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**WFP EVALUATION**

# **Baseline Evaluation of WFP School-Feeding Program for USDA McGovern-Dole Grant [FY 2020-25]**

Decentralized McGovern-Dole Baseline Evaluation Report

WFP Country Office: Lao PDR

Agreement Number: USDA-FAS-10.608-0700-20-(439) Laos

Funding Year: Fiscal Year 2020

Project Duration: 2020-2025

**Date: 13<sup>th</sup> May 2022**

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# Acknowledgements

The NRMCM evaluation team wishes to acknowledge the guidance, support and cooperation received from all the participants in the evaluation.

NRMCM takes this opportunity to extend sincere thanks to the distinguished Government officials at the Ministries, provincial level and district level for their time and precious inputs.

The NRMCM Evaluation Team would like to thank the members of Regional Bureau Bangkok (RBB), Stuart Coupe and Yumiko Kanemitsu, for sharing their useful insights. Their suggestions have immensely helped in enhancing the design of the evaluation.

We would also like to thank the staff of international development agencies who kindly took the time to meet us and give us their views on the school feeding program in Lao PDR.

NRMCM wishes to sincerely acknowledge the support and guidance received from the staff of the WFP Lao PDR Country Office, for assisting with the planning of and facilitating the evaluation mission, and for supplying documentation, especially to Jacqueline de Groot, Nadya Frank, Fumitsugu Tosu, Outhai Sihalath, Yangxia Lee, Jingfu Chen, Air Sensomphone, Phouthasinh Khamvongsa, Sengphet Laopaoher, Joelle Dahm, Vongmany Vongphachanh, Alichit Phommahack, Bouavone Phasouk, Phouttha Khamphanthong, Thongvanh Sayasan, Sengarun Budcharern, Rumbidzayi Machiridza, Khammon Phommakeo, Thai Thao, and the WFP staff from the sub-offices.

We are grateful to the team from SKO Co. Ltd. for their partnership with the NRMCM evaluation team throughout the period of evaluation, particularly for their untiring efforts for data collection.

Last but not the least, the evaluation team wishes to acknowledge the cooperation received from all informants, including school children, school head, teachers, parents, cooks, storekeepers and Village Education and Development Council (VEDC) members, during the primary survey.

## Disclaimer

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. Evaluation features .....	1
1.2. Context.....	2
1.3. Subject being evaluated .....	12
1.4. Evaluability assessment, limitations and ethical considerations .....	15
1.5. Methodological approach .....	15
<b>2. Evaluation findings</b> .....	<b>27</b>
COHERENCE & RELEVANCE .....	27
2.1. Evaluation Question 1 .....	27
2.2. Evaluation Question 2 .....	29
2.3. Evaluation Question 3 .....	32
EFFECTIVENESS.....	33
2.4. Evaluation Question 4 .....	33
2.5. Evaluation Question 5 .....	44
2.6. Evaluation Question 6 .....	55
2.7. Evaluation Question 7 .....	58
2.8. Evaluation Question 8 .....	60
2.9. Evaluation Question 9 .....	61
2.10. Evaluation Question 10 .....	62
EFFICIENCY.....	63
2.11. Evaluation Question 11 .....	63
SUSTAINABILITY .....	65
2.12. Evaluation Question 12 .....	65
<b>3. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>71</b>
3.1. Conclusions .....	71
3.2. Key Observations.....	79

## List of figures

Figure 1: % of students identifying and reading correct words .....	35
Figure 2: % of students identifying and reading correct letters.....	35
Figure 3: % Increase in Enrolment between base and current year .....	37
Figure 4: Attendance rates by grades and gender.....	38
Figure 5: Proportion of students by frequency of teacher narrating stories or poems in classroom .....	40
Figure 6: Proportion of parents talking about different benefits of Education .....	42
Figure 7: Proportion of Parents (by age of children) showcasing high levels of positive behaviour, helping the child in studies .....	42
Figure 8: Proportion of Parents (by wealth quintiles) showcasing high levels of positive behaviour, helping the child in studies .....	43
Figure 9: Perceptions around Nutrition among Students and Parents .....	47
Figure 10: Perceptions around Nutrition among Boys and Girls.....	48
Figure 11: Parents Attitudinal Scores towards Healthy Eating.....	49
Figure 12: Attitude towards School Meals Score of Parents (in percentages) .....	52
Figure 13: Proportion of Parents with their Preferred Modes of Contribution .....	53
Figure 15: Children's handwashing behaviour scores (in percentages) .....	55
Figure 15: Children's handwashing knowledge scores (in percentages) .....	55
Figure 16: Scores for sanitation practices at HH level (in percentages).....	57
Figure 17: Scores for access to Sanitation facilities at HH level (in percentages).....	57

## List of tables

Table 1: Lao PDR data on GII dimensions (2019) .....	7
Table 2: McGovern-Dole SFP beneficiaries .....	13
Table 3: Evaluation Design .....	16
Table 4: McGovern-Dole FY20 evaluation questions .....	18
Table 5: Sample Size Covered.....	21
Table 6: Limitations and Mitigation Measures .....	25
Table 7: Snapshot of Literacy Specific Indicators (in percentages).....	33
Table 8: Snapshot of Nutrition Specific Indicators (in percentages) .....	44
Table 9: Reported Consumption of Food Groups (in percentages) across Provinces .....	46

Table 10: Snapshot of Children's Knowledge and Practices towards Handwashing (in percentages) ..... 55

Table 11: Conclusions of program components ..... 75

# Executive Summary

- 1 The Baseline evaluation of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole Food for Education Grant supported School Feeding Program (SFP) in Lao PDR, commissioned by the World Food Programme (WFP) Country Office (CO) Lao PDR, evaluates the baseline situation in September 2021 for the FY20–FY24 award cycle<sup>1</sup>. The study aims to provide a situational analysis before the program begins; to establish baseline values for all performance indicators and review targets; to validate program design assumptions, and to provide program implementation suggestions for the five-year program.
- 2 WFP Lao PDR has received USD 25 million to implement the USDA McGovern-Dole FY20 SFP. The program, implemented in partnership with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), will provide a package of school health and nutrition activities, including school meals to approximately 64,156 pre-primary and primary school students in 707 schools in 17 MoES priority districts. For this, WFP will procure canned fish, fortified oil, and a portion of fortified rice under the Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) component of the program.
- 3 The primary stakeholders and users of this study are (i) WFP Lao PDR and its cooperating partners (CPs), such as CRS, (ii) USDA, (iii) WFP’s Regional Bureau Bangkok (RBB), (iv) WFP HQ, (v) WFP’s Office of Evaluation (OEV), (vi) Government of Lao and Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), (vii) members of the Internal Evaluation Committee, and the External Reference Group, and (viii) Other partners involved in the education sector such as World Bank and UNICEF, Co-Chairs of the Education Sector Working Group, the European Union and Australia.

## Methodology

- 4 The evaluation followed a mixed-method approach to address the key information areas under the five OECD-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) criteria of *relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability* of the program. The baseline sample was spread across all 11 provinces covering 17 program districts. 34 schools were sampled randomly for the evaluation, two per district, using the demographic variable of remoteness, ensuring adequate representation of ethnic groups residing in rural remote locations. For the literacy assessment, 20 schools in four districts of Khammouane province were randomly sampled. The sampling of students ensured equal representation of boys and girls.
- 5 The primary data sources include quantitative surveys with students, equally split among boys and girls, and their parents; In-depth interviews (IDIs) at schools and community level; key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders at the national and provincial levels, specifically from MoES, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), Ministry of Health (MoH), WFP and CRS; and physical observations of school infrastructure. All school-level data includes disaggregated analyses by sex, wherever appropriate. Data from all sources were synthesized and triangulated to arrive at programmatic findings, ensuring their validity, reliability and credibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as FY20.



- 6 The limitations of the study are: (i) Qualitative discussions were conducted telephonically, which made it difficult to capture specific forms of observational and non-verbal data; (ii) the behavioural indicators were captured via interviews, not directly observed, making responses susceptible to social desirability bias; (iii) as a result of the Covid-19, the recorded values for certain indicators, particularly around literacy and nutritional intake, might be lower than that during the pre-Covid times<sup>2</sup>; (iv) Since the target schools for Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) and Model schools have not been identified yet, the two programmatic variables could not be used for developing sub-groups among intervention sample at the time of baseline; (vi) lastly, data collection could not be undertaken in Longcheng district, Xiasonboun. Due to a lack of a timely response from the Government of Laos and the need to continue with the project, it was decided not to include Longcheng district in FY20 WFP Laos.

## Summary Findings

**Relevance and Coherence:** Coherence with government's education, health & nutrition, social protection and other relevant policies, strategies and plans

- 7 Aligning with the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016 (NNSPA), McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 is designed to address the principal causes of malnutrition, and improve educational outcomes, such as attendance rate, enrolment rate, literacy, and learning results. The ration for SFP was selected based on local acceptability, nutritional content and dietary diversity. The program is investing in nutrition awareness activities, including training the cooks in nutritious recipes adapted to local tastes, which address existing information gaps at the community level.
- 8 The agriculture support component offers smallholder farmers, particularly women, agricultural technical skills and inputs incorporating climate-smart agriculture approaches, apart from building administration & management skills aimed towards strengthening farmer groups.
- 9 The literacy component of the program, aligned with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Education Sector and Sports Development Plan (ESSDP), focuses on improving learning outcomes, especially of girls and students from ethnic groups, by way of strengthening teachers' capacities to conduct formative reading assessments and remedial learning activities, and building learning infrastructure. The WASH component focuses on rehabilitating water sources, which are essential for SFP activities, and promoting hygiene behaviour at the school and community level.

**Effectiveness:** Current status of learning outcomes, enrolment, attendance and participation rates [Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4]

- 10 Literacy assessment covered 199 students who have just entered standard III. On average, students were able to correctly identify 24.84 letters out of 33 (Boys – 23.77; Girls – 25.92); and students were able to correctly identify only 4.87 words out of 20 (Boys – 4.07; Girls – 5.68).

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<sup>2</sup> UNCEF 2021; Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to Covid-19 on the Education section in Asia



- 11 Only 13.6% of students were readers<sup>3</sup> (27 out of 199) according to the reading test, with the proportion of readers significantly higher<sup>4</sup> among girls (20.2%) than boys (7.0%).
- 12 The performance of students in comprehension fell drastically as the difficulty levels increased from letters to words, and then from words to passage. Reading levels were found to be consistently higher (i) among girls, (ii) among students in non-remote schools.
- 13 The average student attendance was found to be relatively high, at around 95%, in the sampled schools, with no major variation between boys and girls across five grades. Poverty is found to be the most critical determinant for absenteeism in schools, as children either accompany their parents to the fields or stay at home to take care of younger siblings. 14.8% of the students were rated as inattentive during classes by their teachers, with no major variation between boys and girls or across provinces.
- 14 As per the School Observation data, one in every three schools (12 out 34 schools) did not have separate classrooms for every grade, and only 11 out of 34 schools had a library. Out of the total, 27 (79.4%) schools did not have any storage facilities, 31 (91.2%) schools did not have a kitchen space, while all 34 schools reported not having a dining area.

**Effectiveness:** Nature of WASH infrastructure in school and at home, WASH support needed, involvement of VEDC and community (SDG 6)

- 15 Only 55.1% of children reported washing hands with soap before meals; 48% said they wash hands properly after meals, and 53.1% of children wash their hands with soap after using the toilet.
- 16 Regarding WASH infrastructure, only 12 out of 34 (35.3%) schools reported having a source of drinking water in or near the school premises. Only 15 (44.1%) schools had handwashing facilities, out of which only 13 schools had access to water and 5 schools had provision of soap. More than half of the schools did not have separate toilets for girls and boys.
 

**Effectiveness:** Current dietary practices, Knowledge Attitude Practices (KAP) of different stakeholders, and nutrition related infrastructure in schools (SDG 2); Production of diverse crops, access to markets, the status of agriculture knowledge and infrastructure available, willingness to contribute to school meals
- 17 83.5% of parents (142 out of 170) mentioned that they could contribute to the school feeding program. The most preferred modes of contribution were: in-kind by providing vegetables (76.5%); in the form of labour for helping in the school garden (76.5%), and cooking for school meals (70%).
- 18 The mean dietary diversity score (DDS) for children in program schools was *medium* at around 7.3 (out of a maximum score of 12). A majority of the children identified key food groups like rice (98.9%), vegetables (83.3%), meat/fish/poultry/seafood (96.9%) and fruits (72.1%) as necessary for consumption at their age. However, around half of the students across grades 1-5 also reported sweetened soda and juices, as well as sugary foods as being important for children's consumption.

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<sup>3</sup> A student is termed a 'reader' if s/he was able to read at least five words correctly in the first 30 seconds.

<sup>4</sup> 95% confidence level

- 19 Most farmers interviewed across 34 villages informed that no farmer groups existed in their villages. Farmers, in general, had favourable views on the SFP, and they expressed their desire to contribute towards school meals in the form of cash, vegetables or meat, on a sustained basis.
- 20 Availability of water, especially during the dry season, remains one of the major challenges in agriculture. Most farmers depend upon ponds or gravity-fed systems from rivers or streams for cultivation during the dry season. In addition to this, safe storage of crops and seeds, protection from pests, and extreme weather remain major unresolved challenges for farmers.
- 21 Covid-19 had a negative impact on people's livelihoods. Every seven in ten of the sampled parents (70%) reported that the food security and nutrition status deteriorated for their household as a result of Covid-19 lockdown.

**Efficiency:** Manner in which program design ensure efficiency in service delivery and handover

- 22 WFP has entered into strategic partnerships with CRS, MoES, MAF, MoH and Nam Saat, consolidating their respective experiences to address inter-related issues in a holistic manner. The MoES is directly implementing SFP in three northern districts, which is strategically relevant as it allows the ministry to leverage its human and other resources. Additionally, the learnings from this experience are expected to make the process of handover more seamless in the future.

**Sustainability:** Capacity levels of different stakeholders, willingness to participate in the program, elements that facilitate handover, need for additional advocacy by WFP

- 23 The McGovern-Dole FY20 program is investing quite heavily in community infrastructure and mobilisation from the start. The program staff will train VEDCs to enhance their capacity to manage the implementation of SFP and employ District Community Facilitators to mobilise and engage communities in SFP activities. More staff has been allotted per district in this program as compared for SFP FY2017 to ensure follow up on community mobilisation activities more frequently.
- 24 The training sessions for cooks and school meals support staff will be aligned with five joint developed guidelines to ensure standardization and continuity after handover. The procedure for selection of cooks followed by VEDCs, along with the measures to incentivize and motivate them, will be vital for ensuring regularity of cooks to sustain the SFP in the long run.
- 25 The program will develop the capacity of government staff, especially at the provincial and district levels, to independently undertake concurrent monitoring of activities and outputs of National School Meals Program (NSMP) using digital platforms. School feeding indicators have already been integrated into the Education Management Information System (EMIS) of MoES.

## Conclusions

- 26 The program design is completely aligned with ESSDP and NSMP, with a vision to improve the educational and nutritional target of the country and meet the SDG targets. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 is directly in-line with WFP's CSP. The program focuses heavily on enhancing the capacities of the government across national, provincial and district levels, and the local communities to enable them to take ownership of school meals by 2025.

- 27 The baseline findings indicate that all program villages are not at the same level at the onset of the program. Schools in remote locations are relatively more vulnerable as a group to malnutrition and poor education outcomes. Poverty is one of the most critical determinants of absenteeism in schools.
- 28 People reflected a general readiness to adopt the program as well as new health and nutritional practices, provided they receive adequate support to pursue the same.
- 29 In order to ensure that the farmers benefit from the program, it is essential to not only increase their farm production but also identify ways and means for increasing their incomes.
- 30 Role of women in leadership roles, particularly at the village level seems fairly limited. Women, particularly from the ethnic groups, living in remote rural locations are less likely to be involved in strategic and financial decision making, which are predominantly reserved for men.

### **Key Observations**

- 31 (1) Need to intensify community mobilization and awareness activities, particularly around introducing nutritious food items not consumed traditionally by certain communities (for instance, lentils); (2) use of digital mediums for capacity building of district officials and stakeholders at the community level; (3) need to diversify livelihoods and establishing market linkages for farmers; (4) need to have higher intensity of SFP implementation in villages in remote locations and those inhabited by ethnic groups; (5) allot fixed responsibilities for development and maintenance of school garden; (6) increase platforms for engagement of VEDCs with the community, and offer non-monetary incentives through gamification.

# 1. Introduction

32. This baseline evaluation Report (ER) is for the baseline evaluation of the USDA's McGovern–Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program in Lao PDR. This study is commissioned by the WFP CO, and evaluates the baseline situation in September 2021 for FY20. The study takes into account the evaluation questions for the midline and final evaluations of the FY20 award, so that appropriate data collection can be undertaken. The evaluation was scheduled between September 2021 and December 2021, but the time period got extended until February 2022 due to Covid-19 related restrictions.

## 1.1. EVALUATION FEATURES

### *Purpose, Objectives and Rationale for the Evaluation*

33. The aim of the baseline study (FY20) is to provide a situational analysis before the program begins, to establish baseline values for all performance indicators and review targets, to validate program design assumptions, and to provide program implementation suggestions for the 2020-2024 program. The baseline study serves the dual and mutually reinforcing objectives of *accountability* and *learning*, according equal priority to both.<sup>5</sup> The study will be used for concurrent monitoring to measure activity outputs, performance indicators for McGovern-Dole's twin strategic objectives that feed into the larger foundational results.

### *Scope of the Evaluation*

34. WFP Lao PDR has received USD 25 million to implement the USDA McGovern–Dole School Feeding Program FY20-24 to enable a smooth transition of the program into the NSMP by 2025. This program will cover approximately 64,156 students in 707 schools in the remaining 17 districts that do not receive school feeding, from a total of 40 priority districts of the MoES. Apart from school feeding, the program activities include WASH, community mobilization, literacy, agriculture support, policy support to government, and health and nutrition. The baseline study is the first stage in the evaluation cycle to fulfil USDA McGovern–Dole program requirement to provide information about the pre-program situation in the targeted districts. The findings of the baseline study will help WFP and program partners in establishing baseline values for all performance indicators, providing a situational analysis before the program begins, informing program implementation and providing important context necessary for the mid-term and final evaluations to assess the program's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact. The evaluation will also ensure that Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (GEEW) and equity are mainstreamed throughout the study. In the current pandemic context, the current baseline study will especially take account of the potential **socio-economic impacts of COVID 19** on the program.

### *Main Stakeholders and Primary users of the Baseline Evaluation Report*

35. Several stakeholders both inside and outside of WFP have interests in the results of the evaluation and some of them will play a role in the evaluation process. The primary users of

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<sup>5</sup> USDA Monitoring and Evaluation Policy, 2019

this evaluation are (i) WFP Lao PDR and its partners in decision-making, notably related to program implementation and design and partnerships, (ii) USDA as the funder for the program and the evaluation, (iii) WFP's Regional Bureau Bangkok (RBB), to use the evaluation findings to provide strategic guidance, program support, and oversight, (iv) WFP HQ as well as key headquarters Divisions such as School-Based Programs Division and the Performance Management and Monitoring Division, to use the evaluation for wider organizational learning and accountability as well as program support on school feeding, (v) WFP's Office of Evaluation (OEV), to use the evaluation findings, as appropriate, to feed into evaluation syntheses as well as for annual reporting to the Executive Board, (vi) Government of Lao and MoES, who will take over the management and monitoring of the school feeding program over time. They will use evaluation findings as input for their handover strategy, (vii) Other partners such as CRS, World Bank, UN agencies such as UNICEF and the Co-Chairs of the Education Sector Working Group, the European Union, and Australia. The ER is of direct interest to WFP CO, members of the Internal Evaluation Committee, and the External Reference Group (including representation from MoES, MAF, MoH, Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), CRS, USDA and others.

### ***Gender dimensions of the evaluation***

36. GEEW and accountability to affected populations are part of the guiding principles for WFP's actions towards the achievement of zero hunger. The evaluation is guided by WFP's latest Gender Policy 2022–2026. Aligning with these principles, it is understood that development programs affect women, men, boys, and girls differently. Hence, the evaluation lays emphasis on testing the program's coherence with the national policy on gender, and operates inclusive strategies and implementation based on sound gender analysis. The study reflects on learnings from the FY17 baseline evaluation to bring a gender lens to the study, understanding the importance of a gender-balanced selection and ensuring adequate representation of women in the study sample.
37. The evaluation (methodology, criteria, questions and the analytical framework) has taken into consideration the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) indicators, specifically relating to gender equality and human rights<sup>6</sup>. The data collection for the evaluation was conducted in a gender-sensitive manner. Data obtained for the attainment of outputs and outcomes has been disaggregated by sex and age, providing empirical insight that can be used and built upon by users.

## **1.2. CONTEXT**

38. Lao People's Democratic Republic is a landlocked country in the heart of the Indochinese peninsula of Mainland Southeast Asia with a population of 7.2 million people<sup>7</sup>, inhabited by 49 officially recognised ethnic groups, classified according to four ethno-linguistic families: Lao-Tai (62.4%), Mon-Khmer (23.7%), Hmong-Mien (9.7%) and Sino-Tibetan (2.9%).<sup>8</sup> Lao PDR

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<sup>6</sup> UNEG Indicators on Gender and Human Rights in UNEG Quality Checklist for Evaluation Reports

<sup>7</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LA>

<sup>8</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. 2015. The 4th Population and Housing Census (PHC) 2015  
<https://lao.unfpa.org/en/publications/results-population-and-housing-census-2015-english-version>

is predominantly rural (68%)<sup>9</sup>, and fast-growing, with the population projected to reach 9 million by 2045.<sup>10</sup> The country has one of the fastest-growing economies in East Asia and the Pacific with a GNI per capita of \$2480 in 2020 and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimated to be US\$ 19.136 billion<sup>11</sup>. This growth has aided in improving the country's Human Development Index (HDI) from 0.405 in 1990 to 0.613 in 2019, an increase of 51.4%, putting it in the medium human development category. Between 1990 and 2019, Lao's life expectancy at birth increased by 14.6 years, mean years of schooling increased by 2.2 years and expected years of schooling increased by 4.3 years. However, despite the improvement, Lao PDR still ranks 137 out of 189 countries (HDR 2020).<sup>12</sup>

39. Poverty is a key factor causing inequalities in education, health, and nutrition outcomes. There is also strong inequality across ethnic groups, children from non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups have lower school attendance rates than those belonging to the Lao-Tai ethnolinguistic group. For example, at primary level, 94% of children from the Lao-Tai group attend primary school but only 83% of children from Mon-Khmer families do. Most of this inequality across ethnolinguistic groups is explained by socioeconomic differences, such as wealth and place of residence. Rurality is also seen to be a disadvantage for children, as it increases the likelihood of children being out of school. 21% of children in urban areas are stunted, and the figure increases to 36% of children in rural areas with roads and 43% of children in areas without roads, which is considered "very high severity" based on the WHO classification.<sup>13</sup>
40. Market access is inconsistent for a large proportion of rural households who are dependent on road quality and infrastructure at district and provincial levels. Many villages, particularly rural upland areas, lose access during the rainy season. Most of the population, particularly those belonging to Mon-Khmer and Hmong-lu Mien ethnolinguistic families, lives in remote areas that are less integrated into the national infrastructure for health and other essential services while disaster-prone environments lead to severe reductions in food intake due to harvest losses and inability to purchase food. In addition, the country's ethnic diversity along with differing beliefs on appropriate dietary and care practices create challenges for addressing malnutrition.<sup>14</sup>
41. **Education:** The country has made significant progress towards achieving SGD 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Quality education is the necessary foundation to further achieve other SDGs such as end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6). There has been a significant improvement in the status of children's education in recent years.
42. These achievements have, however, not been equitable and sustained, with the country still having some of the poorest education indicators in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> As a share of GDP,

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<sup>9</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II (LSIS II) 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Planning and Investment; LSB; UNFPA. 2018. *Lao PDR Population Projections 2015-2045*

<sup>11</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>

<sup>12</sup> Human Development Report 2020: Briefing Note for Lao PDR; [http://hdr.undp.org/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/LAO.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/hdr_theme/country-notes/LAO.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau and UNICEF. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report. Vientiane, Lao PDR. <https://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/lao-social-indicator-survey-lsis-2017>

<sup>14</sup> Chaparro, C., et al. 2014. *Laos Nutrition Profile*. Washington, DC: FHI 360/FANTA

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/laos/education>

expenditure on education is low. It increased from 1.65% in 2009 to about 3.23% in 2013 but again declined to 2.9% in 2018.<sup>16</sup> Article 60 of the Education Law (2015) states that 18% of the national budget should go to education. ESSDP 2016-2020 uses a 17% annual target. Despite these commitments, the actual allocation to education has remained low and decreased from 15.8% in 2015/2016 to 13.7% in 2019 and 13.1% in 2020.<sup>17</sup> The 2019 South-East Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) learning outcomes assessment<sup>18</sup> showed that Lao Grade 5 students show very low proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics. Only 2% of Grade 5 students achieve at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and 8% achieve a minimum proficiency level in mathematics.

43. This debilitating situation in the education sector has been due to issues such as lack of adequate infrastructure, regional disparity in facilities across rural and urban schools, large gender divides, household poverty, poor quality education, and language barriers faced by different ethnic groups while adapting to the formal Lao-based education systems. School attendance is often lower in rural areas, among poorer families and ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> The majority Lao-Tai population has a 75.7% literacy rate, while literacy among the other ethno-linguistic groups is below 40%. The issue of students falling behind in Lao language and readings skills, especially in early grades, is more pronounced for non-Lao speaking students. Inadequate learning at the primary level has flow-on effects to higher levels of education – only 19.3% of Mon-Khmer children attend upper secondary school or higher.<sup>20</sup>
44. **Nutrition and Food Security:** SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security & improved nutrition. There has been significant progress towards SDG 2, evident from a 10% decrease in the proportion of hungry poor from 33% to 23% in the last decade.<sup>21</sup> However, Lao PDR with a score of 25.7 still falls in the “serious” category as per the 2019 Global Hunger Index (GHI), ranking 87<sup>th</sup> out of 117 countries.<sup>22</sup> Using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale, approximately 20% of the population was classified as experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity in 2018-2019, with disproportionately high rates in rural areas, and among the poor and certain ethnicities.<sup>23</sup> In 2020, approximately 31.8% of households experienced mild, moderate, or severe food insecurity (translating to 2.2 million people, including 1.08 million women).<sup>24</sup>
45. The term malnutrition<sup>25</sup>, in Laos (and globally) refers to all forms, that include, underweight (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity. The reduction of malnourishment (SDG 2) reinforces the goal of educational attainments (SDG 4). Malnutrition remains a major challenge in the country. The inequalities in access to nutrition

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<sup>16</sup> UNESCO. 2020. Global Education Monitoring Report.

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Public Investment in Education Advocacy Brief.

[https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/3921/file/Public%20Investment%20in%20Education\\_Advocacy%20Brief.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/3921/file/Public%20Investment%20in%20Education_Advocacy%20Brief.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF & SEAMEO. 2020. SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report: Children's learning in 6 Southeast Asian countries.

