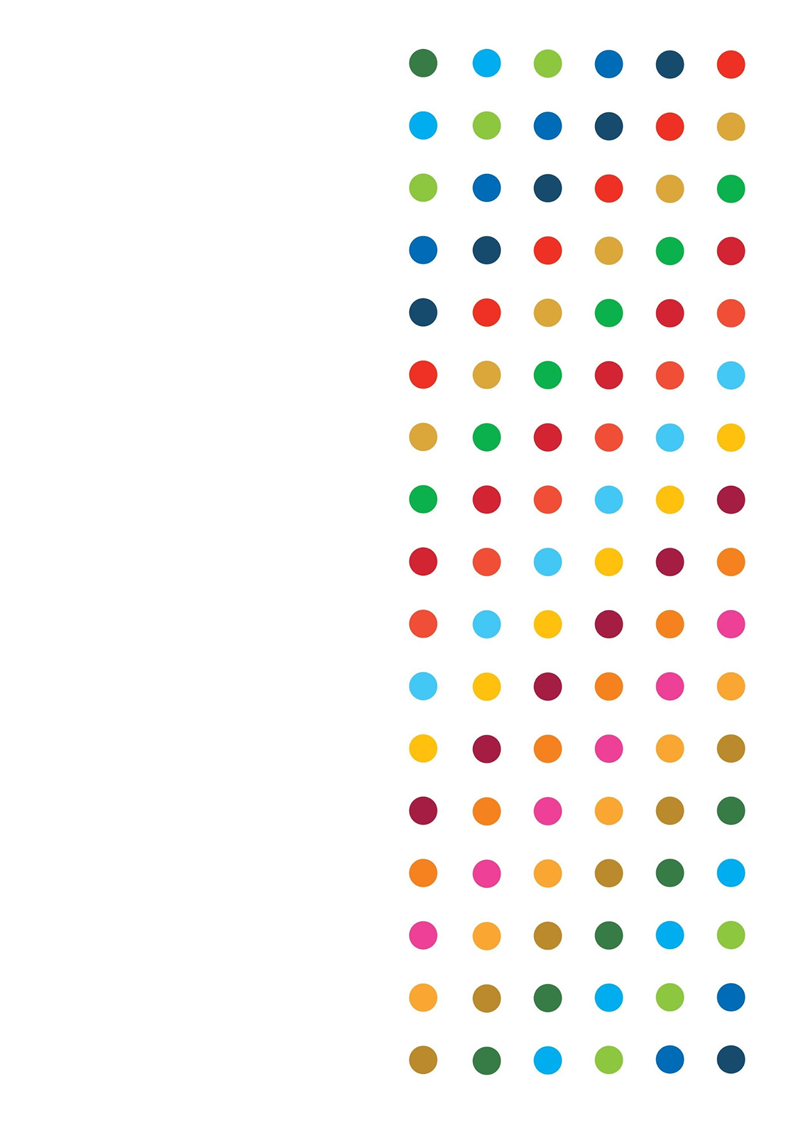


**UNCT Lao PDR**

**JOINT RESPONSE**

To the Joint Questionnaire on COVID-19 and Human Rights by the Special Procedures Mandate Holders

*22 June 2020*



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# GENERAL QUESTIONS

## Impact on Human Rights

* **Please explain the impact of the pandemic on the enjoyment of human rights and what actions have been taken by the State to respect, protect and fulfil human rights?**

On 24 March 2020, the Ministry of Health announced two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country. Since 24March, there have been **19 confirmed cases** (**0 death)** reported in Lao PDR, with the last reported case to date on 11 April. All confirmed cases were isolated in designated hospitals, and **all have been discharged**.

To reduce the severity of the pandemic, **on 29 March 2020** the Prime Minister’s Order No.06/PMO on the **nation-wide lockdown** was released for the period until **4 May 2020**, prohibiting the population from leaving their homes except to purchase essential goods, to visit hospitals and other limited tasks authorized by the Government. All international border crossings were officially closed, with travel – both international as well as inter-provincial – also curtailed for most purposes, although commercial transport and diplomatic/humanitarian entries and exits were exempted. Other restrictions were put in place, including the closing of educational institutions, most businesses including entertainment venues and night markets.

Cultural and social activities of more than 10 persons, such as traditional festivals, Lao New Year, religious activities, weddings, and parties, were prohibited. Funerals and alms offerings for the deceased involving more than 10 people could continue while applying the necessary preventive measures. The lockdown restrictions were in force during the Pii Mai (Lao New Year), the major traditional festival, causing the cancellation of the traditional New Year ceremonies at most Buddhist Temples.

All **Lao students** enrolled in pre-primary to upper secondary education (1,440,733 – 52% girls) have been affected by **school closures on** **19 March – 2 June 2020.** The closing of schools has increased some child protection needs: (1) missing out on school meals, (2) disrupted learning outcomes, as well as (3) impact to children’s mental health, (4) increased risk of violence against children when confined at home, (5) increased risk of child labour and child marriage.

The quarantine and lockdown implemented as part of responses to COVID-19 in Lao PDR have been impacting the **utilization of essential health services**. Essential reproductive, maternal, and child health services (e.g., antenatal care, health facility delivery, postnatal care, and immunizations) have significantly dropped in January-March 2020 compared to that of the first quarter of the previous three years. This tendency holds in the majority of the Provinces of the country. The decrease in service uptake in health facilities and immunizations is also being observed.

Since 19 March 2020, increased numbers of **returning migrants** have been identified at international border crossings between Lao PDR and Thailand, due to the significant shocks and closures in manufacturing industries in economic hubs like Bangkok. The Lao PDR’s Government responded to the increased number of returning laborers by also **closing traditional/informal border crossings** as of 20 March 2020. In addition, Government-led Quarantine Centers were activated to ensure that the 14-day quarantine periods among returning laborers were upheld, irrespective of one’s medical history or point of origin.

With the official border crossings remaining closed, there was a reduction in Lao Nationals entering through formal checkpoints. However, there was a subsequent increase in crossings at less monitored unofficial border crossing points in March-April. According to the official national statistics, as of 31 May 2020, **134,404** **Lao migrants** arrived back in Lao PDR from Thailand. With assistance from Thailand’s Authorities, migrant workers were upheld at rudimentary camps across the border in Thailand as the large numbers of returnees in March-April overwhelmed the Lao immigration Authorities and provisions were required to assist in the additional health screening protocols.

As of 30 April 2020, **1,647 Government-led Quarantine Centers** for returning laborers were established across all 18 Provinces, with most of them based in schools. The Quarantine Centres have not been not centrally managed and do not fall organizationally under any specific Ministry. The management of the Centres is based on the level of interest and capacity of the Local Authorities.

The lockdown in Thailand led to significant increases in unemployment and loss of income for the most vulnerable. The returning migrant population resulted in an estimated reduction of up to US$125 million in remittances, affecting recipient household income, particularly in rural areas.[[1]](#footnote-2) The returning laborers have also caused compounding effects on local labor markets and services, placing additional pressure on the **informal workforce in Lao PDR**, already estimated at 82.7% of total employment.[[2]](#footnote-3) High informality presents a big administrative and financial challenge for the extension of social insurance coverage.

**Women** comprise 64% of **health workers** in Lao PDR, including midwives, nurses, pharmacists, and community health workers on the frontline.[[3]](#footnote-4) With this, women are more likely to be exposed to the virus and experience an increased health risk. Additionally, women have also been burdened by an increase in unpaid domestic work and care for their children during school closures.

The decrease of reach/access to essential health care and services has led to projections on the COVID-19 impact showing that **maternal deaths** in Lao PDR could increase from 286 to 546 (best case scenario) or even to 684 (worst case scenario) in 2020. Over 38% of maternal deaths occur among young women aged 15-24 years.

**Economic challenges** associated with COVID-19 disproportionately affected **women** in Lao PDR, as they are often occupied in the lower rungs or informal dimensions of the labor market and in more vulnerable sectors, including informal, unpaid family workers and small agricultural producers. Among women in the labor force in Lao PDR, 61% worked as unpaid family workers with no paid sick leave or family leave, no health insurance, and social security. Only one in four working women in Lao PDR is reported to hold a bank account, which indicates a lack of autonomy and control in the way women earn a living.[[4]](#footnote-5)  This is also an effect of the low levels of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) in Lao PDR rendering banking services more difficult to obtain.

The lockdown and the subsequent loss of livelihoods and/or household incomes can further perpetuate abuse and the risk of violence on children and women, endangering their lives and mental health and wellbeing in the long-term. The first Lao National Survey on **gender-based violence (GBV)**, released in 2016, revealed that one in three Lao women in a relationship had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence at the hands of their partner. The Survey showed that 28.6% of women who encountered physical and/or sexual violence sought help from local Authorities, 18.9% from local leaders, and 11.7% a Village Mediation Unit (VMU). Only a handful of women approached the Lao Women’s Union, police, or healthcare facilities.[[5]](#footnote-6) Quarantine and isolation policies, coupled with financial stress on families, individuals, and communities, have been exacerbating the conditions for women already vulnerable to domestic violence. Analytics show a potential 30% **increase in domestic violence** during the pandemic. Moreover, care and support to GBV survivors have been disrupted, where health service providers are overburdened.

