

*Name of Volunteer: Karinda Chuntavorn*  
*Position: Resource Mobilization*  
*Agency: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS*  
*Duty Station: Laos*



You would not regret being a volunteer. When you dedicate your time in serving others, you tend to reap in more benefits than you could even begin to imagine and often look back thinking of just how much the community you helped has given you in return, impacting you in far more ways than you know.

Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries in South East Asia. In fact, many of my friends and peers hadn't even heard about it when I was preparing and even returning from my time spent there, often confusing it with Viet Nam or Cambodia. I set off with little to no expectations. After all, I was a final year marketing student with no background in public health and yet, was about to embark on this journey to work on resource mobilisation and partnership engagement with a small joint-UN agency called UNAIDS. Let me begin.

### **Accommodation**

Upon arrival at Wattay International Airport, I immediately exchanged some money (Lao Kip) and grabbed a taxi to the address that the two other HK volunteers gave me who went a couple days earlier. Having already shown me pictures of the rooms available, I was content with the accommodation option and was happy to know that our down payment for rent was on a monthly basis, so we could have easily changed locations later. We had options of either a single room with shared toilet (USD\$150) or a double room with private toilet (\$200) and stayed in a tower block style home with a very friendly Lao family that occupied one floor. There is a common room area with TV, sofa, tables and a kitchenette on each floor. The ground floor also operates as an affordable Lao style buffet during weekday lunches. The location itself was very central with many food options being about a 15-minute walk away or a 5-minute cycle, but more importantly was that it was only a 5-minute walk to the UN House. Our tower was essentially a Mini-UN as other volunteers from the Philippines also lived together with us. The house itself was on a small street that is adjacent to the main commercial road where all the major banks were and well lit up at night, although the street itself could get very dark. In terms of cleanliness, a "mae-ban" (cleaner) does your room twice a week and for everything else it will only be as clean as you make it.

If you're looking for a more private space, want to do more cooking or want to experience living in more of a traditional house, you may want to consider other options - although for the price and location, we think this is one of the best options you can get. Also worth noting is that the landlord herself does not speak much English, but her children are more than happy to help translate as her daughter speaks fluent Mandarin and one of her sons, who was also a UNV, can help with English/French. They also love to go Zumba on weekday evenings; so don't be afraid to ask them to join. A nice thing about living with a Lao family is that they may even take you to join some of their cultural festivities like That Luang Festival and Boat Racing Day.

### **Working at UNAIDS**

On my first day at the office, we were mostly going through briefings from security, UNV and the medical center. Khamkhoun, who had been our point of contact pre-arrival from UNV also introduced me to my supervisor at UNAIDS. I knew it was small, but I discovered that it was actually a one-man agency with a single room office on the third floor of the UN House. I was very fortunate in that regard because my supervisor, Thongdeng, is one of the most genuine, trusting and caring people I have ever met. Working in a small, lesser-known agency also has many benefits as we really relied on one another, got to hold more responsibilities than I expected as a university youth volunteer and had more exposure to work directly with key stakeholders. He also previously worked at UNICEF for over 21 years, so he was very knowledgeable.

As previously mentioned coming to work in the area of public health without having any prior experience in the field was daunting to start off, but my supervisor and the Lao people from the government, civil societies and INGOs that I had a chance to work with, were all very understanding and willing to help get me up to par with the ongoing situation. The first two weeks was spent reading a lot of documents in the office to familiarize myself with HIV/AIDS globally, regionally and locally. As a very service-orientated and passionate person, I found myself wanting to help out immediately and to find out what sort of organisations were implementing what activities at the grassroots level. This was something I eventually learnt to restrain as I soon learnt that it was not UNAIDS mandate to implement any programs but to instead push the global agenda, which is to the fight against HIV/AIDS based on the 90-90-90 targets and the SDGs within the enabling environment. This meant a lot of our work was advocacy based, so I had the opportunity to sit in and contribute our opinions in a lot of high-level government meetings. As a Thai who grew up in Hong Kong, it was really a unique learning experience for me to be able to pick up some Lao and could really see the journey progress from my first two hour Lao meeting in the first month to a three whole day Lao meeting with the government. I remember so distinctly that the first meeting I attended was with the Association of People Living with HIV (APL+), where I was instantly moved and appalled by the stories whereby people living with HIV (PLWHIV) were faced with so many obstacles from discrimination in their social communities, workplaces and even healthcare settings. Most importantly, I think it was so central and humbling to remind myself that none of these people were bad people; in fact they were normal people who can continue to live normal lives with the right access to medication (ARVs). We are just naturally inclined to have preconceptions and prejudices to people based on labels associated with certain illnesses. If I had not known I was meeting a group of PLWHIV, I definitely would not be able to tell they were positive on the streets.

