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REPORT ON THE FIELD VISIT TO THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE WFP EXECUTIVE BOARD

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The Secretariat invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document to contact the WFP staff focal point indicated below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting.

Secretary to the Executive Board, Mr P. Ward tel.: 066513-2917
ad interim:

Should you have any questions regarding availability of documentation for the Executive Board, please contact the Conference Servicing Unit (tel.: 066513-2645).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. The Board members who participated in the field visit to Lao People's Democratic Republic wish to express their appreciation to the WFP Secretariat and thank the WFP country team in Vientiane, Luangnamtha and Oudomxay, led by Country Director Bradley Guerrant, for its professionalism, dedication and support in organizing a flawless and truly informative field visit.

INTRODUCTION

2. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a landlocked and mountainous country with 6.6 million inhabitants of 49 ethnicities who speak more than 200 languages. Its economic growth has recently been high, with an 8 percent average annual increase in the growth of its gross domestic product (GDP); GDP more than doubled in the past five years. Investment has increased significantly in mining, hydroelectric dams, rubber and bananas, with most productivity for export purposes, mainly to China, India, Thailand and Viet Nam. The related increase in incomes, however, has not been distributed equally among the population or throughout all geographical areas. One effect is a sharp rise in inflation, making food and other basic commodities more expensive, which is felt most by those who have yet to benefit from economic growth.
3. While the influx of foreign investors has had some positive effects, various officials mentioned negative effects such as long-term land-lease contracts, which pose a challenge to the tenure rights of smallholder farmers. These investments also affect the food security situation in rural communities and some projects have been detrimental to the environment, such as mining activities that led to landslides or the chemical pollution of rivers and streams.
4. The Lao economy is mainly agriculture-based, and over 80 percent of the population works in the sector. Yields in the upland areas – where over 70 percent of the population lives – are significantly lower than in lower areas of the country. While the Lao People's Democratic Republic has fertile soil, a climate suitable for agriculture, low population density and sufficient arable land, there are pockets and periods of food insecurity. Malnutrition is widespread and a pressing concern; the country has the second highest rate in the region. The lack of proper infrastructure is also a serious problem: only 17 percent of the roads are paved and many roads are inaccessible during peak rainy periods. Unexploded ordnance also presents a major obstacle to agricultural and economic development in certain areas, affecting approximately 25 percent of villages in the country.
5. The low availability and reliability of agricultural data adds a further level of complexity to the monitoring of the food security situation. In a 2011 country report¹ the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concluded that agricultural data collection and statistics were generally inadequate. In preparation for the gradual eventual hand-over of WFP activities it is imperative to emphasize the importance of access to timely and quality data in disaggregated form, which is crucial for monitoring and evaluation. There is significant space for improvement in data collection on the ground. Very strict and time-consuming national rules for recognition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a negative impact on its collection.

¹ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/ess/documents/meetings_and_workshops/APCAS23/documents_OCT10/APCAS-10-11_-Lao_Ctry_report.doc

COORDINATION MEETINGS

Regional Office

6. The Board visit began with a meeting with the regional bureau in Bangkok, where a series of presentations provided a regional overview, and detailed the logistics, climatological and emergency situations. The types of programme were reviewed within the context of the 14 countries benefitting from WFP engagement. Also highlighted were the financing difficulties facing the region, particularly in light of the general shift from protracted relief and recovery operations and emergency operations to country programmes and development operations, which has resulted in persistent underfunding.
7. Asia is the region with the largest number of malnourished children in the world, and only 6 percent of those who need assistance receive it. Undernutrition is the main concern in 13 of the 14 countries with operations, and persists in spite of strong economic growth figures in recent years in most of the countries in the region. Climate change continues to affect WFP's activities – 80 percent of natural disasters are climate-related – and one of the drivers behind emergency preparedness and resilience programmes. WFP focuses on affordable and scalable approaches, which are simpler to implement in collaboration with governments, although governments need more convincing to adopt the strategies and to provide funding for them.
8. Rome-based agency collaboration on a regional level takes place mainly with FAO at the managerial and operational levels. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) does not have an office in Bangkok and thus has no coordinating role in the region. At the country level, WFP cooperates with both FAO and IFAD. For example, following a successful pilot in Timor-Leste, FAO is exploring contributions to replicate the Zero Hunger Challenge elsewhere in the region. WFP undertakes joint baseline data collection with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Country Office

