



Documentation and Systematic Analysis of Nutrition Strategies and Programs Supporting Family Farming

A Case Study in Lao PDR

A SERIES OF ACTIVITIES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE UN DECADE OF FAMILY FARMING

Activity 2. Documentation and systematic analysis of case studies about policies, strategies, initiatives, and programs successfully supporting family farming



Documentation and Systematic Analysis of Nutrition Strategies and Programs Supporting Family Farming in Lao PDR

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFN	Agriculture for Nutrition
AIFS	ASEAN Integrated Food Security
CSO	Civil society organization
DAEC	Department of Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
DHO	District Health Office
DOPF	Department of Planning and Finance
FNS	Farmer Nutrition School
GAFSP	Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme
GOL	Government of Laos
HGNPD	Health Governance and Nutrition Development Project
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IYCF	Infant and young child feeding
KDP	Kum Ban Development Plan
LAK	Laotian kip
LWU	Lao Women's Union
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MCH	Maternal and child health
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MIS	Management Information System
MNP	Multi-micronutrient powder
MOH	Ministry of Health
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NFS	Nutrition and Food Security
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NNC	National Nutrition Committee
NNS	National Nutrition Strategy
NNSPA	National Nutrition Strategy (2025) and Plan of Action (2016-2020)
NPCO	National Project Coordination Office
NSA	Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NTFP	Non-timber forest products
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PHO	Provincial Health Office
PPP	Public-private partnership
SBCC	Social Behaviour Communication Change
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plans
SIP	Strategic Investment Plan
SO	Strategic objective
SPA-FS	Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security
SSFSNP	Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
SUN CSA	Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States dollar
VDF	Village Development Fund
VDP	Village Development Plan
VF	Village Facilitators
VNP	Village Nutrition Plan
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WRA	Women of reproductive age

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Documentation and Systematic Analysis of Nutrition Strategies and Programs Supporting Family Farming in Lao PDR

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I. INTRODUCTION

Background

Family farmers in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) are known to be subsistence or labor-based farming families, most of whom are residing in rural areas. They are often held back by poor or limited access to arable land and water. They also experience structural food shortages, primarily relying on farm production and gathering wild foods. Consequently, this has made them more vulnerable to natural shocks, climate change, floods, and drought. They buy very little food, except rice, in times of shortages, suffering from high levels of poverty and malnutrition. However, some family farmers, especially those who grow maize, rubber, banana, cassava, coffee, and organic vegetables, are transitioning from sufficiency production to commercial production. This would help them diversify and ensure their livelihood with more alternative economic activities to earn a living.

At present, various approaches and interventions from development partners and outsiders could help solve the malnutrition problem in Lao PDR. These include cash transfers, food aid (i.e., USAID, WFP), and nutrition-sensitive agricultural programs. Promoting nutrition-sensitive farming to boost local production and consumption of nutritious food among farming families is the common focus of development partners and the government (Joost & Sinavong, 2022). *“The nutrition-sensitive agriculture/farming (NSA) is based on the proposition that improved agricultural production will contribute to solving undernutrition by increasing availability of and access to nutritious foods and, ultimately, better diet”* (Foppes & Sengyavong, 2017). However, family farmers also have the potential to reduce malnutrition in rural Lao PDR through a self-reliant approach. That is, farmers contribute to reducing malnutrition by themselves.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate and learn from existing practices and explore the possibility of supporting family farmers in reducing malnutrition of their family members, especially children, and rural Lao PDR. It also aims to contribute to achieving the vision that family farming provides food security and adequate nutrition; commercial, diverse, and safe agricultural production; green agricultural ecosystems; decent jobs; and sustainable income. Lastly, the study will also seek to understand how to strengthen multi-dimensionality in promoting social innovations that could contribute to territorial development and food systems that safeguard biodiversity, the environment, and culture.

The Agriculture for Nutrition (AFN) Project is an ongoing project implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Given the availability of data and information, the AFN Project was selected for this case study.

This study involved desk reviews of relevant literature and project documents and included fieldwork in Oudomxay, Northern Province of Lao PDR. The fieldwork was done in consultation with the Oudomxay Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) to select the villages to be visited where discussions with project beneficiaries can be carried out. From 20-24 June 2022, the research team and provincial and district staff visited Phoukheu Village in Namor District and Naleng Village in La District. During the fieldwork, the AFN Project supported and coordinated with its farmer-beneficiaries so the research team could meet with them.

II. POLICY DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Lao PDR has a single-party socialist republic government system. The President is the head of state, the Prime Minister is the head of government, and the National Assembly is the highest legislative body in Laos. The public policy cycle in Laos follows five stages, like in some other countries. These are agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, and policy monitoring and evaluations.

Agenda Setting

The malnutrition rate of young children in Lao PDR is among the highest in the Southeast Asian region (33% of children under five years old in 2020). Reducing malnutrition is a key priority of the government, as it is one of the last obstacles preventing the country from graduating from the least-developed country status. For many decades, poverty has also been a central theme of the country’s development strategy (Foppes & Sinavong, 2022). Malnutrition and poverty are most prevalent among rural farming families, especially in remote upland areas. The causes of malnutrition in Laos have four levels: A. Immediate, B. Underlying, C. Basic Institutional and Resource-based Causes, and D. Basic Social and Economic Causes. These four levels are further broken down into 12 specific causes, as listed in Figure 1.

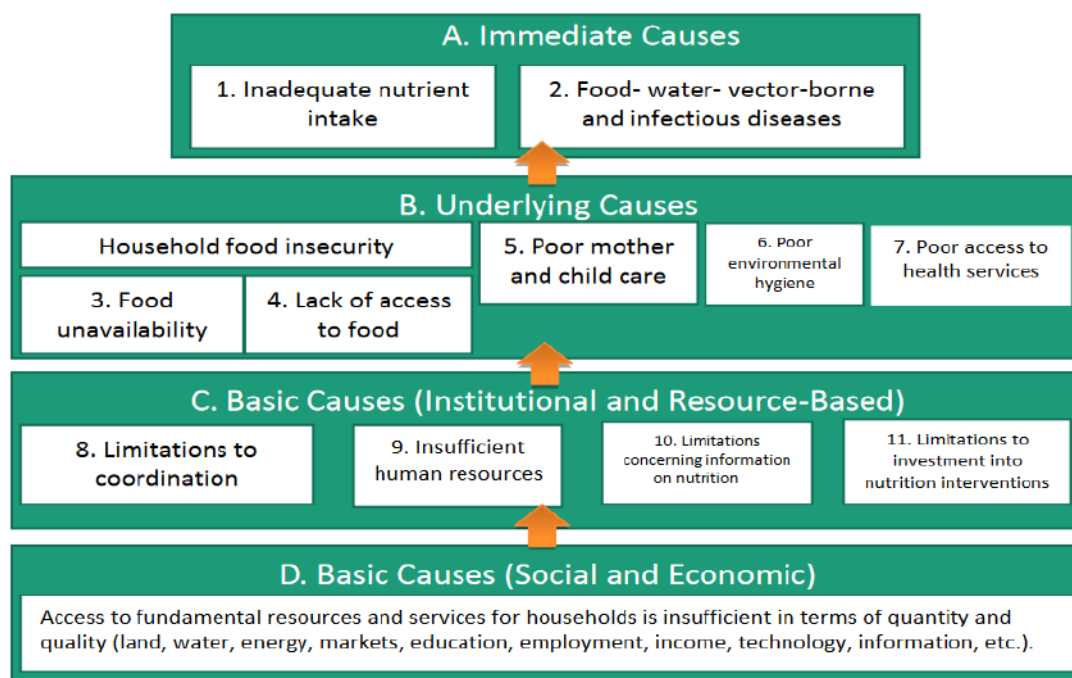


Figure 1. Causes of malnutrition in Lao PDR

Source: GoL, 2015

To address the country's malnutrition issue, the Government of Laos (GoL) created a multi-sectoral program, the National Nutrition Strategy for 2025 and the Plan of Action 2016-2020.

