



The end-line evaluation for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Mc-Govern Dole Food for Education Grant FY14-16 supported School Feeding Programme in Lao PDR

Background

This report is the endline evaluation of the United States Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole Food for Education Grant (FY14-FY16) School Feeding Programme which has been implemented by the World Food Programme in Lao People's Democratic Republic. The programme provides school meals to children in Laos, while building community and governmental capacity to continue the handover of a sustainable community-grown school feeding model.

In alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, the World Food Programme (WFP) with support from McGovern-Dole (MGD) implemented school feeding programmes across 30 districts in seven provinces which were targeted by poverty, malnutrition, and literacy rates. The USD 27 million award began in September 2014 and continued until May 2018.

The activity had significant programmatic shifts from a mid-morning snack to a lunch programme, initially foreseen to only be for half of the assisted schools but changed to include transition for all 1,450 schools for a lunch package. The programme ensured that the goal to feed 405,758 students (approximately 200,039 are girls) in 1,446 schools received a daily meal through the 175-day school year. The programme provided lunch for school children along with complementary resources (school gardens, training of teachers and communities, provision of books and educational material) and built capacity for a gradual handover to the government by 2021.

Objectives

The report evaluates the implementation and performance of the MGD FY14-FY16 award and makes recommendations to strengthen and inform the operational and strategic decision making for the MGD FY17-FY21 award.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted between February and June 2018. The methodology was designed in accordance with the results framework of the MGD FY14-FY16 grant's Terms of Reference. The baseline data and indicators were compared to the endline survey and desk review data. Data from the primary survey was triangulated to assess its reliability. Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women was mainstreamed by disaggregating all school-level data by sex, and the sampling of students was done to ensure an equal representation of boys and girls. The sample was spread across 10 districts in seven provinces. Sixty schools were sampled which represents 1,155 students from grades one to five. It also included 984 parents, 58 cooks and storekeepers, 57 school heads, and 58 teachers. Additionally, 88 qualitative discussions were held with parents, cooks, storekeepers, school heads, teachers, and Village Education Development Committees (VEDC). The survey tools were translated to the Lao language for ease of administration.

Limitations

Two significant limitations of this study area are A) unavailability of all the data points (including baseline data) for all the indicators, and B) method of assessing attentiveness. Attentiveness of a student is the result of several variables, one of which is short-term hunger. Others may include poor teaching methods, lack of interest in the subject matter, and incidents at home. The evaluation measures the attentiveness of children based on the opinion of their teachers, which may be biased based on the teacher's perception of the child.

Key Findings

The evaluation found that the project and activities were positive in terms of design and implementation. The children and areas targeted to benefit from the school meals, were categorised as most in need, and the activities were aligned with the Government of Lao's policies, priorities and strategies. The programme has been effective in improving the reading ability among children as well as their dietary practices. Engaging with teachers and parents has improved the learning environment for children. The programme has the potential to generate economic incentives for parents by reducing household food costs. While educational and nutritional outcomes have improved for boys and girls alike, the programme's impact on the broader issue of gender equality has been limited since gender balance in primary education is nearly achieved.

Recommendations

The end-line suggests steps to strengthen implementation of future school meals activities in Laos, in particular, the monitoring system, which is heavy and requires significant data collection. The evaluation identifies an opportunity for greater investments in nutrition education. The evaluation confirms that access to water is critical for WASH, functioning of school gardens, and the cooking of school lunch. The MGD FY17-FY21 grant includes strengthening and increasing investments in monitoring, water access and nutrition education.

Recommendation 1: Children should not leave school grounds during lunch break. The evaluation team recommends a policy parallel to the retention of children during lunch time in NSMP-supported schools. A government order issued to keep children at school after mealtime.

Recommendation 2: Improving access to water for schools. Many school gardens are functioning in only one semester, coinciding with the rainy season, and many schools did not have water in the toilets. So, for making school gardens an effective contributor to the school meals programme it is essential that access to water is provided.

WFP, using MGD and/or other donor funding, can install rainwater harvesting units to compliment the groundwater drawn for school gardens. The funding can be arranged from WFP's climate change initiatives and other stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: The training of a group of cooks in each school by using a tree-structure approach, with master trainers from each village. These masters would then train groups in their home villages.

The VEDC should be responsible for maintaining the cooking schedule rotation. In addition, the groups would remind those responsible for cooking meals the subsequent day. Incentivisation of cooks needs to be improved.

Recommendation 4: Strengthening the gender dimension of the project's cooking by encouraging the youths (both girls and boys) to volunteer for the school meals programme activities such as cooking, gardening, fetching water and the collection of wood.

Recommendation 5: Strengthening gender dimensions of the project through commodity management. It is important that warehouses are designed in a way that is safe for all. The technical specifications for constructing a warehouse may be developed and circulated among schools. Schools should encourage equal participation of men and women for handling operational activities. The prevailing norms around traditional gender roles need to be changed.

Recommendation 6: The ministries should conduct workshops on respective roles and responsibilities for provincial and district departments. The successful handover of the School Feeding Programme to the National School Meal Programme is highly dependent on the availability of funds for the programme. Ministry of Education and Sports through Ministry of Planning and Investment must ensure that funds are disbursed timely to the schools for effective and efficient implementation of SFP after the handover.

Recommendation 7: Harmonisation of Ministry of Agriculture and Forest technical support to school gardens and crop diversification for farmers. Additionally, WFP and the Ministry of Education and Sports should collaborate with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to identify schools and areas which are progressive in nature and appreciate crop and food diversity.

Recommendation 8: For a successful handover of the School Feeding Programme, it will be essential that stakeholders are aligned with programme objectives and have clarity on their roles and responsibilities. Capacity building of all stakeholders to deepen their understanding of community-led SFPs. In addition, teachers, cooks and communities should be trained repeatedly in the topics of hygiene, education, health, and nutrition.

Recommendation 9: Strengthening of the monitoring and evaluation system by maintaining school records on enrolment, attendance, dropout, and repetitions to be made mandatory. A template to capture teacher attendance and details of school lunch should be submitted by schools to the District Education and Sports Bureau each month. The Provincial Education and Sports Service should compile all District Education and Sports Bureau data and submit it to the Ministry of Education and Sports. The data should be validated either by the Lao Women's Union or the Lao Front for National Development and countersigned before submission to the District Education and Sports Bureau.