The **adolescent birth rate** in Lao PDR is 83 births per 1,000 adolescent girls 15-19 years, which is the highest in the region. The Lao Social Indicator Survey II shows that 23.5% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years are married/in-union, and 41.8% of adolescent girls in the same age group are out of school. It is expected that COVID-19 related disruptions will result in a significant rise in unintended pregnancies. Furthermore, 42.4% of girls and 43.2% of boys aged 5-17 years were involved in child labor, and 41.8% of girls aged 15-17 years were not in school.[[6]](#footnote-7) The COVID-19 pandemic has put adolescent girls and boys, especially from ethnic groups and poor households, at risk of dropping out of schools and engaging in economic activities as child laborers.

46% of people living with **HIV/AIDS** (PLWH) in Lao PDR who did not have access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) before the COVID-19 outbreak and compromised their immune systems are facing a significant risk of developing severe or even deadly COVID-19 infection. Those 54% that had access to ART before the COVID-19 pandemic also became vulnerable during the COIVD-19 lockdown due to the situation of movement restrictions and, therefore, disruptions to ART drug delivery. 839 people living with HIV/AIDS around the country missed clinical appointments in April 2020 due to the disruptions to routine care.

Out of the total population, the Lao ethnic group accounted for 53%, followed by Khamu (11%), Hmong (9%), and other **ethnic groups** (27%)[[7]](#footnote-8) with a higher proportion residing in remote areas. Significant distances from basic health services and Government support structures, limited access to modern technologies, and language barriers have been posing a health threat to the ethnic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lao PDR.

In Lao PDR, among the population five years and above, the overall prevalence of **disabilities** is 2.8%, with 2.5% in urban areas, 2.9% in rural areas, and 3.3% in rural areas without roads.[[8]](#footnote-9) However, these figures are likely to be underreported, with the estimated global average at approximately 15%. Low quality or inaccessible healthcare services, particularly in the situation of COVID-19 lockdown, as well as lack of resources to cover their basic needs and limited access to employment, are resulting in increasing vulnerability.

Lao PDR’s agriculture sector employs over 70% of the population[[9]](#footnote-10). An estimated 551,000 people (35.8% of the labor force) work in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, the majority of it being in the informal economy. An additional estimated 1.5 million engage in subsistence agriculture. **Small farmers** were heavily affected by the 2018/2019 floods and drought in Lao PDR and continue to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 socio-economic shocks. The social impact of the recent natural disasters has led to the loss of livelihoods, forced migration, increased indebtedness, long-term unemployment, and malnutrition, especially for children and young adults, the poor, subsistence farmers, women, and other disadvantaged groups. They have not fully recovered from previous disasters, and now face challenges of both the COVID-19 crisis and potential flood risks with the overlapping monsoon season.

The COVID-19 pandemic can push 96,000 and 214,000[[10]](#footnote-11) **additional people into poverty and subject children and adolescents, especially from poor families and ethnic backgrounds, to multiple deprivations** that can have long-term consequences for productivity and human capacity development. The Lao Social Indicator Survey II shows that infants and children younger than five years were already vulnerable to malnutrition, reflected in prevalent anemia (over 60%), stunted growth (33%), and being underweight (21%).[[11]](#footnote-12) These rates are significantly higher among poor families and ethnic groups, and in rural areas – children in the poorest households are 3.5 times more likely to be stunted than those in the richest households.

The initial data on **food security and agriculture** during COVID-19 in Lao PDR indicates that restrictions in movement by traders, middlemen, and farmers had a visible impact on the sales of farmers produce and on the availability and prices of some food products in several Provinces. 41% of Lao farmers believe that during the lockdown, food availability was 10-50% less, and 6% believed that it was reduced by even more than 50%. The overall income for farmer households declined as a result of both the reduced volume of sales and price fluctuations.[[12]](#footnote-13)

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Following the ASEAN Special Declaration on COVID-19 dated 14 April 2020 that pledges its members, including Lao PDR, *“to remain united and vigilant against COVID-19 [...], protect people’s lives and livelihoods, maintain socio-economic stability while sustaining ASEAN Community building momentum for sustainable development, inclusive growth and leaving no one behind (LNOB),”*[[13]](#footnote-14) and the principles of COVID-19 response by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) that highlights the integration of human rights value in their COVID-19 response,[[14]](#footnote-15) the Lao PDR Government’s actions in order to respect, protect and fulfill human rights include the following:

**Social Protection:**

* Free testing and treatment for those affected by COVID-19; increased trainings for medical personnel, volunteers, military, police and concerned officials; procurement of medical equipment, medication, and protective gears; improved and increased venues for quarantining, isolating and treatment; budgeting for effective and efficient implementation of the work including the extra budget for home visits and outreach; coordination with concerned agencies to mobilize necessary assistance and resources;[[15]](#footnote-16)
* In response to the return of migrant workers in large numbers, the Government of Lao PDR has established several Quarantine Centres. Local Governments have the responsibility and accountability to ensure that these centers function effectively;
* An amount of LAK 52 billion (0.03% of GDP) has been allocated for prevention and control measures.[[16]](#footnote-17)
* Through Prime Minister’s Order No. 6, dated 29 March 2020, a proposed 13-measure economic stimulus package was endorsed by the Cabinet; the measures include establishing an Ad-Hoc Committee to address the economic impact of COVID-19; [[17]](#footnote-18)
* Income tax exemptions, profit tax exemption for microenterprises, duty fee exemption, deferment of tax collection from tourism-related businesses, and postponement of mandatory contributions to social security by affected businesses;[[18]](#footnote-19)
* The national Social Security Administration/Fund’s Policy No.1682 on Social Protection in response to COVID-19 dated 10 June 2020 identified financial support to registered workers who have lost jobs and unemployed during the pandemic;

**Women:**

* Essential personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies were provided to the frontline health workforce; PPE was also procured for midwives and health workers who provide support to pregnant women, lactating, and adolescents;
* Guidelines were developed to support midwives in providing maternal health services in the community through outreach, and home visits, the COVID-19 Guidance for Maternity Services is being translated into the Lao and ethnic languages; the Ministry of Health was supported in data collection of pregnant women, children and adolescents in communities, including those in temporary Quarantine Centers; specific support for pregnant female migrants in quarantine and under surveillance has been strengthened;
* Technical standards for GBV prevention and sanitary supplies, as well as soaps, were made available for the Quarantine Centers;
* With the increase in protection and gender-based violence issues, 17 hotlines providing remote counselling and psycho-social support have been established; the availability of existing counselling services was increased to respond to needs during COVID-19 by extending office hours and promoting new service means (online chat and mobile phone calls); training sessions on psycho-social support were provided to the counsellors of Lao Women’s Union, Lao Youth Union, and Vientiane Youth Center; additional technical resources and materials were provided;

**Children:**

* In response to school closures, the Ministry of Education has improved home-learning materials, education webpages and learning programs for TV and radio;
* An Education COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan was developed by the Ministry of Education and Sports and the education partners, which included detailed planning for re-opening of schools following the global Framework released by UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank; disinfection of the schools used as Quarantine Centers has been identified as the priority before the school re-opening; the “Back to School” Campaign of the Ministry of Education and Sports targeted an improved learning environment through more comprehensive support to children, including WASH facilities, health, nutrition, protection, psycho-social, and other support; schools were supported in ensuring conditions that reduce disease transmission, including access to soap and clean water for safe handwashing, procedures on when staff or students feel unwell, protocols on social distancing and good hygiene practices;
* The Government has been implementing a child grants programme targeted at 1,400 pregnant women and children between 0-12 months;
* The Ministry of Education and Sports is also being supported by the UN Country Team in the distribution of food stocks for school feeding in 925 schools across eight Provinces as take-home rations; a total of approximately 943 metric tons of rice, lentils, fortified cooking oil, and canned fish are being distributed starting from the last week of May; the take-home rations support households access to food, especially for young students after the period of lockdown, though until the end of the school year;
* The Ministry of Health has launched a mobile application called “Noi Yakhoo” to provide basic sexual and reproductive health information to adolescents and young people and to develop referral linkages with adolescent helplines for in-depth information;
* The UN Country Team advocacy on the protection of vulnerable children and appeal to the Juvenile Justice Coordination Committee on the release of children in detention has led to the Government’s decision on not to arrest juvenile delinquents of minor offences in Lao PDR during the COVID-19;

**Migrants:**

* TheLao Authorities have been screening all returnees at Points of Entry (POEs) since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020; all the returning migrants undergo body temperature check and are transferred to the Quarantine Centers for 14 days health monitoring; basic food and water are provided in those facilities;
* TheLao migrants returning from neighboring countries were provided with Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials on basic hygiene practices, precautions, and national regulations, as well as water and food;
* The Ministry of Health developed guidance on the management of returning migrant workers and disinfection of the non-health sectors to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the community through quarantine measures; this guidance has been applied to Quarantine Centres throughout the country, both active and those that have now returned to normal such as schools;
* To analyze the urgent and future needs for the returning migrants, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare is conducting a rapid assessment across all 18 Provinces of Lao PDR;
* With the support of the UN Country Team, the Government equipped 1,500 Quarantine Centres with WASH and protection services on minimizing gender-based violence;

**People living with HIV/AIDS:** The Government has also set up a community mechanism for antiretroviral (ARV) drugs dispensing for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH); the mechanism engages a peer and/or community-based supporter to provide access to the essential drugs to PLWHs during the nation-wide lockdown.

