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Progress Report – Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Asia

30/03/2022 – 31/12/2022

BUILDING SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS FOR ALL - PHASE II

Project Code (GLO/21/34/MUL)



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Country Programme Outcome: LAO 226 Social protection: Government at the national and subnational levels has increased capacity and infrastructure to deliver an inclusive, shock-responsive, sustainable social protection system throughout the life cycle

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; SDG 3. ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Preparation and Review

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► ILO Global Flagship Programme on Building Social Protection Floors for All

Annual update 2022 – Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Asia

1. Regional and country context

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly signalled the urgent need for robust national social health protection systems as an integral part of every resilient health system. The pandemic has also revealed and exacerbated persistent gaps in social health protection coverage. Thus, globally, only 67.1 per cent of the population is affiliated with a social health protection system for primary coverage, with major discrepancies across the world’s regions and across income levels. In Southeast Asia, the percentage of the population at the relative poverty line and who are impoverished by out-of-pocket spending has increased continuously since 2000, with the sick and their families continuing to shoulder almost half of the costs of care.

At the regional level, the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, adopted in 2013, echoes the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202). Since the declaration of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, social protection has been recognized by all countries as a powerful tool for mitigating the potentially adverse effects of greater trade liberalization and for translating gains into shared prosperity and equitable development. At the 14th ASEAN Meeting in 2019, the ASEAN Health Ministers reaffirmed their unity in achieving the goals of the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda, and to “accelerate health for all in ASEAN”, including ensuring sustainable health financing. Moreover, in their joint statement at the 15th ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting in 2020 in Indonesia, they renewed their commitment to regional cooperation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, many countries in the region have identified as a priority increasing the coverage and adequacy of benefits. Thus, Cambodia is in the process of developing a national roadmap towards universal health coverage; Indonesia is seeking to address coverage issues within the informal economy; Nepal has recently established a national health insurance scheme, and Viet Nam is revising its health insurance law.

In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the Eighth Health Sector Development Plan sets the goal of achieving universal health coverage by 2025 and the Lao Health Sector Reform Strategy 2013–25 has drafted a roadmap to that end. The new National Health Insurance Strategy for 2021–25 has been formulated with a clear vision and coherent framework for the development of a unified national health insurance scheme. Additionally, in 2018 the Law on Health Insurance was promulgated and became the first law on social health protection in the country, thus creating a legal framework for national health insurance. Lao PDR has accordingly achieved a social health protection coverage of 90 per cent. However, the population of Vientiane Capital (about 13 per cent of the country’s population) is only partially covered by social health protection mechanisms, and compliance with the contributory scheme covering the formal sector remains a challenge nationwide. Out-of-pocket expenditures are

also high, standing at 49 per cent of current health expenditure,¹ leaving households vulnerable and at risk of impoverishment during periods of sickness. This is a matter of particular concern as total health expenditures are rising owing to an ageing population and in the wake of an increasing proliferation of non-communicable diseases. Inequities also persist, with the rural population in remote areas having less access to doctors than the urban population.² Moreover, the management and administration of the National Health Insurance scheme remain fragile. Critically, the financial sustainability of national health insurance is at risk, having been weakened by irregular, insufficient and unpredictable allocations of Government resources. The issue is also compounded by the impact of the economic crisis the country is facing, which is marked by low predicted growth, a high inflation rate and the high risk of a debt crisis.

At country level, the project aims to accompany Lao PDR in its transition towards the effective extension of coverage, through a financially sustainable national health insurance system and with a modernized administration at both national and all decentralized levels. Lao PDR benefits from the implementation of the project at the regional level, which aims to promote and enable better knowledge sharing and to create real opportunities for capacity-building in social health protection in the Asia and the Pacific region.

2. Progress report

Outcome 1. Effective, efficient, accountable and sustainable gender-responsive social health protection is delivered with an increased coverage in Lao PDR

Output 1: The management and administration of the national health insurance system is strengthened and translates into enhanced institutional capacity and operational effectiveness and efficiency at all levels

On the basis of consultations with national partners in April 2022, priority interventions for the year were identified and the implementation of these started when funds were disbursed in July 2022, and it was planned to maintain the continuity of most of these interventions over the period of 2022-23.

