

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Country strategy and programme evaluation

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Action: The Evaluation Committee is invited to review the country strategy and programme evaluation for the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

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Executive summary

A. Background

1. In line with IFAD's Revised Evaluation Policy and as approved by the IFAD Executive Board at its 140th session held in December 2023, the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) in 2024 undertook a country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This CSPE is the first country-level evaluation conducted in the country. The evaluation period, 2011–2023, covers the implementation of nine projects, with total IFAD financing of US\$118.1 million, and will inform the new country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) to be prepared in 2025.
2. **Process.** Following a documents review, the CSPE team conducted virtual interviews with 53 stakeholders including IFAD staff, development partners, consultants and grantees. In addition, the CSPE conducted an online e-survey with international stakeholders, who provided feedback on IFAD's visibility and contribution (31 respondents). A country visit took place from 1 to 19 July 2024. During this visit, interviews were conducted with government representatives, IFAD partners, other development partners and the teams of the two ongoing projects. The CSPE team visited 15 project villages in six districts across four provinces in the northern region.
3. **Scope.** The CSPE period covers the 2011 COSOP, which was in place until 2017, and the subsequent 2018 COSOP, which covered the period through 2024 and was later extended to 2025. The portfolio reviewed in this evaluation includes the nine operations, with a total cost of US\$341.8 million of which US\$118.1 was financed by IFAD (loans and grants). The remaining funding was provided from domestic and international sources.
4. The CSPE covered a timeframe of 13 years. The beginning of the review period was marked by the new IFAD country presence, with a country director based in Vientiane. The country director moved to the Mekong Hub in Hanoi in 2015, and in 2018 the Vientiane IFAD Country Office was closed.
5. **Relevance.** IFAD's country strategy was adequately aligned with key national priorities, including the National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSED) and National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). This focus on supporting projects in poor areas emphasized a balanced approach to agricultural development and poverty reduction. IFAD's strategy also contributed to all components of the national agricultural sector plan, promoting smallholder agriculture for both self-sufficiency and market-oriented production, while addressing environmental and poverty concerns. IFAD's strategies and mainstreaming themes added value to the implementation of national policies. Support to nutrition was timely vis-a-vis the national policy framework. Cofinancing with development partners responded to the national policy for aid effectiveness (Vientiane Declaration). The projects' implementation arrangements evolved in alignment with the Sam Sang devolution policy.
6. The 2018 COSOP maintained similar areas of focus to its predecessor, but included a more simplified menu of activities. The decision to streamline project portfolio coverage and focus on more salient areas of irrigation and nutrition while continuing to support smallholder animal raising was a relevant adaptation to local capacities. Reducing the complexity of project design meant focusing on some issues at the expense of others. Three areas were less frequently addressed in the projects: (i) village-level capacity-building; (ii) sustainable natural resource management and secure land tenure; and (iii) access to rural credit.
7. **Coherence.** IFAD's leadership in country-level processes has been limited by the absence of a stable country representation. After IFAD closed its country office in

2018, the former country programme officer became a consultant coordinating stakeholder interactions and supporting project implementation processes within the country. This internal arrangement has caused uncertainty within the Government regarding IFAD's commitment and presence in the country. Discontinuing leadership in the Sector Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development (SWG-ARD) has impacted IFAD's pivotal role in promoting exchanges and coordination between development partners. The launch of the Partnerships for Irrigation and Commercialization of Smallholder Agriculture Project (PICSA) under the 2018 COSOP confirmed the advantage of parallel projects with the Asian Development Bank (ADB). PICSA introduced a nutrition-sensitive agriculture approach that contrasted with the agriculture for nutrition (AFN) approach, focusing on food crop markets in less poor areas. The two AFN projects maintained IFAD's historical focus on upland and remote locations. This duality reduced coherence within the programme, and further reduced potential for engagement in policy dialogue with development partners in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Both project approaches nevertheless proved to be equally effective.

8. The country programme streamlined its partnership approach through the 2018 COSOP, pushing for greater collaboration with established partners and government agencies. IFAD's portfolio focused on three main partnerships: one ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), and two development partners, ADB and the World Food Programme (WFP). IFAD's positioning vis-a-vis the two implementing partners indicate that its work has been more productive when addressed in the context of collaborative efforts. IFAD's partnership with ADB has been primarily to address the need for smallholder access to larger investments, such as funding small-scale irrigation infrastructure and water user groups for ADB's large irrigation schemes. The partnership with WFP enabled IFAD to tap into an active network of district staff and village facilitators for the incorporation of nutrition activities.
9. During the two COSOP periods, there was an explicit approach to knowledge management. IFAD's move to the multi-country office (MCO) in Hanoi led to greater emphasis on knowledge exchange between projects within the region. The Lao People's Democratic Republic provided a number of case studies for the IFAD website. Over time, there was a shift towards more accessible knowledge products generated in the projects and more local knowledge incorporated into more practical, community-based applications such as farmer-to-farmer exchanges. A major gap was the incorporation of knowledge generated through grants into the loan portfolio. Without a mandate or budget to implement knowledge from IFAD's grants portfolio, projects in the Lao People's Democratic Republic faced significant silos and weak connections between research and practical application.
10. Under the SWG-ARD, IFAD supported an effective forum through the Government's round table mechanism. From 2012 until 2016, it funded designated technical advisory assistance to this process through Soum Son Seun Jai (SSSJ), a community-based food security and economic opportunities programme. This process allowed for knowledge-sharing among various implementing partners and interviews indicated that IFAD's contributions, particularly its high-level presence, bolstered evidence-based exchanges between development partners and the ministries. However, engagement in the working group was reduced after IFAD's country presence diminished beginning in 2016, impacting its ability to act strongly on sensitive challenges in the complex policy landscape. Issues on land related policies and rural finance were not further pursued. There is considerable scope to enhance collaborative approaches as well as uptake of knowledge from the portfolio for policy engagement.
11. **Effectiveness.** The portfolio has reached out to a remarkable number of poor villages and households. The majority of projects were effective in their outreach to upland and poorer districts. The nine projects took place in a total of 90 districts in

14 provinces, with outreach to 157,745 households. Overall, the country programme was effective. Targets were exceeded on smallholder resilience, and food security and nutrition security. Under the 2018 COSOP projects, all activities were implemented as foreseen. All projects invested in small-scale irrigation schemes and had areas improved 25 to 30 per cent above target. Sustainable land management practices were introduced at group and landscape level. Community driven nutrition interventions included school garden activities and nutrition groups. Combining backyard poultry, vegetables and herbs, and drinking water improvement was effective for both nutrition security and food security. Production groups including model farmers were an effective vehicle for the adoption of productive technology.