**Ethnic Groups:**

* A Prime Ministerial Decree No. 207 on Ethnic Groups was released during the COVID-19 pandemic and provided the officials with guidelines for the regulation of ethnic groups; endorsed on 30 March 2020, individuals and all types of organizations, in both the public and private sectors, are encouraged to engage in the affairs of the country’s ethnic groups; the Decree states that ethnic groups must be governed using principles that ensure unity and equality; in addition, all ethnic groups should be permitted to practice their special customs and traditions in accordance with the country’s constitution and laws; the Decree bans all forms of discrimination against ethnic groups while calling for all ethnic groups to be provided with equal opportunities for development and participation in national protection and development;[[19]](#footnote-20)
* The Ad-Hoc Committee Communications Task Force’s information dissemination on COVID-19 to the ethnic communities with limited access to modern technologies and/or language/communication barriers is being translated into Lao ethnic languages such as Akha, Hmong, Khmou, Souay, Thaidam, broadcasted through the Community Radio stations in five Provinces and displayed on distribution trucks traveling to 2,000 villages;

**Religious Communities:**

* As 65% of the Lao PDR’s population are Buddhist[[20]](#footnote-21), with the UNCT’s support the Government is working with the Central Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Lao PDR to engage the Buddhist religious communities in the COVID-19 planning, response, and recovery, as well as promoting humanity, equality, and universality among people, and overcome misinformation and stigma;
* With the UNCT’s support, the Government organized the #PiiMaiAtHome online campaign which encouraged people to share their celebrations and show each other how the traditional ceremonies and activities can be adapted to celebrate New Year at home during the lockdown;

**People with disabilities:** The daily COVID-19 Press Conference published on the Ministry of Health official Facebook page has been made available with sign language since late April.

* **Are there any measures put in place in your country following the pandemic which have had a limiting effect on human rights? If so, please list them, provide an explanation for their adoption and indicate the time-frame by which they will be lifted?**

The lockdown measures on 29 March – 4 May 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19 did not appear to be imposed with a view to discriminate or limit human rights enjoyment. Recognizing that the health system and reach is limited in the first place, the measures were proportionate to the evaluated risk, necessary, and applied in a non-discriminatory way. The affected population was well informed by the Government of what the emergency measures are, where they apply, and for how long they are intended to remain in effect. The information has been updated regularly and widely available, including in the ethnic and sign languages.

The international border closure increased vulnerability of the returning Lao migrant workers who had to wait in long queues at points of entry or take increased risks of crossing the informal borders to return to their home country.

* **Please describe whether responses to the pandemic by States, businesses, faith-based organizations or others actors have resulted in a rollback of human rights, including in relation to affirmative action, gender-equality, inclusion of persons with disabilities and LGBT persons, land rights of indigenous peoples’ or access to sexual and reproductive health services?**

Public health and social measures such as quarantine and lockdown implemented as part of responses to COVID-19 in Lao PDR have been impacting the utilization of essential health services. Essential reproductive, maternal, and child health services (e.g., antenatal care, health facility delivery, postnatal care, and immunizations) have significantly dropped in January-March 2020 compared to that of the first quarter of the previous three years. This tendency holds in the majority of the Provinces of the country. The decrease in service uptake in health facilities and immunizations is also being observed.

46% of people living with HIV (PLWH) in Lao PDR who did not have access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) before the COVID-19 outbreak and compromised their immune systems are facing a significant risk of developing severe or even deadly COVID-19 infection. Those 54 % that had access to ART before the COVID-19 pandemic also became vulnerable during the COIVD-19 lockdown due to the situation of movement restrictions and, therefore, disruptions to ART drug delivery. 839 people living with HIV/AIDS around the country missed clinical appointments in April 2020 due to the disruptions to routine care.

* **What long-term impacts of the pandemic and its response measures are expected on the enjoyment of human rights?**

At-risk adolescents and teenage mothers face serious vulnerabilities, which are expected to have been heightened in the longer-term by the current crisis. The 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey II showed that about a fourth of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years were married/in-union, while about a sixth of adolescent girls and boys aged 11-14 years were out of school.[[21]](#footnote-22) It is expected that economic disruptions and hardships related to COVID-19 may result in higher numbers of unintended pregnancies (30-50%) and school drop-outs, coupled with an increase in child marriage. Projections also show that maternal deaths could increase from 286 to 546 (best case scenario) or even to 684 (worst case scenario) in 2020.

The significant disruption to education and the lack of distance-learning solutions are expected to drive child labour numbers up. Households may resort to child labour in order to cope with job loss and health shocks associated with COVID-19, in particular, if children are not at school. Children who are from marginalized minority groups, disabled, homeless, or from single or child-headed households, migrants, or disaster-affected areas are more vulnerable and at risk of child labour. Girls, in particular, are burdened by increased domestic chores and care responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic may push 96,000 and 214,000[[22]](#footnote-23) additional people into poverty and subject children and adolescents, especially from poor families and ethnic backgrounds, to multiple deprivations, including anemia, stunted growth, and underweight, that can have long-term consequences for productivity and human capacity development.

## Statistical Information

* **Please provide epidemiological data on COVID-19 infections, recovery and mortality rates in your country, region or locality, disaggregated by nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, membership of indigenous peoples, age, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, income/poverty levels, disability, immigration status or housing situation. Which groups in your country have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and how can this be explained?**

Since 24March 2020, there have been **19 confirmed cases** (**0 death)** reported in Lao PDR, with the last reported case on 11 April. All confirmed cases were isolated in the designated hospitals, and **all have been discharged**:

* **Total:** 19 cases and all recovered | 0 death
* **Vientiane Capital:** 1 | **Luang Prabang:** 3 | **Xaisomboun:** 1
* **Nationality:** Lao Nationals: 18 | non-Lao national: 1
* **Gender:** Male: 9 |Female: 10
* **Age:** 8 cases between ages 15-24 | 4 cases between ages 25-34 | 4 cases between ages 35-44 | 2 cases between ages 45-54 | 1 case between ages 55-64
* **Ethnicity:** 10 Lao Loum | 1 non-national | the ethnicity of the remaining 8 is unknown.

No other disaggregation data was collected as part of the surveillance system.

* **Please provide age disaggregated data on persons infected by COVID-19 and the percentage of them living in care institutions for older persons. Please provide age disaggregated data on deaths caused by COVID-19 and the percentage of them who were in care institutions.**

There were no patients living in care institutions. There was no death reported.

* **Please share any information and data on the availability of health services to ensure access to testing, personal protective equipment and treatment. Please specify to what extent supply issues, economic, social or other barriers have limited access to testing, personal protective equipment and health care services, in particular for persons belonging to particular racial or ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, older persons, persons with disabilities, LGBT persons, persons living in poverty or in situation of homelessness, migrant workers, or persons without legal residency status.**

The Ministry of Health has dedicated two hospital facilities in Vientiane for the case management and treatment of COVID-19 patients, as well as established a national 24/7 hotline to assist individuals that may develop COVID-19 symptoms. The hotline is available in Lao, English, Chinese, Vietnamese, and, since May 2020, Hmong (addition of other minority languages is being discussed). The hotline is available nation-wide free of charge. The Ministry of Health, with support from international partners and the UNCT, has managed to greatly expand the capacity of this hotline service, enabling it to take up to 4,000 calls per day in April.

Only suspected cases that show symptoms according to the national case definition and those who are under quarantine, including the migrant workers, can get tested for free at the designated hospitals. COVID-19 testing is not allowed in the private facilities in Lao PDR.

Free of charge treatment for those affected by COVID-19 is provided on a non-discriminatory basis. However, limited access to the health services of the people with disabilities, ethnic minorities with language barriers, as well as communities residing in remote areas with significant distances from the Government support structures and limited access to modern technologies has disproportionally impacted vulnerable groups.

Using the Health Information Management System and the District Health Information System (DHIS2) platform, the Monitoring System for clinical capacity for treatment of COVID-19 cases was set up, and there will be regular monitoring to ensure the availability of healthcare services for the treatment of COVID-19.

The Government is now working to ensure continuity of essential health services during the pandemic. Regular monitoring of the use of essential health services using data from the District Health Information System (DHIS2) has been conducted by the Ministry of Health. Technical programs including reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCAH) services, immunization, malaria, and HIV/TB have assessed the risk of disruption during the outbreak and developed the Response Plan as part of the draft National COVID-19 Response Plan. The delivery of selected RMNCAH services has been adjusted to an outreach modality and remote counselling, which will contribute to the optimization of essential health services in the time of COVID-19.