9. At the WFP country office in Vientiane, staff offered a comprehensive overview of the national situation, highlighting the food security and nutrition challenges in different provinces. WFP has presence in seven provinces and has achieved momentum on the issue of malnutrition. However, limited availability of reliable statistics renders it hard to track improvement in nutritional status. Food insecurity is most severe in the northern and southern provinces. There is a distinct difference between highlands and lowlands: 60 percent of the country is mountainous, and the lowlands have markedly higher human development indicators than the highlands.
10. The biggest challenge for the Lao People's Democratic Republic remain undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies; despite an almost nine-fold increase in GDP, national rates of stunting remain above 40 percent. WFP actively supports Government emergency preparedness and response, helping the relevant national institutions build their capacity for facing the various natural disasters that affect the country.
11. Cultural and linguistic diversity pose a challenge to programme implementation and delivery of services because there is no widely spoken common language. In remote villages translation from English to Lao to the local language(s) contributes to misunderstandings. In a discussion with the United Nations Resident Coordinator it became apparent that the Government faces challenges to effective tax collection. This contributes to its dependence on foreign aid for the implementation of development activities.

12. Additional information on the operating environment and programme objectives for WFP can be found in the “WFP Lao PDR Country Strategy 2011–2015”.²

Ministry Visits

13. During the first day and a half in Vientiane, meetings with government officials were held, which highlighted the importance of WFP as a development partner in the goal of achieving food security and good nutrition for the entire population. The persistent difficulties arising from the geography of the country, particularly the remoteness of small villages in mountainous areas, were mentioned in several of the seven ministries visited, along with the country’s lack of experience in key areas such as education and emergency preparedness and response. Most interlocutors seemed confident about the expected results of federal government-led development plans, including the plan to achieve middle-income country status. It remains difficult to assess, however, the sense of urgency that the Government attributes to eradicating malnutrition throughout the country and whether it has sufficient capacities for implementation.
14. The Government’s policy for addressing the small size and significant distance between mountain villages is to resettle communities from the uplands to village clusters, accompanied with construction of health, sanitation and educational services. This practice faces challenges, as many villagers tend to return to uplands to live or work their fields because of the insufficient availability of farmland in lowland areas.

SUB-OFFICES

15. The delegation visited two northern regions (Luangnamtha and Oudomxay), with sub-offices in both provincial capitals run by national staff; there is a third sub-office in the southern province of Sekong. The human resources environment for both the national office and the sub-offices is challenging. National staff salaries are significantly lower than in the private sector and even in NGOs, which makes it difficult to retain talent, especially staff with language skills. WFP and other United Nations agencies are considering means for improving compensation packages.

² Available (in English only) at http://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/WFP%20Lao%20PDR%20Country%20Strategy_ENG.pdf

DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

16. Other United Nations agencies present in the Lao People's Democratic Republic include, among others, FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). There seems to be mutual recognition that cooperation with FAO, which is co-chair of the food security cluster, could be further enhanced given the alignment of objectives, and the new Country Director brings energy to the relationship. Both agencies have committed themselves to producing joint publications. There is good collaboration and communication with IFAD; the delegation visited a feeder road construction project and a rice paddy expansion project undertaken with joint WFP–IFAD funding. There is coordination on several important projects with UNICEF. Finally, the United Nations Resident Coordinator acknowledged the exemplary role United Nations agencies could play for local authorities by “Delivering as One”.