12. **Efficiency.** The country programme clearly underperformed on efficiency, with delayed start-up, continued delays in implementation, slow disbursements of IFAD loans, high project management costs and high costs for technical assistance. Project management costs were high throughout the period and typically exceeded the IFAD programme management cost ratio of 10 to 15 per cent. Government operational costs other than project management allocated to subnational levels added to high management costs. The proportion of total budget allocated to in-village activities was low. Insufficient unit costs were used for the construction of small-scale rural infrastructure, compromising quality. There was no strategic direction to support exit from projects' dependence on international technical assistance and the funding of local governments' operational costs. A consideration was missing for IFAD's positioning towards the Government in the context of limited financial capacity and dependence on official development assistance for agriculture and rural development.
13. **Poverty impact.** While rural poverty has overall been on a declining trend, limited evidence was available on progress in areas targeted by IFAD-supported projects. Positive impact has been noted on household assets and food. Improvements in child nutrition were confirmed in the north, but not in the south where the reduction of chronic malnutrition lagged behind the national trend due to the challenging regional context. Evidence on enhanced community capacities was only anecdotal. By aligning with the Government's decentralization policy, IFAD contributed to building individual capacities at the district level and among young village leaders. However, IFAD's approach of working through government systems made it challenging to determine its specific impact, especially given the high density of donor support in the same areas.
14. **Gender equality and women's empowerment.** The portfolio has moved from gender mainstreaming to gradually introducing more gender-transformative approaches, improving the voice and representation of women. The IFAD projects have been successful in reaching out to an increasing number, and proportion, of women. A noteworthy achievement was the enhancement of water infrastructure development, which saved women's labour. One promising aspect of women's participation, access to rural financial services, was halted in the IFAD portfolio. Furthermore, more attention is needed to reach out to women and men in ethnic groups and across different ages.
15. **Sustainability.** Post-project sustainability was a weak point throughout the portfolio, both in terms of steps taken to improve it over time and of actual continuation of activities. This was a main weakness in the south region, where the unsustainability of small-scale infrastructure design and approaches to operation and maintenance remain an unresolved issue. In the north, farmer-to-farmer extension was a more sustainable approach, especially in animal husbandry. AFN I was the first project that had a budgeted exit strategy anticipating the post-project period. The village banks, previously found in IFAD projects, were made sustainable with support from the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

16. **Environment and natural resource management and climate change adaptation.** The COSOPs appropriately identified natural resource management as a focus area, though it shifted from land use planning to climate resilience, with the latter remaining difficult to measure. Operationally, the portfolio tried to introduce comprehensive approaches to balancing food and cash crop production with natural resource management, which proved too complex and was not further pursued. Pressure on natural resources through forest clearing, and increased risks from inflation and the food price crisis in project villages, were seen throughout the CSPE exercise. The portfolio lost expertise in land planning management at a time when it was becoming an issue of interest once again. IFAD's contribution to climate change adaptation was more difficult to discern. While its climate change approach succeeded in reducing the impact of weather-related shocks through irrigation, its overall strategy remains to be defined. Finally, Social, Environmental and Climate Assessment Procedures (SECAP) processes were incoherent and required more support.
17. **IFAD.** IFAD's support and supervision were mostly adequate at the operational level although mission staffing was a weaker point. During the 2018 COSOP period, IFAD improved project design, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, financial management and procurement. The lack of continuity in IFAD's country management and in-country presence was a limitation that affected internal portfolio coherence and engagement with country stakeholders. IFAD remained appreciated as an institution offering worldwide opportunities for exchanges of experience on agricultural development.
18. **The Government** demonstrated ownership of its cooperation with IFAD, with continuity during the CSPE review period. The Government provided a stable venue and encouraged participation in the round table process and its sector working group. Governments at central and local levels exercised oversight over the strategy and portfolio through steering committees and in operational management.

B. Conclusions

19. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) collaboration was an effective operational partnership that ensured alignment with evolving government strategies while allowing multisector coordination at district and village levels. Experience showed that collaboration with more than one ministry had its challenges, and most certainly would not have enabled a similar consistency within the portfolio. Project performance was overall positive, with good output achievements. Gender sensitivity of the portfolio improved over time, the more recent projects going beyond equal participation and into gender-transformative approaches. The MCO helped to enhance fiduciary capacity-building and oversight. The good output achievement came at a hefty price with high project management costs, extensive external technical assistance support and hidden costs such as daily subsistence allowances for government employees.
20. Despite the limited size of its financing in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, IFAD was able to make useful contributions by focusing on proven interventions that work best in remote upland areas. IFAD followed the approaches of its partners – ADB (irrigation), WFP (nutrition) and earlier during the period GIZ (rural finance) – while adding value on smallholder agriculture development based on farmer groups, and effective project implementation at larger scale. Both ADB and WFP have been a good fit for IFAD. The AFN approach defined and implemented in partnership with WFP has scope for long-term engagement given the constraints of multi-ethnic upland areas in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The number of groups per village, with activities that are tailored to poor men and women, has been a key factor for broader inclusion of poor households in AFN. The ADB partnership was an opportunity for IFAD to build its operational partnership with

MAF in a broad number of provinces and districts, focusing on strategic alignment areas that included farmer groups, value chain development and gender equality, but with a less inclusive approach.

