

Laos still faces low nutrition



By Sengthong Phrasavath

(KPL) The incidence of malnutrition is quite high, and is causing children's growth to be stunted, according to the opening speech by Health Minister Ponmek Dalalay at the Nutrition Advocacy Meeting, held in Vientiane yesterday.

Furthermore, anaemia and Vitamin A deficiencies frequently result in the incomplete or slow physical and intellectual development of children. In 2000, 40 percent of children were underweight, an indicator that malnutrition is still widespread.

"All these deficiencies are not well understood by the community and are generally considered as normal or as part of fate," said the Minister. "This perception is in itself the dangerous core of the problem because its impacts are widespread, long lasting and even irreversible, in particular among the high risk group of mothers and children."

He urged the Government to develop a deeper understanding of malnutrition, which has its profound roots in poverty,

and is strongly linked to slash-and-burn practices for rice cultivation, which is not only inefficient, but is also very dangerous in terms of the huge negative impacts on the environment.

It not only perpetuates circular poverty, but is also destroying rich natural resources and biodiversity. A report released this week by UNICEF unveiled that poor nutrition effectively perpetuates the cycle of poverty, and malnutrition and has a direct impact on losses in pro-

ductivity due to people's poor physical status, as well as other losses caused by diseases linked with malnutrition.

In addition, malnutrition also increases health care costs, and the economic costs of malnutrition are high and hamper progress in eradicating poverty.

The meeting was held to strengthen awareness in the community of malnutrition and other nutrition problems in Laos, and the importance of urgently addressing these issues to reach the goals set forth in the Government's National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy and Millennium Development Goals.

The meeting also aimed to increase the awareness of nutrition issues on behalf of policy makers, line ministries, mass organisations, non-governmental organisations and donors.

The meeting was attended by representatives of the Ministries of Public Health and Agriculture and Forestry, the World Health Organisation, the World Food Project, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and other concerned sectors.



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