



Photo: Saravane Provincial Hospital

Briefing Note

MAKING THE CASE FOR THE BREASTFEEDING MODEL HOSPITALS INITIATIVE IN LAO PDR

I. BACKGROUND

Breastfeeding in Lao PDR is widely socially accepted and strongly supported by government policy. While most infants are breastfed, the practice is often sub-optimal: slow initiation, pre-lacteal feeding, and mixed feeding are common. Breastfeeding initiation rates increased substantially from 19% in 2000 to 39% in 2011, but progress has stalled in the past decade, with initiation rates increasing only to 44% in 2017.

To date, breastfeeding support in Lao PDR has consisted public health campaigns that inform families about the health benefits of breastfeeding and the risks associated with other feeding practices; public awareness that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life is generally high but few mothers succeed in achieving this standard. While most mothers stay in hospital for 24 hours after birth they generally receive no postpartum care until 6 week later; those who are unable to establish breastfeeding before leaving hospital are particularly unlikely to successfully exclusively breastfeed.

Lao PDR adopted WHO's Early Essential Newborn Care (EENC) protocol as standard practice in 2014, requiring newborns to remain in skin-to-skin contact for the first 90 minutes of life to maximize early initiation, amongst other steps that benefit early newborn health. However, healthcare staff reported that they have insufficient skills to support early initiation, heavy workloads, and lack clarity about appropriate support procedures during the inpatient period. With funding from Irish Aid, since 2017 Alive & Thrive and its technical implementation partner- Save the Children have been working to strengthen the capacity of health systems in Lao to deliver high-quality breastfeeding-friendly services to mothers and infants.



Alive & Thrive and Save the Children provide strategic technical assistance to the government to implement the Breastfeeding Model Hospital initiative that deliver high quality breastfeeding and EENC services within a supportive policy environment.

The Breastfeeding Model Hospital initiative is made possible by the increased commitment to breastfeeding support, newborn care, and mother's care experience that developed from the Ministry of Health's ambitious 2016-2025 Reproductive Health Services for Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health strategy. The first phase of the strategy enabled the national roll out of EENC standards and the action plan for the second half of the strategic period increased accountability for care in the first 24 hours and set ambitious targets for hospital care outcomes.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ACCREDITATION MECHANISM OF THE BREASTFEEDING MODEL HOSPITALS INITIATIVE

Legal framework

The Five Goods and One Satisfaction (5G1S) policy of the Lao MOH calls for facilities to provide improved reception, convenience, cleanliness, diagnosis and treatment and maintain high patient satisfaction. This policy framework underpins the quality assessment criteria of the the National Hospital Quality Standards and Accreditation Scheme in the Lao PDR (called Dok Champa system). Alive & Thrive, Save the Children and WHO were successful in

advocating for inclusion of indicators measuring performance to consistently implement breastfeeding counseling, prolonged skin-to-skin contact, early initiation of breastfeeding, rooming-in, and adherence to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in the criteria. The Breastfeeding Model Hospital (BFMH) designation is based on these care standards and contributes to the overall goals of the wider Lao hospital quality system.

Accreditation process

Accreditation is based on data collected from three sources:

- Self-reported facility data via the District Health Information Software 2 (DHIS2) platform. The Breastfeeding Model Hospital program has supported MOH to introduce revised patient charts to enable breastfeeding and newborn care is captured effectively which then expands routine data collection about breastfeeding initiation and counseling in hospitals in the Health Management Information Systems (HMIS).

- External quality-focused integrated assessment of facilities across departments has now been instituted by the Department of Health Care and Rehabilitation (as this system is still in initial roll out, EENC Annual Implementation Reviews may also be a source of data until all facilities are active in the integrated assessment system).
- A telephone-based survey of new mothers implemented by the National Nutrition Center that verifies the survey asks mothers about their care experience, what support they received, and their satisfaction with care.

