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Person with Disabilities Celebrates the 2023 International Day for Persons with Disabilities. PHOTO CREDIT: Athit Chanthalat/USAID

## USAID OKARD

USAID Okard (meaning “Opportunity” in Lao), is a 10-year project (2017-2027) that promotes the independence and functional ability of persons with disabilities through equal access to health, rehabilitation and inclusive social services in Laos. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Leahy War Victims Fund, Victims of Torture Program, and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), 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 Lao society’s most marginalized populations. Some of the major causes of disabilities in Laos are from 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.

USAID Okard partners with the public and private sectors to support persons with disabilities in the areas of health, economic empowerment, stakeholder engagement and Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID). It uses a systems-centered approach, focusing on government ownership of disability inclusive policies and development of rehabilitation and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) for long-term sustainability. The project also applies a person-centered approach addressing the individual needs of individuals with disabilities and engaging the entire community to understand and address the barriers they face in functioning optimally and

participating fully in the community. The project was initially implemented in three provinces - Vientiane Capital, Xieng Khouang, and Savannakhet during its first phase (2017-2023), with an expansion to Sekong province (a total of four target provinces) in its second phase (2023-2027).

## **HEALTH**

USAID Okard supports the Ministry of Health to implement and monitor the National Rehabilitation Medicine Strategy to promote rehabilitation as an integrated component of healthcare services. The project provides international and domestic rehabilitation scholarships to upgrade the rehabilitation workforces and trains health and rehabilitation service providers. It also supports the equipment of rehabilitation facilities to provide appropriate services and assistive products at the local level. It also supports MHPSS through training of service providers, counselors, and peer-counseling.

## **ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

The project engages with non-profit associations, governmental bodies and the private sector to provide professional and technical skills development through internship opportunities and increase access of persons with disabilities into the labor force and provide market-based livelihood opportunities. It also creates awareness amongst employers and co-workers to take action towards inclusive employment and accessible workplaces.

## **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

USAID Okard assists the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Department of Policy for Devotees, Persons with Disabilities and Older Persons (Secretariat of the National Committee for Persons with Disabilities) to better coordinate disability inclusion initiatives among the line ministries, and organizations that support persons with disabilities, while advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, mobilizing grassroots networks, and engaging persons with disabilities in policy design and advocacy. This aligns with the Lao Law on Disability and the National Strategy and Action Plan.

## **COMMUNITY BASED INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT**

USAID Okard addresses the individual needs of persons with disabilities through a Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) model. A case manager assesses and analyzes the unmet needs of persons with disabilities and prioritizes interventions to meet these needs to improve function, increase income and wellbeing and remove barriers that hinder participation and inclusion in society on an equal basis with others. At the same time, different stakeholders in the community are encouraged to work together to identify priorities, solutions and create opportunities for inclusion – mobilizing people and resources through positive changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices, leading to a sustainable, and inclusive community.

In addition, USAID Okard implements the Gender and Inclusive Development Action Plan (GIDAP) and Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) as cross-cutting strategies. These initiatives ensure all activities adopt a gender-sensitive and socially inclusive approach to equalize outcomes for vulnerable groups within the diverse community and it aims to influence and change attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors towards disability by fostering understanding and mutual respect,

celebrating human diversity and encouraging behavior that ultimately support the inclusion of all people in the community.

## **KEY RESULTS**

Since October 2017, USAID Okard has:

- improved the lives of over 29,000 vulnerable persons, including 176 survivors of unexposed ordnance or UXO,
- trained 5,417 service providers, strengthened 832 organizations, and supported 8,788 persons to receive health and related rehabilitation services,
- supported the provision of nearly 13,000 basic assistive products for the Ministry of Health,
- and contributed to more than 190 people gaining employment.

For more information visit [www.usaid.gov/laos](http://www.usaid.gov/laos) or contact [info Laos@usaid.gov](mailto:info Laos@usaid.gov)