

## Millennium Development Goals a distant reality



The Lao government needs to work harder if wants to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to reduce child mortality rates and improve maternal health by 2015, as many rural communities remain vulnerable.

Like many others in her community, Ms Kiawa, 24, failed to follow basic reproductive and maternal healthcare practices. Ms Kiawa got married after she was 18 years old as advised by a doctor but she failed to practice family planning and safe birth delivery techniques. Ms Kiawa, resident of Korhai village in Xaysomboun district, Vientiane province, now has three children, with the oldest aged three, the second just over two and the youngest two months old. This means she had two children within one year, a practice that is not advised by doctors. Women can have as many children as they wish, but each child should be born at least two years apart, according to Deputy Head of the Health Science Research Division under the Health Science Institute of the Ministry of Health Dr Sengchanh Khounnavong. President of the Lao Association of Parliamentarians on Population and Development Mr Douangdy Oudthachak led a delegation on a visit to two districts in Vientiane province last week to inform vulnerable villagers about family planning, reproductive health and other mother and child healthcare practices. Some 70 villagers from more than 30 communities in Xaysomboun district participated in an information session conducted by Dr Sengchah on Friday. Participants noted that many pregnant women do not attend a hospital to receive a health check-up during their pregnancy because their uneducated husbands do not want other people touching their wives. This belief also accounts for the high number of home births. However, financial constraints are another contributing factor keeping pregnant women away from hospitals. The Vientiane provincial Health Department has stated that although Luxembourg and UNICEF funded projects provide free health checks for pregnant women, as well birth delivery assistance, many poor people have no money for other related expenses like transportation costs. Like many other mothers, Ms Kiawa mistakenly limited her diet to



just a few varieties of food after she delivered to her by her parents and passed down through generations. “I always eat dry food for the first month after delivering a baby. I never eat any food cooked with water because it will mean a longer recovery time,” MsKiawa told Vientiane Times. Another concerning issue is that many parents prefer that their children do not receive vaccinations, even if they are offered for free, because they believe it will make sick. Dr Sengchanh spent a morning informing villagers about reproductive health, birth delivery, and other mother and children healthcare issues. Over the past nine months, only 24.2 percent of pregnant women in the district went for a health check-up and just 10 percent of women gave birth at a hospital, while 16.6 percent followed advised family planning practices. In the same period, less than 20 percent of children less than one year of age received various vaccinations. Dr Sengchanh said achieving the MDGs involves much work, but commended the government for implementing various initiatives to realize targets. Mr Douangdy, who is also Head of the National Assembly’s Committee on Social and Cultural Affairs, informed the assembled villagers about the achievements of the 9<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the National Assembly held in June. The delegation visited to provide villagers with healthcare education packages in xaysomboun and Hom districts, as well as presenting some aid to the communities.