



European
Commission



We can overcome Undernutrition:

Lao PDR
Case Study

International
Cooperation and
Development

Lao PDR: Reaching a **nutrition** tipping point?

Despite Government efforts, progress on stunting has remained a challenge; but with strong backing from the European Union and others, a 'nutrition tipping point' may have been reached.

Stunting is a significant issue in the Lao People's Democratic Republic ("Lao PDR" or "Laos"), a country with an estimated population of 6.5 million, and therefore a central national development concern.

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies a stunting rate (proportion of under-fives with stunted growth) of over 40% as "very high". Laos' rate in 2012 was 44%;
- That means there are almost 400,000 stunted children under five years of age in Laos;
- It is estimated by UNICEF (2013) that, Laos loses around US\$200m (or 2.4% of GDP) annually to undernutrition.

The European Union's investments in better nutrition in Laos have been significant, amounting to over EUR 18 million between 2009–2012. The Government, along with its international partners, has been putting in place the policies and mechanisms needed to combat undernutrition—and reduce the number of stunted children. As a result, a "nutrition tipping point" may have been reached.

Effects of Stunting

Children who suffer from chronic malnutrition fail to grow to their full genetic potential, both mentally and physically. It significantly increases the likelihood of premature death, and those that survive are prone to ill health and are less able to contribute to an active and productive life. The condition is measured by stunting—shortness in height compared to others of the same age group— which manifests itself in the early life cycle of children, and the effects of which are irreversible.

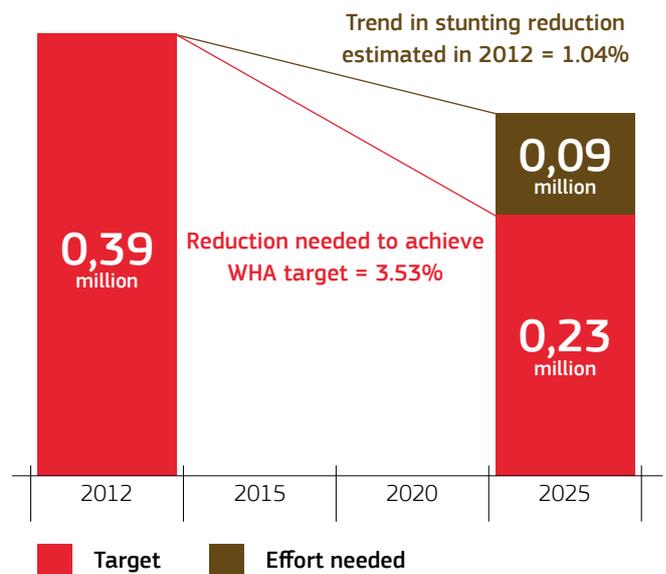
Cover page: *Stunted children fail to reach their full potential (Laos, Asia).*

Photo by: *Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).*

Undernutrition in Laos

Targeted stunting reduction (million Under 5's stunted children)

