EU-UNICEF Partnership:
LAOS PDR

BACKGROUND

In Lao People’s Democratic Republic, it is estimated that 1 in 3 children (275,000) under five years old are stunted, resulting in low height for age and impaired brain development. This undermines children’s chances of learning and has consequences that last into adulthood. The rate of acute malnutrition is also high, with nine per cent of children under five years of age wasted (low weight for height). Despite overall downward trends at national level¹, significant disparities remain across the country’s 18 provinces, with women and children from poorer, rural areas having less access to the maternal and child health care services they need.

Lao PDR has met the Millennium Development Goals target of universal access to primary education with gender parity, with net enrolment in primary education of 98.7% (2017).

Despite this, the country still has some of the poorest education indicators in Southeast Asia. Approximately 70% of 5-year-old children are not enrolled in Early Childhood Education programmes, with those in hard-to-reach areas and from poor families being the most excluded. Only 81.9% (2017) of enrolled children complete primary education, and quality of primary education is a major concern, with students’ learning outcomes low.

¹ There has been a 25% reduction in stunting between 2011 and 2017. Lao PDR has met the National Nutrition Strategy 2020 target of 34%, recording a prevalence of 33% in 2017 (LSIS 2017). Lao Statistics Bureau, Lao Social Indicator Survey 2017

PROGRAMME APPROACH

NUTRITION

The European Union (EU) and UNICEF have a long-standing cooperation on nutrition in Laos, which began in 2011 with the Maternal and Young Child Nutrition Security Initiative in Asia. This project laid the foundations for the Partnership for Improved Nutrition (PIN) 2016-2021. The €9 million programme supports the Lao Government to improve the nutritional status of the country’s women and children, as well as strengthen nutrition governance and scale-up interventions which have proven successful at small scale.

To address the multidimensional drivers of all forms of malnutrition in Laos, a multisectoral approach that addresses both direct and indirect causes is prioritised, as is evidence-based targeting of population groups most affected by undernutrition.

The programme established the National Nutrition Committee – a coordination mechanism for nutrition-related issues consisting of different stakeholders and sectors beyond nutrition, such as health, education, agriculture and water, sanitation and hygiene. This coordination mechanism has also been replicated at sub-national level, with 18 Provincial Nutrition Committees and
At least 50 District Nutrition Committees established. The programme also established the Development Partners Network on Food and Nutrition Security, co-chaired by the EU and UNICEF. With over 50 active members, the network provides a quarterly forum for donors, UN Agencies and civil society organisations engaged in nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive interventions to coordinate and collaborate.

By bringing together all partners involved in scaling up nutrition, the network has improved communication and cooperation and helped avoid duplication in target provinces and districts. By sharing lessons learned, project progress and challenges, and issues which require collective advocacy, the network has contributed to achieving improved results for children. As such, it serves as a model for other sectors to emulate.

The EU also provided support to the implementation of the Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS), based on UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey methodology. This provided critical information on Sustainable Development Goals monitoring, Voluntary National Review Process, Laos’ Least Developed Country Indicators and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Following the success of the collaboration on PIN and LSIS, the EU and UNICEF are partnering on a complimentary initiative from 2018-2022, to establish the National Information Platform for Nutrition. This initiative aims to strengthen the national capacity to generate, analyse and interpret data to inform cross-sectoral nutrition policies in Laos, contributing to more cost-effective and evidence-based policies.

The overall goal of the Information Platform is to contribute to the global reduction of stunting in line with the World Health Organisation 2025 targets. It lays the foundation for the forthcoming EU sector budget support for nutrition, totaling approximately €40 million.

**IMPACT ON HEALTH OUTCOMES**

- The number of provinces with stunting levels above 40% reduced from 13 to 8 out of 18 provinces.
- Early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth has increased from 39% to 50% between 2011 and 2017.
- Exclusive breastfeeding has increased from 40% to 44% in the past 6 years.
- 70% of Children 6-23 months receive the recommended number of meals per day compared to 43% in 2011.
- 75% of households are using adequately iodised salt.

Below: The head of the village health centre counsels women on health-related issues, including the importance of antenatal care and adhering to best practices in nutrition and sanitation.
PROGRAMME APPROACH

EDUCATION

In education, the EU is partnering with UNICEF to provide complementary technical support within the €63 million Sector Budget Support to Education, from 2018 to 2021. This is a new way of working together in which UNICEF provides technical and policy advice to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) for system strengthening, education quality improvement, sector coordination, governance, and public finance management to ensure the most effective use of funds.

This has proven instrumental to further promote an evidence-based, sector-wide programme approach aligned to the sector plan, both at national and sub-national level. The EU-UNICEF partnership builds on the existing Education Sector Working Group, which brings together national government with development partners, co-chaired by the EU, enhancing coordination and strengthening aid effectiveness.

Priority areas for joint support are identified in line with the common strategic focus of the EU-UNICEF partnership in education (see box).