PROVINCIAL VISIT THEMES

Nutrition

17. WFP's nutrition strategy in the country has three pillars:
- i) food support to pregnant and lactating women and children;
 - ii) nutrition education; and
 - iii) government capacity development.
18. With regard to possible ways of reducing micronutrient deficiencies, rice fortification at this point is challenging for several reasons, for example that most Lao people eat glutinous rice, a type of rice that is difficult to fortify. More importantly, most rice consumed in the communities visited is not produced to sell, but for community use and, more commonly, family subsistence. Central milling is rare. Oil and salt fortification are difficult for other reasons: mainly the price, minimal usage and climate-related limitations on long-term storage.

School Meals – Morning Snacks

19. The team visited several schools in Luangnamtha Province, where stunting rates are as high as 60 percent, among the highest in the country. In primary schools, students receive a mid-morning snack of banana fritters fortified with corn-soya blend, prepared daily by volunteering mothers who receive additional rice as an incentive for working in the school kitchen. The programme is replicated in all the schools in the province, with WFP covering 96 percent of the primary schools. The teachers and principals credited the programme for improved enrolment and retention rates, improved test scores, increased attention span of children and increased willingness of parents to leave children at school for the afternoons. Despite the success of the programme, there were numerous challenges, including inconsistencies in the product provided, unreliability of the water supply and the unwillingness of community members who did not have children in school to participate. One further cause for concern was the use of wood-burning open fires for cooking in an enclosed space with inadequate ventilation. The area already has high rates of respiratory illnesses, and this practice could worsen them.
20. During the meetings with the country office it was stated that the morning snacks programme, initiated following an in-kind donation, would evolve to conform to the Lao national policy on school meals, which is based on a midday lunch. The advantages of

this are threefold: children have a stronger incentive to stay at school into the afternoon; it will be easier to hand over the programme to the Government (see below); and it is more in line with local culture, as it is not customary to have any kind of morning snack.

School Meals – Informal Boarders

21. In a secondary school the group visited, boarding students from nearby villages were given a 40-kilo ration of rice for the four-month semester; the ration had been increased from 30 to 40 kilos during the past year. In an interview session, students confirmed the usefulness of the rice ration, given that they visited their homes only on weekends, mostly to work the land, and received very limited financial support from their families. School officials reported that before the ration, families stopped sending their children to school when they ran out of rice. Officials also expressed the need for a protein supplement such as canned fish or beef to complement the rice rations, and strongly recommend that FAO, WFP and other partners collaboratively provide community training on gardening and fishing. FAO is already planning a pilot project to help communities plant and maintain home grown gardens.
22. A common problem in Luangnamtha and Oudomxay provinces is that few girls continue in secondary school. The reasons appear to be mainly cultural: parents ask girls to work at home or in the fields and attending school is apparently not considered a sound investment. Lack of sanitation, latrines and running water also creates an obstacle to attending school. Girls pulled out of school tend to marry young and become young mothers. Reversing this trend is an important objective for WFP and other development partners.

National School Meal Policy

23. Successful implementation of the National School Meal Programme in the village of Houychay in La District demonstrated the potential for communities, the national government, WFP and others to collaborate on providing nutritious meals to children in support of their education. Community officials related that it took 10 years to build full support for the activity, which now enjoys complete buy-in from the village, with a school garden, catfish pond, and annual contributions of rice and chicken from parents. Cooks receive very limited financial compensation for their work. In this village, there were no drop-outs among students and a very large majority of them continued into the next grades. The country office and local officials recognize, however, that this example is unique and could be difficult to replicate because unlike most other communities, the village has easy access to a road and a reliable water source, and has a largely homogeneous population.
24. The National School Meals Policy, launched in 2011 and programmed to be valid until 2019, is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Sports, with support from the National Nutrition Committee of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Health.