Support to the development of management tools

In its new 2021–2025 strategy, the National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB) has set as a priority the improvement of financial accountability by strengthening financial management and reporting in line with the Ministry of Health's (MOH) financial regulations and the Public Financial Management Strategy 2021–25 adopted by the Ministry of Finance. As one of the key priorities in this area, the NHIB aims to strengthen the claims verification process and compliance by health facilities and NHIB offices at subnational levels with these regulations. Thus, in the last quarter of 2022, the project supported the NHIB in planning for the training of officials at subnational level on the area of compliance with the national health insurance verification guidelines. This was with the objective of enhancing the

¹ WHO, Global Health Expenditures Database, 2018.

² Respectively, 32 per cent of the remote rural population have access to a doctor, compared to 35 per cent of the urban population; and 6.5 per cent of the remote rural population have access to a pharmacy compared to 78.3 per cent of the urban population (Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS6), 2018–19).

claims processes and outcomes. The methodology and the training plan have been designed and training sessions will be implemented in the first quarter of 2023.

Capacity and tools developed for increased compliance and effective social security inspections

The project is supporting efforts to extend population coverage, which requires enforcement of legislation on enterprises' registration with the Lao Social Security Office (LSSO) of workers in formal employment and the timely payment of contributions. In this context, strengthening of the inspection function is critical. Hence, the Social Security Inspection Decision, as well as options and recommendations for raising compliance have been developed with support from the project under its first phase. In continuity to this technical work undertaken during this first phase, the project also supported the development of the LSSO's Department of Inspection. Following the Government's endorsement of the Social Security Inspection Decision, which benefited from the project's support, work on the development of inspection guidelines has started. A senior labour inspection expert was contracted to work closely with the LSSO to develop practical inspection guidelines and in December 2022 the first two technical sessions were conducted with the LSSO. Field work has been organized and will take place in the last two weeks of January. The work will include technical working sessions, field visits and a workshop on compliance led by one of the stakeholders. The development of the guidelines, as well as the drafting of a roadmap for enhancing compliance with social security will be completed in 2023.

Furthermore, the knowledge and awareness of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW) concerning inspections were enhanced through the participation of two of its officials in the ILO International Technical Forum on the new ILO guidelines on general principles of labour inspection and the future of work. The Forum was held in Valencia, Spain, in November 2022.

Finally, these ILO guidelines on labour inspection were also translated into the Lao language, in order to facilitate their dissemination and to contribute towards capacity-building efforts. This work has benefited from the support of the of the ILO's regional Labour Administration and Inspection Specialist.

Output 2. Relevant policy reforms on medical care, sickness and maternity benefits are prepared, with a focus on extending coverage and financing, informed by evidence produced within the project

Actuarial valuation of health, maternity and sickness, with recommended policy options towards sustainable funding for universal National Health Insurance (NHI) coverage with guaranteed benefits, including social dialogue and advocacy for increased funding

A comprehensive actuarial analysis of all social security branches was initiated in 2022 in support of the LSSO and the NHIB. This extensive actuarial analysis is funded and conducted by several ILO social protection projects with the aim of providing coherent and informed support to the Government. It covers health care, maternity protection and sickness benefits, as well as other branches such as employment injury and old-age pensions. Carrying out regular actuarial valuations is in line with the ILO's international principles of good governance is an essential tool in assessing the current and likely future financial situation of social security schemes. The comprehensive actuarial analysis will form the basis for decisions on reforms to current schemes,

including those set out in the proposed 2024 Health Insurance Law and 2024 Social Security Law, and will contribute towards the improvement of management, administration and communication processes.

While the ultimate aim of this work is to deliver the requisite actuarial valuations and reports and associated policy and financing technical support as set out above, a key element is also to deliver recommendations related to data management and health policy and financing. Two separate actuarial valuation reports will be produced and recommendations will be made regarding the improvement of data collection and management.

