

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

CHF 336,000

Programme No. 01.59/2000

National Context

Laos has a population of 4.6 million, most of whom rely on agriculture or forestry for a living. The majority Lao ethnic group, about half the population, are rice growers living along the Mekong river plains and usually enjoy better conditions than the many other ethnic communities, with their diversity of languages and culture, who often live in remote mountainous areas and have less access to basic services. In general, the country has poor health and education facilities, and some of the worst health indicators in the region: its maternal mortality is the region's highest, while life expectancy is 50 for men and 52 for women. Many villages are inaccessible by road for most of the year and only an estimated 49% in rural areas has access to safe water.

Laos has been governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party since 1975, after a decade of civil strife which left a legacy of unexploded ordinance that continues to kill and maim. In 1996 Laos began transforming its economy from a centrally planned to an open market based system. It has been badly affected by the regional economic crisis, leaving it facing inflation rates of around 140%.

Compared to the rest of the region Laos has a low natural disaster profile, experiencing only flooding along the Mekong, for which the population has developed traditional coping mechanisms, and the occasional drought.

Country Assistance Strategy

The Lao Red Cross (LRC) has been in transition since 1992. Formerly based within the Ministry of Health it is now officially independent but remains closely linked to government. Its five year plan, for 1998 to 2003, aims at establishing a branch in all 18 provinces. Its current capacity varies considerably, reflecting the country's shortage of skilled manpower. While some Branches are relatively well developed, some branches and the national headquarters have limited management skills, with staff still appointed by the government. Strengthening governance and management remains the area most in need of improvement. Besides capacity building, LRC priority programmes are all related to the promotion of better health.

The Federation has been working in Laos since 1992, assisting in the development of the National Society and in co-ordinating external support. Its overall objective is to assist the Society in strengthening its operational capacity, governance and management and to channel appropriate support to its programmes. It will do this by ensuring adherence to the LRC development plan through a development co-operation model that builds on the presence of five donor National Societies and the Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur. A Federation country representative will provide support for the first three months of 2000, after which technical input will be supplied by the RDKL and a local Federation office.

Programme Objectives

Disaster Response

No relief operations are under way.

Disaster Preparedness

Efforts will focus on defining the LRC role in the national disaster plan, and building human and material resources in disaster prone branches.

Health

The Federation will help strengthen the LRC's national blood programme, of which the ultimate objective is to ensure, by 2003, a nation-wide supply of safe blood based on the principle of voluntary, non-remunerated donation. Support financed by the Japanese Red Cross aims at increasing the number of provincial blood centres from five to ten and the percentage of non-remunerated donors from 50% to 70% by the end of 2000. The Federation will also provide technical advice for the restructuring of the health curriculum and the training programme of LRC health staff.

Humanitarian Values

Dissemination of Red Cross values and principles will target the general public, in particular schoolchildren, and will be co-ordinated with the work of the ICRC. The Federation will assist the LRC in developing the capacity of its information services through a fund-raising strategy, stronger media relations and promotion of the National Society's role.

Capacity Building

The Federation will assist the LRC in revising its constitution and in working with the authorities on drawing up a Red Cross law. It will help develop the management skills of the Society, especially in long-term planning and strengthening the network of branches and volunteers throughout the country. Special attention will be given to nurturing skills in new branches.