Baseline prevalence (2012): 43.6% Target prevalence (WHA 2025): 27.4%

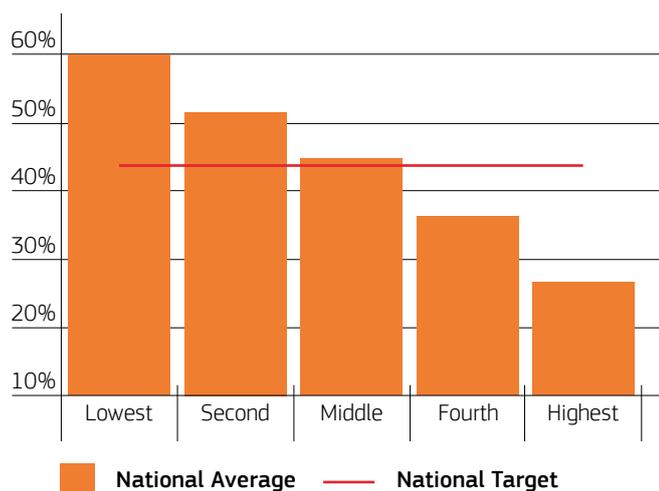


Improvements in Laos are evident but slow. The stunting rate has been reduced from 48% in 2006 to 44% in 2012, and not more than 1% a year over the last two decades. Moreover, as there are now more children in Laos due to population growth, paradoxically **the total number of stunted children has actually increased**. Stunting rates in rural populations are almost twice as high as in urban populations. **Also alarming is the fact that there's a 61% rate of stunting among the poorest fifth of the population, as compared to 20% for the wealthiest fifth¹.** Moreover, **while stunting rates have been reduced quite significantly for those who are better off, they have actually worsened by 7% for the disadvantaged².**

¹ Lao PDR MICS / DHS 2011-2012.

² DHS Surveys 1990-2011 and GNR 2014.

Distribution of stunting across wealth quintiles (2013)



Source: SUN Compendium 'Distribution of stunting across wealth groups'.

In addition to stunting there are two other key (and related) concerns associated with undernutrition in Lao PDR:

Micronutrient Deficiencies:

While up to date and reliable country level data on all micronutrient deficiencies is not available in Lao PDR, Vitamin A deficiencies are known to represent a severe public health concern³.

Vulnerability to Wasting (weight for height):

This can reach alarming levels at times of humanitarian emergency and in specific geographical areas. The prevalence of wasting is as high as 20% in Luangnamtha⁴.

Explaining Undernutrition

There are many interrelated reasons for stunting in Lao PDR, especially among the rural poor:

Making Sense of Stunting in Laos

Poverty and Economic Change

Up to 80% of the population relies on subsistence agriculture. These are increasingly under threat from investment policies such as commercial logging, rubber plantations and mining⁵. Although these policies are linked to economic growth, long-term land concessions granted to external investors are now estimated to involve more land than is used to grow rice. Women are particularly vulnerable to the infringement of their land rights.

Poor access to water and sanitation facilities

Frequent infections and diarrhoea reduce a person's capacity to absorb nutrients. Countrywide, 28% of the population has no access to clean drinking water and 37% does not have access to improved sanitation facilities. Furthermore, these national averages mask significant geographical disparities.

Natural and man-made disasters

Laos is vulnerable to droughts, floods and landslides, which can have a devastating impact on rural households. Laos is also one of the most bombed countries in the world, with unexploded ordinance making some potential agricultural land inaccessible⁶.

Slow rates of Women's Empowerment

The prevalence of child marriage is high, a factor that is strongly associated with low levels of wealth and education. 25% of teenage girls are either married or in a union, and 37% of women between 20 and 49 have given birth before the age of 18. Women, especially in poorer communities, are often poorly educated, have a heavy workload, and lack vital nutrients diet throughout pregnancy.

Challenges of Childcare

Furthermore, women's workload makes it difficult to ensure proper care for young children. Only 40% of infants are exclusively breastfed (up from 23% in 2000) and data suggests that only 52% have started receiving complementary food between 6-8 months. This means that infants are not getting the calories and nutrients they need after about 6 months⁷.

Inadequate healthcare and low levels of outreach

Trained antenatal care providers and birth attendants can play a crucial role in counseling women on adequate weight gain, rest, nutrition, and family planning practices to increase the intervals between pregnancy, which in turn leads to a reduction of low birthweight. UNICEF data suggests that almost one half of Lao women have not received any antenatal care at all, and more than half of all births are not attended by skilled health personnel. As a result, the maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the region. (357 women die for every 100,000 live births.) Child mortality is high too: 68 infants out of every 1000 live births do not reach their first birthday.

Tackling the basic and underlying causes of undernutrition in Lao PDR requires addressing stark inequities in health, education, food security and many other areas of life. And that's precisely what the Lao PDR Government and its international partners, including the EU, are gearing up to do.