21. Building sustainable farmer groups and their access to value chains will require more than initial grants to groups and enterprises. Farmer group formation demonstrated its effectiveness at scale, thanks to direct payment of grants to group bank accounts. Sustaining group development over a longer period will necessitate members' access to rural finance. Support to village banks, seen in the earlier projects, was relevant and proved to be sustainable in the longer term. A village bank network is now operational, although IFAD is no longer facilitating project villages' access to that network. Access to rural credit was also an important entry point for women's empowerment that became absent in the portfolio. IFAD's coordinated private-public-producer partnership (4P) approach has so far been unsuccessful for crop value chains in the sparsely populated uplands. Technical solutions shared by the MCO were mostly limited to IFAD's 4P approach in Viet Nam whereas diversified options were being developed in other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Support to enterprises providing services to smallholder animal production was promising.
22. **The portfolio remained short of a comprehensive approach to small-scale infrastructure and climate resilience.** This reinforced the lack of sustainability of project results, especially in the south. Early project designs attempting to address natural resource management and land use rights in upland villages were unsuccessful due to their complexity. IFAD moved to supporting staple crop value chains but this was in contradiction with sound natural resource management as it encouraged the expansion of annual crops on sloped land. Small-scale integrated improvements of home gardens and small livestock were a relevant but insufficient approach to climate resilience. Project investment levels, technical options for resilience and community-level governance approaches were all missing to ensure that access roads and water infrastructure remain in service after construction, whereas extreme climatic events have made them more vulnerable. The newly started inclusion of civil society organizations through a challenge fund has potential to grow in these fields.
23. **The lack of country presence during the second half of the review period curtailed IFAD's ability** to maintain the earlier more strategic partnership with MAF. IFAD's engagement in policy dialogue sharply declined. Early non-lending activities were effective in supporting the emergence of the Lao Farmer Network, while more recently IFAD's contribution to development initiatives was also mostly operational, for example on nutrition convergence.
24. **The CSPE shows a need to reconsider the strategy and programme approach on:** (i) the portfolio and non-lending partnerships; (ii) the sustainability of farmer groups and the relevance of value chain development efforts; and (iii) climate resilience and natural resource management. A shared challenge in all three issues is how to maintain and enhance inclusion of the poor in the evolving country context while avoiding overlap with other development partners. More broadly, the role of IFAD loans in the country's official development assistance (ODA) support and government capacity development will have to be reconsidered. IFAD covering government operational costs at local levels was effective but raises the issue of how to reduce ODA dependence. A fresh approach will be needed to direct these costs to supporting government capacity development at various levels.

C. Recommendations

25. Going forward, IFAD will have to further enhance its strategy, augmenting its engagement and demonstrating its added value, while addressing the country's development challenges and crises more directly. The upcoming COSOP (to be

issued in 2025) will cover a period starting from 2026 and extending to at least 2030. The two ongoing projects will continue implementation during that period (AFN II until 2029, and PICSA under additional financing). The recommendations cover the new COSOP, IFAD's strategic decisions on human resources and funding sources, and project-level adjustments. They take into account both the CSPE results and opportunities and threats of special relevance to IFAD's action in the Lao People's Democratic Republic in this new period. The COSOP should build on three opportunities: (i) the 2026–2030 five-year plan; (ii) the new law on cooperatives, the growing capacity of the Lao Farmer Association and the availability of a village bank network; and (iii) cooperation and trade among ASEAN countries. Threats that deserve priority attention in the COSOP are: (i) a delayed recovery from the ongoing economic and indebtedness crisis, leading to continued dependency on ODA and grants in rural development; (ii) the growing climate change impacts in rural areas; and (iii) a reinforcing gap in productive assets among the rural population, particularly between those who have access to more fertile land and others.

26. **Recommendation 1. IFAD should adopt a sustainable approach to ensure continued in-country presence and engagement.** Given the presence of United Nations organizations and international financial institutions in the country, IFAD needs to be visible, involved and represented at adequate levels. IFAD should strengthen in-country engagement with regard to non-lending activities, and even if portfolio size and thematic focus could be maintained at current level, IFAD should continue its close partnership with MAF. Under the ongoing IFAD reforms (Decentralization 2.0), responsibilities for managing the country portfolio in IFAD should be reviewed. The aim would be to ensure proximity and continuity in engagement with government partners. The position of the in-country coordinator should be formalized. The country director must be present in country during strategic consultations and decisions with the Government and international partners. These inputs should start in 2025 so that IFAD can meaningfully contribute to the United Nations Rome-based agencies' interaction with the Government on the upcoming five-year plan. Enhanced in-country presence would allow a renewed, more proactive approach to knowledge management exchanges between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and relevant countries. Finally, IFAD should mobilize additional human resources for applications to competitive project financing grants.
27. **Recommendation 2.** IFAD should take a strategic decision regarding cofinancing partnerships considering both coherence and potential trade-offs. IFAD should continue the joint WFP-IFAD project, while enhancing focus on IFAD's added value, production groups and market access, focusing on the needs and opportunities in the remote upland areas and paying special attention to higher difficulties of ethnic communities in the south. IFAD should carefully examine how to make its projects that are parallel to an ADB project (PICSA approach) fully aligned with its own targeting policy, and should invite ADB to partner with IFAD on small-scale rural infrastructure resilience. If both the WFP and ADB partnerships continue, the COSOP should provide an explicit rationale: supporting smallholders in both upland areas and areas with more agricultural production potential. If this is not feasible, IFAD should consider alternative partners on farmers' organizations and climate-resilient small-scale infrastructure.
28. **Recommendation 3.** IFAD should redefine its approach to enhance the sustainability of farmer groups and make them more inclusive. Depending on the level of new country presence, the COSOP should decide whether or not to select support to inclusive farmer groups and emerging cooperatives as a focus, for example through PICSA and any new project. The partnership with the Lao Farmer Association should be redefined to continue to support the growth of farmer groups while remaining open to other market-oriented local service providers. Women's

participation in the leadership of farmer groups and their access to existing credit options should be supported. A partnership with a village bank service provider could be considered. Ways to better include the economically active poor in the groups should be determined starting with PICSA additional financing, building more groups in each village. Support to contracts between farmer groups and enterprises should incorporate best practice in pro-poor value chains in the region, while support to key value chain services in smallholder animal production should continue. This renewed approach to value chain development would gain from active strategic dialogue with value chain experts in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and in the region under the above second scenario.

29. **Recommendation 4. The upcoming COSOP should specify the approach to climate resilience, natural resource management and the needs of those with limited land access.** In the remaining pockets of poverty, the COSOP should provide direction for AFN II's value chain development, helping smallholders to maintain diversified livelihood sources and upgrade production quality to access markets for environmentally sound products (small animals, selected non-timber forest products, fruit and vegetables). In areas with more agricultural potential (PICSA additional financing), sound natural resource management should be promoted among participating enterprises, not only smallholders. Resilient small-scale infrastructure in a changing climate should be a focus, through cooperation with other development partners and paying attention to both design and operations. The participation of civil society organizations should grow beyond what is already planned in AFN II, and would gain from focusing on community capacity to maintain access to the road network and drinking water sources, especially in the south. This would serve the economically active poor people who have limited land access and will therefore benefit little from land intensification.
30. **Recommendation 5. IFAD should set up a transparent system for reporting operational costs with clear financial ceilings.** A structured capacity development programme should be developed with clear, achievable targets for both government and project staff. At national level, MAF's demand for a cross-project M&E system should be taken into account. IFAD project management information systems should be designed for that purpose. This would contribute to preventing overlap and inefficiencies and encourage cooperation among projects and development partners, as envisaged by the Vientiane Declaration.

