



Address by

Ms Sonam Yangchen Rana, UN Resident Coordinator

On the Occasion of the Consensus Meeting on the National Nutrition Strategy and National Plan of Action

Vientiane, 27 October 2009

Your Excellency Prof.Dr.Eksavang Vongvichit, Vice-Minister of Health

Distinguished members of the Government

Members of Donors, IFIs, Bilaterals, and INGOs

UN colleagues.

On behalf of the United Nations Country Team in the Lao PDR it is my great privilege to make this opening statement for the Consensus Meeting on the National Nutrition Strategy and National Plan of Action on Nutrition.

We are gathering here today to review what the nutrition team of this country has defined over the past years as a roadmap for achieving Millennium Development Goal 1 and ending malnutrition in Lao PDR. And we are gathering here today to endorse this document and to commit ourselves to continue the fight against malnutrition.

As we all know malnutrition means much more than a child being hungry. It means a child loses the human right to dignity and social protection. It means a child will suffer from irreversible damage as its brain will not be able to develop the cognitive functions it needs to achieve its full potential. It means a child will not develop physically to be as productive as it could. It means that even if this child gets the best education it possibly could,

it won't be able to absorb what it hears as it cannot concentrate. And it means that the children of this child – some 25 years in the future – will not have the chances they could have had.

As I speak here today, 40% of all children in Lao PDR are still malnourished.

This represents a “chronic crisis” that needs to be urgently addressed. The impacts of malnutrition perpetuate poverty and threaten the goals of this country – including achieving the MDGs by 2015 and exiting LDC status by 2020.

As a response to this threat, the Government of Lao PDR has acted bold and I would like to express my deepest respect and acknowledgement for the achievements until today. Last year the Government of Lao PDR issued the first ever National Nutrition Policy. Based on this document, the first ever National Nutrition Strategy and the first ever National Plan of Action on Nutrition have been developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Health in a truly cross-sectoral, inter-agency effort.

Not only do these documents show us how committed the Government of Lao PDR is to address the problem of malnutrition. They also provide us for the first time with a comprehensive overview of what needs happen to break the current trends in malnutrition.

However, with the MDG hunger goal seriously off track and 99 interventions to be implemented across a highly fragmented stakeholder landscape, the implementation of this strategy and plan of action will be a great challenge. Current financial and non-financial capacity for nutrition and food security is extremely limited. Information systems and data availability is inadequate. The target population is highly dispersed and diverse in terms of language, geographic zones, ethnicity, and cultural habits. The quality, coverage, and utilization of health and other nutrition-related services are poor.

Nevertheless, various countries that faced similar challenges – such as neighboring Vietnam, Thailand or most recently Senegal – have demonstrated that with the necessary political will and a decisive change from “business as usual” it is possible to successfully implement such a comprehensive national nutrition strategy.

It is evident that now – with the policy framework to address malnutrition in place – Lao PDR has reached a critical tipping point: If the country takes immediate, decisive and integrated action, Lao PDR can become one of the great success stories in terms of significantly reducing malnutrition and achieving MDG 1. However, if this window of opportunity is missed, there is a major risk of losing broad stakeholder support and momentum in this common effort.

At this crucial point in time, strong government leadership and commitment from all partners is essential. Speaking on behalf of the UN, I can assure you our fullest support in the implementation of the national nutrition strategy and plan of action.

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Notes:

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The United Nations Country Team in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is committed to supporting the efforts of the Government to improve the life of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable. We shall continue to work closely with the Government and all development partners for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Our collective endeavour is to assist the people of Lao PDR to achieve progress and better standards of living for all.