³ WHO 2005 Global Data Base.

⁴ Lao PDR MICS / DHS 2011-2012. WHO classifies over 15% as 'very severe'.

⁵ 'The Future of Laos - A Bleak Landscape?' Economist 2013 October 26. Also see <http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/aq293e/aq293e.pdf>

⁶ Approximately 25 % of Laos' 10,000 plus villages are UXO contaminated. <http://www.nra.gov.la/uxoproblem.html>

⁷ Unlike many countries, Lao PDR does not routinely collect basic information on whether, once complementary feeding has started, children are receiving an adequate diet.



*If better services can improve the lives of children like these, then the intergenerational cycle of undernutrition can be broken (Laos, Asia).
Photo by: Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).*

Addressing Undernutrition: The response of the Lao PDR Government

The nutrition landscape in Laos has evolved significantly in recent years. A National Nutrition Policy has been in place since 2008 and a draft National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (2010-2015) was published in 2009. Both are now under review and the Lao PDR National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2015-2020 is expected to be launched before the end of 2015.

Gearing Up for Change: How the Lao PDR Government is tackling undernutrition

Moving Nutrition Centre Stage

For the first time, nutrition (and stunting) has been included as a prominent performance indicator in Laos' draft 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), which will run from 2016 to 2020. Nutrition is also prioritised in a healthcare strategy approved by the National Assembly.

Going multi-sector

Tackling the problem of nutrition can't be just "Health Ministry business". It requires coordination between different sectors and levels of government. That's why a National Nutrition Committee (NNC) has been set up.

Planning for Convergence

In Lao PDR, a Multi-Sectoral Food and Nutrition Security Action Plan —or "Convergence Plan"— was drafted in 2013 with EU support through UN agencies and is piloted in three provinces to improve coordination and accountability across different initiatives.

Engaging at the international level

The Government has also joined two international initiatives: the UN's Zero Hunger Challenge, and the SUN Movement (Scaling Up Nutrition). Both initiatives reinforce political commitment, enhance access to international expertise and promote strong coordination mechanisms.

The European Union is a key partner

The EU is one of the most important development partners for Lao PDR and the EU's cooperation policy has been gradually shifting away from traditional short-term project support to a longer-term approach, focusing on policy reforms, sectoral and programme based approaches, budget support, promotion of government ownership and strengthening of coordination with other donors. Nutrition is a high priority for the EU, which has also taken on the role of "donor convener" for SUN in Laos. Together with UNICEF, it plays a key role in mobilizing and coordinating other international donors, UN agencies and NGOs and leading dialogue with Government and development partners on nutrition related issues. The EU is also providing more finance. Following the EUR 18 million provided from 2009-2012, the bilateral aid programme for Laos is expected to increase substantially over the ongoing programming period (2014-2020). 'Sustainable Agriculture and Food and Nutrition Security' is one of three focal sectors for the EU, accounting for a significant part of the funds available under the Multi-Annual Indicative Programme. The main focus is on ensuring that the most vulnerable people can have access to food with all essential nutrients and that this happens all year round. In line with the Global EC Action Plan on Nutrition, the EU's current focus is on **three strategic priorities**.



Sharing childcare responsibilities means that both men and women have to be nutrition aware. Photo by: Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).

Strategic Priority 1: Enhancing mobilisation and political commitment for nutrition

Coordinating approaches across donors

The EU's main objective is to promote and scale up the Government's convergence approach in target areas. There is no magic bullet for undernutrition. In practical terms, nutrition 'convergence' refers to the strategy of ensuring that a comprehensive range of key services (health, water and sanitation, education, agriculture and social transfers) are provided at the same time to the people who need them the most, and that the impact of these on nutrition is closely monitored. Multi-sectoral committees have been set up in three provinces so far with the intention to cover more provinces from 2016. The long-term plan is to further decentralize right down to district level so that communities can directly engage in decision-making and provide feedback to the government on what is and is not working.

