



Executive Brief: Lao PDR Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis

Overview

Lao PDR is classified as a “least developed country”. In 2004, 71 percent of its population lived on less than US\$2 a day and 23 percent on less than US\$1 a day. Despite the steady economic growth of the last 15 years, the nutritional status of the Lao population has not improved and food insecurity still affects parts of the population. The economy is largely subsistence-based and agriculture remains the major sector. Only 27 percent of the population live in urban areas and significant parts of the country are mountainous, uncultivable and inaccessible by road.

The Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis (CFSVA) is the first nation-wide food security study undertaken in rural Lao PDR¹. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of the nature and the extent of food insecurity in rural areas, and identify ways to address it. It aims to contribute to a wider policy discussion on food security and nutrition in Lao PDR, and will guide WFP programme design in the years to come.

The main conclusions are:

- **Every second child in the rural areas is chronically malnourished.** This is alarmingly high and the same level as ten years ago.
- **Two thirds of the rural population are either food insecure (13%) or live on the edge of food security** and could become food insecure should a shock occur during the year.
- **Dietary intake of fat is generally too low.** Wild meat and fish are the main sources of protein and fat. As these natural resources are under threat, it is critical to ensure their preservation and households' access to them.

How was the study done? It is based on a secondary data review and an analysis at the household and village levels. The data collection took place in October and November 2006. Close to 4,000 households and 400 village key informants were interviewed. The nutritional status of about 2,540 children under five and 3,450 women was determined. The survey is representative at provincial level of households living in rural areas.

How many people are food insecure or malnourished?

During the post-harvest season, when the study was conducted, 13 percent of the rural population (84,000 households) were food insecure, with poor or borderline food consumption. It is likely that the proportion increases significantly with the peak of the lean season.

In addition, more than 50% of rural households are at risk of becoming food insecure in case of loss of access to natural resources, flood, drought or/and sudden increases in rice prices. Drought is the biggest threat: 46 % of the rural population is vulnerable to becoming food insecure due to this natural hazard.

About 50 percent of rural children under the age of five are stunted (using the WHO standards). About 31 percent of rural children under 5 are underweight and 8 percent are wasted. There has been no improvement in the chronic malnutrition over the last 10 years, but a reduction in wasting has been noted.

Who are the food insecure people?

Food insecure people are typically farmers with little fishing and hunting activities or unskilled labourers. They practice upland farming on a small plot of land in highly sloped areas. Often, they do not possess a kitchen garden. They are lowly educated and illiterate. They live in villages with little or no infrastructure, and suffer from poor sanitary conditions.

Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups have the highest proportion of food insecure households, followed by the Hmong-Mien and the Austro-Asiatic groups. They mostly reside in the Highlands. The Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic groups are highly vulnerable to nutritional problems.

¹ The survey had the financial support from the Citigroup Foundation and ECHO through the WFP SENAC (Strengthening Emergency Needs Assessment Capacity) project. This project aims to reinforce WFP's capacity to conduct impartial, accurate and transparent needs assessment during emergencies and the immediate aftermath.

Where are the food insecure people?

At national level, the levels of food insecurity are generally low, but there are some provinces where the levels are very high.

The highest proportions of food insecure households were found in Bokeo (41%), Saravane (30%), Xiengkhouang (25%) and Sekong (24%). Seventy percent of the food insecure households are located in only 7 provinces: Saravane, Sekong, Oudomxay, Bokeo, Luang Prabang, Huaphanh and Xiengkhouang. These 7 provinces make up only 31% of the population.

The highest prevalences of stunting were found in the Northern and Southern Central Highlands.

What are the causes of food insecurity?

Policies: Measures are currently lacking to mitigate the effects on food security of some policies such as the bans on opium production and shifting cultivation, and the resettlement strategy.

Food availability: The net production of rice is just enough to meet per capita consumption requirements, with major deficit in the Northern provinces. Food imports play a key role in providing complementary supply to food deficit areas when there are production shortfalls.

Food access: Households in Laos mainly rely on their own production. Rice production is the main livelihood activity of the majority of rural households.

- Access to productive land is a problem for some households. Large parts of the country are characterized as uplands and are only suitable for shifting cultivation and forestry development. Large areas of the country are unsafe as they are contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO).