Stakeholders involved in the accreditation

The accreditation is officially administered by the National Nutrition Center, under the Department of Hygiene and Health Promotion, in coordination with the Department of Health Care and

Rehabilitation and with the advisory support of the University of Health Sciences. Technical support is provided by Alive & Thrive, Save the Children, in coordination with WHO.

Assessment/ evaluation criteria and tools/checklists

Hospitals are assessed across six key criteria:

- ✓ Breast-milk substitutes (BMS) are not available for purchase anywhere in the health facility and no marketing of BMS occurs in any part of the facility
- ✓ Immediate and sustained skin-to-skin contact for at least 90 min and a complete breastfeed
- ✓ Exclusive breastfeeding during in-patient stay
- ✓ Staff providing childbirth, newborn or postpartum care services at the hospital that are trained in EENC or/and IYCF
- ✓ Feeding status screened at discharge
- ✓ Pregnant women receive breastfeeding counseling during antenatal care (ANC)

II. RECOGNIZING THE FIRST BREASTFEEDING MODEL HOSPITALS

Lao PDR has demonstrated a solid commitment to protect, promote and support breastfeeding. This effort reflects in its close collaboration with various stakeholders in providing training and assessment for hospitals to fulfill the Breastfeeding Model Hospital criteria. The first two health facilities that received the recognition have successfully improved their breastfeeding outcomes and show strong potential to maintain the best practices in the long run.

In recent years, Saravane Provincial Hospital has been a trusted facility for pregnant women and families. With the increasing number of clients, the hospital has taken the chance to expand breastfeeding training for more mothers and families. In 2020, the number of breastfeeding courses held by the hospital raised by 40%. Since 2017, Saravane Provincial Hospital has trained 95% of its

staff in early essential newborn care and breastfeeding, ensuring that they have practical skills to consult mothers in breastfeeding and infant nutrition. In addition, the hospital also introduced a breastfeeding support policy with ten steps, which restricts formula milk in the hospital area and warns mothers and families about the risks of infant formula. With these supportive policies, Saravane Provincial Hospital has received remarkable breastfeeding outcomes. The hospital recorded 90% of newborns being exclusively breastfed until hospital discharge, and 93% of mothers reported receiving breastfeeding counseling before leaving the hospital. With 1800 – 1900 annual childbirths at Saravane Breastfeeding Model Hospital, its breastfeeding support practices could ensure the best start in life for thousands of babies.



Houphan Provincial Hospital also fulfilled the Breastfeeding Model Hospitals criteria with an outstanding result. Among the eight hospitals assessed for recognition, Houphan Provincial Hospital received a top score in all eight criteria. More than 80% of mothers and newborns at the hospital enjoyed immediate and prolonged skin-to-skin contact for at least 90 minutes. As 70% of hospital staff are trained about early essential newborn care and breastfeeding counseling, mothers giving birth at the hospital could be confident to continue

breastfeeding their babies. Assessment result shows that 80% of mother exclusively breastfeed their babies during the hospital stay, and more than 80% of mothers assessed have proper breastfeeding skill after hospital discharge. The hospital has initially succeeded in improving breastfeeding outcomes for mothers and family members. With 1300 babies born at Houphan Hospital every year, the hospital has strong potential to scale up breastfeeding practices and increase breastfeeding rate in Lao.

III. THE WAY FORWARD

In 2022, the Ministry of Health and partners will support an inclusive COVID-19 recovery and adaptation. The initiative will further scale the evidence-based maternal, infant, and young child nutrition interventions, including the Breastfeeding Model Hospital initiative, to new geographies. Alive & Thrive and Save the Children will expand provider-driven best practices among health facilities

and ethnic minority communities alongside the Laos – Viet Nam border. Services for vulnerable newborns, including kangaroo mother care and breastfeeding counseling and support in health facilities, will be strengthened and monitored to address bottlenecks, improve quality, and increase the uptake of best newborn care practices.