In order to carry out this work, a modelling actuary and a senior actuary have been hired with the support of a health and data specialist based in Lao PDR and contracted specifically to support the MOH and MOLSW in the work of data collection on the ground. The general workplan for the actuarial analysis has been presented and agreed upon by partners. Likewise, the data request has been prepared and shared with partners. Data collection started in 2022 and was due to be concluded towards the end of the year, depending on data availability. In the same year, two training sessions were organized and delivered by the regional ILO actuarial expert for the benefit of the MOLSW and MOH officials. These sessions benefited 17 participants (seven of whom were female) and who also included five participants from the NHIB. In addition to Luxembourg funding through the multi-donor Flagship Programme, this intervention benefits from the co-funding of the EU funded Programme “Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management (SP&PFM)” and the ILO-Korea Partnership Programme “Supporting the Implementation of Sustainable Social Protection Floors for Workers and their Families in ASEAN – Phase III”.

Research and technical review of policies focusing on increasing coverage and equity

A review of the lessons learned during the implementation of the Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) scheme by the Government of Lao PDR has begun and will be completed in March 2023. The study aims to document the legacy of the CBHI and assess how it has helped to shape the country’s current national health insurance scheme. Crucially, it is expected to also highlight the main issues the CBHI faced in its mission to provide adequate social health protection to the population of Lao PDR, and thus stimulate discussion over what reforms of the national health insurance scheme might be necessary. The study is expected to be completed in 2023 as part of a global research initiative led by the ILO Social Protection Department in Geneva.

Output 3. Foundations for building a culture of social health protection, including medical care, sickness and maternity, are developed (planned for 2024)

Activities under this output have been budgeted from 2024 onwards only.

Outcome 2. CONNECT in Asia is a recognized network of public and non-for-profit institutions working on social health protection in the Asia and the Pacific region and it contributes to the extension of social health protection through joint research, collaborative and gender-responsive capacity-building opportunities and advocacy efforts

Output 1. Coordination capacities of CONNECT's Secretariat are strengthened, and membership is extended to new members

Strengthening CONNECT's Secretariat in order to achieve better coordination of the platform

Under the first phase of the project, a network of public institutions and private not-for-profit organizations in the Asia and the Pacific region was launched (CONNECT), with the mandate to strengthen the capacity of countries in the region and to implement joint research for the purpose of developing and implementing strong, sustainable and comprehensive policies, strategies and systems for social health protection. In 2022, the CONNECT Secretariat within the ASEAN Institute for Health Development (AIHD) at Mahidol University experienced turnover in some key members of its staff. On-the-job support as well as professional coaching support had been provided as planned to the manager in July and August 2022, but the manager was then assigned to a new position. A new manager was subsequently identified and appointed but was promptly assigned to different responsibilities. The position is now vacant pending Mahidol University nomination. Since September 2022, the project manager is playing the role of the manager of CONNECT, thus enabling the Secretariat to continue its operation. The project has led CONNECT's coordination meetings to ensure coordination of product development and adaptation, and follow-up of sustainable activities and the funding plan. Three CONNECT meetings have been organized during the period.

Extension of CONNECT's membership with new partnerships, including with other relevant platforms, and increased visibility

The work of the Secretariat prioritizes the promotion and the extension of the CONNECT network. Promotional material was developed and two animated short videos produced ("What is Connect?" and "How to join CONNECT"). Three additional short promotional videos were produced with the participation of all CONNECT members in which they share their experiences with the network. Videos are also being posted on the CONNECT website and shared with new or prospective members. Furthermore, the website has been maintained on a regular basis and is currently undergoing further development.

During the reporting period, the mapping of potential partners was updated. The CONNECT network was extended to include the global Partnership for Health (P4H) network on universal health coverage, Hanoi University of Public Health and the Swiss Red Cross in Lao PDR. A new draft memorandum of understanding was developed and finalized with all members and it is expected that it will be signed in 2023.