Lao People's Democratic Republic Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation Agreement at Completion Point (ACP)

A. Introduction

1. The Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) conducted the first country-level evaluation conducted in Lao PDR. The evaluation period, 2011-2023 covers the implementation of nine projects, with a total IFAD financing of USD106.4 million since 2011. It will inform the new COSOP to be prepared in 2025.
2. The main objectives of the CSPE were to: (i) assess the performance and results of the IFAD strategy and operations in Lao PDR, as outlined in the COSOPs, (ii) generate findings and recommendations for IFAD's upcoming country strategy and its partnership with the Government of Lao PDR, and (iii) identify lessons that could be shared on IFAD's presence and interventions in other with a smaller IFAD portfolio and a large development aid landscape.
3. This **agreement at completion point (ACP)** contains recommendations based on the evaluation findings and conclusions presented in the CSPE report, as well as proposed follow-up actions as agreed by IFAD and the Government. The signed ACP is an integral part of the CSPE report in which the evaluation findings are presented in detail and will be submitted to the IFAD Executive Board as an annex to the new country strategic opportunities programme for Laos. The implementation of the recommendations agreed upon will be tracked through the President's Report on the Implementation Status of Evaluation Recommendations and Management Actions, which is presented to the IFAD Executive Board on an annual basis by the Fund's Management.

B. Recommendations and proposed follow-up actions

4. The upcoming COSOP (2026) will cover a period starting from 2026 and extending to 2031. The two on-going projects would continue implementation during that period (AFN II, until 2030, and PICSA additional financing until 2028). The recommendations will be relevant to the new COSOP, IFAD's strategic decisions on human resources and funding sources, and project-level adjustments. They take into account both the CSPE results and opportunities and threats of special relevance to IFAD's action in Lao PDR in this new period. The COSOP should build on three opportunities: (i) the national 2026-2030 five-year plan; (ii) the new Law on cooperatives, the growing capacity of Lao Farmer Association (LFA) and the availability of a village bank network; (iii) cooperation and trade among ASEAN countries. Threats that deserve priority attention in the new COSOP are (i) a delayed recovery from the on-going economic and indebtedness crisis, leading to continued dependency on Official Development Assistance (ODA) and grants in rural development; (ii) the growing climate change impacts in rural areas; and (iii) a reinforcing gap in productive assets among the rural population, particularly between those who have access to more fertile land and the others.
5. **Recommendation 1. IFAD should adopt a sustainable approach to ensure continued in-country presence and engagement.** Given the presence of UN organisations and IFIs in the country, IFAD needs to be visible, involved and represented at adequate levels. IFAD should strengthen in-country engagement with regard to non-lending activities, even if portfolio size and thematic focus could be maintained at current level, IFAD should continue its close partnership with Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Under the ongoing IFAD reforms (Decentralisation 2.0), responsibilities for managing the country portfolio in IFAD should be reviewed.

The aim would be to ensure proximity and continuity in engagement with Government partners. The position of the in-country coordinator should be formalised. The country director must be present in country during strategic consultations and decisions with Government and international partners. These inputs should start in 2025 so that IFAD can meaningfully contribute to the RBA's interaction with government on the upcoming five-year plan. Enhanced in-country presence would allow a renewed, more proactive approach to knowledge management exchanges between Laos and relevant countries. Finally, IFAD should mobilise additional human resources for applications to competitive project financing grants.

Proposed Follow-up: *Partially Agreed.* While the Government of Lao PDR and IFAD acknowledge the importance of a sustained and visible in-country presence, the decision to station a Country Director (CD) in any country is driven by a prioritization exercise, based on portfolio size and future business opportunities. While the current size of the portfolio does not envisage a CD-led office, IFAD is committed to strengthening its in-country engagement and visibility. As part of the ongoing review of operational metrics, IFAD will assess the feasibility of formalizing a Country Programme Coordinator (CPC) position in Lao PDR. At the same time, the Country Director or delegated representative—based regionally, currently in Hanoi—will remain actively and consistently engaged, including through in-person and virtual participation in strategic consultations and decision-making with the Government and development partners.

Additionally, IFAD has already mobilized additional regional human resources based regionally — currently in Bangkok — to strengthen engagement, access competitive project financing and grants and enhance knowledge exchanges and learning partnerships between Lao PDR and other relevant countries.

This approach will be regularly reviewed and adapted in line with IFAD's corporate decentralization reforms and the evolving needs and priorities of Lao PDR.

Responsible partners: IFAD Department of Country Operations (DCO)/ Senior Management

Timeline: 2026-2031

6. **Recommendation 2. IFAD should take a strategic decision regarding co-financing partnership considering both coherence and potential trade-offs.** IFAD should continue the joint WFP-IFAD project, while enhancing focus on IFAD's added value, production groups and market access, focussing on the needs and opportunities of the remote upland areas and paying special attention to higher difficulties of ethnic communities in the South. IFAD should carefully examine how to make its projects that are parallel to an ADB project (PICSA approach) fully aligned with its own targeting policy and should invite ADB to partner with IFAD on small rural infrastructure resilience. If both WFP and ADB partnerships continue, the COSOP should provide an explicit rationale: supporting smallholders in both upland areas and areas with more agricultural production potential. If this is not feasible, IFAD should consider alternative partners on farmer organizations and climate-resilient small infrastructure.

Proposed Follow-up: *Agreed and on-going.* The Government of Lao PDR and IFAD jointly recognize the importance of a strategic and coherent approach to co-financing partnerships that reflects national rural development priorities, promotes complementarity among development actors, and leverages IFAD's comparative advantage.

The ongoing joint implementation of AFN II (IFAD12 loan financing blended with a GAFSP grant through 2030) by the Government, IFAD, and WFP continues to enhance nutrition outcomes while strengthening production groups, improving market access, and addressing the specific needs of remote upland areas, with a focus on the South and ethnic communities.

Regarding the PICSA approach, implemented under a programmatic framework that includes the ADB-financed SRIWSMP and the GIZ/GCF-financed ERP, the Government and IFAD reaffirm that targeting remains consistent with IFAD's policy and national development goals. While the broader program covers both poor and near-poor districts to facilitate market integration and systemic impact, IFAD's targeting within PICSA continues to prioritize the poorest and most vulnerable smallholders, especially in villages not directly reached by ADB (i.e., PICSA and GIZ villages).