Formulation

The National Nutrition Committee (NNC) and its Secretariat were established in 2013 through Decree 73/PM. The Committee provides high-level support for multi-sector coordination and governance among sectors involved in nutrition at the national level. The Deputy Prime Minister chairs the NNC and includes representatives from the Ministries of Health, Education and Sports; Finance; Industry and Commerce; Planning and Investment; and Information, Culture, and Tourism, as well as the National Commission for Women and Children and civil society organizations (CSOs).

To respond to the high level of malnutrition, the GoL promulgated the first National Nutrition Policy in December 2008. The NNC Secretariat, chaired by the Ministry of Health and co-chaired by the Ministries of Agriculture and Forestry, Planning and Investment, and Education and Sports, was formed in August 2013. Consisting of 21 members at the Director and Deputy Director levels, the Secretariat is tasked with coordinating the development of the Multi-Sectoral Food and Nutrition Security Action Plan. The Centre for Nutrition has been designated to support the Secretariat and manage its daily activities. The Centre is assisted by the Department of Hygiene and Health Promotion under the Ministry of Health. In addition, establishing the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance (SUN CSA) in 2014 has created space for non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society to engage with the Government on improving nutrition.

When the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) reached its final stage, reducing malnutrition remained one of the three targets Lao PDR could not achieve. With this, the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020 (NNSPA) has been created to help achieve the new Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” and to contribute towards achieving the targets of the 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDPP) of the government of the Lao PDR.

Due to a lack of coordination mechanisms, adoption, and monitoring, plus a limited budget for implementation, it has become challenging to implement direct nutrition interventions and promote indirect nutrition interventions. The declining direct assistance for nutrition interventions mainly implemented by the health sector, especially interventions associated with the first 1,000 days of life, is critical to support, such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement. To remedy this, the NNC was created to provide overall leadership and guidance for coordinating the NNSPA for the relevant sectors at all levels to achieve the targets.

The SUN CSA Laos is a formal network of over 60 civil society organizations in Lao PDR working to support the nutrition efforts of the national government. It focuses on improving the nutrition status of all Lao people, particularly women and children, in their first 1,000 days of life. SUN CSA is a part of the Global SUN Movement, which seeks to coordinate and support civil society through skills building for convergent action and learning from best practices. SUN CSA members support the government’s NNSPA to accelerate the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (SDG1 & SDG2). Lao PDR joined the SUN Movement in 2011, forming the SUN Laos Secretariat led by the National Nutrition Centre in the Ministry of Health. This consolidated the government’s commitment to collaborative action that will accelerate progress in food and nutrition security led by the Ministry of Health. Currently, in Lao PDR, four SUN Networks are established to align efforts that support improving nutrition in the country. These networks include the SUN CSA Network, SUN Donor Network, SUN United Nations Network, and SUN Business Network.

The 22 interventions across nutrition, agriculture, and education that form the foundation of the National Nutrition Strategy were initiated in 2015, and the SUN Network has been strengthened with the establishment of the SUN CSA Network. The informal development partners group on food and nutrition security, co-chaired by the European Union and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), has been a dynamic addition to these coordination mechanisms (Bouapao et al., 2016).

At the ASEAN level, Lao PDR engaged in the development process of the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework and the Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security (SPA-FS), which provide the scope and joint pragmatic approaches for cooperation among the ASEAN Member States in addressing food security in the region.

GoL has likewise developed and implemented several policies and strategies to strengthen food and nutrition security, namely the Agricultural Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision to 2030, the National Rice Production for National Food Security Strategy, and the Development Strategy of the Crop Sector 2025 and Vision 2030.

Recognizing the complexity of the malnutrition issue in Lao PDR and the need for a multi-sectoral approach to addressing this, the GoL and the Secretariat to the NNC have joined efforts with the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Forestry, Education and Sports, Planning, and Investment, and Rural Development and Poverty Eradication sectors, to formulate the NNSPA in 2015. The NNSPA aims to reduce chronic

malnutrition from 35.6 percent to 25.0 percent by 2025 and to reduce underweight to 12.0 percent. The NNSPA's vision, mission, and overall goal are as follows:

Vision: NNSPA adopts the vision specified in the 8th five-year NSEDP (2016-2020): A prosperous country with a healthy population, free from food insecurity, nutrition, and poverty.

Mission: Establish effective overall mechanisms through policies, strategies, programs, and interventions. Arrange priorities, ensure coordination, and implement plans through multi-sectoral unity and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to achieve good nutrition and food security in Laos.

Overall Goal: Reduce malnutrition rates among women and children and improve the nutritional status of the multiethnic people so that they may be healthy and have a high quality of living and thus contribute to the preservation and development of the nation so that it is elevated from its status as a least developed country in 2020 and attains its strategic targets in 2025.

National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) is a ten-year (2015-2025) strategic implementation framework aimed at reducing maternal and child malnutrition rates while improving the nutritional status and food security of the multi-ethnic people and attaining these strategic targets for 2025. NNS sets out four strategic directions, 11 strategic objectives (SOs), and 29 interventions, of which 22 fall under Priority 1 (Figure 2, Table 1).

Strategic Direction 1: Address immediate causes

SO 1: Improve the nutrient intake

SO 2: Prevent food and waterborne infectious diseases

Strategic Direction 2: Address underlying causes

SO 3: Produce food for consumption

SO 4: Improve access to nutritious food

SO 5: Improve maternal and child health (MCH) practices

SO 6: Improve clean water [system and practices], sanitation, and environment

SO 7: Improve access to health and nutrition services

Strategic Direction 3: Address basic causes

SO 8: Improve institutions and coordination

SO 9: Develop human resources

SO 10: Increase the quantity and quality of information

SO 11: Increase investment in nutrition interventions

Strategic Direction 4: Linkages

Relevant policies and strategies (MCH and immunization, communicable and non-communicable disease control, land allocation improvement, energy and mines, water sources and the environment, climate change/natural disasters, telecommunication and transportation systems, human rights, and poverty reduction).

