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Disability in Lao PDR

Key points:

- **World Report on Disability (2011) cites prevalence of 8% based on World Health Survey data (2002) - around 536,000 people living with disabilities**
- **2005 Population and Housing Census estimated prevalence of only 1.3% - but relied on self-identification of disability and did not specifically seek information about mental health**
- **From the 2005 Census, 61% of people identifying as having a disability were male and 39% female**

The Lao PDR is a small, landlocked country in South East Asia, bordered by China to the north, Vietnam and Cambodia to the east, Thailand to the south and Myanmar to the west. The estimated population was 6.7m in 2014. Over the decade 2006 - 2016, the Lao PDR experienced rapid economic growth, averaging 7% per annum, and is now classified by The World Bank as a lower-middle income country. Despite this, an estimated 23% of the population continues to live in poverty. The majority of the population live in rural areas, around 80% as subsistence farmers.

The Lao PDR made good progress on a number of Millennium Development Goals, most notably halving poverty. However, others remain off track, most crucially on nutrition, with an

estimated 44% of under-five children stunted and 27% severely underweight. The Lao PDR still has a high maternal mortality rate and limited skilled birth attendance. All these factors contribute to the incidence of disability.

WHO and The World Bank estimate that 18% of the adult population of lower-middle income countries experience disability. In the Lao PDR, it is likely to be higher. This is attributable not only to poverty and low standards of healthcare, but also to contamination of rural areas by unexploded ordnances (UXO's) - the result of 10 years of intensive bombing by the USA during the Vietnam (American) War. Another possible cause is chemical contamination resulting from widespread spraying with dioxin (Agent Orange).

From the 2005 Census, the leading cause of disability in the Lao PDR is 'since birth' (congenital conditions, and impairments acquired during pregnancy or birth) (39%), followed by 'disease' (28%), 'accident' (16%) including vehicle accidents, and 'war accident' (11%). The Census notes that reporting could be affected by the social stigma associated with having a child with disability.

There is a lack of accurate statistics on disability prevalence and types of disability in the Lao PDR. More information would better inform government policies and actions by development partners to address disability.