



## LAO PDR INSIGHTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS FROM THE SCALING AND AHAN PROJECTS



*A woman breastfeeds her child in Thalane village, Attapeu province.  
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### Malnutrition in Lao PDR

Good nutrition is the bedrock of child survival, health and development; yet stunting (short height for age) remains the silent scourge of many children throughout Lao PDR. While the country has made important progress in nutrition by reducing stunting from 44% in 2011 to 33% in 2017, the prevalence of stunting remains much higher than the regional average, and there has been little progress on child wasting (low weight for height). Even prior to COVID-19, three quarters of young children received an inadequate diet, while at the same time the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children, adolescents and adults is on the rise. Sharp nutrition inequalities exist, both across provinces and between different wealth groups and ethnicities, with an estimated 83% of the population unable to afford a healthy diet<sup>1</sup>. Supported by the donor community, and especially the EU, the Government has been implementing its National Nutrition Strategy (2016-2025) and recently launched its second five-year National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN) for the period 2021-2025.

### COVID-19 and Nutrition in Lao PDR

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a social and economic crisis with grave risks to the nutritional wellbeing and survival of young children, adolescents, and women as well as the population at large. In Lao PDR, the impact of the pandemic on economic growth and livelihoods is expected to have detrimental consequences on access to food, health, education, and nutrition services with life-long impacts on education, child growth and development, and overall human capital development. Recent estimates suggest that the national economy will contract significantly due to mitigation

measures related to the pandemic. Since reduced incomes have a negative impact on households' abilities to ensure adequate diets for all family members, child stunting and wasting are expected to worsen. The country's ability to meet the international target for stunting reduction, on course before the crisis hit, may be under threat.

### The SCALING<sup>2</sup> and AHAN<sup>3</sup> Projects

Both projects are implemented by NGO consortia and share the goal of improving nutrition among poor communities. Crucially, they support the Government's multi-sectoral nutrition strategy and involve working closely with local authorities through recently established coordination mechanisms as well as with communities themselves. A key focus is to improve the availability of diverse and healthy food all year round as well as ensuring that everyone, including the very young, are able to access an adequate diet. At the same time communities are supported through enhanced awareness of dietary and care practices, as well as behaviours related to water, sanitation and hygiene, which are crucial for good nutrition. The sustainability of all interventions is ensured by building on and reinforcing the capacities of existing structures and systems of service delivery. Covering 26 districts, the two projects reach 220 000 women and adolescent girls, as well as 100 000 children under five.

### Tangible Results in the Lives of Women and Children

An in-depth study of eating and feeding practices among the project communities highlighted that low income and resulting severe food insecurity are the main drivers of inadequate diets. Final evaluations are yet to be undertaken, but data

1 UNICEF 2021 *Asia and Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition*

2 Sustainable Change Achieved through Linking Improved Nutrition and Governance (SCALING), implemented by a consortium of NGOs led by Save the Children Netherlands

3 *Accelerating Healthy Agriculture and Nutrition* (AHAN), implemented by a consortium of NGOs led by World Vision International



from a Mid Term Review (MTR) of the AHAN project in 2020 has already confirmed evidence of good progress in less than two years, relative to baseline data<sup>4</sup>, despite severe flooding in 2019 followed by the onset of the pandemic. For instance, the diversity of food produced by households in their home gardens had increased by 15 percentage points. This in

turn has translated into a nine percentage point increase in improved diets for children and a six percentage point increase for women of reproductive age<sup>5</sup>. Overall, the percentage of food secure households increased from 11.7% to 14.7%<sup>6</sup>. Whereas before the intervention only 23% of families had access to improved toilets, this increased to 39%.

### Early indication from the AHAN project that tangible results are being achieved

	Baseline (%)	Mid-Term Review (%)	Change (% points)
Diversity of food production (households)	26	41	+15
Food Security (households)	12	15	+3
Dietary Diversity (children)	23	32	+9
Dietary Diversity (women)	39	45	+6
Rate open defecation (households)	74	53	-21
Access to toilet (households)	24	39	+15

### Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite having to suspend activities during lockdown, both projects managed not only to stay on track, but in addition (and following approval from the EU), to play a crucial role in supporting the Government's COVID-19 response in target districts. For example, in the SCALING project, emergency medical supplies were provided to health centres, and both projects adapted Social Behaviour Change Communication initiatives to promote vital measures such as handwashing, hygiene, social distancing and the use of face masks. The projects also helped ensure that the numerous village volunteers involved in project implementation have been able to conduct meetings and home visits in a safe manner. In 2021 the SCALING project released the results of a survey to assess the socio-economic impact of the pandemic which found that in 71% of households, income had reduced. More than 90% of households reported that food prices had increased and that the quantity and quality of food consumed had been affected. However, the AHAN MTR highlighted the important contribution that home gardens supported by the project had made to the quality of diets during the lockdown period by reducing families' dependence on local markets for fresh produce.

### Realising Human Potential

Gender equality and women's empowerment are core cross cutting issues for both projects. Based on studies undertaken jointly with the communities themselves, intensive efforts have been made to bring about a transformative approach to decision making by women and a fairer distribution of their workload. For instance, village savings and loans associations managed by and on behalf of women have been supported, with leadership training, to accelerate economic and social empowerment. Specific activities involving women and men have also been introduced to reduce the heavy workload of women so that tasks are more equitably shared within the family. These activities have included awareness sessions along with the promotion of simple but effective technologies to save labour, such as locally designed push carts and recently developed cooking stoves known as 'quick stoves' that reduce the amount of firewood to be collected and hence the time expended.

<sup>4</sup> Baseline data was collected January 2019. Mid-term Review data was collected July-October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> These results are measured using the globally recognised indicators of minimum dietary diversity for children 6-23 months (MDD) and women of reproductive age (MDD-W) respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Applying the SDG indicator known as Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES).