



International  
Labour  
Organization

## Progress Report – Lao People's Democratic Republic and Asia

01/01/2023 – 31/12/2023

ILO GLOBAL FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME ON BUILDING SOCIAL  
PROTECTION FLOORS FOR ALL - PHASE II

Project Code: GLO/21/34/MUL



**Belgique**

partenaire du développement

**LUXEMBOURG**  
AID & DEVELOPMENT



01 February 2024

Donor: Belgium and Luxembourg

Admin Unit: ILO DWT for East and South-East Asia and the Pacific Country Office for Thailand, Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic

Project title:	BUILDING SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS FOR ALL - PHASE II – SUPPORT TO THE EXTENSION OF SOCIAL HEALTH PROTECTION IN ASIA
----------------	---

Report type (pick one):	Annual
-------------------------	--------

Reporting period:	From January to December 2023
-------------------	-------------------------------

### Linkages

ILO Strategic Policy Outcome: Outcome 7: Universal social protection

ILO Country Programme Outcome: LAO 226 Social protection: Government at the national and subnational levels has increased capacity and infrastructure to deliver an inclusive, shock-responsive, sustainable social protection system throughout the life cycle

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; SDG 3. ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

### Preparation and Review

Report prepared by: Marielle Phe Goursat, 02/02/2024

Report reviewed by: Markus Ruck, 29/02/2024

Report approved by: Oktavianto Pasaribu, 12/04/2024

## 1. Country context

The world is still not on track to reaching those Sustainable Development Goals relating to universal access to healthcare for all<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, Asia is no exception. Thus, only 63.4 per cent of the population in Asia is effectively covered by social health protection, leaving about 1.6 billion people unprotected<sup>2</sup>. Such aggregated figures mask inequalities within and across countries. Based on the latest available estimates, the South-East Asia region has continued to be the second worst-performing region in the world on catastrophic out-of-pocket health spending<sup>3</sup>. For example, in 2019 (most recent data available), 16.1 per cent of the population of South-East Asia suffered catastrophic health expenditures, representing an additional 34.2 million persons compared to 2015<sup>4</sup>.

At regional level, the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, adopted in 2013, echoes ILO Recommendation No. 202 on Social Protection Floors. Since the acceleration of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, social protection has come to be recognized by all ASEAN countries as a powerful tool for mitigating the potentially adverse effects of greater trade liberalization, as well as for translating gains made into shared prosperity and equitable development. The ASEAN Health Ministers have constantly reaffirmed their unity in achieving the goals of the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda and pooling their efforts to “Accelerate Health for All in ASEAN”. It is in this spirit that the ASEAN countries have renewed their commitment to regional cooperation, particularly in the context of the period post the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, in their joint statement at the 42th ASEAN summit in 2023 in Indonesia.

In Lao PDR, the Eighth Health Sector Development Plan has set the goal of achieving universal health coverage (UHC) by 2025 and to this end, the Lao Health Sector Reform Strategy 2013–2025 has drawn up a road map towards reaching universal health coverage by 2025. The National Health Insurance Strategy 2021–2025 has been formulated with a clear vision and coherent framework for the development of a unified National Health Insurance scheme. Additionally, the Law on Health Insurance was promulgated in 2018 and became the first one of its kind on social health protection in the country, thereby creating a legal framework for national health insurance. On this basis, Lao PDR has achieved a social health protection population coverage of 94 per cent. However, the population of Vientiane Capital (about 13 per cent of the country's population) is only partially covered by social health protection mechanisms, and compliance with the contributory scheme covering the formal sector remains a challenge nationwide. Out-of-pocket expenditures are decreasing but remain high, standing at 31 per cent of current health expenditures<sup>5</sup>, leaving households vulnerable and at risk of impoverishment during sickness, which is an issue of particular concern as total health expenditures are growing in the wake of increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases and an ageing population. Inequities persist, with the rural population in remote areas having less access to doctors than the urban population<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the management and administration of the National Health Insurance scheme remain fragile. Importantly, the financial sustainability of national health insurance is at high risk, having become weaker owing to irregular, insufficient and unpredictable allocations of resources by Government. It was against this backdrop that the year 2023 witnessed the beginning of the revision of the Law on Health Insurance, with the objective of

---

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization; World Bank. 2023. Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report. © Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40348> License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.”

<sup>2</sup> ILO, 2021, Extending social health protection: Accelerating progress towards Universal Health Coverage in Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>3</sup> The SDG target 3.8.2 defines a household's health out-of-pocket expenditures as being catastrophic when they exceed 10 per cent or 25 per cent (two thresholds considered) of the household's total expenditures or income.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization; World Bank. 2023. Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report. © Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40348> License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.”

<sup>5</sup> WHO, Global Health Expenditures Database, accessed on January 31, 2024, at 17h35.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively 32 per cent of remote rural population have access to a doctor, compared to 35 per cent of urban population; and 6.5 per cent of remote rural population have access to a pharmacy compared to 78.3 per cent of urban population (Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 6, 2018–2019).

addressing the fundamental issue of financing social health protection in Lao PDR without reversing the progress on coverage achieved so far. Further still, strengthening operational capacities to administer the scheme is at the core of the Government's priorities.

Overall, the project aims to accompany Lao PDR in its transition towards sustained extension of coverage, through a financially sustainable national health insurance with a modernized administration at national and all decentralized levels. Lao PDR benefits from the regional level interventions of the project, which is focused on promoting and enabling better diffusion of knowledge and the creation of concrete opportunities for capacity-building on social health protection in the Asia and Pacific region.

## 2. Progress report

### Outcome 1. Effective, efficient, accountable and sustainable gender-responsive social health protection is delivered with an increased coverage in Lao PDR

*Output 1: The management and administration of the National Health Insurance scheme are strengthened and translate into enhanced institutional capacity and operational effectiveness and efficiency at all levels*

**Output status:** On schedule

#### **Activity 1.1: Support for the development of management tools**

The Ministry of Health revised the National Health Insurance Claim and Verification Guidelines developed with the support of the project. These guidelines are essential for ensuring that national health insurance payments made to hospitals and patients comply with the management rules governing them. Upon the revision of the guidelines, the project supported the National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB) in providing training sessions to 230 district and provincial health insurance officers (145 females and 85 males). In April and May 2023, seven two-day trainings on verification guidelines were conducted in the seven provinces of Oudomxay, Phongsaly, Bokeo, Saysomboun, Attapeu, Sekong and Luangprabang. These trainings have since enabled central and local health insurance officials to better monitor and examine the nature of the health services provided and their compliance with the benefit package as per the submitted claim reports. Thus, the training covered two main areas: guaranteeing accurate and timely payment to health facilities; and ensuring that members receive the services they are entitled to and are not being asked to pay more than the official co-payment. The development of management tools, such as the national health insurance claim and verification guidelines and the strengthening of institutional capacity for applying these guidelines, is central to the protection of members' entitlements and to the financial sustainability and overall good governance of the scheme.