My day-to-day tasks were mainly ad hoc duties that could vary significantly depending on the week and projects we get assigned by partnering agencies, organisations or the regional office team. The tasks written in my DOA were very broad projects without any urgent deadlines, so I had the flexibility to work on it across the span of the six months such as creating a fundraising country profile leaflet, networking with potential future organisations for partnerships and analyzing the funding gap for the Lao PDR HIV/AIDS response. Some of the biggest learning opportunities for me were when we worked with two separate international consultants for two different projects. The first was on drafting a fundraising proposal for the PEPFAR's Key Population Investment Fund (KPIF) for HIV consortiums around the world, so UNAIDS took on the lead facilitator role in pulling in various groups together to apply. I



remember how stressful but incredible it was to witness how everything came to place with everyone’s hard work and contribution given the extremely short timeframe we had. The second consultant we worked with was for providing technical assistance for the Center of HIV/AIDS/STIs (CHAS) for a rapid assessment on how to reach “unreached” Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in Lao PDR. It was a very controversial topic and the consultant was really knowledgeable who was very open to answering my questions. One of favorite reactions was when I attended a meeting with gay and transgender peer educators who said, “No offense (directed at me), but regular girls don’t look as beautiful on the streets because they don’t try as hard as a transgender women would”. This was also when I really began to understand the complexity of gender as an urgent and contemporary issue that I had not been as exposed to especially in Hong Kong.

One of my highlights was the chance to lead the development of the social media campaign for UNAIDS, World AIDS Day 2016 on December 1<sup>st</sup>. It was challenging given that we had very little resources and no local social media pages, but was a great opportunity to draw on all my lessons, observations and integrate my major in Marketing towards raising awareness for the theme of Hands Up for #HIVPrevention. It was fun to leverage all the connections I made in the first five months of my assignment to take a visual photo story project and get colleagues alike to really think about HIV and what can be done better as a community. I loved seeing their reactions, whether it is from learning a new fact through my explanations or getting embarrassed when talking about the importance of condoms. As my supervisor gave me a lot of responsibility and creative freedom to manage it, I also took the initiative to visit the National University of Laos (NUOL), where I talked to several university students on their awareness on the issue where I was surprised to learn that there really were no mandatory sex education integrated into their curriculums, which ultimately increases the vulnerability of HIV transmission among many people who engage in risky behavior, which is easily preventable. We also got to meet with some former service women and peer educators to help write human-interest stories for the campaign and fundraising leaflet.



I even mobilised another HK volunteer with me to get HIV tested as I really wanted to better understand the procedure and experience of what I was advocating for.



Though my assignment was primary externally focused, there were some opportunities to get involved internally where I was often part of the Outcome 10 Group led by UN Women and UNFPA, as well as the Informal Health Partners group with WHO. As a UNV, you are required to dedicate at least 10% of your time for UNV-specific activities so this was my main exposure to UN events. This included the International Youth Day, UN Day (themed ‘Digital UN’) and a Climate Change Flashmob – all activities to further promote volunteerism and the SDGs. It was amazing to see just how diverse the UN team can be as we had volunteers from Nicaragua, Germany, South Korea, Japan, Finland...etc. One regret is that I wish I made more effort to be a part of internal affairs as I found out that there were innovation and communications groups that I could have been a part of, but since my agency was quite isolated it did require some extra self motivation and initiative to seek out.

Lastly, it was by pure luck that our assignment was also during the time of the ASEAN conference when Lao PDR was also chair. So naturally, it was really exciting to witness all the preparation work, see how the local people went crazy for Obama’s first visit to Laos and to meet the then Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, in person.



We did not get a picture with him, but we did have a lot of keepsake and will proudly cherish the memory we were a part of.

### **Life, People and Culture**

Work life in Lao PDR is probably the opposite end of the spectrum to that of Hong Kong. Everything is much more slow-paced and inefficient, so that is something to bear in mind. It is not surprising that meetings are longer than the what you'd would find in Hong Kong, but one thing you can always look forward to are the array of fruit platters or snacks often paired with a guilty cup of sweetened tea/coffee. Lao people are generally very friendly, almost to a fault, where you can easily ask street vendors for extra soya milk or rice with almost no additional charges. They tend to be quite reserved and conservative especially if you look like a foreigner, but once you make the effort to get to know them or work with them for a while you can see a completely different side and learn how much Lao people really like to celebrate and enjoy life. It is common to find yourself falling into 'Lao time' otherwise known as the "sabai sabai (relax relax)" lifestyle, which is indicative of their laidback mannerism that often involves drinking, eating or singing karaoke with family and friends. Female staff also wears "sinh" to work, which is a long traditional skirt that we also wore occasionally.

Cost of living is comparatively much higher than their neighbors such as Thailand and Viet Nam because a lot of food and products are imported. You can find an average meal out costing about 20,000-30,000LAK (HKD\$1 = 1000LAK) so most Lao people prefer to eat at home simply because it is too expensive in relation to the average income. As a result, it is not uncommon to find both locals and expats doing a border run to Nong Khai or Udon Thani in Thailand, which is a 45 minutes - 2 hour journey to buy groceries and shopping (or simply for a fast food/Starbucks run). Some local dishes include a Laap (meat salad), Jeaow (sauce), Khao Piak Sen (chewy noodle soup), gaeng naw-mai (bamboo soup) and Lao-style pate (baguette).