There is an Online Platform established to monitor stocks and ensure the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), at the central and sub-national levels to ensure real-time monitoring of vital supplies and maintain service delivery.

The Government has also set up a community mechanism for antiretroviral (ARV) drugs dispensing for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH). The mechanism engages a peer and/or community-based supporter to provide access to the essential drugs to PLWHs during the nation-wide lockdown.

* **Which groups have been identified as particularly vulnerable to socio-economic hardship in the context of the COVID-19 crisis?**

(1) Migrants; (2) women and girls, in particular, those living in rural areas without roads; (3) rural households and small farmers, especially those affected by the floods and drought in 2018/2019; (4) children and youth; (5) survivals of gender-based violence and trafficking; (6) Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs); (7) workers engaged in travel, tourism and hospitality sectors; (8) daily workers - were identified as the main target groups of the national health and socio-economic immediate and longer-term response.

Information and programming interventions targeting the elderly, ethnic groups, and people with disabilities remain insufficient.

* **Please provide data on the number of older persons who live in residential care institutions or alternative setting; the number of older persons in situation of homelessness and/or without adequate housing; and the number of older persons who are in prisons, refugee camps and informal settlements.**

The Lao Social Indicator Survey II indicates that the percentage of people over 65 years old stands at 5.1%, which translates to 362,100 people. [[23]](#footnote-24) Other figures reveal that 6.78% of the population in the country is over 60 years old.[[24]](#footnote-25) There is no statistical data available on elderly people who are homeless, in residential care institutions or without adequate housing, partly due to the domination of the extended family model in Lao PDR.

* **Please provide data on incidents of domestic violence, including femicides disaggregated by a) intimate partner femicide b) family related femicide based on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim/s and c) all other femicides based on the country context.**

Detailed statistics are not available. The Lao Women’s Union continues to monitor the caseload of domestic violence and child sexual abuse through 17 psycho-social support hotlines.

Expanded and strengthened support for hotlines and online counselling has been made available, and efforts are underway to harmonize and improve data collection. These efforts are part of a broader response to CEDAW and the implementation of the Essential Service Package for Violence Against Women (VAW).

## Protection of Various Groups at Risk and Indigenous Peoples

* **What measures have public authorities taken to protect high-risk populations from COVID-19, including: a) health care and social workers, b) older persons, c) other persons with a possibly reduced immune system such as indigenous peoples, or persons living with HIV, d) detained and incarcerated persons, including persons under state custody; e) persons living in care homes, f) children and adults living in institutions, camps, shelters or collective accommodation, g) persons with disabilities, h) homeless persons; i) persons living in informal settlements or overcrowded homes; j) refugees, IDPs and k) migrant workers.**

The Government has been engaging Lao residents in risk communication and preventative messaging, working with partners from multiple sectors (UNCT, religious and faith-based groups, INGOs and local CSOs, educational institutions, media, and private sector). Target audiences include all Lao children, women, and men, with a specific focus on vulnerable groups, including returning migrants, youth and adolescents, ethnic groups etc.

The following measures exemplify the Government’s efforts in protecting high-risk populations from COVID-19:

**a) Health Care and Social Workers:** The Ministry of Health has conducted simulation exercises, and trainings in infection prevention and control measures, including appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE), screening, triage, and treatment of COVID-19 patients and hospital preparation (including surge capacity for healthcare facilities, human resources for health and logistics management) for COVID-19 across the 17 Provinces; essential PPEs and supplies were procured for midwives and health workers who provide support to pregnant and lactating women, and adolescents.

**c) Persons with a Possibility of Reduces Immune System:** The Government has set up a community mechanism for antiretroviral (ARV) drugs dispensing for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH); the mechanism engages a peer and/or community-based supporter to provide access to the essential drugs to PLWHs during the nation-wide lockdown.

**d) Detained and Incarcerated Persons:** The UN Country Team advocacy on the protection of vulnerable children and appeal to the Juvenile Justice Coordination Committee on the release of children in detention has led to the Government’s decision on not to arrest juvenile delinquents of minor offences in the country during the COVID-19.

**g) Persons with Disabilities:** To ensure access to accurate information by people with visual impairment, the daily COVID-19 Press Conference published on the Ministry of Health official Facebook page has been made available with sign language since late April.

**k) Migrant Workers:**

TheLao Authorities have been screening all returnees at Points of Entry (POEs) since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020; all the returning migrants undergo body temperature check and are transferred to the Quarantine Centers for 14 days health monitoring; basic food and water are provided in those facilities.

TheLao migrants returning from neighboring countries were provided with Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials on basic hygiene practices, precautions, and national regulations, as well as water and food.

The Ministry of Health developed guidance on the management of returning migrant workers and disinfection of the non-health sectors to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the community through quarantine measures; this guidance has been applied to Quarantine Centres throughout the country, both active and those that have now returned to normal such as schools.

To analyze the urgent and future needs for the returning migrants, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare is conducting a rapid assessment across all 18 Provinces of Lao PDR.

With the support of the UN Country Team, the Government equipped 1,500 Quarantine Centres with WASH and protection services on minimizing gender-based violence.

* **What measures have been taken by public authorities to ensure continued provision of services, including food, healthcare, education, psycho-social assistance to persons in vulnerable situation, including a) older persons, b) persons with disabilities, c) LGBT persons, d) persons in situations of homelessness, e) indigenous peoples, f) victims and survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, g) human trafficking, h) discrimination, i) victims of contemporary forms of slavery, including forced labour, as well as h) child victims of sale and sexual exploitation?**

**Food:** With the UNCT’s support, the Ministry of Education and Sports has been distributing food stocks for school feeding in 925 supported schools across eight Provinces as take-home rations. A total of approximately 943 metric tons of rice, lentils, fortified cooking oil, and canned fish are being distributed starting from the last week of May. The take-home rations support household access to food, especially for young students after the period of lockdown, throughout the end of the school year.

**Essential Healthcare:** The Government has been assessing the disruption of the reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCAH) services, immunization, malaria, and HIV/TB. The delivery of selected RMNCAH services has been adjusted to outreach modality and remote counselling, which will contribute to the optimization of essential health services in the time of COVID-19. The Government has been implementing a child grants programme targeted at 1,400 pregnant women and children between 0-12 months. A community-based mechanism for antiretroviral (ARV) drugs dispensing for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH) has also been established.

**Education:** In response to school closures, the Ministry of Education has improved home-learning materials, education webpages and learning programs for TV and radio.

**Psycho-social assistance:** 17 hotlines providing remote counselling and psycho-social support have been established; the availability of existing counselling services was increased to respond to the accelerating demand during COVID-19 by extending office hours and promoting new service means (online chat and mobile phone calls). Under the Counselling and Protection Center for Women and Children (CPCWC), the Lao Women’s Union in Luang Namtha has received 15 women from China who were under the age of 18 and identified as a victim of trafficking; CPCWC and Lao Women’s Union both in Vientiane Capital and Luang Namtha continue supporting 13 vulnerable women (10 from China and three from Thailand) with shelters, food, water, personal protective equipment, in-house basic skills trainings; their types of victimization have not been identified yet.

* **Has there been any interruption of services, such as the closure of emergency shelters, food banks, or the disruption of health care or psycho-social services that has been of concern?**

One of the measures adopted by the Government to prevent the spread of infections was the closure of schools on 29 March – 4 May 2020, impacting more than 1,708,501 students enrolled in the pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary as well as technical-vocational schools and other educational institutions throughout the country for the school year 2019-2020. This closure resulted in the interruption of school feeding activities for children.

* What measures have been taken to address racial disparities, prevent racial discrimination and protect victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance during the pandemic?

No specific measures were undertaken to address racial disparities. A Prime Ministerial Decree on Ethnic Groups released on 30 March 2020 during the lockdown provided officials with guidelines for the regulation of ethnic groups. The Decree bans all forms of discrimination against ethnic groups while calling for all ethnic groups to be provided with equal opportunities for development and participation in national protection and development.

## Social Protection

* Please provide information on implemented and planned adjustments to the social safety net in response to the crisis, to ensure that individuals who lost all or part of their income as a consequence of the pandemic have access to sufficient nutrition, housing, water and sanitation, health care, energy and other essential goods and services? How has the State ensured fair and equitable access to social safety net measures across lines of race, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, membership of indigenous peoples, and others?

Lao PDR is at the initial stages of developing its social protection system. Coverage is extremely low by regional standards. 1.6% of GDP is allocated to social protection – a mere 0.7% if health (0.9%) is excluded. To date, Lao PDR’s investment in social protection is the lowest in the region.

Recent years have seen important developments in Lao PDR. The coverage of the National Health Insurance scheme has expanded significantly. Still, when the income protection component of social protection is considered, a large number of people, especially workers in informal employment and households dependent on agriculture, are not protected. Farmers and informal workers have low incomes, poor income security, and working conditions, and little to no social protection in case they lose their incomes or fall sick.