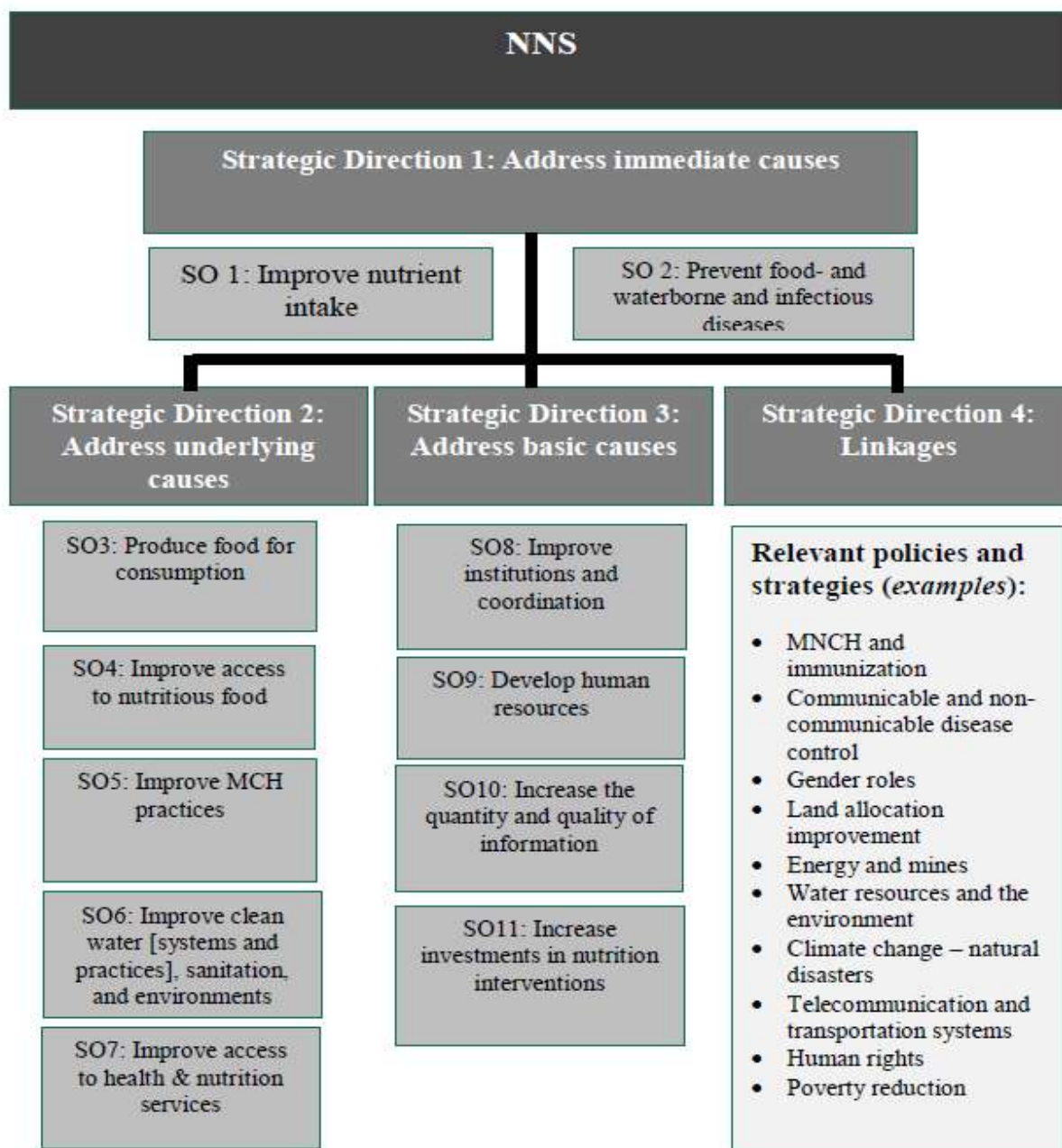


Figure 2. National Nutrition Strategy Framework

Source: GoL, 2015

Table 1. Twenty-two (22) interventions under Priority 1, by sector with budget

No.	Agriculture Sector US\$ 144,190,131	Education Sector US\$ 60,060,604	Health Sector US\$ 174,443,284	Multi-sectoral US\$ 32,442,275
1	Increase the cultivation of crops of high nutritional value and high nutrient levels.	Provide food in schools.	Provide micronutrients, vitamins, and multi-micronutrient powder (MNP). Create an overall needs plan for all products and medicines related to nutrition. Procure, deliver, and distribute. Integrated MCH services, immunizations, storage management, and inventory inspections and reporting (iron, vitamin A, deworming tablets, MNP, zinc, vitamin B1, and others).	To ensure nutrition and food security (NFS) efficiently and effectively, promote capacity building in organizations.
2	Produce and promote animal meat, which has protein for household consumption (poultry, fish, and other aquatic life). In doing so, provide the necessary materials, equipment, and infrastructure (small-scale irrigation systems, agricultural service units, etc.).	Promote vegetable gardens in schools.	Deworming	Improve multi-sectoral NFS management and coordination systems.
3	Build facilities to cater to post-harvest produce (including food dehydrators and food storage facilities) and apply technology in the processing and preservation of food so that it may remain safe and nutritious to ensure food security all year round.	Integrate nutrition into curricula.	Provide iodized salt, achieving full coverage. Promote the consumption of iodized salt and micronutrient-fortified foods. Procure, deliver, and distribute potassium iodate, basic testing equipment, and chemicals. Improve monitoring systems. Inspect quality/ Evaluate and declare the eradication of iodine deficiency by 2020.	Improve nutrition surveillance data systems, conduct scientific research, and perform monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of NNSPA implementation and adoption.
4	Promote income-generating activities, such as the cultivation of crops, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and traditional medicines and food to build a household income.	Distribute deworming tablets and iron supplements to schools.	Promote exclusive breastfeeding for children from birth until six months and promote counseling for infants and childcare.	Increase NFS support and investment.
5			Food supplements for pregnant and breastfeeding women.	
6			Food supplements for children under the age of two years.	
7			Improve food quality and safety.	
8			Control severe malnutrition, including providing therapeutic food supplements for treatment at medical treatment facilities and in communities.	
9			Bring about a change in practices related to nutrition through multi-stakeholder participation.	
10			Strengthen clean water systems in health centers, communities, households, and schools.	

Source: GoL, 2015

Adoption

The MAF has adopted the NNS into its 9th Five-Year Development Plan 2021-2025. *“The overall direction of the 9th five-year agriculture, forestry, and rural development is to mobilize all efforts to boost agricultural production, to ensure food and nutrition security, to promote quality and diversified agricultural products increasing people’s incomes to all alleviate poverty and for improved livelihoods in rural areas, forests and forest resources are protected, and to create and develop more added value and venues for the national economy.”* (MAF, 2021)

MAF’s ninth Five-Year Development Plan consists of three pillars: agriculture, forestry, rural development, and poverty eradication. To pursue these three pillars, the MAF formulates four key programs: food security assurance, commodity agriculture and forestry, forestry resource management, and rural development and poverty alleviation (Table 2).

Table 2. Pillars of the 9th Five-Year Agriculture, Forestry, and Rural Development Plan

Pillar	Agriculture	Forestry	Rural Development and Poverty Eradication
Program	Food security assurance program	Forestry resources management program	Rural development and poverty alleviation program
	Commodity agriculture and forestry program		

Source: MAF, 2021

There are four interventions to support food security assurance and commodity agriculture and forestry programs under the Agriculture Pillar.

Four Interventions in the Agriculture Pillar:

1. Increase the cultivation of crops of high nutritional value and nutrient levels.
2. Produce and promote animal meat, which has protein for household consumption (poultry, fish, and other aquatic life). In doing so, provide the necessary materials, equipment, and infrastructure (small-scale irrigation systems, agricultural service units, and so forth).
3. Build facilities to cater to post-harvest produce (including food dehydrators and food storage facilities) and apply technology in the processing and preservation of food so that it may remain safe and nutritious to ensure food security all year round.
4. Promote income-generating activities, such as the cultivation of crops, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and traditional medicines and foods to build household income.

To contribute to the four interventions in NNS mentioned above, MAF mainstreamed the malnutrition issue into its 9th Five-Year Development Plan 2021-2025, particularly under the agriculture pillar. One project that supports the four interventions identified in the NNSPA of the agriculture sector is the AFN, with support from the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP).

Implementation

The AFN project is mainly funded by the GAFSP and implemented by the MAF through its Department of Planning and Finance (DoPF). The project seeks to tackle malnutrition and rural poverty by providing nutrition education and agricultural training to improve and diversify food production for household consumption and create stronger market linkages so families can earn extra income.

The AFN project is implemented in approximately 400 villages in 12 districts of Northern provinces, including Namor and La districts of Oudomxay province (1) Mai, Boun-tai, Samphan, and Khua districts of Phongsaly province (2) Kham and Nonghet districts of Xieng Khouang province (3); and Huamuang, Xam-tai, Kuan, and Xon districts of Houaphanh province (4) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Location of AFN project sites in Lao PDR

Source: IFAD, 2021a

Figure 4 shows the pathways to improve household nutrition through the AFN project, and it shows the key sections with specific activities as described below:

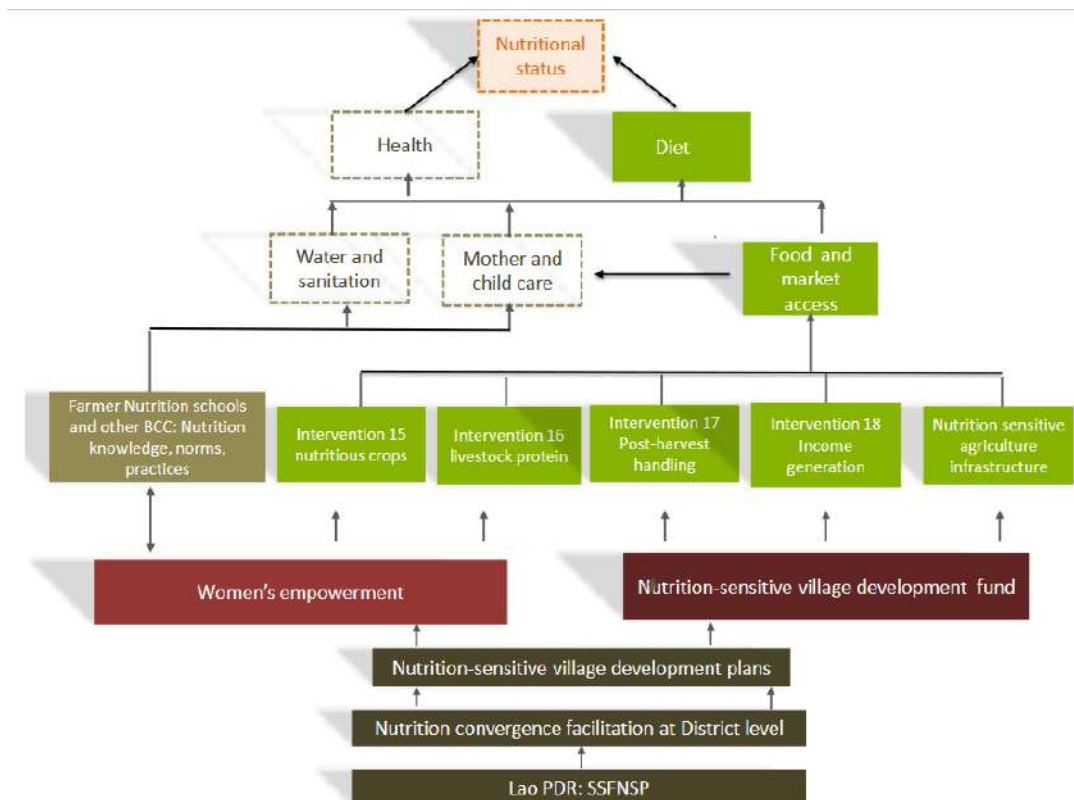


Figure 4. AFN project pathways to improve household nutrition

Source: IFAD, 2016

Lao PDR SSFSNP: Lao PDR Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project

Nutrition convergence facilitation at the district level: Planning for nutrition investment and service delivery convergence

Nutrition-sensitive village development plans: build the capacity of village stakeholders to lead the development process in their communities by investing in building communities' identification with their values, heritage, resources, and traditional knowledge, strengthening their ability to collaborate, plan, and act effectively.

Women's empowerment: promote women-led nutritional behavior change and support investment in the NNSPA agricultural interventions addressing improved nutrient access and availability at the household level.

Farmer nutrition schools (FNS): A social behavioral change communication. FNS will aim to balance agricultural production, wild food collection, and food purchase throughout all seasons of the year, thus enabling villages to increase access to and availability of food for improved dietary diversity from their village agro-biodiversity. FNS messages will also address food processing and preservation. They will link with health sessions on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), infant and young child feeding (IYCF), indoor air pollution, and maternal care and nutrition. The FNS will target women of reproductive age (WRA) and older women who influence cultural beliefs concerning food and other taboos related to pregnant women and infant children.

Household availability and utilization of nutritious food: Building off the Village Development Plan (VDP), Lao Women's Union (LWU) representatives, with District Health Office (DHO), District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), and Project gender/nutrition expert support, will facilitate an FNS-led discussion with village women on opportunities to increase, diversify and seasonally improve the household supply of nutritious food, mainly household vegetable, and small livestock production.

Nutrition-sensitive village development fund: Supporting women-led household availability and utilization of nutritious food will be one hundred percent grant financed, but beneficiaries would be required to access and use a toilet as a condition of entry. Women/women's groups will be eligible for grants of up to \$120 per household/member.

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture infrastructure: Under this activity, nutrition-sensitive agriculture production infrastructure, identified in the Kum Ban Development Plan (KDP), will be established through co-financed public infrastructure investment grants of between LAK 160 million (USD 20,000) and LAK 320 million (USD 40,000) per village, dependent on village population. Irrigation will be a particular investment focus. The rehabilitation of existing village infrastructure will be given priority over new investments.

Intervention on nutrition crops, livestock proteins, post-harvest handling, and income generation: To improve household availability and utilization of nutritious food. Under the VDP, existing household food consumption habits, food sources by season for the six food groups, and cooking and food preservation practices will be mapped.

Food and market access: To improve agriculture production and productivity, household nutrition, and climate adaptation, the Project will support farmer groups/associations to (i) establish innovative, sustainable, climate-adapted, nutrient-rich food crop, animal protein production; (ii) to sustainably manage natural resources, including community-based forest management; and (iii) through post-harvest storage, processing and marketing facilities at village level. The project will encourage farmer group investment in the most profitable commodities for their location to achieve greater market power through higher volume production. To link farmers to markets, the project will review the current contract farming program and propose adjustments to government legislation, regulations, and implementation procedures underpinning contract farming agreements to establish fairer, more equitable, and more productive agreements and programs, benefiting farmers and investors alike. This will include technical assistance in support of (i) improved contract farming policy, regulatory framework, and contractual proceedings; (ii) the preparation of training material and training of District staff and farmer groups to strengthen their contract negotiation skills; and (iii) under Activity 2 below, assistance to contract farming investors to link with Project-supported farmer groups. The Project will pilot public-private- partnership (PPP) funding to promote investments and job opportunities among rural enterprises and households, with particular attention to poor and women-headed households in the Project area.

Health: The primary role of the Ministry of Health (MoH) is to ensure that the SSFSNP is aligned with the implementation of the NNSPA. MoH will collaborate closely with the MAF for the four agricultural priority nutrition interventions. At the operational level, MoH will be responsible for the capacity building of Provincial and District staff from various sectors and other service providers and, at the district level, for implementing the FNS. MoH will also be tasked to provide regular technical backstopping (e.g., by assigning

senior Provincial staff from the Provincial Health Office (PHO) to visit target villages regularly) and lead the coordination for the SNP program. In this regard, MoH will support SSFSNP by assigning senior staff to coordinate the abovementioned tasks. The persons assigned to work on the SSFSNP must regularly report to the NNC and ensure that the SSFSNP is a learning platform for the national nutrition dialogue.

The AFN project addresses chronic malnutrition and food insecurity in Lao PDR upland areas through the support of the NNSPA (IFAD, 2021b). AFN implements seven key activities: 1) participatory village development and infrastructure planning to build better roads, irrigation, and community markets; 2) farmers' nutrition schools for pregnant women and mothers with children under two years old; 3) garden grants (USD 120) to support home gardens and livestock for household consumption; 4) establishment of agricultural production groups who receive grants to raise fish, pigs, poultry, goats or grow vegetables, fodder, cardamom and more; 5) farmer-to-farmer extension activities including demo sites, training, and peer-to-peer exchanges; 6) training of local service providers such as village facilitators and lead farmers, and 7) value chain development through co-investment with lead enterprises. These activities are implemented under four project components: Component 1: Strengthened public services, Component 2: Nutrition-sensitive agriculture planning, Component 3: Sustainable and inclusive market-driven partnership, and Component 4: Project management. The project costs US\$ 38.8 million (GAFSP: 30 million, Laos's side: 8.8 million) (Figure 5).

