
**UN UNIVERSITY VOLUNTEER IN
COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIPS IN
UNAIDS LAO PDR**

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DAY IN VIENTIANE

UNAIDS

In 2019, there are estimated 12,000 people living with HIV in Lao PDR. However, only 54% of them are on regular and effective treatment. This is largely due to the misunderstanding towards HIV/AIDS and discrimination in the community that turned people living with HIV away from treatment and services.

Lao PDR has been doing fairly well in controlling its HIV epidemic. Yet with its anticipated graduation from the list of least developed countries in 2024, foreign aids into the country are gradually reducing.

During my six-month assignment, I worked under the supervision of the Country Manager, Mr. Thongdeng Silakoune, the one and only staff in UNAIDS Lao PDR. I always joked about being the Acting Country Manager when my supervisor was out of office. The UNAIDS country office in Lao PDR coordinates the national HIV/AIDS response by working closely with different stakeholders including the government, local civil society organisations and other UN agencies. We also worked with communities like female sex workers, men who have sex with men and transgendered people, who are linked to HIV/AIDS-related issues.



Highlights

Working on Strategic Information with Specialist from Regional Office

Without prior experience in statistics or data analysis, working on improving strategic information of the Lao government on HIV/AIDS with UNAIDS Data Specialist was quite a breakthrough for me. Through the three-day meeting with the government, we provided recommendation and outlined the action plan for the upcoming year. The accuracy of data has to be ensured as it is vital in evaluating the current HIV/AIDS epidemic.

DAY IN VIENTIANE

The limitation of resources has always been an obstacle in the HIV/AIDS response of Lao PDR. All of us acknowledge that the current effort is lacking yet we could not have done more with little know-how, limited human resources and reduced funding. Therefore, UNAIDS Lao PDR has been striving to mobilise more resources, especially in technical support and extra funding. Everyone wants to end the epidemic as soon as possible, however no one can do it single-handedly. I was accustomed to being result-oriented and in need of recognition, but I learned to accept that sometimes there is not much I could do in actual practice. The question is how do we carry on when the reality is full of constraint?



Drafting National Progress Report to UN Secretariat and Press Release

Working as the second staff in the office, my first duty is to support my supervisor. Being the only one to coordinate the national HIV/AIDS response, Mr Thongdeng has a hectic schedule occupied by meetings that take place inside and outside of the country. As a university student, I would not have imagined that important duties would be coming up to me, but the limited staffing in UNAIDS Lao PDR provided an enabling environment where I could take charge. Oftentimes instruction may not be sufficient as Mr Thongdeng was out of office, but things have to happen and it has to be figured out. Drafting the progress report to UN Secretariat responding to “Women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS” on behalf of Lao PDR was a great challenge, as we had less than one week to prepare and the sources of information were not ready. Writing up the press release for World AIDS Day to mobilise resources for HIV/AIDS response is another milestone in my UNV journey. Consolidating data from diverse sources was tiring yet rewarding. I am grateful for the trust Mr Thongdeng has in me to work individually.

Coordination with Civil Society Organisations on World AIDS Day

World AIDS Day on 1st December every year is an important event for HIV/AIDS community. Preparation began in November with civil society organisations and the government to align our messages and approaches. A number of these organisations are set up and operated by people living with HIV, men who have sex with men and transgendered people. I really admire the way community is engaged in the decision-making process and leads the HIV/AIDS response that are for them.

DAY IN VIENTIANE

I acted as the focal point for the social media campaign with several civil society organisations. It was my pleasure to be working with local organisations that have inspired me with exceptional insights. Language barrier was one of the biggest obstacles I faced working in Laos, nevertheless we were very patient as we sincerely wish to understand each other. There was a time when I felt lacking during the campaign, as the social media posts have to be in Lao language given the context yet I am not capable of writing so. Despite the frustration in the beginning as assistance was not available, I am glad that we were able to sort it out not long after.

In addition, I helped coordinating seminars and community fair as a series of events celebrating World AIDS Day. Working in a small-scaled office has lots of flexibility, but it also brings uncertainty and sudden changes that could turn the whole world upside down. Learning to accommodate and managing expectation were big lessons for me.



DAY IN VIENTIANE

Weekend

Waking up to the warm and comfy sun, my weekends in Vientiane usually started off with a search of café. Much different from Hong Kong, cafés in Vientiane are spacious and tranquil. You could spend your whole day there undisturbed. Locally planted coffee is another highlight. Mostly originated in Bolaven Plateau, the southern part of Laos, their coffee is usually strong with rich aroma. Each café serves their own blend of coffee with different brewing methods. Be sure to check it out if you happen to be in Vientiane, but remember to tell them “Bor Waan” (Not sweet) and “Nam Gon Noi” (Little ice) if you do not like sugar and lots of ice in your coffee like me.