Should IFAD continue partnerships with both WFP and ADB under the new COSOP, the rationale for doing so will be made explicit—supporting differentiated approaches for smallholders in both remote upland areas and zones with higher agricultural production potential. At the same time, recognizing possible trade-offs, IFAD and the Government are jointly identifying additional or alternative partners to strengthen support for farmer organizations and climate-resilient small-scale infrastructure. These strategic directions will be fully elaborated in the design of the upcoming 2026–2031 COSOP, in close consultation with the Government of Lao PDR, as the owner of IFAD-financed projects.

Responsible partners: IFAD Laos (APR), Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

Timeline: 2026–2031

7. **Recommendation 3. IFAD should redefine its approach to enhance the sustainability of farmer groups and make them more inclusive.** Depending on the level of new country presence, the COSOP should decide or not to select support to inclusive farmer groups and emerging cooperatives as a focus, for example through PICSA and any new project. The partnership with LFA should be redefined to continue to support the growth of farmer groups while remaining open to other market-oriented local service providers. Women's participation in the leadership of farmer groups and their access to existing credit options should be supported. A partnership with a village bank service provider could be considered. How to better include the economically active poor in the groups should be redefined starting with PICSA additional financing, building more groups in each village. Support to contracts between farmer groups and enterprises should incorporate best practice in pro-poor value chains in the region, while support to key value chain services in smallholder animal production should continue. This renewed approach to value chain development would gain from active strategic dialogue with value chain experts in Laos and in the region under the above second scenario.

Proposed Follow-up: Agreed and on-going. *The Government of Lao PDR and IFAD are already addressing this recommendation through current initiatives under AFN II and PICSA Additional Financing. These focus on strengthening the sustainability and inclusiveness of farmer groups and cooperatives, with balanced group composition that enables better-off households to catalyze opportunities for poorer members. Support includes emerging cooperatives, enhanced leadership roles for women, and targeted financial and business literacy (e.g., GALS and BALI under AFN II).*

The upcoming 2026–2031 COSOP will define whether support to inclusive farmer groups and cooperatives remains a strategic priority and identify new partnerships beyond LFA, including with market-oriented service providers. Expanded access to microfinance, potentially through ADB co-financing, is under consideration for the IFAD13 pipeline.

Support to pro-poor value chains—especially in smallholder livestock production—will be deepened through improved farmer-enterprise contracting, informed by regional best practices (as applied in AFN II, PICSA AF, and the IFAD13 design). IFAD and the Government will also pursue strategic dialogue with national and regional value chain experts to refine this inclusive value chain approach.

Responsible partners: *IFAD (APR, ECG, PMI, GPR) + Government (MAE for agricultural production, processing, and market linkages & MOF for rural and microfinance and policy oversight, in closer collaboration with Ministry of Industry and Commerce on Multi-Stakeholder Platforms and trade facilitation as well as other relevant ministries and local authorities, depending on the thematic focus and partnership requirements).*

Timeline: *2026–2031*

8. **Recommendation 4. The upcoming COSOP should specify the approach to climate resilience, natural resource management and the needs of those with limited land access.** *In remaining pockets of poverty, the COSOP should provide direction for AFN II's value chain development, helping smallholders to maintain diversified livelihood sources and upgrade production quality to access markets for environmentally sound products (small animals, selected NTFPs, fruit and vegetables). In areas with more agricultural potential (PICSA additional financing), sound NRM management should be promoted among participating enterprises, not only smallholders. Resilient small infrastructure in a changing climate should be a focus, through cooperation with other development partners and paying attention to both design and operations. The participation of CSOs should grow beyond what is already planned in AFN II and would gain from focussing on community capacity to maintain access to the road network and drinking water sources, especially in the South. This would serve the economically active poor that have limited land access and will therefore benefit little from land intensification.*

Proposed Follow-up: Agreed. *The 2026–2031 COSOP and IFAD13 design will define a clearer approach to climate resilience, natural resource management (NRM), and support for land-constrained, economically active poor. IFAD is also seeking to mobilize blended climate finance through GEF-9 to strengthen climate mainstreaming under IFAD13. Key thematic priorities include: (i) climate finance, (ii) adaptive capacity-building, (iii) NRM, and (iv) rural infrastructure and renewable energy.*

AFN II will continue promoting diversified, climate-resilient livelihoods (e.g., small livestock, NTFPs, horticulture), while PICSA AF will reinforce NRM practices among both smallholders and enterprises. Climate-resilient infrastructure—particularly irrigation, roads, and water systems—will remain a portfolio-wide focus, with attention to sustainable design and maintenance.

The new COSOP will also explore expanded CSO engagement to strengthen community-level infrastructure access and management.

Responsible partners: *IFAD (APR, ECG, PMI) + Government (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry + Ministry of Finance)*

Timeline: 2026-2031

9. **Recommendation 5. IFAD should set up a transparent system for reporting operational costs with clear financial ceilings.** A structured capacity development programme should be developed with clear, achievable targets for both government and project staff. At national level, MAF's demand for a cross-project M&E system should be taken into account. IFAD projects' MIS should be designed for that purpose. This would contribute to prevent overlap and inefficiencies and encourage cooperation among projects and development partners, as envisaged by the Vientiane Declaration.

Proposed Follow-up: Agreed and on-going. IFAD has established the Online Project Procurement End-to-End reporting system (OPEN) to improve transparency in operational cost reporting. Financial ceilings per category are reflected in project Procurement Plans (PPs) and Annual Work Plans and Budgets (AWPBs), which are submitted via OPEN for IFAD's technical review and No Objection. Relevant project staff have been trained on the system, with continued support from IFAD procurement and financial specialists.

In response to MAF's request, IFAD is supporting the development of a cross-project M&E system (PROMIS) under AFN I and II. This aims to improve coordination, reduce overlap, and foster cooperation among stakeholders, in line with the principles of the Vientiane Declaration.

Responsible partners: IFAD (APR, PFM) + Government (MOF + MAF)

Timeline: 2026-2031

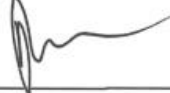
Signed by:



Santiphap Phomvihane
Minister of Finance
Lao People's Democratic Republic

Date:

26 May 2025



Donal Brown
Associate Vice-President, Department of Country Operations
International Fund for Agricultural Development

Date: 28/05/2025

Main report

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Currency equivalent, weights and measures

Currency equivalent

Currency unit = Lao Kip (LAK)

US\$1.0 = LAK 8,030 (2011)

US\$1.0 = LAK 20,500 (December 2023)

US\$1.0 = LAK 22,200 (August 2024)¹

Weights and measures

1 Ton = 1000 Kg

1 Ha = 10,000 square meters

Abbreviations and acronyms

4P	Public-Private-Producer Partnership (IFAD)
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFA	Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development
AFN	Agriculture for Nutrition
APG	Agriculture Production Group
APR	Asia-Pacific Region (IFAD)
ASAP	Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (IFAD)
BMZ	Germany Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CDE	Centre for Development and Environment
COSOP	Country Strategic Opportunities Programme
CPMT	Country Programme Management Team (IFAD)
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSPE	Country Strategy and Programme Evaluation
CTA	Chief Technical Assistant
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
DOPC	Department of Planning and Cooperation (MAF)
DSF	Debt Sustainability Framework
EB	Executive Board (IFAD)
EIRR	Economic Internal Rate of Return
ENRM-CCA	Environment and Natural Resources Management and Climate Change Adaptation
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion

¹ Source: exchange-rates.org and Bank of Lao PDR.

