



Lessons from an Integrated Community Health Education Initiative in Rural Laos

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Summary. — This mixed-methods study examines annual community events promoting integrated health in Laos using an Ecohealth approach. A Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices survey of 218 rural households indicated that attendees valued “Community Health Days” and had greater recall of human health topics, but not of animal or environmental health topics, than non-attendees. The survey and organizational observations suggested that such events are opportunities for multi-sector collaboration in the region, yet delivery may be enhanced by refining the vision, topics, and facilitator roles. Research on transdisciplinary education programs is limited, so this study could inform similar initiatives about potential directions and challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Laos is one of the least developed countries in South-East Asia. In 2012, it ranked 138th out of 169 countries on the 2012 Human Development Index with an average life expectancy of 68 years. However, the country has experienced a steady economic growth over the last two decades (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). Poverty declined from 46% to 27% during 1992–2008, suggesting that the country is on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty by 2015. In spite of this progress, meaningful development in Laos does not only rely on income-based poverty reduction, since progress of this indicator has not been sufficient to decrease persistent health inequity and food insecurity across the country (Government of Lao PDR & United Nations, 2008), particularly among women, ethnic minorities, and rural inhabitants (World Food Programme, 2007). In response, a multi-sector initiative involving local academic and government experts was trialed to address health education and health-promoting behaviors using an approach termed “Community Health Days” (CHDs). First launched in 2010, a second series of CHDs, focused on women and children, was organized in 2012 in 11 villages of the Xaythany District within the Vientiane Plain of central Laos. The purpose of the CHDs was to encourage healthy behaviors and promote wellbeing with the ultimate goal of improving community health and food security in rural Laos.

This action-research study explores successes and challenges of a multi-sector program that integrates public, animal, and environmental health education to address local health concerns. The study describes and explores how integrated health messages were presented at the community level through CHDs, and examines how effective this approach has been for raising awareness of the issues addressed. Qualitative and quantitative data collected on the CHDs were analyzed using an “Ecohealth” approach (Unahalekhaka *et al.*, 2013). Particular attention was paid to the experiences of different types of

stakeholders, namely event facilitators and both CHD attendees and non-attendees. This involved an observational analysis of the planning process and a knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) survey on self-reported preventative health practices.

This paper will commence by introducing the context of human, environmental, and animal health in Laos, which informed the CHD as a model for community intervention. This is followed by a brief review of the concepts guiding the analytic framework of this study, specifically action research and Ecohealth. A summary of findings is provided, followed by a discussion of the potential future direction of this community-based initiative.

2. BACKGROUND

(a) *Human, animal, and environmental health in Laos*

The United Nations Development Programme’s Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) classified 47.2% of Lao people as multi-dimensionally poor, defined as being deprived of at least 30% of ten weighted indicators in health, education, and standards of living (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). Only one third of the rural population of Laos is considered food secure (World Food Programme,

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2007), a state of having sufficient access to safe and nutritious food for a healthy, active life (World Food Programme, 2012). Although poverty is largely concentrated in rural areas, as the urban population in Laos increases, it is likely that new challenges for food insecurity will arise for both urban and rural populations (Fullbrook, 2013). According to a recent national survey, the main factor differentiating households with sufficient *versus* poor levels of food consumption is animal protein intake, particularly of wild caught foods (World Food Programme, 2007). However, wild food resources are declining due to widespread ecosystem degradation. A case study in the Vientiane Plain found that recent land tenure policies have led to increased competition for land through resettlements, social inequalities, and an estimated loss of 80% of forest cover along the edges of the Plain (Ducourtieux, Laffort, & Sacklokham, 2005; Sacklokham & Dufumier, 2006). Although 78% of households keep at least one species of livestock (Steering Committee for the Agricultural Census, 2012), the Lao population does not consume enough livestock to compensate for the potential loss of protein as wild food sources decline (World Food Programme, 2007). This is partially due to high livestock morbidity and mortality from disease, which is one of the greatest constraints to livestock production (Katagami & Oka, 2003). Veterinary care is largely lacking in Laos. In 2011, there were only 36 qualified graduate veterinarians (DVMs) working for the livestock and fisheries departments at the national and provincial levels (Bastiaensen, Kamakawa, & Varas, 2011). Sporadic outbreaks of endemic and emerging diseases in livestock have been attributed to limited knowledge of disease prevention, treatment, and control (Caro, Edwards, Fitch, Surma, & Morzaria, 2010; Rast, Windsor, & Khounsy, 2010), uncontrolled trans-boundary animal movements, and poor access to veterinary support (Khounsy *et al.*, 2008; Wilson, 2007). A recent survey of owners of large ruminants in northern Laos found that these farmers had very limited knowledge of diseases, nutrition, and biosecurity measures (Nampanya, Rast, Khounsy, & Windsor, 2010). Similarly, after an important outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in 2004, many poultry producers in Vientiane still had limited awareness of the disease symptoms, reporting requirements, and safe poultry handling practices (Barennes, Martinez-Aussel, Vongphrachanh, & Strobel, 2007). In 2010, an outbreak of HPAI occurred in the Xaythany district, the region under study (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). Livestock diseases also have important economic implications, since outbreaks among ruminants in northern and central Laos continue to constrain productivity among small-scale farmers from the loss of draught power (Khounsy *et al.*, 2008, 2012).