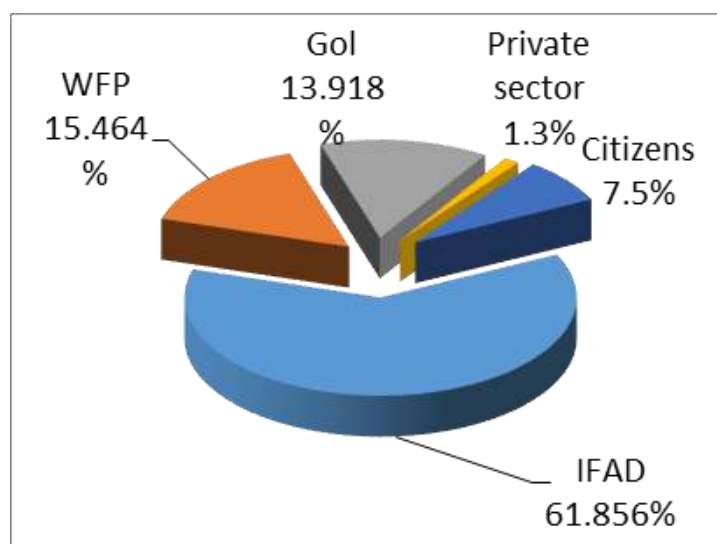


Figure 5. AFN total project cost¹
Source: Oudomxay PAFO, 2021

Component 1: Strengthened public services

This component underpins the development of government staff capacities, procedures, and technical packages to support and converge community implementation of selected National Nutrition Strategy interventions. It comprises two main activities: (1) establishment of a tiered project planning, supervision, monitoring, and knowledge management system within the MAF, and (2) strengthening the capacities of Provincial and District Agriculture and Forestry Offices, Technical Service Centres, the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) and the DAEC to develop and deliver sustainable climate-adapted and nutrition-sensitive agriculture and natural resource management technologies and training programs to monitor their impacts.

¹ 24 million managed by IFAD, 6 million managed by WFP, 5.4 million contributed by GoL, 0.5 million contributed by the private sector, 2.9 million contributed by citizens.

Component 2: Community-driven agriculture-based nutrition interventions

The World Food Programme (WFP) supports and supervises this component. It has two sub-components:

Sub-component 2.1: Planning for improved nutritional outcomes. This comprises the support for multi-sectoral convergence planning at the district level to accelerate the implementation of the NNSPA. This includes mapping different stakeholders' programs and infrastructure assets to identify development gaps at the village level. Simultaneously, the Project supports improved village development planning in terms of building the capacity of village stakeholders to lead the development process in their communities. The preparation of three-year, multi-sectoral, nutrition-sensitive VDPs will be supported by experienced and existing community planning service providers.

Sub-component 2.2: Women-led improvement in household nutrition. In all project villages, this encompasses the rollout of a social behavioral change communication program jointly supported by the Project and the World Bank-financed Health Governance and Nutrition Development Project (HGNDP). The purpose is to encourage nutrition-enhancing behavior that maximizes the benefit of the Project's co-financed investments in the four NNSPA agriculture interventions (Table 3). The project supports establishing monthly village-level "farmer nutrition schools" or FNS. The FNS aims to balance agricultural production, wild food collection, and food purchase throughout all seasons, thus enabling villages to increase food access and availability for improved dietary diversity.

FNS provides practical learning sessions aimed mainly at women to disseminate information about nutrition, menu planning, food preservation and processing, dietary diversity, and nutrition-sensitive gardening. To apply the newly acquired knowledge from FNS sessions, WFP distributes approximately USD 70 per participant cash grants that complete the learning modules. These cash grants are used for small home garden investments, cultivating nutrient-dense crops, and raising small livestock.

Component 3: Sustainable and inclusive market-driven partnership

This component includes two sub-components:

Sub-component 3.1: Profitable investment in nutrient-sensitive, climate-adapted agriculture. The Project identifies commodities with investment potential that follow the provincial and district socio-economic development plans (SEDPs). Commodity selection criteria will envisage a strong potential for the commercial production of nutritious food export and import substitution, involvement of poor rural households to undertake investments and creation of incremental jobs. A Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) will be prepared for each selected commodity. The SIP will inform the VDP process and provide a framework for inviting farmers to form production groups and for entrepreneurs to co-invest in the Project area. Simultaneously, the Project will co-finance VDP-identified community and farmer group investment in profitable and sustainable nutrient-sensitive agriculture infrastructure and production through a Village Development Fund (VDF).

Sub-component 3.2: Linking farmers to markets. With the support of MAF and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), the Project shall review the current contract farming program in the project area. The review shall propose adjustments to government legislation, regulations, and implementation procedures, underpinning contract farming agreements to establish more equitable and productive agreements benefiting farmers and investors alike. This will include technical assistance in support of an improved contract farming policy. Based on sub-components 3.1 and 3.2, the project shall pilot using PPP funding to promote investments and job opportunities among rural enterprises and households.

Table 3. Project interventions focused on the implementation of four nutrition-sensitive agricultural activities within the NNSPA priority interventions

<p>I. Increase the cultivation of crops of high nutritional value and high nutrient levels</p>	<p>II. Produce and promote animal meat, which has protein for household consumption</p>	<p>III. Build facilities to cater to post-harvest produce and food storage facilities) and apply technology in the processing and preservation of food so that it may remain safe and nutritious to ensure food security all year round</p>	<p>IV. Promote income-generating activities</p>
<p>1. Nutrition Learning Center 2. Funding for gardening 3. Investment in basic infrastructure (irrigation)</p>	<p>1. Nutrition Learning Center 2. Funding for small animal raising 3. Investment in basic infrastructure (fish pond)</p>	<p>1. Nutrition Learning Center 2. Funding for food storage/processing 3. Investment in basic infrastructure (rice bank)</p>	<p>1. Funding for Income generating activities 2. Business joint venture for products and agricultural services 3. Investment in basic infrastructure (irrigation, road)</p>

Source: AFN, 2021

Component 4: Project management

The Sam Sang decree of 2012 supports building capacity at the grassroots to facilitate integrated rural development. The Sam Sang policy is implemented in various administration areas, with various ministries and committees involved. In Laos, the administrative structure has four levels: central, provincial, district, and village. The Sam Sang (Three Builds) is the government policy with the directive process province as the strategic unit, district as the integration unit, and village as the development unit in terms of rural development and poverty reduction. In the AFN project, the Sam Sang approach is the main foundation for project implementation and management.

Dietary diversity is a big problem in Northern Laos. Many rural families consume only four of 10 major food groups, with rice often forming most meals (IFAD, 2021a). AFN is being implemented in approximately 400 villages (approximately 34,000 households) in 12 districts across four provinces: Oudomxay, Phongsaly, Xieng Khouang, and Houaphanh provinces.

In Oudomxay province, the project is implemented in 68 villages in two districts (Table 4): Namor and La. Namor district is in the north of Oudomxay province with an area of 1,921 square kilometers, covering 12.76% of the entire province. Namor district has mountains covering 87% of the total district and shares borders with other districts and provinces. In the north, it shares borders with the La district of China, covering 18.70 km. In the south, it shares a border with the Xay district of Oudomxay province, covering 78.44 km, and the Lae district of Luang Namtha province, covering 43.60 km. In the east, it shares a border with the La district of Oudomxay province, covering 26.51 km, and the Boun-tai district of Phongsaly province, covering 5.06 km. In the west, it shares a border with the Namtha district of Luang Namtha province, covering 72.64 km (Namor, 2022).

