

The progress of health sector reform in Lao PDR: National health coverage scheme introduction and challenges

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Abstract

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), a landlocked, ethnically diverse country in South-East Asia, shows rapid growth in economic and social infrastructure. Particularly healthcare is one of the important areas for the national strategy for graduating from the LDCs., in which national health insurance (NHI) is recognized as a prominent scheme to attain equality in healthcare delivery for poorer people, informal workers and remote residents in the country. Although the latest version of *The Health Sector Development Five-year Plan* under *The National Socio-economic Development Five-year Plan* (NSED) addressed the *Universal Health Coverage* (UHC) system as the highest priority target should be achieved, several health problems including maternal mortality and under five-year mortality rate in rural residents are remained. In 2014, the Ministry of Health (MoH) launched an ambitious health sector reform plan, in which reduction of patients' out of pocket payment and expansion the opportunity of medical care service delivery for rural and remote residents through rebuilding conventional payment schemes, scarcity of healthcare workforces and institutes in remote areas are hindrance to achieving the goal of the plan. To understand the current working environment and the intention of retaining present workplace and roles, we carried out questionnaire survey to those who are working in the capitol and district hospitals located in Vientiane capitol area. 802 respondents including medical doctors, dentists, nurses & midwives, pharmacists, and lab-technicians provided several valuable information: there was significant difference in medical doctor's time allocation by duties between capitol and district hospitals, in which those in district institutes spend more time to be engaging in managerial work; almost of all workforces expressed higher job satisfaction than expected and low intention of moving workplace; furthermore, in some informal conversations with local administrators, it was stated that many medical staffs working in the capitol area desire to return to their hometown even if they may earn less than in their present situation. As a general, current health sector reform in Lao PDR is, indeed, underpinned by the change of financial condition to contribution and co-payment by means of merging former financial scheme into national health insurance scheme. However, the existence of mal-distribution of healthcare resources in the country may indicate it may not be easy for the government to implement immediate improvement in the provision of qualified healthcare services under NHI scheme for every corner resident in the country.

[Keywords] health sector reform, Universal Health Coverage, National Health Insurance, remote residents, healthcare workforces, job satisfaction

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