The key role of the EU in helping to bringing 'Convergence' to life

Although Lao PDR joined the SUN movement in 2011, the convergence approach is gathering pace in recent years as a result of the activation of the National Nutrition Committee and its Secretariat as well as an active Food and Nutrition Security Group of Development Partners (formed in 2013, meeting on a quarterly basis and co-chaired by the EU Delegation and UNICEF).

The EU Delegation has been very active as SUN donor convener. Quarterly meetings of development partners on food and nutrition security are now being co-convened together with UNICEF and an initial donor mapping exercise has recently started and will be completed for the entire country with EU financial support.

With EU co-funding, UNICEF has conducted a joint assessment of the economic impact on undernutrition in Lao PDR titled 'The Assessment on the Economic Consequences of Undernutrition in Lao PDR' (2013). A follow up Government / Development Partner Round Table Meeting led many other donors to consider increasing their level of investment in nutrition (Ireland, World Bank, Australia and USAID).



With little education, many women take on a heavy workload from an early age (Laos, Asia). Photo by: Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).

Significant funding

An EU-funded regional project (EUR 22.5 million total) known as 'MYCNSIA' (Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Initiative in Asia) has provided multi-annual support, via UNICEF, for national policy and the SUN movement including piloting of the Community Based Management of Acute Malnutrition, Support to development of National Guidelines on Infant and Young Child Feeding (2013), and technical assistance to strengthen the monitoring and enforcement of the International Code on Breast Milk Substitutes.

The project significantly reinforced the Government's commitment to improve child survival, growth and development as a political priority.

Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Initiative in Asia (MYCNSIA)

The four-year project (2011-2015) covered 5 countries in the region. With a budget of EUR 3.1 million for Lao PDR, MYCNSIA targeted 46 high risk districts in three southern provinces (Attapeu, Saravane and Sekong) where the Government had already begun to implement activities to tackle high rates of stunting and anaemia.

MYCNSIA has also helped develop and implement the multi-sectoral response to nutrition in Lao PDR, by:

1. Generating new evidence on which activities are having a positive effect (such as use of zinc with Oral Rehydration Salts to treat diarrhoea, home fortification with micro-nutrient powder, vitamin A supplementation and deworming guidelines) to inform a nutrition policy.
- At the same time MYCNSIA has generated political support for programming, including the Eight National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2016-2020 and the new National Nutrition Strategy to 2025);
2. Promoting the convergence approach into a Plan of Action (2016-2020) to address high levels of undernutrition, through reinforcing national and provincial coordination mechanisms (especially the Secretariat to the National Nutrition Committee and mechanisms to help different line departments work together to improve nutrition in the three pilot provinces); and,
3. Supporting priority interventions such as micronutrient supplementation and infant and young child feeding.

In addition MYCNSIA has funded a strategically important national exercise to collect baseline data. This will help track progress in coming years and ensure that the most vulnerable communities are not being left behind.

It is also important to recognize the work that UNICEF, with EU funding, has done at regional level through partnership with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), including recent discussions on supporting the development of a common regional policy position on overcoming undernutrition.



*The Laos Women's Union is now helping to provide nutrition education even to the more inaccessible rural regions.
Photo by: Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).*

Strategic Priority 2: Scaling up actions at country level

The EU is investing in nutrition-sensitive interventions because it is estimated that nutrition-specific interventions (such as breastfeeding, complementary feeding or provision of micronutrients) could only reduce stunting by 20%⁸. For the rest, it is necessary to address food security, health, education and other issues. In Laos the EU is investing in sectors such as water and sanitation, sustainable farming with improved nutrition through more diverse food production, and empowerment of women. International experience shows that efforts to combat undernutrition only work when local communities and their village institutions are at the centre of the action. For instance, currently the Laos Women's Union is receiving support to take on a key role in nutrition education, even in remote areas where access is difficult.