There is no proper public transportation system in place and while there are some public buses, most people either drive, ride motorbikes or cycle. I usually got around on my bicycle or on foot, but since Vientiane is quite small and accessible, cycling was not much of a problem plus it was a nice change to the average HK lifestyle. Although it can be quite dangerous especially at night where most incidents reported are either theft/snatched bag or drunk driving accidents. Three of five volunteers had their phones stolen. Tuk Tuks are typically a complete rip-off and would not be recommended unless you really have to or in a larger group.

Lao PDR is a socialist and Buddhist nation, where people do have to adhere to quite a lot of customs. There are many different festivals across the year to experience some of the local traditions, or else it is also quite common to see the morning Alms ceremony (Daak Baht). Another way to experience their way of life is to attend some Lao weddings, if you are presented the opportunity.

### **Spare Time**

One of my biggest fears was not having anything to do. I did extensive research prior to the assignment where many travel blogs appeared to arrive at a common consensus that you did not need to spend more than 48 hours in the capital city of Vientiane and heck, we were about to spend the next six months in this place. Rest assured, I had never been so busy doing the things I enjoyed the most because I truly believe that your experience is as good as you choose to make it. I was really happy that the other volunteers happened to share a lot of similar interests so we did get to do a lot of activities together. We even had a bucketlist wall that



we made as a way to remind ourselves to keep trying new things. A typical weekday evening would consist of some form of exercise ([Ultimate Frisbee](#), [Running training](#), [Rugby](#), Zumba or [Gym](#)), followed by dinner downtown at our favorite Pakse wonton noodle shop or Chengdu Restaurant. And, if we're really feeling like a treat we would get Soya Milk from a shop named Happy Soya Milk or grab a delicious roadside Roti Paratha pancakes. In a nutshell, most of our days aside from work were spent either eating or exercising to burn some calories from all the snacks we consumed. The organisations linked were really welcoming, open to people of all levels and very affordable (free to 20,000LAK). We also volunteered at the COPE disability center and joined board game nights on occasion. If we were feeling lazy, a simple walk to catch the sunrise was a never a let down.

On the weekends, we try to plan monthly trips to see more of Laos and had some of the best adventures in Vang Vieng (kayaking, ziplining), Luang Prabang (where we joined a half marathon event for a children's hospital), Pakse, Salavan (Bolaven Plateau), Paksong (Mandarin orchards and [Jhai Coffee House](#) is a must visit) and 4000 Islands (majestic, serene escape). Domestic flights are quite pricey so the majority of our trips were taken on a minivan or overnight bus. A typical weekend in Vientiane for me would involve journaling at a local cafe, getting a massage or helping out on worship at Church. The food scene is definitely growing there with a variety of cuisines available – one of my favorite places is a French contemporary restaurant called [Blu](#).



In terms of events, I had a lot of fun being a volunteer for the first-ever TEDx event in Laos (TEDxLaneXangAvenue) and got to talk to many inspiring speakers including the first Lao women to win Miss Asian America, a Frenchman who founded Vientiane's only free ambulance service (Vientiane Rescue) and many more. As mentioned, the HK volunteers and I also joined the Luang Prabang Half Marathon Event (7km category) as well as the Vientiane Classic 12km race, which was really our only motivation to keep up the running training. Both were great opportunities in my mind to advocate for better public healthcare facilities and awareness. Aside from all these activities, we also had chances to bond with some of our UN colleagues where my supervisor took our HK UNV team to try frog skin for the first time and even got to try a Hungarian feast for an early Christmas party. Another UNDP colleague even got us involved to foster some kittens temporarily, after our office cat gave birth to 8 new kittens. You never know what to expect in Vientiane!

### **Lessons Learnt, Words of Advice**

The start of my journey as a United Nations volunteers was like many others – full of unknowns. Was I making the right choice? Am I really going to benefit the community that I would be placed in? How will this impact my studies? How well will I adapt to living in new surroundings?

I really appreciated being able to see the value that a youth like myself could bring in a field I thought I knew so little about, that it has even motivated me to look further into the area of health promotion. What really pushed me was being able to witness first hand where healthcare facilities, medication and testing for HIV is free but because of its taboo nature it is not freely discussed openly and that the general public are just not aware of such services that we are seeing a rapid increase in avoidable cases of HIV in the region. People also need to better understand that risky behavior does not mean that you cannot protect yourself and that being ignorant in an already passive society will only do more harm. This gap in a world that is so full of information, but not nearly processed as relatable, relevant knowledge well enough makes me want to further understand how communication can be used as a tool to really drive and change behavior change. My goal was to open and start a global dialogue and I think this UNV experiences is just the start of achieving that.

If there is any piece of advice I would give, it would be this: Get out there. Don't be afraid to try. Travel and see the sights and sounds of Laos, but most importantly stay humble. You will come back with plenty of stories to share and be more appreciative of how little we know, yet is to know.

--

**Karinda Chuntavorn**

UNV Resource Mobilisation & Partnership Engagement 2016 | UNAIDS Lao PDR | 17.02.2017

**Additional photos:**