#### **Activity 1.2. Capacity development on leadership, management and supervision at Central, Province and District levels**

One innovative approach of the project is to provide a mix of on-the-job, short-term and long-term capacity development opportunities to the partner country. Under this approach, during the reporting period, three government officials from Lao PDR received fellowships funded by the project for them to study for a Master's Degree in Primary Healthcare Management and Social Health Protection in Thailand (for more on this, see Outcome 2). Among staff benefiting from this are:

- Academic Year 2022/2023: One National Health Insurance Bureau staff member (female), whose graduation is pending publication of her thesis.

- Academic Year 2023/2024: One official from the Faculty of Public Health of Lao PDR (male); and one official from the National Health Insurance Bureau (male).

Once the Master's degree is completed, all fellowship students will return to their home institutions upon their graduation to further contribute to policy development and implementation on social health protection.

### **Activity 1.3: Capacity and tools developed for increased compliance and effective social security inspection**

The project has as its core objective the expansion of population coverage by the National Health Insurance Scheme. Among other strategies, this necessitates the enforcement of laws regarding the registration of enterprises with Lao Social Security Office (LSSO) for workers in formal employment and the payment of contributions. Enhancing the inspection function of the LSSO is of paramount importance in achieving this objective. To that end, the project is providing comprehensive technical support to the LSSO to build a robust inspection workforce.

At its outset, the project conducted a full review of the social security inspection of the LSSO. This review provides an in-depth analysis and recommendations for developing a coherent and comprehensive legal and regulatory framework for social security inspection. Besides these, it provides detailed guidance on legal changes that are required to clarify and strengthen the mandate of inspectors, their rights and duties, the types and contents of inspections and enforceable sanctions and fines. The review also includes recommendations on the modernization of the inspections. In particular, it suggests the drafting of guidelines, the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs), the establishment of an information system for inspection, the adoption of an ethical code of conduct and the organization of training activities.

On the basis of the review, the project supported the LSSO in the development of the Inspection guidelines. Developed in line with the international labour standards on labour inspections (Convention No. 81), the guidelines are organized as separate individual modules and follow a structure similar to the LSSO labour inspection guidelines to facilitate functional synergies across departments. The guidelines also form a set of practical rules that can be referred to in the operationalization of inspections on the ground. They specify the steps to be followed in preparing, implementing and reporting on inspections. They also provide information on the mandate and responsibilities of inspectors and include the ethical code inspectors must follow. The guidelines were finalized in June 2023.

The development of standard operating procedures was initiated upon the finalization of the guidelines. From July to December 2023, the ILO worked closely with a social security inspection expert and the LSSO to develop a set of standard operating procedures. The joint work was conducted through a combination of seven online working sessions and two expert missions. The standard operating procedures cover the following tasks: planning and preparation of inspections; approval of inspections; execution of inspections; indirect inspection; direct inspection; reporting of findings, and monitoring and evaluation of inspection findings. The draft of the standard operating procedures also includes the forms and flowcharts associated with each task. The standard operating procedures will be completed in the first quarter of 2024 and will be followed by training sessions before actual implementation.

In parallel to this process, the project supported the initiation of cross-sectoral exchanges for the development of a broader compliance strategy. In January 2023, core stakeholders met and identified collaborative interventions in relation to the areas of improvement of coordination mechanisms, law enforcement, coordination between labour and social security inspections and advocacy and awareness. It is expected that in accordance with Lao Social Security Office priorities, some initiatives will be implemented in 2024.

Upon the implementation of the social security inspection guidelines and standard operating procedures, it is anticipated that more enterprises will register with the LSSO and enrol their workers, hence leading to an increase of coverage and financing for the scheme.

*Output 2: Relevant policy reforms on medical care, sickness and maternity benefits are prepared, with a focus on extending coverage and financing, informed by evidence produced within the Project*

**Output status:** On schedule

**Activity 2.1: Actuarial valuation of health, maternity and sickness, with recommended policy options towards sustainable funding for universal national health insurance coverage with guaranteed benefits, including social dialogue and advocacy for increased funding**

Carrying out regular actuarial valuations is not only consistent with good governance but is an essential tool for assessing the current and potential future financial situation of social security schemes. In 2023, a much needed actuarial analysis of the National Health Insurance Scheme and other social security branches was conducted in Lao PDR as part of the revision of the Law on Health Insurance and the Law on Social Security. Indeed, the results of actuarial work form the basis for decisions on reforms to current schemes and the improvement of management, administration and communication processes. In relation to health, an actuarial analysis is essential for providing the evidence required to address the scheme budget deficit and measure the financial impact of government policy decisions likely to affect the revenues and expenditures of the scheme.

Throughout 2023, the actuarial analysis. In collaboration with the ILO-Republic of Korea Partnership Programme on “Supporting the Implementation of Sustainable Social Protection Floors for the Workers and their Families in ASEAN – Phase III” project, a set of training sessions was delivered throughout the actuarial work process to the LSSO and the National Health Insurance Bureau. This training enabled government officials to take an active part in the analysis. Moreover, a regional training was also organized in Bangkok in November 2024 (see Outcome 2 for further details).

In December 2023, the results of the actuarial analysis were first presented through bilateral exchanges with namely, the LSSO, the National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB), the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU) and Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI). These meetings were then followed by a national workshop chaired by the Vice-Minister of Health and the vice-Minister of Labour and Social Welfare to present and discuss the results of the actuarial analysis with key stakeholders. The meeting was attended by 51 participants, including representatives from the following: the Ministry of Health; Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare; the National Assembly; the Prime Minister’s Office; Ministry of Justice; Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU); Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI); Oxfam; the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and World Health Organization (WHO). Participants’ inputs were collected and considered for their use in the revision of the actuarial valuation report.

In 2024, additional technical expertise will be provided by the project to deliver a technical brief providing recommendations related to data management and health policy and financing.

