

Factsheet midterm findings Global Challenges Programme Call 3



Scaling up nutrition-sensitive agricultural initiatives in poor mountainous areas in Vietnam and Lao PDR

Summary

Food insecurity and malnutrition remain persistent challenges among upland, remote populations in Asia. Interventions are often fragmented and address immediate rather than underlying causes. Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture (NSA) is a food system approach maximising agriculture's contribution to improved food and nutrition security (FNS). However, it lacks a robust evidence-base. This project generates evidence on the effectiveness of, and best way to scale-up, NSA amongst ethnic minorities in mountainous areas in Vietnam and Laos. Utilizing a transdisciplinary research methodology, the project analyses and enhance processes of embedding NSA interventions in food systems.

In both countries the project has conducted (1) retrospective case studies on NSA projects; (2) extensive baseline research in the intervention areas; and (3) two systematic reviews on outcomes, facilitators and barriers of NSA projects. Based on the findings, interventions to improve food security and nutrition in three sectors (agriculture, health and education) were identified during multi-stakeholder community meetings, and their implementation has started during the course of 2018. The interventions are monitored in a reflexive and participatory way and are adapted if needed. Early 2020 the baseline research will be repeated. A comparative case study analysis will result in a framework to develop, implement and scale-up NSA interventions in remote settings. Lessons learned will advise a variety of stakeholders to address FNS of vulnerable populations.

Interim research findings

The project team collected data on all elements of the food and nutrition security framework using validated questionnaires and qualitative interviews with household heads, women, teachers, village heads and other stakeholders. In Laos and Vietnam Food and Nutrition Insecurity (FNinS) in the project intervention areas (Nong District, Laos and Dong Xuan District, Vietnam) remains high and more than twice as high as provincial averages, with respectively 62% and 77% of households being food insecure, and 48% and 58% of children under 5 stunted. Remarkably FNinS is worse in Vietnam where households have more access to markets. In both settings agricultural production systems are subsistence focused, with pockets of transitioning to agro-industrial systems in Vietnam. Diversity remains low, largely based on a diet of rice, chili and bamboo shoots (Laos)/ cassava leaves (Vietnam). In Laos diversity is slightly better due to access to forest resources. In both cases there is limited nutrition literacy, in particular on the needs around the first 1000 days (demand) and limited availability of affordable foods (supply). Accessibility is constrained by (1) limited own production (vegetables) and use (animal products) of a variety of food groups; (2) depletion of natural sources for a variety of foods (forest and river); and (3) production of cash crops (Vietnam) and related vulnerability to global market price fluctuations.

Intermediate outcomes achieved

Together with stakeholders, and based on insights from our studies and the broader literature, the project has developed context-specific, multi-component and multi-sectoral interventions for both Laos and Vietnam. Community groups, local governments from education, agriculture and health participated in the design and selection of interventions. In both countries the interventions are implemented and monitored in five villages in Vietnam (with three control villages) since January 2018), and in 20 villages in Laos (with three control villages) since August 2018. For example, the home gardens and chicken rearing activities have started. The health sector has carried out medical/nutrition check-ups for children and pregnant women and severely malnourished children are

treated immediately. In Vietnam social entrepreneurship initiatives are undertaken to provide nutritious porridge in nursery schools. In Laos, in collaboration with woman union, awareness raising activities on nutrition and feeding children were initiated and school gardens were set-up.

In addition, strong connections have been established in both countries between partners from central government, provincial and district authorities and experts from national research institutes and universities to support the district partners in planning, implementation and monitoring activities. District partners from agriculture, health and education (and woman's union in Laos) are working and planning together.

Messages to

A) Actors from private sector:

- In Laos the accessibility of markets is poor. The opportunity of local collectives has to be investigated, next to private sector involvement.
- New local small-scale businesses provide promising possibilities to improve FNS.

B) Civil society and practitioners' organizations:

- Work multilevel and multisectoral as FNS solutions require multilevel/sectoral collaboration and it facilitates implementation and sustainability.
- Any interventions should be accompanied with behavioural change communication.
- Adapt interventions to the local situation during design and implementation.

C) Policy makers:

- Remote mountainous areas in Vietnam and Laos are disproportionately affected by FNinS. District and Provincial data are underestimating the problem, warranting increased attention for data collection in remote mountainous areas.
- Embed intersectoral collaboration with national and local policies, but allow for contextual change.
- Policy makers should further investigate whether it is (dis)advantageous for farmers in remote mountainous areas to focus on growing cash crops in relation to FNS. The project preliminary findings indicate that the growing cash crops is reducing FNS.
- Include NGOs/civil society in of integrated policies to help in their operationalisation.

Knowledge products

Facebook presence

- [MCNV Vietnam](#) and [MCNV Laos](#)

Project videos

- Video on [CANTEEN project: Better nutrition, better future](#) (By MCNV, June 2020)
- Video on [School meal Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture](#) (By MCNV Vietnam, October 2019)
- Video on [CANTEEN project of MCNV in Laos](#) (By MCNV, November 2018; in Dutch)
- Video on [the Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture Project](#) (By MCNV Vietnam October 2018)

Knowledge networks

- [SUN Alliance, Laos](#)
- [FIT4FOOD2030](#)

Co-creation

Co-creation is at the heart of our methodology and takes place at the level of villages and individual interventions, district, national and cross-country. At village level the various user groups contribute to the selection of activities and thereby contribute to the co-creation process. Especially in Laos the project benefits from the EU-funded Canteen project which has as an objective to strengthen capacity of community groups (bottom-up planning). For example, Village Development Committees (VDCs) have had quite an impact on the school garden activities. They contribute to the farming – especially those that do not have access to arable land nearby – in return for some of the yield. The school benefits of the facts that the land is being farmed and that parents participate in school-life. District, province, experts, communities also co-create implementation plans of interventions. For example, based on insights from various actors the National Nutrition Committee in Laos has contextualized training materials for Nong in collaboration with the Women's Union. Furthermore, cross-country and the project has conducted a workshop in Savannaketh (Laos) with 45 participants from Laos and Vietnam. Attendees from both countries included community members, district and provincial government staff, NGO staff and researchers. Here the project planned further for interventions and scaling-up based on each other's experiences.

Consortium partners

- VU Amsterdam, [Athena Institute](#) (NL)
- [MCNV](#) (Vietnam)
- [Hue University of Medicine & Pharmacy - Institute Community Health Research](#) (Vietnam)
- [Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry](#) (Vietnam)
- Lao Tropical and Public Health Institute (Lao)
- [National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute](#) (Lao)
- National Nutrition Center (Lao)
- Dong Xuan District People's Committee (Vietnam)

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Project website

- [F&BKP Research Project page](#)