La district is located in the Northeast of Oudomxay province, with a population of 18,516 (2020). The district covers 12.47% of the entire province and has mountains covering 95% of the total district. In the north, La district shares a border with the Khoua and Boun-tai districts of Phongsaly province. In the south, it shares a border with Xay, and in the west, with Namor and Xay districts of Oudomxay province. In the east, it shares a border with the Nambak district of Luang Prabang province (Wikipedia, 2022).

Table 4. Village profile of AFN project implementation sites

Parameters	Namor District	La District
Village cluster	9	6
Total village	63	45
Poor village	59 (93.65%)	13 (28.89 %)
Family	7,325	No data
Poor family	5, 339	769
Population (female)	42,447 (20,961) in 2021	18,516 in 2020
Poor population (female)	31,538	4,278 (2,136)
Number of ethnicities	11	10
Project target village	34	34

Sources: *Namor DAFO, 2022; La DAFO, 2019*

In Oudomxay province, the AFN project has been working in two districts (Namor and La districts), covering 68 villages. From 2016-2022, the AFN project has successfully 1) established farmer nutrition schools in all 68 villages under the project; 2) trained 204 village-level facilitators and established one agricultural production group with 2,282 members, 1,148 female members; 3) organized cooking sessions using nutrient-dense foods grown and produced in all 68 villages, with 81,517 participants, 93% were women.

During fieldwork, the research team conducted three discussions with project beneficiaries in Phoukheu village of Namor district and Naleng village of La district. Discussions aimed to investigate the impact of AFN project activities on beneficiaries' livelihood, project sustainability, and critical reasons for successful farmers as well as gender issues in AFN activities, using key questions such as:

- How is your livelihood after AFN came to the village?
- How differently have you been feeding a baby before and after the project?
- Will the activities on nutrition improvement continue after the project ends?
- What are your difficulties in joining the project activities?
- What do you like about the project?
- Since joining the project, did you notice any changes in food sharing among family members: father, mother, and children during dining?
- Why do you think you succeed in the commercial production of vegetables and fish raising while others do not?

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Project M&E system was designed to track and verify the levels of achievement of project outputs, the associated outcomes, and the success in achieving the project objective and its development goal. These levels are all causally connected as set out in the project Logical Framework (Figure 6). To a large extent, the M&E system will be participatory, involving the supported communities in data collection and management. The National Project Coordination Office (NPCO) M&E officer will develop and operate the management information system (MIS) and establish and ensure the M&E function, reporting, and knowledge management.

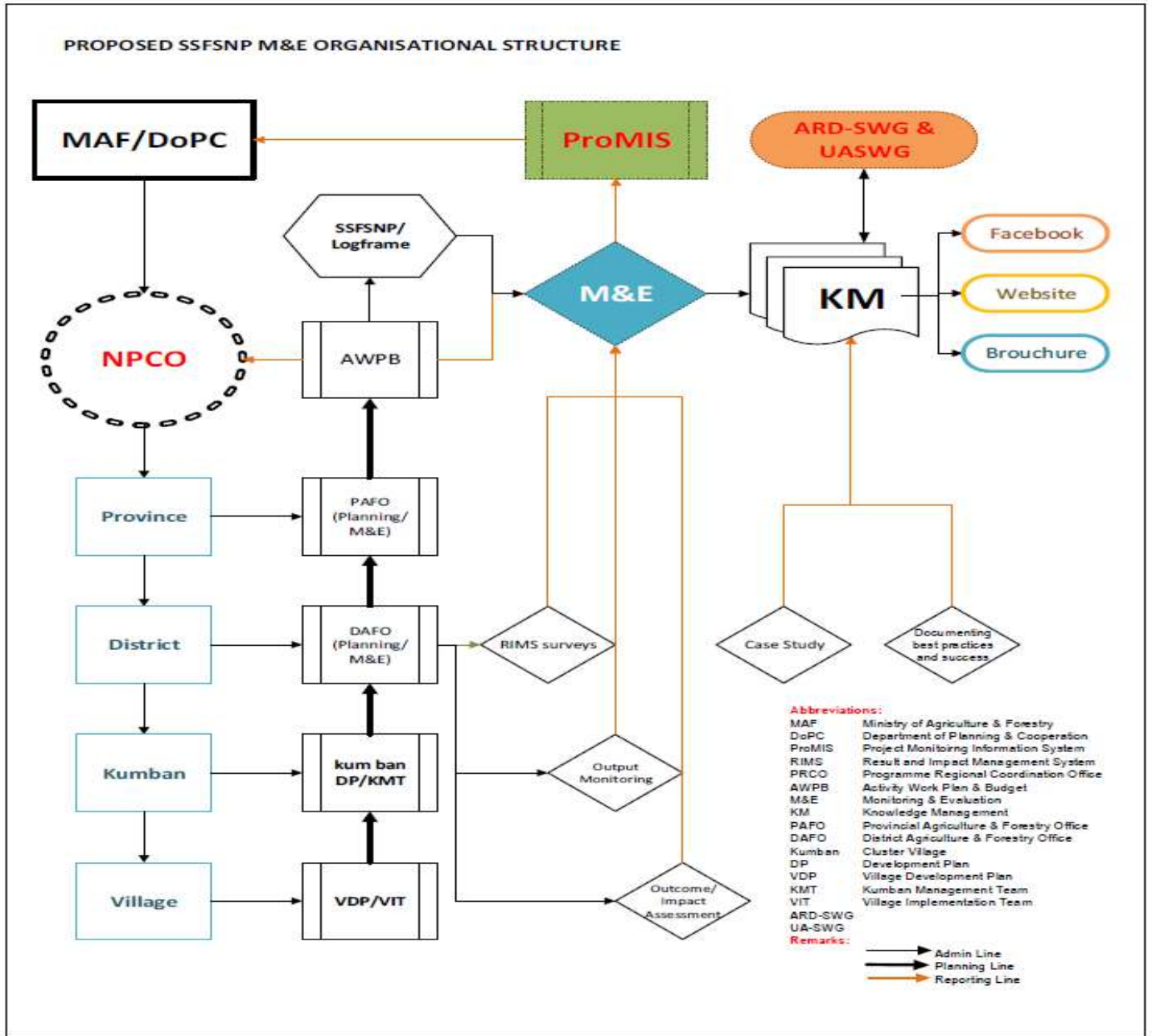


Figure 6. SSFSNP M&E/KM Organizational Structure

Source: IFAD, 2016

The photo below shows the significant findings of the 2020 household impact survey (Figure 7).