**Activity 2.1. Support to the revision of the National Health Insurance Law for strengthening the institutional and financial independence of the National Health Insurance Bureau for approval by the National Assembly**

In 2023, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare respectively initiated the revision of the Law on Health Insurance and the Law on Social Security. These cyclical reviews represent the opportunity to introduce policy reforms aimed at extending coverage, adequacy of benefits, strengthening the financial sustainability of the scheme and enhancing overall governance. The proposed revision of the Health Insurance Law is intended to comprehensively review and align with other laws and to address financial gaps resulting from insufficient budget allocation and inflation rates, as well as other factors impacting health services. The ILO contributed to the process by providing comprehensive support to the LSSO and the NHIB. This includes the following interventions:

- **A legal review report:** The review examines the laws and regulations related to social security and national health insurance, taking into account expected policy reforms and simultaneously endeavouring to align with international labour standards. It accordingly provides general and detailed comments and suggestions on the current Health Insurance Law for the development of the new draft laws. The comments and recommendations are based on the key principles and quantitative and qualitative benchmarks underpinning up-to-date ILO international social security standards. Of particular relevance, are the Medical Care and Sickness Benefits Recommendation, 1969 (No. 134); the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No.102); Medical Care Recommendation, 1944 (No. 69); the Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202); and Medical Care and Sickness Benefits Convention, 1969 (No. 130). Where appropriate, these comments and recommendations are complemented by additional ones derived from ongoing research, such as the actuarial analysis and review of compliance with Convention No. 102 (see below). The review was presented to the NHIB as well as to social partners in June and September 2023.
- **Specific comments on the individual provisions of the current Law on Health Insurance,** provided in June 2023. The comments aim at supporting alignment of the Law with international social security standards. In particular, the ILO inputs focus on ensuring equality of treatment of non-national residents; specifying rights and obligations of all parties; clarifying the schemes denomination and their respective individual scope of coverage; aligning benefits covered with international minimum standards; guaranteeing the sources of financing of national health insurance with due recognition of employers' contribution; possibility of mobilizing health taxes and adjustment of contributions and co-payment; outlining the importance of protection of personal data; and guaranteeing the existence of an appeal process.
- **A review of the legal framework** considering international social security standards and principles, particularly Convention No. 102 on Social Security (Minimum Standards), in November 2023. Also entitled "Review of compliance with Convention No. 102", this report contains an assessment of the compatibility of the legal framework applicable to the social security schemes that have been implemented in Lao PDR according to the benchmarks and principles set out in the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102). It also contains an assessment of the implementation of these provisions, to the extent of statistical information then available and in light of prevailing practice. The report constitutes a sound basis for the Government of Lao PDR to address identified gaps with a view to possible future ratification of Convention No. 102.

The project also provided extensive technical and financial support to facilitate the consultative process needed to engage and collect inputs from all national stakeholders. It convened a series of meetings that systematically shadowed the official law revision process conducted by the Government of Lao PDR. The series included the following meetings:

- **First kick off meeting on the revision of the Law on Health Insurance** held in June 2023. The meeting introduced the roles and responsibilities of the members of the advisory Health Insurance Law amendment committee. It declared the priority areas guiding the revision of the Law so as to

ensure that policy reforms will be aligned with the current financial constraints the scheme is facing. The meeting gathered 75 participants (including among them 35 women) from the following: the National Assembly; the Prime Minister's Office; the Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Security; Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW); and development partners. The meeting was financed by the project.

- The **Health Insurance Law Assessment and Revision Meeting** comprehensively reviewed the implementation of the Health Insurance Law between 2019 and 2023. The gathered feedback has highlighted a notable deficiency in healthcare providers' understanding of the scheme, particularly concerning the delineation of medical and non-medical benefit packages for members. Notably, the assessment revealed that healthcare providers frequently impose co-payments on vulnerable groups, including poor families, children under the age of 5, and pregnant women, despite their entitlement to exemption from such charges. This assessment was conducted through three regional meetings encompassing 18 provinces and central levels. The meetings were attended by a total of 325 participants, including 215 females, and representing various entities such as: the National Assembly; the Prime Minister's Office; the Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Security; Ministry of Health; the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU); Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI), and provincial health departments. They all actively contributed to the evaluation process, and their feedback was used to guide decisions of the Advisory Steering Committee (see the following paragraphs below). The project provided technical support to these meetings.
- Based on the aforementioned Health Insurance Law assessment reports, the **Advisory Steering Committee**, which convened twice in Vientiane and Thalat, provided guidance on the required revisions to the Law on Health Insurance. This committee featured participants from diverse entities, such as: the Prime Minister's Office (PMO); Ministry of Justice (MOJ); Ministry of Finance (MOF); Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MOAF); Ministry of Health (MOH); the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU); the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI), and DPs. In all, approximately 110 participants were involved. In these meetings, the draft Law was revised in detail, provision by provision and by all members. These collaborative efforts enabled the Advisory Steering Committee to formulate priorities for the draft Law, with the objective of streamlining processes, ensuring effectiveness, accountability and transparency in the utilization of national health insurance resources. The Advisory Steering Committee in Vientiane was financed by the project.
- Based on the Advisory Steering Committee guidance, a total of **13 technical meetings** were conducted by a core team with the technical support of the project to prepare the draft Law. The meetings were attended by 50 members from the Prime Minister's Office, MOJ, National Health Insurance Bureau and other Development Partners. These meetings were inclusive, with the active participation of 28 female contributors. Three of the 13 meetings were financially supported by the project.
- **Working sessions for the revision of National Health Insurance Instruction 0476 and Decree 470.** These decrees contain the requisite provisions for enabling the actual implementation of the Law on Health Insurance. They cover issues relating to payments to providers, co-payments and contributions from persons protected. The review of the decrees aimed to overhaul and enhance the national health insurance verification and payment process to health facilities, ensuring the effective and accountable utilization of the national health insurance budget. Additionally, the reforms seek to address the question of an increase in co-payments and the possible re-introduction of a contributory approach for people not within the scope of the LSSO. To facilitate these revisions, the project supported the organizing of two successive meetings each attended by 30 technical members (including 18 women) and focused on refining the instructions.

Financial and technical support to the consultation and drafting process was jointly provided through coordinated support from the ILO, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (KOFIH) and the WHO.

The outcomes of these deliberations will serve as a foundation for subsequent consultations at the provincial level in January 2024.