Especial Café & Bar



The Cabana Café



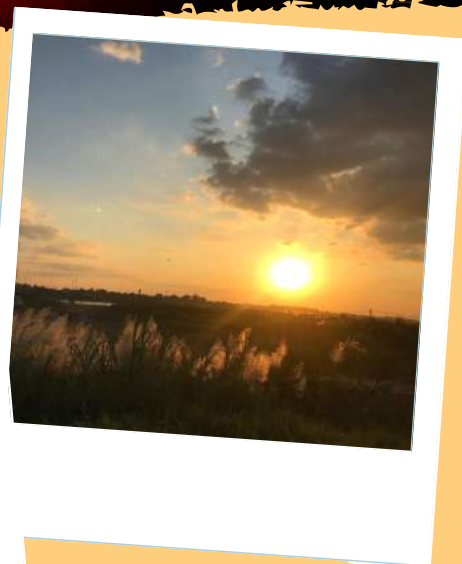
Naked Espresso Premium

After brunch, I would usually take a walk downtown. Laos is a diversified country with 49 major ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has their own distinctive cultures and traditions. I enjoyed wondering around the town looking for handicrafts every weekend. Vientiane does not have the famous brands that we are familiar to. I learned to appreciate the uniqueness in every piece of products and the story it tells. It is depressing to see that the culture that belongs to them are being commodified and stolen by reputable brands without giving them credits, while the local people are struggling to make ends meet as they create their products stitches by stitches. It changes my spending behaviour when I realised the money that I am casually spending is actually a vote to an ideology and power imbalance is not what I would vote for.



DAY IN VIENTIANE

Sunset in the Mekong riverside always perfectly concluded my day. During the dry season starting from October, the sunset is breathtaking as it gradually melts into the mother of waters that flows all the way through Laos. Gazing at the other side of the Mekong river is the territory of Thailand. The dim lights across the river probably tell a whole new story of the same ethnic group speaking the same language, yet happen to be separated by the border.



NIGHT IN VIENTIANE

The downtown of Vientiane provides a wide range of options for dinner but we the Hong Kong UNVs usually gather in our rendezvous. Café Ango is one of our favourites. Operated by a Japanese couple who are also artists in the town, Café Ango serves home-like cuisine that cannot be found elsewhere. The ambience is cosy and pleasant, providing us the perfect place for girls talk. I always looked forward to dinner time a lot as we would share and listen to each other's stress and dilemma. I sincerely appreciate their companion in this foreign country.



Cafe Ango

After dinner, we would sometimes head for a drink or two. We talked about everything, from music and colours to philosophy and personal struggles, in our secret cocktail bars. The intellectual stimulation from these like-minded yet entirely different people was only available there.



Friday nights are meant to be fabulous. We would indulge ourselves in the music and beer in the Wind West Pub. We left behind all our worries during the week as we entered the country feel pub and danced to our favourite band, although occasionally we would bump into our colleagues there...



Wind West Pub

OUTSIDE OF VIENTIANE

Laos is a hidden gem in Asia, I am grateful to be given this opportunity to explore this country in-depth.

Pakse



View of Mekong River from Wat Phou Salao.



Ethnic village on Bolaven Plateau and the view of waterfall from far.



Friendly young villagers greeting us with "Saibaidee" (Hello).



People in the town would drive a long way to the market of ethnic groups to support them.



The sanctuary of Wat Phou on the mountain.

Kong Lor Cave



A walk in the Springriver resort.



Headlight is provided as the cave is in complete darkness.



First glimpse of natural light after 7.5 metre long of darkness.



Farm and house on the roadside.



Exterior of Springriver resort.

Wang Vieng



Blue Lagoon 2.



Hot air balloon during sunset.



Kayaking in Nam Song River.



Listening to safety instruction given by local guide.



Zip-lining across the forest.

OUTSIDE OF VIENTIANE

Luang Prabang



Almsgiving ceremony at dawn.



Exterior of Pak Ou Cave.



Textile store in Whisky Village selling scarves and sinhs (Lao traditional dress).



Kwang Si Waterfall.



Bamboo bridge across Nam Ou River, only available during dry season and demolished during rainy season.



Learning to carve a wood gecko with local craftsman.



Silk scarf weaving lesson with Master Weaver in Ock Pop Tok.



Preparation of silkworms by Master.



View of Nam Ou River from Mount Phousi.



Lotus pond in Manda de Laos.

Savannakhet



Taking overnight bus to SVK, the bed is shared by two.



Lunch with local villager who was also our trekking guide.



Ing Hang Stupa during That Ing Hang Festival.



Street view in the town.



An abandoned building beside Mekong River.