



Nutrition Policy Brief

The multi-sectoral approach and nutrition coordination in Lao PDR



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Lao PDR has adopted a multi-sectoral approach in addressing the high prevalence of malnutrition in the country. However, more evidence is needed to understand better how the multi-sectoral approach and nutrition coordination operate at both central and sub-national levels for optimal results.

This brief highlights findings from “Assessment of multi-sectoral approach and nutrition coordination in Lao PDR,” a report prepared in April 2022 by the Socio-Economic Policy Research Institute (SPRI), part of the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Science (LASES) in collaboration with the Development Research Institute (DRI) part of the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI).

1 What's at stake?

The **multi-sectoral coordination approach** involves engaging multiple sectors in the same localities (e.g., district-, provincial-, central-level) to address the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition.

Lao PDR has adopted a multi-sectoral approach to implementing and coordinating nutrition interventions, which is aligned with the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement that Lao PDR joined in 2011. The first National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (2010-2015) was the first multi-sectoral framework that addressed under-nutrition holistically.

The National Nutrition Strategy (2016-2025) aims to strengthen the multi-sectoral approach to nutrition and, more explicitly, defines the interventions, procedures, and institutional arrangements for achieving more comprehensive action using a multi-sectoral convergent approach. Accordingly, the implementation of nutrition interventions has been decentralised, and the Provincial Nutrition Committees (PNCs) and District Nutrition Committees (DNCs) oversee coordination across the sectors at the sub-national level.

Global evidence suggests that this combined strategy can successfully address the multi-faceted causality of malnutrition more cohesively and sustainably. This involves implementing a series of coordinated policies, strategies, and action plans.

2 Research Approach

The assessment explores the implementation of nutrition multi-sectoral approaches and coordination of the National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action 2016-2025, makes observations, and identifies challenges related to the multi-sectoral coordination approach.

The lessons presented here are based on a literature review and insights from 37 key informant interviews and focus group discussions that took place from December 2021 to February 2022. The participants in these interviews and discussions included Director Generals of selected Departments in the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), and Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES); members of Provincial and District Nutrition Committees; members of technical working groups of the line ministries; and members of the Provincial and District Nutrition Committee Secretariats (PNC-S and DNC-S).

3 Key Findings

The assessment made the following observations on the multi-sectoral approach and the implementation of nutrition interventions in Lao PDR.

- **Political framework.** Lao PDR has a well-established political framework and an extensive range of action plans, sectoral policies and strategies reflecting nutrition and food security issues. These include the National Nutrition Policy (NPP) 2008, National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) 2010-2015, NNS 2016-2025, and National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) 2016-2020, National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN) 2021-2025. There is high-level support for nutrition, and the Government of Lao PDR is committed to implementing the national policies, strategies, and plans of action. The current NPAN 2021-2025 focuses more on the multi-sectoral approach and actions to address malnutrition. In the conceptual framework, most of the underlying and basic causes of malnutrition require a more holistic and multi-sectoral contribution to address them.
- **Establishment of PNCs and DNCs.** Province and district multi-sectoral committees and secretariats have been established throughout the country. Since the establishment of PNCs and DNCs, the coordination mechanisms, roles, and responsibilities of the PNCs and PNC-Ss have improved. Meetings are being organised and held, sectoral and monitoring reports are produced, and each sector has increased nutrition awareness. However, the functioning between the established PNCs and DNCs across the country varies, and opportunities exist to strengthen them.
- **Increased knowledge of multi-sectoral coordination.** There is increased awareness regarding nutrition and the multi-sectoral approach and the need to coordinate the implementation of nutrition interventions. Focal points for each sector have been appointed and oversee coordination and collaboration with other sectors involved in implementing nutrition interventions.