<https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/sea-plm-2019-main-regional-report>

<sup>19</sup> WFP. 2017. Lao PDR Country Strategic Plan 2017-2021.

<sup>20</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II (LSIS II) 2017.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/countries/laos-peoples-democratic-republic>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2019.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Lao Statistic Bureau and World Bank. 2020. *Poverty Profile in Lao PDR: Poverty Report for the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 2018-2019*

<sup>24</sup> WFP. 2020. Rapid Assessment of Food Security and Agriculture in Lao PDR

<sup>25</sup> Addressing malnutrition in school-based programs encompasses all forms of malnutrition.



map along similar divides as the inequalities in education status, with children from rural, poorer, and ethnic groups households having relatively lower access. According to the Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS-II) 2017<sup>26</sup>, 33% of children under age 5 were stunted - a “high severity” prevalence of chronic malnutrition - which is higher than the average for the Asia region (21.8%). There is a large disparity between ethnolinguistic groups: 50% of children in Hmong-Mien households are stunted compared with 23% of children in Lao-Tai households. LSIS II also states that the proportion of U5 children wasted stands at 9%, underweight U5 children at 21.1% and overweight U5 children at 3.5%. Percentage of prevalence of undernourishment in the population remains almost unchanged, marginally reducing from 16.8% in 2015 to 16.5% in 2018.

46. Affordability impacts households' access to a nutritious diet, with 83.3% unable to afford a healthy diet, compared to an average of 41.5% in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>27</sup> Small landholding, absence of secure land tenure and low irrigation spread have contributed to a lower level of domestic production of food items, thus impacting the availability of food. This has led to a disproportionately higher intake of carbohydrates and a lack of food diversification, with low intake of fats, oils, animal protein, fruits and other micronutrients.
47. **Health:** Lack of health infrastructure and healthcare services are the biggest contributors for the poor health and nutrition of the people. On average, there are only two healthcare service providers for a population of 1,000. The situation further deteriorates in the northern and southern provinces where the nearest healthcare facility for nearly 60% of the population is located more than 10 kms away. As of 2018, the country's under-5 mortality rate (U5MR) was 4.7%<sup>28</sup>. Although there has been a significant decline in U5MR from the 1990s, it continues to fall short of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target for child mortality.
48. The Government of Laos (GoL) has been gradually increasing the level of government spending on health, from 1.9% of GDP in 2011 to 2.4% in 2019.<sup>29</sup> Early initiation of breastfeeding has improved a lot in recent years, with the rate rising from 39% in 2011 to 50% in 2017. There has also been some progress towards achieving the low-birth-weight target with 17.3% of infants having low weight at birth. Some progress has also been made towards exclusive breastfeeding, with 44.4% of the infants aged 0 to 5 months exclusively breastfed as of 2020.<sup>30</sup> However, the gaps in health and healthcare continue to exist and exacerbate health and nutritional outcomes in the country.
49. **Water, Sanitation and Hygiene:** SDG 6 seeks to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The use of clean water in Lao PDR has increased in the past 5 years from 69.9% in 2012 to 83.9% in 2018; the use of improved sanitation

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<sup>26</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau and UNICEF. 2018. Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

<sup>27</sup> FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2021. *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020*. <http://www.fao.org/3/cb2895en/cb2895en.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2020.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> UNDP. 2019. Human Development Index: Lao PDR Country Profile

<sup>30</sup> <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/south-eastern-asia/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/>

facilities has increased significantly from 56.9% to 71% in the same period.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, the status of WASH in Lao PDR has remained one of the poorest in the region, and the country was found to have the second-highest level of open defecation in the region, after Cambodia.<sup>32</sup> Approximately 24% of the rural population in Laos were found to practice open defecation, and only 28% of children's faeces were reported as being disposed of safely.<sup>33</sup> The health and nutrition outcomes of unsafe water and inadequate sanitation are severe. Children living in households with safe water and sanitation are less prone to diarrhoea, stunting and being underweight. The unhygienic practices also lead to high levels of soil transmitted helminthiasis (STH), thus increasing the need for deworming. The overall economic costs of poor sanitation in Lao PDR were last estimated to be US\$193 million per year, which is equivalent to about 5.6% of the GDP.<sup>34</sup>

50. Progress is roughly on track to achieve universal coverage by 2030 in all schools, with about four in five schools having water (78%) and sanitation (80%) facilities. However, only 35% of schools in Laos have handwashing facilities<sup>35</sup> and even fewer schools students practice handwashing with soap. Furthermore, 28% of schools nationwide lack access to safe drinking water.<sup>36</sup> Lack of access to WASH facilities can have detrimental effects on attendance, enrolment, and learning outcomes. Diarrheal disease and parasitic infections – both sanitation-related – are leading causes of mortality and malnutrition in those under five years of age and missed school days and disability among children of all ages.<sup>37</sup>
51. **Agriculture and smallholder farmers:** Target 2.3 of SDG 2 aims to double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, by 2030. Most of this land is devoted to paddy production, with glutinous (sticky) rice making up almost 80% of rice production.<sup>38</sup> More than 60% of labourers are employed in the agricultural sector, contributing 16% of the GDP.
52. Lao agriculture is still predominantly subsistence and rice-based, limiting the diversity of diets. Most farmers source additional nutritious food from nearby forest areas, small home gardens and small-scale poultry or fish raising. However, in recent years, more farmers are shifting to cash crops, responding to changing demand and prices. This has resulted in a gradual shift towards high value crops and increase in farm productivity among the cash-crop farmers, resulting in reduction in poverty.<sup>39</sup>
53. Women comprise over 50% of the agricultural workforce and contribute significantly to all parts of agricultural production, however, they face significant and persistent barriers. The shifting landscape from subsistence to market-based models, has unique – and potentially negative – impacts for rural women, many of whom face constraints in accessing markets due

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<sup>31</sup> Lao People's Democratic Republic Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/publication/improving-rural-sanitation-in-lao-pdr>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/laos/water-sanitation-hygiene-and-climate-change-resilience>

<sup>34</sup> Hutton et al. 2009. Economics of Sanitation Initiative: The Economic Cost of Poor Sanitation in Lao PDR. World Bank.

<sup>35</sup> World Bank and MoES. SABER Service Delivery Survey Report 2018.

<sup>36</sup> World Bank and MoES. SABER Service Delivery Survey Report 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Lao PDR Ministry of Health. 2012. National Plan of Action for Rural Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.

<sup>38</sup> USDA Foreign Agricultural Service. 2020. *GAIN Report: Laos Rice Report Annual*.

<sup>39</sup> World Bank. 2020. Poverty Profile in Lao PDR and Poverty Assessment 2020: Catching Up and Falling Behind.

to limited mobility, literacy and, in the case of ethnic women, Lao language skills. Bank processes require land titles, assets, high interest, and the signature of the head of household (most often men), all of which prevent women from accessing banking and credit systems as easily as men.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of women in rural areas without roads are disproportionately engaged in unpaid family work.<sup>41</sup>

54. Smallholder farmers face a range of challenges that include limited technical knowledge in climate-smart agriculture, climate change, extreme weather, limited access to financial services and risk management tools, poor market access, limited food processing, lack of access to market information and understanding of food safety, and community-based approaches for agricultural and rural development.<sup>42</sup> Changing climate patterns combined with poor access to both markets and diverse livelihoods worsen the situation in remote upland areas, where 25% of households are food insecure.<sup>43</sup>

### Gender Analysis

55. Lao PDR has a Gender Inequality Index (GII) value of 0.459, ranking it 113 out of 162 countries in the 2019 index. 27.5% of the parliamentary seats in Lao PDR are held by women, which is more than the global average (25.5%).<sup>44</sup> However, the proportion of women in other decision-making institutions within the Government is still low (estimated to be 5% as of 2012).<sup>45</sup> Women are mostly involved in the informal sector like services and retail while men are engaged as civil servants, professionals or technicians. Although, participation of women is higher in agriculture, they have limited control on farming inputs as well as access to agricultural credit. Low levels of female participation in decision making is further hampered by low literacy levels.

**Table 1: Lao PDR data on GII dimensions (2019)<sup>46</sup>**

GII value	GII Rank	Maternal mortality ratio*	Adolescent birth rate	Female seats in parliament (%)	Population with at least some secondary education (%)		Labour force participation rate (%)	
					Female	Male	Female	Male
0.459	113	185.0	65.4	27.5	35.1	46.2	76.7	80.2

\*Maternal mortality ratio is expressed in number of deaths per 100,000 live births and adolescent birth rate is expressed in number of births per 1,000 women ages 15-19.

<sup>40</sup> FAO. 2018. *Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic*. <https://www.fao.org/3/CA0154EN/ca0154en.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. 2015. Results of population and housing census, 2015. [http://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PHC-ENG-FNAL-WEB\\_0.pdf](http://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PHC-ENG-FNAL-WEB_0.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> WFP. 2021. Lao PDR Country Strategic Plan (2022-2026).

<sup>43</sup> WFP. 2013. Food and Nutrition Security Atlas of Lao PDR;

WFP, 2017, Consolidated Livelihood Exercise for Analyzing Resilience in Lao PDR.

<sup>44</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2021. *Women in Parliament in 2020*. <https://www.ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020>

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.la.undp.org/content/lao\\_pdr/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html](https://www.la.undp.org/content/lao_pdr/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html)

<sup>46</sup> Human Development Report 2020: Briefing Note for Lao PDR.

56. With a Gender Development Index (GDI) value of 0.896, Lao PDR ranked 141 out of 188 countries in the 2015 index<sup>47</sup>. The country has demonstrated significant advancements, as per the 2019 HDI report, which indicates the female HDI value for Lao to be 0.589 in contrast with 0.636 for males, resulting in a GDI value of 0.927, placing it now into Group 3.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in view of the objectives of McGovern-Dole SFP and achieving Goal 5 (Gender equality) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is imperative that gender disparities in outcomes, particularly related to health and education *as interrelated indicators*, are addressed. Doing so will help improve the nutritional status of school children and enhance educational outcomes.

### **School Feeding Needs**

57. As defined by the World Bank, “School feeding programs are targeted social safety nets that provide both educational and health benefits to the most vulnerable children, thereby increasing enrolment rates, reducing absenteeism, and improving food security at the household level”.<sup>49</sup> The most direct and immediate benefits of a school meal program are enhanced enrolment and reduced absenteeism rates amongst children.<sup>50</sup> School feeding programs aim to address all forms of malnutrition - undernutrition (wasting, stunting, underweight), micronutrient deficiencies (inadequate vitamins or minerals), overweight, obesity, and diet-related non-communicable diseases.

58. However, in addition to the food security and nutritional benefits, multiple analyses of the School Feeding approach have repeatedly shown that quality education, combined with a guaranteed package of health and nutrition interventions at school, such as school feeding, can contribute to child and adolescent development and build human capital.<sup>51</sup> Research has shown that school feeding programs can alleviate short-term hunger, improve cognitive skills and even increase enrolment of girls in schools. Literature review suggests that SFP has contributed towards increasing the enrolment of children in schools with the gross enrolment ratio at the primary level at 102%.<sup>52</sup>

59. A Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) of the school meal programs in Lao PDR, jointly undertaken by MoES, WFP and MasterCard (2018)<sup>53</sup>, highlights that the investment in school meals is a **profitable investment as a social safety net** and in the development of human capital, benefiting individuals, communities and the country’s economy in the short as-well-as long term. School meal programs also act as safety nets by ensuring education for children, and increasing their chances to earn higher income as adults, thus breaking the vicious circle of

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<sup>47</sup>UNDP. 2015. *Human development report 2015: Work for human development*.

[http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015\\_human\\_development\\_report.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> Human Development Report 2020: Briefing Note for Lao PDR.

<sup>49</sup><https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/04/25/scaling-up-school-feeding-keeping-children-in-school-while-improving-their-learning-and-health>

<sup>50</sup> Bundy, Donald; Burbano, Carmen; Grosh, Margaret; Gelli, Aulo; Jukes, Matthew; Drake, Lesley. World Bank.

2009. *Rethinking School Feeding Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector*.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2634>

<sup>51</sup> As defined by the World Bank’s Human Capital Project, “Human capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society.”

<sup>52</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LAO#>

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Education and Sports, WFP and Mastercard. 2018. *Cost-Benefit Analysis of the School Meals Programs in Lao PDR*. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/cost-benefit-analysis-school-meals-programme-lao-pdr>

poverty. The report further shows that for every 1 US\$ invested in SMPs, the return of investment ranges from 5 US\$ (cash-based modality) to 6.1 US\$ (food-based modality) over the lifetime, with the greatest benefit derived from improved education and increased productivity. More specifically, children who receive school meals are expected to make USD 750 more in wages over a lifetime, compared to those who do not receive school meals. Other sources of benefits include value transfer, return on investments from saved assets, healthier life, and positive externalities from gender equality.<sup>54</sup>

### **Government Programs and Policies**

60. GoL has approved a package of complementary national strategies and plans, which aims to ensure that economic growth is accompanied by improvements in health and nutrition, education, and human capital. Key strategies include the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) (2016–2020), 9<sup>th</sup> National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025), Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) (2016–2020 and 2021–2025), National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action (NNSPA) (2016–2020 and 2021–2025) and National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) 2030. School feeding is seen as a key component of these strategies, and a platform for addressing food insecurity and nutrition as well as increasing attendance and learning outcomes. The 9th NSEDP attributes increased attendance and lower drop-out rates to school lunch and food supplements, among other initiatives (p.32–33), and highlights the importance of promoting a diverse diet and eating behaviour among children through school feeding, as well as micronutrient supplementation and deworming (p.34).
61. The *Policy on Promoting School Lunch (2014)*, laid the foundations of a nation-wide approach of the Government offering school lunches as an incentive for children in primary school age from disadvantaged backgrounds, to attend school and complete education. The policy encourages and promotes the implementation of 5 aspects of education. These are i) Attainment of Education For All (EFA) goal; ii) Increase in Net Enrolment Ratio (NER), class progression, completion rate, reduce repetition and dropout rate; iii) Mobilize resources to ensure program institutionalization and sustainability; iv) Food security through school-based food production integrated with local food production system and; v) Develop and upgrade capacity for effective management of school meals operations<sup>55</sup>.
62. In 2015, the GoL adopted a National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (NNSPA) with the goal to reduce all forms of malnutrition and “improve the nutritional status of the multi-ethnic people.” The Government identified 22 priority interventions in the NNSPA to reach this goal including: 1) Provide food in schools; 2) Promote vegetable gardens in schools; 3) Promote the consumption of iodized salts and micronutrient fortified food; and 4) Increase the cultivation of crops which have high nutritional value. *ESSDP 2016- 20* further stressed the need for expanding and maintaining school feeding programs to encourage the disadvantaged children in lower primary grades to remain in school<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> MoES. 2014. Policy on Promoting School Lunch.

<sup>56</sup> <http://moe.gov.la/data/publications/ESDF%20English%20version.pdf>

63. As stated in Lao's first Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2018)<sup>57</sup>, nearly 60% of the 160 8<sup>th</sup> NSEDP indicators were linked to the SDGs. Lao PDR's 9<sup>th</sup> NSEDP 2021–2025 currently serves as the country's overarching strategy for achieving the SDGs. In line with Agenda 2030, it aims to ensure that "No One is Left Behind" in the country's development process. It includes a strong focus on children, youth, gender, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, informing the Government's policymaking to advance sustainable and inclusive economic growth, human capital investment, infrastructure development, and a smooth transition from Least Developed Country (LDC) status. SDG 5 on gender equality is one of the cross-cutting priorities of the 8<sup>th</sup> NSEDP and 9<sup>th</sup> NSEDP. With the 9<sup>th</sup> NSEDP, Lao PDR has set a target of safe water utilization rate to reach 95% and household level toilet utilization rate to reach 85% by 2025.
64. Lao PDR's *Agricultural Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision 2030* aims at "ensuring food security, producing comparative and competitive agricultural commodities, developing clean, safe and sustainable agriculture and shift gradually to the modernization of a resilient and productive agriculture economy linking with rural development contributing to the national economic basis."

### **Development Assistance in Lao**

65. Official Development Assistance (ODA) and more traditional development cooperation provides crucial support and remains important to address Lao's national development priorities, including the graduation from LDC status and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2017, ODA investment was around 977 million USD (equivalent to 8.078 billion Kip), covering 16.2% of total investment of the year 2017. The overall increase of ODA disbursement in 2017 was driven by growth in disbursement from South-South Cooperation partners. World Bank and Asian Development Bank were two major donors with combined disbursement accounting for 17.9% of total fund. China was the top external development partner, representing 47.8% of total ODA disbursement in 2017.<sup>58</sup> Gross ODA figures for 2018 and 2019 are 677.4 million USD and 723.2 million USD respectively.<sup>59</sup>
66. WFP has been engaged in school feeding in Lao since 2002 and has established several strategic partnerships with government institutions, UN agencies, donors and NGOs. This has included four rounds of McGovern-Dole support, from FY 2008 – 2010, FY 2014 – 2016, FY 2017 – 2021 and the current award, from FY 2020 – FY 2024. The FY14 SFP provided lunch for school children in seven provinces, along with complementary resources such as school gardens, training of teachers and communities, provision of books and educational material. In 2016/2017, WFP shifted from mid-morning snacks (corn soya blend) to cooked meals in line with the Policy on Promoting School Lunch, released in 2014. Under the FY17 SMP, rice, lentils and fortified oil were provided to intervention schools in eight provinces, and the communities were encouraged to voluntarily contribute vegetables and fuelwood for school

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<sup>57</sup> <https://laopdr.un.org/en/13108-voluntary-national-review-implementation-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>. Lao PDR released a second VNR in 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR. 2019. *Foreign Aid Implementation Report (FAIR) 2018 Progress and plan 2019*. <https://rtm.org.la/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FAIR-2018-1.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/countries/laopeoplesdemocraticrepublic/aid-at-a-glance.htm>



meals. The Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) Program was conceptualised to ensure the sustainability of SMP, and was piloted in Nalae district in Luangnamtha Province from March 2017 to June 2019. Through the LRP program, WFP provided over 1,100 farmers with agricultural training, tools and seeds, for: (1) supporting school meals by way of sustained supply of vegetables thereby increasing community ownership of the program; and (2) increasing household income by strengthening sustainable farming and establishing requisite commercial linkages.

67. WFP has taken a leadership role in the creation and expansion of the NSMP, beginning with the handover in 2012 of 56 WFP-supported schools to the Government to launch the national program. WFP has also supported the Government in developing institutional frameworks, legislation and school meals management, including the Policy on Promoting School Lunch (2014), Handover Plan (2018) a Prime Minister's Decree to integrate school feeding into the national budget (currently in process) and guidelines on school meals implementation at the national, provincial, district and community levels.<sup>60</sup>
68. WFP's Country Strategic Plan 2017–2021 as well as 2022–2026 mark a pathway of gradually reducing direct implementation of programs while increasing national and local capacity strengthening initiatives, building on the strong relationships with the Government at all levels. More focus is expected to be placed on transition strategies to the Government, and support to the Government's strategic and policy frameworks. The long-term vision is to enable the Government and communities to own, manage and implement food and nutrition security programs by 2030.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

69. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the country's previously robust economic growth, with the GDP estimated to decline by 0.6% in 2020. In 2020, unemployment reached 25%, with higher unemployment rates for women, and public debt was expected to increase to at least 69% of GDP.<sup>61</sup> High exposure to and reliance on industries such as travel, tourism and hospitality (11% of total employment and 22% of urban jobs), and migrant remittances (estimated reduction of US\$125 million in 2020) make the Lao PDR economy exceptionally vulnerable to the impact of the measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus.<sup>62</sup> COVID-19 has further exacerbated the agricultural problems that the country faced due to the 2019 drought in the north and floods in the south that resulted in food shortages.
70. As a result of the pandemic and related lockdowns, children have had their education disrupted, causing learning losses in a country already facing a learning crisis. According to a World Bank report (2020), five months of school closures due to COVID-19 will result in an immediate loss of 0.6 years of schooling adjusted for quality, bringing down the effective learning that a student can achieve from 7.9 years to 7.3 years.<sup>63</sup> The outcomes are

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<sup>60</sup> WFP Lao PDR. 2021. FY 2020 USDA McGovern-Dole Proposal.

<sup>61</sup> World Bank. 2021. *Lao PDR Economic Monitor*

<sup>62</sup> UNICEF. 2021. *Impact of Covid-19 on Children, Adolescents and their families in Lao PDR.*

<https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/4936/file/impactofcovid-9onchildrenadolescentsandtheirfamiliesinlaopdr.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> World Bank. 2020. COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings.



particularly concerning for the most vulnerable students who “have a heightened risk of getting left behind”<sup>64</sup> due to fewer opportunities for learning at home.

71. During school disruptions, the introduction of distance learning options mitigates the impact of school closures and reduces the drop in attendance. However, it is the poorest (households in rural areas with and without roads), without access to TV, internet or smart phones, who are disproportionately impacted. Further, according to historical data, ethnic differences in digital accessibility exist. Mobile phone ownership and internet access have been far lower among Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Sino-Tibetan families compared with Lao-Tai families.<sup>65</sup> The impact of Covid-19 and related mitigation measures thus threatens to reverse decades of progress made in Lao PDR.

### 1.3. SUBJECT BEING EVALUATED

72. The subject of the study is the WFP supported SFP for FY2020-2024 award, funded by USDA's McGovern-Dole program. The SFP activities are aligned to support the McGovern-Dole program's highest-level Strategic Objectives: MGD SO1: Improved Literacy of School-Aged Children; MGD SO2: Increased Use of Health and Dietary Practices; and LRP SO1: Improved Effectiveness of Food Assistance through Local and Regional Procurement and Agriculture Support Component. The program is based on the logic that the Strategic Objectives would be achieved through (a) Improved quality of literacy instruction (MGD 1.1), (b) Improved attentiveness (MGD 1.2), (c) Improved student attendance (MGD 1.3), (d) improved knowledge of health and hygiene practices (MGD 2.1), (e) Increased knowledge of safe food preparation and storage practices (MGD 2.2), (f) Increased knowledge among schools and communities around nutrition (MGD 2.3), (g) Increased access to clean water and sanitation services (MDG 2.4), (h) Increased access to preventive health interventions (MGD 2.5) and (i) Increased Access to Requisite Food Preparation and Storage Tools and Equipment (MGD 2.6). The subsequent section talks about the critical program components. It is noteworthy that major changes or refinements have been made to the program design over the baseline period. The Results Frameworks have been attached in Annex 18.
73. WFP has incorporated a strong focus on capacity strengthening to ensure sustainability by targeting the following McGovern-Dole Foundational Results: increased capacity of government institutions (MGD 1.4.1/2.7.1), improved policy and regulatory framework (MGD 1.4.2/2.7.2), increased government support (MGD 1.4.3/2.7.3) and increased engagement of local organizations and community groups (MGD 1.4.4/2.7.4). These results pertain to the strengthening of the external ecosystem vis-à-vis policy framework and capacities of the government. Further, they also relate to increasing engagement of the local organisations and community groups, thereby building community's ownership of the program.
74. The proposed program targets high-need schools in the 17 MoES priority districts with the aim to transition and graduate these schools to the NSMP by the end of 2025. The program will focus on increasing capacity at the school, district, provincial, and national levels so that

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<sup>64</sup> Global Partnership for Education. 2020. Lao PDR gets additional funding to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on education.

<sup>65</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Impact of Covid-19 on Children, Adolescents and their families in Lao PDR.

the program can be transitioned to government management when the program ends. This program is a collaboration between WFP, leading the school feeding activities in nine districts, CRS – leading the literacy and WASH activities along with the community mobilization components in five districts – and MoES facilitating the provision of school feeding in the four northern districts. The Terms of Reference (ToR) of the baseline study are attached in Annex 1.

75. The program hinges upon some key assumptions. The program assumes that the Government would continue with its commitment and allocation of funding, staffing and other resources to school feeding (NSMP) in the 10<sup>th</sup> NSEDP. While the program proposes to engage with the farmers and provide agricultural support to them, it assumes that the farmers do not witness any large-scale natural disasters and experience economic loss or any form of loss of livelihoods. The program, by way of investing in community mobilization, assumes to develop greater levels of ownership at the community level, ensuring sustained contribution of cash, food produce and labour towards the school meals.

### **Planned Outputs and Beneficiaries**

76. **School meals:** The program aims to provide daily hot lunch to approximately 64,156 pre-primary and primary school students in 707 schools in 17 MoES priority districts throughout the entire 175-day school academic year, which runs from September to June.
77. **Local and regional procurement:** Under the current program, WFP will procure locally and regionally produced commodities such as canned fish, fortified oil, as well as a portion of the fortified rice.
78. **Literacy and learning materials:** This aspect of the program will focus on 90 schools in Khammouane Province. The package of activities will focus on emergent literacy skills covering the first two years of primary school – with an emphasis on non-Lao-speaking children. The program will also establish corner libraries stocked with MoES-approved fiction and non-fiction storybooks.
79. **Teacher and Administrator Training:** In alignment with the national curriculum rollout by BEQUAL, the program will provide training on formative reading assessments and differentiated learning to provincial staff at Provincial Education and Sports Service (PESS) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs), to district Pedagogical Advisors (PAs), and 180 teachers in the community across 90 schools on a yearly basis, from FY22 till FY25.
80. **WASH activities:** WASH activities will target approximately 130 schools that do not have a functional water source. The program will provide improved water source infrastructure in these schools through the building or rehabilitation of water sources and installation of handwashing stations, combined with school-based hygiene messaging. WASH activities will be sustained through building the capacity of community-level stakeholders to self-manage their infrastructure.

**Table 2: McGovern-Dole SFP beneficiaries**

Beneficiary type		FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Children receiving daily school meals	Total	0	62,719	63,000	63,000	63,000
	Female	0	30,319	30,350	30,350	30,350

	Male	0	32,400	38,720	38,720	38,720
Number of teachers/educators/ teaching assistants trained or certified	Total	0	90	90	90	90
	Female	0	54	54	54	54
	Male	0	36	36	36	36
Number of individuals receiving short- term agricultural sector productivity or food security training	Total	900	900	1,800	1,800	1,800
	Female	450	450	900	900	900
	Male	450	450	900	900	900
Number of schools using an improved water source		74	339	435	736	736

### **Program Timeline**

81. WFP Lao PDR has been awarded \$25.0 million to implement the McGovern-Dole-funded school feeding program (2020 - 2024) in Lao PDR. The five-year program closely aligns with the priorities of the Government of Lao PDR and the US Government on school feeding, nutrition and education, and will help to strengthen the capacities of the host government and communities in school feeding to enable a smooth, coordinated transition of all WFP-supported schools into the National School Meals Program (NSMP) in 2025, in line with government plans.

### **Resource Requirements and Funding of McGovern-Dole SFP**

82. WFP will implement a 5-year McGovern-Dole program in Lao PDR. The total Federal award amount is \$25.0 million. This includes USDA commodity (\$2,548,800), freight (\$1,105,000), and administrative costs (\$21,346,200). The following budget narrative describes the operating budget and does not describe the commodity and freight portions of Federal funding.