FNML	Southern Laos Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme
GAFSP	Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEWE	Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
GIS	Geographical Information System
GIZ	German Development Cooperation
GoL	Government of Lao PDR
Ha	Hectare
ICO	International Country Office (IFAD)
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGO	International Non-Government Organization
IOE	Independent Office of Evaluation (IFAD)
IT	Information Technology
K4D	Knowledge for Development
KM	Knowledge Management
LFA	Lao Farmer Association
LFN	Lao Farmers' Network
LSB	Lao Statistics Bureau
LuxDev	Luxemburg Development Agency
LWU	Lao Women's Union
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MCO	Multicountry office (IFAD)
MDD-W	Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women
MIS	Monitoring Information System
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MTCP	Medium-Term Cooperation Programme
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NAFES	National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NARDT	Network of Agriculture and Rural Development Think-tanks
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NNSPA	National Nutrition Strategic and Plan of Action
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NRSLDP	Northern Region Sustainable Livelihoods through Livestock Development Project
NSLCP-RFSP	Northern Smallholder Livestock Commercialization Project - Rural Financial Services Programme
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Product
O&M	Operations and Maintenance
OBİ	Oracle Business Intelligence
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ORMS	Operational Results Management System
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PBAS	Performance Based Allocation System (IFAD)

PCR	Project Completion Report
PCRv	Project Completion Report Validation
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PICSA	Partnerships for Irrigation and Commercialisation of Smallholder Agriculture Project
PMD	Project Management Department (IFAD)
PPCP	Public Private Community Partnership
PPE	Project Performance Evaluation
PTT	Policy Think Tank
QAG	Quality Assurance Group (QAG).
RBA	Rome-Based Agency
RLIP	Rural Livelihoods Improvement Programme in Attapeu and Sayabouri
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SECAP	Social, Environmental and Climate Assessment Procedures (IFAD)
SNRMPEP	Sustainable Natural Resource Management and Productivity Enhancement Project
SO	Strategic Objective
SRIWMSP	Sustainable Rural Infrastructure and Watershed Management Sector Project (ADB)
SSFSNP - GAFSP	Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project - Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme
SSSJ	Soum Son Seun Jai - Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme
SSTC	South-South and Triangular Cooperation
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
SWG-ARD	The Sector Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development
TA	Technical Assistance
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
UNCDF	UN Capital Development Fund
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNSDCF	United Nations' Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
VCB-N	Value Chain Capacity Building Network
VDP	Village Development Plan
WFP	World Food Programme
WOCAT	World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies

Map of IFAD-supported operations in Lao PDR

Lao People's Democratic Republic

IFAD-funded ongoing operations

Country strategy and programme evaluation



The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IFAD concerning the delimitation of the frontiers or boundaries, or the authorities thereof.

Map compiled by IFAD | 16-02-2024

Lao People's Democratic Republic

IFAD-funded closed operations

Country strategy and programme evaluation



The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IFAD concerning the delimitation of the frontiers or boundaries, or the authorities thereof.

Map compiled by IFAD | 16-02-2024

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Country strategy and programme evaluation

I. Background

A. Introduction

1. In line with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Evaluation Policy and as approved by the 140th Session of the IFAD Executive Board in December 2023, the Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE) has undertaken in 2024 a country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). This CSPE is the first country-level evaluation conducted in Lao PDR. The evaluation period, 2011-2023 covers the implementation of nine projects, with a total IFAD financing of US\$118.1 Million since 2011. It will inform the new COSOP to be prepared in 2025. The CSPE draws from the findings of earlier project-level evaluations in the country and assembles additional evidence from documents review and country mission. Its explicit focus is the performance of the partnership between IFAD and the Government of Lao PDR (GoL), which the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs defined.
2. **Background.** IFAD started operations in Lao PDR in 1979. Since then, 17 operations have been funded for a total of US\$164.8 Million of IFAD financing.¹ Highly concessional loans were available until 2019. Since then, Lao PDR has been eligible to IFAD loans in blend terms by currency.
3. IFAD had a country office (ICO) in Vientiane until 2018. The ICO was headed by a country director who was outposted since 2013 and supported by a Vientiane-based country programme officer who was since then the single in-country IFAD staff. After the office closed under IFAD's Accelerated Decentralization Plan 2018-2019, the country director was based in IFAD's Mekong multicountry office (MCO)² in Hanoi, Vietnam, and IFAD's in-country presence was reduced to an IFAD consultant country coordinator.

Table 1
Snapshot of IFAD operations in Lao PDR

First IFAD-funded project	1979
Number of projects (1979-2023)	17 projects
On-going projects in 2024	PICSA and AFN II
Total amount of IFAD financing	US\$164.8 million
Counterpart Government funding	US\$42.3 million
Beneficiary contributions	US\$17.5 million
Co-financing amount (local)	US\$4.9 million
Co-financing amount (international)	US\$272.8 million
Total portfolio cost (since 1979)	US\$509 million
Lending terms	Highly concessional available until 2019 Blend terms by currency under the 2018 COSOP
Co-financiers	2011 COSOP: ADB, BMZ/GIZ, WFP, SDC, LuxDev. 2018 COSOP: ADB, GAFSP, WFP.
COSOPs	COSOP 2011-2015, extended to 2017. COSOP 2018-2024, extended to 2025

¹ IFAD website.

² The Hanoi MCO became a CD-led ICO in 2024. The CD is covering Lao PDR, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar.

	IFAD country office in Vientiane (2012 – 2018)
Country office	Multicountry office (Mekong subregional hub, Hanoi) since 2018
Country Directors/ Country Programme Managers	Seven since 2010: Stefania Dina (2010-2013); Benoit Thierry (2013 - 2016); Henning Pederson (2016-2017); Thomas Rath (2017- 2020); Kaushik Barua (2020-2021); Francisco Pichon (2021-2022); and Ambrosio Barros (since November 2022).

