

WFP Assistance to the Lao PDR Country Portfolio Evaluation

Context

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the least developed, landlocked countries in the Southeast Asian region. The economy, while transforming rapidly, is still largely subsistence-based, with a large proportion of the population living in rural areas. Recent policies and investment to develop the economy have had an impact on rural communities, providing them with opportunities but also challenging their traditional livelihood systems. Overall food insecurity has been reduced thanks to increasing gross food production. However, food access and utilization are uneven. Underweight rates are as high as 38 percent, and stunting rates have been 40 percent without improvement between 2000 and 2006.

WFP's Assistance to Lao PDR

WFP has assisted Laos since 1975. While increasing especially since the opening of a country office in 2000, by WFP global standards the portfolio is considered small. Between 2000 and 2008, eight operations took place of which three were ongoing at the time of evaluation. The main objectives were closely associated with specific programme activities

- Food for relief to address the immediate needs of populations who suffered losses from localized emergencies caused by floods and droughts;
- Food for work to improve the livelihood or reduce long-term food insecurity of food insecure people, households and communities with the aim of meeting immediate needs and to help recover livelihood assets; and
- School feeding to contribute to the improvement of school enrolment and attendance rates in primary schools.

A number of smaller programme activities have taken place, such as assisting people living with HIV and AIDS.

Objective and Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation had the dual objectives of accountability and learning. It addressed the following three questions:

- How well did WFP position itself strategically and align with government and partner strategies?
- How did WFP make choices and how strategic were these? and
- How did the portfolio perform, and what were its results?

The evaluation covered the period 2000-2008. It was carried out between January and June 2009 by a team of three evaluators.

The evaluation report was presented to the Executive Board in November 2009.

Key Findings of the Evaluation

Alignment and Strategic Positioning

WFP's portfolio was generally well aligned with national policies, systems and processes. This alignment is particularly visible in the education sector where school feeding is fully integrated into the national education sector development framework.

Government ownership is high especially with counterparts at respective ministries, which applies to food for relief and to school feeding. Food for work is implemented through two channels: one with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare which has limited capacity and authority over the technical areas in which the schemes are implemented.

At the village level, ownership depends on the degree of participation and self-determination that communities could exercise in the choice and implementation of programme activities, especially under food for work. In addition, socio-cultural factors play a role in ensuring that schools and school feeding are locally accepted and owned. But, difficulties in securing participation and empowerment are not unique to WFP.

WFP participates in government-led processes, but challenges continue in translating these coordination efforts into programmes that have positive synergies. One exception was school feeding where collaboration with the Asian Development Bank and UNICEF created positive multiplier effects.

Making Strategic Choices

The country office undertook a surprising amount of analytical work, which was a clear indication of a desire to learn about the operational context, explore possibilities for implementing new initiatives, and inform decision-makers both within WFP and among partners. The comprehensive food security and vulnerability assessment (CFSVA) is the strongest example of this work, combined with effective advocacy, contributing to greater awareness of nutrition issues among government stakeholders and partners.

However, the analytical work was of limited use for resolving systemic problems or for strategic decision-making, for instance by closing the gap in WFP's programme related to needed nutrition programmes.

This lack of translating analytical work into strategic choices can be explained, in part, by the absence of country strategies. The country office planned its current operations pragmatically, following a bottom-up approach based on its understanding of how programme activities can be implemented and which activities would be supported by donors. This approach corresponds to WFP's operating and funding model, but does not guarantee that programme activities are strategically placed to make the best possible contribution to hunger solutions for the Laotian people.

The approach also lacks a focus on results at the country level and synergies between WFP operations and those of partners, which would require

- Understanding the goals and sector strategies of government and partners from a perspective where WFP can make the largest possible contribution to hunger solutions;
- Analyzing issues arising from a rapidly changing rural sector, something the country office tries to attain with the rather limited resources it has; and
- Determining implications for WFP programming and opportunities for partnerships that enhance synergy effects between WFP programmes and those of others.

Portfolio Performance and Results

Beneficiaries reached

Between 2005 and 2007, the country portfolio reached between 300,000 and 500,000 people per year. This performance meant that 75 to 100 percent of intended beneficiaries were reached. Beneficiaries were largely among the adult population – 47 percent – with only a small proportion of children up to 5 years of age, which is one of the most vulnerable groups. According to reports, 50 percent of beneficiaries were women, but data do not identify the proportion of pregnant and lactating women, which is the other most vulnerable group identified in the CFSVA.