### **Gender Dimensions of the Intervention**

83. As highlighted prior, a vast array of literature and statistical studies have highlighted the intersectionality of gender with health and nutrition. In recognition of these, several gender focused components have been included as part of interventions. The WFP School Feeding Policy (2020) and Gender Policy for 2022-2026 lay emphasis on recognizing and including specific needs of young girls, ethnic and religious groups, and children with disabilities. In order to promote inclusion and equity in education, WFP has supported the Government's efforts to increase enrolment and attendance of school girls.

84. WFP has integrated gender components in several of the McGovern-Dole SFP intervention implementation processes since the FY14 award to include measures such as the promotion of sharing of tasks in school gardens between boys and girls without defining tasks by gender, strengthening of nutrition education and mainstreaming of gender into field-level activities by using new literacy materials to challenge unsuitable gender roles and improve sensitivity. Hence, the current evaluation would also focus on drawing a larger gender analysis for FY20 program, by way of ensuring gender balance as far as coverage of the sample size is concerned at the school and community level, and hence, voicing issues and concerns most relevant for them. With the aim of ensuring fair representation of women's narrative around food & nutrition, literacy, WASH and agriculture, the evaluation design includes equal proportion (50:50) of boys and girls for quantitative surveys,

interactions with men and women at the community level, as well as in-depth interviews with the Presidents of Village Women Unions.

#### **1.4. EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT, LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

85. In consideration of the nature of baseline studies, the current evaluation mainly focussed on assessing the *relevance, effectiveness and sustainability* of the program with lesser focus on *efficiency*; establishing *impact* at this stage was not possible.
86. To assess the *relevance of the program*, the evaluation sought to answer whether the program activities planned for the FY20 grant were aligned with the national priorities, strategies and the five-year plans of the GoL around education, nutrition, health and WASH. Additionally, the evaluation examined whether the design and interventions of the program are relevant to the needs of girls and women, particularly those belonging to the most vulnerable groups.
87. At the baseline stage, the *effectiveness of the program* is assessed by capturing the current values on indicators such as enrolment, attendance, attentiveness, availability of school infrastructure, dietary diversity, adoption of better health and hygiene practices and overall health-related absenteeism to establish baseline values across sampled schools. These established values are critical in determining the progress and impact of the program following implementation and consequent monitoring and evaluations.
88. The evaluation assesses the *efficiency of the program* with regards to the extent to which its design would potentially ensure efficiency in service delivery and handover. The evaluation would review the planned processes of implementation, partnerships planned and established, and distribution of roles and responsibilities in place at the initial stage.
89. From the *sustainability perspective*, the evaluation assesses the extent to which learnings from the past programs have been incorporated to increase community and government interest, participation, capacities and commitment to take forward various interventions of the program. The evaluation also assessed the potential for developing and sustaining ownership with respect to the school feeding program, at the community level, with special emphasis on women and women institutions like Village Women Unions.

#### **1.5. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

90. The current baseline evaluation took place during the period between August 2021 and January 2022. The study covered the McGovern-Dole FY20-24 program, including plans and targets for activities and processes related to its implementation, resourcing, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Overall, the baseline evaluation consisted of three broad components, including (a) review of secondary data, (b) preparation for primary data collection, and (c) analysis of baseline findings. More details pertaining to operationalization of the baseline evaluation are provided in Annex 3. The data collection was undertaken in November 2021, after schools in the country were reopened.

##### **Research Design**

91. The study methodology is guided by the ToR underpinned by the results framework of the FY20 program. The evaluation followed a **mixed-method approach** to address the key information areas under the five criteria of the **OECD-DAC** using primary data collected

through the quantitative survey, KIIs, IDIs, Observations, and secondary data collected through desk review of secondary documents. Data from secondary review and the primary component was synthesized and triangulated to arrive at programmatic findings, ensuring their validity, reliability and credibility. In addition to OECD-DAC, the evaluation used a combination of (a) socio-ecological approach, looking at the intervention work through the lens of four key domains - individual level, institutional level, social level and the external environment, and (b) the logic model approach, establishing linkages among program resources, activities, and outputs, thus explaining short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes related to the identified issues. The following schematic represents our technical approach for the baseline study. More details pertaining to the nature of evaluation tools used for the primary data collection are provided in Annex 3.

**Table 3: Evaluation Design**

Methods of data collection	Target Group/ Source of Information	
	Primary Data Collection	Secondary Review
Quantitative (Structured Questionnaires)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Questionnaire</li> <li>• Parent Questionnaire</li> <li>• Physical Observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USDA McGovern-Dole FY2020 – Program Proposal</li> <li>• USDA McGovern-Dole FY17 Baseline report</li> <li>• Semi-annual report – USDA McGovern-Dole FY17 2019 and 2020</li> <li>• WFP Annual Country Report 2020</li> <li>• WFP CO Laos – CSP 2017-2021 Evaluation Report - draft</li> <li>• Endline Evaluation on USDA LRP</li> <li>• LSIS 2017 (Lao Social Indicator Survey 2017)</li> <li>• EMIS 2020-2021</li> <li>• 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan(2016–2020)</li> <li>• The draft 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan</li> <li>• The Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2016–2020) and (2021-2025)</li> <li>• National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action (2021–2025)</li> <li>• National Social Protection Strategy 2030.</li> </ul>
Qualitative (Focus Group Discussions, IDIs and KIIs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KIIs with government representatives at district, province and national level as well as local NGOs/Cooperating Partners (CPs)</li> <li>• IDIs with school heads and school teachers</li> <li>• FGDs with parents VEDC, PTA, farmers and other community members</li> </ul>	

**Indicative outputs of data collection**

Methods of data collection	Target Group/ Source of Information	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish baseline values of key indicators</li> <li>Establish values of enrolment and attentiveness (from direct and indirect influence)</li> <li>Availability and access to food supplies and other school materials</li> <li>Identify key change agents</li> <li>Implementation modalities, changes and reasons, policy perspective, province and district level initiatives, resources and partnerships, innovation and learning</li> </ul> <p><i>Wherever appropriate sex and ethnicity disaggregated analysis will be provided</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build context and relevance of the program</li> <li>Program design's suitability to local needs and responsiveness to external factors (e.g. COVID-19)</li> <li>Gender and equity considerations of the program</li> <li>Establish alignment of the program with government initiatives and WFP's country strategy, GoL's policies and programs such as NSMP</li> <li>Provide a benchmark for performance indicators</li> <li>Key design elements that can contribute to direct and indirect change</li> <li>Pathways created for sustainability; scope of replicability and key considerations for recommendations, especially from a global pandemic perspective</li> </ul>

92. At the time of baseline no major differences were anticipated among intervention and control (non-intervention) schools, with respect to the presence of necessary infrastructure as-well as the situation of key program outcome and impact indicators. Thus, for evaluating the program outcomes and impact, a purposive-comparison sampling design was adopted wherein, instead of drawing using comparison between intervention and control schools, the study undertook intra-intervention comparison. Within the purposive-comparison design, quasi-experimental techniques were deployed to classify schools into different sub-groups, identified by a combination of demographic and programmatic variables<sup>66</sup>. Since the target schools for WASH and Model schools have not been identified yet, the two programmatic variables could not be used for developing sub-groups among intervention sample at the time of baseline. The comparison of outcome and impact indicators across these intra-intervention sub-groups across baseline, mid-term and end line evaluation would help determine the efficacy of different program components across each of these sub-groups.
93. The findings have been synthesised **to benchmark the values of the performance indicators**, identifying the enabling factors and foreseen challenges, examine contribution towards government's agenda, innovations and good practices and key considerations for scaling up. In order to mainstream GEEW throughout the analysis, all school-level data includes disaggregated analyses by sex, and sampling of students ensures equal representation of boys and girls. The key baseline evaluation questions are presented in the

<sup>66</sup> Demographic Variable: Type of roads – improved vs. unimproved; Programmatic variables: Model vs. Non-Model schools and WASH vs. Non-WASH schools

table below. It is noteworthy that no major changes have been made in the evaluation questions during the baseline period.

**Table 4: McGovern-Dole FY20 evaluation questions**

Focus Area: Evaluation Criteria	Key Evaluation Questions
<p><b>Coherence &amp; Relevance</b></p>	<p><b>Coherence with government’s education, health &amp; nutrition, social protection and other relevant policies, strategies and plans</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How well is the program aligned to national policy, national needs, WFP policy guidance and donor and partner strategies?</li> <li>• How well is the design of the SFP aligned with the Lao government’s education, school health and nutrition (including school feeding), social protection and other relevant policies, strategies and plans?</li> <li>• To what extent have the interventions under the program aligned with WFP’s Country Strategic Plan (2017–2021 and 2022–2026)?</li> </ul> <p><b>Design of the program aligned with needs of the relevant communities, school-level stakeholders and the most vulnerable groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent has the package of interventions/design planned as part of the program have been based on adequate needs assessment [design including program components, intended targeting, modalities, relevance to identified need based on analysis (e.g. gender, capacity)]</li> <li>• To what extent is the <b>design/SFP</b> appropriate/responsive to the context and aligned to needs of the most vulnerable groups (women, men, girls and boys)?</li> <li>• To what extent is the <b>design/SFP</b> aligned to needs of the relevant local community and school level stakeholders?</li> </ul> <p>To what extent has the SFP been relevant to address the capacity needs of the government national and provincial stakeholders managing the NSMP (specifically from a post-handover perspective and sustainability perspective)?</p> <p>To what extent was the SchoolFeeding Program based on a sound gender analysis? And to what extent was the design and implementation of the School Feeding Program gender responsive and sensitive?</p>
<p><b>Effectiveness</b></p>	<p><b>Current status of learning outcomes, enrolment, attendance and participation rates</b></p> <p>What is the current status of literacy and literacy instructions in the intervention schools? What are the current attendance and participation rates for school aged children among different intervention sub-groups? What are the current literacy rates for school aged children among intervention sub-groups? What is the current status of literacy instructions in the intervention schools?</p>



Focus Area: Evaluation Criteria	Key Evaluation Questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are current knowledge, attitudes and practices around literacy and education among intervention sub-groups?</li> <li>• To what extent can literacy support and infrastructure planned, cater to improved literacy outcomes for children and communities?</li> </ul> <p><b>Current dietary practices, KAP of different stakeholders, and nutrition related infrastructure in schools</b></p> <p>What are the current dietary practices and dietary diversity status across intervention sub-groups?</p> <p>To what extent do students demonstrate use of child health and nutrition practices? What are current knowledge, attitudes and practices around healthy diets across intervention sub-groups?</p> <p>What is the nature and status of nutrition related school infrastructure? (Access to clean drinking/cooking water, storage, kitchens etc.) To what extent are community members likely to be involved in the provision of school meals?</p> <p>What is the nature of agricultural support and infrastructure existent in the schools? How would agricultural infrastructure be maintained and improved in the schools? To what extent can school level agricultural support and infrastructure planned, cater to nutritional knowledge and needs of children? To what extent would community members be involved in the same?</p> <p><b>Nature of WASH infrastructure in school and at home, WASH support needed, involvement of VEDC and community</b></p> <p>What are current knowledge, attitudes and practices around WASH practices across intervention sub-groups?</p> <p>What is the nature and status of WASH related school infrastructure? (Access to clean water, separate toilets, status of facilities, access to drinking water, handwashing stations etc.)</p> <p>To what extent can nutrition and WASH support and infrastructure planned, cater to improved health and nutrition outcomes for children and communities?</p> <p>To what extent would VEDC members be involved in WASH related interventions?</p>

Focus Area: Evaluation Criteria	Key Evaluation Questions
	<p><b>Production of diverse crops, access to markets, status of agriculture knowledge and infrastructure available, willingness to contribute to school meals</b></p> <p>Is there sufficient production of diverse and nutritious crops in the communities?</p> <p>What is the nature and status of agricultural knowledge and infrastructure available to the community members?</p> <p>To what extent are farmer groups/communities contributing to the nutritional needs of school aged children?</p>
<b>Efficiency</b>	<p><b>Manner in which program design ensure efficiency in service delivery and handover</b></p> <p>To what extent does the program design (including partnerships with CRS and MoES) ensure efficiency in service delivery and handover?</p>
<b>Impact (Not for baseline)</b>	<p><b>Analysing gender dimensions of SFP FY2020</b></p> <p>In what ways would different groups benefit from the intervention outcomes? To what extent would GEEW outcomes vary by stakeholder groups?</p> <p>What is the status of enrolment, drop-out rates, and retention rates in 12 provinces? What factors could affect results?</p>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<p><b>Capacity levels of different stakeholders, willingness to participate in the program, elements that facilitate handover, need for additional advocacy by WFP</b></p> <p>What are the capacity levels of VEDCs and communities with respect to supporting the SFP? Is there evidence within communities for self-sustainability of SFPs over the long run?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent are VEDCs and Farmer Groups willing to participate in the agriculture support activities of the program?</li> <li>• <i>To what extent are VEDC and Farmer Groups open to diversification of crops for meeting nutritional needs of children?</i></li> <li>• <i>To what extent are Farmer Groups open to diversification of crops for improving marketability in accessible markets?</i></li> <li>• <i>To what extent do VEDC and Farmer Groups and communities are open to contributing to school feeding programs?</i></li> </ul> <p>To what extent does the design of the School Feeding Program facilitate the handover of the SFP to GoL and integration into the National School Meals Program at the end of the program timeframe?</p>

Focus Area: Evaluation Criteria	Key Evaluation Questions
	What are the capacity levels of GoL and implementation partners with respect to supporting the SFP? Is there evidence for self-sustainability of SFPs over the long run? Which components of the SFP will be the most sustainable in terms of operational efficiency?
<b>General and Covid-19</b>	<p><b>Impact of Covid-19 on community needs and the program, influence on sustainability, need for modifications in program design</b></p> <p>What is the impact of COVID on women and girls in the program areas? What modification are needed to the program to compensate for this? Are there any foreseeable influences of COVID-19 on the sustainability of the program?</p> <p>Is there evidence supporting need for reallocating structure of program budget in consideration of the pandemic? To what extent has COVID-19 affected or is expected to affect policy level contributions to school education and nutrition programs/School Feeding Programs?</p>

94. Most of the evaluation questions hold relevance even during the mid-term and end line evaluations. Measuring level of coherence with government's education, health & nutrition, social protection and other relevant policies, strategies and plans, as-well-as program's relevance, apart from setting the benchmarks for key outcome and impact indicators had enhanced focus during the baseline. The mid-term as-well-as the end line evaluation on the other hand, apart from tracking progress in outcome and impact indicators, would include high focus around efficiency and sustainability of the program. In addition to this, a few more evaluation questions specifically for the mid-term and end line evaluation would added to the evaluation matrix. Details of such questions have been included in the detailed evaluation matrix in annex 4.

### **Sample Size Covered**

95. The table provided below elucidates the total sample size covered as part of the baseline evaluation. More details around the evaluation design and methodology are provided in Annex 3.

**Table 5: Sample Size Covered**

Target Group	Discussions per unit	Total number of discussions
Total provinces		11
Total districts		17
Total number of schools	2 per district	34
Quantitative Survey		
Students	16 per school (8 boys-8 girls)	544
Parents	5 per school (2-3 men and 2-3 women)	170

Target Group	Discussions per unit	Total number of discussions
Students (Learning Assessment in Khammouane)	10 per school in 20 schools	200
<b>Total</b>		<b>914</b>
<b>Key Informant Interviews</b>		
District Level Officials		17
Province Level Officials		23
National Level Officials		5
WFP Official at National Level		3
NGOs and CPs		8
<b>Total</b>		<b>56</b>
<b>In-Depth Interviews</b>		
School Head	1 per school	32
School Teacher	1 per school	33
Community (PTA and VEDC members)	2 per school	61
Farmers	1 per community	34
Parents	1 per district	17
<b>Total</b>		<b>177</b>

96. The baseline sample was spread across all 11 program provinces covering 17 districts. 34 schools were sampled randomly for the baseline. For the literacy component, 16 schools in Khammouane province were randomly sampled. The sample distribution is detailed in Annex 3 and a list of sample schools is presented in Annex 6.
97. Inclusion of ‘type of roads’ as a sampling variable is a measure of remoteness of schools. Given that eventually 34 schools were randomly sampled across 17 program districts in a way that the proportion of improved vs. unimproved roads in the sampled schools was broadly identical to the sampling universe, ensuring adequate representation of remote schools and populations in the baseline evaluation sample, which is expected to translate in insuring inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable sections of the Laotian society.
98. Quantitative and qualitative interviews were conducted with school-children from primary grades, their parents, teachers and school head, while IDIs were conducted with community members and farmers. Physical observations of school infrastructure, storage area and cooking areas were noted. KIs were conducted by the National Consultant with key stakeholders at the national and provincial levels (specifically from MoES, MAF, MoH, WFP and CP).

### **Data Triangulation**

99. The evaluation team triangulated data from the primary survey across stakeholders as well as with secondary data. Complementary observations and comments made by all stakeholders were taken into account in the final analysis and the preparation of the evaluation report. The findings were synthesised to determine the achievement of the

performance indicators, identify the enabling factors and barriers, understand the perceptions of the beneficiaries towards the program services, and examine contribution towards government's agenda, innovations and learnings. For instance, similar sets of information including knowledge, attitude and practices around nutrition, literacy & education, and WASH were collected from school children, their parents as-well-as the teachers, and triangulated to identify of such information enabled the evaluation to enhance credibility and validity the findings, and highlight contradictions, if any.

100. The quality and reliability of the data was augmented by way of taking certain specific steps, including conducting intense training of the qualitative and quantitative data collectors, ensuring that there was complete understanding of the research tools and the sampling mechanisms, undertaking strong monitoring checks on the collected data to identify and correct errors, and ensuring systematic procedures for data cleaning and coding before analysis. The evaluation design ensured representation of both the genders as-well-as all major communities across the 11 program provinces, including the most marginalised sub-groups, signifying equality in the primary data collected for the baseline evaluation.

101. The primary data collection at the community level was conducted by the local field staff. Adoption of all Covid-19 related safety measures and precautions was ensured. The data collection team strictly followed WHO guidelines and those issued by the local government, practice social distancing and go through regular temperature screen tests.

### ***Integration of Gender into the Methodology***

102. The evaluation focussed on analyses of sex disaggregated data in school feeding, literacy, and attendance. It also provided sex disaggregated data (depending on availability) on attainment of program outcomes related to enrolment, attendance, disease-related absenteeism of the students and health and nutrition practices of the community.

103. Additionally, the evaluation examined the gender roles envisaged in the design of the FY20 program with respect to enhancing participation and involvement of women in local community groups and VEDCs. Furthermore, the evaluation team also assessed whether the plans for monitoring of the implementing partners considered gender dimensions. A gender balance was ensured in the data collection team as well.

### **SITE MAPPING**

104. The Baseline evaluation was conducted across the 11 provinces of Bokeo, Luangprabang, Xiengkhouang, Vientiane, Vientiane Capital, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Salavan, Champasack, Xekong, and Attapeu; sampling of specific villages and schools across these provinces happened randomly, with due consultation from WFP CO. The mapping of these domains although random, included schools and villages from some of the most vulnerable and underserved regions.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

105. The analysis for quantitative data aimed to establish baseline values of key indicators as per the program framework across the comparison sub-groups. Raw data obtained from the field was checked by the data analyst for consistency errors, duplicity of cases and

missing data (refer to Annex 10 for detailed note on Data Cleaning and Analysis). Further, through intra-intervention comparison across sub-groups, the analysis aided in identifying key influencing demographic and programmatic factors, along which, future monitoring and evaluations for program impacts was assessed. The data analysis provided descriptive analysis of sex disaggregated data while data obtained for gender-related questions were analysed comprehensively to report on the gender dimensions of the evaluation.

106. Qualitative data was analysed using content analysis. The qualitative data from IDIs and KIIs were documented, translated, coded and analysed by the researchers. Finally the analysis of primary data was triangulated and supported by secondary data. A detailed review of data cleaning and analysis plans has been provided in Annex 10

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

107. The evaluation team understands the UNEG norms, standards and ethical guidelines and adheres to ethical practice and code of conduct during all its evaluations following its own ethical guidelines and that of the clients. The team also especially caters to engagement needs of sensitive population groups such as women and girls as-well-as social and religious groups. *The team for this assignment has been guided by the UNEG ethical guidance principles* which ensured that no violations, like collecting data without consent, collecting data not pertaining to this assignment, accessing areas within the institution premises for which approval has not been taken etc., were committed during the data collection. Details of ethical considerations followed have been provided in Annexure 12.

## RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

108. The proposed methodology and team composition is accommodative of the potential risks that arose during the evaluation, some of which include (i) mobility restrictions and guidelines issued by the Government to contain the spread of Covid-19, (ii) language barriers while interacting with non-Lao speaking communities and (iii) climate and weather related limitations like rainfalls.

109. To address these risks, **mitigation measures** in the form of prepared and grounded teams, adequate communication, and context sensitive planning with the CO have been undertaken.

110. To address the unpredictable status of Covid-19 related closures, we undertook face-to-face interactions for quantitative surveys with students and parents, and qualitative telephonic interviews with community members, school staff and other stakeholders. Risks associated with virtual data collection and mitigation measures have been detailed in Annex 11.

111. To avoid difficulty in interacting with communities which speak in local languages/dialect other than the Lao language, we sought the help of local implementation partners/NGOs or the village head or any other local translator, with respect to assuming the responsibilities of translating the questions and responses.

112. Finally, due to the recency effect, there were chances that the respondents might have talked extensively about situation post the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than recalling the

normative status of education, health and nutrition in schools and communities, prior to the pandemic. Given the special circumstances, the prevailing context was into consideration during analysis.

## LIMITATIONS

113. Some of the key limitations to the baseline evaluation include:

**Table 6: Limitations and Mitigation Measures**

Limitations	Mitigation Measures
Qualitative discussions were conducted telephonically, which made it difficult to capture specific forms of observational and non-verbal data	A team of experienced moderators was deployed for the qualitative component. Also, adequate emphasis was laid on quality measures during the training for moderators to capture accurate qualitative information over telephonic interviews.
Behavioural indicators were captured via interviews, not directly observed, making responses susceptible to social desirability bias	Behavioural data was captured from multiple respondent categories, for instance, children, their parents and teachers, which helped in triangulating and validating the data.
Due to the recent impact of Covid-19, the recorded values for certain indicators, particularly around literacy and nutritional intake, might be reported lower than actual by respondents	Covid-19 is likely to have negatively affected the livelihoods of people in certain regions, resulting in fall in income, which might have negatively affected certain outcome indicators around nutrition. Similarly, literacy and education outcomes was likely to be negatively affected by the lockdown. However, the program design intends to ascertain and compare the change (delta) among different intervention sub-groups across baseline, mid-term and end line evaluations. This, as a result, is unlikely to be affected by low baseline values.
Since the target schools for WASH and Model schools have not been identified yet, the two programmatic variables could not be used for developing sub-groups among intervention sample at the time of baseline.	The two programmatic variables (WASH & Non-WASH, and Model & Non-Model) would be included at the time of the end line evaluation; the 8 sub-groups would be created retrospectively, and differences across these sub-groups would be analyzed through a post-facto analysis.
Data collection could not be undertaken in Longchen district, Xiasonboun.	Due to a lack of a timely response from the Government of Laos and the need to continue with the project, it was decided not to include Longcheng district in FY20 WFP Laos



## QUALITY ASSURANCE

114. WFP has developed a Decentralized Evaluation Quality Assurance System (DEQAS) based on the UNEG norms and standards and good practices of the international evaluation community (the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) and the Development Assistance Commission (DAC)). It sets out process with in-built steps for quality assurance and templates for evaluation products. DEQAS standards and guidelines will be systematically applied during this evaluation by evaluation team at NRMC.
115. The ET ensured that all prescribed quality protocols including the DEQAS and UNEG norms and standards were integrated with the data collection process to improve the quality of deliverables. The team leader ensured delivery of high quality products that comply with DEQAS and orientations provided by the Evaluation Manager. Some of the key steps to ensure quality at various stages of the survey have been mentioned in Annex 11.
116. In view of the COVID crisis, additional ethical guidelines pertaining to behaviour of data collector during data collection exercise and while interacting with the community or other stakeholders has been added. Entire data collection team strictly followed the guidelines issued by WHO and local government for safeguarding against contracting and spreading COVID-19.
117. The team also ensured that any COVID-19 related information about any participant was not revealed publically and was only used to re-plan or modify the data collection process to ensure safety for everyone. A detailed field manual was created in accordance with WHO norms and standards to carry out safe data collection, prioritizing the health of very individual.
118. The ET developed a detailed field movement plan in advance, indicating daily movements and number of interactions to be conducted. NRMC sought WFP's support in contacting and scheduling meetings with government officials and partners in advance. A field plan for the field mission has been attached in Annex 8 for reference.
119. The data collection team was hired locally from Vientiane. NRMC provided the data collection team a detailed explanation of the tools (two day class room training) which also included training on safe data collection during COVID-19. During training, specific sessions were conducted on ethical issues faced during data collection and data integrity.
120. A robust monitoring process was followed for quality assurance during data collection. At least one member of the core evaluation team of NRMC was in constant touch with the team present in the field during the entire period of data collection. The WFP CO was also regularly updated about the field progress.

## 2. Evaluation findings

### COHERENCE & RELEVANCE

#### 2.1. EVALUATION QUESTION 1: DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM ALIGNED WITH NEEDS OF THE RELEVANT COMMUNITIES, SCHOOL-LEVEL STAKEHOLDERS AND THE MOST VULNERABLE GROUPS

121. Section 1 showcases the country context around nutrition, education and WASH-related needs across the country, along with the design of McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20. The program draws from the previous McGovern-Dole-funded programs in Lao PDR, expands school feeding and related interventions, developing requisite capacities and systems within the local communities as-well-as government departments across levels.
122. 40 priority districts were identified by MoES, primarily based on their performance around certain key education indicators such as net enrolment rate<sup>67</sup>, primary education repetition rate<sup>68</sup>, and primary education dropout rate<sup>69</sup>. While the first 22 districts from the list were covered through a combination of the FY 17 McGovern-Dole award under WFP, as well as the CRS program and districts covered under the NSMP, McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 focusses on the remaining 17 priority districts.
123. **Health & Nutrition:** World Bank report *Nutrition in Lao PDR: Causes, Determinants, and Bottlenecks 2016* identifies lack of quality in the form of dietary diversity as one of the primary causes for poor nutritional status in Lao PDR. The issue compounds further as a result of insufficient awareness of nutrition at the community level, poverty and poor access to market<sup>70</sup>, particularly in the upland areas and among the rural population.
124. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 is designed to address some of the principal causes of malnutrition. WFP finalised ration for the school meals ensuring dietary diversity as well as nutritional value, while keeping in mind local tastes and food preferences. Apart from improving micronutrient status among school children, the program aims to address existing information gaps at the community level, by (a) investing in nutrition awareness activities and (b) training cooks about the nutritional value of different food items. Provision of school lunches on a regular basis is also expected to reduce economic burden for vulnerable families by reducing household food expenditure.
125. **Agriculture and smallholder farmers:** Agriculture in Lao PDR is marked with constrained physical access to land productive land and natural resources. Almost 80% of all farmers in the country are small landholders<sup>71</sup>, who are primarily engaged in paddy production<sup>72</sup>. Smallholder farmers' ability to secure livelihood is severely constricted by lack of technical know-how resulting in poor productivity and inconsistent quality, lack of access to market

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<sup>67</sup> Lower than 60%

<sup>68</sup> Higher than 7%

<sup>69</sup> Higher than 6%

<sup>70</sup> WFP. 2017. Fill the Nutrient Gap Lao PDR Summary Report

<sup>71</sup> WFP. 2016. Strategic Review of Food and Nutrition Security in Lao People's Democratic Republic

<sup>72</sup> USDA Foreign Agricultural Service. 2020. *GAIN Report: Laos Rice Report Annual*

and market information as-well-as limited options for food processing<sup>73</sup>. In rural areas, most men are likely to be landholders, as acquiring land titles for women from various ethnic groups is very difficult.

126. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 aims to establish and support farmer groups, with enhanced focus on poor households, households with any person living with disability and women-headed households. The component proposes to support agricultural production by way of provisioning requisite agricultural inputs such as vegetable seeds, gardening tools and materials for building greenhouses. The component intends to foster a communal ecosystem, encouraging lead farmers to attend trainings, and share acquired skills with other farmers within their community. The program offers agricultural technical skills, including approaches to climate-smart agriculture, apart from building administration & management skills, aimed towards strengthening farmer groups.
127. In order to reduce wastage of vegetables and other perishable food items, particularly in villages with poor access to markets, the program aims to support food processing and preservation initiatives. In addition to this, it is essential that the program invests in strengthening linkages between farmers and traders of agriculture produce, especially in remote locations, enhancing trade.
128. **Education and literacy:** GoL continues to retain Lao language as the only medium of instruction in schools. As a result, education and literacy outcomes across the country are particularly poor among students from non-Lao speaking ethnic tribes<sup>74</sup>, resulting in higher chances of drop outs. Education and learning outcomes are severely compounded by unavailability of reading infrastructure such as library and reading books, as well as lack of teachers with adequate knowledge and pedagogical skills.
129. The literacy component lays primary emphasis around preventing dropout and grade repetition among students from ethnic groups who do not speak Lao as their mother tongue. The program acknowledges the need to strengthen teachers' capacity to be able to effectively assess students' reading abilities, and accordingly offer tailored adaptive learning instructions. The program also intends to strengthen learning infrastructure, by establishing corner libraries stocked with MoES-approved books and high-quality learning materials.
130. **WASH for Schools:** With more than one-fourth of schools in Lao lacking access to water<sup>75</sup>, it is extremely difficult for the school staff to ensure maintenance of WASH infrastructure and adherence to desirable WASH behaviour. Lack of consistent access to water forces students to go home for tasks such as drinking water, washing their hands, or using the latrine.
131. WASH interventions under McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 primarily focus on improving water source infrastructure in 130 schools, which would be followed by (a) installing hand washing

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<sup>73</sup> IFAD. 2018. Lao People's Democratic Republic Country Strategic Opportunities Programme 2018-2024

<sup>74</sup> UNICEF and MoES. 2015. Student Learning Outcomes in Primary Education in Lao PDR

<sup>75</sup> World Bank and MoES. SABER Service Delivery Survey Report

stations, and (b) building awareness among school staff, students and community-level stakeholders around maintaining cleanliness and hygiene.

132. **Design of McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 is Gender Sensitive:** The current program draws extensively from the learnings of the previous McGovern-Dole grant awards, which were evaluated using a sound gender analysis. Similarly, the Pilot LRP initiative undertaken in District Nalae of Luang Namtha informed the design of agriculture component for the current program. The evaluation of the LRP entailed effects of the pilot initiative on both male and female farmers separately, drawing learnings which have also informed the current program.

133. The design for McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 involves reaching out to all students in the program schools, providing benefits of nutritious school lunch meals, literacy and WASH-related interventions to both boys and girls. As part of ensuring universal coverage, the program ensures that the likelihood of drawing benefits of the intervention is equal for both boys and girls. At the same time, by design the program reaches out to 17 priority districts, and hence, lends enhanced focus to the schools in the most remote geographies, prioritizing students from ethnic groups who do not speak Lao as their mother tongue, and girls from ethnic groups.

#### **Sub-research question 1.1: SFP FY20 Based on adequate needs assessment**

134. Literacy and education component under MGD-SFP FY20 has predominantly drawn learnings from the USAID Reading MATTERS conceptual framework and the literacy interventions of the revised national curriculum rollout led by BEQUAL program. Some of the key insights drawn from the BEQUAL rollout include (a) need for enhanced technical support for teachers enabling them to undertake rapid assessments of students and offer tailored learning instructions, and (b) need for additional learning support among non-Lao speakers.

135. For the agriculture component, WFP plans to undertake a needs assessment in collaboration with MoES and MAF to identify target villages and farmers or farmer groups. It is envisioned that decisions pertaining to the types of crops to be promoted, nature of technologies to be adopted and other support to be offered as part of the agriculture component would be taken keeping in mind, (a) need for locally-available nutritious food for the school meals program, (b) possibilities of market linkages and (c) climate change adaptability.

## **2.2. EVALUATION QUESTION 2: COHERENCE WITH GOVERNMENT'S EDUCATION, HEALTH & NUTRITION, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND OTHER RELEVANT POLICIES, STRATEGIES AND PLANS**

136. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 aligns well with the priorities of the Government of Lao PDR on school feeding, nutrition, education and WASH. The program, therefore is aimed at strengthening the capacities of the government system across national, provincial and district levels, as-well-as the local communities in school feeding, which is expected to ensure a smooth transition of all WFP-supported schools into the National School Meals Program in-line with government plans.

137. The NNSPA aims at reducing malnutrition rates among women and children, and improving the nutritional status of the multi-ethnic<sup>76</sup> people so that they may be healthy and have a high quality of living. The plan of action outlines four broad strategic directions (and 11 strategic objectives), addressing (a) immediate, (b) underlying and (c) basic causes of malnourishment among children, apart from (d) drawing linkages with other institutions or stakeholders which impact nutrition and food security interventions.
138. Strategic Direction 1 articulates two SOs (SO1 & SO2) for addressing the immediate causes of malnourishment among children. SO1 lays emphasis on ensuring sufficient quantity and quality (that is, nutrition & diversity) of food intake, promoting supplementation of food and micronutrients, provision of food in schools, and micronutrient fortification. SO2, on the other hand, focusses on reducing incidence of water, food and vector-borne diseases.
139. Aligning with these objectives, McGovern-Dole also aims to directly address the principal causes of malnutrition. Provision of school meals under the program is aimed at improving dietary diversity and micronutrient status among school children. WASH component under the program is expected to contribute towards reduction in incidences of water, food and vector-borne diseases, by focusing on enhancing cleanliness and promoting hygiene behaviour at school and community level.
140. Agriculture Development Strategy 2025 and vision 2030 aim towards ensuring (a) food security and quality in terms of nutrition, (b) environment friendly and safe agricultural production, and (c) employment and income generation for farmers.
141. Secondary review and interactions with officials across national, provincial and district levels point that both McGovern-Dole-SFP as-well-as the agriculture development strategy 2025 and vision 2030 aim towards achieving food & nutritional security, along with maintaining dietary diversity.
142. The vision of Education Sector Development Plan is ensure that by 2030 the entire population must have equal and equitable access to quality education. In order to achieve universal access to primary education, ESSDP proposes (a) improving quality of education in both formal and non-formal systems, (b) Improving the quality of teacher training, (c) Improving education administration and management and (d) engaging students in sports and other physical activities. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY 2020 activities are aligned with ESSDP, providing school meals, and providing literacy and education support by way of building teachers' technical capacities and strengthening learning infrastructure in high priority regions.
143. MoES spearheads the implementation of the nation-wide school meals program in Laos. MoES has setup a dedicated Inclusive Education Promotion Center (IEPC) unit for oversight and scaling up NSMP. WFP has been closely coordinating with MoES for McGovern-Dole-SFP FY2017. This well-entrenched relationship between WFP and MoES will aid in integrating McGovern-Dole-SFP FY2020 with NSMP with joint action on addressing challenges.

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<sup>76</sup> Representing an ethnically-diverse society

144. National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) aims to ensure universal access to basic social protection services, including health insurance, social security and social welfare, in an equitable, adequate, effective and sustainable way by 2030. In addition to guaranteeing access to quality health care without financial hardships, and providing social protection services for government officials, workers and self-employed professionals, NSPS aims to extend scope of social welfare schemes by including provision of scholarships to poor students and school meals for human resource, social and economic development.
145. 9<sup>th</sup> NSEDP, in line with Agenda 2030, aims to ensure that “No One is Left Behind” in the country’s development process. It promotes implementation of school meal programs as a way to ensure adequate nutritional intake among children necessary for their growth and development. The plan aims at building a culture of improved nutritional diets, at home as well as at school, and implementing educational campaigns at the community level to deepen understanding of the importance of maintaining good hygiene and nutritional diet.

### **Sub-research question 2.1: Coherence with WFP-CSP**

146. WFP Country Strategic Plan (2022-2026) is underpinned by four strategic outcomes: i) School children in vulnerable areas have improved food security, nutrition, and learning results by 2026 (SO1), ii) Vulnerable groups, in particular women and girls of reproductive age, children under five, and school-aged children have improved nutrition outcomes by 2026 (SO2), iii) Vulnerable people in disaster affected or at-risk areas have enhanced food and nutrition security and increased capacities to mitigate and manage risks associated with climate and other shocks by 2026 (SO3), and iv) Crisis-affected populations are able to meet their food, nutrition, and other essential needs during and after disasters (SO4).
147. The activity under SO1 includes direct support and technical assistance to the government to facilitate a sustainable transition. The McGovern-Dole design provides a platform to WFP to provide direct support for school feeding programs in new districts, and engage with GoL for ensuring successful transition to a sustainable NSMP.
148. WFP, through this program, will focus on the prevention of malnutrition by way of (a) providing of nutritious school meals, (b) ensuring contribution of nutritious vegetables and other food items from community members for school meals, (c) undertaking community mobilization and SBCC activities to generate awareness among parents, children and community members around nutrition, (d) training cooks to ensure they cook nutritious food, taking into consideration needs of nutritionally vulnerable groups, and addressing discriminatory gender roles and feeding practices.
149. Under McGovern-Dole, WFP would support small holder farmers, particularly women, to enhance production and ensure sustained availability of nutritious and diverse crops at community level for the school meals. Towards ensuring supply of the desired dietary options, McGovern-Dole will facilitate establishment and maintenance of school gardens, fishponds and raising of poultry. Apart from increasing livelihood options for small holder farmers, the component is expected to strengthening capacities to withstand shocks, and improve social protection, thus contributing to SO1 and SO3 of CSP.
150. The plan also elaborates on the need for gradual shift in WFP’s strategy from direct provision of food assistance to more enabling policy level engagements and capacity



development. It is envisioned that such efforts would enhance the capacities of government as-well-as the communities, enabling them to be able to design, implement, and manage their own programs by 2030. The McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 focusses extensively on capacity building activities as well as transition and exit activities, which are broadly in-line with CSP.

### **2.3. EVALUATION QUESTION 3: DESIGN REVELANT TO ADDRESS CAPACITY NEEDS OF THE GOVERNMENT NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL STAKEHOLDERS**

151. In the current program, WFP as part of its larger strategy, aims to gradually shift from direct implementation of school feeding to providing technical and policy support to the government, and help in smoothening the process of transition and ownership of SFPs within the community, and the government across national, provincial and district levels. WFP has immense learnings from the previous McGovern-Dole grants, which forms the basis for providing technical support around national legislation and guidelines, capacity strengthening and knowledge sharing with the Government.
152. As part of the current program, WFP would conduct workshops and stakeholder consultations to provide technical support to revise the Government's National School Meals Program (NSMP)<sup>77</sup> strategy (2021-2025). WFP would also provide support towards establishing School Meal staffing structure and recruiting staff in School Meals Unit at provincial and district levels, aiding the quality of management of NSMP.
153. Development of nutrition guidelines is extremely critical as far as ensuring smooth scale-up and sustained high quality management of the school feeding program by the government is concerned. WFP, working with the MoES Inclusive Education Center and Nutrition Education Secretariat, and with support from the National Nutrition Center (NNC), would provide technical support towards the development of the nutrition guidelines.
154. WFP provides technical support in the development of Community Capacity Assessments (CCA) tool, which aids identification of the most mature villages and schools for the handover, by way of assessing the capacities of schools, communities or districts to be handed over to the NSMP.
155. WFP, under the program, aims to provide support for the development of an extensive monitoring and evaluation system, in partnership with MoES. WFP would also conduct regular workshops, meetings and training sessions with relevant government stakeholders across national, provincial and district level ensure that the government systems is capacitated enough to eventually undertake concurrent monitoring of activities and outputs of NSMP independently, using this system.

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<sup>77</sup> The name of the Government's National School Meals Program (NSMP) was changed in 2014 to School Lunch Program (SLP) to better reflect the specific objectives of the program. However, as many documents still refer to the NSMP, this report uses NSMP to refer to the Government Program.

## EFFECTIVENESS

### 2.4. EVALUATION QUESTION 4: CURRENT STATUS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES, ENROLMENT, ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION RATES

**Table 7: Snapshot of Literacy Specific Indicators (in percentages)**

Baseline Actuals	Overall	Girls	Boys
Average number of food items recalled by students as measured by the CRS expressive vocabulary test	7.9	7.9	7.9
Average number of animals recalled by students as measured by the CRS expressive vocabulary test.	8.6	8.4	8.7
Proportion of students who could correctly identify initial letters/sounds from all three words	39.7%	37.4%	42.0%
Average number of correct letters identified and read by students (out of 33)	24.8	25.9	23.8
Average number of correct words identified and read by students (out of 20)	4.9	5.7	4.1
Proportion of students who could correctly identify and read at least half of words (10 out of 20)	21.1%	26.0%	16.0%
Average number of words correctly matched with images (out of 10)	4.6	4.8	4.4
Average number of phrases correctly matched with images (out of 17)	5.9	6.7	5.2
Proportion of readers among all students	13.6%	20.2%	7.0%
Proportion of readers with correct comprehension (answered at least 6 out of 8 questions correctly)	55.5%	70%	14.3%
Increase in enrollment rate: Pre-primary grade	9.2%	8.3%	9.9%
Increase in enrollment rate: Primary grades	1.2%	2.0%	0.7%
Student Attendance: Grade 1	93.6%	94.7%	92.5%
Student Attendance: Grade 2	94.7%	93.9%	95.4%
Student Attendance: Grade 3	95.1%	95.4%	94.8%
Student Attendance: Grade 4	95.6%	96.4%	94.6%
Student Attendance: Grade 5	96.6%	97.2%	96.0%

156. Assessment of learning outcomes was undertaken across 20 schools in Khammouane, covering 199 students, who had completed standard II, and just entered standard III. The assessment involved use of the standard Save the Children tool<sup>78</sup> for measuring reading and comprehension levels.

157. **Expressive vocabulary:** Students were asked to name all possible food items and animals which they could recall. At an overall level, students listed on an average, 7.9 food items and 8.6 animals. No variation was observed in the mean figures listed by boys and girls, and across four districts.

158. **Matching words with sounds:** Subsequently, the enumerator read out three distinct words, and, requested the students to identify the corresponding letters, matching the sound. Nearly four in every ten students (39.7%) listed all three correct letters. The

<sup>78</sup> The literacy assessment tool is adapted from Save the Children's Literacy Boost package; a review and adaptation of the tool was undertaken to ensure that it aligns with material from the new primary curriculum.

proportion of such students was significantly higher<sup>79</sup> in Nhommalath (65.3%), and lowest in Mahaxay (14%). Nhommalath is relatively more developed as far as social and economic parameters are concerned, in comparison to the other three districts, having higher rate of urbanization, which explains relatively better literacy outcomes in the district than the other three. No statistically significant difference was observed in the proportion of boys and girls who got all three letters correct. Mean number of correct letters listed for all students stood at 1.81 (Boys – 1.89; Girls – 1.74).

159. **Identifying and reading correct letters:** Under this exercise, the enumerator showed the students a total of 33 letters commonly used in Lao language, one after the other. The students were asked to identify and read each letter, before moving to the next one. On an average, all students were able to correctly identify and read 24.84 out of 33 letters (Boys – 23.77; Girls – 25.92).

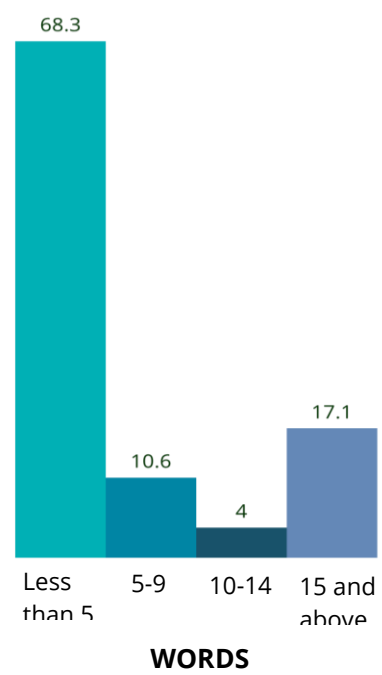
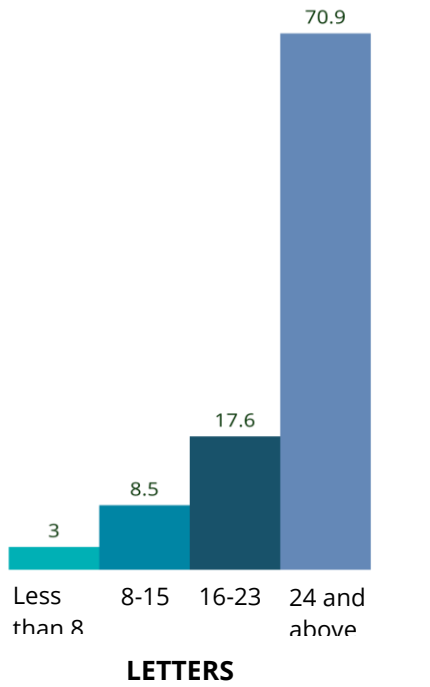
160. **Identifying and reading correct words:** Similar to the previous exercise, the enumerator presented a total of 20 common Lao words, one after the other, which the students were supposed to identify and read. On an average, students were able to correctly identify and read only 4.87 words out of 20 (Boys – 4.07; Girls – 5.68). Among the four districts, mean number of words correctly identified and read was recorded to be highest in Nhommalath at 7.12, significantly higher<sup>80</sup> than those in other three districts. Words which turned out to be the hardest for students included: ໂສ້ງ - Pants (11.1%), ອາບນ້ຳ - Bath (14.6%) and ກ້ວຍ - Bananas (14.6%). The evaluation team, however, was unable to determine the reasons why students found it more difficult to identify and read these three words.

161. The charts presented below exhibit almost mirror images of each other, showcasing diametrically opposite responses. While majority of the students were able to correctly identify and read at least 24 out of 33 letters (70.9%), more than two in every three students (68.3%) were unable to correctly identify and read at least 15 out of 20 words. While the proportion of boys who were able to identify and read at least half of all word was 16%, more than 26% of the girls identified and read at least half of all words.

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<sup>79</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

<sup>80</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval



**Figure 2: % of students identifying and reading correct letters**

**Figure 1: % of students identifying and reading correct words**

162. Given that correct identification and reading of words is the first step towards ensuring sound reading and comprehension skills, it is therefore essential for the teaching staff, education department and development programs which focus towards enhancing learning outcomes to focus on developing skills among students to correctly identify and read words.
163. **Matching words with correct images:** Under this exercise, enumerators presented ten images, each having an incorrectly matched word placed against it. The enumerator pointed towards the first image, and asked the student to point towards the matching word. The same exercise was repeated for all ten images. On an average, all students were able to correctly match 4.57 out of 10 words, with their corresponding images (Boys – 4.39; Girls – 4.76).
164. **Matching phrases with correct images:** Similar to the previous exercise, enumerators presented a total of seventeen screens, each having a total of four images and phrases. The students were asked to read out the phrase first and then requested to point towards one of the four images which matched with the phrase. On average, all students were able to correctly match only 5.93 out of 17 phrases, with the corresponding images (Boys – 5.19; Girls – 6.69). Mean number of phrases identified by students from schools with improved roads stood at 6.53, as against a mean of only 4.83 phrases among students from schools with unimproved roads.
165. Distribution of students across multiple categories for correctly matching words and phrases with provided images indicate certain similar patterns. Majority of the students can be located in the left half of both the charts (Words: 54.3% could match less than 5 out of

ten words; Phrases: 75.9% could match less than 9 out of 17 phrases), indicating low reading and comprehension levels. There also exists high variation in the students' performance with respect to matching words and phrases with images, which points that it is essential for the teachers to be able to instruct and manage students within the same grade but placed at different learning levels.

166. **Reading test:** Under this test, students were provided with a passage, which they were supposed to read. After first 30 seconds, the enumerators stopped the timer and counted the total number of correct words read by each student. A student was termed a 'reader' if s/he was able to read at least five words correctly in the first 30 seconds. As per the data, there were only 13.6% of readers (27 out of 199) in this exercise. The proportion of readers was significantly higher among girls (20.2%)<sup>81</sup>, in comparison with boys (7.0%). Similarly, significantly higher proportion of students from schools with improved roads (15.6%)<sup>82</sup> were termed as readers, in comparison with students from schools with improved roads (5.6%).
167. **Comprehension test:** After completion of the reading test, the readers were encouraged to read the complete passage, after which the enumerators asked them a total of eight questions based on the passage. Overall, 23.1% of the readers were able to answer at least 6 out of the 8 questions correctly. (Boys – 15%; Girls – 31.4%)<sup>83</sup>. No significant difference was observed in the mean comprehension score for students across four districts.

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<sup>81</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

<sup>82</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

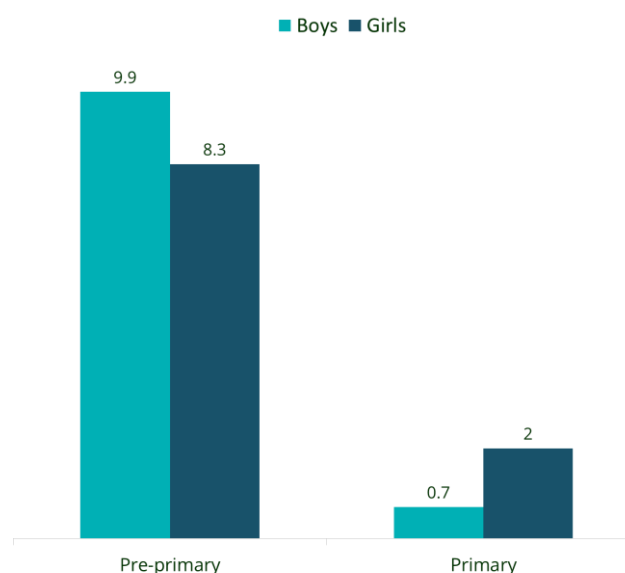
<sup>83</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

## Enrolment Rate

168. The baseline quantitative survey at the school level collected enrolment data from the school head records for pre-primary and primary (grade I-V) sections for the past two academic years. At an overall level, the proportion of schools maintaining enrolment records for pre-primary sections was 79.4% for 2020-21 (current year), and 67.6% for 2019-20 (base year). Relatively higher proportions of schools maintained enrolment records for the primary sections (100% for 2020-21, and 94.1% for 2019-20).

169. % change in school enrolment was calculated by comparing the number of students enrolled in 2020-21 to the previous academic year (2019-20). Comparing the enrolment data across two years points that there has been an increase of 9.2% in enrolment in the pre-primary section, and an increase of 1.2% in enrolment in primary sections.

170. Interestingly, both boys and girls experienced increase in enrolment for pre-primary and primary sections between base and the current year. While the proportion of increment was marginally higher for boys in the pre-primary section (B-9.9% vs. G-8.3 %), increase in enrolment in primary section was relatively steeper for girls in the primary sections (B-0.7% vs. G-2%).



**Figure 3: % Increase in Enrolment between base and current year**

171. The female to male enrolment ratio in the pre-primary section reduced from 0.9 in current year to 0.88 in the base year. The ratio, however, marginally increased from 0.92 in the base year to 0.93 in current year in the primary sections.

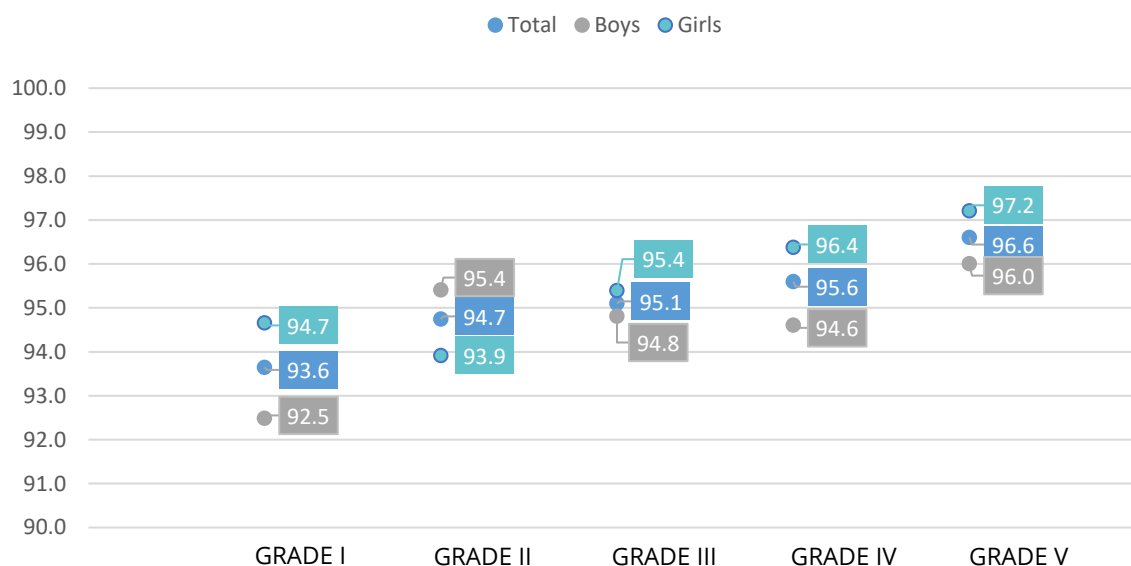
172. No drop out was reported in the last two academic years across both pre-primary and primary sections. Overall, 5% students in pre-primary section and 2% students in primary sections had to repeat the grade during the last academic year. No major variation was observed in the repetition rates among boys and girls for both pre-primary and primary sections.

## Student Attendance

173. Monthly attendance data for the time period September 2020-February 2021 was collected from the school records. While interviewing the school head, the enumerator randomly selected three students from each of the five grades, and collated information pertaining to their monthly average school attendance for the above-provided time period.