**Activity 2.3. Research and technical review of policies focusing on increasing coverage and equity, particularly for enhanced unification of the National Health Insurance Scheme and extension of social health protection in Vientiane Capital**

In addition to the actuarial analysis and legal review mentioned above, the project produced one technical review on the legacy of the Community-Based Health Insurance and is in the process of completing two additional research activities, both focusing on increasing social health protection coverage and equity. These are summarized below:

- **Technical review on the legacy of the Community-Based Health Insurance.** Many countries have adopted strategies to extend social health protection to their entire population, with the objective of achieving universal health coverage. However, the operability of such policies is still widely discussed and the debate on financing and operational mechanisms to cover the entire population, including households dependent on the informal and rural economy, remains open. In the early 2000s, community-based mechanisms emerged as the chosen strategy for expanding health coverage in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. While this approach remains widely discussed, the exact role of community-based mechanisms, their outcomes on coverage and how they may have contributed to the historical processes of developing national health insurance schemes are less known. This technical review documents the experience of Lao PDR in this regard, with the view of informing future policy decisions on the extension of coverage in the country, particularly in Vientiane Capital, where the CBHI scheme is still implemented. The review shows that only low population coverage could be achieved, and hence a cautious approach is called for in the policy discussion regarding the possible re-introduction of this mechanism. This study also contributes to global research on the role and impacts of community-based health insurance in national social health protection systems.
- **Assessment of the National Health Insurance Scheme.** The main objective of the research is to produce evidence on the implementation of the national health insurance, and particularly on compliance with exemptions and co-payment policies, referral systems, payment of food and transport allowance and general awareness on entitlements. With the support of the project, the research is being led by the Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute and the Swiss Red Cross in Lao PDR. The research results contribute to achieving Strategic Objective 4 of the National Health Insurance Strategy 2021–2025, which is to “ensure responsiveness of health facilities and improve quality of healthcare services.” Specifically, the National Health Insurance Bureau is mandated to engage with all health facilities by enhancing the verification of health services to promote the scheme and ensure that health facilities comply with the provisions of the scheme, make the national health insurance benefit package available and comply with the co-payment rates, in particular co-payment exemption rules for the poor, pregnant women (PW), and children under five years of age (CU5). By providing insights and evidence on members’ experience with the national health insurance, the research is also expected to contribute to Strategic Objective 3 of the strategy “Strengthen the National Health Insurance Bureau’s institutional capacity and operational effectiveness and efficiency at all levels (that is, the National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB), Provincial Health Insurance Bureau (PHIB) and District Health Insurance Bureau (DHIB))”. At the

time of preparing this present report, the methodology and tools have been designed. The training of surveyors, data collection and analysis and reporting will be completed in 2024.

- **Research on access to health insurance for persons with disabilities.** This research is conducted in collaboration with the Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute. At the time of this report, the methodology and tools have been designed and data have been collected. The analysis and report-writing and dissemination will be conducted in 2024 (see Outcome 2 for more details of this).

### *Output 3: Foundations for building a culture of social health protection, including medical care, sickness and maternity, are developed (planned for 2024)*

**Output status:** On schedule

#### **Activity 3.1. Support to capacity and systems development for national health insurance and LSSO to respond to members' requests on entitlements and grievance**

In 2023, a short review of the existing complaint systems of the National Health Insurance was made. This review looks at the existing system for monitoring complaints, resources to address them and coordination with the LSSO. It concludes on the need to develop a more member-centric approach, with training of staff in charge of addressing members' issues, and to introduce additional infrastructure, particularly at the provincial level. It is anticipated that selected interventions could be implemented in 2024, upon prioritizations being made of these interventions by the NHIB.

**Outcome 2. CONNECT in Asia is a recognized network of public and non-for-profit institutions working on social health protection in the Asia Pacific region, and contributes to the extension of social health protection through joint research, collaborative and gender-responsive capacity-building opportunities and advocacy efforts**

CONNECT is a network of public and non-for-profit organizations in Asia working on social health protection (SHP). It supports countries towards the extension of social health protection coverage to develop and implement strong, sustainable and comprehensive health policies, strategies and plans towards the achievement of universal health coverage. Through joint collaborations based on South-South and Triangular Cooperation, the network promotes knowledge development and capacity-building on social health protection. The network has been established under the first phase of the project.

#### *Output 2.1. Coordination capacities of CONNECT's Secretariat are strengthened, and membership is extended to new members*

**Output status:** Completed

#### **Activity 2.1.1: Strengthening CONNECT's Secretariat in order to achieve better coordination of the platform**

CONNECT's secretariat is responsible for the extension of the network's membership as well as the daily administration of the network. The latter includes the organization of coordination meetings and communication on the network's activities. Under the reporting period, these functions have been assumed by the ILO owing to internal turnover at the leadership level at Mahidol University.

Information about the CONNECT activities are shared regularly on the [CONNECT website](#). The back-office of the website is administered by the secretariat, with professional maintenance and integrity support from a specialized company.



#### **Activity 2.1.2. CONNECT's coordination meetings to ensure coordination of product development and adaptation and follow-up on sustainable activities and funding plan**

In line with the members' expectations for cost and time-effective coordination arrangements and the project's work plan, the network's coordination meetings are kept to a minimum, with two such meetings taking place in March 2023 and October 2023. These meetings provided an opportunity to take stock of the progress on joint collaborations and to consider extension of membership, as well as to plan joint interventions for the following year. In addition to these, technical meetings were organized throughout the year between organizations collaborating on specific products, as is detailed below.

#### **Activity 2.1.3. Extension of CONNECT's membership with new partnerships, including with other relevant platforms, and increased visibility**

At the time of report-writing, the CONNECT network numbers 13 members. In 2023, CONNECT welcomed the following three new members:

- Cambodia National Public Health Institute;
- the Australia National University;
- the Faculty of Public Health of Lao PDR.

Current members of the network include the following:

- International Labour Organization
- ASEAN Institute for Health Development (AIHD), Mahidol University, Thailand
- Health Strategy and Research Institute (HSRI), Ministry of Health, Thailand
- Health Strategy and Policy Institute (HSPI), Viet Nam
- Hanoi University of Public Health (HUPH), Viet Nam
- Seoul National University (SNU), Republic of Korea
- Korea Institute for Health Development (KIHASA), Republic of Korea
- Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute (HSPI), Lao PDR
- Swiss Red Cross in Lao, Lao PDR
- P4H Network

A memorandum of understanding was finalized and signed by all CONNECT founding members and an official ceremony will be held in 2024.