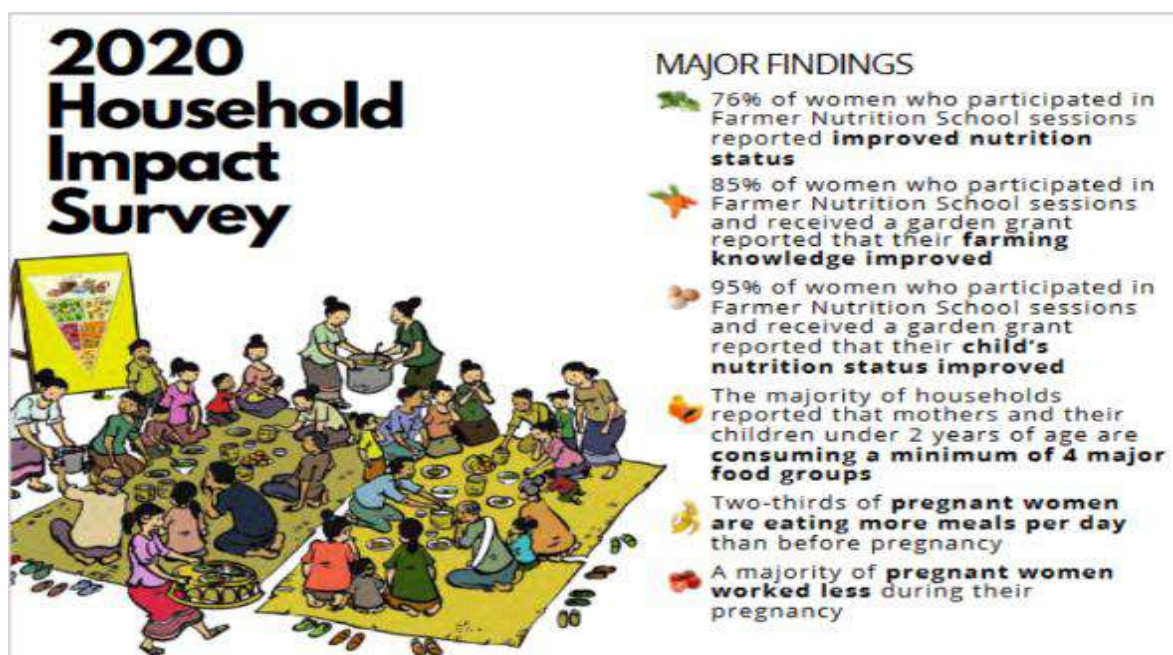


Figure 7. 2020 FNS Household Impact Survey

Source: WFP, 2020

FNS has four elements: basic nutrition information, nutrition-related health problems, planning and animal raising for improved nutrition, and household nutrition planting. In each village, two to three village facilitators were trained to lead the FNS activities and help families to apply their newly acquired knowledge. WFP is supporting the work of FNS with research activities. The study drivers of Food Choices provide information that will help mothers address their need to prepare quick, nutritious meals for their children, thus cutting the workload and ensuring healthy nutrition for families. FNS participants can apply for a garden grant of USD120 to create or enhance their home gardens or buy small livestock, which can help diversify their diets. As of March 2020, 6,843 grant applications have been approved.

Family members' roles in the four nutrition-sensitive agricultural sectors

The target groups/farmers in the AFN project are poor households/families. Family farming/members play a vital role in the four agricultural sectors' interventions: 1) Increase the cultivation of crops of high nutritional value and high nutrient levels; 2) Produce and promote animal meat, which has protein for household consumption; 3) Build facilities to cater to post-harvest produce and food storage facilities) and apply technology in the processing and preservation of food so that it may remain safe and nutritious to ensure food security all year round, and 4) Promote income-generating activities.

In the project pathways (Table 5) to improve household nutrition, husband/father/men and wife/mother/women participate and contribute to the pathways differently.

Table 5. Family farming involvement and contribution to policy implementation through AFN project activities

AFN Project pathways to improve household nutrition	Family farming/family members' involvement and contribution
<i>Nutrition convergence facilitation at the district level</i>	The project provided several technical trainings. Men and women villagers were trained as village facilitators and worked with the project team in all four AFN project components.
<i>Nutrition-sensitive village development plans</i> Build the capacity of village stakeholders to lead the development process by investing in building communities' identification with their values, heritage, resources, and traditional knowledge, strengthening their ability to collaborate, plan, and act effectively.	More than 334 Village Nutrition Plans (VNP) with community/villagers/men and women, older and young's values, heritage, resources, and traditional knowledge have been developed as a critical basis for the development of District Nutrition Planning. Village Nutrition Committee with some Village Facilitators (VFs) as members.
<i>Women's empowerment</i> Promote women-led nutritional behavior change and support investment in the NNSPA agricultural interventions addressing improved nutrient access and availability at the household level.	In this pathway, the women/mothers' role drives behavior change and household-level nutrition improvement. In some particular cultures/ethnicities, women's empowerment helps them become brave enough to discuss with their husbands and decide to volunteer to take the lead as village facilitators in project nutrition improvement activities.
<i>Farmer nutrition schools</i> A social behavioral change communication. FNS will aim to balance agricultural production, wild food collection, and food purchase throughout all seasons of the year, thus enabling villages to increase access to and availability of food for improved dietary diversity from their village agro-biodiversity.	A Village Nutrition Committee with some VFs as members has been established in the villages with clearly defined TORs and training on their roles and knowledge of nutrition-related activities. VF who are women/mothers facilitate working with target groups. FNS messages addressed food processing and preservation and linked with health sessions on WASH, IYCF, indoor air pollution, and maternal care and nutrition. The FNS targeted women, particularly WRA and older women, who influence cultural beliefs concerning food and other taboos related to pregnant women and infant children. FNS with women VF also worked on information sharing, cooking demonstrations, regular monitoring of malnourished children, etc.) were carried out with timely actions taken to tackle the issues of malnutrition of children, among others, and changes in eating patterns and habits based on changes to the food environment, etc., at village level. <i>"In the past, mom and her newborn baby were prohibited from eating chicken. Now, we know that chicken is good for the health of both"</i>
<i>Household availability and utilization of nutritious food</i>	In this pathway, building off the VDP, LWU representatives, with DHO, DAFO, and project gender/nutrition expert support, facilitate an FNS-led discussion with village women on opportunities to increase, diversify, and seasonally improve the household supply of nutritious food, mainly household vegetable and small livestock production. Women members (having children under five years old) of the FNS receive small grants (120 USD) to implement their household investment plans that address seasonal food and nutrition gaps.
<i>Nutrition-sensitive village development fund</i> Supporting women-led household availability and utilization of nutritious food will be one hundred percent grant-financed,	Women/women's groups will be eligible for grants of up to \$120 per household/member. Beneficiaries/household was required to access and use a toilet as a condition of entry. Such requirements/criteria encourage husbands to prepare household investment plans that address household seasonal food and nutrition gaps by having

AFN Project pathways to improve household nutrition	Family farming/family members' involvement and contribution
	proper toilets first so that women and household members could have basic daily life conveniences and reduce the workload on women.
<p><i>Nutrition-sensitive agriculture infrastructure</i> Under this activity, nutrition-sensitive agriculture production infrastructure, identified in the KDP, will be established through co-financed public infrastructure investment grants of between LAK 160 million (USD 20,000) and LAK 320 million (USD 40,000) per village, dependent on the village population. Irrigation will be a particular investment focus. The rehabilitation of existing village infrastructure will be given priority over new investments.</p>	<p>In this pathway, villagers/households comprising husband and wife had a chance to participate in the public infrastructure usage and maintain regulations formation. With improved agricultural infrastructure, roads, and irrigation, family farmers have more water to grow vegetables and crops even in dry seasons. As a result, households' food security and nutrition conditions are improved.</p>
<p><i>Intervention on nutrition crops, livestock proteins, post-harvest handling, and income generation</i> To improve household availability and utilization of nutritious food. Under the VDP, existing household food consumption habits, food sources by season for the six food groups, and cooking and food preservation practices were mapped.</p>	<p>Both husband and wife participate in the season for six food groups, cooking, and food preservation practices mapping. Husband and wife received various technical training on agricultural productions; they have knowledge and skills to produce food for home consumption all the year.</p>
<p><i>Food and market access</i> To improve agriculture production and productivity, household nutrition, and climate adaptation, the Project supported farmer groups/associations.</p>	<p>AFN supported (i) the establish of innovative, sustainable, climate-adapted, nutrient-rich food crop and animal protein production; (ii) sustainably manage natural resources, including community-based forest management; and (iii) through post-harvest storage, processing, and marketing facilities at village level. The project encouraged farmer group investment in the most profitable commodities for their location to achieve greater market power through higher volume production. Family members help each other in production at the household level based on market demand (example as Discussion 3, on page 20). For instance, besides selling maize, family farmers also feed their chickens with maize. The family eats chicken and sells it for extra income when needed.</p>
<p><i>Health</i> At the operational level, MoH is responsible for the capacity building of Provincial and District staff from various sectors and other service providers and, at the district level, for implementing the FNS. MoH will also be tasked to provide regular technical backstopping (e.g., by assigning senior Provincial staff from PHO to visit target villages regularly) and lead the coordination for the Social Behaviour Communication Change (SBCC) program. In this regard, MoH will support SSFSNP by assigning senior staff to coordinate the aforementioned tasks. The persons assigned to work on the SSFSNP must regularly report to the NNC and ensure that the SSFSNP is a learning platform for the national nutrition dialogue.</p>	<p>In this pathway, family members participating in AFN do not take the lead as the activities implementers. However, they are information providers to the senior staff from the district to the provincial sectors. Various aspects of livelihood improvement of husband, wife, and children are one of the key indicators for AFN to achieve. As an achievement indicator, family farmers/households must have an improved food production system. They could grow crops in all seasons and ensure nutritious food security for parents and their children.</p>

