



The Adolescent Health Research Agenda Lao PDR



Guidance for researchers and donors
To facilitate relevant evidence generation
for policy and programming for
adolescents in Lao PDR.
To ensure they are not left behind in the
Sustainable Development Agenda.

Introduction

Background and Rationale

It is time to put adolescents centre stage, to do this we need evidence providing us with information about the root causes of issues adolescents face, everyday events that impact their life and development and factors influencing their choices and creating their opportunities to be healthy, stay in school and make choices for their own lives.

Despite global efforts to increase access to sexual and reproductive health services, adolescents tend to be left behind. There are numerous publications indicating that health services are not adolescent responsive, they are not reaching out to the most vulnerable groups including adolescents in remote areas and they are not catering to the needs of young people. However, there is limited evidence suggesting solutions, showing what works within adolescent reproductive health.

The Lancet Commission on Adolescent health was an important milestone (1), putting the adolescents on the academic agenda and highlighting the need for research and evidence especially from low-income settings. Until today, developed countries have been the key producers of research and have been setting the research priorities for low-resource countries. In fact, few developing countries have had a say in setting research priorities relevant to them (2). Hence it is now time to go beyond this traditional one-directional approach and establish a multi-directional partnership approach where the low-resource country is in the driving seat, and where regional and global partnerships facilitate the research agenda setting and subsequently support the realization of the identified research priorities. This allows the countries to which the research is most relevant to identify the bottlenecks and set the priorities to fill the evidence gaps. Such a multi-directional partnership approach was applied in the development of the ‘adolescent health research agenda’ in Lao PDR, to ensure country ownership and priorities aligned with national plans for development.

The 2017 report on Transformative Accountability for Adolescents was launched as a part of the annual assessment of progress on the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This report included a set of key recommendations, one of which particularly relevant for research and governance, supporting the importance of the adolescent research initiatives in Lao PDR as well as this document. Namely ‘Make Adolescents Visible and Measure What Matters’ referring to the importance of “Member states, national statistics offices, and UN agencies should implement systematic reporting and use of disaggregated data on adolescent health and development, including at intergovernmental levels such as the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development” (3).

To put adolescent girls at the forefront of the development agenda in Lao PDR, ‘Noi’ the adolescent girl representing all adolescent girls in Lao PDR was introduced in 2016 on the day of the first Adolescent Research Day. Noi serves as an entry point for dialogue, and to create awareness about adolescent issues as well as to establish partnerships. Importantly, Noi serves as a reminder to not leave adolescents behind in the SDG Agenda, and by promising accountability towards Noi we also promise to ensure availability of data on Noi and her progress in the Agenda 2030.

While it is important to identify issues where more research and data is needed it is also time that different agencies and organisations join forces and work together to ensure the protection of the health and rights of adolescent girls. Inspired by the introduction of Noi in 2016 the Noi 2030 Framework was created by partners in 2017 to facilitate the tracking of progress of adolescent girls within the 2030 agenda. This adolescent research agenda will contribute greatly towards quality data in Lao PDR to visualise the progress of adolescents in both the National and Global Development Goals.

Guiding Principles

Given the international and transdisciplinary nature of this network international standards and guiding principles in conducting research involving human subjects will apply. We primarily refer to the Declaration of Helsinki developed by The World Medical Association (WMA). This document lays out a statement of ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects, including research on identifiable human material and data. Additionally, we would like to refer to the World Health Organization developed a ‘Standards and Operational Guidance for Ethics Review of Health-Related Research with Human Participants’ (4) for further guidance.

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of this Research Agenda is to promote research areas that have relevance to public health with a focus on adolescents, particularly those that can:

- Fill the knowledge gaps with regard to adolescent health
- Reduce scientific uncertainties of what works in adolescent programming, including young adolescents (10-14 year old)
- Challenging research to go beyond the numbers and explore the root causes of issues in relation to adolescent health to inform policy and practice
- Respond to knowledge gaps and limited public awareness through the development of communication strategies for effective dissemination of evidence and to inform policy and practice.

The document is structured according to issues identified during the consultation workshops and are categorized according to theme. A brief summary of existing/ ongoing research is provided for each theme, along with overarching issues relevant to the design and analysis of future studies.

This publication is intended for use by researchers and funding agencies. Researchers are encouraged to use it as a guide to design studies according to identified knowledge gaps and that are likely to have high value for improving the health of adolescents to ensure social development and growth of the country in which they exist. Research funders and other key partners are encouraged to use the research agenda as a guiding document to organize resources to align with the identified issues laid out in the Research Agenda. Moreover, the agenda aim to facilitate coordination to minimize any unnecessary duplication of effort and maximize the effectiveness of research programmes.

