



ADOLESCENT HEALTH

Webinar Series

ADOLESCENT HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT:

A deeper look into the key health challenges in the region

Post-webinar report

Adolescent Health and Development: A deeper look into the key health challenges in the region

Adolescents as a group of individuals are often overlooked in health related discussions, despite the need to tackle the health challenges they face during a crucial period of transition from childhood to adulthood. The various aspects of their health and well-being (psychological, social, developmental and sexual) are impacted by a myriad of factors such as technology, poverty and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

With a view to discussing these important issues and exploring some of the different aspects they impinge on, the SingHealth Duke-NUS Global Health Institute (SDGHI) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Lao PDR collaborated to organise a 4-part webinar series. The 4 webinars highlighted the key challenges and approaches in adolescent health and well-being in the region by: 1) looking at the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents, 2) understanding the implications of the rapidly evolving digital environment on their health, 3) examining the key approaches to sexual and reproductive health, 4) looking at poverty as an underlying determinant that increases the vulnerability and health risks of this demographic. It brought together speakers working in different areas of adolescent health and development from various countries in the region and provided a holistic picture of how the different aspects explored intersect and influence the overall health and well-being of adolescents.

Webinar 1

The Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescents

Ms Mariam A. Khan, Country Representative, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Lao PDR
Dr Sitthiroth Rasphone, Director General, Centre for Development Policy Research, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR

Ms Jayamalar Samuel, UNFPA Assistant Representative, Malaysia

Ms Amina Mahmood, Deputy Director, SingHealth Duke-NUS Global Health Institute (SDGHI) (moderator)

SDGHI and UNFPA Lao PDR hosted the first webinar in the series on 14 July 2021. This webinar provided an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents' health and development. It highlighted specific aspects of the impact of COVID-19 and ongoing responses in Lao PDR and Malaysia. The panellists also emphasised the need for further inclusive and comprehensive, medium to long term response measures for mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents.

In the opening the webinar, **Ms Amina Mahmood** said that adolescents are in the crucial transition phase from childhood to adulthood and in the process of forming their identities. They face several issues in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, mental health as well as grapple with challenges relating to educational, psychological, social and developmental issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has

disproportionately affected their health and wellbeing. This webinar will bring out these issues through the case studies from Lao PDR and Malaysia.

Ms Mariam A. Khan highlighted the interlinkages between academia and applied service delivery in ensuring better adolescent health outcomes. She stressed the importance of focusing on adolescent's health and development as it often does not receive sufficient attention. Referring to the UNFPA's recently released the state of world population report 2021 [‘My Body is My Own: Claiming the Right to Autonomy and Self-Determination’](#), she said that Lao PDR scored 96 points out of 100 on the sustainable development goals indicator, 5.6.2, that tracks the number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education. She further emphasized that laws and frameworks are well placed in Lao PDR, the need of the hour is to accelerate their implementation. She expressed her hope that this webinar series will help share the good work done in Lao PDR and other countries in the region.

‘It is very important that the cycle of information between the adolescent health programmes on the ground keep in touch with research and evaluations to strengthen the academic know-how.’ – Ms. Mariam A. Khan

Dr Sitthiroth Rasphone presented the findings from the assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents in Lao PDR jointly conducted by the Centre for Development Policy Research, Ministry of Planning and Investment, UNFPA and the United Nations Children's Fund. Sharing the impact on the

‘The major economic impact is a decline in economic growth, ranging between 1% to -1.8%, thereby disrupting family income and increasing the risks of child labour and protection issues.’ – Dr Sitthiroth Rasphone

education sector, he projected a 5% increase in school dropout at secondary level with adolescent girls and students from the poorest households facing the highest risk of school dropout. The impact on their health was related to a reduction in contraceptive use, increased risk of unplanned pregnancy and maternal deaths as well as increased risk of anxiety and psychosocial stress. He also highlighted the increased risk of gender based violence (GBV), online harassment, sexual exploitation and child marriage.

Dr. Rasphone also presented the ongoing response to COVID-19 such as risk communication. UNFPA supported mental health psychosocial support telephone helplines, telehealth initiatives, videos for providing online comprehensive sexuality education, *Noi Yakhoo* mobile Application for young people, essential service package on GBV and supply of menstrual hygiene products to returnee female migrant workers. He also recommended keeping adolescent girls at the centre of COVID-19 response to ensure that the progress made in the last few decades is not reversed. He also highlighted the need of using adolescents' age disaggregated data for planning responses; continued delivery of adolescents and youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services; and providing financial and social protection assistance to adolescent girls and their families.