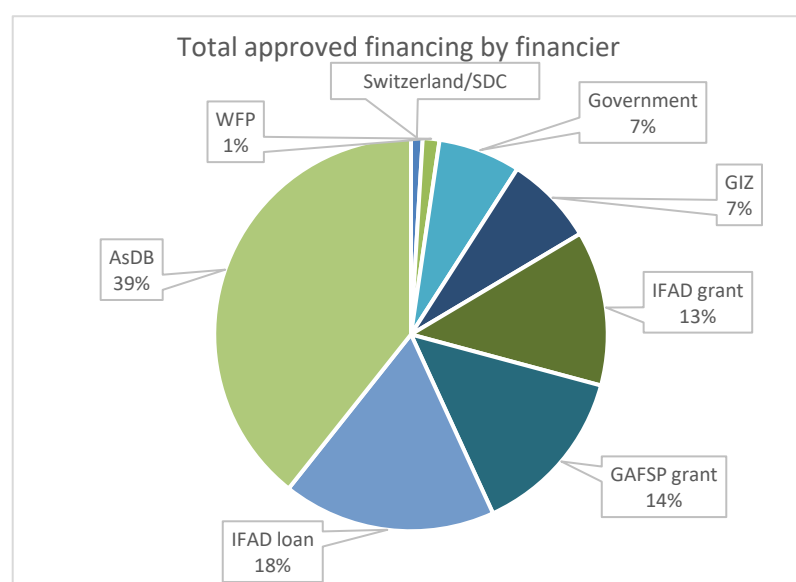
Source: IFAD Oracle Business Intelligence (OBI)

B. Objectives, methodology and process

4. **Objectives.** The main objectives of the CSPE were to: (i) assess the performance and results of the IFAD strategy and operations in Lao PDR, as outlined in the COSOPs, (ii) generate findings and recommendations for IFAD's upcoming country strategy and its partnership with the Government of Lao PDR, and (iii) identify lessons that could be shared on IFAD's presence and interventions in other countries with a smaller IFAD portfolio and a large development aid landscape.
5. **Scope.** The timeframe of the CSPE is 2011-2023. This period covers the previous COSOP, approved in 2011 and the current COSOP (2018-2024, extended to 2025). The portfolio reviewed in this evaluation includes the nine operations, which includes seven closed and two on-going operations as of end-2023 (Table 2). Total cost for these projects was US\$341.8 million of US\$118.1 were financed by IFAD (loans and grants).³ The remaining funding was provided from domestic and international sources (see figure 1 below)

Figure 1

Project financing according to funding source (since 2011)



Source: Oracle Business Intelligence (OBI) and Operational Results Management System (ORMS) data

6. **Operations portfolio.** The CSPE reviews these nine operations as a set of three groups of projects (Table 2 and annex IV): (i) RLIP, NRSLLDP and SNRMPEP were designed before the 2011 COSOP and closed in 2014-2015. They were reviewed in this evaluation under all evaluation criteria (annex I) to analyse trends in the portfolio. IOE evaluations (PPE and PCRV respectively) were available for RLIP and NRSLLDP. (ii) SSSJ and FNML were designed under the 2011 COSOP and closed in 2017 and 2019. The evaluation of FNML took place in 2023, just one year before the CSPE. (iii) SSFSNP – GAFSP (later renamed AFN I), PICSA and AFN II are

³ For FNML OBI data indicate the project cost approved by IFAD (US\$79.43 million). Co-financing by ADB was cancelled. Without ADB co-financing, the actual project cost of FNML was US\$18.86 million (FNML PCRV and Annex IV). For PICSA OBI data do not include ADB and GIZ cofinancing provided through parallel financing modality (US\$65 million).

grouped under the 2018 COSOP. AFN I⁴ closed in 2022, and PICSA passed mid-term at the end of 2023. AFN II, a project largely based on AFN I, only just began operations. Only the latter two projects were approved under the 2018 COSOP. IFAD approved NSLCP-RFSP and AFN I outside the formal scope of a COSOP. NSLCP-RFSP, a rural credit project, was cancelled at mid-term. The CSPE reviews it separately only under relevance.⁵

Table 2
CSPE operations portfolio

Nr	Project acronym (1)	Years	CSPE period	IOE and other main reports	Evaluation criteria
1	RLIP	2005-2014	Pre-2011 COSOP	PPE (2015)	All criteria
2	NRSLLDP	2006-2013	Pre-2011 COSOP	PCRVR (2016) PPE (ADB-IFAD joint evaluation) (2018)	All criteria
3	SNRMPEP	2008-2015	Pre-2011 COSOP	PCRVR (2018)	All criteria
4	SSSJ	2011-2017	2011 COSOP	PCRVR (2019)	All criteria
5	FNML	2013-2020	2011 COSOP	PPE (2023)	All criteria
6	NSLCP-RFSP	2016-2019	Interim period cancelled after MTR	(mid-term review)	Relevant criteria
7	SSFSNP - GAFSP (AFN I)	2016-2022	interim period, completed	PCRVR (2023) APR stocktaking on nutrition (2023)	All criteria
8	PICSA	2019-2025	2018 COSOP, mid-term	MTR available	All criteria
9	AFN II	2022-2030	2018 COSOP on-going	-	Relevance, efficiency, innovation, gender, ENRM-CCA

Full project names: 1: Rural Livelihoods Improvement Programme in Attapeu and Xayaboury.⁶ 2: Northern Region Sustainable Livelihoods through Livestock Development Project. 3: Sustainable Natural Resource Management and Productivity Enhancement Project. 4: Soum Son Seun Jai - Community-Based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme. 5: Southern Laos Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. 6: Northern Smallholder Livestock Commercialization Project: Rural Financial Services Programme. 7: Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project - Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP) Funds. 8: Partnerships for Irrigation and Commercialisation of Smallholder Agriculture Project. 9: Agriculture For Nutrition - Phase 2.

Source: Elaborated from ORMS data (see annex IV).

Acronyms in table: ADB: Asian Development Bank. APR: Asia-Pacific Region, IFAD. PCRVR: Project Completion Report Validation; PPE: Project Performance Evaluation; MTR: Mid-Term Review. ENRM-CCA: Environment and Natural Resources Management and Climate Change Adaptation.