Output 2. Regional capacities on social health protection are developed

Technical support for the Master's programme in Management of Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection (M-MPHC/SHP)

In August 2022, a new version of the Master's programme in Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection was successfully launched with the project's support. In addition to the lectures provided by Mahidol University, the project manager gave a comprehensive introduction to social health protection to the students through seven technical sessions on the social health protection framework, principles, design and implementation. Most of the sessions, as well as the review of assignments, took place at the Salaya Campus of Mahidol University, hence offering a better learning opportunity and a chance for the students to interact. Three additional lectures have been prepared for January and February 2023, and a total of five sessions are expected to be delivered in the second semester of 2023. These sessions will mobilize other ILO colleagues in specific areas of expertise, as well as experts from the region, through the CONNECT network. The project is also supporting the students in the development of their thesis topics and ensures close coordination with the students' home country institutions so that the content of their Master's thesis meets a research need that is in line with national policy reforms.

Provision and support for Fellowships on the Master's programme in the Management of Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection (MPHC/SHP)

Out of the seven students enrolled on the above-mentioned Master's programme, six are recipients of project-funded fellowships. Following invitations to countries to nominate potential candidates, six students from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and Nepal were jointly selected by Mahidol University (MU) and the ILO in May 2022. They are all officials involved in policy design or the implementation of social health protection in their countries. Upon graduation, they are expected to return to their home institutions and remain at them for at least three years. The students come from the following institutions: the General Secretariat of the National Social Protection Council (GS-NSPC) in Cambodia; the BPJS Kesehatan in Indonesia; the Lao National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB), and the National Health Insurance (NHI) in Nepal. All are studying in Thailand at the Salaya Campus of Mahidol University (MU).

Preliminary discussions are still underway with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) in Cambodia for potential future funding of fellowships, with the objective of diversifying the sources of funding for the Master's programme and hence contributing to its sustainability.

Development and delivery of short-term training by CONNECT members

During the reporting period, CONNECT members discussed capacity-building needs and identified actuarial analysis training for policymakers as a priority. The concept note and the training plan for this have been developed and a one-week training course is planned for the first semester of 2023.

Output 3. Relevant knowledge, with a focus on gender, is produced and shared within CONNECT's network

Research work has been planned for 2023. A main topic identified by CONNECT members is regional research on access to Social Health Protection (SHP) for persons with disabilities. The draft concept note has been developed and technical inputs are being collected from CONNECT members. This first research initiative will be implemented in 2023.

Additional collaborations in 2023 include the running of the ILO course on social health protection (SHP) at the International Training Centre in the first semester of 2023, a regional training course on actuarial analysis and an online conference on SHP and migration.

Output 4. Technical support is provided to other countries from the region, based on demand, and South–South knowledge exchanges on social health protection are promoted across regions

Technical support on policy formulation to other countries in the region, based on demand (project manager's (CTA) time, funding from other social protection projects)

Cambodia. In support of, and in collaboration with, the ILO Social Protection Team in Cambodia, the project manager conducted a review of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) health insurance scheme and prepared a report on this. Based on primary data collection and a series of stakeholders' interviews, the project manager's report provides a review of the health insurance scheme's achievements in terms of coverage, benefits and financing since its implementation in 2017. It also provides a review of the core operational functions and suggests a set of recommendations to increase coverage and enhance the efficiency of the administration of the health insurance scheme. The report's findings were presented to the NSSF as well as to core stakeholders, including social partners and development partners, through a series of consultations in 2022. The final version of the report will be broadly disseminated upon completion of the ongoing translation of it into Khmer in February 2023. This review is part of the NSSF modernization efforts, and also of broader national efforts towards formalization. In addition to the project manager's time, financed by Luxembourg, this report was produced with the financial support of the Joint SDG Fund, co-financed by the European Union.

The project manager also supports the work of the General Secretariat of the National Social Protection Council (GS-NSPC) in the implementation of the National Social Protection Policy Framework, which includes Social Health Protection. The project manager takes part in the universal health coverage (UHC) dialogue and national discussions on the UHC roadmap, which are led by the GS-NSPC. Thus, in July 2022, the project manager presented some regional experiences of the extension of social health protection in the Asia region at a technical session organized by the ILO. The presentation was based on the findings of the regional compendium, published by the project under Phase I³ and which are regularly used by partners to learn about experience from other countries. The project manager also made an in-depth presentation on the Viet Nam model to the GS-NSPC in October 2022. Finally, the project manager regularly liaised with development partners, such as WHO,

³ ILO, 2021. *Extending social health protection: Accelerating progress towards Universal Health Coverage in Asia and the Pacific*.

