

Nutrition policy to address child mortality

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The first national policy on nutrition will focus on reducing mother and child mortality rates and is expected to be implemented next month.

The policy is awaiting approval from the Prime Minister and will target Laos's high rate of malnutrition, according to the Ministry of Public Health's Health Promotion and Nutrition Division Head Dr Bounthom Phengdy.

"The new policy will help the government reduce levels of malnutrition, especially of vulnerable groups, and to include nutrition in national socio-economic plans," he said.

A World Health Organisation analysis found that malnutrition was a significant factor in 59 percent of deaths caused by infectious diseases in Lao children aged under five.

A separate reproductive health survey conducted in 2005 showed that 405 mothers out of every 100,000 died during childbirth and 98 of every 1,000 children died before their fifth birthday. Among infants less than one year old, 70 out of 1,000 died. A proportion of these deaths are believed to be related to poor nutrition.

Dr Bounthom said department data from 2006 showed 37.1 percent of children under five were underweight, 40.6 percent suffered from anemia and 45 percent were deficient in vitamin A.

The policy is targeting all people in Laos, with special focus on groups living in remote areas and poorly educated people in urban areas.

It will focus on reducing food and vector borne diseases, and improving nutrient intake, health education and food access and availability.

The policy will recognise that nutrition is central to socio-economic development, and encourage priority investment in nutrition to facilitate action-oriented research.

The Ministry of Public Health has worked with the ministries of agriculture, forestry and education to draft the policy, with support from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the World Food Programme.