CONNECT Initiative

Building sustainable primary health care in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic through community engagement and trust building

Location
Vientiane Capital, Bokeo, Bolikhamsai, Champasack, Houaphan, Vientiane, Xaisomboun and Xieng Khouang provinces, Lao People’s Democratic Republic

Organization(s)
- Ministry of Health (MOH)
- Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA)
- Mother and Child Health Center (MCHC)
- Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute (Lao TPHI)
- Vientiane Capital Health Department
- WHO Lao People’s Democratic Republic
- European Union (EU)
- Luxembourg
- Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (KOFIH)
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Date
2020–2022 (pilot project)
2023–present (scaling pilot programme to additional sites)

Focus Area
Maternal and child health care and COVID-19

Community Engagement Approach
An integrated and systemic intervention to build trust and strengthen connections between communities, health centres and local governance structures. Key activities included: (a) local governance strengthening workshops, (b) participatory planning and community engagement workshops, (c) capacity development for health centres, and (d) supportive supervision. Stakeholders were diverse and ranged from villagers to health centre staff and local governance leaders for the purpose of co-design and collective implementation of health action plans.

This case study was one of four country projects in the WHO Community Engagement Research Initiative, a multi-country effort that aimed to design, implement and research relationship-focused community engagement interventions in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
Background and context

Despite recent progress, inequities remain for health outcomes in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, especially in terms of maternal and child health in rural areas. This is associated with constraints in access to health care and lack of human resources for essential health services. On top of this, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic exacerbated inequities around essential health-care provision, including immunization outreach activities, antenatal care, delivery with skilled birth attendants, family planning and admission to health-care facilities.

COVID-19 also underscored the need for multisectoral collaboration and stimulated greater government attention towards health. This included decentralizing public health responses in the country, which granted local authorities and communities greater ownership in the implementation of primary health care.

At the same time, the pandemic demonstrated the importance of fostering meaningful and positive relationships between villagers and health services, and the value of local ownership of decision-making for overall community health. There has been a unique opportunity to strengthen the relationship between local governance and service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic by fostering context-specific, grounds-up approaches that draw upon existing community structures and capacities.

The community engagement intervention

In response to these challenges and opportunities, and building upon years of relationship building across institutions, the World Health Organization (WHO) – alongside funding from the European Union (EU), Luxembourg, the Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (KOFIH) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – supported partnering and collaboration among a coalition of government partners, including the Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute (Lao TPHI), Mother and Child Health Center (MCHC), Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and Vientiane Capital Health Department. The purpose of this coalition was to improve disease prevention, surveillance and community preparedness for COVID-19, and increase the uptake of essential maternal and child health care through improved trust. Key questions of concern were:

1. Why do some health facilities have higher service utilization rates compared to others?
2. What are the enabling factors for building trusting relationships and good cooperation between health providers, communities and local government?
3. What are the enabling factors for increased uptake of four essential health services (family planning, antenatal care, delivery with skilled birth attendants and vaccination)?

From January to September 2021, the Lao team developed a community engagement research programme that embodied a collaborative and iterative learning process drawing upon the lived experience, expertise and scope of all stakeholders. The programme included the following efforts:

Establishing a mutually shared understanding of context and key issues through meaningful engagement

- Held consultations with local government stakeholders from four provinces to learn about local governance realities during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Created a participatory method toolbox of research and engagement activities, and developed capacity for government staff and Lao TPHI master’s students through a collaborative process.
- Conducted qualitative community engagement research in rural communities in Bokeo province to learn why some health centres were experiencing better uptake of essential health services than others.
- Conducted qualitative analysis of research results to identify key enabling factors for the uptake of essential health services and the importance of relationships.

Designing and implementing a comprehensive community engagement intervention

- Co-developed a community engagement intervention model called CONNECT (Community Network Engagement for Essential Healthcare and COVID-19 Responses through Trust) based on research findings, methods and reflections by researchers and diverse stakeholders.
- Tested and implemented this intervention model (participatory community-based health planning workshops) with 12 communities and six health centres in three provinces, leading to improved relationships and the development of joint community and health centre action plans.

“At the other meetings they would just talk about government direction and developments. But at this workshop there are relationships and empathy between the participants, and we can exchange our experiences.”

Local community member
Strengthening learning and implementation through supportive supervision

- Provided virtual supportive supervision to follow and support the roll-out of joint community and health centre action plans.
- Assessed initial outcomes from feedback interviews and documentation of actions shared in virtual supportive supervision groups.

From the outset, addressing sustainability and scaling of promising practices

- Analysed and collectively reflected on the data, using findings and insights in decision-making as well as ongoing adjustments to implementation of activities, including refining facilitator trainings for provincial and district staff to lead future processes.
- Planned the intervention’s scale-up to other provinces and secured continued commitment from coalition partners.

The research and intervention model were based on a participatory action research approach that encouraged all stakeholders to identify clearly articulated roles and work collaboratively to build healthier communities. The approach aimed to identify and draw on resources that were already present among stakeholders and within the local communities they served. They thus empowered each other at all levels to identify and use their existing capacities and strengths to create a shared sense of ownership for community health.