Ms Jayamalar Samuel presented the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents in Malaysia. She shared that the major economic impact was poor families losing their only source of income due to lockdown measures. The demand and access to affordable goods and services were affected by the closure of informal markets and limited public transportation. The confined living spaces of populations in high risk settings increased the likelihood of contracting the virus and affected their physical and mental health.

Referring to the study findings, she mentioned that 30% of households found it more difficult to receive medical assistance and 66% of households experienced emotional distress during the movement control implemented. Adverse impact on education and nutritional status of adolescents, and an increase in suicides were also recorded during the movement control. She highlighted the need to address the educational, nutritional, protection and empowerment needs of adolescents to mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19 on adolescents in Malaysia.

'Household poverty and food insecurity have a long term impact on adolescents' health and development.' – Ms Jayamalar Samuel

Ms Mahmood asked about the strategies used by the two countries for multi-sectoral collaboration in COVID-19 response measures. Lao PDR assigned the Ministry of Planning and Investment as the nodal agency for preparing the response policy on economic aspects and coordinating with international development partners. They ensured representation of concerned line ministries such as health, education, labour and social welfare. They allocated budget from government sources and mobilised funding from donors and the private sector through cooperation and partnerships. Malaysia engaged the Ministries of Education, Health and Religious Affairs, Universities, civil society organizations and non-governmental organisations in the discussions, planning and implementation of response measures such as child marriage prevention and comprehensive sexuality education.

Responding to the question on engagement of adolescents, Ms Samuel highlighted the importance of having adolescents on the decision making table as active stakeholders in contributing to response measures and policy decisions. Dr Rasphone shared the example of 'Me, My Body, My Planet, My Future campaign', run in partnership with UNFPA, government ministries, Lao Youth Union, Lao Women's Union and non-governmental organisations, which provides opportunities to adolescents to promote risk communication and take action online and offline on issues affecting them and their communities.

Dr Rasphone also mentioned the cash transfer programme for nutrition assistance in Lao PDR, implemented in collaboration with UN agencies, Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. He shared information on interventions for addressing maternal death in rural areas, ethnic groups and poor communities.

On the possibility of using the COVID-19 lockdowns as an opportunity, Ms Samuel said that the COVID-19 movement restriction gave families an opportunity to spend more time with each other, to strengthen family bonds and develop better understanding between family members. It also provided an opportunity for parents to better understand the views and needs of adolescents. Dr Rasphone said that the COVID-19 lockdown provided the Lao government the opportunity to increase domestic production and reduce dependence on neighbouring countries for consumer products.

This webinar successfully presented the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on adolescents along with insights on ongoing successful responses in two diverse countries in the region. The session also highlighted the need for adolescent-centred inclusive and comprehensive response measures with multi-sectoral collaboration to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents.

To watch the complete recording of the webinar on YouTube, please click the links below to access it:

UNFPA Laos YouTube Channel:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP_2iNgjASs&list=PL8meX36E4sJDeyoM-Ga_pL_QkYrBvOii&index=4

SDGHI YouTube Channel: https://youtu.be/ZP_2iNgjASs

Webinar 2

Adolescents in the digital environment (Technology and Teenagers)

Dr Daniel Fung, CEO and Child and adolescent psychiatrist, Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Singapore

Dr Tej Ram Jat, Programme Specialist Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Lao PDR

Ms Ketsana Siphonephat, Deputy Head of Academic Affairs Section, Lao German Technical College, Department of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of Education and Sports, Lao PDR

Ms Ticiana Garcia-Tapia, Youth and Adolescent Development Specialist and Gender Focal Point, UNICEF, Indonesia

Dr Courtney Davis, Co-Lead Education and Training Core Lead, SDGHI and Staff Physician Adolescent Medicine Service, KK Women's and Children's Hospital, Singapore (moderator)

SDGHI and UNFPA Lao PDR hosted the second webinar in the series on 21 July 2021 with adolescent health experts from Singapore, Lao PDR and Indonesia who shared their insights on youth as digital natives. This webinar addressed the risks and benefits of the digital environment on adolescents by looking at its i) *impact* – on mental and physical health, ii) *implementation* – how digital tools are integrated for adolescent health service delivery and iii) *intersection* – with online education and the consequences of the sudden shift to e-learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Daniel Fung from IMH, Singapore, opened the webinar with an overview of 'adolescence in the digital dimension'. He emphasised on the importance of adolescents finding the right balance when using technology to ensure they make the most out of it with minimum disruption to their health and well-being.

