

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The Situation of Children with Disabilities in Xiengkhouang Province, Lao PDR

PENDA (Programme for Evidence to Inform Disability Action) is a consortium led by the International Centre for Evidence in Disability. Funded by the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), PENDA creates evidence to achieve long-term improved wellbeing and inclusion of people with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries, by developing knowledge, people and tools.

Key messages:

- Half of school-age children with disabilities were out of school
- Many children with disabilities do not receive the support they need at school
- Children with disabilities can experience an unmet need for healthcare and assistive devices
- Caregivers of children with disabilities have low levels of knowledge about their child's health needs
- Over 70% of children with disabilities experienced recent discrimination

Disability in Lao PDR

The 2015 Population and Housing Census estimated that approximately 1% of children and youth in Laos have a disability.¹ This number is likely even higher: for example, UNICEF estimates 1 in 10 children worldwide have a disability.² Lao PDR ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009, passed Law No.57 for people with disabilities in 2018, and has developed a national policy, strategy and action plan for people with disabilities for 2020-2030.³ These laws and policies enforce non-discrimination on the basis of disability and outline strategies for improving accessibility and inclusivity of education, health and other services.

However, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities notes that there are still gaps in legislation and policy, and that they were developed with limited involvement from people with disabilities.³

The Committee also notes that children with disabilities experience discrimination and exclusion in the community, lack access to education, social services, protection and support, and opportunities to express their views on matters concerning them.³

Examining if and how a cash-plus programme benefits children with disabilities in Lao PDR

- ▶ PENDA is conducting a rigorous evaluation of a pilot cash-plus programme for children with disabilities in Lao PDR. The programme is implemented in Xiengkhouang Province by UNICEF Lao PDR and the Lao government, with funding from the Government of Australia.
- ▶ The cash-plus programme combines a regular cash transfer with provision of assistive devices and a family support programme for caregivers. Families of children with disabilities receive a monthly cash transfer of 400,000 LAK (approximately \$23 USD). Children with disabilities will also be given needed assistive devices (e.g. hearing aids, wheelchairs) free of charge. Caregivers are invited to a family support programme which aims to improve their understanding of their child's disability, how to provide support to their child and the caregiver's financial skills.
- ▶ The evaluation aims to assess if the cash-plus programme improves outcomes for children with disabilities and their families. The evaluation compares outcomes between children who receive the programme and children who do not. Data is collected from children and caregivers before the roll-out of the programme and after it has been running for 2 years.
- ▶ In 2023, LSHTM and Lao TPHI collected baseline survey data from children with disabilities and caregivers in five districts (Pek, Khoun, Phoukoud, Nonghed, Kham) before implementation of the programme. The data in this brief comes from this baseline survey, which included 420 children with disabilities.

The situation of children with disabilities in Xiengkhouang Province

Education and disability

- ▶ Only 47% of children with disabilities aged 6-18 were currently in school (compared to 80% of all children aged 6-16 in the 2015 Population and Housing Census¹). There was

no difference between girls and boys with disabilities but children with multiple disabilities and intellectual disabilities had the lowest attendance (22% and 35%, respectively).

- ▶ Amongst children in school, over half of caregivers (54%) reported that their children needed extra support in school because of their disability. A third of children with disabilities had an unmet need for support. Additionally, 80% of caregivers did not feel that they could talk to their child's teacher about his/her disability.

Health and disability

- ▶ Most caregivers reported that their child had received the healthcare they needed due to their disabilities, although 32% reported unmet need. Amongst families accessing healthcare, 67% were at least somewhat satisfied with the services they received.
- ▶ Half (52%) of caregivers reported an unmet need for assistive devices for their child. In particular, children with hearing (76%), physical (48%) and multiple disabilities (67%) had high levels of unmet need for assistive devices. Overall, 22% of children with disabilities had accessed some sort of assistive device and, of this group, most (80%) were at least somewhat satisfied with the products received.
- ▶ Caregivers generally reported low levels of knowledge about their child's health needs. For example, 51% did not know what type of healthcare would be helpful for their child and 34% did not know where to go for appropriate healthcare. Further, 56% did not know what type of assistive devices their child needed and 67% did not know where to go for these devices.

Discrimination

- ▶ Over two-thirds (71%) of children have experienced discrimination in the last 30 days (e.g. been called names/insulted, avoided because of disability).
- ▶ Hmong and other minority groups were more likely to experience discrimination.

What's next?

- ▶ These results come from a baseline survey of an impact evaluation of a pilot cash-plus programme. The evaluation will determine if receiving the programme improves key outcomes for children with disabilities and their families – such as child wellbeing and deprivation, caregiver wellbeing and quality of life, and unmet access to disability-related goods and services. The evaluation is collecting data from children with disabilities who receive and who do not receive the programme at two time points – before the roll-out of the programme (baseline – conducted in 2023) and after the programme has been running for 2 years (endline – 2025). For more information on the evaluation design, see the published study protocol.⁴
- ▶ We will also conduct a process evaluation, which includes qualitative research, to explore why and how the programme did or did not have impact. It will involve interviews with caregivers and programme designers and implementers to explore their reflections on the strengths and challenges of the cash-plus programme. The process evaluation will start in late 2024.
- ▶ Findings on the impact and implementation of the cash-plus programme will be available in mid-2026.

Reference

[1] Lao Statistics Bureau. Disability Monograph of Lao PDR. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Lao Statistic Bureau, 2020; [2] UNICEF. Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities. New York, USA: UNICEF, 2021; [3] Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Concluding observations on the initial report of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Geneva, Switzerland: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2022; [4] Banks LM, Soukphaphone B, Scherer N, Siengsounthone L, Carew M, Shakespeare T, et al. Impact evaluation of a cash-plus programme for children with disabilities in Xiengkhouang Province in Lao PDR: study protocol for a non-randomised controlled trial. *BMJ Open*. 2024;14:e081536

Findings in this Evidence Brief are preliminary and will be formally published as a peer-reviewed article in due course.

Further information

For further information about PENDA, visit: <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research/centres-projects-groups/penda>

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Research Partners

- ▶ International Centre for Evidence in Disability, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
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Programme Implementer and Funder

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