GIZ and the P4H network focal point over technical exchanges on policy reforms, identification of possible collaborations and alignment of support to the Government.

Viet Nam. In November 2022, the project completed research into social and health protection, occupational safety, health access and knowledge gaps among coffee farm workers in central Viet Nam. The findings and recommendations of the study will be used to help shape the development of policies and strategies and to design measures to strengthen coffee farm workers' resilience by incorporating social protection and occupational safety and health (OSH) in future coffee sustainability initiatives. The report has been finalized and its findings have been disseminated among core stakeholders at a dedicated workshop. In addition to the Luxembourg support, this research work has been conducted through the collaboration of several ILO projects, namely: the ILO Vision Zero Fund (VZF); the ILO–Irish Aid Inclusive Growth, Social Protection and Jobs Programme; and the ILO Vietnam–Nestlé Public– Private Partnership project.

On the basis of the findings, new research into linkages and possible synergies between health insurance, employment injury insurance and occupational safety and health is being conducted as part of a global research initiative led by the Social Protection Department in Geneva.

Mongolia. The project manager provided technical inputs to the health section of the Mongolia Social Protection Diagnostic Review under the coordination of the ILO's regional Senior Social Protection Specialist, and national experts were mobilized to provide up-to-date information on current policies.

3. Collaboration and Partnerships

Bilateral discussions were held in April 2022 and again in December 2022 with the Government (as represented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW) and the Ministry of Health (MOH), with employers' representatives from the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) and with workers' representatives from the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU) to identify their core priorities and accordingly define the 2022 and 2023 collaborative workplans. All partners are playing an active role in the implementation of the workplan.

The strengthened presence of the ILO in Lao PDR has allowed for a strong engagement with key partners. The ILO participates in formal and informal Development Partners meetings and actively participates annually in the Development Partners planning process, aligned with the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB) strategy 2021–2025. Synergies have already been identified with several partners, including the WHO and Swiss Red Cross, on assessment of the NHI scheme and revision of the Health Insurance Law.

At the regional level, the project has actively supported South–South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) through the CONNECT network, and the P4H network, in which the project Manager acts as a regional focal point.

Finally, as elaborated in the section 2 of the report, the project worked in partnership with the following ILO projects:

- Lao PDR: EU funded Global Action on “Improving Synergies between Social Protection and Public Finance Management (SP&PFM)”; the ILO–Korea Partnership Programme on “Supporting the Implementation of Sustainable Social Protection Floors for Workers and their Families in ASEAN – Phase III”.
- Viet Nam: Vision Zero Fund (VZF), the ILO–Irish Aid Inclusive Growth, Social Protection and Jobs Programme and the ILO Vietnam–Nestlé Public-Private Partnership project for Viet Nam.
- Cambodia: Joint SDG Fund, European Union for Cambodia.

4. Issues and actions

The project was approved in March 2022, and the first disbursement was received in late June 2022. The project’s continuity was assured thanks to the availability of ILO internal funds to maintain the team in place. However, the implementation of most activities could only start in July 2022 upon receipt of the donors’ first disbursement.

The depreciation of the Euro against the US dollar creates some uncertainties in the overall disbursement that is to be allocated to the project in US dollars and accordingly adjustments have had to be made to the workplan. A detailed workplan has been developed for the year 2023 and is under consideration in consultation with key national counterparts. It will be validated at the national consultative workshop scheduled to take place in the first quarter of 2023.

Significant turn-over of personnel at Mahidol University (MU), a main partner in the CONNECT network and regional capacity-building efforts, has put a brake on the extension of the network. While the project manager has stood in as manager at Mahidol University (MU) since 2022, it is expected that a new official from the university will be nominated in early 2023 and the development of the network thus fully implemented. Likewise, pending the nomination of the new director of the ASEAN Institute for Health Development (AIHD), activities for the accreditation of the Master’s programme in Management of Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection (MPHC/SHP) and the promotion of it have been put on hold by the University. It is expected, however, that these will resume in 2023.