Many Lao households rely on family members seeking higher-paid employment in cities and centers of economic activity. As a direct impact of COVID-19, many global value chains have stalled, in turn affecting worker and household incomes. It can be assumed that the post-COVID-19 market demands will (at least) initially be lower than before, while the regional production networks and global value chains may see long term impacts.

The impact of this situation is reinforced by the fact that many Lao households are dependent on remittances from cross-border migration. Lao migrant workers in Thailand are predominantly employed in low-paid jobs in the tourism, hospitality, domestic work, agriculture, and industrial sectors, and are less likely to be able to cope with the adverse impacts of the crisis. The lockdown in Thailand led to significant increases in unemployment, loss of income at the household, and queues of returning migrants at points of entry.

The loss of livelihoods due to COVID-19 can push households into povertyand subject children and adolescents, especially from poor families and ethnic backgrounds, to multiple deprivations that can have long-term consequences for productivity and human capacity development. Women are also disproportionately represented among the poor and the vulnerable. Women tend to be confined to more casual, insecure, and hazardous forms of work and self-employment, particularly in the informal economy, with no or limited access to social protection.

Lao PDR is undertaking a set of social protection measures to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.An amount of LAK 10 billion (slightly less than 1% of GDP) has been allocated for prevention and control measures. In response to the return of migrant workers in large numbers, Quarantine Centres have been established. Free testing and treatment are provided to those that have been in contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case. The Government is also providing for trainings for medical personnel and concerned officials, in addition to procuring medical and protective equipment.

The Government is planning to launch a cash transfer programme to cover expectant mothers and children under the age of 3 in poor Districts. As mentioned in the National Social Protection Strategy 2025, the programme aims to improve access to nutritious food during the first 1000 days of a child’s life.

Unemployment insurance has been among the instruments used by the Government to support those who have lost their jobs: the national Social Security Administration/Fund’s Policy No.1682 on Social Protection in response to COVID-19 dated 10 June 2020 identified financial support to registered workers who have lost jobs or unemployed during the pandemic. However, its coverage is limited to those working in the formal sector, and unfortunately, many of those working in sectors affected but not covered by the National Social Security Fund do not have any form of protection.

The UN Country Team has jointly developed an advisory briefing paper for the Government on potential social protection responses to the economic shock that could be implemented to protect the most vulnerable.

* How has the State approached social protection of small entrepreneurs and for people whose livelihoods are based in informal economies, in particular persons working often informally, in agriculture and other traditional livelihoods, child and health care, domestic work, construction, restaurants, street vending, tourism or as sex-workers? What specific efforts have been made to assess and mitigate the relevant health and social-economic risks to these populations?

The tax measures announced to date in response to COVID-19 have focussed on reducing immediate payments, with a view to supporting economic recovery:

* The vehicle road tax payment deadline was extended from until 30 June 2020, while the payment of personal income tax was exempted for low-income workers, or those earning under LAK 5 million, until June 2020;
* Profit tax was exempted for businesses earning LAK 50 million to 400 million for the second quarter of 2020;
* Tourism businesses also received a tax deferral for three months beginning in April; entitled businesses were determined by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism;
* Tax exemptions were applied for certain goods related to the prevention and control of the COVID-19, while the price of fuel has been being regulated;
* The pricing for utilities including electricity, water, and the internet was recommended to reduce;
* Commercial banks increased the time required to repay loans, both principal and interest. Interest rates and fees were reduced, and banks were required to offer new loans to debtors and affected enterprises.

The Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Ministry of Finance, and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry are assessing the impact of COVID-19 on trade and the private sector for Lao PDR with UN support.

A 15-point [Action Plan](http://www.intracen.org/covid19/15-Points-Action-Plan/) on supporting small business through the COVID-19 crisis has been published, targeting MSMEs in developing and transition economies that are reliant on international trade flows and are therefore particularly vulnerable to the repercussions of the crisis.

## Participation and Consultation

* What decision-making processes were used to adopt measures to respond to the pandemic? Did they include participation of local and decentralized authorities, including indigenous authorities, scientific experts, and civil society organizations?

**Ad-Hoc Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Response in the health sector:** On 3 February 2020, the Prime Minister of Lao PDR approved the appointment of the Ad-Hoc Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Response in the health sector. The Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Health lead the Committee consisting of the six Task Forces under the Committee Secretariat: (1) Emergency Operations Center, (2) External Relations focused on mobilizing funds and facilitate the return of foreign citizens to their own countries, (3) Communications and Anti-Fakes, (4) Budget and Logistics which is focused inter alia on the arrangement of the Quarantine Centers; (5) Import and Export of Goods; (6) Returned Students and Lao Labourers.

The Committee monitors, assesses, and regularly reports on the COVID-19 situation, leads the coordination across the health sector with Central and Local Authorities, neighboring countries, and development partners, including the UN Country Team, to develop and undertake the necessary measures to address and control the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Ad-Hoc Committee discussed the technical issues related to the COVID-19 virus with the national scientific, and clinical experts and associations specialized in infectious diseases.

**Ad-Hoc Committee on Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19:** On 20 February 2020, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of the Ad-Hoc Committee on the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 led by the Ministry of Planning and Investment to address the social and economic aspects of the COVID-19 impact and implement broader coordinated measures of response and ensure the “build back better” strategy.

On 9 April 2020, the Committee activated eight Sub-Teams led by the Deputy-Ministers: (1) Macroeconomic Policy and Investment Promotion; (2) Financial; (3) Monetary Policy; (4) Labour Policy; (5) Production and Service Businesses; (6) Goods Supplies; (7) Cooperation with the Development Partners; (8) Public Services and Utilities.

Indigenous Authorities and CSOs are not included in the established Ad-Hoc Institutions.

In support of the Ad-Hoc Health Committee on Health, from 19 March 2020, the network of the Health Clusters usually associated with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is being informally used as “COVID-19 Health Partners Working Group” lead by WHO to coordinate the partners’ response and establish synergies between 50 NGOs, UN entities, development partners and donor community.

UNICEF leads the informal Partner Groups based on WASH and Education Emergency Cluster’s networks to ensure coherency in the developing activities and repurposing of the existing projects on the COVID-19 issues involving water, sanitation, and hygiene, as well home-learning, safe returning to schools and impact mitigation on Lao PDR’s education system. The Group is comprised of the Government, NGOs, UN entities, and other development partners.

* What participation and consultation methods have been employed in preparing and implementing re-opening strategies or after emergency regulations have been lifted?

An Education COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan was developed by the Ministry of Education and Sports in consultation with the education partners, including the UN Country Team, which included detailed planning for re-opening of schools following the global Framework released by UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank. The “Back to School” Campaign of the Ministry of Education and Sports targeted an improved learning environment through more comprehensive support to children, including WASH facilities, health, nutrition, protection, psycho-social, and other support. Schools were supported in ensuring conditions that reduce disease transmission, including access to soap and clean water for safe handwashing, procedures on when staff or students feel unwell, protocols on social distancing and good hygiene practices.

## Awareness Raising and Technology

* What awareness-raising activities have been undertaken by the State to inform groups in vulnerable situation, indigenous people and other populations living in remote or conflict-affected areas of health risks associated with COVID-19?

The Centre of Information and Education for Health (CCEH) of the Ministry of Health has made the COVID-19 24/7 hotline available in Lao, English, Chinese, Vietnamese and, since May, Hmong (addition of other minority languages is being discussed); this hotline service is available nation-wide free of charge; the Ministry of Health with support from international partners and the UNCT has managed to greatly expand the capacity of this service enabling it to take up to 4,000 calls per day in April.

CCEH leads the Communications and Anti-Fake Taskforce under the Ad-Hoc Committee on COVID-19 managing risk communication, public outreach and community engagement. The members of the Communications and Anti-Fake Taskforce include the Ministry of Education and Sports,  Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, WHO, UNICEF, UN RCO, IOM, UNDP, UNFPA, WFP, World Bank, Save the Children and SNV. The Taskforce manages risk communication planning and implementation, including identifying communication objectives and risks, developing relevant messaging, planning dissemination activities, mapping and utilizing community engagement capacities of its members and their partners.

The video of the daily COVID-19 Press Conference published on the CCEH Facebook page has been made available with sign language since late April; three videos by WHO and “Hands of Hope” on COVID-19 have been published and promoted with sign language.

Videos and posters on key messages for ethnic minorities have been produced in local languages by the Lao Women’s Union with the UNCT’s support; together with the UNCT, CCEH and Lao National Radio have produced radio and TV spots in ethnic languages (Hmong, Khmu, Akha, Bru).

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, together with the UNCT, has been displaying Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials at the points of entry of returning migrants.

CCEH and the Lao Front for National Development have been working with the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization to engage monks in promoting COVID-19 prevention measures for those visiting Temples and religious ceremonies.

CCEH, with support from the UNCT and Lao Telecom Company, has been sending out SMS blasting to all LTC and Unitel mobile phone numbers with COVID-19 prevention messages.