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The AFN project is a multi-sectoral project with systematic objectives, roles, and responsibilities for each sector based on the NNSPA. It was designed based on experiences and for the existing government system to implement and manage. Utilizing the Sam Sang approach and existing mechanisms in the local community, development partners work closely with local staff and villagers/farmers to carry out all project activities from the planning stage to implementation by villagers/farmers.

To date, the results of the AFN project implementation in Lao PDR are reported to have reached 204,256 people, 74% of them women. Among these, 29,791 people, more than 23,000 of them are women, have benefitted from training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture; about 30,000 households are benefiting from village infrastructure projects, with 442 households growing forage seeds and planting material on 632 hectares; and 2,297 households are growing 1,163 hectares of forage for feeding purposes. The project also has developed, disseminated, and facilitated training on nine guidelines and tools, including farmer-to-farmer guidelines.

To strengthen public services, the project has continued its technical support to 14 Technical Service Centers to establish demonstration sites through green- and net-houses, poultry- and frog-raising, and forage production. The project has trained 5,119 civil servants dedicated to sectoral planning and strategy on better practices, selected lead farmers, and village veterinary workers, including women in 400 villages, linking them with farmer groups and project beneficiaries. Finally, since 2020, Farmer Nutrition Schools have expanded to include all 400 villages under the project, carrying out learning sessions through 1,217 village facilitators for 21,593 participants, of which 95% are women. Cooking sessions are organized as part of the project to show participants and interested villagers' recipes using nutrient-dense foods grown and produced in the villages, with 19,949 people joined since the last reporting period, 94% of them are women”.

AFN project is an example of the intervention using multidimensionality supporting family farming to improve household livelihood, especially improving the nutrition status of their family members by ensuring food availability and the ability to access better knowledge for agricultural production and nutrition. The malnutrition problem is complex and may be difficult for a single sector to improve. Instead, it calls for joint efforts from all relevant sectors involved in implementing the NNSPA. However, using “single unit of family farming” to solve complex problems like malnutrition could help achieve improved malnutrition status. This case study shows that the key to success is to strengthen multi-dimensionality to reduce malnutrition and improve rural households' inclusion, resilience, and well-being.

From fieldwork, the voice from the ground said that their livelihood is changing, especially now that they have some funds from AFN to invest in poultry raising. Before AFN, parents did not know how to feed their babies properly. Now, they knew it. For example, babies under six months old are fed breast milk and other food such as rice soup and bananas. A mother expressed her feeling that the lesson she likes the most is on how to feed children. This includes making rice soup for the children twice a week, where they also put in eggs and vegetables. In addition, farmers learn a new technique in raising chickens in cages where it is easy to look after the chickens.

This study found that successful farmers participate in AFN to support the proper family household as a family farming unit where each member takes part in the production with a clear role and responsibility. Based on a discussion with an AFN beneficiary, she said it is because some households that received financial support from the AFN project did not use it on purpose. On the other hand, families/households received support from the AFN project. They are working hard, spending their financial support from the project, and becoming successful in farming for home consumption and selling.

Nevertheless, the intervention using multidimensionality supporting family farming to improve household livelihood, like AFN, needs to continue paying attention to the culture and local context as well as gender issues while implementing to ensure the success of delivering better livelihood and nutrition for family farmers. AFN's beneficiaries reported that sometimes they had difficulties when the village had a group meeting on the AFN project, but both husband and wife had to go to production fields. In such cases, they send their older people (grandparents) representing their household to attend the meeting, but they could not understand.

Regarding the sustainability of the project in terms of behavioral changes, the mothers reported that even after the AFN project ends, they will continue to practice feeding their babies properly because they have already learned the right ways to produce food (duck and chicken raising, home gardening, and biofertilizers) and feed their baby and children.


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Annex

Highlights of the Discussions with Project Beneficiaries

Discussion 1

<p>Location and participants</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phoukheu village, Namor district, Oudomxay province • PAFO, DAFO, project beneficiary of components 1 and 2
<p>Key questions during the discussion:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is your livelihood after AFN came to the village? 2. How differently have you been feeding a baby before and after the project? 3. Will the activities on nutrition improvement continue after the project ends?
<p>Highlights of the discussion</p>	<p><i>“Our livelihood is changing, especially now that we have some funds from AFN to invest in poultry raising.”</i></p> <p><i>“Before AFN, we did not know how to feed our baby properly, but now, we do. For example, for our less than six months old baby, we feed them with breast milk and other baby food such as rice soup and banana.”</i></p> <p><i>“Before, mothers did chew food and feed baby, but now they do not because they know it is not hygienic for the babies.”</i></p> <p><i>“If AFN ends, we will continue to feed our baby properly because we have already learned how to produce food (e.g., duck and chicken raising, home gardening, and biofertilizers) and feed the baby.”</i></p>

Discussion 2

Location and participants



- Naleng village, La district, Oudomxay province
- Village chief, project beneficiaries of components 1 and 2, nutrition village facilitator, PAFO, DAFO

Key questions during the discussion:

1. What are your difficulties in joining the project activities?
2. What do you like about the project?
3. Since joining the project, did you notice any changes in food sharing among family members: father, mother, and children during dining?

Highlights of the discussion

“We have difficulties when the village has a group meeting, but we must go to production fields. In such case, we send our elderly people representing our household to attend the meeting, but they could not understand.”

“Project activities or meetings take us the whole day sometimes; my husband is unhappy because I did not go to production fields and did not do some household work.”

“I like the most is the lesson on how to feed children. Especially now, I know how to make rice soup for my children. I put eggs and vegetables... I cook and feed my children twice a week.”

“We also like raising chickens in the cage. Before AFN, we did not have a cage for them. When chickens feel sick, we give them boiled water with lemon grass, and our chickens are healthy because it is easy for us to see and care for them.”

“Nothing changes about sharing our food. Nevertheless, what differs from the past is that now, after eating our food/chicken, we have to plan how to raise more chicken for household consumption. Before, we did not think like this. We eat our chicken....”

Discussion 3

Location and participants



- Phoukheu village, Namor district, Oudomxay province
- PAFO, DAFO, project beneficiary of component 3

Key questions during the discussion:

Why do you think you succeed in the commercial production of vegetables and fish raising while others do not?

Highlights of the discussion

“I think some households receiving funds from the project did not spend their money purposefully. In addition, they are not hardworking.”

“I have enough labor for my family, and we help each other based on our main duties. For example, my husband and I are in charge of gardening, raising fish, and selling, while my daughter and son-in-law are in charge of chicken raising.”