



EPIISODE 2

# South-South and triangular cooperation in ending preventable maternal death

Good Practice



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A pregnant woman with dark hair, wearing a pink patterned long-sleeved shirt, is smiling at the camera. She is seated, and her hands are resting on her belly. In the background, there are posters on a wall, including one with Khmer text and a table with columns of text. A large white text overlay 'Introduction' is positioned across the lower half of the image.

# Introduction



**E**nding preventable maternal death is one of the three transformative results of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Likewise, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have a target to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to fewer than 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030. UNFPA fosters the capacity of Thailand, a leader in the reduction of maternal death, to exchange experience and knowledge on sexual and reproductive health through South-South and triangular cooperation. The aim is to reduce MMR in Thailand to half of the Sustainable Development Goal target, or 31 maternal deaths per 1,000 live births. UNFPA uses South-South and triangular cooperation as a development mechanism to promote well-being for people of all ages, which is a major conceptual framework of the United Nations in people-centred sustainable development. Such cooperation enables countries to share knowledge and techniques in maternal health and overall sexual and reproductive health with neighbouring and high-risk countries. The aim is that skilled medical

and public health personnel will participate in efforts to reduce the risks of maternal death from childbirth, most of which are highly preventable.

Thailand is a high-middle income country that has been successful in public health, particularly in promoting safe birth for both mother and child. It is widely accepted that Thailand has good practice in terms of maternal health and sexual and reproductive health. Recognizing the country's potential and achievements, UNFPA encourages Thailand to exchange experience, knowledge and technical skills, especially with Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and the Kingdom of Bhutan. Thailand has also exchanged experience, knowledge and technical skills with countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. These exchanges support the efforts of countries to strengthen knowledge management and capacity development for midwifery personnel and public health officials, reduce the number of maternal deaths and provide a model for good practice in the efficient promotion of the well-being of mothers and children.

The 11th Country Programme of UNFPA and Thailand provided a five-year framework to support the Government of Thailand through South-South and triangular cooperation. Between 2017 and 2021, Thailand promoted the reduction of preventable maternal death through various activities, including systematic capacity



development in maternal health for public health personnel. For example, the largest initiative was with Lao PDR, where activities enabled approximately 150 nurses, midwives and public health personnel from Lao PDR to gain knowledge and experience in quality operational guidelines, to strengthen their work in maternal health, to promote safe childbirth and to avert preventable maternal death.



The exchange of good practice on ending preventable maternal death has been successful thanks to triangular cooperation, which has also helped to promote advocacy for better policies. Virasakdi Futrakul, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Thailand, highlighted the importance of this work in achieving development goals:

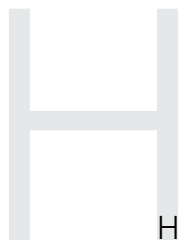
*“With the support of Thailand, we have to continue our work on promoting the rights, strategic partnership of the media and cooperation from private sector for the progress of development, not only in Thailand but also in other developing countries through the South-South Cooperation network. This will enable Thailand and other development partners including UNFPA to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as agreed by all countries in the world.”*





# Chapter 1

Thailand as a mentor in reproductive health for neighbouring countries



High-quality sexual and reproductive health is the key to a healthy life at any age, as it protects the health and safety of mothers before, during and after birth, and reduces the risk of newborn death. Supporting the health of mothers and infants is the starting point of a healthy population and is consistent with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being.



## **1.1 Capacity building project for midwives in Lao PDR**

Under the 11th Country Programme of UNFPA and Thailand, the model for cooperation includes three parties: the Department of International Cooperation under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, UNFPA and the Ministry of Health of Lao PDR. The aim of this cooperation is to ensure good quality of life in terms of sexual and reproductive health, reduce maternal death and strengthen the health and safety of infants. A series of initiatives ran for three years from 2015 to 2017. One project was the preparation of nursing and midwifery courses in accordance with the standards of the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) and the World Health Organization (WHO), covering both theory and practice. The aim was to support Thai public health personnel and reproductive health specialists to conduct training and transfer technical skills in midwifery to public health personnel in Lao PDR.

