and teaching their children to eat healthy food following the ministry's health advice.

It is not only children in remote areas that are malnourished. Some children in more developed urban areas are also below average for height and weight because their parents don't feed them nutritious meals.

Some children are given

money to buy a healthy meal at school but that's not always the case, with parents not checking if their child is spending the money wisely.

The Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Sports, and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and international agencies are now working hard to provide adequate nutrition to people living in remote areas.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is also helping people living in rural areas with crop planting, animal husbandry and fish breeding in order to improve nutrition.

The US Embassy to Laos announced at the end of last year the start of a US government-funded US\$6 million (over 48 billion kip) programme to improve the health of women and children in Laos.

Over the next three years, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Nurture initiative will help to reduce child nutritional stunting and improve household nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene practices.