With the expected increase in protection and gender-based violence (GBV) issues, 17 hotlines providing remote counselling and psycho-social support have been created. The availability of existing counselling services was increased to respond to accelerating demand during COVID-19 by extending office hours and promoting new service means (online chat and mobile phone calls).

* Have public officials and law enforcement officials been trained and briefed with regards to the overall human rights impact of the pandemic, and the situation of groups in vulnerable situation during and after the crisis?

UNODC has developed training materials (back pocket guides and posters) for the frontline officers at the Border Liaison Office network to strengthen the response of border officials to the COVID-19 outbreak in respect of human rights, WHO guidelines, and IOM’s SOP. 17 training sessions for 170 frontline border officials based are planned to be conducted.

## Internet

* The internet and social media were increasingly used for work, education, shopping for food and other goods, awareness raising sharing of information, freedom of expression, religious ceremonies, cultural and social interaction, consultation and political decision making. What challenges and obstacles has the pandemic highlighted in terms of access for all to internet? Has the recent situation given rise to increased violations of human rights, mobbing and bullying online? If so, how was this addressed?

There had been media briefings held prior to the first cases in the country, which had the participation of both traditional and online media representatives, and International Organization Communication Officers to help guide messaging on prevention, awareness-raising, as well as identifying possible misinformation. Several posts were removed when circulation of misinformation was reported or found, namely when the related post sparked unnecessary panic, stating that there was an additional number of cases or inaccurate information, posing as an official media outlet.

The Ministry of Health conducts a daily COVID-19 Press Conference through its official Facebook page aimed at providing accurate and updated information. The Government also has a dedicated website.

The Centre of Information and Education for Health (CCEH) of the Ministry of Health has been carrying out targeted, manual social media monitoring, looking at the many comments on information published on the CCEH Facebook page which has become the most popular source for COVID-19 information in Lao PDR, as well as discussions on widely read Lao news forums on Facebook such as Tholakhong.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the national COVID-19 hotline has become a channel for public feedback to the Government. The supervisors of this service compile a list of top questions and comments received each day, and this is sent to the regular Emergency Operations Centre meetings.

CCEH and Ministry of Health are in the process of implementing an automated “big data / AI” system for social media monitoring and identifying the emergence of rumors and misinformation. The Lao media has been publishing calls against discrimination and against the publication of personal information and photos of people affected by COVID-19.

* What approach have the relevant authorities taken to monitor online information related to the pandemic? Have some contents been removed from the internet? If so, what criteria were applied to decide that the specific contents should be erased? Have specific measures been implemented against hate speech in cyber-space?

Several COVID-19-related posts were removed when the circulation of misinformation was reported or found by the Communications and Anti-Fakes Special Task Force, namely when the related post sparked unnecessary panic, stating that there was an additional number of cases or inaccurate information, posing as an official media outlet.

On 4 April 2020, a Facebook user from Phoxay Village in Savannakhet Province was charged for live-streaming an event that violated the Prime Minister’s Order No.06/PMO on the nation-wide lockdown. However, the official charge was in non-respect of stay at home order, and not the information dissemination online.[[25]](#footnote-26)

There is a concern of the increase in online exploitation of children by predators as well as the impact of porn on adolescent girls and boys, especially during the pandemic. The UN Agencies, Funds, and Programmes have initiated a dialogue with national Authorities on how to address this emerging challenge. UNFPA is supporting the Ministry of Education and Sports to develop online comprehensive sexuality education videos, which will be streamed through national TV and on Satellite channels.

## Accountability and Justice

* Could you provide any account and statistics on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation of the justice system, including law enforcement, the provision of legal assistance and the operation of courts? Which activities were temporarily suspended?

Justice services were considered as non-essential, including on-site police and labor inspections, under the lockdown arrangements of the Prime Minister’s Order No.06/PMO.

Following the Order, the Government has diverted resources to address the pandemic, and the police were assigned with *“monitoring and implementing safety, security and social order.”* Under these conditions, the investigation and prosecution cases of trafficking in persons became a lower priority, and proactive inspections of suspect sites and cases have been reduced. This will later have an impact on arrests, investigations, prosecutions, and convictions, and eventually risk leading to an exemption of punishment, with the effect that traffickers can operate with even lower risk of detection and conviction.

* Please describe measures taken by the justice system in your country in protecting individuals from human rights violations and abuse during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. What measures have been taken to prevent, investigate, or prosecute a) arbitrary arrest and detention, b) gender-based violence, c) sale and sexual exploitation of children, d) contemporary forms of slavery, e) racial discrimination, or f) illegal evictions?

The Legal Aid Services and Village Mediation Units (VMU) remained partially operational during the COVID-19 lockdown.

## QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

* Do the employment policies associated with the economic recovery plans take into account the specific situation of people working in the informal sector, and the need to improve working conditions in that sector as well as to extend formal social protection to them? Have such policies sought to increase the employability of groups that face specific barriers in their access to employment, for example, through demand-driven skills development and vocational training?

With ILO support, the Government is now finalizing the National Rural Employment Strategy. When adopted, it could serve as the medium-term COVID-19 recovery framework. Its implementation, in principle, can support the improvement of working conditions and protection of workers in rural areas, where poverty and decent work deficits are concentrated. The draft Strategy focuses on improving the employability of the rural workforce in relation to the demand that exists in the market.

* Have the economic recovery measures prioritized investments in education and skill development for women and girls, and in sectors where women make up a considerable proportion of the labour force (such as in export manufacturing)? Do they include gender budgeting to ensure that women benefit equally from public investments?

Advocacy led by UNFPA on the need to ensure inclusive Gender Equitable Response has been made using the national data, comprehensively looking at disproportionate burden face by women and girls and consequent impact. This work is to be continued not just through the support provided to the Lao Women’s Union but also consistent requests to all the line Ministries to use disaggregated data for planning and budgeting response. The Adolescent Girl Working Group consisting of the UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes, INGOs, and CSOs has prepared an advocacy brief for protecting the rights of adolescent girls.

There is a discussion within the Government on strengthening the capacity of the workforce, including the returning migrant workers. However, there is no specific COVID-related response on economic recovery with a gender lens at the policy level.

* Have the tax reforms associated with the economic recovery plans sought to widen the tax base, by rebalancing the tax contributions of corporations and those in high-income brackets? Have the impacts of the introduction of new or higher taxes on those living in poverty been assessed?

The tax measures announced to date in response to COVID-19 have focussed on reducing immediate payments, with a view to supporting economic recovery:

* The vehicle road tax payment deadline was extended from until 30 June 2020, while the payment of personal income tax was exempted for low-income workers, or those earning under LAK 5 million, until June 2020;
* Profit tax was exempted for businesses earning LAK 50 million to 400 million for the second quarter of 2020;
* Tourism businesses also received a tax deferral for three months beginning in April; entitled businesses were determined by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism;
* Tax exemptions were applied for certain goods related to the prevention and control of the COVID-19, while the price of fuel has been being regulated;
* The pricing for utilities including electricity, water, and the internet was recommended to reduce;
* Commercial banks increased the time required to repay loans, both principal and interest. Interest rates and fees were reduced, and banks were required to offer new loans to debtors and affected enterprises.
* The human rights principles of participation, transparency and accountability require States to create and maintain mechanisms by which individuals can meaningfully and effectively contribute to, provide feedback on and claim redress from policy measures that affect their enjoyment of human rights. Were any mechanisms established to allow people living in poverty to participate in the design, implementation and assessment of economic recovery plans?

The COVID-19 hotlines have been playing a significant role in receiving feedback from the general public. Compiled feedback through the hotlines is reported to the daily Emergency Operations Centre’s meetings held at Ministry of Health with the members of the COVID-19 Ad-Hoc Committee and reflected its policy decisions. The key concerns from the general public are also addressed through daily COVID-19 Press Conference.

The Lao National Front members at the Village, District, Province, and National levels have been ensuring a two-way flow of communication between the health Authorities and different ethnic groups on COVID-19 and other issues of importance. The community-led Radio Stations operated by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism in five Provinces have been used to involve the local communities in discussions on COVID-19 response and recovery plans.

# QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHT TO FOOD

* To what extent, and how, were international and domestic food supply chains disrupted during the pandemic? What were the measures taken by national, federal, provincial or local governments? Did authorities close particular local markets or impose export restrictions on certain goods? What was the reasoning for the actions taken by the respective authorities?

The restrictions in movement by traders, middlemen, and farmers had a visible impact on the sales of farmer produce (cash crops and horticulture) and on the availability and prices of some food products in several Provinces, including Luangnamtha and Bokeo.[[26]](#footnote-27) Despite the movement restrictions, national and international food supply chains are now somewhat functional. However, the supply chain of agricultural inputs has been disrupted because there is a large number of informal traders who import inputs (seeds, fertilizers) and whose movements across the borders remain restricted. Hence, not only the prices have increased, but also the availability thereof may be affected during the coming months.

* What measures did national, federal, provincial or local governments put in place to ensure access to food for the individuals in vulnerable situations such as older persons, children, women, rural communities, LGBT persons, national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic minorities, and indigenous peoples?

