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Main Accomplishments to Date

After one year of program implementation and based on monitoring and mid-year program review, the SMP is referred to as a "WORRY-FREE" program and shows specific outcomes:

- School enrollment increased with more girls going to school
- Children stayed longer in school to read and study, high transition rate
- Improvements in nutritional status as measured by Body Mass Index (BMI)
- Household and teacher expenses reduced
- Stronger student - teacher - parent/community relationships
- Increased community participation, cooperation, ownership, creativity
- Capacity developed in transparent cash management, monitoring, nutritional assessment, program review
- Multi-sectoral linkages established particularly with key Ministries and mass organizations like Lao Women's Union and Lao Youth Union
- Local purchase of rice and other food ingredients

Lessons Learned from Implementation to Date

- Development of a concise, easily understood program framework provides a useful tool for operationalizing the SMP strategy
- Highlighting the importance of nutrition in terms of achieving short-term results like good learning outcomes and educational targets as well as the long term goal of national socio-economic development results in better appreciation of SMP as an intervention among parents and villagers
- Use of food based interventions complemented with public health interventions are important building blocks to a sustainable SMP. Implementing a comprehensive set of interventions allows for leveraging on synergies
- Political commitment and good governance at all administrative levels are very important
- Establishing sustainable food systems which take into account geographic as well as well as climatic conditions have the potential of showing sustainable increases in food production

- Home-grown solutions, designed by consulting various stakeholders especially villages are likely to be more accepted than top-down solutions
- There is no one size fits all solution for a country like Lao PDR where there is so much diversity, local context should always be taken into account
- Capacity-building is an important pillar in implementing any development intervention; however its effectiveness is dependent on well conducted needs assessment

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SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM IN LAO PDR

At a Glance

Australian AID

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP for EDUCATION

School Meal Program in Lao PDR At a Glance

Background

Studies conducted in many parts of the world have shown the importance of School Meal Programs (SMP) as an important intervention for achieving Education for All as well as national socio-economic development. School meal programs are a unique development intervention that can leverage the effects of other social, health and nutrition interventions.

The Government of Lao PDR has prioritized School Meal Program as one of the key components to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 – Universal Education, in general and improve school enrollment, transition and survival rate as well as reduce repetition and dropout rates in primary education, in particular. The program also contributes to promoting gender equality (MDG 3) by encouraging girls to go to school.

Since 2002, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) through the Inclusive Education Center of the Department of Pre-primary and Primary Education and the World Food Program have been implementing School Feeding in 30 districts in the 6 provinces of Phongsaly, Oudomxay, Luangnamtha, Saravan, Sekong and Attapeu, all of which have high rates of poverty. In 2012, with funding from the Global Partnership for Education, Ministry of Education and Sports and World Food Program handed over 66 School Feeding schools to transition to the School Meal Program, implemented under the leadership and management of the Government of Laos.

Some of the main achievements of the School Meal Program include regular school attendance, elimination of repetition and dropout rates and improved school performance. Specifically, there was an observed increase in net enrollment (close to reaching MoES standards) in the two model Northern Provinces of Oudomxay and Phongsaly.

Applying the principles of the Paris-Vientiane Declaration of Aid Effectiveness, the School Meal Program is also promoting self-reliance, program ownership and sustainability. While funds are available from donor agencies, there is increasing evidence of a sustainable strategy as the communities are mobilized and take an active part in managing the various aspects of the SMP. Community contributions come in the forms of rice, fresh foods, water, fuel, labour, materials for construction of rice storage, kitchen and dining facilities, seeds/seedlings and cash.

The Lao Model of the School Meal Program

The program provides a strong incentive to send children to school and keep them there and allows the children to focus on their studies, rather than their stomachs. Providing school meals has many benefits.

- **Proper nutrition.** Volunteer cooks mostly from the Lao Women's Union are taught about the nutritional value of different types of food and how to prepare safe and varied meals, using local ingredients, and developing special menus. The food is hot and freshly cooked. Better nourished children are likely to learn more.

- **Food security.** Vegetables and fruits are cultivated while animals are raised in the schools and communities. As such, there is a steady supply of fresh food for school meals. This also helps boost local agriculture and supports local farmers. The program focuses on nutritionally improved traditional Lao recipes.

- **Good personal hygiene.** Children are taught to wash their hands properly before and after meals and after using the toilet. School administrators are encouraged to have safe water and clean toilet facilities.

- **Community empowerment.**

Since volunteers - from cooks to mobilizers - are from the areas where the schools are located, community participation and ownership are prerequisites for success. Those who see the value of SMP are happy to lend a hand. Many villagers, for instance, have donated produce from their own vegetable gardens. Local knowledge and wisdom is also encouraged such as handicraft for making eating materials using local materials, gardening using traditional techniques etc.

Apart from this, the Program focuses on building capacity of local cooks, provincial and district technical staff on basic nutrition, food safety, personal hygiene and environmental sanitation. Intensive training of people involved is a key to the success of the program.

Funding

The Ministry of Education and Sports, of the Government of Lao PDR, implements the School Meal Program. It is funded by the Global Partnership for Education.

Main milestones

- **2012 – Modelling phase** 2 Northern Provinces: Oudomxay and Phongsaly; 66 schools – representing 50% of total schools covered by School Feeding in Khoa and La districts

- **2012-2014 – Expansion phase** and alignment with GoL policies - 9 districts in 5 poor provinces: Aed, Xamtay, Viengsay, Houamoeng, Sopbao (Huaphan province), Xaychamphone (Bolikhamxai province), Xaysanthan (Sayaboury province). Strengthening of model areas and complete coverage of schools in La and Khoua districts

- **2015 – Gradual handover** of School Feeding schools to the Ministry of Education and Sports

School Meal Program: Nutrition and Development

The School Meal Program is anchored in the belief that good nutrition leads to good health, which improves resistance to diseases and promotes good mental and physical development. As a result, children learn better and go to school regularly.

The Program does not only provide school lunch to address short-term hunger but also promotes linkages with other school interventions like access to safe water, other basic health and nutrition services and personal hygiene.

To ensure sustainability of the School Meal Program and its impact, the program has identified key factors such as integrated local food production (to ensure a steady supply of varied foods for school, food security and family income), capacity-building in various areas like nutrition (for adequate food intake), and community participation and multi - stakeholder platform.