The training project was prompted by the number of maternal deaths in Lao PDR exceeding the target of the Sustainable Development Goals. In response, Lao PDR conducted a survey and developed national strategies to reduce preventable maternal death during pregnancy and childbirth. This led to a knowledge exchange with Thailand to reduce maternal death in compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals. UNFPA, together with the Government of Thailand, believes that transferring technical knowledge and skills will improve knowledge and expertise in

midwifery in Lao PDR, address the causes of maternal death and promote policies that will enhance maternal health in Lao PDR in the long term.

A highlight of the project was strengthening the capacity of local and national educational institutions responsible for training midwives and managing maternal health in Lao PDR. Curriculum was improved to meet the needs of midwifery teachers, schools and midwifery colleges. The Faculty of Nursing of Khon Kaen University in Thailand was selected by the three cooperating partners as the academic institution to lead this capacity building effort. The new curriculum focuses primarily on maternal health issues in Lao PDR and the needs of midwifery institutions. The curriculum consists of two parts: (i) a midwifery executive programme for institutions that train midwives and (ii) midwifery teacher courses. There is an emphasis on student participation, both in the theory of midwifery and in hands-on practice. It also covers evaluation and quality assessments of learners in all processes to regularly meet their needs.

Two short courses in maternal and child health serve as models for standard midwifery teacher training. These courses were completed by 24 midwives from provinces across Lao PDR, including Luang Phra Bang, Bor Kaew, Wiang Chan, Khyum-Muan, Sawannakhet, Salawan and Jumpasak. In addition to capacity building, the project also supports cooperation among Thai academic



“This project is considerably beneficial for the Ministry of Health. It helps health care personnel working in remote areas to upgrade their skills, gain valuable experience and interact with their working partners in Thailand. Without such cooperation, the Ministry of Health may not be able to organize the training due to budget constraints.”



institutions, UNFPA and Lao PDR, upgrading knowledge and strengthening the relationship between the two countries.

Midwives in health institutions across the country, from basic health centres to hospitals, have enhanced their skills and are equipped with the tools they need. As for outpatient referrals in remote areas, personnel have acquired knowledge and techniques from Thai experts in both emergency obstetric skills and the use of advanced midwifery tools. This knowledge enables trained personnel to provide maternal care for 20 to 50 individuals per month. Between [MONTH YEAR and MONTH YEAR], 52 midwifery executives and midwifery teachers received training in Lao PDR, and are expected to transfer their knowledge and experience to at least 300 midwifery students each year. These quality personnel will go on to work at health centres and hospitals across Lao PDR.

## **1.2 Transferring knowledge and skills to improve maternal health in Bhutan**

Another example of South-South and triangular cooperation has been the collaboration of UNFPA, Thailand and the Kingdom of Bhutan to strengthen knowledge and share experience on local maternal health management and referral systems, good approaches to the safety and well-being of pregnant women and the general improvement of women's health to reduce maternal mortality.



This collaboration was the result of maternal and newborn health services in Bhutan not meeting the target set by the Sustainable Development Goals. Only 88 per cent of pregnant women have access to quality prenatal care and there is a lack of specialists in maternity care. This results in a high risk of maternal death for pregnant women in Bhutan, with a maternal mortality ratio (MMR) of 225 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

Under the South-South and triangular cooperation model, the Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), UNFPA and the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan reached an agreement to transfer knowledge and share skills and experience, both theory and in practice, to enhance maternal safety and the capacity of Bhutan in public health and maternity health. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, the Ministry of Health of Bhutan and UNFPA to implement the action plan over five years (2012–2016).