5. Summary and outlook

The ILO’s presence is welcomed by the tripartite partners as well as other development partners and its mandate to support decent work not only has the potential to contribute to encouraging stronger linkages between the contributory and non-contributory schemes but also to foster linkages between social protection and formalization policies. The project’s main achievements are summarized below.

Lao People’s Democratic Republic PDR

In Lao PDR, under the reporting period, the project prioritized interventions supporting the sustainability of the health insurance scheme.

A first approach has been to focus on increasing compliance. In furtherance of the technical work initiated under the first phase, the project is supporting the development of the Lao Social Security Office’s (LSSO) Inspection Department. A senior labour inspector expert has commenced support for the LSSO in the development of practical inspection guidelines and also a roadmap to increase compliance with social security. This work will be completed in 2023. Capacity-building has been further enhanced through the participation of two officials in the ILO International

technical forum in Spain on the new ILO guidelines on general principles of labour inspection and the future of work.

A second approach is focused on improving the financial sustainability of the scheme, with the production of the requisite evidence to inform the policy reforms to be included in the revised Social Security Law and Health Insurance Law in 2024. To that end, a comprehensive actuarial analysis of all social security branches, including health insurance was initiated in 2022. For the purpose of carrying out this work, a modelling actuary and a senior actuary have been hired, who will avail themselves of the support of a health and data specialist based in Lao PDR and contracted specifically to support the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLSW) in the work of data collection work on the ground. The general workplan for the actuarial analysis has been presented to partners and agreed upon by them. Likewise, the data request has been prepared and shared with partners. Data collection commenced in 2022 and depending upon the availability of data, it will be concluded towards the end of 2023. Two training sessions were organized and delivered in 2022 by the regional ILO actuarial expert for officials of the MLSW and MOH.

Similarly, a review of the lessons learned in the implementation of the Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) scheme by the Government of Lao PDR has commenced and will be completed in March 2023. The study aims to document the legacy of the CBHI and demonstrate how it has contributed to shaping the current national health insurance scheme. Crucially, it is hoped that it will also bring to the fore the main issues and challenges that the CBHI has faced in pursuit of its mission to provide adequate social health protection to the population of Lao PDR, and in turn contribute to the discussion of the necessary reforms to the NHI scheme and the CBHI scheme in Vientiane Capital.

The enhancement of the management and administration of the NHI scheme were started with the preparation of training on the NHI verification guidelines and in the methodology and training plan designed.

Regional component

Under the first phase of the project, a network of public institutions and private not-for-profit organizations in Asia and the Pacific region (CONNECT) was launched with the mandate to strengthen the capacity of countries in the region and to implement joint research endeavours conducted for the purpose of developing and implementing strong, sustainable and comprehensive policies, strategies and systems for Social Health Protection. In 2022, owing to internal changes among personnel at Mahidol University (MU), the CONNECT Secretariat was unable to avail itself of the support of Mahidol University (MU), and therefore the project manager is currently acting as manager. This has enabled CONNECT's coordination meetings to ensure coordination of product development and adaptation and to follow up on sustainable activities and the funding plan. Three CONNECT meetings were held during the period. In addition to this, the Secretariat set out to prioritize the promotion and the extension of the CONNECT network. Promotional material was produced and two short animated videos developed (entitled "What is CONNECT?" and "How to join CONNECT"). Three additional short promotional videos have been produced with the participation of all CONNECT members, who recount their experiences with the network. Videos are being posted on the CONNECT website and shared with new or prospective members. The website has also been maintained and updated on a regular

basis and is currently undergoing further development. During the reporting period, the mapping of potential partners was also maintained. Thus, the network was extended to include the global P4H network on universal health coverage (UHC), Hanoi University of Public Health and the Swiss Red Cross in Lao PDR. A new draft memorandum of understanding was drawn up and finalized with all members and it is expected that it will be signed in 2023.