The secretariat is regularly updating the mapping of potential members and organizing information meetings to present the network. Thus, exchanges were organized with the School of Public Health, Fundan University (China) and Thamassat University (Thailand) to explore possible partnerships.

### *Output 2.2. Regional capacities on social health protection are developed*

#### **Activity 2.2.1. Provision and support for Fellowships on the Master's degree in the Management of Primary Healthcare and Social Health Protection**

Under the reporting period, the project enabled 11 government officials to enrol in the Master's degree on Primary Healthcare and Social Health Protection. They participated across two academic years and in the following numbers:

- Academic year 2022/2023: 6 students from Cambodia (1), Indonesia (3), Lao PDR (1) and Nepal (1).
- Academic year 2023/2024: 5 students, from Cambodia (2), Indonesia (1) and Lao PDR (2).

These numbers have exceeded those foreseen in the work plan objectives, with co-financing of the tuition fees by Mahidol University making it possible to support more students.

The selection of the students is conducted according to a thorough selection process that usually takes place over a five-month period. In this process, candidates first apply at their institutions and a short-list is then drawn up by institutions and reviewed by the ILO. The final selection is made by Mahidol University subsequent to assessments and interviews.



Meeting at Mahidol University, December 2023.

#### **Activity 2.2.2. Technical support for the Master's degree in Management of Primary Healthcare and Social Health Protection (M-MPHC/SHP).**

The Master's degree is conducted over two semesters, with the first one being dedicated to primary healthcare management and the second one focused on social health protection. In addition to the lectures provided by Mahidol University professors, the project provides a number of lectures and assignments to the students, which are a fully integral part of the Master's degree curriculum. Most sessions, as well as the review of assignments, have taken place at Salaya Campus, hence providing an enhanced learning opportunity for the students through their being able to interact with experts. Furthermore, online sessions have been held with experts located abroad.

In 2023, two expert lectures were delivered, with the mobilization of ILO experts as well as experts from the region, through the CONNECT network. Attendance at the expert sessions was opened to government institutions from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Nepal, with interpretation services provided by the project to facilitate participation. The sessions covered the following topics:

- "Extending Coverage to Migrants, Refugees and their Families", presented in January 2023 by the ILO expert, Shana Hoehler, and attended by 30 participants.
- "Principles and Good Practices to Design and Implement MIS for Social Protection", presented in February 2023 by the ILO expert, Rodrigo Ortiz D'avila Assumpção and the Viet Nam Social Security and Cambodia National Social Security Fund, and attended by 32 participants

Besides the foregoing, the project organized a half-day workshop in February 2023 to assist the students in the finalization of their thesis topics. Representatives of their home institutions were invited to provide contextual feedback on their selected thesis topic and to share their recommendations and ideas concerning implementation of methodology, possible information resources, stakeholders and so on. The event gathered experts from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Nepal and Thailand, students, ILO experts and academics from Mahidol University, thus creating a further opportunity to strengthen South-South collaboration through the fostering of regional exchanges on social health protection in the region.

### **Activity 2.2.3. Development and delivery of short-term trainings by CONNECT members**

**Regional training on actuarial analysis.** As part of CONNECT activities, and in close collaboration with the ILO-Thai Social Security Office project "Strengthening Social Security Office Capacities in Policy Design with a Focus on Research and Actuarial Services", the project organized a 5-day training on actuarial analysis in Bangkok. The training supported the efforts of social security institutions to build up capacity within their institutions in the implementation and management of different aspects of the actuarial valuation process and other areas where actuarial work is involved. This activity was particularly relevant to social security institutions in the region owing to the shortage of actuarial valuation training opportunities in the region, particularly in respect of social security actuarial work. The training also allowed the exchange of experiences and discussion on challenges among the different social security institutions represented. Importantly, the training was organized in parallel with an ongoing actuarial analysis taking place in country, specifically in Lao PDR (see Outcome 1) and Cambodia. It also highlighted the importance of the actuarial valuation for policy making and financing, which is highly relevant in the context of law revisions (see Outcome 2).

The training was organized as follows:

- Day 1-3: A mandatory initial training of three days duration on actuarial valuation, data, assumptions and the reporting of issues of interest to all participants, regardless of their branch of responsibility.
- Days 4-5: Two parallel streams focusing on branch-specific issues. These consisted of *Stream I*, with a focus on health actuarial valuation work (for two days), with the support of an ILO health actuarial

expert; and *Stream II* with a focus on pension benefits (day 4) and unemployment insurance benefits (day 5) respectively, delivered by the regional actuarial expert.

The regional training reinforced the capacity of 34 government officials from Lao PDR (7), Cambodia (5), Viet Nam (1), Thailand (11), Indonesia (4), Malaysia (4) and Pakistan (2).

### **Global training on social health protection.**

In collaboration with CONNECT and the International Training Centre of the ILO, a training was organized, entitled "*Addressing inequities in access to healthcare: extending social health protection*". The training took place over seven weeks, with the project manager participating as one of the principal lecturers. Experience from Asia was shared by experts from Viet Nam and the Republic of Korea, participating as guest lecturers from the CONNECT network. The training was attended by 44 participants, including five from Asia (Bangladesh: 1; Lao PDR: 1; and Viet Nam: 3). Three fellowships were provided by the project to Lao PDR and Viet Nam.

The course provided an overview of the objectives of social health protection and its contribution to reaching universal health coverage and universal social protection (USP) in the context of the 2030 Agenda. It examined the state of coverage and macrotrends at global and country levels before exploring the guiding principles provided by ILO standards for the design and operationalization of social health protection schemes. The course focused on the extension of the various dimensions of coverage and provided insights on the technical options for coverage expansion.

At the time of this present report, the 2024 course is under preparation.