The major code of conduct for the South-South and triangular cooperation between Thailand and Bhutan is being united in their work. Whether it is communication between the two countries, linking network partners or coordinating on various project activities, the three partners respond to the needs of all parties. This also applies to the design, implementation, monitoring and quality review of the project so that all stakeholders – including health care personnel in the Ministry of Health of Bhutan, those representing

the Government of Thailand, namely the Nursing College under the Ministry of Health, Department of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as UNFPA offices in Bhutan and Thailand – have a sense of ownership and can contribute to the project in a way that is appropriate in the local context.

The good practice derived from the training under the South-South and triangular cooperation was affirmed by a participant who stated:


*“This project is considerably beneficial for the Ministry of Health. It helps health care personnel working in remote areas to upgrade their skills, gain valuable experience and interact with their working partners in Thailand. Without such cooperation, the Ministry of Health may not be able to organize the training due to budget constraints.”*





# Chapter 2

Social returns on investment for  
sustainable development

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Investment in human resources cannot be measured in terms of monetary value since a healthy population is a reflection of a society with high potential and quality of life. However, to persuade policymakers of the cost-effectiveness of such projects, it is necessary to have tangible numbers and an economic analysis, including whether they meet the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being. The social value of these projects is the focus of the report, “Social Returns on Investment”, an evaluation and analysis prepared as part of the South-South and triangular cooperation between UNFPA and the Government of Thailand.

The projects that emerged from collaborations between UNFPA, TICA, Bhutan and Lao PDR have improved the quality of reproductive health, enhanced international relations, promoted public health education through capacity building programmes for institutions providing maternal and child health services (in Bhutan), midwifery training and national midwifery education (Lao PDR). The socioeconomic value of such positive outcomes was analysed to raise awareness within the government of each partner country.

## **2.1 An evaluation finds strong returns on investment in Lao PDR**

The Social Returns on Investment (SROI) evaluation was based mainly on South-South and triangular cooperation in Lao PDR, and took three months to complete. As for the South-South and triangular cooperation in Bhutan, as well as other cooperation projects in the future, an implementation plan will consider the various contexts in the countries to be evaluated and modify it based on the SROI evaluation in Lao PDR.

The analysis prioritized the participation of all parties, to study the efficiency and effectiveness of project implementation. Most importantly, it clearly captured the monetary returns, highlighting the social and economic value of the project and the better quality of life for people in each country. It also provided a clear answer on the financial benefit of investing in people-centred development.



The SROI evaluation is for the benefit of the three cooperation partners and all relevant stakeholders. Stakeholders included:

- TICA, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has the major duty to manage and implement various forms of development cooperation between Thailand and neighbouring countries, and with cooperation partners, international organizations and other developing countries;
- Training participants from Lao PDR, Lao teachers and midwives, executives of midwifery training agencies, the first cohort of training participants in 2016 and the second cohort in 2017;
- Faculty of Nursing, Khon Kaen University, the main implementor of the South-South and triangular cooperation project with Lao PDR;
- UNFPA in Thailand and Lao PDR; and
- Ministry of Public Health of the Government of Lao PDR.

Other stakeholders include midwifery students in Lao PDR, midwifery students who have been trained or taught by teachers participating in the project, as well as midwifery schools, local hospitals and other organizations in Lao PDR that sent their staff to the training.

An SROI evaluation is conducted in four stages. The first stage is setting the scope and identifying relevant stakeholders. This helps to establishment the parameters for a social returns

analysis, identifying relevant factors and individuals to prioritize and engage all stakeholders. The second stage involves data collection, selection of various indicators, identifying economic values and proxies, as well as combining the defined data. The third stage is to create a model and calculate results, including analysing input, tallying the benefits and any potential value in the future, calculating social returns, analysing the stability of the study results, as well as calculating the additional value and payback period. The last step is to prepare a report and linkage of information to communicate the evaluation of SROI.

The South-South and triangular cooperation initiative in Lao PDR, which was implemented for three years, was analysed through the SROI evaluation to understand its social and economic returns. The outcome was satisfactory, showing an increase in the joint investment of the three parties. The initial investment of US\$ 445,932 created additional value of \$1,763,362. That is, it is estimated that the social return of these initiatives is \$1:3.95, or for each dollar invested there is a social value of \$3.95, an almost fourfold increase.