Moreover, the methods aimed to create safe spaces, develop trust and relationships, and reduce the power differential between community members, health staff, local authorities, researchers and facilitators. The methods included, among others, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, drama and role-play techniques, community mapping, teamwork activities, participant observation, community visits, self-reflective positivity exercises, peer video-making and consensus-building joint health action planning.

Outcomes and results

Community stakeholders and facilitators from the central, provincial and district levels stated that this engagement approach and way of working was completely new to them. Their reaction was enthusiastic and positive. The initiative documented high acceptance, satisfaction and feasibility of the newly implemented community engagement interventions for vulnerable populations in local contexts. Researchers reported improved trust and relationships between village residents, health-care workers, and local and provincial district officers, which is expected to improve health service uptake and subsequent health outcomes.

For example, in ethnically diverse Bor Village, in the central province of Bolikhamsai:

- use of antenatal care increased from 41% in 2020 to 80% post-intervention in 2021 during a similar three-month period, and
- deliveries taking place at the village health centre increased from 12% in the same period in 2020 to 34% in 2021.

Health-care staff reported visits to the clinic by pregnant members of ethnic minority groups who almost never visit the clinic. One woman – pregnant with her eighth child – gave birth for the first time in the health centre. Another woman who had recently given birth at the health centre said:

“The staff pay more attention to patients compared to before, and during my delivery and after they took good care of me, so I felt comfortable.”

Local community member
When asked about the improvements, the health centre team reported improved relationships, better understanding of individual roles within the local sector, and better cooperation between authorities, groups and organizations in the community. They highlighted efforts by the Lao Women’s Union and other groups to encourage pregnant women to receive health care, emphasizing the availability of no-cost birth services, stronger efforts by health centre staff to support junior staff, and improved interactions and communication with patients.

In some directly supported communities such as ethnic minority groups in Xieng Khouang province with historically low vaccine coverage, the uptake of people receiving the COVID-19 vaccine for the first time increased by two and a half compared to previous visits. CONNECT also encourages village representatives to build a supportive environment for the families affected by COVID-19 and to reduce stigma. In Vientiane Capital, facilitators observed a change of approach in the way that village authorities acted towards families who were infected, especially in terms of providing psychosocial support and reducing stigma.

In Bolikhamsai, the head of one family who had taken part in the workshop described his experience of being quarantined at home and the support they received from the community:

“*We are overwhelmed by offers of support from the village and local authorities – we have received food, water and other household essentials... I feel this is a good test of what we have learned from the workshop.*”

Local community member

### Lessons learned

- **Trust and communication between health-care users and providers, as well as the quality of relationships among stakeholders, is essential in influencing the design, delivery and experience of primary health care.**

- **Action-based participatory research is an essential element of community engagement processes, ensuring real-time implementation of research findings in real-world settings. Capturing lived experience and convening community conversations can yield critical insights into the needs of directly affected stakeholders. It provides a mechanism to discuss and agree on pathways forward. Case scenario and role-play methods are an especially effective way for communities to plan and respond to COVID-19 and other health issues.**

- **Shared decision-making structures between communities and health-care workers – where local communities set priorities for change that are then shared with district authorities – is an effective way to empower specific, achievable actions for improved community health.**

- **Virtual supportive supervision and learning is an effective assets-based approach to developing and maintaining relationships and building trust to address and promote the well-being of mothers and children in communities for long-term positive health outcomes.**

- **Adaptive leadership is essential when working in a multisectoral environment. Learning how to motivate, organize and support each other, and adapt working styles and actions based on immediate and emerging needs, becomes a necessary skill set and competency across all sectors, especially during a pandemic. Leaders need to model effective collaboration, which is built upon shared values, compassion, encouragement, a clearly articulated vision and alignment in purpose.**

- **Investing in strengthening local governance is crucial for structural and sustained change. Capacity-building for provincial and district stakeholders through well-facilitated experientially based training helped improve mutual understanding and the quality of their relationships with communities by learning how to listen and make meaning together.**

- **The study’s interactive and reflective processes led to the sharing of significant learnings among local, national and global public health stakeholders, thereby contributing to an emerging body of knowledge and practice for understanding how and why community engagement works.**

“This research gives a chance for prototyping and testing different ways of ‘building relationships between stakeholders’ in ways we have never done before.”

Lao TPHI team member
Next steps

Country-led national scaling of the CONNECT approach will be implemented over the next few years. Key considerations include:

- Maintaining and strengthening ongoing collaboration among diverse stakeholders so that new ways of working become the norm.
- Balancing scalability and flexibility so that interventions address context-specific needs alongside continuous evolution and financial sustainability.
- Sustaining ownership at the district and provincial levels, which is crucial for sustainability. This includes providing facilitator trainings and resources, combined with supportive supervision.
- Assessing longer-term outcomes while expanding to other geographical areas. A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan will be conducted from 2022 to 2023 to measure intervention impacts, including key equity measures and changes in trust.
- Continuing to document and share lessons learned, with the country team preparing videos, conference abstracts and publications to support others interested in leading community engagement efforts in their local contexts.

“I could see the change in motivation – not only from the health centre staff but the community as well. During and after the workshop, they really committed themselves – ‘I’m going to do this.’ It’s really amazing to see the changes in just a short period of time… so I want to continue using this approach.”

Local government facilitator