### ***Output 2.3. Relevant knowledge, with a focus on gender, is produced and shared within CONNECT's network***

#### **Activity 2.3.1. Research conducted by CONNECT members and other partners**

##### **Research on access to social health protection for persons with disabilities.**

Despite the significant number of persons with disabilities among their populations and the importance of this group being able to access needed healthcare, countries rarely consider their perspectives in the design and implementation of social health protection systems. Improving and extending social health protection coverage to persons with disabilities is essential for any country that aspires to uphold human rights and equality in its approach to reaching universal health coverage. Research is scarce that focuses on the needs of persons with disabilities in terms of their effective access to social security and to health services and adequacy of benefits. With this consideration in mind, the project initiated a research to inform current legal and regulatory gaps and barriers persons with disabilities are facing in accessing social health protection and long-term care services in a number of selected countries in South-East Asia. The findings are expected to inform the design of adequate strategies to fill the coverage gaps, including in system design, administration and implementation strategies. The research covers Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The main stakeholders are the Health Strategy and Health Institute (Viet Nam) and the Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute (Lao PDR), which are both CONNECT members. In Cambodia, Agile, a local research institute, has been identified as the national partner. An international expert on inclusive social health protection is leading the research with the ILO. Seoul National University, also a CONNECT member, is conducting a case study on the Republic of Korea to further feed the regional research, as well as to provide insight from the perspective of a high-income country.

In 2023, the identification of national research institutes took place, and data collection was carried out in Lao PDR. The research is expected to be finalized and disseminated in 2024. Besides its results, the research

itself constitutes an opportunity for mutual learning and knowledge exchange across national institutions as part of the CONNECT network mandate and objectives. Thus, in 2023, the project organized online working sessions to foster exchange of methodology, tools development and other practical aspects of the research. Additional sessions will be organized at the time of data analysis and report-writing.

### **Access to health and social protection for domestic workers in ASEAN**

In collaboration with the EU-funded “SAFE and FAIR: Realizing Women Migrant Workers’ Rights and Opportunities in the ASEAN Region”, the project undertook a stocktaking review of social security legal provisions for domestic workers in ASEAN countries. The research compiles information on legal provisions on coverage, benefits and conditions to access applied to domestic workers for each of the nine branches<sup>7</sup> in all ASEAN countries. It considers and analyses gaps in coverage in general, as well as discrepancies between domestic workers and other groups of population, as well as between national and migrant domestic workers. At the time of this report, a final draft is available. The report will be edited in 2024 and results disseminated in the first semester of 2024.

### **Activity 2.3.2. Regional conference organized with other partners**

Although knowledge and experience sharing were not anticipated in the work plan for this reporting period, the project actively engaged in organizing regional webinars on this dimension.

#### **Webinars on social health protection and migration in the Asia Pacific region**

The series of webinars was jointly organized by the CONNECT and P4H networks, with the Australia National University as a lead. The webinars took place in April, May and June 2023. The webinar series aimed to promote knowledge-sharing and dialogue on social health protection for migrant communities.

Indeed, approximately 83 million people in the Asia Pacific region live outside their countries of birth; they constitute 30 per cent of the world’s international migrant population. This region is also a major destination for migrant workers, with 24 million international migrant workers in the region. Under the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, migrant workers and their families are entitled to equality of treatment with nationals of the State of employment in relation to access to social and health services. Nonetheless, varying and inadequate social health protection for documented and undocumented migrant workers have been reported. Similarly insufficient or inadequate social health protection for vulnerable populations has resulted in care deficits, increased financial burden and impoverishment among the migrant populations.

In this context, the webinars aimed at facilitating the sharing of lessons learned from Asia and the Pacific with other countries, as well as among the region’s own countries and hence identify strategies for closing these gaps. More specifically, the webinars focused on the following:

- outlining the extent and focus of social health protection for migrant workers and their families in host and sending countries.
- describing the challenges, gaps and plans in social health protection for migrant workers and their families.
- identifying key topics and concerns in supporting regional and national stakeholders to develop and implement social health protection for migrant communities in the region.

Beyond the support to the overall organization of the series of webinars with P4H and Australian National University, the project provided a regional overview and international legal framework for labour migration

---

<sup>7</sup> There are nine different social security branches: medical care, sickness, unemployment, old age, employment injury, family, maternity, invalidity and survivors’ benefits.

in the Asia and Pacific region, with the ILO Migration Specialist in Asia and the Pacific – who is also the project’s manager – in the role of the social health protection expert. The three webinars featured countries presentations from Thailand, Australia, Singapore and the Philippines as well as other regions, including Arab States and Africa (Rwanda).

**WEBINAR**  
**Social Health Protection for Migrant Workers and Their Families**

Join us on Zoom  
**APRIL 26**

9:00 – 10:30 am CET  
 14-15:30 (GMT +7, Indochina Time)  
 17-18:30 (GMT +10, AEST)

Lao-English Interpretation

**Panellists**

**Nyan Linn**  
 Head of Programs, Dreamilements

**Thaworn Sakunphanit**  
 Foundation for Research on Social Protection and Health

**Nilim Baruah**  
 Migration Specialist, ILO

**Marielle Phe Goursat**  
 Chief Technical Adviser, ILO

**Regional Experts**

**Christine Phillips, Moderator**  
 Professor, Social Foundations of Medicine, ANU

**Claude Meyer**  
 Team Lead, Partnership for Health Financing, WHO headquarters

**Russell Gruen**  
 Dean, ANU College of Health and Medicine

P4H, Australian National University, Immigration Services, World Health Organization, connect

The webinars were attended by representatives from government, social security institutions and national programmes providing social health protection to international migrant workers, key NGOs and academic institutions that have expertise or an interest in social health protection for migrant communities, regional and national stakeholders, including the ILO, International Organization for Migration (IOM), the WHO, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Migration Council of Australia. The first webinar was attended by more than 130 participants, and the two others by more than 100 participants. Interpretation was provided by the project in Lao language so as to facilitate participation from Lao PDR. The webinar was attended by Lao PDR National Health Insurance Bureau and Lao Social Security Office officials.

### Webinar on long-term care and social health protection

Many countries around the world are currently experiencing a demographic transition that is resulting in an acceleration of population ageing. This trend is particularly observable in Asian countries, where it is happening at an unprecedented pace. Several Asian countries, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore, have already established dedicated long-term care schemes. However, other Asian countries have only recently started developing policies to address the specific challenges related to long-term care in the context of population ageing. This webinar focused on ageing in Asia and set out to explore the demographic, financial, institutional, regulatory, administrative and labour market challenges and opportunities for meeting the long-term care needs of ageing populations in Asia. The speakers have been invited from both the countries that have advanced long-term care policies and the countries that are currently advancing such policies, such as Viet Nam and Thailand.

