

## Handout 4: Case Study: Mord's Story

TONGWAI, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 20 December 2012 – The rice is in harvest. As ears ripen, the landscape turns from green to gold. Farmers are hard at work, harvesting, threshing and pounding the grains.

At the Tongwai Health Centre more than 200 health workers identify and treat severely malnourished children. They also provide outreach to distant villages. There, they work closely with community volunteers who use mid-upper-arm circumference tape to diagnose malnutrition early. Through the screening, they diagnose 11 children suffering from acute malnutrition.

One of the most malnourished is 11-month-old Mord, who's been brought here by his aunt. His story is typical of many children under 5 in the country. After having been breastfed at the beginning of his life, he was moved on to rice. Now, rice is all he eats.

Rice is a staple food for over half of the world's population. People in this country eat more rice than in any other country in the world. Even the word 'eat' translates directly as 'eat rice'.

But while it is a rich source of energy, rice doesn't contain all of the nutrients needed for good nutrition. An over-reliance on rice has left children here among the most undernourished in the region. Thirty-one per cent of children under 5 are underweight, and 48 per cent are stunted in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Malnutrition affects both the physical and cognitive development of children.

"When we find cases of severe acute malnutrition," says one of the doctors, "we provide two weeks' worth of ready-to-use therapeutic food (a kind of peanut paste) which we receive from UNICEF. After two weeks, we do a follow-up with the patient to see whether or not the weight has improved."

Mord's aunt, Eaya, is given the two-week supply and advised how best to feed her nephew from now on.

"The doctor told me that he's malnourished and that he needs to be treated and checked again in two weeks' time," says Eaya. "From now on, in addition to the paste, I will add meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables to his food to make it rich and to make him healthy."

All of this is part of a partnership between UNICEF, the European Union and the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The program aims to treat those who are suffering from malnutrition – but also to educate communities about its causes.

In the long term, education is key. As part of the program, members of the Laos Women's Union have been trained by UNICEF partner Health Poverty Action to teach pregnant women

and mothers about proper nutrition and hygiene. Each month brings new lessons and new advice.

“Even though there was lots of food in the village, mothers didn’t know how best to feed themselves and their children. They didn’t know which foods were good for them,” says Ms. Vone, head of the local chapter of the Women’s Union.

“I went to the district headquarters for training, and now I give the women here health education. I teach them about nutrition and hygiene practices. Since I started this, I’ve noticed that there is less sickness in the village and that children are much healthier and better nourished.”

It’s this growing awareness of nutrition that the European Union, the government and UNICEF hope will change eating and feeding habits in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. And it’s this growing awareness they hope will end malnutrition.