174. In comparison to 82.9% attendance at primary level as reported by Census 2015, average student attendance is relatively higher at around 95% in the sampled schools. No major variation is visible in the attendance rates for boys and girls across five grades. In terms of trends, we observe a marginal increment in the attendance rates for both boys and girls as we move grade I to grade V.



**Figure 4: Attendance rates by grades and gender**

175. Of all the students interviewed, only 75% reported that it had been at least a week since their schools were open after Covid related restrictions. Among them, almost one in every six student (16.9%) reported being absent for at least one full or half day in the week prior to the date on which the survey was conducted. The proportion of such children was marginally higher among boys (18%), in comparison to girls (15.8%), though the difference was statistically insignificant.

176. Qualitative interactions with community members and government officials across levels point that poverty is the most critical determinants for attendance in schools. Children from financially disadvantaged households are often expected to either accompany their parents to the fields, especially during harvest season, or stay at home to take care of younger siblings. Quantitative data also corroborates this finding, since in 47.8% of the instances of absenteeism, children reported primary reason for not attending school as 'involvement in household chores and farm work'.

177. Qualitative discussions point gender division of work as boys usually accompany parents to the fields during harvest season, whereas girls are expected to stay back at home on some days and help with household chores and take care of younger siblings. The second most common reason for absence cited by children was illness (15.9%).

178. Interactions with teachers and school heads point that parents from some of the ethnic groups, such as *Houan* or *Monekamae* in Khammouane, or *Mouser* in Bokeo etc. are not

willing to send their children to school because of poverty<sup>84</sup>. In such cases, it is noted that VEDCs need to play an instrumental role in reaching out to such parents, understand the reasons for not sending their children to schools, provide material or monetary support, relax some of school rules (for instances, wearing school uniforms etc.), and explain the importance of formal education.

## Attentiveness

179. In order to assess attentiveness of students, two teachers from each school were asked to rate each of the 16 sampled students on the basis of their conduct inside the classrooms. Combining responses of both the teachers, nearly one in every seven students (14.8%) was rated as inattentive during classes. In terms of geography, the proportion of inattentive students was found to be highest in southern provinces (16.5%), followed by central (13.1%) and northern provinces (10.9%). No major variation was observed in the reported attentiveness for boys and girls across all provinces.
180. In addition to hunger and lack of nutrition, qualitative discussions with school head and teachers pointed towards several other reasons for lack of attentiveness among primary school students. It is observed that students from Lao Loum community are relatively more attentive in classrooms, when compared to other ethnic groups. Non-Lao speaking students usually find it difficult to follow teaching instructions in Lao language, and as a result, are more likely to get distracted in the class.
181. Remote villages in most parts of Lao are usually sparsely populated. As a result, schools have limited number of teachers and students. Due to paucity of teaching staff in such locations, teachers are supposed to handle multiple grades at the same time. As a result, teachers are unable to offer requisite attention to the students or engage them in interesting learning activities, which adversely affects students' attentiveness.
182. Quantitative data collected from school heads point that there are, on an average, only 5 school teachers in each of the sampled primary schools. While schools in well-connected Vientiane (district Feung) and Vientiane Capital (district Santhong) have, on an average 8.5 and 7.5 teachers respectively, the figure is as-low-as 3.5 in remote district of Pak Ou in Luang Prabang.
183. At overall level, male-female ratio for teachers stands at 11:9, with no major variation across northern, central and southern provinces. The ratio of male-female teachers is almost 1:1 in schools with improved roads, whereas it increases to 3:1 in schools with unimproved roads. It is understood that schools with unimproved roads are more likely to be in remote areas. The above-provided data point, thus hints that female teachers are less likely to be placed in schools in remote locations. Lack of female teachers in remote areas can potentially have detrimental effects on the enrolment, attendance and learning outcomes of girls, particularly those from ethnic groups<sup>85</sup>.

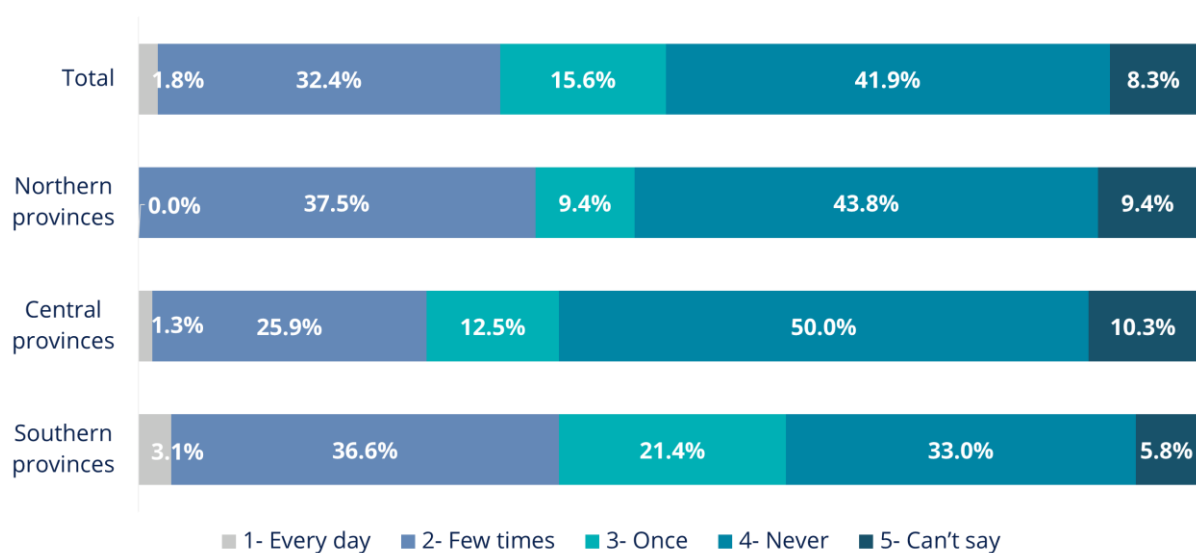
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<sup>84</sup> Parents were not explicitly asked about the ethnic groups they belonged to. The information regarding the ethnic groups of sampled children and their parents was collected from the school teacher

<sup>85</sup> Morley, A. (2019). Unraveling the 'female teacher effect': The positioning and agency of female teachers in girls' education reform. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(141).

## Teaching Support

184. As highlighted above, it is well understood that teachers are one of the most critical determinants for attainment of desirable learning outcomes. Teachers who are not only well-capacitated in their respective academic subjects, but also well-trained to empathise with young children, understand their psyche, and capable enough to be able to adopt innovative teaching and learning methods.
185. Qualitative discussions with officials from PESS and DESB across program provinces and districts point that in remote rural locations, it is difficult to find educated and well-trained local teachers. Also, since GoL intends to retain Lao language as the only medium of instruction in schools, many Lao-speaking teachers are recruited who do not speak the local language. As per Student Learning Outcomes in Primary Education in Lao PDR 2015, issued by UNICEF and MoES, provinces with a high proportion of students from ethnic groups score relatively lower on reading skills assessments.
186. Quantitative data collected from school records regarding monthly attendance during the time period September 2020-February 2021 points that attendance rate for sampled teachers was almost 99%, without any variation across program provinces and districts.
187. Survey with students inquired if their teachers narrated any story or poem in the last week. Quantitative data points that instances of teachers narrating stories and poems in the classroom on a daily basis is extremely rare in the sampled schools. More than 40% of the sampled students reported that their teachers did not narrate any story or poem in the last week. Such behaviour is usually shaped by a function of multiple reasons, including



**Figure 5: Proportion of students by frequency of teacher narrating stories or poems in classroom**

188. During qualitative interactions, some of the teachers and school heads reported that they had participated in trainings organised by DESB and PESS around new teaching and learning methods, involving use of games, pictures and other teaching aids such as charts and flash cards. However, despite gaining knowledge, not all the trained teachers were able

to use these techniques. Given that the new teaching methods demand more time and efforts from the teachers, it becomes substantially more difficult for the ones handling multiple grades to implement such methods.

189. At the same time, teachers also expressed the need for more trainings around new teaching and learning methods. It was pointed out that such trainings must cover all the teachers within every program school, and in greater detail, as only then students across all the grades would stand to draw the benefits.

### Learning Infrastructure in Schools

190. Observations conducted in each of the sampled 34 schools revealed presence of, on an average, 5.4 classrooms per school. One in every three schools (12 out of 34 schools) did not have separate classrooms for every grade, with the proportion of such schools being highest in Khammouane and Champasak. Significantly<sup>86</sup> higher proportion of schools with unimproved roads (55.6%) did not have separate classrooms for each grade, in comparison with those having improved roads (28%).

191. In terms of other learning infrastructure, only one in every three schools (11 out of 34) had a library, with no major observable differences across northern, central and southern provinces, or among schools with improved and unimproved roads.

192. Qualitative discussions with teachers and school heads revealed need for external support for construction/repair of school building and the classrooms, provision of basic school furniture like chairs and tables, sports equipment like rattan balls, nets, and footballs, and modern teaching-learning aids like LDC screens and speakers. Some of the school heads reported having received external support in the past for constructing/repairing buildings and classrooms from Luxembourg Development Cooperation and *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement* (IRD).

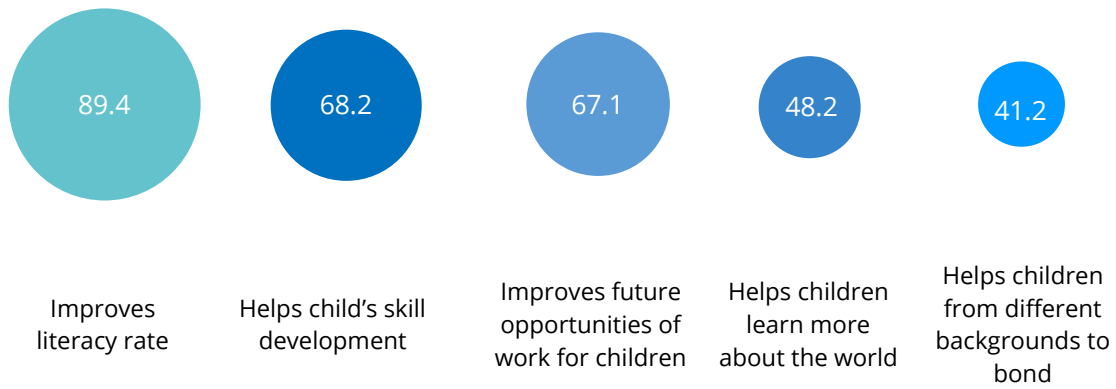
### Involvement of Parents

193. Qualitative interactions with parents suggest that majority of the parents possess a positive disposition towards the idea of formal education, and encourage their children to get educated at least till 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Parents recognize that access to education helps children develop skills around reading, writing, mathematics and public speaking. In addition to this, parents feel it is essential for the schools to also teach at least one vocational subject, apart from English and Lao languages, which could help children gain employment after completing their education.

194. The qualitative findings are corroborated by the quantitative data collected from parents as part of the household survey. The diagram provided below presents the key benefits of education articulated by the parents. With two in every three parents looking at education as a means to develop the child's skills, and hence improve chances of gaining employment in the future, the link between education and parents' expectations of securing a safe livelihood is unmistakable.

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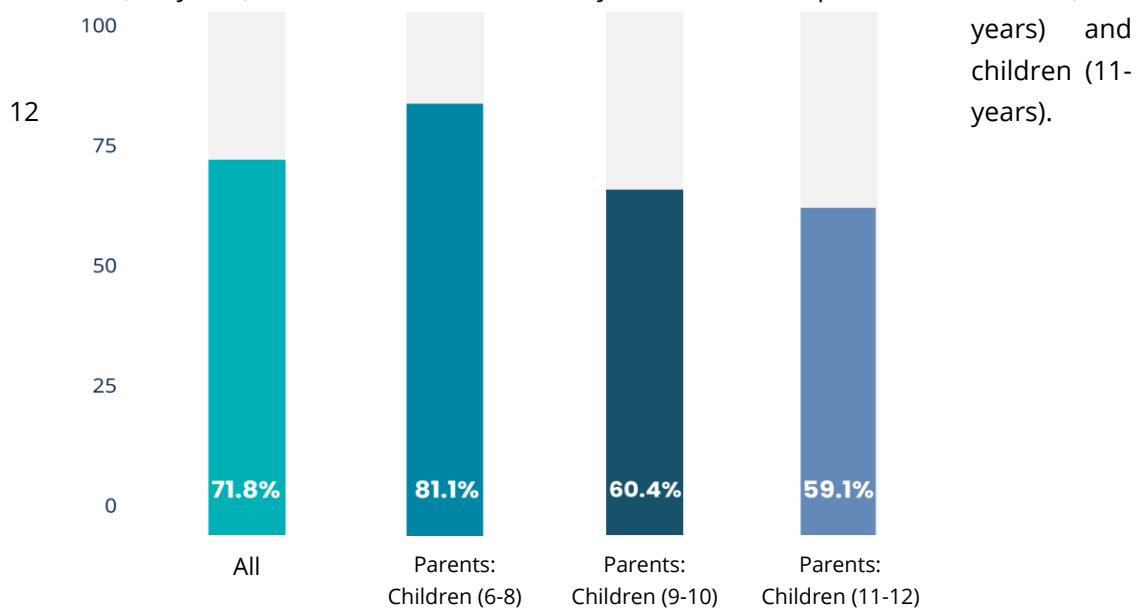
<sup>86</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval



**Figure 6: Proportion of parents talking about different benefits of Education**

195. Despite understanding merits of education, it is understood that parents, particularly in remote locations, face certain challenges in sending their children to school on a regular basis. Qualitative interactions highlight that some parents prefer that their children accompany them to the fields for working, instead of attending school. In some of the households, eldest daughter stays back at home during the day to take care of their younger siblings. In addition to this, certain ethnic groups, such as Khmu in Luang Prabang, prefer their traditions and customs over education, opting for early marriage.

196. In order to assess the nature of support parents provide in developing a learning environment at home, a composite score was created by combining two areas of information: (a) whether anyone at home reads stories or poems for the child, and (b) whether anyone at home helps the child in studies. The composite score points that majority of the parents (71.8%) exhibit high levels of positive behaviour, helping the child in studies. The proportion of parents with high levels of positive behaviour is highest for children (6-8 years), and it reduces successively as we move to parents of children (9-10



**Figure 7: Proportion of Parents (by age of children) showcasing high levels of positive behaviour, helping the child in studies**

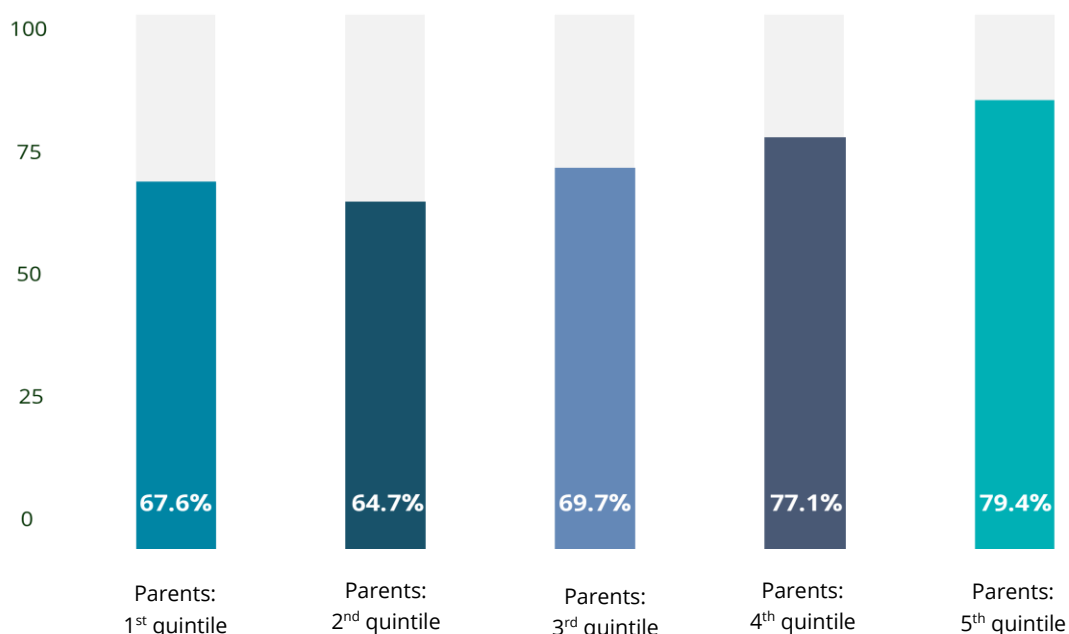
197. On the other hand, there exists a direct relationship between economic condition of the family, and the extent of support provided by the parents in studies. The proportion of parents exhibiting high levels of support in child's studies increases as we move from parents in 1<sup>st</sup> quintile (bottom 20%), to those in 5<sup>th</sup> quintile (top 20%).

198. Qualitative discussions with parents highlight that most parents intend to support their children with studies, and encourage them to read books. However, parents who are either illiterate, or educated below primary grades, find it difficult to support their children with education. Parents in economically disadvantage households work for longer hours in the field, and hence are unable to find enough time to spend with their children, and offer support around their education.

### Engagement with School Staff and VEDCs

199. Parent-Teacher meetings (PTMs) are organised in schools on a regular basis, to facilitate regular and sustained interactions between parents and school teachers, discussing their child's performance in academics and extra-curricular activities. Qualitative interactions with parents suggest that while parents acknowledge the importance of engaging with teachers, and attending PTMs on a regular basis, many of them are unable to participate because of paucity of time.

200. VEDC members articulated their role in persuading parents to send their children to school



**Figure 8: Proportion of Parents (by wealth quintiles) showcasing high levels of positive behaviour, helping the child in studies**

on a daily basis, and discussing the need for applying new teaching and learning methods in the school to improve children's learning outcomes. Qualitative discussions with VEDC members highlight their role in (a) promoting education by engaging in conversations with parents explaining the value of education, (b) participating in parent-teacher's meetings. In addition to this, VEDC members also talked about their role in collecting monetary contributions, and spearheading construction, or repair and maintenance of requisite school infrastructure.

### Sub-research question 2.4.1: Assessing the Status of School Gardens

201. As part of the program design, WFP intends to set up school gardens in each of the program schools, in line with MoES directive which has made it mandatory for NSMP schools to have a garden. It is envisaged that development and maintenance of school gardens would not only ensure sustained supply of fresh vegetables for school meals, but also emphasize on the importance of a healthy diet, building children’s knowledge around agriculture, health and nutrition.
202. 18 out of 34 schools did not have a school vegetable garden at the time of survey. Interactions with teachers and school heads pointed towards their willingness towards developing and expanding school gardens, engaging students in its maintenance and upkeep, ensuring access to fresh vegetables for school meals. However, majority of the schools reported facing water issues, which they fear, would hamper the chances of maintaining the gardens during the dry season.
203. Interactions with parents and VEDC members point towards their willingness to contribute labour towards making fences, or any other activity. Quantitative survey indicate that almost all parents (94.7%) believed that every school must have a school garden. Some of the top benefits, according to the parents, which accrue as a result of maintaining a school garden include steady source of vegetables for school meals (86.3%) and build children’s knowledge and skills around agriculture (70.2%).
204. In the few schools which reported having a school garden, both teachers and students volunteer their time and efforts. While students mostly assume the responsibility for watering the garden, it is the teachers who grow the vegetables. In villages where the river is located far away from the school, students have to carry water in buckets. Some of the teachers were quick to point out their additional work load, seeking support from the community in maintenance of school gardens.
205. Such gardens, however face severe water issues, particularly during dry season, impacting the production of vegetables. Also, it was reported that it is difficult for the school staff to continue maintaining the gardens during school vacations. In the absence of any structured support from DESB or any program in the form of (a) provision of agricultural tools, (b) restoration of water supply, (c) impartment of necessary trainings, and (d) adequate incentives, current involvement of parents in development and maintenance of school gardens was reported to be limited.

## 2.5. EVALUATION QUESTION 5: CURRENT DIETARY PRACTICES, KAP OF DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS, AND NUTRITION RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE IN SCHOOLS

To assess the program’s strategic objective of increasing use of health and dietary practices (SO2)<sup>87</sup>, the baseline study collected information on the status of several nutrition related KAP.

**Table 8: Snapshot of Nutrition Specific Indicators (in percentages)**

Baseline Actuals	Overall	Girls	Boys	Overall	Mothers	Fathers
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<sup>87</sup> WFP Lao PDR. 2020. FY 2020 USDA McGovern Dole Proposal.



	Children			Parents		
Mean Dietary Diversity Score (Out of 12)	7.3					
Perceptions around Nutrition among students and parents (Accepting at least 5 healthy food items and rejecting both unhealthy food items)	16.4%	16.9%	15.8%	25.3%	29.4%	21.2%
Attitude towards healthy eating (Highly Positive – score 3 out of 3 )	1.3%	1.1%	1.5%			
Attitude towards healthy eating (Moderately Positive – score 2 out of 3)	61.9%	68.8%	55.1%			
Parents' Attitude: Perceptions towards healthy food (mean score out of 5)				3.0	3.0	3.0
Parents' Attitude: Knowledge about nutritional value/benefits/negative consequences of eating certain food items (mean score out of 5)				3.6	3.7	3.3
Parents' Attitude: Perceived barriers (mean score out of 5)				2.7	2.8	2.8
Parents' Attitude: Self-efficacy (mean score out of 5)				3.4	3.3	3.3
Parents' Attitude: Readiness to change (score out of 5)				3.4	3.5	3.5
Parents' Attitude towards School Meals (Proportion with 'Very high positive attitude')				63.5	65.9	61.2

## Dietary Practices

206. The quality of students' diet was assessed in terms of dietary diversity. The evaluation team collected detailed information on foods and drinks consumed by students in the last 24 hours (prior to the interview) for 416 students through interviews with parents. The child's consumption recalled by parents were categorized into 12 food groups based on based on Food and Agriculture Organization (2007) recommendations<sup>88</sup>. A positive score of 1 was given for each food group consumed while zero (0) points were given for groups not consumed. The Dietary diversity scores (DDS) was calculated by summing up points and classified as low ( $\leq 4$ ), medium (5–8) and high (9–12).

207. The mean dietary diversity score (DDS) for students in program schools was **medium** at around 7.3 (out of a maximum score of 12). While most DDS across most provinces was medium (with DDS between 5-8), provinces like Champasak (mean = 8.7), Salavan (8.5) and Xekong (8.3) were found to be performing better. On the other hand, Xiengkhouang province was identified as the only province with *low* dietary diversity with a score of 4.8. A clear difference in mean DDS was also observed across

**Table 9: Proportion of reported consumption**

<sup>88</sup> FAO, F. (2007). Guidelines for measuring household and individual dietary diversity. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) Project, Rome, Italy.

regions with the Southern Provinces having a significantly<sup>89</sup> higher score (8.5) than the central (6.6) and northern (6.4) provinces.

208. As can be referred from the table, amongst the 12 food groups, highest consumption across all provinces was reported for Cereals (98.8%), Vegetables (87.6%), and Meat (79.9%), while consumption of White tubers and roots (13%), Legumes, nuts and seeds (34.3%) and Milk and milk products (44.4%) and Oils and Fats (56.2%) was least reported. Considering lentils are not a part of the Lao diet and consumed less, the need for proper training on preparation of this food item would be crucial to increasing protein consumption amongst students.

209. Affordability of food items emerged as a distinct factor influencing dietary diversity as DDS scores for households increased progressively across economic categories<sup>90</sup> as we moved from low income categories to high income categories [First Quintile: 6.2; Second Quintile: 7.3; Third Quintile: 8.0; Fourth Quintile: 7.7; Fifth Quintile: 7.4].

210. Qualitative interactions with school heads and teachers across provinces reported nutrition of students to be generally “not up to mark” due to inaccessibility to “all 5 food groups”. Parents highlighted accessibility and affordability as key factors influencing their use of ingredients. For instance, parents reported incorporating eggs, vegetables, meat and canned fish into diets since these items were easy to swallow as well as “available in the area at affordable prices”. Lack of access to markets was also a challenge to food diversification, due to which, parents used limited ingredients and incorporated items grown/reared at home.

Food Groups	Proportion of Reported Consumption (in %)
Cereals	98.8
White Tubers and Roots	13
Vegetables	87.6
Fruits	59.2
Meat	79.9
Eggs	69.2
Fish and Seafood	60.4
Legumes, Nuts and Seeds	34.3
Milk and milk products	44.4
Oils and fats	56.2
Sweets	61.5
Spices and Condiments	71

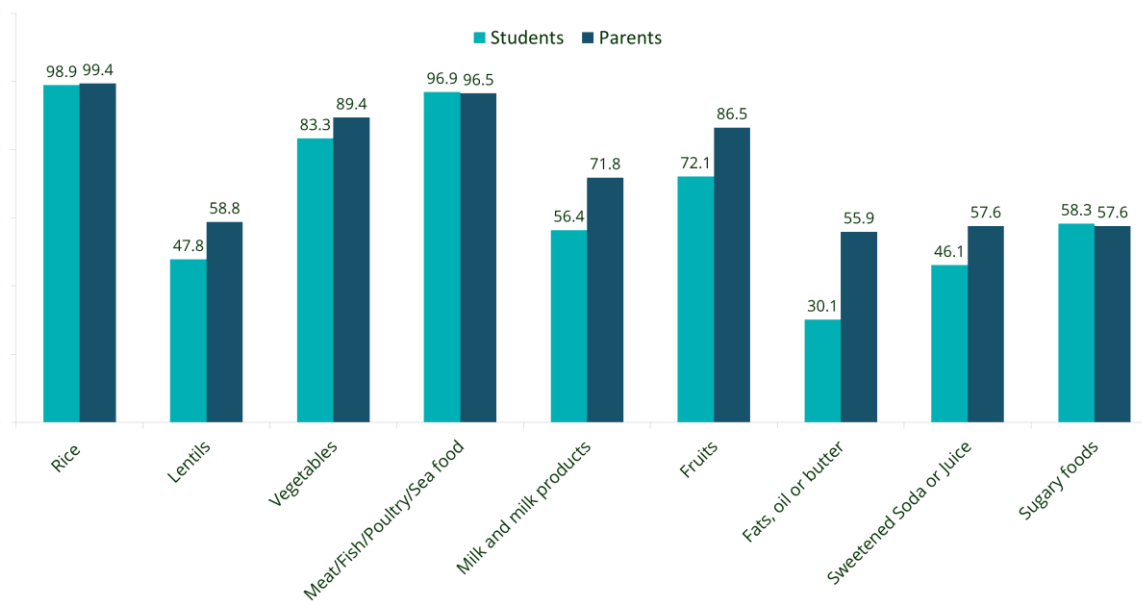
**Table 10: Reported Consumption of Food Groups (in %) across Provinces**

<sup>89</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

<sup>90</sup> Economic status of households was calculated based on Household Assets.

## Nutrition Knowledge and Attitudes

211. In line with the program logic, the study also collected data on nutrition related perceptions of key stakeholders. As can be seen in Figure 9, majority of the students identified key food groups like rice (98.9%), vegetables (83.3%), meat/fish/poultry/sea food (96.9%) and fruits (72.1%) as necessary for consumption by students. Similar to the trends mentioned, lentils (47.8%), milk and milk products (56.4%) as well as fats and oils (30.1%) were perceived important by lesser proportion of respondents, which can also be attributed to the usual diet patterns existing in their local contexts.