The webinar was organized by the project under the CONNECT network in partnership with the International Social Security Association (ISSA) in September 2023. The keynote speech was delivered by Seoul National University (SNU). The ILO presented on how long-term care is an integral part of social protection system. The project manager facilitated the discussion among the panellists, who included the following: the National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA), the People’s Republic of China; the Faculty of Medicine of Kurume University, Japan; the Health Strategy and Policy Institute, Viet Nam; and the Director of the Welfare Policy Division, Japan Rengo Trade Unions, Japan.

**ILO-ISSA Webinar: Long-term care in the context of population ageing in Asia**

21 September 2023 | Virtual

Thursday, 21 September 2023, 09:00-10:30 (UTC/GMT+2 or CEST)

Languages: Simultaneous interpretation in English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Vietnamese (*Simultaneous interpretation – Frequently asked questions*)

This webinar is jointly organized by the International Social Security Association (ISSA) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and *Connect*.

International Labour Organization

connect

< back to list of events

Details

Overview

Videos

Presentations

It was attended by 91 participants. Simultaneous interpretation in English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Vietnamese was provided by the project and ISSA.

**Output 2.4. Technical support is provided to other countries from the region, based on demand and South–South knowledge exchanges on social health protection are promoted across regions**

**Activity 2.4.1. Technical support on policy formulation to other countries in the region, based on demand**

**Cambodia**

The project is providing technical support to the actuarial analysis of the National Social Security Fund, which is coordinated and financed by the social protection team in place in the country (EU-Funded Advancing Social Protection project), with the support of the regional senior actuarial expert based in Bangkok. The actuarial analysis covers the health insurance, sickness and maternity scheme and the employment injury scheme. Data collection was carried out in 2023 and the analysis will be completed in 2024.

Moreover, following the decision by the Government to extend coverage to the self-employed workers and dependants of National Social Security Fund (NSSF) members, the ILO elaborated a technical note on key elements that should be taken into consideration. The ILO advocates a cautious approach towards extending coverage through a voluntary modality.

**Viet Nam**

The project developed a case study on the organization of occupational health services in Viet Nam and its coordination with the social protection system. The case study, entitled “Accès universel à la protection sociale, à la santé et la sécurité au travail (GLO2059FRA)”, was written as a collaborative initiative with the ILO project and it aims to strengthen universal access to social protection and health and safety at work through three distinct sub-actions.

The research examines the linkages between national social health protection (SHP) systems and occupational health services (OHS). A principal objective of this project is to guide the integration and coordination of national policies on social health protection and occupational health services through the documentation of existing practices globally, particularly those that promote the extension of coverage to workers in the informal economy. A better understanding of such linkages will allow for the documentation

of best practices that can guide the strengthening of both systems towards increased efficiency and coverage of workers in all forms of employment in the face of increasing climatic and financial crises. This research complements the ongoing ILO work in Viet Nam on the Luxembourg-funded project (GLO/21/34/MUL) but also on occupational health services and social protection through the Vision Zero Fund (VZF) initiative and ILO–Irish Aid “Inclusive Growth, Social Protection and Jobs Programme (Viet Nam Component)” (VNM/16/54/IRL). The review of the design and implementation of occupational health services and the social protection system in Viet Nam was finalized in 2023. Building on this review, a cross-analysis will be developed in 2024. It will identify the gaps and synergies between occupational health services and Health Social Protection, with regard to aspects on governance, legal framework, scope of coverage, benefits and financing, among others. The findings will be disseminated in 2024.

OUTPUTS: Overall delivery assessment <sup>8</sup>			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Highly satisfactory Implementation of almost all (>80%) outputs is on schedule as envisaged in the implementation plan and almost all (>80%) indicator milestones have been met.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Satisfactory Implementation of the majority (60-80%) of outputs is on schedule as envisaged in the implementation plan and the majority (60-80%) of indicator milestones have been met.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory Some (40-60%) outputs are being implemented on schedule as envisaged in the implementation plan and/or only some (40-60%) indicator milestones have been met.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very unsatisfactory Few (<40%) outputs are being implemented on schedule as envisaged in the implementation plan and/or only a few (<40%) indicator milestones have been met.

## Summary outcome(s)

---

See the table summary outcomes [here](#).

### ► Gender and non-discrimination

The project takes into account gender equality and non-discrimination and works towards these through the following:

- By engaging in research work that focuses on disability inclusion (such as regional research on the access of persons with disabilities to social health protection).
- By conducting research and organizing knowledge exchange on the extension of coverage to vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers, domestic workers and the elderly.
- By partnering with organizations concerned with people with disability in order to engage in research work.
- By making gender equality and non-discrimination guiding principles in its work, such as the Law on Health Insurance, and in particular, recommendations on coverage and benefits packages that

---

<sup>8</sup> This is a self-assessment.

may impact women and other groups at risk of discrimination. In that regard, the project has strongly advised that the scope of the Law on Health Insurance's application be extended to cover persons who are legal residents, in line with the principle of non-discrimination and equality of treatment in social security.

- By explicitly stating when inviting applications for training opportunities that applications from women are particularly welcome.
- By ensuring gender balance in panel discussions and presentations at meetings and the like.
- By monitoring for female participation in project-supported events.

### 3. Collaboration and partnerships

The strengthened presence of the ILO in Lao PDR has allowed a strong engagement with key development partners. The ILO participates in formal and informal meetings with Development Partners and actively takes part in the Development Partners' planning process every year, which is aligned with the Ministry of Health–National Health Insurance Bureau (MOH–NHIB) strategy for 2021–2025.

At the regional level, the project has actively supported South–South and Triangular Cooperation through the CONNECT Network, and the P4H Network, in which the project manager acts as a regional focal point.

Finally, as elaborated in the report, the project worked in partnership with the following ILO projects:

- Lao PDR: ILO–Republic of Korea Partnership Programme “Supporting the Implementation of Sustainable Social Protection Floors for Workers and their Families in ASEAN – Phase III”;
- The SOLAR project – “Reducing vulnerability in Lao PDR: Advancing social protection and labour rights and entitlements in the coffee and tea sectors”.
- Viet Nam: Vision Zero Fund (VZF), the ILO–Irish Aid Inclusive Growth, Social Protection and Jobs Programme and the ILO Viet Nam–Nestlé Public–Private Partnership project for Viet Nam.
- Cambodia: Accelerating Social Protection (ASP) - European Union for Cambodia
- Thailand: ILO/SSO Project “Strengthening Social Security Office Capacities in Policy Design with a Focus on Research and Actuarial Services Project”.
- Global ILO Project: “Accès universel à la protection sociale, à la santé et la sécurité au travail (France).

