



**Remarks by Dr. Pia Rebello Britto, Representative,
UNICEF Lao PDR**

Human Capital Summit 2024

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National Convention Centre**

Your Excellency, Dr. Sonexay Siphandone, Prime Minister of Lao PDR,

Honourable Ministers and Vice Ministers,

Government Representatives,

Development Partners,

Civil Society Representatives,

Distinguished Guests,

It is with great honour and deep respect that I stand before you today. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Honorable Prime Minister, His Excellency Dr. Sonexay Siphandone, whose unwavering leadership and commitment have made him a true champion for every child in Lao PDR. I also wish to thank all ministers, vice ministers, government representatives, and esteemed colleagues from various sectors and countries who have joined us. Your presence here today, your leadership, and your guidance underscore our collective commitment to addressing the critical issue of nutrition in Lao PDR.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Around the world, economies on the rise have invested in human capital as their core growth strategy, and I applaud Lao PDR for also making human resources development a pillar in its 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan.

But this begs the question: what builds human capital? A core ingredient is nutrition.

Because nutrition nourishes the mind, strengthens the body, and builds the future. Nutrition builds brains, and brains build economies.

Human brains have infinite potential to be formed in the first 1,000 days of life. Nutrition feeds brain development. Nutrition is recognized by Nobel laureates as

the best investment in human capital. Nutrition builds the foundation for cognitive development, which is crucial for future economic stability and growth.

Given our joint agreement and understanding on the power of nutrition for human capital, let us turn to the next question, how can we accomplish good nutrition outcomes for all?

The answer is clear – through two actions: effective high-level coordination among government agencies, development partners, and civil society. And financial investments that must be strategically directed towards high-impact interventions that provide the greatest returns.

So, how did we arrive at these two key strategies? Building on almost 15 years of evidence, published by the world's leading experts in pre-eminent research journals, such as the Lancet – some of the authors are among us today, such as Dr. Roland Kupka - and the extensive data and evidence published in the region and Lao PDR, by UNICEF and other partners. And national surveys such as the Lao Social Indicator Survey, national nutrition surveillance systems, supported by the Ministry of Health and WFP and the extensive analyses by MPI, Lao Academy of Socio-Economic Sciences supported by EU. All this evidence - from global to the local level - has led to these two core actions.

So let us turn to the first action: effective high-level coordination among government agencies, development partners, and civil society for the convergent delivery of high impact interventions for each child.

Why is high level coordination so vital? Because achieving good nutrition outcomes demands action from multiple sectors: Ministry of Agriculture ensuring access to a variety of nutritious affordable foods, the Ministry of Public Works ensuring clean water and sanitation, the Ministry of Health providing

essential healthcare, the Ministry of Education and Sports promoting nutrition education, and the subnational levels implementing these initiatives.

Coordination and planning, informed by robust data and advanced digital systems, are crucial. By leveraging real-time monitoring and dynamic dashboards, we can ensure our efforts are aligned, our actions are impactful, accountability is upheld, and our vision is realized. The Prime Minister's focus on digital transformation and data will be instrumental in this endeavour.

Second, we need to make smart investments.

Given the finite resources available to support nutrition, resources must be spent more effectively to achieve the desired results. This requires prioritizing investments towards effective interventions to address immediate malnutrition determinants to improve diets, services and practices. We also need better tracking by the Government of Lao PDR of the investments made as well as more informed reallocations needed.

What will it take to deliver on these two actions? It will require robust partnerships and unwavering political commitment to strengthen the diets, services, and practices throughout the country.

With respect to robust partnerships, in Laos we are fortunate to have the National Nutrition Committee, chaired by the Honorable Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR, Prof. Dr. Kikeo Khaykhamphithoune.

This committee convenes the national Nutrition Forum, bringing together all stakeholders in the nutrition sector to coordinate efforts in the implementation of nutrition services, stronger governance of the sector at national and sub-national levels, and greater coordination amongst partners, including development partners, civil society partners, private sector and individual actors to jointly deliver on nutrition outcomes. As partners, our commitment to further

strengthening the forum as a working group will enable us achieve progress towards the 9th NSEDP nutrition results on human capital.

We are also fortunate to have the political championship of nutrition, as evidenced by this summit today. The world today faces numerous challenges which are trickling down into the homes of the most vulnerable.

Globally and in Lao PDR, crop failure and lack of income are identified as causal pathways to malnutrition for young children. Approximately 60% of families in Laos are living on less than 20 million kip per year and they struggled to feed their children appropriately because of a lack of resources including time. The interventions that can make a difference and improve the diets of young children, the services available to them and the caring and feeding practices practiced in their households are not complicated nor expensive but they save lives and help children and countries thrive.

The urgency to act cannot be overstated because the current data indicate troubling downward trends in nutrition. However, together we can reverse these trends and political championship can make nutrition a priority in the 10th NSEDP.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Permit me to also share a personal message today, as this is my final high-level event before I complete my assignment in Laos as UNICEF Representative.

My time in Lao PDR has been one of the most meaningful personal and professional chapters of my life. It is with gratitude that I stand here before you, as part of the 50-year legacy of the partnership between UNICEF and the Government of Lao PDR, steadfastly supporting the realization of child rights.

From day one, nutrition has always been a cornerstone of our mission. Our efforts have consistently focused on improving nutrition in the early years of life, recognizing that these interventions are crucial for a child's development and future.

Last year, I visited Mahosot Hospital with many of our dear partners and it was humbling to see the equipment provided by UNICEF decades ago still in use, measuring the growth and development of children. This long-standing commitment exemplifies the enduring partnership between UNICEF and the people of Lao PDR.

As I bid farewell, I reaffirm UNICEF's commitment, with its five decades of experience in Lao PDR, to supporting nutrition efforts through technical expertise including support for the generation and use of data.

We are committed to aiding the government's digital transformation, enhancing planning, and improving decision-making. By providing accurate, timely data, we can better monitor progress, make informed decisions, and ensure every child in Lao PDR benefits.

Distinguished guests,

The challenges are significant, but the opportunities for impactful change are within our grasp. We must act now.

In these challenging times, it's more crucial than ever to ensure every dollar and kip is spent wisely. We must focus on interventions that deliver the greatest impact and can reach every child in every corner of the country. We cannot afford to let disparities in nutrition persist, as they threaten to undermine all our progress. We must track our investments diligently, ensuring that our efforts translate into tangible, positive outcomes for Lao children.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the leadership and vision of His Excellency, the Honorable Prime Minister, Dr. Sonexay Siphandone for his guidance which is invaluable as we navigate these critical times.

I also extend my deepest thanks to all colleagues at the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Ministry of Health for their hard work and dedicated efforts to improving the nutritional status of children throughout Laos.

And my appreciation of course goes to our dear partners at the World Bank for supporting this important Summit.

Today we are making history, ensuring that every child in this nation is fed a nutritious diet and can access nutrition services to help realise their potential. By building Lao PDR's human capital today, we will pave the way for a brighter and more prosperous tomorrow.

Thank you.