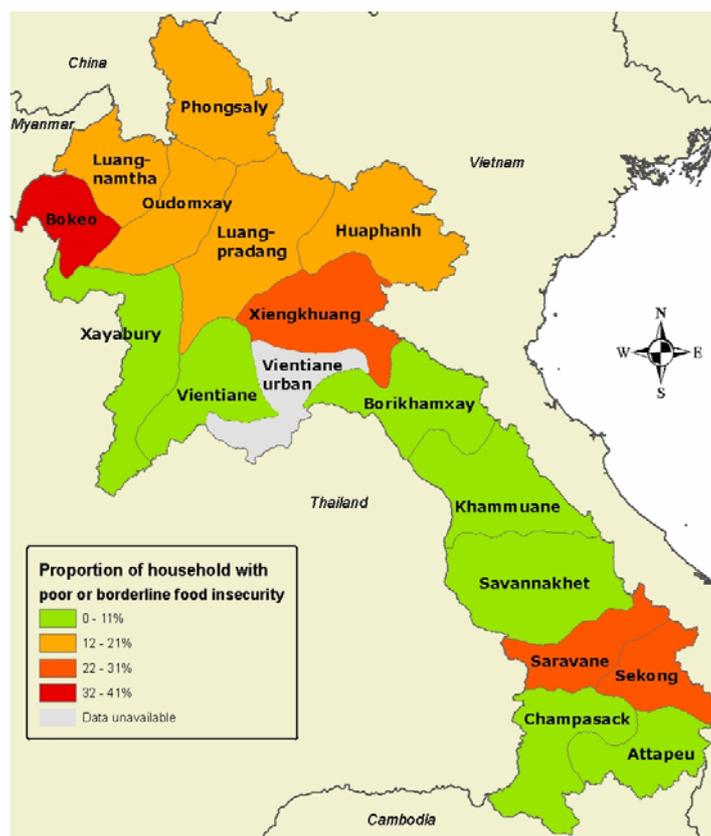
- Markets constitute the second source of food for households after their own production. A substantial amount of their purchases on markets are made of food items (45 percent). Seasonal price variation of rice is an important constraint to household access to food, especially during the lean season. More generally, an increase of food commodity prices would have a negative impact on households' food consumption.

- Laos has very poor transport infrastructure which is a major obstacle to access markets and to the development of integrated domestic markets. This also limits access to export markets.

Food Utilization: Other studies have shown that inadequate care and feeding practices (especially on breastfeeding and weaning) are among the underlying causes leading to the high levels of chronic malnutrition observed in Lao PDR. To complement this, the CFSVA focuses on food consumption patterns:

Household food consumption: Lao households rely on a wide variety of food items, but access to many of these items is seasonal and the quantities may be limited. Most of them eat rice, or rice coupled with other staples, 7 days a week. Consumption of vegetables is very seasonal, but was sufficient at the time of the survey. Fruit consumption, however, was very low, but this could be due to seasonality issues.

- Dietary intake of fat is generally too low. The use of oil in the diet is rare and most of the fat comes from wild meat and fish. Households who have livestock tend to sell it or eat it only for special occasions. What differentiates households with acceptable food consumption from households with poor or borderline food consumption is mostly wild animal/fish protein intake. Access to such food sources is therefore critical.



Sanitation, health and education

- Access to proper toilet facilities and safe water sources appears to be a serious problem throughout the country. Physical access to water is less of a problem than the quality of the water source itself.
- Only 10% of villages have a health center, although many have a health volunteer and/or medical kit. In the remote uplands, health services are often difficult to access.
- The study shows that households with higher education and literacy levels are having more healthy food consumption patterns. The level of education is fairly low, especially for women and particularly low among the Sino-Tibetan groups. Seventy-one percent of spouses of household heads have no or incomplete primary education.

Recommendations

Policy level: These recommendations call for high-level policy initiatives that would create a more enabling environment for more effective reduction of hunger and malnutrition.

- The Lao Government should give the highest priority to addressing malnutrition;
- The concept of food security should be expanded beyond just rice availability to include production, access to and consumption of a wider range of food items;
- The impact of certain policies, such as the resettlement policy, on food security should be monitored and addressed.

Hygiene and Nutrition

- The Ministry of Health with support from other ministries and UN agencies should encourage a higher consumption of proteins and oil/fat (general education campaign);
- WFP should include oil and some form of protein (pulses, canned fish) in relief food baskets;
- The Ministry of health, UNICEF, WFP and NGOs should seek to improve sanitation infrastructure, provide training on proper usage and improve access to safe water.

Agricultural and environmental factors

- Access to wild meat and fish should be safeguarded through the management of wildlife and aquatic resources, which are increasingly under threat;
- Kitchen gardens should be promoted as sustainable sources of necessary fruits and vegetables;
- WFP, FAO, GoL and partners should promote initiatives that provide employment activities outside the agricultural sector in the Highlands.

Infrastructure

- WFP should continue road construction projects through FFW; and provide support in cooperation with relevant ministries to the development of rural infrastructure, in remote and food insecure rural villages;
- WFP and other food aid agencies should continue to purchase food locally, whenever market conditions permit;
- WFP should continue to clear UXO from land suitable for agricultural production with Clearing Agencies.

Education: It should be addressed as a long-term strategy to improve food security.

- WFP should seek partners to provide adult literacy classes for women in the Northern provinces, and other provinces where the gender gap is particularly stark.

The vulnerability to food insecurity of Hmong-Mien, Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic groups should be addressed by the Government but also by WFP through its Food for Work and school feeding programmes.

Comprehensive food security monitoring:

- The GoL, with assistance from relevant UN agencies, should continue to develop food security monitoring systems, in particular to better monitor hazards (i.e. droughts and floods);
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, with support from FAO and WFP should set up a system to monitor cross border food trade, prices of food commodities at district level and initiate studies with other relevant ministries to understand internal flows of food.

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