#### **Report on engagement with social partners**

In Lao PDR, bilateral discussions were held in March 2023 with the Government (via the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW) and the Ministry of Health (MOH)); the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) as employers' representatives and the Lao Federation Trade Unions (LFTU) as workers' representatives. Together, they sought to identify their core priorities and accordingly define the collaborative 2023 work plans. All partners are playing an active role in the implementation of the work plan. In particular, the project advocates strongly for the involvement of LNCCI and LFTU in national consultations on the revision of the Law on Health Insurance. It also financed specific events to ensure the active engagement of the social partners in the process. As a result, social partners participated in consultative meetings. Furthermore, the project organized bilateral meetings with partners to enable the sharing of recommendations on specific themes (such as actuarial analysis, revisions to laws and so on) with the objective of raising the capacities of the partners to formulate their own informed positions.

At the regional level, the ISSA–CONNECT webinar was organized as a tripartite arrangement with representatives from workers' organizations.

## 4. Main challenges and corrective actions

Since the start of 2022, Lao PDR's economy has faced challenges owing to significant depreciation in the exchange rate, resulting in elevated inflation and declining living standards. Economic growth has continued, but concerns persist over the sustainability of public debt<sup>9</sup>. The situation has had a direct impact on the administrative operations, including those of the Ministry of Health. Implementation of interventions has at times been hampered by a shortage of financial resources, as the project's rules require at least a 20 per cent advance from its counterpart. At policy level, the dire situation has directly influenced the options the Government has at its disposal in addressing the scheme's financial deficit and the goals it can realistically achieve in the area of social health protection. Despite the Government's good offices, it is foreseeable that the economic situation will reverse the achievements made so far, particularly when it comes to quality of service and adequacy of benefits. The project therefore endeavours to adapt its recommendations and to build evidence that responds to the ongoing budgetary constraints.

At regional level, significant turnover at Mahidol University, a main partner in the CONNECT network and regional capacity-building efforts, has necessitated the transfer of the secretariat from the ASEAN Institute for Health Development (AIHD) to the ILO project team. It was expected that a new official from the University would be nominated in 2023, but this has yet to take place. Likewise, pending the nomination of the new director of the AIHD, activities for the accreditation of the Master's programme in Management of Primary Healthcare and Social Health Protection and the promotion of it have been put on hold by the University. It is expected, however, that these will resume in 2024. As a mitigation strategy, the functions of the secretariat were temporarily taken over by the project.

## 5. Summary and outlook

At country level, the project accompanied Lao PDR in its transition towards sustained extension of coverage through a financially sustainable national health insurance with a modernized administration at national and all decentralized levels. Lao PDR has benefited from the regional level interventions of the project, which has promoted and enabled better diffusion of knowledge and created concrete opportunities for capacity-building on social health protection in the Asia and Pacific region.

The capacities of the Ministry of Health to design policies and administer the National Health Insurance Scheme have been enhanced through a mix of **short-term and long-term training**. In particular, three officials attended the **Master's degree** on primary healthcare management and social health protection at Mahidol University, Thailand, thanks to fellowships provided by the project. The Master's degree was enhanced through the involvement of ILO and Thai expert academic lecturers. Additionally, **guidelines on claims administration** have been revised, and 230 concerned officials have been trained in their optimal application. This has resulted in improved accurate and timely payment to health facilities but it has also ensured that members receive the services they are entitled to and that they are not required to pay more than the officially stipulated co-payment. The guidelines are central to the protection of members' entitlements, to the financial sustainability of the scheme and overall good governance.

Sustainability of the social health protection system and protection of people's rights require a sound legal framework that is in line with international standards. With the support of the project, the **Law on Health Insurance** is being revised, with the objective of guaranteeing the financial sustainability of the national health insurance without reversing the achievements made to date, or in other words, maintaining a 94 per cent population coverage and pursuing a further reduction of out-of-pocket spending. An advanced draft is now available, which has been developed through extensive cross-sectoral consultations and social

---

<sup>9</sup> IMF, Article IV, Country report 2023. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2023/05/22/Lao-People-s-Democratic-Republic-2023-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-533636>

dialogue. Furthermore, the draft is being supplemented by sound evidence gathered by the project. This includes, in particular, a **comprehensive actuarial analysis** which provides necessary evidence to address the scheme budget deficit and measure the financial impact of government policy decisions likely to affect the scheme's revenues and expenditures. Moreover, an in-depth **legal review** of the current Law guided by compliance with international standards on social security has been produced to inform the drafting of the Law.

In order to further extend coverage to more persons in Lao PDR, a transition towards better compliance of enterprises with social security registration has been initiated. This has been translated into the development of social security inspections at the Lao Social Security Office, with 13 inspectors being selected by the LSSO. **Inspection guidelines** have been developed. A **review and recommendations on the requisite legal changes** are available and are being used to guide the revision of the Law on Social Security. **Standard operating procedures** for social security inspections have almost been completed. Furthermore, a technical paper has analysed the lessons learned from the past experience of the **Community-based Health Insurance**, still in operation in Vientiane Capital, and hence to inform the current discussion on the strategies for extension of coverage.

At regional level, the CONNECT network is playing an active role in the collective creation and diffusion of knowledge on social health protection. The **network now numbers 13 active members** from Cambodia, Lao PDR, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Through the research and webinars organized by the network, a body of evidence has been assembled to facilitate the coverage of vulnerable groups by social health protection systems, as they are more likely to suffer impoverishing health spendings. Among the functions and activities informed by this evidence are:

- Identifying barriers **persons with disabilities** face in accessing social health protection in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam.
- Identification of gaps and strategies to protect **migrant workers** from catastrophic health expenditures (three webinars with a total of 330 participants).
- Identification of gaps and strategies in the provision and financing of long-term care for **elderly persons** and persons with disabilities, in the context of an ageing population in Asia (one webinar, 91 participants).
- Taking stock of the legal social security entitlements for **domestic workers** in the ten ASEAN countries (research-based).

In addition to being a forum for the kind of research and knowledge exchanges mentioned above, CONNECT resources have also enabled the training of 44 persons in Asia and Africa on social health protection (CONNECT-ITC ILO training) and 35 persons in Asia on actuarial skills.