One of the key CONNECT collaborative products is the Master's programme in Management of Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection (MPHC/SHP). A new version of the Master's programme was successfully launched in August 2022 with the project's support. In addition to the lectures provided by Mahidol University (MU), the project Manager provided a comprehensive introduction on social health protection to the students through seven technical sessions on social health protection framework, principles, design and implementation. The project is also supporting the students in the development of their thesis topics and ensures close coordination with the students' home country institutions, so that their chosen thesis topics address areas of research that complement national policy reforms. Out of the seven students enrolled on the above-mentioned Master's programme, six hold project-funded fellowships. The students come from institutions working on social health protection in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao National Health Insurance Bureau, Nepal, and Thailand.

Although research work was not planned in 2022, CONNECT members have already identified access to social health protection (SHP) for persons with disabilities as being an area of priority regional research. A draft concept note has been developed and technical inputs are being collected from CONNECT members and research will commence in 2023. Additional collaborations in 2023 include participation in the course on SHP at the International Training Centre of the ILO in the first semester of 2023, a regional training course on actuarial analysis and an online conference concerning SHP and migration.

Technical support is provided to other countries in the region

Cambodia. In support of, and collaboration with, the ILO social protection team in Cambodia, the project manager conducted a review of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) health insurance scheme.

Viet Nam. In November 2022, the project completed research into social and health protection, occupational safety, health access and knowledge gaps among coffee workers in central Viet Nam.

Mongolia. The project Manager has provided technical inputs to the health section of the Mongolia Social Protection Diagnostic Review under the coordination of the ILO's regional Senior Social Protection Specialist.

Challenges:

- The fact that funds were disbursed in late June 2022 meant that the project had to find additional resources in order for it to commence operation in March 2022.
- A fluctuating currency exchange rate resulted in budget reduction in US dollars, which the project is trying to offset through reprioritization and cost-sharing with other social protection projects.

Some of the anticipated priorities for 2023 include:

At the regional level:

- Extension of CONNECT membership and the nomination by Mahidol University (MU) of a new Secretariat manager.
- Lectures at Mahidol University (MU) within the Master's programme in Primary Health Care and Social Health Protection (MPHC/SHP) and mobilization of external experts; support for six student fellows on this Master's programme.
- Preparation of the next version of the Master's programme and exploring possible funding opportunities beyond the project budget.
- Regional research on access to SHP for persons with disabilities, with a focus on Lao PDR.

Lao People's Democratic Republic:

- Support for the preparation of the revision of the Social Security Law and Health Insurance Law.
- Finalization of the actuarial analysis, and support for policy dialogue on National Health Insurance (NHI) financial reforms.
- Strengthened compliance of enterprises with registration and payment contributions to the Lao Social Security Office (LSSO) and also with a finalized roadmap – as well as strengthened capacities to conduct inspection work, including enforcement.
- Support for enhancing management and administration capacities of the National Health Insurance Board (NHIB), based on their identified priorities, which are to be validated at the annual consultative meeting in February 2023.

Some lessons learned:

- The project's support is of significant relevance to Lao PDR given the crucial need to enhance sustainability of the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme. Therefore, it was important that the second phase continue those efforts initiated under the first phase.
- As evinced in the first phase of the project, the implementation of new strategic interventions and of policy changes directed towards improving the financial sustainability of NHI and administration capacities require time in Lao PDR. Hence, workplans should be constructed that give consideration to absorption capacities of administration and the leveraging of collaborations across projects.
- The project has also continued to prove its relevance at the regional level, as borne out by ongoing demand among partners and the achievements of the project, particularly under Output 4 of the Regional Outcome. The regional nature of the project provides an effective platform for exchange of knowledge and expertise across countries. The fruits of this are yielded in the form of collaboration opportunities provided by the CONNECT network on capacity-building (as with the Master's programme) and research. They are also the outcome of the direct interventions by the project that make it possible to identify common challenges and achieve positive gains on the ground.

The regional CONNECT network does not require many resources on the operational side, but it does need more significant funding of joint initiatives. Through its mandate, the ILO is well placed to provide both technical and financial resources. However, other institutions may not have the necessary frameworks in place to finance such South–South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC). Therefore, the network still depends to a great extent on the ILO, though partners are indeed active in providing technical support for the development of collaborative products.