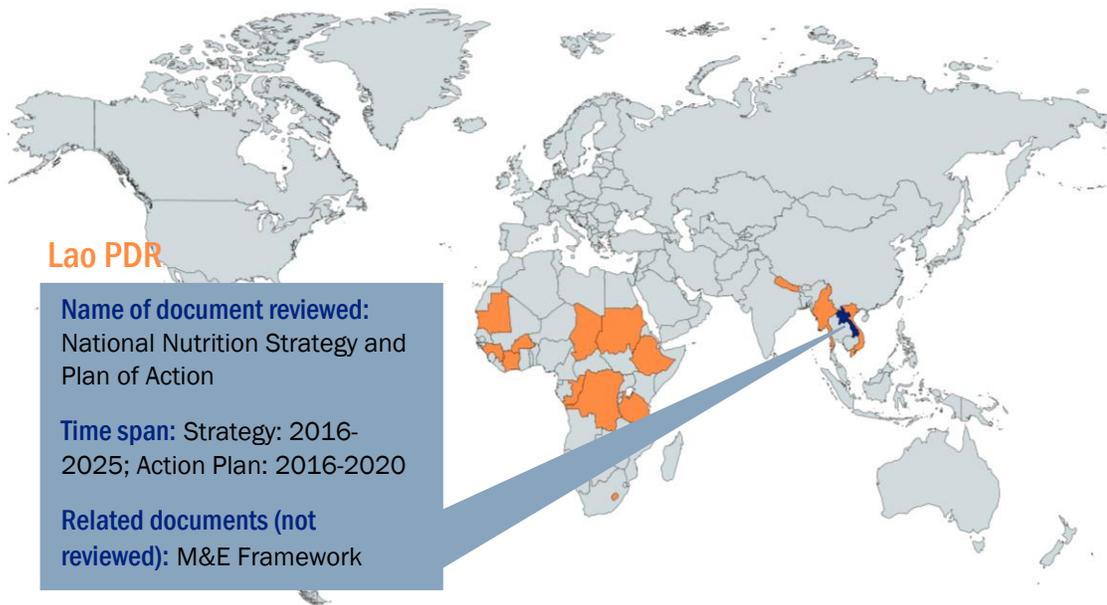


# National Nutrition Plan Assessment: Lao PDR

In December 2016, the United Nations Network for the SUN Movement and the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS), with the support of an expert group, developed and launched the [Checklist on the Criteria and Characteristics of “Good” National Nutrition Plans](#) (“SUN Checklist”). In 2018, at the request of the SMS, the Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition Plus (MQSUN+) project undertook a systematic assessment of the main planning document of 15 countries’ multisectoral national nutrition action plans, according to the criteria in the SUN Checklist. This brief summarises select strengths (✓) and suggested areas for improvement with recommendations ( - ) for Lao PDR, organised by each of the five areas in the SUN Checklist: (1) situational analysis and policy and programming review; (2) stakeholder engagement and high-level political commitment processes; (3) costs and budgetary framework; (4) implementation and managing arrangements; and (5) monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review. A section on gender considerations is also included.



## Overview

Lao PDR’s *National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020* is the country’s second national nutrition strategy and implementation plan and first plan since it joined the SUN Movement in 2013. Coordinated by the National Nutrition Committee, the plan’s activities propose four strategic directions and eleven strategic objectives that address the immediate causes of malnutrition (nutrient intake and prevention of disease); underlying causes (food production and access, mother and child care practices, clean water/sanitation, health services; and basic causes (institutions and coordination, human capacities, quantity and quality of information and nutrition investments).

## Key strengths

The plan is well structured, and the proposed actions consider the current country context and capacity and align with global frameworks and evidence-based approaches for nutrition. Below are a few key strengths that emerged from the review:

- ✓ Building on UNICEF’s conceptual framework, presents country-specific policy, financial and service delivery analyses of the causes of malnutrition that form the basis for the proposed interventions.
- ✓ Contains a logical framework, strategic directions and objectives and priority interventions that are well designed and structured and build on global frameworks and evidence; incorporates all nutrition-related World Health Assembly impact indicators and relevant country-specific indicators.
- ✓ Proposes actions that are wide-ranging, include all nutrition-specific actions recommended in the Lancet 2013 Nutrition series, and respond to the underlying causes and system-wide governance and financing deficiencies described in the situational analysis.
- ✓ Presents cost estimates for each of the proposed activities of the plan, including crosscutting and multisectoral actions (such as coordination activities and information system development).
- ✓ Assigns main responsibilities to the relevant government institutions and states the supporting key development partners.
- ✓ Acknowledges the need for capacity building, and proposes activities to address both institutional and individual capacities for effective coordination.

## Key recommendations

### Area 1: Situational analysis and policy and programming review

- Despite a brief mention that poor households, mothers without formal education and ethnic groups residing in remote locations have higher rates of malnutrition, the plan presents limited information on other disparities or disaggregation related to nutritional status.
  - **Recommendation:** Consider reviewing nutritional outcomes and underlying causes of malnutrition by region, agro-ecological zones, ethnic groups or other groups and ensure to prioritise as per needs in the event of funding short falls. In future iterations of the plan, reflect disaggregation and priorities in the common results framework and plan narrative.
- While the plan mentions food provision and treatment of severe acute malnutrition as strategies to address nutrition emergencies and climate-induced disasters, it does not include other strategies to address these fragilities nor does it discuss or provide mitigation strategies for other risks to the plan.
  - **Recommendation:** Consider additional activities to address food crises, such as the development of emergency plans, training authorities and/or communities in emergency management or targeted strategies for populations prone to shocks. As well, identify risks to plan implementation and develop mitigation strategies to respond to them.