Scope

This Research Agenda addresses urgent research priorities within adolescent health of major public health relevance. The majority of topics laid out in this agenda document focus on reproductive health related issues, since early marriage and early childbearing are major issues in the region. These practices often result in low educational attainment especially among girls and limited opportunities to enter the labour market, subsequently contributing to the continued cycle of poverty. Moreover, migration is on the rise, especially among young people exposing young people to health risks that are often neglected, in particular those of sexual and reproductive health. Suggested research designs and methodologies are outside of the scope of this document. This Research Agenda focuses on identifying short- and long-term research needs, including more programme oriented research and implementation research as well as public health research that will enable evidence-informed policy making and programming and result in the improved health of adolescents.



Process of setting research priorities

Reviewing the literature

An extensive search and review of existing literature was done to assess the availability of quality data on adolescent reproductive health in Lao PDR. In addition to searching scientific publications in databases such as PubMed and reports and generic publications online, agencies and research institutes working in the field of adolescent reproductive health in Lao PDR were approached to identify ongoing work, unpublished work and grey literature. There is some evidence with regard to adolescent reproductive health, however very limited.

In 2015 the first adolescent and youth situation analysis (AYSA) in Lao PDR was disseminated. The situation analysis covered five major topics (Education, Health, Employment, Protection and Participation). Due to the breadth of the report it could not go in depth on any of the five topics however it lay the ground work, put adolescents and young people on the map and provided a stepping stone for further advocacy. One of its key conclusions was the lack of evidence and data on adolescents and youth in general however with a few areas that were particularly emphasized, namely migration, abortion, protection and youth participation.

In addition to the AYSA, a few studies focus on the traditions and perceptions of adolescent sexual and reproductive health in a specific tribe in northern Laos (5-6). Other studies focus on urban youth, or high-risk groups such as female sex workers (7-8) or men having sex with men (9-11). In addition to scientific publications a few reports and studies were identified, however not enough to fill the gaps and to enable evidence-informed policy making and programming.

The assessment helped conceptualise the adolescent research day to ensure relevance. In addition to reviewing the literature and mobilizing a research conference with the focus on adolescent research UNFPA have conducted a lot of advocacy to raise awareness around the adolescent girl and the importance to invest in adolescent girls.

The Adolescent Research Day

The day consisted of three components; the launch of the state of the world population and the official introduction of Noi – the adolescent girl representing all adolescent girls in Lao PDR; the regional seminar on adolescent research with keynote sessions and regional overview of the current situation and ongoing research initiatives including poster exhibition and a market place; panel discussions to initiate the drafting of the research agenda for adolescent reproductive health in Lao and the greater Mekong region.

High-level representatives attended the meeting from government, embassies and development partners as well as researchers and technical experts within the field of Adolescent health from the Mekong region as well as from international research institutes. The launch of the UNFPA State of the World Population focused on the 10 year-old girl and highlighted the relevance of adolescents to achieve the SDGs. The day continued with key note presentations to set the stage, globally and regionally, followed by country presentations laying out the adolescent situation in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam as well as highlighting existing research and identifying the research and programme gaps. The afternoon consisted of panel discussions with technical experts from different institutions active within research on adolescent health, regionally and globally. These discussions laid the platform for the research agenda presented in this document.

The keynote speaker and adolescent research expert Dr Shireen Jejeebhoy set the stage by saying: “We need to understand what works, there are a lot of promising practices but we cannot yet say that we have the best practices”

At numerous times during the day, we heard that there is limited data and research on adolescents’ reproductive health today in general but in particular from this region and Lao PDR. Very little or questionable quality research has been carried out to understand young people’s practices and needs related to sexual and reproductive health and no research has looked at early adolescence although early marriage by the age of 15 is common (12). Based on the presentations and the panel discussions a number of key issues with related research questions were identified to be included in the final adolescent research agenda.

SDG4A - The Adolescent research network

SDG4A is a Network for Researchers, Development partners, and Stakeholders within the field of Adolescent Health in the Mekong Region (Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar and Vietnam). The network wants to bring actors together in an attempt to join forces to generate a body of evidence that can be used for high level decision-making and programming purposes within the field of adolescent health. It is an effort to increase the investment in adolescents and resources for adolescent responsive interventions.

The SDG4A research network aims to establish new cross-country and interdisciplinary collaborations to build a stronger body of evidence within adolescent health and to translate research into best-practice. The network should act like a platform of expertise, interaction, collaboration and knowledge sharing across countries within the region as well as with international experts on adolescent research. The network will primarily operate virtually through the established network website (www.sdg4a.org), however will also come together to meet on an annual basis. The network has three specific objectives, which are:

1. Support the Lao PDR National Institute of Public Health (NIOPH) and associated public health institutes in the region to provide national authorities and stakeholders with expertise, documentation, reports and relevant tools for increasingly evidence-based adolescent health policy-making leading to progress towards the sustainable development goals.
2. Enhance the institutional development capacities, resource and role of the National Public Health Institute and associated training institutes in the region in effectively providing evidence to policy makers with a specific focus on adolescent health including aspects such as reproductive health, nutrition, cost-effectiveness and the socio-cultural determinants of health.
3. Enhance cross-country collaborations and knowledge sharing to generate a solid evidence base with relation to adolescent health, what works and what doesn't work, in the greater Mekong region.