Objectives attained

The objective of addressing the immediate needs – post disaster or through food for work – seemed to have been generally met by food for relief operations, although reports varied about the arrival time of food. The success of food for work to address this objective was hampered by the implementation schedule of schemes, which often delayed food delivery beyond the time when households and communities had found alternative solutions. In some instances, they had engaged in negative coping strategies, something the programme had aimed to prevent.

Attaining education outcomes – increased enrolment and attendance rates – was demonstrated with improved education statistics. However, school feeding took place in the same geographical areas where other partners had implemented far reaching programmes (including school buildings, teacher training, and quality of school initiatives) that would have equally contributed to this success.

Assessing the effectiveness of the portfolio in meeting its objectives to create productive assets and generate economic benefit was difficult. Monitoring data is scarce on what assets had been created. Examples were found that showed positive results in developing rice paddy, roads or fishponds, but success was determined by the extent to which participation ensured ownership from the outset. A quantification of the benefits was not possible.

Contributing to Development and the Humanitarian Situation

The impact of the portfolio was expected in reduced distress and faster recovery, especially for the food for relief and food for work in the aftermath of natural disasters. The coping strategies of households and communities, and the severity of the disasters, were such that they were able to cope well even before assistance arrived.

Impacts from investments in livelihoods and education were perceived as positive, but only information is insufficient to determine the contributions that WFP operations made as compared to other factors that played a role to attain these impacts.

Factors Explaining Results

The portfolio's performance and results are affected by low population density and the remoteness of the terrain, which translates into small case loads at high cost. In addition, timeliness is affected by both transport challenges – in remote areas there are no access roads and villagers walk for several days through mountainous terrain – and institutional limitations that resulted in processes for food for work that were time consuming.

Overall Assessment

Alignment and strategic positioning. WFP's role and operations are well aligned with government policies. They share common objectives, and although government policies do not foresee the provision of food aid, they do not prevent food assistance from playing a role within the development process. In a number of instances, positive synergies were created with the operations of other partners, although not all opportunities were sought out and exploited. Ownership of programmes was generally strong, especially when they were well integrated into government priorities. The choice of partner agency plays an important role in ensuring ownership and should be adjusted depending on the objective of the programme activity.

Making strategic choices. WFP and the country office performed well in undertaking analysis and reviews of its ongoing portfolio. However, the analytical work showed limited use for strategic decision-making, partly owing to the absence of a country strategy. It was also not effective in resolving systemic problems, which were repeatedly noted in several reviews and also observed by the evaluation. Monitoring systems are not designed or working to inform decision-making, strategic choices or operation management.

Portfolio performance and results. The portfolio performed well in reaching between 75 and 100 percent of intended beneficiaries and, on average, equal numbers of men and women. However, to realign the portfolio with needs, it would have to refocus on the population group identified as most vulnerable. The activities were generally relevant and appropriate to needs, and increased their relevance and positive synergies when implemented in collaboration with others and through participatory methods.

Efficient delivery of the portfolio is a challenge; low numbers of beneficiaries and high transport costs require innovative solutions. The effectiveness of programme activities varied according to the activity and the objectives it aimed to attain.

The sustainability of assets created through food for work schemes depends largely on local ownership and capacity to maintain the assets. The sustainability of school feeding is supported by its inclusion in the Government's policy framework, but will require commensurate capacity development and financial allocations.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 The country office should continue to undertake analytical work that informs the choice of hunger solutions that are most relevant to the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Recommendation 2 In developing its country strategy, the country office should define clearly a unifying goal for its portfolio in the country.

Recommendation 3 The country office, its partners and other stakeholders should determine ways of improving participation and increasing local ownership.

Recommendation 4 At the corporate level, discussions of WFP's funding model should take into account how WFP's comparative advantage is affected by high-tonnage choices to generate funding.

Recommendation 5 The country office, with the support of the regional bureau and/or Headquarters, should design a monitoring system that informs decision-making at various levels.

Reference: Full and summary reports of the Evaluation are available at: <http://www.wfp.org/about/evaluation>
For more information, please contact the WFP Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@wfp.org