As a result of this evaluation, it can be concluded that the capacity building project for midwives in Lao PDR was worth the investment. It created economic value for stakeholders and beneficiaries in several sectors. It also generated various types of social value. For example, 93 per cent of participants in Lao PDR who were trained say they have more confidence in their midwifery

profession; 63 per cent have significantly improved their ability to work with their organizations; 29 per cent have better employment prospects; and 24 per cent are more capable and can contribute positively to their communities.

The SROI evaluation report is clear evidence of the social and economic benefit of the South-South and triangular cooperation project. The concrete success appears as distinguished outcomes, including the upgrading of knowledge and the ability of midwifery personnel in Lao PDR to meet international standards. The improved quality, skills and expertise of personnel have positive effects on the general quality of the national institution they work with, resulting in various outputs and innovations with valuable returns. Through this project, they have opportunities to work with medical practitioners for midwifery training at district health centres and hospitals. The project also includes teacher exchanges, a breastfeeding support programme, educational VDO and a micro-teaching programme and a talented teacher network.

## **2.2 UNFPA support for leadership in reproductive health**

The evidence from the SROI evaluation reinforces the UNFPA strategy for promoting reproductive health, and highlights the potential of Thailand as a leader in the region in reproductive health, including maternal health and family planning. Thailand has



been technically successful in terms of maternal health and is able to implement relevant projects that have helped reduce the MMR to 24.6 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, which is significantly lower than the target of 70 per 100,000 live births set by the Sustainable Development Goals, yet higher than the national target. These achievements contribute to global recognition of Thailand as a maternal health leader. With the support and cooperation of UNFPA, the Government of Thailand will become even more successful in international development cooperation at subregional, regional and global levels, as evidenced by the high value of returns in the SROI evaluation.

In terms of monetary contributions, from 2012 to 2017 UNFPA and TICA provided annual support of US\$ 60,000–80,000 to implement technical cooperation projects for partner countries. Specifically, between 2015 and 2017, contributions totalled \$450,000 to develop skills and human resources for midwifery projects in Lao PDR, where activities included a four-month training course for 11 school managers and midwifery colleges and a six-month training course for 52 students from 11 midwifery institutes. Participatory monitoring and evaluation were conducted periodically to adjust activities in response to the needs of all stakeholders.

Cooperation between Thailand and Lao PDR under the support of UNFPA has led to various activities that generate social returns for participants. Examples include a study visit of high-ranking officials

from Lao PDR to learn about the midwifery system and maternal health programme. During the visit, the Faculty of Nursing of Khon Kaen University provided technical advice on sexual and reproductive health. This activity represents a continuous investment in midwifery education, as well as the capacity development of educational institutions in Lao PDR. Strengthening the capacity of public health personnel in Thailand and Lao PDR through the South-South and triangular cooperation project can therefore generate both long-term economic and social returns.

UNFPA support to the Government of Thailand focused on collaboration and multilateral partnership, which can be built on to obtain additional joint financing, add value and generate more return on investment. It is evident that the South-South and triangular cooperation between Thailand and Lao PDR leads to continuous mobilization of resources, both from civil society and the private sector in Thailand and other countries, and results in concrete successes that meet the goals set by UNFPA.

The SROI evaluation result is important evidence to motivate governments to develop a policy for collaboration with partnering countries under the South-South and triangular cooperation model, with the Department of International Cooperation playing a major role and encouraging resource mobilization between governments and other partner organizations. One of the major social returns of the South-South and triangular cooperation projects is a model for



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maternal health projects as well as other sexual and reproductive health projects that can be applied to other countries in the region.

In addition to the economic value generated, the South-South and triangular cooperation projects also advanced several of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to the promotion of good health, strengthening midwifery institutions and upgrading the skills and expertise of personnel to meet international standards. Ultimately, the greatest value and worth of the projects was putting people at the centre of development.





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