In particular, the partnership aims to work as a catalyst to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the sector plan, not only at policy and system level but also at operational level, to make real positive difference in participation and learning outcomes of children, especially those most disadvantaged.

The key focus of the support therefore is placed on sub-national level capacity building to enable more equitable resource allocation and increased operational ability at provincial and district level in evidence-based, result-oriented planning, budgeting and monitoring. This is combined with focused system enhancement, particularly education quality improvement, through improved teacher management as well as strengthening of Pedagogical Advisors. In addition, joint efforts are being undertaken to ensure public financial management reforms, which will advance improved efficiency and effectiveness in resource allocation and utilisation.

Through the partnership support to MoES, the EU and UNICEF promote institutional, organisational and individual capacity development in a holistic manner, both at national and sub-national level, to ensure sustainability and national ownership.

A paradigm shift in the sector planning and management is required, which is a significant challenge for the MoES and the Government. This includes moving from an input-based, project-based approach to a result-based sector-wide programme approach; improved quality of data and the capacity to use it; as well as enhanced sub-national capacity and their link with the national level. The ongoing EU-UNICEF partnership support holistically addresses these challenges.

One of the recent positive results was noted through the Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the education sector plan which took place in late 2018, in which EU and UNICEF played a key role. With technical and financial assistance from EU and UNICEF, the MTR strengthened evidence-based, equity-focused policy analyses and dialogue to draw policy recommendations, which highlighted the pressing need to reduce disparities in access, participation and learning outcomes. Consensus was reached between the MoES and development partners to call for targeted recourse allocation and interventions as a priority to address the root causes of persistent challenges in a most cost-effective manner.
PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The EU-UNICEF partnership in Laos goes far beyond the traditional donor-recipient contractual model. Rather than focusing on a single project or programme, the EU and UNICEF work together to identify broad areas of intervention and leverage both partners strengths and expertise to maximise results and achieve a lasting impact.

The partnership at country level is based on the outcome of the 2015 EU-UNICEF Partnership Dialogue. Six areas were jointly identified in order to enhance cooperation locally:

1. Promoting national policies, plans and systems through policy dialogue and sector reforms
2. Collaboration across the programme cycle
3. Strengthening formal and informal communication
4. Supporting and building equitable and sustainable health and education systems
5. Enhance communications and visibility
6. Generate sound evidence and lessons learned

To better structure and focus the dialogue and collaboration, regular meetings take place between the EU and UNICEF to monitor and review progress on the actions agreed under the partnership priorities. Six-monthly dialogue sessions on strategic focus areas (see box), enable monitoring against a matrix of indicators including agreed actions, progress of joint activities and forecast of planned activities.

WAY FORWARD

The EU-UNICEF partnership has created high-level political interest in national nutrition response. However, in order to maintain progress and momentum, this must filter down to provincial and district level. The future partnership could therefore provide additional added value by providing more support to ownership at national as well as provincial and local level, paying particular attention to strengthening planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation capacity at sub-national level.

In Education, all these areas will be further reinforced through the Complementary Support programme which was formalised in November 2018 for the next four years.

The EU and UNICEF will continue the bi-annual joint strategic dialogue and review meetings on the key issues in different sectors, organising joint policy dialogue with high-level policy makers. Being key players across the social sectors, including nutrition and education, the EU and UNICEF will further enhance their efforts to strengthen cross-sectoral linkages and coordination for a holistic life-cycle approach to the development of children’s well-being.

The EU and UNICEF are also in the process of reinforcing their strategic partnership with other major development partners, such as the World Bank, for improved aid effectiveness and better results for children.

BEST PRACTICES

1. Ensure regular and open communication and policy dialogue to enhance coordination and strengthen aid effectiveness.
2. Move beyond the traditional donor-recipient relationship and project mentality to identify where the two partners can add value to their shared goals.
3. Alignment to national and/or sub-national priorities and capacities, in order to ensure national ownership and promote domestic resource mobilisation as the country transitions from LDC status.

STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS FOR DIALOGUE

- Nutrition
- Education
- Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools
- Child rights
- Data and evidence generation
- Public finance management

This system of joint decision-making and monitoring and evaluation of interventions has helped ensure better results for children. In particular, the dialogue since 2016 has translated into significant scaling-up of programmes and systems strengthening in the areas of nutrition, education and child rights promotion.

For example, in the area of nutrition, the quarterly Development Partner meetings on Food Security and Nutrition, which are co-chaired by the EU and UNICEF, have proven to be instrumental in securing wider support on advocacy issues such as the Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. As a result of information sharing and specific presentations about the Code through the partners meetings, there is a better understanding of the complexities and sensitivities related to Code advocacy. The EU has subsequently included a Code indicator in the Budget Support Performance Assessment Framework (PAF). This can help increase government accountability for Code implementation, and therefore for improving the enabling environment for breastfeeding protection, promotion and support.