In April 2020 during the nation-wide lockdown, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, supported by WFP and FAO, conducted a Food Security and Agriculture Survey via phone calls from the field staff to district and village-level informants, including District Authorities, small farmers, naibans (village chiefs), school teachers, village facilitators, and village health volunteers. A total of 1,007 completed responses from all 17 Provinces and Vientiane Capital were received. Based on the Survey’s conclusions, the Government is in the process of developing a coherent Mitigation Plan to ensure continuous food supply through normal commercial channels with consideration of targeted groups.

With the UNCT’s support, the Ministry of Education and Sports has been distributing food stocks for school feeding in 925 supported schools across eight Provinces as take-home rations; a total of approximately 943 metric tons of rice, lentils, fortified cooking oil, and canned fish are being distributed starting from the last week of May; the take-home rations support household access to food, especially for young students after the period of lockdown, throughout the end of the school year.

* What were the conditions under which food workers such as agricultural labourers, store workers, transporters, cooks, and shopkeepers had to work? What measures did national, federal, provincial or local governments put in place to ensure the safety and welfare of these workers? Were any special provisions and protections made for migrant workers?

Most agricultural workers have been working under the normal conditions on their individual farms; however, disruptions in marketing have been observed because the collection points are not fully functional.

* Can you provide examples of any other measures taken by national, federal, provincial or local governments in your country to prevent hunger during the pandemic and in its aftermath?

The Ministry of Industry and Commerce introduced national agricultural price control measures to reduce price spikes of the key agricultural commodities, including eggs and meat. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has introduced several agricultural response policies, including (1) Order No.688 dated 7 May 2020 on the planting of crops; (2) Order No.609 dated 8 May 2020 on maintaining bio-safety in the livestock sector; and (3) Order No.698 dated12 May 2020 on crop pest control measures.

The Ministry of Education and Sports launched the distribution of food stock for school feeding in 925 supported schools across eight Provinces as take-home rations.

Key nutrition messages and counselling materials on breastfeeding, healthy diets, and infant/young child feeding for caregivers suspected or confirmed with COVID-19 were developed.

The Department of Communicable Diseases Control within the Ministry of Health officially requested the UNCT to support the food needs of returning migrant laborers with a focus on the Quarantine Centers in Savannakhet and Xayabouly Provinces. In cooperation with World Vision, three meals a day to returnees are being provided in Kaysone Quarantine Center – the largest Quarantine Center in Savannakhet with a capacity of 160 people.

* Has your country declared a prohibition on evictions? If a prohibition was declared, indicate its legal basis and how long it will last. Please specify if it is a general prohibition and if it also applies to persons living in informality or in informal settlements. Is the prohibition of evictions restricted to tenants or mortgage payers who have been able to pay their rent or serve their mortgages, or broader?

Prohibition on eviction has not been mentioned in any of the governmental Degrees or Regulations as most Lao people own houses, and informal settlement has not officially been in place.

* Can you provide examples of any other measures taken or planned by national, federal, provincial or local Governments in your country to protect the right to adequate housing during the pandemic and in its aftermath?

The Ministry of Finance Notice No.1027 and the Decision No.238 of the Bank of Lao PDR introduced financial measures that included the reduction and postponement of instalment and interest payment, as well as offer new loans.

# QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL RIGHTS

* What have been the impacts on cultural rights and on cultural life\* of: a.) the pandemic? b.) measures taken to respond to the pandemic?

The cultural and social activities of more than 10 persons, such as traditional festivals, Lao New Year, religious activities, weddings, and parties, were prohibited. Funerals and alms offerings for the deceased involving more than 10 people con continue while applying the necessary preventive measures. The lockdown restrictions were in force during the Pii Mai (Lao New Year), the major traditional festival, causing the cancellation of the traditional New Year ceremonies at most Buddhist Temples.

Recognising the importance of exercising of cultural rights, the Centre of Information and Education for Health (CCEH) of the Ministry of Health and Lao Front for National Development are working with the Central Buddhist Fellowship Organization on reviewing cultural and religious practices in light of the ongoing need of physical distancing. Training to junior monks on COVID-19 and preventive practices will take place in July 2020 prior to their outreach programme in local communities.

* What efforts have been made to guarantee the exercise of cultural rights, in accordance with the requirements of public health? How has the message that cultural life must be enjoyed in ways that respect public health and medical expertise been communicated?

With the UNCT’s support, the Government organized the #PiiMaiAtHome online campaign, which encouraged people to share their celebrations and show each other how the traditional ceremonies and activities can be adapted to celebrate New Year at home during the lockdown.

Recognizing the importance of exercising of cultural rights, CCEH and Lao Front for National Development are working with the Central Buddhist Fellowship Organization on reviewing cultural and religious practices in light of the ongoing need of physical distancing. Training to junior monks on COVID-19 and preventive practices will take place in July 2020 prior to their outreach programme in local communities.

Lao singers and influencers have been partnering with CCEH and CSOs to call for staying at home during the lockdown and Lao New Year and to promote preventative measures, in particular handwashing, through songs.

* Have scientific and medical experts been able to express themselves freely about the pandemic, its impacts and needed responses? What measures have been taken to address the denial of scientific information about the pandemic, and to ensure access to reliable scientific information to guide policymaking and personal choices.

The governmental Ad-Hoc Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Response discusses the technical issues related to COVID-19 with the national scientific, and clinical experts and associations specialized in infectious diseases.

CCEH has been carrying out daily COVID-19 Press Conferences with updates on COVID-19 situation in Lao PDR.

Free 24/7 hotline has been established operating in Lao, English, Hmong, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

SMS blasting has been carried out by CCEH in cooperation with WHO to users of Lao Telecom sharing updates on COVID-19 preventative measures and “Safe at Home.”

Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials developed by CCEH in cooperation with WHO, UNICEF and UN Country Team more generally through the participation of the UN RCO, chair of the UN Communications Group (UNCG), have been delivered to the Provincial and District health facilities; additionally, the Ministry of Health has developed materials to assist businesses in strengthening infection protection and control measures, enabling employees to return to work safely.

IEC materials have been displayed at the points of entry of returning migrants by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in cooperation with IOM.

IEC materials have been provided to schools by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with UNICEF and to factories in cooperation with ILO, ITC and UNIDO.

CCEH, together with UNICEF and WHO, has carried out two sensitization workshops for media professionals, with over 100 participants registered for the first one, focusing, in particular, on scientific data available about the virus and preventing misinformation.

# QUESTIONS BY THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS

* Please provide information how and how many older persons called for assistance, help or made official complaints during the pandemic.

Systematic and age disaggregated data is not available. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare did not include aging as a funding priority during 2019, as aging is not an immediate pressure in the demographic transition of Lao PDR with the elderly constituting less than 5.1% of the Lao population.[[27]](#footnote-28)

The Department of Policy for Devotee, Disability, and the Elderly is working with ESCAP and UNFPA on the draft Law on Older Persons.

# QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

* How has your Government supported indigenous peoples in their own initiatives to fight the pandemic, protect health and provide assistance in their own communities?

The national COVID-19 hotline is available in Lao, English, Chinese, Vietnamese, and, since May 2020, Hmong (addition of other minority languages is being discussed).

The Ad-Hoc Committee Communications Task Force’s information dissemination on COVID-19 to the ethnic communities with limited access to modern technologies and/or language/communication barriers is being translated into Lao ethnic languages such as Akha, Hmong, Khmou, Souay, Thaidam, broadcasted through the Community Radio stations in five Provinces and displayed on distribution trucks traveling to 2,000 villages.

The Lao Front for National Development is a Governmental body with responsibility for ensuring mutual respect and cooperation between the different ethnic groups in the country. The Lao Front, along with the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, Lao National, and Provincial TV and Radio, has been working to ensure that ethnic communities in Lao PDR have access to accurate information on COVID-19 and protective measures in their languages. The Lao Front members at the Village, District, Provincial and Central levels have been ensuring a two-way flow of communication between the health Authorities and the local communities.

# QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF SLAVERY

* What steps have been taken by the Government to reduce increased risks of contemporary forms of slavery in the context of the outbreak? Please, share any good practices and identify persistent challenges, including with regards to prevention; identification of victims; provision of access to recovery and rehabilitation services; and investigation and prosecution of slavery-related crimes.

The introduced policies on reduction income tax from the citizens; reduction of import taxes and fees for the purpose of prevention and protection from the COVID-19 spread; extended period for paying yearly tax of the enterprises in tourism sector, inter alia, can contribute to the reduction of contemporary forms of slavery risks in the context of the pandemic.

* Has there been engagement with business entities and other stakeholders to develop joined strategies on reducing the risk of vulnerable workers in their operations and supply chains becoming exposed to contemporary forms of slavery in the context of the pandemic.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare recently has issued a Decree No.68 that defines regulations and facilitates services in exporting Lao laborers to work overseas, conditions, rights and responsibilities of workers, recruitment agencies, and Lao Government Authorities. The Decree introduces the fixed cost for the recruitment agencies during the recruitment process. The development partners, including IOM and ILO, have provided technical inputs during the drafting phase. The Decree launch is now scheduled in July 2020.