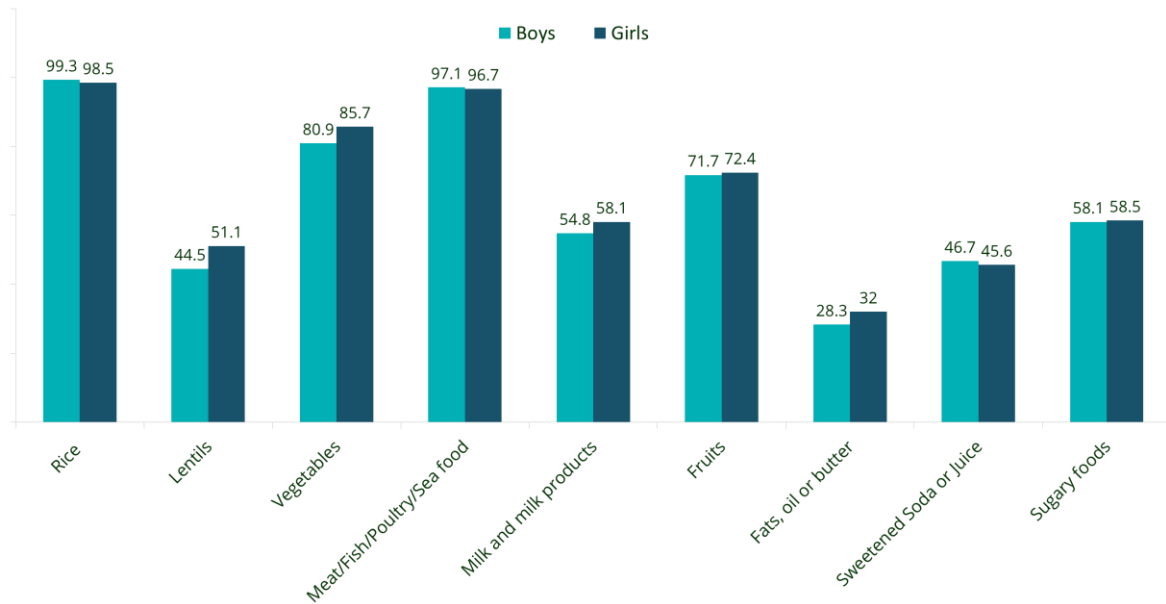
**Figure 9: Perceptions around Nutrition among Students and Parents**

212. Interestingly, more than half of the parents (57.6%) reported Sugary foods (chocolates, candies, cookies and cakes) as-well-as Sweetened Soda and Juices as being important for students' consumption. Similarly, a little more than one half of the students (58.3%) across grades 1-5 accepted the need for consumption of sugary foods; the proportion of such students who the importance of consuming sweetened soda or juice was reported to be 46.1%. Meanwhile, no significant difference in perceptions around nutrition with respect to different food groups was observed across boys and girls (Figure 10).

213. While 46.1% students reported being guided by parents and teachers around the negative effects of junk food, another 42.3% also reported not being guided around the same, indicating space for program to invest in building parents' awareness around this to influence their child's behaviour.

214. To assess students' attitudes towards healthy eating, attitudinal scores were calculated encompassing questions on students' opinion, preference and openness around healthy eating, with the highest possible score being 3.

215. Out of the 416 respondents, a majority of the students reported *moderately-high* positive attitude towards healthy eating (with a score of 2), while only 1.3% children having *highly positive* attitudes (with score of 3). On the other end, 14.3% reflected negative attitude towards healthy eating (with a score of 0).



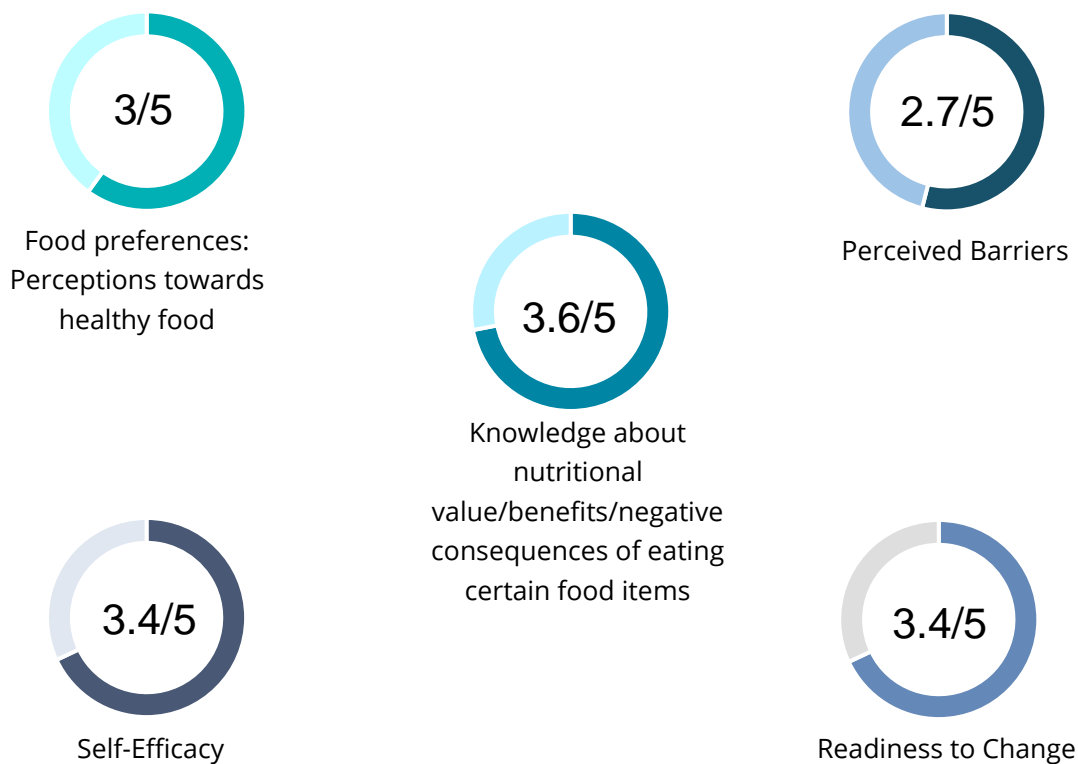
**Figure 10: Perceptions around Nutrition among Boys and Girls**

216. Disaggregated by gender, proportion of girls reporting *moderately high* positive attitudes (68.8%) was significantly<sup>91</sup> higher than boys (55.1) while *negative attitude* score was reported more among boys (18.4%) than girls (10.3%). However, no significant difference was identified in reporting of *highly positive* attitudes between both the genders.

217. To assess the attitudes of parents towards healthy eating, responses of parents were recorded for multiple dietary practices related attitudinal statements. Their attitudes were measured along five broad themes of (i) Food preferences (Perceptions towards healthy food) (ii) Perceived Benefits (iii) Perceived Barriers (iv) Self Efficacy and (v) Readiness to adopt change. Through a composite scoring approach, attitudes of parents along each of the five themes were scored as **Low (less than 2.9), Medium (3), and High- (more than 3)** (With Low reflecting low positive attitudes and High indicating high positive attitudes).

218. Across the five themes, parents largely had Medium to High positive attitudes. On each of the separate themes, minor differences were identified, which have been detailed below. For *Food Preferences*, attitudes of respondents were found to be *Medium* with a mean attitudinal score of 3. No difference in attitudinal scores of male and female respondents was observed.

<sup>91</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval



**Figure 11: Parents Attitudinal Scores towards Healthy Eating**

219. *Knowledge of parents on nutritional value of food items was High (3.6) across provinces with no significant difference observed between males (3.5, High) and females (3.7, High). Perceived Barriers was reported to be Low with a mean score of 2.7. No significant difference observed between males (2.8, Low) and females (2.7, Low).*
220. *Self-efficacy was reported to be High across all provinces with a mean score of 3.4; the same was observed across northern (3.5), Central (3.3) and Southern (3.5) provinces. Both males and females reported High self-efficacy (with a shared score of 3.4). Finally with respect to Readiness to change, all provinces reported highly positive attitudes with a mean score of 3.4 (High). Again, no difference in readiness was observed between genders with both males and females reporting High Readiness to change (with a shared score of 3.4).*
221. *In line with the quantitative findings, qualitative interactions with parents, VEDC members and school teachers also indicated higher knowledge and attitude around significance of diverse eating, inclusion of key “5 food groups”, inclusion of vegetables and fruits for fiber and immunity, need for consuming breakfast for higher concentration, importance of consuming well cooked food and avoiding fatty food, sweet candies, packaged snacks and carbonated drinks due to their ill-effects on the health and growth of children. Interestingly, rancid food (including bamboo shoots, pickled foods), sour fruits, and beverages were also reported as unhealthy food categories”.*

## Nutrition Components of the School Feeding Program

222. The cooked School Meals Program will consist of 100g of fortified rice (over 85% from USDA and a small quantity through local procurement from 2022/23 to 2023/24 school year<sup>92</sup>), 35g of lentils distributed three times a week (USDA), 30g of canned fish provided two times a week (regional procurement), and 10g of vegetable oil fortified with Vitamins A and D (regional procurement). The fortified products will provide school children with much needed vitamins and micronutrients, including vitamins A, D and B12, as well as iron, zinc and folic acid, while canned fish will add a protein source as well as increase the variety of the meals, complementing the lentils procured from USDA.
223. Building on previous program success at engaging communities and linking local farmers into SFPs, the ration will be complemented with fresh commodities procured locally to support a diversified diet. Cook(s) will be assigned to each school by the VEDCs, with one cook covering approximately 50 students for preparing meals in the school kitchen while Storekeepers will be appointed for bringing food from the storage facilities, storing items safely and recording commodity usage.

## Status of Nutrition related Infrastructure and Capacities

224. To assess the status of requisites relevant for the planned activities to work, the baseline study incorporated observation of 34 schools to map out presence and status of **Nutrition Related School Infrastructure**.
225. Out of 34 schools, 27 did not have any storage facilities while only 6 schools had storage within the school and 1 reported presence of a facility outside premises. 31 schools did not have a kitchen space while all 34 schools reported not having a dining area.
226. Similarly, qualitative discussions highlighted need for “school canteens”, better/uninterrupted electricity connection, reservoir to contain water, protected store rooms, galvanized iron roofs for kitchen and kitchen equipment like utensils, pots, pans etc. which are expected to be provided by the program and governmental support, while contribution of local materials (timber, gravel etc.) and labour for infrastructure development were identified as the community’s responsibility.
227. In order to address gaps in infrastructure, the program will work with VEDCs to sign an agreement around the support the program will provide, the role of the government partners, and what is expected from the school and community<sup>93</sup>. Based on these, warehouse/ storerooms, school kitchens would be planned in all schools, and dining areas would be planned for the model schools. To sustain diverse meals, School Gardens would

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<sup>92</sup> Rice will only be provided for three academic years, from the 2021/22 school year to the 2023/24 school year. The community will contribute milled or cooked local rice from home in the last year of the program (2024–2025) as part of the transition strategy and in line with the Government’s vision; the aim is to prepare the community to take over the provision of rice before WFP completes the handover of these schools to MoES by the end of 2025.

<sup>93</sup> WFP Lao PDR. 2020. FY 2020 USDA McGovern Dole Proposal.

also be established in all target schools alongside training to VEDC and farmers on appropriate crop selection.

228. Meanwhile, **Capacities** of key stakeholders like parents and VEDCs around proper food preparation and storage was found to be largely moderate. Qualitative discussions revealed that most of the VEDC members had not received any previous training specifically on food and nutrition management practices. Few participants however reported had received general trainings on children's health, education and importance of cooking for children, which they broadcast to community members via loudspeakers.
229. A few schools where preparation had begun, teachers had clear understanding of their roles and planned to utilize visual methods (e.g., flash cards) and local language to communicate nutritional knowledge to children. Both parents and VEDC members stressed upon the need for training on food processing and nutritious cooking (that preserves nutritional value of foods) to be provided for multiple community members to ensure flexibility in division of responsibilities among multiple cooks along with the provision of updated cooking manual and recipe booklets to every school. Need for ensuring some form of incentives for cooks was also highlighted.
230. To address capacity gaps, National Nutrition Center (NNC), MoH will provide nutrition training for cooks, storekeepers, and school meals support staff (teachers, principals, VEDCs), apart from one on safe food preparation and storage practices in collaboration with school administrators, district education staff and the Lao Women's Union.<sup>94</sup> Trainings will be held towards the beginning and the end of the five-year program, and more frequently at the committee level as cooks frequently rotate. A cookbook, designed by WFP and CRS, containing recipes adapted to local tastes containing nutrient-dense crops that can be grown in school gardens would be provided to schools and cooks.

### Community Attitude and Knowledge about School Feeding Program

231. Although the SFP FY20 aims to provide ration for school meals, develop capacities and improve/establish infrastructure, by design it is highly dependent upon the village community members and parents for its functioning and sustenance. An effective program will depend on the leadership and initiative of the community in ensuring that commitments and contributions are managed and met, and that problems are solved locally<sup>95</sup>.
232. Community's contribution of fresh commodities like vegetables, meat and other animal protein as well as condiments from parents and community members would be essential for preparation of diversified meals regularly.<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, fresh produce from School Gardens as well as local farmers have also been envisioned to supplement the school meals. Parents and community members' contribution would be required in terms of time, effort (cooking, store-keeping, procuring fresh items daily, maintaining gardens, contributing

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<sup>94</sup> These trainings will be delivered by WFP and CRS staff at the school level, and Government staff will take over the delivery of trainings at the community level when districts are handed over. The structure of the trainings will be aligned with Government manuals to ensure standardization and continuity after handover.

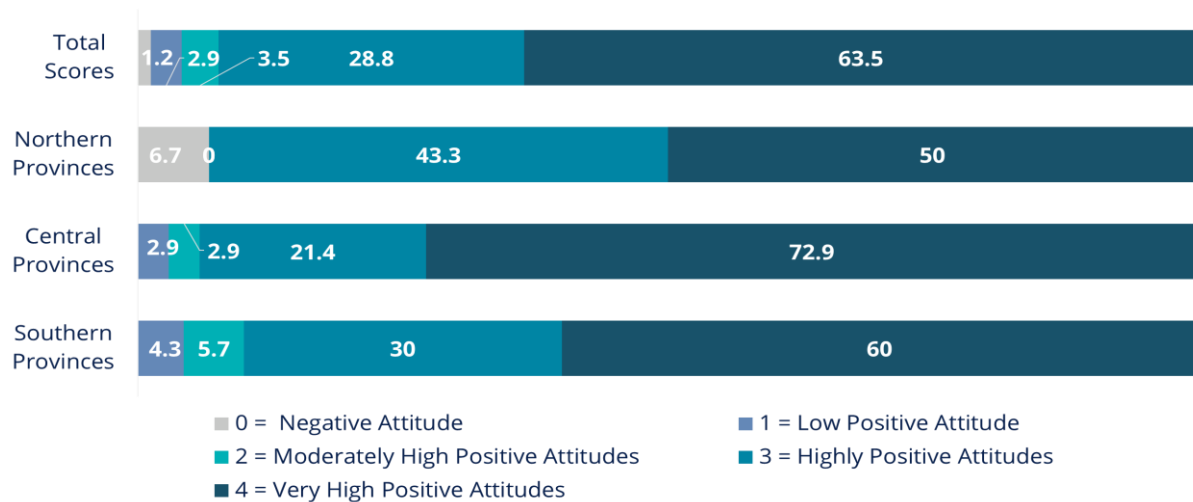
<sup>95</sup> WFP Lao PDR. 2020. FY 2020 USDA McGovern Dole Proposal.

<sup>96</sup> The contribution of fresh produce from the local communities, while voluntary, is part of the Government's strategy as outlined in the School Lunch Program Strategy No. 903/MoES (July 2019), which promotes communities to be the owners of the SFPs.



materials for infrastructure development, labor for infrastructure development) as well as cash contributions. It would thus be pivotal for parents and community members to believe in, and have positive attitudes, expectations and interest around the program as a whole.

233. Thus, to gauge attitudes of parents towards the school feeding program, the baseline evaluation calculated Attitude towards School Meals scores (with 0 = negative attitude and



4 = Highly Positive attitude) based on sum of four attitudinal statements around significance and potential impacts of school meals for children.

234. As referred in the figure, majority of the total parents reported Very High Positive attitudes

**Figure 12: Attitude towards School Meals Score of Parents (in percentages)**

(63.5%) followed by Highly Positive attitudes (28.8%). Meanwhile, no significant difference was observed between the attitudinal score of male and female parents.

235. Majority of the parents (94.7%) agreed with the need for schools to have School Gardens. These gardens were expected to have several benefits such as “Being a source of food material for school lunch” (86.3%), “Improving knowledge and skill for children” (70.2%) as well as “Improving knowledge and skill for community members” (42.9%).

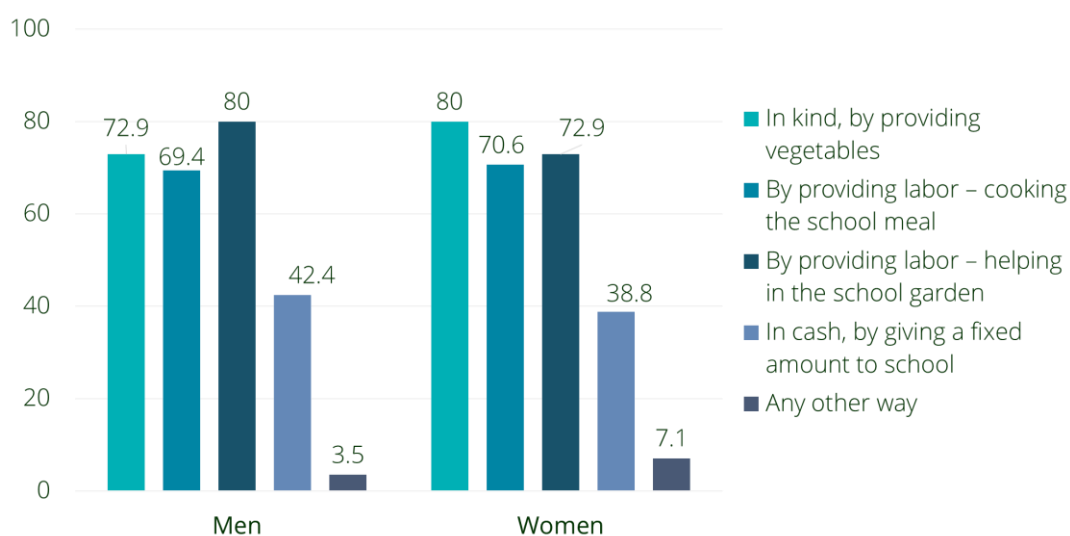
236. In terms of knowledge, most parents identified multiple benefits of the school feeding program with the most reported benefits being “My child will get nutritious food for lunch” (86.3%), “The child will not stay hungry in school” (70.2%), and “My child will stay in school all day/improve attendance” (64.9%), followed by “Less expense on food” (58.8%), “The child can pay more attention in class” (55.7%), and “More time for parents to work and earn” (51.9%).

237. Meanwhile qualitative interactions parents and VEDC members reflected the program as being highly useful for: (i) parents who are usually not at home and unable to cook food for their children, (ii) children from poor families who lack access to adequate nutritious food and (iii) students living far from the school or whose parents face difficulty in preparing lunch.

## Community Contribution to the Program

238. In terms of interest and expectations of involvement in the program, a majority of parents (83.5%) thought that they or their family members could contribute to the school lunch in some way. Disaggregated by gender, no significant difference was observed between the proportion of male respondents (82.4%) and female respondents (84.7%) who reported ability to contribute.

239. Amongst the 142 respondents (out of 170) who expressed an ability to contribute to the program, the most preferred mode of contribution (Figure 13) identified by a majority of parents were “in kind by providing vegetables” (76.5%) and in the form of labor “for helping in school garden” (76.5%) and “cooking for school meals” (70%). No significant difference



was observable in the preferred modes of community contributions among men and women.

240. Notably, only 40.6% parents’ expressed preference for contributing in cash although this did not reflect directly based on the economic situation of the households. In fact, while 44.1% respondents from first quintile and 41.2% respondents from second quintile households preferred cash contribution, this was even lesser reported by respondents from third quintile (36.4%) and fourth quintile (35.3%) in terms of economic status of the households.

241. Amongst those who reported cash as a preferred mode of contribution, most parents preferred contributing “Once every semester” (29%) or “Once a year” (21.7%), while “Once a week” (4.3%) and “twice a month” (5.8%) were largely not preferred. Notably a significant 20.3% were open to contributing “As and when the school asks”, indicating flexibility and openness to involvement in the program.

**Figure 13: Proportion of Parents with their Preferred Modes of Contribution**

242. As per the respondent estimations, 40,000 Kips was the annual median amount of cash that parents would be willing to contribute to the program. A clear difference in estimated amount was observed across the provinces with the Northern provinces reporting the

highest amount (median = 240,000 kips), followed by Southern Provinces (median = 40,000 kips) and Central provinces (20,000 kips).

243. Qualitative interactions on the other hand indicated a general willingness of parents and community members to contribute labour and materials for different program components while cash contributions were seldom mentioned. Parents and VEDC members identified the need for village authorities/VEDCs to establish rotational mechanisms of engaging parents in cooking school meals, supporting development and maintenance of school infrastructure and maintenance of school gardens.
244. These findings highlight the need for the program implementation to devote special efforts into community mobilization, community development, and identification of new fund sources for future activities, and improvement of local livelihoods to ensure effective and sustainable involvement of community members. Notably, the FY20 program aims to address this by training and employing community mobilizers to work directly with local MoES and school staff to ensure the adequate set up and functioning of the SFPs, with a phased transition to Government partners. This will be complemented by the development of communication materials around nutrition to enhance communication, particularly with ethnic groups.

## 2.6. EVALUATION QUESTION 6: NATURE OF WASH INFRASTRUCTURE IN SCHOOL AND AT HOME, WASH SUPPORT NEEDED, INVOLVEMENT OF VEDC AND COMMUNITY

Table 11: Snapshot of Children's Knowledge and Practices towards Handwashing (in percentages)

Baseline Actuals	Knowledge			Behavior								
	Overall	Girls	Boys	Don't wash			Only use water			Use water & soap		
				O	G	B	O	G	B	O	G	B
Before eating a meal	98.3	98.5	98.2	0.9	0.7	1.1	43.9	40.4	47.4	55.1	58.8	51.5
After eating a meal	89.5	90.1	89.0	4.0	4.4	3.7	48.0	42.3	53.7	48.0	53.3	42.6
After using toilet	68.6	67.6	69.5	11.8	10.7	12.9	35.1	34.2	36.0	53.1	55.1	51.1

### Current knowledge, attitudes, and practices around WASH

246. The baseline quantitative survey captured students' behaviour around handwashing and soap usage<sup>97</sup> through a mix of multiple questions. A composite score measuring handwashing practices was computed by combining the responses for all these questions. Each positive practice was given a score of one, thus higher scores indicate better handwashing behaviour. Overall, 17.1% of students received a total score between 1 to 5 (low), 55.5% got scores between 6 & 10 (medium) and 27.4% scored above 11 (high). A higher proportion of girls (30.9%) scored above 11, in comparison to boys (23.9%). Similarly, higher proportion of students in schools with improved roads had scores in high category (29.3%), when compared to students in schools with unimproved roads (22.2%), though

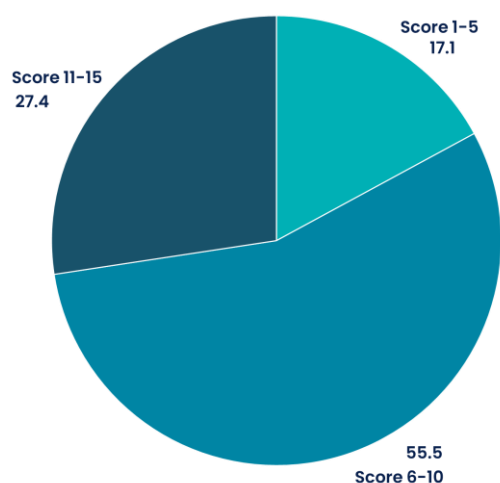


Figure 15: Children's handwashing behaviour scores (in percentages)

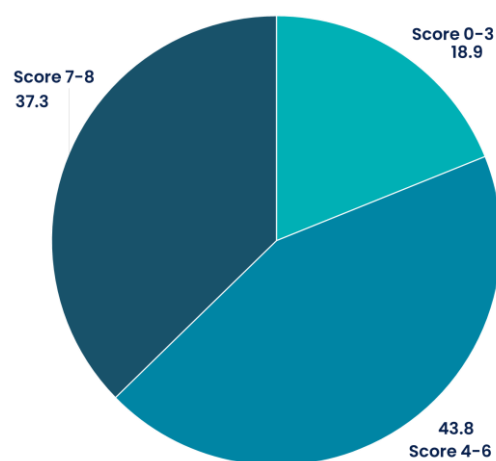


Figure 15: Children's handwashing knowledge scores (in percentages)

<sup>97</sup> Scores for handwashing behaviour in a variety of situations (before meals, after meals, after using the toilet, before handing food, before feeding a baby, after handling farm work/animals): score of 2 for washing with water and soap, score of 1 for washing with water; score of 0 for not washing hands; score of 1 if a child washes their hands even when no one is around to enforce handwashing behaviour.

these differences were not statistically significant. Students cited infrastructural gaps, such as lack of wash basins, water or soap in school, for their poor handwashing behaviours.

247. The survey assessed students' knowledge of ideal handwashing practices<sup>98</sup> using a similar scoring system. 18.9% of students got low scores (less than 4), 43.8% received medium (between 4 & 6) and 37.3% received high scores (7 or 8). No major differences were observed in the knowledge levels of girls and boys, younger and older primary school students, or children of schools with improved and unimproved roads.

248. Interviews with parents captured information around WASH knowledge and behaviour at the household level. More than half (56.5%) of the households surveyed reported using unimproved sources<sup>99</sup> of drinking water. The difference in use of improved water sources between households in northern provinces (63.3%) and central provinces (31.4%) was statistically significant<sup>100</sup>.

249. Scores were provided to assess the availability of sanitation facilities (toilet and handwashing station with running water) at the household level. 30.6% of households received low scores (less than 3), 57.6% of households received medium scores (between 4 & 5), and 11.8% got high scores (above 6). A significantly higher proportion of households belonging to upper economic status<sup>101</sup> scored high scores around the availability of sanitation facilities. The difference in the proportion of households receiving high scores among central provinces (2.9%) and southern provinces (14.3%) was found to be statistically significant<sup>102</sup>.

250. All parents interviewed (100%) reported that one should wash hands before meals; 92.9% reported that washing hands is important after meals, while 78.2% agreed that hands should be washed after using the toilet. 17.6% of parents reported not having a handwashing facility in their household premises.<sup>103</sup> Remarkably, 91.2% of respondents reported having access to soap for handwashing at home, however, actual usage of soap during handwashing was reported to be lower (55.9% before meals, 49.4% after meals and 69.4% after using the toilet).

251. Sanitation practices at the household level (toilet usage, frequency of cleaning the toilet, frequency of handwashing and use of soap) were also analysed by way of developing a composite score. No household scored low (below 5 on a scale of 20), 11.8% of households received scores between 6 – 10, 30.6% households received scores between 11 – 15 and 57.6% households scored above 16.

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<sup>98</sup> Scores for knowledge around handwashing: score of 1 for each situation mentioned in footnote 97; score of 1 if the child says that using soap is important for washing hands; in the situation where hands look dirty or smell bad, score of 1 if child says hands should be washed using water and soap, score of 0 if the child says only water can be used.

<sup>99</sup> Improved drinking water sources include: Piped water into the house, piped water to yard/plot of the house, protected well, protected spring, boreholes, rainwater collection and bottled water.

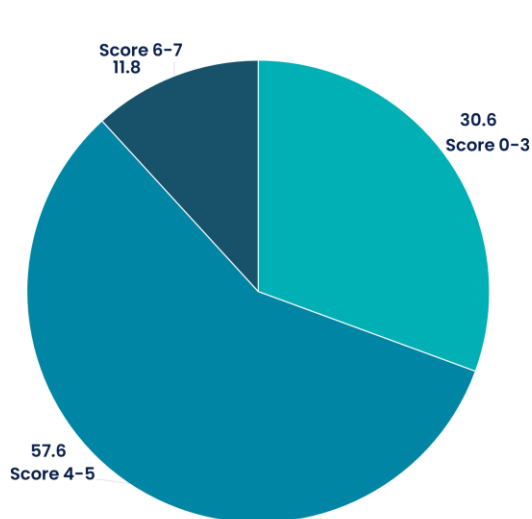
Unimproved water sources include: Surface water (river, lake, stream, canal, etc.), unprotected well, unprotected spring and tanker truck.

<sup>100</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

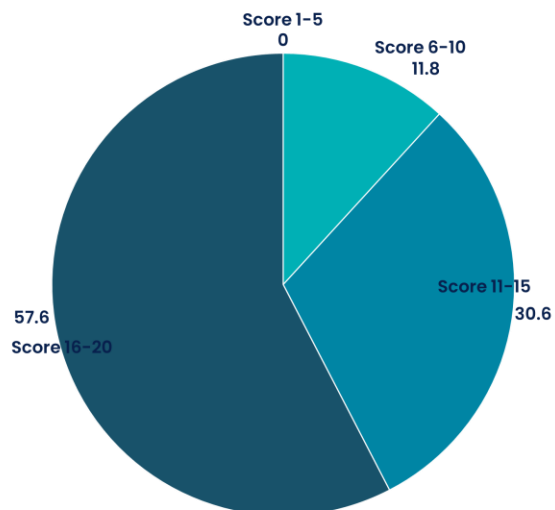
<sup>101</sup> The economic classification was done according to possession of household assets.

<sup>102</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

<sup>103</sup> Inside the house, yard or plot.



**Figure 17: Scores for access to Sanitation facilities at HH level (in percentages)**



**Figure 16: Scores for sanitation practices at HH level (in percentages)**

252. The difference in sanitation practices of households whose children study in schools with improved roads (62.4% scored above 16) and households whose children study in schools with unimproved roads (44.4% scored above 16) was found to be statistically significant<sup>104</sup>.

253. The survey found students to have medium levels of knowledge and behaviour towards WASH. While the proportion of students with low scores around WASH behaviour and knowledge are largely identical, the proportion of students with high WASH knowledge is relatively higher than those with high WASH behaviour. This indicates that high knowledge translates into behaviour, though not proportionately – indicating the role of other determinants in WASH behaviour, primarily school infrastructure.

254. It is noteworthy that most households were found to have high levels of WASH knowledge and behaviour; parents have high knowledge levels, moderate access to sanitation facilities at home, and high levels of WASH behaviour. Few households do not have functional toilets, mainly because of a lack of provision for running water. Also, it is noteworthy that high WASH knowledge and behaviour at household levels would not automatically translate into high WASH behaviour in schools until and unless this is backed by requisite improvement in WASH infrastructure at the school level.

### Existing WASH infrastructure in schools

255. According to the data captured at the school level, only 35.3% of the schools reported having a source of drinking water in or near the school premises (12 schools out of a total of 34 sampled schools). Out of these, 6 schools reported having a borehole to source water, 3 schools reported using tap water while 2 schools reported using an unprotected spring. Only one school reported that they treat the water for drinking purposes. Children, in general, reported carrying their own water bottles to school.

256. The majority of the schools (31 out of 34) reported having toilets for students, with the median number of toilets per school being 3. However, more than half of the schools did

<sup>104</sup> Statistically significant in 95% confidence interval

not have separate toilets for girls and boys. Only 19.4% of the toilets in the schools (13 out of 67 observed toilets) had piped water connections. The lack of a consistent water source in many schools rendered the toilets unusable. This forces students to go out in the open or travel back home for defecation. Moreover, only 44.1% of schools (15 out of 34) have handwashing facilities, out of which only 13 schools had access to water and 5 schools had provision of soap at the handwashing stations.

257. There is a need for sustainable access to clean water in schools. Most students were unable to wash their hands with soap at school due to a lack of water, handwashing facilities, or soap – or all three. Many schools have toilets but they are not sex-segregated and lack water supply, the latter especially those in districts located at high altitudes. This causes students to adopt poor hygiene behaviour.

### **Community and Government Involvement in WASH-related interventions**

258. The program, in coordination with Nam Saat, will provide improved water source infrastructure in approximately 130 schools in two provinces, Khammouane and Savannakhet, through the building or rehabilitation of water sources and installation of handwashing stations, combined with school-based IEC hygiene messaging and provision of hygiene kits. The hygiene promotion messaging will focus on (1) the importance of handwashing with soap at critical times, (2) safe drinking water storage, (3) using and cleaning latrines, and (4) personal hygiene.

259. The WASH activities will be sustained through building capacity of community-level stakeholders to self-manage their infrastructure. The program staff will collaborate with the Nam Saat to form and train Water User Committees (WUCs) made up of men and women who are stakeholders in the school: village chiefs, VEDC members, parents, and/or teachers. Training of WUCs will cover techniques on calculating and collecting fees from households for small repairs, basic bookkeeping, and handling operations & maintenance of boreholes.

260. The community members reported willingness to provide labour support for the construction/rehabilitation of school infrastructure, including water drilling. It is noteworthy that WASH component would focus primarily on the provision of water connections, but not other hygiene facilities such as construction or rehabilitation of toilets. Nevertheless, the provision of clean water is critical for other aspects of the school meal program, such as cooking, watering school gardens and handwashing before and after meals. It is also appropriate that the program is collaborating with Nam Saat from the start, for the design and other aspects around the construction of water systems as well as training for mechanics. The WUCs, consisting of multiple community and school-level stakeholders, will ensure the upkeep and maintenance of WASH infrastructure.

### **2.7. EVALUATION QUESTION 7: PRODUCTION OF DIVERSE CROPS, ACCESS TO MARKETS, STATUS OF AGRICULTURE KNOWLEDGE AND INFRASTRUCTURE AVAILABLE, WILLINGNESS TO CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL MEALS**

261. As part of the agriculture support component, the program intends to identify key issues and challenges which plague agriculture by way of undertaking a comprehensive needs assessment study. The study would, based on the issues identified, attempt to prioritise the



formation of farmer groups, promote cultivation of nutritious food items – a portion of which could be contributed or sold to the schools for enhancing the nutritional value of school meals, establish linkages between market players and farmers to augment farmers' income and encourage adoption of farming techniques which are not only climate-friendly, but also more adaptable to climate change.

262. Most farmers interviewed across 36 villages informed that no farmer groups existed in their villages. However, there were a few villages where farmers mentioned about some form of collectivisation of farmers, taking care of specific issues. In one of the villages in Vientiane Capital, a group had been formed specifically to grow organic rice. Farmers in a village in Vientiane had formed a funding group, extending loans to its members. Farmers in a village in Champasak, on the other hand, informed about presence of a group specifically for cassava growers, and one for cattle owners.
263. Most farmers across all 12 provinces informed undertaking farming for two seasons a year. Cultivation of rice is mainly limited to the rainy season (June to November), with farmers switching to vegetables like sweet corn, lettuce, and mustard, green onion, coriander, sweet potato, yam bean, beans, garlic, ginger, lemongrass, kale, coriander, peppermint and morning glory or cash crops like tobacco. While farmers depend on rain for cultivating rice, other water sources like rivers, pond, and underground water are utilized for growing vegetables during the dry season.
264. In few cases, for instance in Sekong, where farmers have sufficient access to water during the dry season, farmers reported growing rice in two seasons, in lowlands during rainy season, and in uplands during dry season. While currently farmers reported using rice and vegetables for household consumption, surplus rice is usually sold to local traders.
265. In addition to rice and vegetables, a number of farmers reported cultivating cassava, which is a cash crop, easily sold for cash in the local markets. However, cultivation of cassava is fairly limited, largely because of limitations in terms of capital and labour. Farmers articulated the need for access to cheap capital, which would help them increase cultivation of cash crops such as cassava, to increase household income.
266. Availability of water, especially during the dry season remains one of the major challenges in agriculture. Farmers depend upon ponds or gravity-fed from rivers or streams for cultivation during the dry season. Few farmers, however reported use of pumps for drawing ground water.
267. In addition to lack of availability of water, farmers face huge threats from pests outbreaks, such as golden apple snail, caterpillar and aphid, which can potentially destroy certain crops. Some of the farmers occasionally use chemical pesticides, though district agriculture officers recommend the use of natural and organic pesticides.
268. In addition to this, safe storage of crops and seeds, and protection from rats, weevils and birds, and extreme weather remain major unresolved challenges for farmers. Many of the farmers reported building separate space for storing crops and seeds, but also acknowledged that a substantial proportion of the produce still gets wasted as the existing storage spaces are unable to protect the produce, especially from insects and rats.

269. Farmers usually produce vegetables only for household consumption. Given that the market for vegetables is limited to the village, any increase in production is accompanied with fear of losses due to wastages.
270. In addition to this, agriculture in Lao PDR is increasingly being affected by climate change, making the farmers more vulnerable to extreme weather conditions. In the past two years, farmers reported having faced increased number of instances of floods and drought, negatively affecting their produce.
271. Farmers had favourable views on the school feeding program, acknowledging the potential benefits that accrue not only to the students, but also for the entire community at-large. Farmers indicated their desire to participate in the program, form groups, and benefit from all kinds of support to be extended to farmer groups under the program. The farmers showcased their interest, particularly in gaining technical knowledge around agriculture, and access to low-cost agriculture inputs including tools, materials and greenhouses. Interactions with officials at PAFO pointed towards provision of training on vegetable plantation techniques such as soil preparation, and vegetable seed/variety selection, which are expected to boost production levels.
272. Farmers expressed their desire to contribute towards school meals in the form of cash, vegetables or meat, on a sustained basis. Some of the farmers suggested that the village-level head or VEDC could possibly fix the nature and quantum of contributions, in consultation with the larger community. At the same time, there was a clear expectation that the program would bring about a positive change in the farmers' income, a portion of which would be contributed towards the school meals.

## **2.8. EVALUATION QUESTION 8: ANALYSING GENDER DIMENSIONS OF SFP FY2020**

### **Alignment of the program with the priorities of women, men, girls, and boys**

273. Literature review points that girls' literacy is relatively lower, especially in rural locations, with without proper access to roads, making the most marginalised and poor sub-groups of girls more vulnerable to early drop out<sup>105</sup>. Reasons for absenteeism among girls are found to be different from that for boys. While boys miss school primarily during the harvest season, because of their involvement in farming, girls are required to complete household chores and take care for their younger siblings, conforming to the existing gender roles. The presence of rigid gender roles constrains women's time allocation among paid and unpaid productive and household activities, leading to 'time poverty.' Girls from certain ethnic groups such as Hmong are married off at an early age, resulting in early drop out.

### **Gender sensitive design and implementation**

274. The McGovern-Dole SFP FY2020 design is gender sensitive; it includes measures to promote division of tasks among boys and girls at the school level, particularly around maintenance of school gardens, without defining tasks by gender, strengthening of nutrition education, and mainstreaming of gender equality into field-level activities.

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<sup>105</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan

275. By forging partnerships between VEDC and VWU, women have been encouraged to take up leadership roles in school management. However, the role of women in leadership roles, particularly at the village level seems weak. While women are extensively involved in farming, their role is largely restricted to provision of manual labour, as most strategic and financial decisions are reserved for men. Women, particularly from the ethnic groups, living in remote rural locations are less likely to have secured land tenure. This makes it difficult for them to access loans, as land-use rights do not provide rights to use land as collateral. Women are further disadvantaged in terms of accessing financial resources and are overall less likely avail loans and credit<sup>106</sup>.

### **Sustaining the gender-based outcomes**

276. The program design offers considerable attention to gender, and aligns with the national gender commitments and policies. The program offers benefits to both boys and girls in an equal manner, without any form of discrimination. The program design ensures responsiveness to gender-based needs and differences. As a result, it is critical to enhance participation of women in leadership roles, particularly around strategic decision making in VEDCs and VWUs.

## **2.9. EVALUATION QUESTION 9: MONITORING SYSTEMS AND THEIR ABILITY TO INFORM INFORMATION BASED MANAGEMENT; ABILITY TO INFORM GEEW ANALYSIS**

277. Drawing learnings from the SFP FY 2017, the current program intended to develop a monitoring system which could be easily mainstreamed into the government set-up after the handover. As a result, the monitoring system is primarily digital in nature, consisting of a home-grown application, developed in consultation with the EMIS collecting data on critical program indicators on a routine basis.

278. The application would have provisions for the school staff to collect data pertaining to a wide variety of indicators, ranging from provision of school meals, WASH related behaviour, maintenance of school gardens etc., for each and every boy or girl, and hence, would have the ability to perform GEEW analysis across all relevant indicators. The data would be submitted from the program tablet on a daily basis, which would go to district and provincial level for validation. Subsequently, the data from the app would get stored in the big data server of the Prime Minister Office national scientific office, on MoES server as-well-as on EMIS server.

279. Under SFP FY 2017, it used to be a challenge to ascertain the actual food requirements for each and every school. Drawing learnings from this, the monitoring application developed under SFP FY 2020 has been linked with EMIS data. As a result, with the EMIS database, the school meals application can track total food items distributed to every school on a quarterly basis, and link with total food items utilised in school meals on a daily basis. All this would help the program team generate accurate stock reports for each school, highlighting closing stock balance, and thus, support in streamlining the logistics.

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<sup>106</sup> FAO 2018; Country Gender Assessment

280. As part of WFP corporate data protection policy, real time data would be available for monitoring and analysis, but after removing all identifiable information, such as name and other identifiers, in order to ensure confidentiality of all individuals.
281. Another integral component of the monitoring system is the provision of customer feedback mechanism, offering hotline phone numbers, which could be used by the program beneficiaries for sharing feedback around different program components by way of a call, WhatsApp message or SMS. The mechanism, in a way, provides equal voice to all male and female program beneficiaries without any discrimination, or influence of their backgrounds, privileges or vulnerabilities.
282. In addition to the quantitative data monitoring, the current program consists of a comprehensive component for collecting, collating and analysing qualitative data. Based on the quantitative monitoring exercise, five poor performing schools would be identified in each district on a monthly basis. The DESB and WFP monitor would undertake visits in such schools to conduct qualitative tools to identify key reasons for such performance. In addition to this, qualitative data collection would also be undertaken in some of well-performing school to identify best practices. Thus, triangulation of qualitative and quantitative monitoring data would be undertaken to identify key trends, and offer remedial measures or actionable points for programmatic intervention.

## **2.10. EVALUATION QUESTION 10: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COMMUNITY NEEDS AND THE PROGRAM, INFLUENCE ON SUSTAINABILITY, NEED FOR MODIFICATIONS IN PROGRAM DESIGN**

283. Covid-19 has impacted almost every aspect of our lives in the past two years. Frequent lockdowns in Laos in the past two years ensured that the schools were closed, and the children were expected to shift to online and self-learning at home. According to the teachers and school head, lockdown has negatively impacted the learning outcomes for most students, as it is extremely difficult for the teachers to track each and every student's academic performance on a regular basis.
284. Interactions with parents point that not all of them could support their children with education. Households where parents were not well-educated, or were primarily busy with securing their basic necessities were unable to spend enough time with their children, and support them with their education.
285. According to the parents, students found it difficult to study subjects on their own. Parents felt that the schools should have extended greater support, particularly in the form of books, during this period to improve reading skills. As per the quantitative survey, only 10.6% of parents reported receiving any kind of assistance from the school to meet their child's learning needs.
286. It is understood that lockdown negatively impacted people's livelihoods. Every seven in ten of the sampled parents (70%) reported that the food security and nutrition deteriorated in their household as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. However, only 3% of all parents reported receiving any kind of support or assistance from the government or any other institution during Covid-19.

287. Covid-19 related restrictions have definitely affected the manner in which different government services are provided. Officials at provincial and district levels are unable to undertake school visits, and conduct face-to-face meetings and trainings. Given that online learning in itself cannot reach all potential students, and match face-to-face learning, according to the MoES, there is a need to explore and adopt new teaching-learning approaches which encourage students to speak, write and enjoy physical activities.
288. While Covid-19 related lockdown and other restrictions have affected the provision of services at the grassroots level, there isn't necessarily a wholesale shift in the community's needs. Community members still depend on government's support around education, food security, nutrition and livelihoods. The government and the national assembly continue to be committed towards the idea of school lunch meals, creating a separate budget line and allocating funding for it, and hence, there seems to be no major change as far as government's support is concerned.

## **EFFICIENCY**

### **2.11. EVALUATION QUESTION 11: MANNER IN WHICH PROGRAM DESIGN ENSURE EFFICIENCY IN SERVICE DELIVERY AND HANDOVER**

289. It is interesting that WFP entered into strategic partnerships with CRS, Nam Saat, MoES, MAF and MoH among others. The program, in a way is a platform that brings multiple development actors and service providers together, and address issues around food security & nutrition, education & learning, and WASH in a holistic yet efficient manner.
290. The decision to form a partnership with CRS helped WFP consolidate respective experiences of working on school meals in Laos, and handling multiple McGovern-Dole grant awards in the past two decades. In the current design, CRS continues to work in Khammouane and also look at the literacy component, which has been its core competency – both in terms of geographic focus, as-well-as thematic expertise.
291. The arrangement would also entail bringing together the best of their respective tools and techniques, developed as part of their previous programs, bringing greater levels of efficiency. For instance, the current program would include the modules developed by CRS for training VEDC members.
292. The program covers a total of 17 districts, spread out across 12 provinces. The distribution of districts is particularly widely spread out in the northern region, wherein four districts are being covered across four provinces, making the implementation component relatively inefficient. The decision of MoES directly implementing the program in these four districts is strategically relevant, as it allows the ministry to efficiently leverage its human and other resources. Additionally, this would be a useful experience for MoES to implement this program at a large scale; learnings from this experience is expected to make the process of handover more seamless in the future.
293. Broadly, McGovern-Dole SFP FY2020 was designed by drawing extensively from the past experiences of WFP and CRS of implementing McGovern-Dole grant awards. As a result, the program does not look to re-invent the wheel, but instead builds over the existing programs,

by adding very specific components, aimed at generating incremental impact. For instance, one of the major learnings from the previous programs points towards the need for addressing the issue of lack of water. As a result, the current program includes a WASH component covering 90 schools across 3 provinces: Khammouane, Savannakhet and Champasak. The program builds over the initial assessment undertaken by CRS to identify schools with water access needs, bringing together Nam Saat and CRS, which have considerable experience of working on WASH globally as-well-as in rural Laos.

294. At the provincial and district levels, the program brings together departments of education, health and agriculture for undertaking their respective roles and responsibilities, as agreed. At one end, each department would bring its expertise around the matters of education, health & nutrition and agriculture respectively, expected to bring greater efficiencies in planning and implementation. On the other hand, however, the arrangement would require high levels of coordination and synergy between the three departments and WFP-CRS teams.
295. Lastly, it is expected that Covid-19 related restrictions would impact few of the program activities in some way or the other. The nature of some of the activities might get altered in order to ensure their implementation in the renewed context, for instance, program shifting from face-to-face trainings to undertaking online capacity building sessions. On the other hand, in cases where is not possible to alter the nature of implementation, the activities might get pushed by a few days or months, resulting in delays.

## SUSTAINABILITY

### 2.12. EVALUATION QUESTION 12: CAPACITY LEVELS OF DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS, WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM, ELEMENTS THAT FACILITATE HANDOVER, NEED FOR ADDITIONAL ADVOCACY BY WFP

#### Capacity of community-level stakeholders (communities/parents, VEDC/VWU and school staff)

296. **School staff:** While teachers form the backbone of the Lao school education system, they have been found to have low content knowledge and pedagogical skills<sup>107</sup>. Moreover, Pedagogical Advisors (PAs) often lack the skills and resources to provide adequate mentoring support to teachers. Due to staff shortage, many teachers are required to teach in multiple grades, apart from handling other administrative responsibilities. Non-Lao-speaking children face barriers in learning as teachers find it difficult to instruct in local non-Lao languages.
297. To address these challenges, the program aims to offer training on teacher coaching support, formative reading assessments and remedial learning activities to provincial staff at PESS and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs), to district PAs, DESB officials and teachers in the community. Through this, the program will align administrative support from institutions that are charged with supporting and training new and existing teachers.
298. The program will train DESB staff, teachers, students and school heads, using the National School Garden manual, on basic gardening techniques to support the school gardens. Training will be provided to aid selection of crops that flourish in specific geographic and seasonal conditions, aimed at maximising production.
299. The capacity building activities planned under the program for school teachers seem sufficient, and address key technical and managerial needs. It is understood that the program investment in capacity building of teachers across program schools would essentially build, over a period of time, a cadre of well-capacitated teachers, which would increase the chances of sustaining program outcomes around learning and nutrition, even after the program is completed.
300. **VEDC:** All sampled villages reported having functioning VEDCs. The frequency of VEDC meetings ranged from monthly to bi-annual meetings. The VEDCs primarily focus on promoting education and health – encouraging parents to enrol their children in school at the right age, discouraging absenteeism and dropouts, procuring learning materials such as textbooks and stationery for children from poor families, recommending families to boil water for drinking, handwashing before meals and use of toilets. They work with village chiefs to ensure the involvement of male and female community members in activities such as repairing school fences, cutting grass and cleaning the school premises before the new academic year starts. They also collaborate with district health officers for facilitating vaccination drives for children.

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<sup>107</sup> World Bank and MoES. SABER Service Delivery Survey Report.



301. Limited VEDCs have received trainings around their roles and responsibilities related to school education. Female participation in VEDCs in sampled villages was found to be on the lower side. Furthermore, most members of village women's unions were unaware of the functioning and composition of the VEDC, which indicates a lack of engagement between the two bodies. These challenges may limit the ability of VEDCs to support the implementation of the SFP, and provide targeted support to improve school outcomes. To enhance the capacity of the VEDCs, program staff would train the members using the approved VEDC training manual issued by MoES. To ensure uptake and retention of the training content, these sessions would be conducted on an annual basis, keeping the scope in line with the annual school development plan that VEDCs are tasked to submit to MoES. Given that VEDCs act as a bridge between the schools and the community, they are expected to take ownership of the SFP, and assume leadership once the current program is completed. In order to sustain provision of school meals beyond the duration of the program, it is essential for the program to invest in strengthening VEDCs and building the capacity of its members.
302. **Community:** Local communities are expected to contribute fresh produce and labour for the SFP. The Laos Cost-Benefit Analysis of the SFP (2018) found that contributions from the community in the form of fresh foods, cash and labour were high. Village orientations and consultations have already started, and the community has broadly articulated its willingness to support SFP by contributing wood and other locally available materials for building kitchen and rice storage and volunteering for other activities such as water drilling.
303. It is essential to set community expectations regarding this program right at the beginning. For this, the program team would work with the VEDCs in each village to develop an agreement outlining the support the program would provide during the next five years, and the key expectations it would have from the school and community members. The program would employ community mobilizers to increase awareness among community members regarding the benefits of the SFP, to mobilise and engage communities in the process of program implementation, and ultimately to take ownership of the school meals once the program is completed. In addition to this, WFP and CRS would develop in-depth guidelines around community mobilization to support smooth handover process, when the government officials take over the role of mobilizers.
304. The program will install or rehabilitate water points in approximately 130 schools to support access to drinking water. In these schools, WUCs comprising of various stakeholders, such as village chiefs, VEDC members, parents, and/or teachers, will receive training on calculating and collecting fees from households, basic bookkeeping, and handling operations & management of boreholes to ensure transparency and accountability around financial controls. WUCs will collect money from each contributing family every month to cover ongoing small repair costs of the WASH infrastructure. This ensures that the schools are not completely dependent on the government for resources. It remains to be seen whether this will adversely affect the capacity of these community members to contribute for school meals in such schools.
305. **School cooks and storekeepers:** The cooks will be in charge of preparing meals in the school kitchen. It is seen that a structured approach would be adopted for their hiring and

training. If there is more than one cook in a school, they would render their services on a rotational basis. It needs to be ensured that a roster is prepared and intimated to all the school meals support staff. Storekeepers will be responsible for bringing food from the storage facilities to the school, recording stock balance and the safety of the warehouse.

306. To ensure sustained support from cooks, it is imperative to think about appropriate incentives for them. The cooks and storekeepers will receive a total food ration of 50kg rice per semester, which would essentially be divided among them. There are also some concerns about the availability of cooks during the rice planting and harvest season. The procedure for selection of cooks followed by VEDCs, along with the measures these committees take to support and motivate them, will be vital for ensuring the regularity of cooks to sustain the SMP in the long run.

307. Nutrition training will be provided to cooks by the National Nutrition Center (NNC), MoH. The training sessions will follow standardized guidelines to ensure continuity after handover. WFP and CRS have developed a cookbook that contains recipes adapted to local tastes containing nutrient-dense crops that can be grown in school gardens. This is crucial as many community members expressed apprehensions that the taste of the food and its nutritional value may vary in case a particular school employs multiple cooks. Trainings will be held frequently at the committee level as cooks frequently rotate. The Government staff will take over the delivery of trainings at the community level when the districts are handed over to NSMP.

### **Sustainability of Agriculture Support component**

308. Farmers participating in the program are expected to support the SFP by way of contributions in the form of cash and/or fresh food items. Linking farmers with schools is expected to result in a certain sense of ownership among the community members with respect to the provision of school meals. As per the qualitative discussions, farmers articulated their willingness to join the program; many of them also expressed the need for technical training and expert supervision to improve the farm production.

309. The agriculture support component will support existing farmer groups, and establish new ones by way of offering trainings around technical skills, enabling them to share knowledge and resources among themselves. The trainings would also include climate-smart agriculture approaches, comprising of sessions around development of community gardens, agroforestry and climate information and services, to support community-based resilience building and adaptation.

