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## USAID OKARD

USAID Okard is a five-year project that promotes the independence and functional ability of persons with disabilities through equal access to health and social services in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Leahy War Victims Fund and Victims of Torture Program, and the U.S. Department of State, USAID Okard partners with the Lao government and civil society to develop and implement disability inclusive policies so that no one is left behind.

Persons with disabilities are among society’s most marginalized populations. Some of the major causes of disabilities in Laos are unexploded ordnance (UXO), road traffic crashes, stunting and increasingly, non-communicable diseases such as stroke, Type 2 diabetes, and an ageing population. USAID Okard promotes greater economic self-sufficiency, improved functional ability and the well-being of persons with disabilities and their households, especially those who have mobility limitations. The project works towards creating an environment in which persons with disabilities can equally access health and social services and are empowered to actively participate in society.

### KEY APPROACHES

USAID Okard project partners with the public and private sector to support persons with disabilities in the areas of health, economic empowerment and stakeholder engagement. It uses a systems-centered approach focusing on government ownership of disability inclusive policies and development of physical rehabilitation and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services for long-term sustainability. The project also applies a person-centered approach addressing the individual needs of persons with disabilities and the

communities that support them. The project is primarily implemented in Vientiane Capital and in the provinces of Xieng Khouang and Savannakhet.

## **HEALTH**

USAID Okard trains health and rehabilitation service providers, supports health centers to provide assistive products at the local level and promotes rehabilitation as a standard component of healthcare services. It also supports Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) through trainings of service providers, counselors and peer-counseling.

## **ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

The project engages with a variety of partners including non-profit associations, governmental bodies and the private sector to implement inclusive vocational training courses, integrate persons with disabilities into the labor force and provide market-based livelihood opportunities.

## **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

USAID Okard assists the Ministry of Health and the National Committee for Disabled People and the Elderly to better coordinate organizations and institutions that support persons with disabilities. In addition, the project strengthens disabilities-focused organizations' engagement with the Government of Laos to advance the rights of persons with disabilities, mobilize grassroots networks and engage persons with disabilities in policy design and implementation.

## **COMMUNITY BASED INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT (CBID)**

USAID Okard addresses the individual needs of persons with disabilities through community based inclusive development (CBID). Case managers identify persons with disabilities and develop a personalized action plan with the family to address specific health, economic and social needs and remove barriers that hinder participation and inclusion in society. Actions could include access to health care to improve function and wellbeing such as rehabilitation, assistive products and psychosocial support, access to income generation and social activities. At the same time, different stakeholders in the community are encouraged to work together to identify solutions and create opportunities for inclusion – mobilizing people and resources through changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices, leading to a sustainable, inclusive community.

## **IMPACT AND RESULTS**

- USAID Okard supported the Government of Lao PDR to disseminate two new key policies; the National Disability Law and the National Rehabilitation Medicine Strategy that will support persons with disabilities to access support, services and benefits.
- USAID Okard supported the Ministry of Health to complete the WHO STARS, an evidence based and standardized situation assessment on the status of rehabilitation, which provided clear recommendations to guide strategic planning on strengthen rehabilitation within the health system.
- USAID Okard lead the creation of accessible Covid-19 information, including the first ever national broadcasts with sign language interpretation, so persons with disabilities could access crucial health information and know how to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

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