"The previous generations, we call ourselves 'digital migrants' but the children and adolescents growing up today are the 'digital natives' " – **Dr Daniel Fung**

He talked about some of the emerging concerns in Singapore around the use of digital technologies by adolescents, pointing to case studies on misuse of technology by teenagers in the country. He also described ongoing national initiatives such as the cyber wellness programmes offered at schools that are designed to focus on the well-being of students as they navigate cyber space. The three core cyber wellness principles he mentioned included: i) Respect for self and others, ii) Safe and responsible use, iii) Positive peer influence.

Dr Fung also gave a detailed rundown on the direct health impacts of increased digital exposure among adolescents. These included low physical activity, early exposure to sexually explicit content, risk of substance and behavioural addiction and violence victimisation. He particularly highlighted the increasing trend in gaming addiction among youth and its long-term impact on adolescent mental health outcomes.

He concluded his presentation by emphasising the opportunities that have opened up in this new age digital world, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. He outlined IMH's telepsychiatry services for adolescents, which include: a) Tele-Collaboration, b) Tele-Treatment, c) Tele-Monitoring, d) Tele-Support.

Moving from *impact* to *implementation*, in the next segment, **Dr Tej Ram Jat and Ms Ketsana Siphonephat** from Lao PDR shared their experience in delivering adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and comprehensive sexuality education using digital technology in the country. Dr Jat from UNFPA Lao PDR gave a detailed overview of the country's demographics in relation to ASRH. With over 50% of the population below 25 years of age - making it one of the youngest populations in the region - adolescents in Lao PDR are an important target group for development policies and service delivery, especially for health and education.

Lao PDR has the highest birth rate in the Southeast Asian region (83 births per 1000 girls aged 15-19 years) with a high-unmet need for contraceptives among married and unmarried girls. These statistics raise serious concerns on ASRH and point to the need to advocate for government action and intervention with support from agencies like UNFPA to deliver services in a timely and effective

“We see increased risk of gender based violence, unplanned pregnancies, child marriage, school dropout, child labour etc. because of the COVID-19 pandemic” – Dr Tej Ram Jat

manner. In connection with this, Dr Jat explained the Noi approach taken by UNFPA Lao PDR in collaboration with the Government and other stakeholders. Aligned with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, [the Noi Approach](#) was launched in 2016 to raise awareness of adolescent issues and increase comprehensive investments in youth, reduce adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality through multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

A key component of this framework included comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Ms Ketsana Siphonephat from the Ministry of Education and Sports in Lao PDR detailed this programme and the use of digital tools to implement it. CSE has been introduced in primary, secondary and technical and vocational education. It uses a systems approach and curriculum-based process of teaching and learning covering different aspects of the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality through integration with the subjects such as civic education, biology and safe use of social media. She also presented the different digital application tools and web platforms used for delivering CSE in and outside school settings to reach a wider spectrum of adolescents.

In the final presentation, **Ms Ticiana Garcia-Tapia** from UNICEF Indonesia outlined the challenges rising from the sudden and long-term shift to digital learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She pointed out the technological mismatch between students and teachers with respect to digital literacy and familiarity. She said “teachers have reportedly been struggling to make the transition from offline to online learning. It is not enough to just be able to use the device, but it is really the way one teaches online that has become important”. She also mentioned that less than 20% of teachers reported using interactive apps like Zoom or Google Meet and 60-90% of teachers use Whatsapp to communicate with students resulting in a one-way restrictive teaching style.

“Very one-way learning and very little opportunity for discussion, for brainstorming and for creative exchanges and this has been highlighted by young people as a major challenge during the pandemic” – Ticiana Garcia-Tapia

Ms Garcia-Tapia also discussed issues related to access to the internet and helped to evaluate some of the more deep-seated factors that tend to be masked in many research studies. She highlighted that the digital divide is most apparent between rural and urban areas, among people with disability compared to people without disabilities and between low and high-income groups. She argued that while gender differences may not always be so obvious, the global internet user gender gap has grown from 11% to 17%. In addition, female youths are three times more likely not to be in education,

employment or training compared to male peers, putting them at a greater disadvantage. She also shared some of the key takeaways from youth consultations and emphasised that adolescents strongly believe that teaching systems are not yet ready to be running completely online and urgent teacher training is required to bridge the gap. On a final note, Ms Garcia-Tapia described UNICEF's Reimagine Education Initiative as a global initiative that is run with a pro-equity approach for all country contexts through co-creation with educators and young people to produce localised, contextualised and relevant content, with a real-time feedback loop mechanism.