Crop production faces further pressure by land degradation. A survey in northern Laos found that 54% of cash-crop maize farmers considered their farmland to be degraded (Southavilay, Nanseki, & Takeuchi, 2012). However, many Lao farmers also have limited knowledge of the underlying causes of land degradation and remediation techniques (Southavilay *et al.*, 2012), and often use harmful pesticides banned in developed countries (Escalada, Heong, Sengsoulvong, & Schiller, 2006).

In addition to these challenges, human parasite burden is a constraint on food security in Laos by causing nutrient loss and ill health (World Health Organization, 1985). A recent nation-wide study found that 62% of primary school children tested positive for helminths (Rim *et al.*, 2003). The high prevalence of parasitic infections in Laos is related to poor sanitation (World Food Programme, 2007), the consumption

of contaminated vegetables (Maipanich *et al.*, 2011), polluted water sources (Sayasone *et al.*, 2011), and living in close proximity to livestock (Randolph *et al.*, 2007). A survey in the Vientiane capital found that high parasite load in children was more common when their parents had lower levels of education (Phathamavong, Moazzam, Xaysomphoo, Phengsavanh, & Kuroiwa, 2007). In countries like Laos where helminth infections are endemic (Rim *et al.*, 2003), deworming alone is often insufficient due to the rapidity of reinfection (Ziegelbauer *et al.*, 2012). A recent meta-analysis recommended that sanitation education be promoted alongside treatment strategies (Ziegelbauer *et al.*, 2012).

(b) *Community health days*

There is increasing recognition in the development community that health is a multifaceted entity, as indicated by a shift away from the biomedical model to the social, ecological, and economic “determinants of health” (Webb *et al.*, 2010). The World Health Organization’s 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion emphasizes this integrated approach to health, recognizing that people and their environments are inextricably linked (World Health Organization, 1986). Considering the multi-faceted nature of health and food insecurity in Laos, there is significant potential in community-based education programs that improve community awareness and action on the integrated social and ecological linkages affecting human health. The Community Health Days under study are part of a wider program run by Veterinarians without Borders-Canada (VWB) and the Faculty of Agriculture of the National University of Laos (NUOL), hereafter referred to as Lead Organizers (LOs), to improve local capacity in animal health, and related human and environmental health issues. The program targets 11 villages in the Xaythany District, Vientiane Prefecture, central Laos. This district was selected due to high livestock morbidity and mortality, strong community interest in improving animal health, and its proximity to the university. In response to community consultations, the LOs’ main focus in Laos has involved training and supporting 33 local men and women in basic veterinary skills to act as “Primary Animal Health Workers” (PAHWs). Their role is to help reduce livestock mortality in the district by providing outreach services (e.g., vaccinations, consultation) through household visits for a small fee. In 2010, the LOs expanded the scope of their activities in animal health and production when they organized the first series of “Community Health Days” (CHD). These involved all 11 villages in association with local stakeholders (village chiefs, PAHWs, Women’s Union and other community representatives), followed by a second series in 2012. The vision of this community mobilization activity was to increase the communities’ knowledge of human, animal, and environmental health and their inter-linkages, and to promote the PAHWs and their services, while providing an engaging learning and social experience for all ages. The CHDs were an opportunity to promote the PAHWs because not all community members with animals use their services. The focus of this study is the CHDs organized in 2012. At these events, representatives from government and the university presented a range of educational materials in a communal space with cooperation from local leaders. Agendas for the CHDs were meant to reflect priority issues in the region as identified by the LOs, community members, the local District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), and the District health department.

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