

Speech of Mr. Serge Verniau, FAO Resident Representative
Round Table Meeting on National Nutrition Policy 2020,
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- Excellencies:
 - Dr. Bounkoungh Phichit, Vice Minister of the MOH
 - Mr Bounthavy Sisouphanthong, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Planning and Investment and
 - Dr. Ty Phommasack, Vice-Minister of the MAF
- My colleagues from WFP, UNICEF and WHO and, of course FAO
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me first to welcome you all – on behalf of the entire United Nations Country Team, including the agencies present here today – to this Round Table Meeting on the National Nutrition Policy 2020.

I would also like to offer my appreciation and congratulations to all Lao Government ministries and institutions for their work on the draft National Nutrition Policy document. I'd especially like to thank and congratulate them for their dedication and commitment to establishing a long-term vision for improving nutrition in Lao PDR.

When Nobel Laureate and development economist Joseph Stiglitz visited Laos a few months ago, he described this country as being at an economic and social development crossroad. He discussed at length the “natural resource curse” – the risks that developing countries take when they pursue natural resource-based growth without taking steps to offset the potentially negative economic impacts. Part of that challenge for the Government of Lao PDR is also to reduce chronic malnutrition.

The World Food Programme’s recently released Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis shows that every second child is chronically malnourished and stunted in the rural areas – especially minority ethnic groups and those living in the highlands. Children who experience chronic malnutrition are in danger of not reaching their full mental and physical potential. They are also unable to fully contribute to, and benefit from, the socio-economic development of their country.

A recent World Bank report establishes a link between chronic malnutrition and economic growth. The causes are many and complex, which means the NNP 2020 will need an integrated approach. But a well-designed policy is not enough on its own. Good design has to be followed by collective action by both the Government and international development organizations. A comprehensive strategy and action plan, with realistic goals and deadlines, is vital.

When establishing a comprehensive strategy and action plan, it's important to be as inclusive as possible. A vast number of organizations, institutions and communities – from the Lao public and private sectors as well as the international community and the beneficiaries – will be involved in, and affected by - our efforts to reduce chronic malnutrition. Including all stakeholders in discussions is important to the development of any policy that is designed to reduce chronic malnutrition and thus improve socio-economic development.

Many of the underlying causes of chronic malnutrition have received little attention. One such cause, one that presents an interesting challenge, is the development conflicts that have arisen from protecting wild food resources. The management of wild food resources has protected biodiversity: an important result that is vital for environmental sustainability. But this has also contributed to chronic malnutrition by denying vulnerable communities important sources of food.

Land access is also an issue. Investment schemes, including plantations and land concessions, erode the food base of the vulnerable, especially ethnic minorities and highland communities, decreasing the amount of land available to them for agriculture. This development also has an impact on the aquatic biodiversity living in rice fields. These aquatic resources are important nutrition component of rural people's diets.

At this point I should also mention the effect of UXO on land access and chronic malnutrition, is the extent of UXO that cover the country. Vast sections of the entire country are too dangerous to be used for agricultural purposes that might reduce chronic malnutrition. The government and the international development community, including the UN and other NGOs, are already working closely together in partnerships to clear these lands of UXO. But this is another challenge that should be included in action plans to address chronic malnutrition.

But there is another issue that is central to formulating an action plan and strategy to address chronic malnutrition: the right to food. The fact that chronic malnutrition is so widespread shows that this basic human right is not being realized by a vast proportion of this country's population.

The right to food is a universal right. It is enshrined in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was adopted in 1966 and signed by Lao PDR in May 2007. It means that every woman, man and child must have access at all times to food, or to means for the procurement of food, which is sufficient in quality, quantity and variety to meet their needs. It must be free from harmful substances and must be acceptable to their culture.

This definition is based on the assumption that chronic malnutrition, and indeed hunger, are not just caused by a lack of available food, but also by poverty,

income disparities, and lack of access to health care, education, clean water, and sanitary living conditions.

A right to food-based approach is vital to reducing, and ultimately, eliminating chronic malnutrition. This approach combines three major elements. First, there are food security considerations involving availability, access, stability and utilization. Secondly, there are concerns for human dignity and cultural acceptability. Thirdly, there is empowerment by means of participation, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability.

This approach enables individuals, particularly the hungry and marginalized, to actively look for the means to fulfill of their right to food and to hold governments accountable for food security commitments it has made. The people thus become subjects of legal rights instead of being objects of assistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today is an important opportunity to discuss innovative ideas and plan for innovative action. If we are not open to new thinking it is likely that we will continue on the path of the last 10 years, and fail in our obligation, our duty, to reduce chronic malnutrition and stunting. The NNP 2020 will only be successful if timely and concerted action is taken at all levels: central, provincial and district and by all ministries. It's a huge task, with ambitious goals, but it is achievable if we all work together.

The NNP 2020 shall guide the implantation of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy and direct avenues for innovative activities in the development of the next National Social and Economic Development Plan. As these developments progress, nutrition will become a priority investment.

Over the past few months, the Ministry of Health has taken up – with great success – this important challenge. But it needs the active support of the other ministries. I can assure you that the United Nations Country Team will provide continuous support to the Government, and work in partnership to address this challenge. We would also like to develop closer partnerships with development partners – WB, ADB, EC – to provide this support to the Government.

Improving nutrition needs much more than a classical, health-focused approach. Let's be open to new ideas and strategies for tackling this challenge. In doing so, let's us finalize the National Nutrition Plan 2020 and also develop a National Nutrition Strategy with new ideas that build upon Lao culture and this county's rich biological heritage.

I wish you all success in your discussions. Thank you.