The SDG4A Network was founded by National Institute for Public Health (NIOPH) in collaboration with UNFPA Lao PDR and MCNV. The network was launched for the first

time during the Regional Adolescent Research Workshop held in Lao PDR in October 2016, hosted by NIOPH and co-hosted by UNFPA and MCNV. The network sets out to join partners and stakeholders together to create a joint research agenda within health - starting with a focus on sexual and reproductive health. In addition to generating new evidence the network also want to facilitate collaboration and sharing of resources and opportunities within the field.

Integration of the adolescent research agenda into the general health research agenda

NIOPH led an exercise to prioritize the health research agenda for Lao PDR early 2017. The prioritization based on interviews with program managers, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. In total, twenty-two research topics were identified reflecting the perceived research needs over a wide range of domains, including (i) disease- and injury specific research; (ii) prevention, education and intervention research; and (iii) health system and policy research. The key issues derived from the interviews, following either of two criteria: 1) the topic is frequently mentioned as a priority among stakeholders; or 2) the topic is a priority among all four stakeholder- groups.

Within the key areas identified, suggestions for research focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of Lao citizens in terms of prevention, education and existing interventions. Particularly, understanding perceptions and experiences within the areas of malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, sexual health and non-communicable diseases. Understanding health behavior and how to encourage people to change certain health behaviors was seen as important knowledge to obtain better health outcomes. In this domain, researchers suggested to target adolescents and young adults to provide insights where health education can make a considerable contribution to establishing healthy behaviors. Interestingly, none of the stakeholders' highlighted the particular needs of adolescents and the importance of research targeting particularly adolescents. This indicates the continued needs to highlight this in advocacy and programming. Therefore, by recognizing the need to establish a national research agenda for Lao PDR, while taking into account the relevance of inclusiveness of stakeholders in priority setting, integration of list of adolescent research agenda topics below are feasible fit into the general health research agenda.

Adolescent Research Agenda Topics and Corresponding Research Questions

The topics identified during the agenda setting process and some of the corresponding questions are reflected in the table below (Table 1).

Key Issues	Corresponding research questions
Early marriage before 18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child marriage – What are the determining factors? • How can we delay marriage?
Children are bearing children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the first pregnancy be delayed and the second pregnancy spaced?
Pre-marital sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we address and talk about pre-marital sex?
Unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many adolescent pregnancies are unintended? • How do adolescents cope with an unintended pregnancy and what are their choices? • What are the pathways of unsafe abortions among adolescents?
Child/Adolescent labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does child labour exist in Lao PDR today? • What is the impact of child labour on adolescent sexual and reproductive health? • To what extent are adolescents exposed to human trafficking and sex work? • How can we reduce vulnerability and improve wellbeing among factory workers, in particular girls?
Educational opportunities or lack thereof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we keep girls in school beyond primary education? • What are the means of motivating families to keep girls in school?
Break the cycle of maternal mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do adolescent pregnancy contribute to maternal mortality in Lao PDR • Are adolescents more prone to home birth? • How does cultural traditions such as home birth, hot beds etc. influence adolescent maternal mortality?

Drug and alcohol use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the use of alcohol and drugs among adolescence influence sexual behaviour? • What are the perceptions among adolescent boys of a girl that drinks alcohol and how do they result in reproductive outcomes?
Educational opportunities or lack thereof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we keep girls in school beyond primary education? • What are the means of motivating families to keep girls in school?
Unmet need for contraception among 15-19 year olds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are young people not using condoms and contraception? • How can we provide health services that actually target and respond to adolescents' needs?
Communicating SRHR to adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we reach out to adolescents with information about SRHR? • What are the effective means of communication, in- and out-of-school?
Violence and sexual coercion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we reach out to adolescents with information about SRHR? • What are the effective means of communication, in- and out-of-school?
Patriarchal structures and gender norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do patriarchal norms at the village level or in the immediate environment of adolescents influence adolescents reproductive rights? • How can adolescent girls negotiate patriarchal and gender norms and cultural traditions in their immediate environment?
Pornography use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role does pornography play in adolescents' perceptions of sexual relations and reproductive rights? • How frequent is pornography resorted to in the region? • Why do adolescents use pornography?
Nutrition among adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the nutritional status of adolescents in Lao PDR influence their reproductive health, childbearing, childbirth and early childhood? • To what extent do malnutrition and early pregnancy relate and what are the reproductive outcomes?

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