Mother-and-Child Health and Nutrition

25. Although mother-and-child health and nutrition (MCHN) activities were present in all nine of the villages visited, the team was able to appreciate up close how they functioned in six of these spread across Luangnamtha and Oudomxay provinces. Interviews were held with health workers, programme recipients, local officials, field monitors and others in order to gather information first-hand on experiences with the products and programmes. Activities consisted mainly of nutritional support for pregnant and lactating women and their children, as along with health and nutrition education.

26. In the village of Houyhok in Oudomxay Province, a group of mothers, healthcare workers, representatives from the women's union and the village healthcare volunteer shared their experiences with Plumpy'Doz, a lipid-based nutrient supplement. All of them reported that children who ate Plumpy'Doz were taller, heavier, healthier and more active than children who had not. Mothers reported that occasionally older children also consumed the supplement; the volunteer who distributes the supplement detailed how he keeps track of rations and advises mothers on their use. Overall views of Plumpy'Doz were positive, but there was uniform criticism of its packaging, with beneficiaries and healthcare workers requesting that it be made available in single-serving packages. Although the product does not require refrigeration, which was not widely available, there were concerns about the potential for spoilage once the package had been opened, and about not being able to control the amount consumed.
27. Despite the benefits to the community from the broad range of MCHN activities, some cultural practices in Houyhok, which are also present elsewhere in the country, are an obstacle to progress. For example, one ethnic group prioritizes feeding guests and men, rather than the children, during periods of scarcity, and the women express and dispose of colostrum, rather than offering it to newborns. These deeply ingrained practices are obstacles to improving the overall health and nutrition of the community.
28. There are mixed opinions on the functioning of health centres. Mothers do use them and reap the benefits of nutrition support. But when it comes to health and nutrition education, it is uncertain to what extent the villagers actually learn something. Giving birth in the health centres is possible and encouraged, but when more sophisticated medical facilities and medication are needed, they are not always available, so more demanding procedures like Caesarean sections are not possible. In many instances, the hospital is hours away, which contributes to the high infant mortality rate. Another complicating factor is language: often health centre employees and volunteers do not speak the language of some villagers, while many villagers do not speak the official Lao language.
29. While ready-to-use supplementary foods (RUSFs) appear to be having an impact on birth weight, the exact weight increase in different provinces needs to be confirmed through methods other than observational. WFP is planning to undertake this analysis in the coming months. From a scientific perspective, a stunted mother – less than 147 cm tall – is likely to have a narrower pelvis, which may make childbirth difficult. In Asia, 9 percent of maternal mortality is attributed to obstructed labour.
30. With regard to nutrition education, more could be invested in researching “positive deviation”, which looks at people who are better off and observe what they do differently from others. A focus on training a smaller group of pro-active women is highly recommended, as receiving advice verbally from older and respected women is still the leading method of knowledge transmission in many of the communities visited. This would improve the day-to-day supervision and guidance in the village.

Feeding the Future

31. In Mokjod in Luangnamtha Province, one of the poorest provinces in the country and where a drought is expected to reduce the 2014 autumn rice harvest by 60 percent, the delegation observed an inter-active Feeding-the-Future (FeFu) activity. The activity educates the community about proper nutrition, including advising people about different sources for a healthy and diverse diet, such as substituting taro or corn when rice is unavailable or consuming insects and worms for protein. The women of the village prepared a sampler of local dishes with locally produced and procured ingredients, including worms and grasshoppers, squirrel and variations on the traditional sticky-rice preparations. Mokjod

also participates in the morning snack school meals programme; the village head told the team that the community would continue school feeding even if WFP assistance were to stop, because the students had become used to it.

32. Using the FeFu package, the WFP school meals programme has provided training for Village School Meal Committee members in all target villages. The training covers the importance of nutrition along with hygiene standards and proper sanitation specific to the cooking process. Nutrition training is also being developed for district and provincial school committees, and primary and secondary school students.