For the period 2014-2020, a significant part of the bilateral aid programme will help scale up nutrition interventions. In addition funds are also being made available to address undernutrition in the northern provinces (under the Northern Uplands Development Programme) and the central provinces (under the former EU Food Security Thematic Programme). Furthermore, a forthcoming initiative on Food Fortification offers support to Government efforts to better understand the most appropriate ways to address micronutrient deficiencies.

⁸ 2013 Lancet series on 'Maternal and Child Nutrition'.

Working towards Food Fortification

From 2016 onwards, Lao PDR will receive expertise and investments via the EU's global food fortification programme. The objective of this programme is to improve the production, accessibility and consumption of technologically viable and culturally acceptable fortified food, in a manner compliant with international standards. This will be done by working closely with, and bringing together, a range of stakeholders including: government and intergovernmental regulatory bodies, the food processing private sector operators and civil society.

In Lao PDR the programme could potentially:

1. Strengthen the regulatory framework for food fortification.
2. Develop the capacity of national producers of processed staple foods to reach the most vulnerable populations.
3. Inform government policy by generating evidence regarding the cost effectiveness of food fortification approaches in various locations and contexts.

Strategic Priority 3: Strengthening the expertise and the knowledge-base

To track policy effectiveness and ensure accountability, an innovative nutrition information platform is to be launched with EU backing and funding.

Accountability - making the difference by measuring the difference

The EU recognizes that the effectiveness of its support will need to be monitored by tracking changes in:

- ✓ Farming systems among smallholders;
- ✓ The number of different kinds of food eaten by young children, girls and mothers; and
- ✓ The number of children who are stunted.

As donor convener in Lao PDR, a priority for the EU is to support national efforts to bring about a common comprehensive framework for measuring progress as a result of the convergence of investments in nutrition. This will require the establishment of clear responsibilities for monitoring and reporting within the Government. There is currently no separate budget line for nutrition, and the development of a system to enable the tracking of nutrition related expenditures across all key sectors (not only direct nutrition interventions) will be a key step.

From 2016, Lao PDR will be able to receive EU support via the National Information Platforms for Nutrition initiative (NIPN). These platforms will link available data on investments, programme implementation and impact of multi-sectoral policies and programmes. By doing this in Lao PDR at both national and sub-national level, NIPN will build capacities to use this information to answer the Government's most pressing policy and programme relevant questions, and to help decision makers to identify and prioritise the most effective approaches.

The EU funded SMILING project (2012-2014) was an important 'North-South-South' regional collaboration to prevent Vitamin and Minerals Deficiencies in Women and Young Children in 5 countries of South-East Asia.

SMILING for Lao PDR: Sustainable Micronutrient Interventions to Control Deficiencies and Improve Nutritional Status and General Health in Asia

With a budget of EUR 2.3 million (2012-2014) the SMILING project's objective was to improve access for women and young children to micronutrients on a large scale. This was achieved by providing information about nutrition best practices and proposing effective and relevant interventions to public and private stakeholders and policy makers.

By bringing together all available information on micronutrient malnutrition in the specific Laos context and strengthening the understanding of priorities for change together with lessons learned from other countries, the project enabled decision makers to match proven interventions with needs.

Challenges ahead

Many of the prerequisites to make progress in Lao PDR are now in place. But much remains to be done. Monitoring of nutrition outcomes, as currently piloted in three provinces, will need to be scaled up. Nevertheless, there is a growing sense that Lao PDR may finally be reaching its 'nutrition tipping point'. Ensuring an effective multi-sectoral approach at national level and corresponding context-specific package of services at district level will be central to overcoming the challenge of undernutrition. The EU's shift to a longer-term focus on building good nutrition governance at all levels (central, provincial, district and community) plays a crucial role towards this goal.

*Support for home gardens can improve both diets and household incomes (Laos, Asia).
Photo by: Koen Everaert (EU Delegation).*



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