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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 injuries, nutritional deficiencies, and increasingly, non-communicable diseases such as stroke, type 2 diabetes, and an aging 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 partners with the public and private sectors 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.

Photo: Duang Phephada

HEALTH

USAID Okard trains health and rehabilitation service providers, supports health facilities to provide assistive products at the local level and promotes rehabilitation as an integrated component of healthcare services. It also supports MHPSS through training 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 provide skills and increase access of persons with disabilities into the labor force and provide market-based livelihood opportunities.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

USAID Okard assists the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, National Committee for Disabled People and the Elderly to better coordinate organizations and institutions that support persons with disabilities, while advancing the rights of persons with disabilities, mobilizing grassroots networks, and engaging persons with disabilities in policy design and implementation.

COMMUNITY BASED INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

USAID Okard addresses the individual needs of persons with disabilities through a community based inclusive development (CBID) model. Case managers identify persons with disabilities, assess their situation, 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 on an equal basis with others. Actions 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 and implement two new key policies: the National Disability Law and the National Rehabilitation Medicine Strategy that supports persons with disabilities to access support, services, and benefits.
- USAID Okard supported the Ministry of Health to complete the World Health Organization Systematic Assessment of Rehabilitation Situation, an evidence based and standardized situation assessment on the status of rehabilitation, which provided clear recommendations to guide strategic planning on strengthening rehabilitation within the health systems.
- USAID Okard created accessible COVID-19 information, including for national broadcast briefings with sign language interpretation, so persons with disabilities could access crucial health information and know how to protect themselves from COVID-19. USAID Okard also assisted and facilitated beneficiaries including women to receive information about accessing vaccination to ensure maximum protection against COVID-19.
- USAID Okard translated the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme package intervention guides to support the scale-up of mental health care training of 42 district doctors and nurses to address a much needed gap in services and enable people with mental health and psychosocial needs to receive support.
- USAID Okard designed an innovative, digitized disability needs assessment tool and database for case management in compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) principles. This is used by the CBID case managers demonstrating that comprehensive data on the support needs of persons with disabilities can be collected in a resource constrained context.

- Through individualized case management, USAID Okard has supported 1,624 persons with disabilities (626 women) and their households in the target districts to meet their needs to access health, rehabilitation services, including priority assistive products, medical treatment for UXO survivors, and psychosocial support to improve functioning, participation, and wellbeing.
- USAID Okard has supported 2,613 service providers (422 women) who serve vulnerable persons to be trained, 8,901 of targeted beneficiaries (2,489 women) have increased knowledge/skills and awareness on disability and inclusion, and supported 244 persons with disabilities (99 women) and their households to establish sustainable income generating activities to improve economic self-sufficiency.
- USAID Okard, in a partnership with the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, organizes annual events to celebrate the National and International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPWD). In 2021, a virtual celebration of IDPWD reached and informed 16,550 people about the importance of human diversity, including diversity in the ability to move, communicate, see and hear, as well as diversity in learning and well-being.
- Over 20 Self Help Groups of disability support networks have been established in Savannakhet and Xieng Khouang, with 1,111 members (605 women).

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