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The World Bank Multi-Sectoral support for the nutrition convergence agenda in Lao PDR

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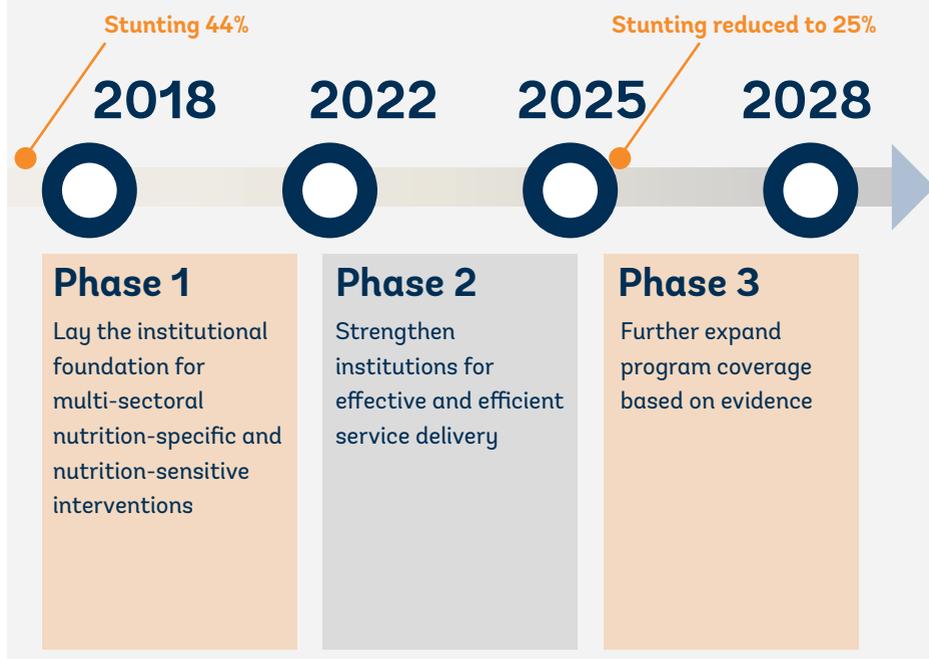
The persistence of high levels of childhood malnutrition despite a decade of economic growth and poverty reduction presents a staggering, yet avoidable, loss of human and economic potential for Lao PDR. Malnutrition raises the risk of infant and child morbidity and mortality, increases expenditure on healthcare and social safety nets, lowers the efficiency of investments in education, and decreases lifelong income-earning potential and labor force productivity, with the potential to be transmitted across generations. At the current levels of maternal and childhood malnutrition, the burden on the national economy is estimated to be at least \$200 million annually, representing about 2.4% of the country's GDP.

Given the strong links between childhood stunting, poverty and economic growth, investing in the early years, especially in stunting reduction, is a key corporate priority for the World Bank. The World Bank Group Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for Lao PDR 2017 - 2021 sets the stage for a multi-sectoral long-term strategy to support the Lao Government in addressing malnutrition, which is aligned with the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2016-2020 and the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025. The Strategy embodies a multi-sectoral convergence approach designed to accelerate the reduction of maternal and child malnutrition from the current rate of decline of 0.8% per year in stunting to 1.6% between 2016-2020 and 1.8% during 2021-2025.



The World Bank has recognized that to address childhood stunting effectively and sustainably, a series of coordinated policy and programmatic actions (via a series of projects) would be needed over the next decade. Through various sector-specific operations, the World Bank is supporting activities that seek to address the immediate, underlying, as well as the basic causes of childhood malnutrition (and overall childhood development) in a multi-phase approach (Figure 1). During the first phase of support, the CPF has identified several World Bank operations that will support the Government of Lao PDR implement key nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions identified in the National Nutrition Strategy in four of Lao PDR's northern provinces.

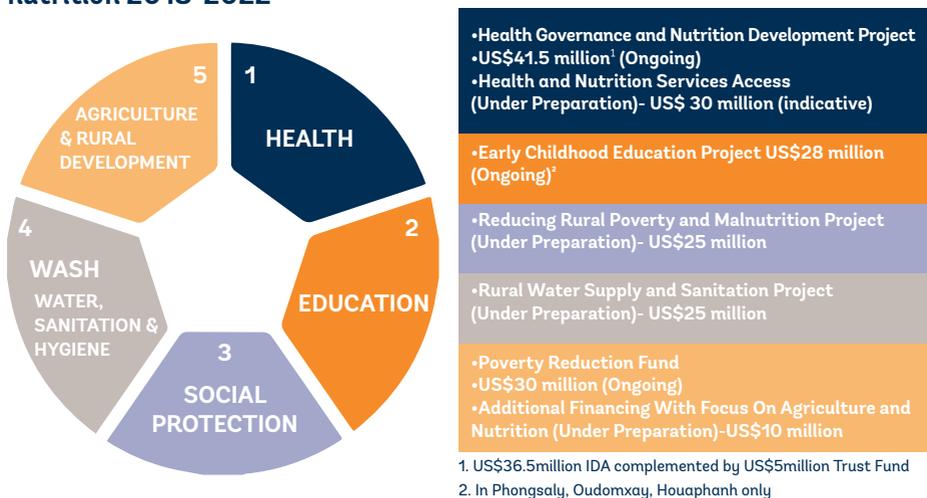
Figure 1. World Bank Lao PDR multi-phase approach to reduce stunting, 2018-2028



The World Bank is proposing to support only tried-and-tested methods, so-called “evidence-based interventions,” that have been shown to improve children’s health and nutritional wellbeing in other contexts and also to test their effectiveness during the first phase. This approach will prioritize investments in provinces with some of the highest stunting prevalence during the first phase while ensuring effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation. More specifically, the proposed multi-sectoral approach will support a package of nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions via a set of operations

that are ongoing or under preparation in the same geographic areas – 12 target districts in four northern provinces: Phongsaly, Oudomxay, Xiengkhouang and Houaphanh . Three ongoing and four pipeline operations have been identified as having potential to have a positive impact on nutrition and as being crucial to coordinate interventions to maximize reduction in stunting. These operations include: the Health Governance and Nutrition Development Project , Poverty Reduction Fund, and Early Childhood Education Project (all ongoing); the Health and Nutrition Services Access Project, Water Supply and Sanitation Project, Rural Poverty and Malnutrition Reduction Project and Poverty Reduction Fund Additional Financing Project (all under preparation). In the short term, these projects stand out as having the greatest joint potential impact on childhood stunting (focused on the first 1,000 days) within the current portfolio (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Existing IDA portfolio and areas of intervention for improved nutrition 2018-2022



Effective implementation of a multi-sectoral approach will require a strong leadership, guidance and ownership at central, provincial and district levels.

The World Bank operations are expected to be implemented by several ministries, specifically the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Ministry of Education and Sports, and Ministry of Public Works and Transport, with support from the Ministry of Planning and Investment, in the same geographic areas. Coordination, and strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks would be needed to ensure effective implementation. The World Bank is committed to working in close collaboration with the Government of Lao PDR and other development partners to ensure that best practices from around the world are beneficial for the country and implemented in a coordinated manner.