Food Assistance for Assets

33. The team visited three food assistance for assets (FFA) activities: two rice-paddy expansion projects and one road-building project linking two neighbouring villages. These activities were carried out with development partners from the United Nations system; one paddy expansion was implemented with UNODC and the other two projects with IFAD. Houyhok village, where the joint project with UNODC took place, was not the only village where UNODC has established a presence. It also works in the northern provinces of the country, considered part of the Golden Triangle where large amounts of poppy seed used to be grown for opium and heroin production.
34. A general impression of the FFA programmes, particularly in the country office, is that they have the most visible and immediate positive effects on villagers' livelihoods. Doubling the area of a village's rice paddy and linking it via transit road to villages that are geographically, culturally and socially very close, but previously linked only by mule paths, has had an immediate and measurable impact on trade, food availability and general well-being. The increase in agricultural production allows these small villages to create reserves of rice, which can become scarce or non-existent during the rainy season. However, because the majority of funding received is earmarked for MCHN or school meals programmes, resources to finance this type of project are endemically limited and permanently more limited than what village leaders and provincial authorities would want. The selection of beneficiaries is sometimes a contentious aspect, because, as the country office acknowledged, there are households whose members are too poor to work, because they have to dedicate all their time to subsistence agriculture and household chores.
35. The issue of continuity and maintenance was raised during the team's exchanges with villagers, given that the roads are often severely affected during rainy seasons and rice paddies require continuous care. The team was informed that in all cases committees were put in place to oversee the conditions of the assets built; however, the debris from a landslide that had occurred during the rainy season was still present on one of the roads, which naturally raised doubts about the effectiveness of the maintenance. One very clear limitation on the economic benefits of increased rice production is the unfair market practices of rice traders, who operate as a monopsony: they have divided their areas of action geographically and fixed the prices at which they buy from villagers. Even if producers go to the nearest marketplace to sell their production, traders refuse to buy from them, which forces them to sell their rice at below market prices, which prevents them from investing in further increasing production, diversifying their diets or spending on other household needs.

Emergency Preparedness

36. The Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit of the Government was recently transferred from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment. Unfortunately, the team of people that had been managing the unit, who had collaborated amply with development partners, was not

transferred. This has meant having to build basic capacity as a first step for WFP and other development partners with expertise in this area.

37. Furthermore, there is virtually no information-sharing among government ministries, or with provincial authorities, even in cases of emergency. The decision-making process is extremely vertical and top-down, which makes it difficult for experience gained at the field level to affect decisions taken by authoritative bodies.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The delegation observed a general decrease in “food-based programming” and greater emphasis on service provision and advocacy. Enhanced empowerment and resilience in communities is evidenced by progress indicators and results of FFA activities and the successful National School Meals Programme that the team visited.
- Promoting women as “agents of change” focuses attention on the village volunteer committees, and provides a dedicated incentive structure for women to educate target groups of other women on health and nutrition.
- A joint way forward is a necessity; the Government must take the lead to generate and allocate sufficient and stable capacity and financing to achieve gradual hand-over of some activities by 2020, including through better intra-government coordination.
- United Nations agencies should strengthen the Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Plan to more consistently Deliver as One in the field, and should consider a multi-sector roadmap for joint hand-over to the Government.
- Access to information is a key element for programme success: measures should be taken to improve local government capacity to collect and analyse quality data.
- Nutrition education among partners on the ground (FAO, Lao Women’s Union, the Government, UNICEF, etc.) should be harmonized.
- WFP should further develop the nutrition strategy and approach to better target adolescent girls.
- WFP should engage with suppliers concerning the possibility of providing single-serve rations of Plumpy’Doz.
- Currently private-sector and individual contributions amount to USD 1 million annually. WFP and its government partners are encouraged to seek broader and more innovative ways of expanding private-sector involvement.

ACRONYMS USED IN THE DOCUMENT

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FeFu	Feeding-the-Future
FFA	food assistance for assets
GDP	gross domestic product
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MCHN	mother-and-child health and nutrition
NGO	non-governmental organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime