



Rodent outbreaks in the Northern Uplands of the Lao PDR

Emergency Food Security Assessment Executive Brief

Overview, scope and methods

- × The Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. In rural areas, every second child under 5 is chronically malnourished while 13% of the total population is food insecure after harvest. An additional 50% of rural households are at risk of becoming food insecure should a shock affect their livelihood¹.
- × Since April 2008, many villages in Northern Laos experienced a major increase in the rodent population. This caused severe damage to upland production (mainly to rice but also to some cash crops). According to villagers, these are the worst rodent outbreaks in over 20 years, adding to an already high strain on household food security. The reason for the rodent outbreaks is not confirmed but appears to be linked to bamboo flowering.
- × WFP conducted an Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) between the 11th and 15th of March 2009. Its purpose was to provide WFP and its partners with information on: (1) the extent and impact of the rodent outbreaks; (2) how severely people were affected; and (3) how much immediate assistance is required. This assessment is the basis for formulating the required response and fund-raising efforts.
- × The assessment was led and carried out by WFP Laos with support from district officials from the Department of Labour and Social Welfare and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Four teams covered 9 districts in the northern provinces of Luangprabang, Oudomxay, Xayabury and Luangnamtha. Some secondary information was also obtained on affected districts in Phongsaly, Huaphan and Bokeo provinces.

How was the assessment carried out?

The assessment was based on analysis of secondary information and primary data collected at the village and households levels. The villages and households were selected by purposive sampling. The teams conducted discussions with key informants and focus groups (men and women) in 29 villages. A total of 113 households were interviewed.

Recommendations for interventions

The rodent outbreak has increased food insecurity amongst the most vulnerable people in Laos. Help is needed urgently before it is too late.

Immediate needs:

- × Food assistance is urgently needed for 85,000 to 140,000 food insecure people.
- × Seeds need to be provided to severely affected farmers to allow them to plant during the upcoming cultivation season.
- × Cash will allow farmers to directly purchase food, seeds and other important items.

Long-term needs: Strengthen the resilience and coping options for upland farmers

- × Contribute to community development.
- × Improve access to land and labour opportunities.

Further assessments needed:

- × Quantify the needs for seeds.
- × Assess the impact on nutrition.
- × Monitor the situation in the affected areas as well as in other districts and provinces in order to respond in cases where the situation does not improve.
- × Identify the causes of the rodent outbreaks and ways to prevent or mitigate future outbreaks.

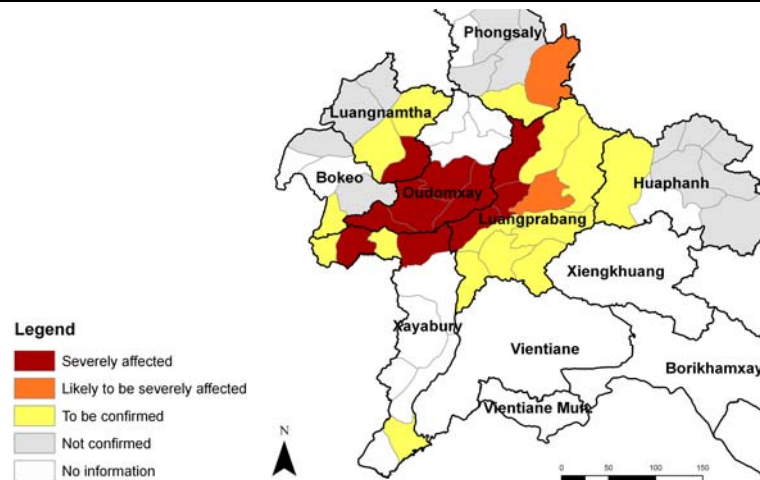
¹ Source: CFSVA, 2006

How many people are food-insecure because of the rodent outbreaks?

- × **The affected provinces account for more than half of the chronic and borderline food insecure households in the country.**² The rodent outbreaks are an additional shock to their livelihood as coping options run out. Those affected are now in a situation where they did not produce enough rice to meet household needs; meanwhile, opportunities to earn supplementary income are declining. This occurs in a context of higher rice prices and lower cash crop prices. In some cases, communities are also dealing with the continued impacts of earlier shocks (floods, droughts).
- × **Between 85,000 and 140,000 people are estimated to be food insecure as a result of the rodent outbreaks**, representing approximately 5% of the population in the affected provinces. The EFSA results show that in very affected villages, all the villagers became food insecure, with many villagers reducing the quantity or quality of meals, or skipping meals altogether. Numbers of food insecure people were determined by identifying the number of people living in villages identified by the local authorities (province and district level) as having been severely affected by the rodent outbreaks.
- × **Affected households are struggling to find enough food to eat.** Many households' rice stocks are empty. Wild food sources are under strain. It is not uncommon for people to eat only 1 or 2 meals per day. Affected households are consequently at high risk of hunger, malnutrition and disease.

What areas were affected by the rodent outbreaks?

- × Nine districts across four provinces were confirmed to have been severely affected. It is likely that other northern districts in other provinces not included in the EFSA were also affected.
- × Affected areas are among the poorest and most food insecure in Laos. Most of the affected districts are characterized by remoteness, mountainous terrain and upland shifting cultivation.



Who are the food insecure people affected by the rodent outbreaks?

- × **Non Lao-Tai upland farmers in remote villages are the most affected by the rodent outbreaks.** They are the most vulnerable and food insecure people in Laos. They are characterized by high reliance on self-produced or gathered food and have few alternative means of livelihoods.
- × **The rodent outbreaks aggravated food insecurity for particularly vulnerable households.** This includes female-headed households, isolated individuals, and elderly people who have limited labour and few livelihood opportunities.
- × **The effect of the rodent outbreaks on food security depends on how well households can cope.** The assessment teams noted differences in the levels of food security among affected villages. The most food insecure villages following the rodent outbreaks were non Lao Tai villages that rely mostly on upland farming, are far away from markets, have poor road access, reduced labour opportunities, and limited access to natural resources. In these villages, since the affected people were already amongst the most food insecure and vulnerable in the country, it is likely that all affected households are now food insecure.

² Source: CFSVA 2006.

Why are they food insecure?

- × **Rodents damaged entire upland harvests.** 74% of the interviewed households reported losses between 50 and 100%. 100% rice losses were common. Maize harvest was also severely damaged with 43% of households reporting yields of less than 50% of expected production. Widespread damage was similarly reported for Job's Tears, sesame, and cassava. These losses are a major livelihood shock for rural households who rely on their own production as a source of food and income.
- × **Opportunities for income generation are declining.** Lower production levels mean both a greater supply of and falling demand for casual labour. Consequently, work is harder to find inside and outside the village. The availability of non-timber forest products, a usual source of food and income, is also under strain as more families harvest them to cope with production losses. This is happening while managed access to natural resources is decreasing.³ Ultimately, the decline in income opportunities in the wake of the rodent outbreaks reinforces food insecurity in the affected villages.
- × **Rising rice prices are occurring at the same time that cash crop prices are falling.** Though price changes are unlikely due to the rodent outbreaks, the net effect is that villagers have a smaller income from which to buy more expensive rice.
- × **Physical access to markets is difficult in these remote areas.** Many of the assessed villages, though close to roads, were nonetheless located far away from district centers with limited market access. Market access is even worse for affected villages located far from roads. Without market access, alternative food sources cannot be secured to supplement the significant production losses.
- × **Declining food intake will lead to hunger and increased malnutrition.** Already limited production and food access means households have less to eat. To cope, households are reducing the number of meals and the quality of those meals. Households already characterized by poor nutritional status are consequently worsening their diet. This is particularly problematic for children and pregnant women who, if not well nourished, will reduce the mental and physical development of the next generation.

The situation is likely to worsen in the coming months with the rainy season

- × **Food insecurity will intensify into the rainy season.** The already scarce rice stocks will be depleted and, as is usual in the lean season, rice prices will rise even more. Casual labour will also be more difficult to find. The situation will be especially troublesome for villages with poor road access. As the rain makes roads inaccessible, alternative food sources and income opportunities will become even scarcer. The result will be greater food insecurity in both extent and severity. Acute hunger could result.
- × **If help is not provided soon, the situation is likely to get worse.** As cultivation season approaches, many affected farmers must divert their attention to finding food and income. Seed stocks, meanwhile, are also depleted after several unsuccessful replanting attempts last year. Consequently, affected farmers do not have the time, energy, or resources to plant the next harvest. If the problem is not addressed, the negative impacts of the rodent outbreaks will extend well into 2010.
- × **There is no evidence that the rodents have left the affected areas.** Worse, in some areas, villagers have reason to believe that the rodents will come back. Rodents have also reportedly affected new areas in 2009.

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³ Managed access of natural resources is decreasing for reasons not linked to the rodents (e.g. deforestation, agribusiness).