

A Systemic Approach to Nutrition: Capitalizing on 10 Years of Experience in Laos

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How to address nutrition in a systemic and integrated way? How does multi-sector collaboration on nutrition work in practice? What are effective approaches to foster nutrition comprehensively? – These questions were addressed in a recent study that analyzed ten years of experience of the Upland Integrated Development Project (UDIN) in Laos. This article presents key insights from project implementation and lessons for ongoing work on sustainable food systems worldwide.



School vegetable garden of a secondary school in Pienghong village (Nonghet, Laos) © HELVETAS

The UDIN project

The objective of the UDIN Project was to **improve nutrition** in select rural communities by fostering consumption of nutritious and hygienic food and by increasing income and livelihood opportunities (cash and time for food). At the same time, the project enhanced knowledge, planning and decision-making processes related to nutrition, hygiene and care practices. The UDIN project was implemented by HELVETAS from 2010 to 2018 with funding from the EU, HELVETAS and HAPPEL Foundation. It covered 30 remote villages in Nonghet, a district in the Northern uplands of Laos. The food system of upland communities largely depended on small-scale farming, collection of wild foods and breeding of small livestock, mostly for self-sufficiency with only marginal access to local markets. Over the last ten years, maize as cash crop was promoted along with farming systems intensification and increasingly replaced rice and other crops, leading to accelerated deforestation and biodiversity loss. The rice-based diets used to be little diverse and depended strongly on seasonality. Most communities lacked access to clean water and sanitation infrastructure and had very limited access to primary health, care and extension services. Hygiene conditions in the villages used to be poor and the awareness on adequate nutrition and childcare practices was low. As a result, the incidence of malnutrition was high, especially among young children and mothers.

To reduce malnutrition sustainably in these communities, their **local food systems** were assessed holistically. Only by addressing the several underlying causes of malnutrition simultaneously, positive nutrition outcomes could be achieved.

Linking Agriculture, Nutrition and Natural Resources Management (LANN)

LANN is a community-based capacity building approach that is founded on three principles:

1. **Nutrition** must be addressed **holistically** by linking it systemically to agriculture, natural resources management, water, sanitation, hygiene and waste management, health and childcare, income and local markets.

2. Adoption of nutrition sensitive practices requires sound building of **awareness and receptiveness** for nutrition as a topic, by applying nutrition knowledge to the specific situations and existing practices of target groups.
3. To create genuine ownership and change in practices, a **participatory process** for community-based planning is required by which stakeholders identify and prioritize their key nutrition issues and decide to take appropriate own action.

Along these principles, UDIN orchestrated joint actions among communities and local stakeholders from multiple sectors. Furthermore, based on a **nutrition convergence** approach, the project promoted the collaboration between different sectoral departments of provincial and national authorities (agriculture, forestry, health, education), facilitating their joint formulation of coherent nutrition policies.



Man in Houayloum village washing clothes at a newly built drinking water point (Nonghet, Laos) © HELVETAS

Achievements

Over a period of 10 years of focused interventions, the local food system changed substantially at various levels and generated positive nutrition and livelihood outcomes for communities:

Diversified food production: Communities have diversified their production of nutritious food, including widespread vegetable gardens, orchards, pastures for cattle as alternative to maize production, fishponds, and protected forest and river zones for sustainable wild food collection.

Water and sanitation: Communities have constructed and are managing own drinking water supply systems and latrines. They have improved hygiene in the villages through better animal keeping and waste management.

Nutrition knowledge: Good practical understanding of balanced diets and healthy nutrition is widespread today. Knowledge on food safety in food preparation, personal hygiene and waste management is widespread in the communities.

Nutrition practices and behaviours: There are positive changes in eating habits and dietary diversity, in feeding and caring practices for small children, the abandoning of food taboos, and progressive improvements in WASH practices. Gender role perceptions regarding nutrition and the sharing of work between women and men have equally shifted: Men increasingly engage in tasks traditionally assigned to women and relieve them from heavy work, for example during pregnancy.

Nutrition leadership and partnership: Newly built capacity of local leaders and pioneers in promoting processes of planning, decision making and implementation of nutrition-relevant actions in the communities are a key asset for the further development of local food systems.

Reduced malnutrition: The achievements above strongly contributed to reduced malnutrition in the target population.

Key lessons

- LANN and similar approaches **link nutrition to agriculture, water use, health, care practices**, among other topics, in a systemic and practical way. As UDIN's experience shows, this is an effective way to trigger the receptiveness among beneficiaries to take own nutrition action.
- A collaboration with **topic leaders** and **early adopters** as key food system actors supports the adoption of nutrition practices. Particularly in sensitive topics like nutrition and childcare that are shaped by traditions and beliefs, role models and "pioneers" of improved nutrition practices are decisive to trigger behavioural change among a large number of people.
- **Convergence or multi-sector approaches on nutrition** are essential to address nutrition in a systemic way. UDIN successfully engaged multiple sectors at different administrative levels (from Ministry to district offices) to work jointly on nutrition policies and programmes. This work between administrative "silos" is an important basis to shape food systems and nutrition comprehensively.
- The effect of higher **income on nutrition** is not linear. Higher income only translates into improved nutrition if a simultaneous process of nutrition awareness raising also achieves a **shift in people's priorities towards nutrition**.
- Building local capacity for high quality **nutrition monitoring systems** should be part of project efforts from their beginning. It should be based on collaboration with multiple stakeholders, particularly governments. Supporting local institutions in monitoring nutrition outcomes is an important foundation for fostering sustainable food systems.

Key take-aways

Shifting nutrition behaviours is a long-term process that goes beyond one project phase. People's receptiveness and ownership towards a change of own nutrition practices will only happen if insistent coaching is provided and if the nutrition topic is closely linked to real options for personal action. A **holistic and participatory approach** like LANN is key to inducing such nutrition behaviour change, but it is not enough to induce systemic changes at a broader level. It should be combined with a **food systems approach**. In 2010, the project zone of UDIN was characterized by remoteness, bad road infrastructures and low access to services. Communities largely depended on food self-sufficiency. Their food system boundaries were thus very local (community). Using a community-based approach like LANN was suitable. Since then, the situation in most communities has changed and the **food system boundaries have shifted**: Roads were built, farmers started producing cash crops for sale on district and national markets, and families increasingly complemented their food baskets with products purchased from shops and district markets. With the multiple flows of people, products and services from and to the communities, the geographical food system boundaries now extend to the entire district and beyond. Addressing nutrition in this new context requires a stronger focus on food value chains, local market development, income and jobs, changing food culture, among other aspects, thus asking for a broader food systems approach.

For more information please find the [full study report](#).