Overall, this 1-hour long webinar on adolescents in the digital environment introduced the audience to both the positives and negatives impact of today's digital world on youth. Leading adolescent health experts gave country specific case studies from Singapore, Lao PDR and Indonesia covering a wide range of issues that are affecting youth in the region. It was revealing to find out how these countries with very different demographics and levels of economic development were grappling with similar issues related to adolescent health. In conclusion, the digital world can be a boon or a bane but as Dr Fung puts it "the main question is how to find the right balance".

To watch the complete recording of the webinar on YouTube, please click the links below to access it:

UNFPA Laos YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-bdbfS4eEA&list=PL8meX36E4sJDeyoM-Ga_pL_QkYrBvOii&index=3

SDGHI YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-bdbfS4eEA>

Webinar 3

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) in South East Asia (SEA)

Ms Sivananthi Thanenthiran, Executive Director of the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Malaysia

Dr Sommana Rattana, Deputy Director of Health care and Habitation Department, Ministry of health, Lao PDR

Ms Siriphone Sally Sakulku, Sexual and Reproductive Health Programme Coordinator, UNFPA, Lao PDR

Ms Ni Luh Eka Purni Astiti (Eka), advocacy consultant Indonesia Planned Parenthood Association (IPPA) and Youth Country Coordinator of *Get Up Speak Out (GUSO)* programmes

Ms Mariam A. Khan, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Country Representative, Lao PDR (moderator)

SDGHI and UNFPA Lao PDR hosted the third webinar in the series on 28 July 2021 with three experienced panellists in the area of adolescent and reproductive health from Malaysia, Lao PDR and Indonesia. The webinar explored key issues surrounding ASRH in the region, the importance of youth involvement in ASRH programmes and the various strategies adopted to advance ASRH education at the national and local levels.

Ms Sivananthi Thanenthiran, from ARROW, opened the session by highlighting the key conventions that protect the rights of adolescents - The International Conference in Population and Development (ICPD) and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The key sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents include:

- The right to sexual and reproductive health information, services and counselling

- The right to delay marriage and have full and free choice in marriage related decisions
- The right to be free from gender-based violence
- The right to be equal within the family and community through gender equitable roles and attitudes

Ms Thanenthiran set the stage for the session further by emphasising the need to adopt an intersectional lens and take into account social determinants such as age, gender, poverty and exclusionary status when addressing ASRH in the region. She detailed some of the key challenges, such as unintended pregnancies and early age marriages, that adolescents in the region are currently facing and underlined strategies that are employed to advance the agenda for adolescent sexual and reproductive health.

“What are the key rights and policy interventions that are necessary for adolescents to thrive in the world?” – Sivananthi Thanenthiran

Some key strategies mentioned include capacity building in youth led organisations, creation of spaces for young people to participate in the formulation of policy briefs and adopting age disaggregated data to bring the youth agenda to governments.

“Nothing about us, without us!” – Sivananthi Thanenthira as she quotes disability rights groups from the 80’s

Ms Thanenthiran ended her talk by highlighting that young people are critical stakeholders in decision-making and in how policies and programmes are crafted. “Young people have the right to review and monitor how policies and programmes fulfil their sexual and reproductive health”.

Following the overview of ASRH in the region, **Dr Sommana Rattana** provided an in-depth country analysis of how ASRH programmes are being delivered in Lao PDR. She highlighted that with half of the population in Lao PDR aged below 25 years, along with the presence of diverse ethnic groups and geographical characteristics in the country, addressing ASRH poses many challenges. She shared that the key principles the Ministry of Health in Lao PDR adopts when implementing ASHR health services and programmes are equity, accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness and effectiveness.

The Integrated national adolescent and youth friendly services (AYFS) programmes were rolled out in Lao PDR in collaboration with private sector partners based on these principles. AYFS focuses on strengthening the capacity of institutes and civil society organisations and improving accessibility to ASRH services and information through mobile clinics, ASRH peer educators in schools and factories.

Ms Siriphone Sally Sakulku adds to this by highlighting the innovative ways in which technology is being used for ASRH in Lao PDR. She highlights the ASRH support hotline which has trained counsellors

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