310. SMP is targeted to areas where 70% of the households rely on subsistence farming as their main livelihoods. Most farmers practice single cropping as they don't have enough labour to expand production, or a market to sell the extra produce, resulting in food waste. They grow mostly rice in the rainy season and vegetables in the dry season. Water shortage is a major issue, especially during dry season. Many farmers don't have proper storage space for their produce, resulting in inadequate protection from rats and weevils.

311. Food processing and preservation training will directly benefit the SFP as this would help farmers increase the shelf life and value of their produce, reduce wastages and target new

markets. This is expected to improve food security and offer new income generating opportunities for the local farmers. However, the component around establishing market linkages seem relatively weak at this moment, especially in remote villages, which located in uplands far away from markets.

312. Improving farmers' income is extremely necessary to ensure sustained contribution from them towards the school feeding program. Increased productivity as a result of joining the program may not necessarily translate into a proportionate increase in income for all farmers. If the farmers are not able to witness a significant change in their income levels, they may not have any economic incentive to continue participating the program, and contribute cash or food items for the school meals on a sustained basis.

### **Building Capacity levels of Govt. partners and CPs to support SFP**

313. Capacity building activities for PESS and DESBs are planned to be organized around: 1) School Feeding Project Management, and 2) Monitoring and evaluation, and information sharing system. Most officials interviewed at district and provincial levels were unaware of the NSMP, indicating the need for an orientation on the national policy as well. The MoES will directly implement the SFP in three northern districts which will offer first-hand experience of managing such a large-scale and complex program.

314. Drawing learnings from the SFP FY 2017, the current program has developed a monitoring system that will be easily mainstreamed into the government set up after the handover. The monitoring system, which is digital, consists of an application, integrated with the EMIS, collecting data on critical program indicators on a routine basis. The application has provisions for the school staff to collect data pertaining to a wide variety of indicators. While WFP would play a central role in establishing and running the new monitoring mechanism for the next five years, MoES would also be directly involved in its design and operationalization. Adequate steps would be taken during this program to constantly build capabilities within the government systems at the national, provincial and district levels, as well as the school staff to use the monitoring mechanism on a sustained basis.

### **Elements that facilitate integration of SFP into NSMP**

315. McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20 provides a platform for GoL to extend school feeding in the remaining 17 priority districts. In line with WFP's country strategic plan and global approach, WFP under the current program intends to shift from directly implementing school feeding to supporting the transition and ownership of SFPs by way of building necessary structures and systems within the community, and the government across national, provincial and district levels.

316. Community Capacity Assessments (CCA) is one of the most critical tools, which facilitates the process of integration of SFP into NSMP, by way of identifying the most mature villages and schools for the handover. The tool helps assess the capacities of the schools, village-level institutions, parents and other community members as well as district level government staff around different facets of the school feeding program. CCA includes assessment of different stakeholders around their awareness levels, ownership of school

feeding activity, and resilience to climatic and economic shocks, apart from evaluation of schools based on sustained availability of food items for school meals and presence of WASH infrastructure.

317. Community mobilization is one of the core program components, aimed at engaging communities in the implementation and improvement of the program, seeking their support in building infrastructure in support of the program, and developing ownership towards school feeding program to smoothen the process of integration of SFP into NSMP.
318. Nutrition Campaigns in schools, targeted towards parents, teachers, children, school cooks, local farmers and VEDCs, will promote good nutrition practices and foster demand for locally available nutrient-dense foods. To develop an appropriate SBCC strategy, WFP will conduct a formative assessment focusing on knowledge, attitudes and practices around food and nutrition, as well as on understanding barriers faced in uptake of healthy behaviours. These campaigns will empower parents and community members to achieve improved nutrition outcomes and support local agriculture, by improving dietary diversity through conscious healthy food choices in the long run.
319. The program aims to develop extensive monitoring and evaluation systems in partnership with MoES in a way that the exercise builds the capacity of government staff especially at provincial and district levels to independently undertake concurrent monitoring of activities and outputs of NSMP using digital platforms.
320. The program design restricts the supply of rice from the US only for the initial three academic year, that is, from 2021-22 till 2023-24. School meals in the last year of the program (2024-25) would involve supply of fortified rice from local millers, or contribution of cooked rice directly from parents and other community members. This provision is in line with the transition strategy, preparing the community to gradually take ownership of the school meals before the process of handover to NSMP is initiated.
321. As part of the WASH component, the program would collaborate with the Nam Saat to establish and develop capacities of village-level WUCs, consisting of village chiefs, VEDC members, parents, and/or teachers. Well-capacitated WUCs are expected to collect fees from households, and handle all kinds of repair and maintenance of WASH infrastructure, enhancing community ownership towards WASH before handing over schools to NSMP.
322. In addition to the above-mentioned specific program components, both WFP and CRS plan to undertake capacity building for PESS and DESBs around (a) School Feeding Project Management, and (b) Monitoring & evaluation and information sharing system, facilitating integration of SFP into NSMP.

### **Advocacy and Policy Support under McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20**

323. Through McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20, WFP aims to provide policy-level support at the national level, and strengthen capacities of government staff across levels to facilitate transition to the NSMP in 2025, ensuring that GoL has necessary structures and systems in place to take over management of school feeding in 17 districts in the 10th NSEDP (2026-2030).
324. WFP plans to support GoL in revising the Government's School Lunch Program strategy (2021-2025), by way of undertaking workshops and initiating relevant dialogues among

stakeholders. In order to ensure successful integration of nutrition into SFP before handover to NSMP, there is a need to extend necessary policy support in terms of setting school feeding nutrition standards and finalising standard cooking recipes and portion sizes etc.

325. As part of McGovern-Dole-SFP FY20, WFP would initiate steps towards establishing School Meal staffing structure and ensuring recruitment of permanent officials in School Meals Unit at provincial and district levels. The development of a full-fledged School Meals Unit across levels is expected to play a pivotal role in improving quality of management, as well as provision of technical support for NSMP.

326. In order to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly at the provincial and district levels, are well aware of the NSMP policy before the handover is completed, WFP and CRS plan to work together to engage relevant actors, and communicate key policy details.

## 3. Conclusions

### 3.1. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are stated according to the DAC criteria.

#### Relevance & Coherence

327. The program has been designed keeping in mind the existing needs and aspirations of the local communities. Issues pertaining to malnutrition, poor learning outcomes among students, poverty, poor sanitation infrastructure and hygiene behaviour are all inter-related, constantly reinforcing each other. The program aims to address each of these issues in a holistic manner, by way of (a) provision of school meals ensuring dietary diversity as well as nutritional value, (b) supporting agricultural production of nutritious food items by way of technical trainings as-well-as provisioning requisite agricultural inputs, (c) improving learning outcomes by way of strengthening teachers' capacities and building learning infrastructure, (d) improving water source infrastructure by installing hand washing stations, and building awareness among school staff, students and community-level stakeholders around WASH, and (e) promoting good nutrition practices and healthy diets through a SBCC strategy targeted towards children within the primary schools, as well as the caregivers of school children and the wider community.
328. The program focusses on activities to improve literacy levels of the community, especially girls from the most marginalized and vulnerable communities. In addition to improving agriculture production, the program aims to leverage school gardens for ensuring cultivation of different vegetables, as well as for enhancing nutrition education among children and communities. Transfer of technical knowledge on nutrition and school gardens will help communities to diversify their food basket.
329. The program design is completely aligned with Education Sector Development Plan and National School Meals Program, with a vision to improve the educational and nutritional target of the country and meet the SDG targets, by providing school meals and literacy and education support, by way of building teachers' technical capacities and strengthening learning infrastructure in high priority regions. The program entails capacity building activities to support a wide variety of stakeholders and processes. At the operational level, the program builds capacities of VEDC members, school staff and farmers. At the strategic level, it offers training sessions as-well-as exposure visits for officials at national, provincial, and district levels for effective implementation of SFP.
330. Mc-Govern Dole SFP FY20 is coherent with WFP CSP 2022-2026. It is directly aligned with three out of the four strategic outcomes: i) School children in vulnerable areas have improved food security, nutrition, and learning results by 2026 (SO1), ii) Vulnerable groups, in particular women and girls of reproductive age, children under five, and school-aged children have improved nutrition outcomes by 2026 (SO2), iii) Vulnerable people in disaster affected or at-risk areas have enhanced food and nutrition security and increased capacities to mitigate and manage risks associated with climate and other shocks by 2026 (SO3).

331. The program design provides a platform to WFP to provide direct support for school feeding programs in new districts for attaining SO1. Under this program, WFP would augment supply of nutritious food items by way of developing school gardens, and engaging with farmers support to ensure contribution of nutritious vegetables and other food items. These activities contribute to SO2 of the CSP. In addition to increasing production levels and developing market linkages, the agriculture component aims to strengthen capacities of farmers to withstand shocks, and improve social protection, thus contributing to SO3 of CSP.
332. Mc-Govern Dole SFP FY20 is directly in-line with WFP's strategy of gradually shifting from direct provision of food assistance to enabling more policy level engagements and capacity development. The program focusses heavily around enhancing the capacities of government as-well-as the communities, enabling them to take over this program by 2025. WFP will explore additional funding sources such as private sector funding, to provide cash to targeted schools, mirroring the NSMP model and in support of the ongoing handover processes.

### Effectiveness

333. Poverty is found to be the most critical determinant for absenteeism in schools, as children either accompany their parents to the fields, or stay at home to take care of younger siblings. Wide variations are observed with respect to the reading levels among students. Reading levels were found to be consistently higher (a) among girls in comparison with boys, and (b) among students in schools with improved roads in comparison with students in schools with unimproved roads. This points towards the fact that students within the same grade are placed at different learning levels, making it difficult for the teachers to bring everyone in the classroom on the same page.
334. It is understood VEDCs play a crucial role in bridging the gap between school staff and the parents, though their engagement with parents and other village level institutions such as VWU is limited. The program, by way of extensive community mobilization activities, needs to establish and leverage platforms bringing VEDC and parents together for initiating discussions around school and education. VEDCs can play an instrumental role in reaching out to parents, understand the reasons for not sending their children to schools, and explain the benefits of attaining formal education.
335. The baseline study found the status of nutritional knowledge, attitude and practices across provinces to be moderate with some variations observed across provinces. The mean DDS for children in program schools across provinces was **medium** (7.3). Southern provinces fared better than the central and northern provinces. Schools located in non-remote areas (with improved roads) were found to have better dietary diversity than schools in remote areas (with unimproved roads).
336. Most parents understand the benefits of dietary diversity as well as have knowledge about the value of different food items. However, poor accessibility to diverse food items such as lentils, meat proteins and fruits, and distantly located markets were found to restrict many families from adopting food diversification. Affordability of food items is also a major factor limiting consumption of different food groups (e.g., fruits) for several parents. Several



families depended on consumption of food items that they could grow/rear by themselves. A need for measures to improve income of local communities to increase intake of food categories (as well as be able to sustainably contribute to the program) is evident.

337. Community members, particularly in remote locations and belonging to ethnic groups, might showcase resistance with respect to accepting certain food items (for instance, lentils) which have not been consumed traditionally. There is a need for proper training on preparation of this food item and information about its nutritional value would be crucial to increasing protein consumption among children.
338. While most food categories are consumed frequently, consumption of White tubers and roots, legumes, nuts and seeds, Milk and milk products and Oils and Fats were least reported, which is a notable finding from a program perspective as consumption of Legumes and Oil is expected to increase through the school meals<sup>108</sup>. Baseline findings point that not all program villages are at the same level at the onset of the program. Schools in remote locations are relatively more likely to perform poorly around reading and nutrition outcomes, making them more vulnerable as a group to malnutrition and poor education outcomes.
339. Majority of the respondent parents reported positive attitudes towards the program in general and school meals, in particular. School gardens are also perceived as beneficial for improving children's nutrition and developing the knowledge and skills of children as well as community members. Parents also expressed willingness to contribute labour for maintenance of the gardens. A need for streamlining responsibilities of different stakeholders for improved functioning of the School Gardens is identified, as teachers are already burdened with teaching as-well-as non-teaching administrative responsibilities.
340. People reflected a general readiness to adopt the program as well as new health and nutritional practices, provided they receive adequate support to pursue the same. However, several expectations beyond the program plan (e.g., from government to procure fresh food items like fruits and milk over the long run; from WFP to provide all kitchen instruments including serving ware etc.) were also articulated. Such findings have highlighted the need for the program to set appropriate expectations and ensure clarity in understanding the nature of program support and community responsibilities.
341. Most households were found to have good access to sanitation facilities and positive WASH behaviour. While children possess sound knowledge around handwashing behaviour, most of them were unable to wash their hands at school due to infrastructural gaps, such as lack of wash basin, water or soap. Moreover, many schools have toilets but do not have them sex-segregated, and lack sustained water supply. The issue of inconsistent water supply is more pronounced in districts located at high altitudes.
342. Covid-19 related restrictions, in the last two years, have severely affected the manner in which different government services are provided. Officials are unable to undertake school visits, or conduct face-to-face meetings and trainings with the community. Schools shifted

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<sup>108</sup> The SFP FY20 aims to provide daily hot lunch across schools in 18 MoES priority districts, which is envisioned to consist of 100g of fortified rice, 40g of lentils, 30g of canned fish and 10g of vegetable oil fortified with Vitamins A and D.

to online classes during the lockdown. It must be acknowledged that Covid-related disruptions will likely affect program outcomes in the future. If such restrictions continue, they are likely to negatively affect the implementation and logistics of the program, possibly resulting in delays or changes in the way certain activities are implemented. The program activities must be rolled out with pre-emptive mitigation measures in place.

## Gender

343. Role of women in leadership roles, particularly at the village level seems fairly limited. Women, particularly from the ethnic groups, living in remote rural locations are less likely to be involved in strategic and financial decision making, which are predominantly reserved for men. As a result, it is likely that the role of women at the village level, around implementation and management of school feeding program might be restricted. It is essential for the program to have necessary mechanisms set in place to ensure adequate female representation as far as decision making around school meals is concerned at the village level.

## Sustainability

344. The program will train provincial and district education staff around providing coaching and mentoring support to early-grade teachers. Teachers will be trained to conduct formative reading assessments and deliver remedial instruction, especially for non-Lao speaking children. However, teachers are already managing too many responsibilities, which points towards the need to manage their work load and offer incentives.

345. As part of the WASH component, the program would collaborate with the Nam Saat to establish and develop capacities of village-level WUCs. Well-capacitated WUCs are expected to collect fees from households, and handle all kinds of repair and maintenance of WASH infrastructure, enhancing community ownership towards WASH before handing over schools to NSMP.

346. The program will employ community mobilizers to strengthen the capacity of VEDCs to manage the SFP, increase community awareness of the SFP; to mobilise and engage communities in the implementation and improvement of the program; and to ultimately take ownership of the program to ensure sustainability. More staff has been allotted per district, in comparison with the previous Mc-Govern Dole program, to ensure follow up on community mobilisation activities more frequently.

347. The training sessions for storekeepers and school meals support staff (teachers, principals, VEDCs) will be aligned with Government manuals to ensure standardization and continuity after the Government staff will take over the delivery of trainings at the community level. Initial steps will be taken to support research on food fortification, alongside a phased introduction of fortified rice to the SFP. However, availability of cooks particularly during harvest season might be a challenge. There is a need to maintain a buffer while training cooks and other community level stakeholders, as this would ensure continuity of services, particularly during harvest season.

348. Food processing and preservation training will directly benefit the SFP by extending the shelf life of produce, and with support to target new markets; food waste can be avoided

and produce sold. This is expected to lead to improved food security and income generating opportunities for local farmers. However, mechanisms for strengthening market linkages for farmers appear hazy at this moment, given that such mechanisms are shaped by a number of factors, including remoteness of the location, terrain, market size, condition of the roads etc.

349. In order to ensure that the farmers benefit from the program, it is essential to not only increase their farm production, but also identify ways and means for increasing their incomes. Farmers' engagement and ownership with the program would automatically rise if they are able to view tangible and observable benefits of their participation.

350. The extensive monitoring system to be developed in partnership with MoES builds the capacity of government staff, especially at the provincial and district levels to independently undertake concurrent monitoring of activities and outputs of NSMP using digital platforms.

**Table 12: Conclusions of program components**

Components	Conclusions
School Meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Logistical and other arrangements for provision of school meals are assured by WFP. The implementation of the program will build on successful WFP strategies and experiences in Laos since 2002 as well as the ongoing handover process.</li> <li>Adequate planning is in place for capacity building of government stakeholders and other actors from central to school levels. It is envisioned that government staff will play a mediating role to resolve any issues that may arise.</li> <li>Quality assurance and accountability mechanisms (such as Resource tracking, digital Monitoring and periodic reporting systems) are in place for effective inter-ministerial co-ordination, multi-sectoral planning, joint action, and monitoring and evaluation.</li> <li>The program will integrate school gardening and link local farmers to SFP. However, sustained contribution of vegetables and other food items by community members is not guaranteed; contribution depends upon the nature of engagement undertaken with farmers and the community, at large.</li> <li>In-person trainings for community level actors like cooks, storekeepers and VEDCs might be affected by Covid restrictions and protocols. There are also some concerns about the availability of cooks, particularly during the rice planting and harvest season.</li> </ul>
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A detailed participatory analysis will be undertaken to understand the root causes hampering the functionality of existing water points in schools, to rehabilitate and address them accordingly.</li> <li>Intense WASH intervention by Nam Saat and CRS is concentrated in 130 schools, ensuring high focus. WFP also aims to create small</li> </ul>

Components	Conclusions
	<p>water connections in the school kitchen and handwashing areas and school gardens in approximately 577 schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well-capacitated WUCs are expected to collect fees from households, and handle all kinds of repair and maintenance of WASH infrastructure, enhancing community ownership towards WASH before handing over schools to NSMP.</li> <li>Though WUC finances will ensure that schools are not completely dependent on the government for resources, the activities of the committee depend heavily upon sustained monetary contributions from the parents, which is uncertain.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Mobilization and Infrastructure Building</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WFP and CRS will work with the GoL to institutionalize the role of VEDCs and communities as an integral part of the SFP setup and implementation.</li> <li>The expectations from different stakeholders in the SMP are clearly delineated from the outset. The program team has signed agreements with VEDCs in each community which outline the training and other support the program will provide, and the role of the government partners, the school and community.</li> <li>Majority of the engagement around building/rehabilitating infrastructure is expected to be in the initial years of the program. The District Community Facilitators will conduct regular visits, resolves issues and mobilise community members.</li> <li>WFP and CRS will develop guidelines on community mobilisation into a “School Meals Implementation Toolkit” with support and ownership by MoES. SBCC approaches and visual materials (posters, photos and videos) will be used to communicate program priorities with communities, particularly ethnic groups.</li> <li>Teachers are overburdened with teaching as-well-as non-teaching, administrative responsibilities; they may not be able to offer requisite time and effort for establishing and maintaining school gardens.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Literacy</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intervention with CRS is concentrated in 90 schools, ensuring high focus. Schools which are performing low in education indicators, have no additional literacy support, and high percentage of students from ethnic groups who do not speak Lao as their mother tongue will be prioritised in this component.</li> <li>The literacy materials will be circulated periodically among schools in the same district, allowing students access to a rotating inventory and wider selection of books. The program will include</li> </ul>

Components	Conclusions
	<p>MoES approved books that are accessible to students with disabilities as a priority in book selection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers will be trained on how to manage book lending as well as how to perform formative reading assessments of students to inform level-appropriate instruction. Given that teachers are overworked, it is not certain if they would necessarily use new teaching methods in classes and be able to support the activities linked to corner libraries.</li> <li>Covid-19 restrictions have caused significant disruptions to the school calendar. In this context, home learning kits provided by CRS and orientations for parents will be crucial to promote extra reading practice at home. However, non-literate and ethnic parents may be relatively disadvantaged to support students' education, and they may not consider formal education necessary for employment in the future.</li> </ul>
<b>Agriculture Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nutrition-sensitive agricultural extension benefits both rural economies and enhances the nutritional quality of the produce. Ensuring availability of variety of fruit and vegetables grown by local farmers is an important step in community ownership of school meals.</li> <li>Farmers' continued engagement with the program would depend largely on the tangible benefits they witness as a result of their participation, such as increased productivity and income.</li> <li>In addition to the direct benefit to the SFP, the farmer groups created under this activity will foster longer-term sustainability and market linkages, empowering them to decide how they can best use their products in existing markets. Farmer groups link farmers and create a forum for the exchange of knowledge and skills on best practice for agriculture, building a sense of camaraderie among all farmers, enabling them to share knowledge and resources, as well as plan the farming of vegetables.</li> <li>Trainings in food processing and preservation, a sector currently underdeveloped in Laos, will directly benefit the SFP by extending the shelf life of produce, while closely linking with nutrition goals, improved food security and income generating opportunities for local farmers. It will increase the value of their produce, reduce wastage and enable them to target new markets.</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Support/ Government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The transition to a sustainable NSMP depends on mainstreaming school feeding into national policies and plans. WFP plans to support GoL in revising the Government's School Lunch Program</li> </ul>

Components	Conclusions
Capacity Strengthening	<p>strategy (2021-2025), and would initiate steps towards establishing a School Meal staffing structure and ensuring recruitment of permanent officials in School Meals Unit at provincial and district levels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level policy support is crucial for well-defined and secure budgetary allocation, cross-sectoral co-ordination and policy convergence, efficiency, donor harmonization at country-level. Establishing a visible mandate to be realized and setting standards for service delivery.</li> <li>• However, identifying other sustained and protected sources of funding, such as from private sources, remains a challenge. A comprehensive Lao-specific funding model for school feeding can be developed, which will enable different actors to seek additional support for various components.</li> </ul>
Health and Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By combining food provision with behavior change messaging and sensitization, the program has the potential to improve nutrition and health both at the school and household levels, including diet diversification, water and sanitation and healthy eating practices.</li> <li>• The program aims to progressively increase the involvement of communities in the management, control and supervision of SMP at the local level. Local procurement of fortified rice will commence in the 2022 - 2023 school year, involving supply of fortified rice from local millers, or contribution of cooked rice directly from parents and other community members. This is in line with the transition strategy.</li> </ul>

## Lessons Learnt

351. There is a need to adopt a flexible approach to data collection as pandemic related lockdowns and travel restrictions create a dynamic situation on the ground. The baseline adopted a hybrid approach to data collection, tapping into local resources and hiring enumerators from local NGOs to form district-specific teams for quantitative data collection, to avoid inter-district travel. All qualitative interactions were held virtually and FGDs were adapted to telephonic IDIs as it became logistically difficult to gather people, in light of Covid protocols.

352. Data collection with children should preferably be done face-to-face, especially the literacy assessment, considering their limited attention span and need for rapport building. To avoid interview fatigue, separate samples were drawn for the quantitative survey and the literacy assessment with children.

353. Capturing data from various sources helps in triangulation of findings and establishing validity of indicator values. This is especially important for behavioural information (for example, WASH behaviour at home) which was not observed directly by the interviewer. It is also helpful to pay close attention to contradictions in the data, as it can sometimes prompt further analysis leading to interesting insights.
354. The data collection for baseline evaluation was primarily done in the months of October and November. It is desirable that the mid-term and end line evaluations are also conducted in the same months/season. For example, the literacy assessment was conducted with Grade 3 students at the beginning of their second semester. Future literacy assessments should ideally also be conducted at this time of school year. It is also important to be cognizant of the situation that schools were closed for the last six months prior to the baseline evaluation and students were attending online classes. Any comparison of learning levels of children from baseline to mid-term and ultimately, end line stage should be done bearing this in mind.
355. To assess the agriculture component, interactions with more stakeholders can be planned at the mid-term and end line stages. For example, interaction with members and leaders of Farmer Groups can help understand their functioning and group dynamics. Traders can also be interviewed to assess market linkages, along with an observatory component at the market level, if possible.
356. To assess softer aspects such as group dynamics of VEDCs and VWUs, motivation levels of school teachers etc., various activity-based interview questions and projective techniques may be used at the time of mid-term and end line evaluations.

### **3.2. KEY OBSERVATIONS**

The sub-section provided below elucidates key observations about the program, based on the findings drawn from the baseline evaluation.

357. Community members, particularly in remote locations, belonging to ethnic groups, might showcase resistance with respect to accepting certain food items (for instance, lentils) which have not been consumed traditionally. Acceptance of such new food items is a gradual process, which could be smoothened by way of undertaking very specific community mobilization activities around it.
358. It is essential that regular trainings of implementation team and district staff are held to ensure mitigate the effect of frequent transfers. Similarly, it is essential to train more cooks that required in order to ensure continuity of services, particularly during harvest season. While this is an efficient way of mitigating risks posed by Covid-19, it also helps reach out to greater number of individuals on a more frequent basis. Use of audio-visual based content is also likely to increase user engagement and comprehension. In order to address the issue around lack of requisite hardware (smart phones or tablets), the program could consider developing Village Champions – village youth, who could support in mobilizing the trainees together and handling the technology.
359. It is essential that farmers' participation in the program and contribution towards schools meals, to a large extent would depend upon the chances of the program increasing their



incomes. In order to ensure that the farmers benefit from the program, it is essential to not only increase their farm production, but also identify ways and means for increasing their incomes. Farmers' engagement and ownership with the program would automatically rise if they are able to view tangible and observable benefits of their participation.

360. The program would benefit by establishing linkages between farmers and the market and traders, to facilitate sale of their produce on a sustained basis. Similarly, it is essential to identify a variety of other solution ideas, such as food fortification or food processing etc. which could increase farmers' income and diversify their income sources. The second stage would entail developing and testing small pilots in limited geographies to build evidences around each of these solution ideas.
361. Baseline research shows that not all program villages are at the same level at the onset of the program. There are certain characteristics which inherently make certain villages more vulnerable to malnutrition and low educational & learning outcomes. It is therefore essential to develop proxy variables (for instance type of road etc.) which can help us identify such villages. The second step would be to adopt a more intensified and customized approach, responding to their unique cultural contexts and challenges.
362. Baseline findings point that teachers are overburdened with teaching as-well-as non-teaching, administrative responsibilities. In light of this, it is essential to identify individuals from the community who could be trained along with teachers and student around development and maintenance of school gardens. However, like in case of cooks, it is essential to also fix accountability of an individual or a group of individuals to take care of school gardens. Such an approach would not only reduce teachers' workload, but also initiate a shift towards a more structured approach for management of school gardens.
363. Baseline findings suggest that while VEDCs have been engaging with school staff, their discussions with VWU members and the larger community is fairly limited, which could negatively impact program implementation. There is, thus a need to energize VEDCs by way of increasing their engagement within the village, that is, with other village institutions and community members, and with stakeholders outside their village.
364. One of the potential ways of increasing VEDC's engagement could be undertake competitions among multiple VEDCs within a particular geographical cluster. Developing a system where the performances of all VEDCs in a particular geography (say, district) could be tracked on a routine basis, would enable the program to rank all VEDCs. Six - monthly events bringing all VEDCs together, and facilitating and recognizing the best performing VEDC could be useful not only in motivating VEDCs to improve their working, but it would also help develop a platform which could be used for sharing challenges and best practices.

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**World Food Programme**

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