### Area 2: Stakeholders’ engagement and high-level political commitment process

- The plan does not propose advocacy and communication activities to engage national and local authorities.

→ **Recommendation:** If not already done, consider developing a corresponding advocacy and communication strategy to ensure advocacy with key stakeholders at multiple levels (e.g. politicians, community leaders, plan beneficiaries) to facilitate buy-in, resource mobilisation and uptake of plan activities. This should be complemented by appropriate governance mechanisms and coordination structures at national and subnational levels.

### Area 3: Costs and budgetary framework

— While the plan presents cost estimates of the planned actions, it does not provide current levels of financing and an estimate of the financial gap.

→ **Recommendation:** Assess which activities in the plan need to be initiated or expanded, estimate their costs and communicate the gap when advocating for resources. In the event of a financial shortfall, issue guidance to national and subnational bodies on how to prioritise actions using available data and transparent criteria. As well, develop targets for increased spending, which can be used to measure the success of Strategic Objective 11 (increasing support and investment).

### Area 4: Implementation and management arrangements

— The roles and responsibilities of the multisectoral steering committee, the coordination bodies at national-, regional- and prefectural-level and reporting and accountability structures are unclear.

→ **Recommendation:** Develop terms of reference for each group that outline committee composition, expectations, roles in annual planning and reporting mechanisms that illustrate how each group will interact with each other to ensure good progress and target achievements.

— While the plan does note the responsible sectors and partners for the planned actions, it does not present a clear timeline for the development of guidelines and annual operational planning.

→ **Recommendation:** Add specific timelines for activities requiring technical guidance to move forward, such as curriculum development and development of nutrition surveillance systems; and issue clear guidance on processes for incorporating the proposed actions into annual planning for both national and subnational implementers.

### Area 5: Monitoring, evaluation, operational research and review

— Although almost all intervention areas have established indicators, they are still inconsistent in the level of specificity or are missing from certain strategic objectives. The plan does note a forthcoming monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework and corresponding system.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure the M&E framework includes clear outcome/output indicators with annual targets for each activity. The M&E framework should also describe reporting processes with respect to the different nutrition coordinating bodies and incorporate community involvement in the collection of evaluation information and dissemination of results, as appropriate.

## Gender considerations

Beyond the SUN Checklist, all country plans were assessed with a gender lens for their consideration and inclusion of gender dimensions of nutrition. See supplemental [gender brief](#) for the specific factors that were considered.

While Lao PDR's plan includes "promotion of gender roles" as one of its guiding principles, there is an absence of details on how gender influences nutritional status within the country context and how gender will be mainstreamed across planned actions. This could be strengthened through the following recommendations. It is acknowledged that some of this may have already been completed or documented in supplemental planning documents.

- **Situational analysis:** While several gender-sensitive factors are presented in the situational analysis, a gender assessment could be conducted as part of an updated analysis to fully assess gender-related dimensions of nutrition in the Laos PDR context (e.g. exploring traditional gender roles and norms and how these may influence nutrition), if not already done. As well, data in the situational analysis should be sex- and age-disaggregated for nutrition-specific indicators and relevant nutrition-sensitive indicators to inform targeted and appropriate interventions.
- **Planned actions:** Ensure that relevant planned actions consider the unique circumstances of different populations based on the situational/gender assessment, including actions that address underlying inequities and broader harmful gender norms, where possible. Also, establish mechanisms to assess and address the specific needs of men, women, boys and girls across planned actions.
- **Capacity building:** Capacity-building actions should include measures to encourage active participation of both men and women (and address any unique needs or potential barriers to participation). Capacity-building efforts should also broadly integrate gender discussions, where relevant, to address gaps in knowledge and action around gender-related needs and differences.
- **M&E:** Selection of appropriate gender-related indicators should be based on Laos PDR's individual situational analysis. Relevant data should also be disaggregated by sex and age, and there should be a documented plan for how sex-disaggregated data will be used to inform decision making. For nutrition-specific indicators, it is recommended that all should be sex-disaggregated, and disaggregation of nutrition-sensitive indicators should be determined based on the country context.

For future nutrition planning at both national and subnational level, the involvement of gender-experienced stakeholders (e.g. Ministry of Women's Affairs, gender representative CSOs, relevant UN agencies/international NGOs) and the discussion of gender norms and differences can strengthen the consideration of gender across nutrition actions.

## Moving forward

These recommendations can be applied to either the ongoing implementation process for Lao PDR's national nutrition plan or to the next iteration of the plan once the time frame of the current plan comes to a close in 2020. Country stakeholders should refer back the [SUN Checklist](#) to consider other areas of improvement. For additional information on how closely this plan aligns with the SUN Checklist, please contact SMS or [MQSUN+@path.org](mailto:MQSUN+@path.org) to request a full copy of the plan assessment.

MQSUN+ belongs to the Technical Assistance for Nutrition (TAN) programme with partners Nutrition International and the Emergency Nutrition Network to strengthen the capacity of the 60 countries within the SUN Movement to deliver policies and programmes which reduce malnutrition.

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