Challenges identified

- **Weak coordination and implementation of nutrition actions.** the NNS and NPAN are in place. However, implementation at the community level is done at a sectoral level with limited coordination and joint planning across sectors. Nutrition is still not seen as a multi-sectoral issue where several sectors should coordinate implementation and address the multiple causalities. This leads to siloed implementation of nutrition actions. In addition, it is challenging to implement nutrition actions at the sub-national level, how these are conveyed to provincial, district and village governments, and how resources are best used for implementation.
- **Roles and responsibilities.** Responsibility for implementation has been delegated and decentralised to provincial and district levels. However, the delegation of authority from the central to the sub-national level is not always clear, leaving provincial counterparts uncertain about whether they have the designated authority to act. Therefore, there is a need for more supportive supervision between the three levels, from central to provincial and district levels, to address the various causes of malnutrition and reach the targets as indicated in NNS and NPANs.
- **Human resources.** Human resources for nutrition is a challenge which affects nutrition coordination within the different sectors. As a result, the role of nutrition coordination is often an add-on task for focal persons. In addition, frequent staff rotation is challenging, as institutional memory is lost and new staff need to get familiar with the new role and responsibility, which causes delays in implementation and coordination.
- **Financial resources.** While funding has improved in recent years, districts and provinces still face financial constraints to facilitate PNC and DNC meetings and conduct joint planning and monitoring field visits to villages in the districts.

4 Recommendations

Different causes and factors of malnutrition must be targeted and approached simultaneously to strengthen the multi-sectoral convergence approach so that sectors work closely together when implementing activities.

The assessment recommends the following actions to be taken into consideration for the implementation of the National Plan of Action for Nutrition 2021 – 2025 at the sub-national level:

- **Increase the awareness of multi-sectoral coordination.** There is still a need to raise awareness of the multi-sectoral coordination approach and why this approach is essential for implementing nutrition interventions. Nutrition and the consequences of malnutrition on national development and productivity should be an integral part of the national development agenda.
- **Strengthening the coordination and monitoring of multi-sectoral activities.** There is still a need to strengthen the multi-sector coordination approach further, as each sector tends to implement it independently. In addition, there is a need to strengthen the multi-sectoral convergence approach and target different causes and factors of malnutrition at the same time. To ensure effective multi-sectoral coordination and convergence, it is essential for line sectors to schedule coordination meetings and have joint planning and implementation of nutrition activities. It is also recommended to improve and strengthen the multi-sector reporting and have better reporting mechanisms in place for each relevant sector with precise and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place, as reporting by the line sectors often is not standardised, accurate, or complete.
- **Strengthening capacity and ownership of multi-sectoral coordination.** To enhance coordination, joint planning, and monitoring, there is a need to strengthen the capacity of government staff at all levels on multi-sectoral coordination and implementation of nutrition interventions. The collaboration between central and sub-national levels should be strengthened. The support to PNC and DNC should be enhanced through technical support and supervision from the central level with a structure that facilitates local coordination.
- **Investment in human resources.** To support the provincial and district nutrition coordination committees, it is recommended to invest in human resources for nutrition by building the capacity of staff to function. Staff turnover has been identified as a challenge for coordination and implementation of nutrition interventions and should be avoided as much as possible. Concerning this, the person leaving should prepare proper handover documents, and other staff members should support the position until the new staff is fully on board. Also, in situations where nutrition coordination facilitators are recruited, they should have good knowledge of nutrition programmes and understand the skills required and the complexity of addressing malnutrition in a multi-sectoral coordination environment.
- **Strong leadership – commitment to accountability.** Suppose the targets and goals of the National Nutrition Strategy and the new National Plan of Action for Nutrition are to be reached, government partners need strong commitment and ownership, particularly at the sub-national levels. Establishing mechanisms for accountability from the central to the village level is necessary to continue multi-sector coordination and implementation. It is key for the implementation of activities that plans, and the definition of roles and responsibilities are important and clear.

- **Budget allocation.** Although nutrition is the key priority of the Government of Lao PDR, budget allocation does not meet the requirements to implement activities in all districts. Implementation of nutrition interventions relies heavily on external support from development partners through funds from projects or grants given to the Government of Lao PDR. Implementation of the multi-sectoral coordination approach should not be so heavily reliant on external support, and resource mobilisation should be expedited and earmark funding for nutrition and used transparently.
- **Working closely with mass organisations.** For example, a way to improve the implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy and National Plan of Action for Nutrition at the community level could be to have the Lao Women's Union and Lao Front assist with the implementation of nutrition programmes at the community level together with the education, health, and agriculture sectors. Leveraging their strong community presence and networks could inure advantages. They could support community mobilisation, information dissemination and education and have meetings across the sectors to share and exchange experiences on lessons learnt, which can help implementation and monitoring going forward.







The National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) is an international initiative of the European Commission with support from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) of the UK Government and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

NIPN aims to build institutional capacities at national and sub-national levels to manage and analyse information and data from all sectors that influence nutrition, track progress, and better inform their policies and strategies.

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