ILO has supported the Government in strengthening the capacity of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Committees in the garment industry on emergency preparedness (with focus on communicable diseases) and built the capacity of the Lao Coffee Association’s members on COVID-19 infection prevention and control.

UNFPA supports the Lao Women’s Union and the Ministry of Health in implementation of the peer education programmes for vulnerable female workers in the garment industry in Vientiane. An MoU was signed in 2019 with four large industries to actively promote protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and wellbeing of the largely female young workforce.

* Since the outbreak, has the Government continued investigating and prosecuting human rights violations related to decent-based slavery; forced labour; debt bondage; serfdom; sexual slavery; commercial sexual exploitation of children; child labour; domestic servitude; and servile forms of marriage?

Justice services were considered as non-essential, including on-site police and labor inspections, under the lockdown arrangements of the Prime Minister’s Order No.06/PMO.

Following the Order, the Government has diverted resources to address the pandemic, and the police were assigned with *“monitoring and implementing safety, security and social order.”* Under these conditions, the investigation and prosecution cases of trafficking in persons became a lower priority, and proactive inspections of suspect sites and cases have been being reduced. This will later have an impact on arrests, investigations, prosecutions, and convictions, and eventually leading to an exemption of punishment, which traffickers can operate with even lower risk of detection and conviction.

* In light of the Sustainable Development Goals and global commitments to eradicate slavery (target 8.7) and measure progress in this area, has the Government been able to ensure timely collection and analysis of disaggregated data? If available, please share the data collected in the first quarter of 2020, including information regarding the number, age, gender, and nationality of identified victims; the number of prosecution of perpetrators; types of services provided to the victims; industries where victims were identified. Has any of these data significantly varied from previously recorded trends due to factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Under the Counselling and Protection Center for Women and Children (CPCWC), the Lao Women’s Union in Luang Namtha has received 15 women from China who were under the age of 18 and identified as a victim of trafficking.

## QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE SALE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

* What is the impact of COVID-19 crisis on the nature and scope of various manifestations of sale and sexual exploitation of children, including sexual exploitation and abuse of children, both online and offline; child marriage; trafficking of children; surrogacy and sale of children; illegal adoptions and child labour?

The significant disruption to education and the lack of distance-learning solutions are expected to drive child labour numbers up. Households may resort to child labour in order to cope with job loss and health shocks associated with COVID-19, in particular, if children are not at school. Children who are from marginalized minority groups, disabled, homeless, or from single or child-headed households, migrants, or disaster-affected areas are more vulnerable and at risk of child labour. Girls, in particular, are burdened by increased domestic chores and care responsibilities.

* What essential protection measures, including identification, reporting, referral, and investigation, have been put in place to detect and prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation cases and how effective have they been since the outbreak?

Systematic data is not available. Efforts are ongoing to develop referral pathways and complementary systems for the prevention of gender-based violence and the protection of women and girls. This work is planned with the Lao Women’s Union and Commission for the Advancement of Women and Mother-Child as part of the follow-up to CRC and CEDAW. Implementation of the Essential Service Package for Prevention and Response to violence against women is also underway.

* Have there been any initiatives on collecting disaggregated data on specific forms and manifestations of sale and sexual exploitation of children during the pandemic and assessing the near and long-term impacts of COVID-19?

Disaggregated data is not available. The Lao Women’s Union leading the hotline for victims/survivors of gender-based violence has been raising the concern of the increase in domestic violence and trafficking during the lockdown. UNFPA is working with the Women’s Union to strengthen existing counselling and hotline services, with Vientiane Youth Center and Lao Youth Union, by extending office hours and promoting new service means (online chat and mobile phone calls).

* Please, share information about challenges faced in the provision of undisrupted healthcare, education and legal aid, as well as care recovery and reintegration services for the victims in the context of the outbreak.

Public health and social measures implemented as part of the response to COVID-19 in Lao PDR have been impacting the utilization of essential health services. Essential reproductive, maternal, and child health services (e.g., antenatal care, health facility delivery, postnatal care, and immunizations) have significantly dropped in January-March 2020 compared to that of the first quarter of the previous three years. This tendency holds in the majority of the Provinces of the country. The decrease in service uptake in health facilities and immunizations is also being observed.

46% of people living with HIV (PLWH) in Lao PDR who did not have access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) before the COVID-19 outbreak and compromised their immune systems are facing a significant risk of developing severe or even deadly COVID-19 infection. Those 54 % that had access to ART before the COVID-19 pandemic also became vulnerable during the COIVD-19 lockdown due to the situation of movement restrictions and, therefore, disruptions to ART drug delivery. 839 people living with HIV/AIDS around the country missed clinical appointments in April 2020 due to the disruptions to routine care.

All Lao students enrolled in pre-primary to upper secondary education (1,440,733 – 52% girls) have been affected by school closures on 19 March – 2 June 2020. The closing of schools has increased some child protection needs: (1) missing out on school meals, (2) disrupted learning outcomes, as well as (3) impact to children’s mental health, (4) increased risk of violence against children when confined at home, (5) increased risk of child labour and child marriage.

During the nation-wide lockdown, justice services were considered as non-essential, including on-site police and labour inspections. Under these conditions, the legal aid, investigation, and prosecution cases became a lower priority.

* Has there been a surge of resource allocation, actions plans or coordination mechanisms, prevention and response services for the protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation?

ILO is supporting the Government in finalizing the draft National Plan of Action (NPA) to Eliminate Child Labour and Promote Decent Work for Youth 2020-2025/2030; the firsts draft is being reviewed with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic; further support in NPA implementation will include capacity building and awareness-raising for tripartite constituents in addressing child labour and promoting decent work for youth of 14-17 years old in hospitality and agriculture sectors.

## QUESTIONS BY THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON PROTECTION AGAINST VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

* Can you identify good practices in the State interventions in relation to COVID-19 and LGBT persons? Can you identify good practices stemming from civil society actions? Have lessons be learned from the pandemic on how not to leave LGBT persons behind in emergency situations?

UNFPA and UNAIDS have regularly been working with the LGBTI-led CSO “Proud to be US” and other local NGOs to continue the awareness raising and training of frontline health workers on SOGIE. The most recent session on SOGIE was conducted on 10 June 2020 targeting the service providers in three Provinces.

During the nation-wide COVID-19 lockdown, the local CSOs continued promoting the OralQuick HIV self-test services through social media platforms targeting MSM/TG in Vientiane. However, other project sites outside the capital were closed following the official restrictions.

## QUESTIONS BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND MANAGEMENT AND DISPOSAL OF HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES AND WASTES

* Which initiatives and measures have been taken to understand such link and to currently address this problem?

While no specific measures required to be taken given no serious or deadly cases in Lao PDR, the UNCT members, including UNIDO and UNDP, support the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and other line Authorities in extending expertise on waste management, including medical waste, implementing to reach out vulnerable target groups and community within the country.

## QUESTIONS BY THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON FOREIGN DEBT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

* Did your Government benefit or have been allocating (as a creditor, lender or donor) any forms of debt alleviation including debt standstill, relief, moratorium, restructuring or cancellation. Was human rights a major consideration in making decisions and the use of the financial resources? Were there any specific groups at risks identified and if so, please detail specific measures considered to protect their human rights.

Lao PDR would be eligible to apply for IMF relief on certain bilateral sovereign debt payments under the G20 debt relief initiative. The Government has not yet applied for relief under the initiative.

* In addition, have the debt repayment requirements pressed your Government to cut some of the social expenditures, including on health? If so, do you think that this has hampered the current response of the health system to the COVID-19 crisis?

Lao PDR already had very limited fiscal space prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Declining economic activity as a result of travel and operating restrictions in response to COVID-19 has resulted in significant declines in Government revenue. The Ministry of Finance has estimated that 2020 revenue loss could reach 3% to 4% of GDP in 2020. Lao PDR is considered to be at high risk of debt distress by the World Bank. However, no specific cuts in social expenditure have yet been announced. Some Ministries have, however, indicated ODA as a source needed to cover COVID-19 related policy proposals referring to the limitations of national Government’s finances.

* Going forward, what measures or policy recommendation are being considered by your Government/institution for economic recovery and debt sustainability and to prevent and mitigate human rights impacts of the COVID-19 economic fallout?

The Government has already implemented some measures to support economic recovery, including tax relief and deferrals to businesses, a more expansionary monetary policy, and a credit moratorium. However, limited fiscal space constrains capacity for larger fiscal stimulus measures. The UNCT has jointly developed an advisory briefing paper for the Government on potential social protection responses to the economic shock. The scale of any social protection response would similarly be limited by available resources.

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**United Nations Lao PDR**

UN House, Lane Xang Avenue, PO. Box 345

Vientiane, Lao PDR

+856 (21) 267 777

[oneun-info.la@one.un.org](mailto:oneun-info.la@one.un.org)

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