7. **Evaluation of non-lending activities.** Regional grants in which Lao PDR was one of the focus countries were reviewed through grant management documents, deliverables and interviews with grantees. The CSPE looked at knowledge management, policy engagement and partnership building both through the projects and as specific non-lending activities, looking at how they supported the strategic thrust of the two COSOPs and innovation and scaling up, and whether they contributed to the institutions and policy dimension of rural poverty impact.
8. **Methodology.** The evaluation assessed the overall strategy pursued by IFAD, both implicitly and explicitly. It reviewed the decisions made in relation to the different elements of the country strategy and programme, the extent to which the operations portfolio and non-lending activities and synergies between them contributed to the achievement of the strategy, and the role played by the GoL and IFAD. The CSPE drew from the findings of the three project-level evaluations and

The acronym of Project 7 was SSFSNP-GAFSP. The CSPE employs the term AFN I, that is now broadly used in the IFAD project teams, for the purpose of simplification.

The NSLCP-RFSP project was cancelled at mid-term. At that stage only 5 per cent of the project budget had been disbursed (NSLCP-RFSP MTR).

The CSPE uses the Lao Statistics Bureau's standard spelling of province and district names (<https://www.lsb.gov.la/en/home/>). These may differ from IFAD documents.

other IOE reports in the country and assembled additional evidence, including project reports, documentation from cofinanciers and grant recipients, and corporate surveys. The role of cofinanciers in strategic decision-making was carefully paid attention to, particularly considering these generally outweighed IFAD in financial contributions.

9. The CSPE followed the updated 2022 IFAD Evaluation Manual⁷ and, based on a thorough desk review, produced an approach paper and a theory of change (ToC) (see Annex III). The approach paper presented the evaluation methodology in detail. Reconstituting the theory of change allowed the CSPE to identify three shared impact pathways that structured the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs – although there were differences in the activities financed under each project and in management modalities.⁸ This helped confirm the scope of the evaluation as a comparison between the two COSOPs and with the pre-2011 COSOP period, considering the rapidly changing country context. The ToC also helped define evaluation questions (see Annex II) and guided the analysis of effectiveness and impact. In summary the main evaluation questions were:
 - (a) What were the main reasons for the performance in the Lao PDR strategy and portfolio, and which were areas for improvement?
 - (b) What were the strategic and operational changes under the 2018 COSOP and to what extent did they help to improve project performance?
 - (c) To what extent was IFAD able to enhance its comparative advantage and value-added offering, with greater focus on knowledge management, innovation and scaling up?
 - (d) What are the lessons and recommendations that should inform preparation of the new COSOP in 2025?
10. The two COSOPs had contrasted statements of goals and objectives, and the nine projects under the CSPE review period each partly differed in their activities and management approaches. The CSPE analysed trends and decisions in this series of individual projects, making a distinction between differences that reflected the strategy defined under each COSOP and those that reflected individual project design options.
11. **Process.** IOE finalized the approach paper in April 2024 and shared it with GoL and the IFAD country team. Virtual interviews were then conducted over the May-June period with 53 stakeholders including IFAD staff, development partners, consultants and grantees. In addition, the CSPE conducted an online e-survey with international stakeholders, who provided feedback on IFAD's visibility and contribution from 31 respondents (see annex VII.1). Interviews with grant recipient organizations were useful given the large body of regional grants.
12. A country visit took place from July 1 to July 19, 2024. During this visit, interviews were conducted with government representatives, IFAD partners, other development partners and the teams of the two on-going projects. The CSPE team visited 15 project villages in six districts of four provinces in the Northern region.⁹ The field teams also interviewed six beneficiary enterprises. Technical discussions were held with the provincial agriculture and forestry offices (PAFOs) as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) with the various district-level government departments having participated in the two projects. Scoring cards from 92 local

⁷ IOE. 2022. Evaluation Manual, Third Version.

⁸ The main pathways identified in the CSPE theory of change were (i) adoption of climate-smart technologies and sustainable natural resource management practices; (ii) community-driven nutrition interventions and investments into nutrition-sensitive crops; and (iii) increased market production and value for crop and livestock. Basic assumptions include complementarity of interventions supported by different development partners; adequate government capacities for programme implementation; sufficient labour for agricultural market production; physical access to remote areas; and climate resilient infrastructure to mitigate extreme weather events.

⁹ Refer to annex VI.4 for list and description of villages visited by the CSPE.

government participants in province and district level meetings were collected and analysed (Annex VIII-2). In the villages, the CSPE team held FGDs with women and men beneficiaries and with village committee members. Direct observation of project activities was complemented with GIS mapping methods, these being supported by the phone application Mergin Maps (see Annex VI-4).

13. IOE's Director joined the country visit, including field work in one district. He conducted interviews with the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), and with United Nations (UN) organizations in Vientiane.¹⁰
14. Preliminary findings were shared at a wrap-up meeting at the end of the country visit on July 18, 2024. This meeting was hosted by the Department of Planning and Cooperation (DOPC) at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Participants included DOPC representatives, current and previous national project coordinators from MAF, representatives from other ministries and IFAD's country team. Participants provided valuable feedback during and after this meeting, which is reflected in the CSPE report. The draft report underwent IOE peer review before being shared with Government and IFAD Management for comments. After their integration, IOE presented the report at a national workshop, which allowed in-country stakeholders to provide direct feedback on the conclusions and recommendations.
15. **Limitations.** The CSPE noted the following limitations. **First**, the CSPE observed a loss of institutional memory within IFAD about design of the COSOPs and about the first four projects under review. Interviews with several country directors and IFAD consultants allowed reconstitution of the timeline of decisions in lending and non-lending and attention was paid throughout the CSPE to identifying which elements in the COSOP had strategic implications. **Second**, there was a strong preference for in-person meetings expressed by government stakeholders. On-line interviews and the e-survey were primarily used to gather feedback from international stakeholders. **Third**, given the limited time, the country visit focused on provinces in the North region. Since the CSPE team included the national consultants that recently conducted the PPE of FNML, it was possible to recollect first-hand evidence from the South. To maximise coverage of villages in the North, the CSPE team divided into two sub-teams, each visiting different provinces in different climate zones. **Fourth**, the CSPE team provided tiered criteria for the selection of villages for field visits, aiming at a diversified sample of districts and villages that also included remote villages. Based on a set of criteria (IFAD project participation, poverty level, remoteness and, ethnicity) that the CSPE team provided, the districts proposed villages for visits.¹¹ To compensate for biases, information gained from village discussions was triangulated with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) datasets and with outreach data. In two cases of poor weather, interviews were conducted remotely, or the inaccessible village was replaced with one meeting the same criteria.

¹⁰ Interviews were held with the UN country team, the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The villages had not been visited during earlier IFAD missions. At least three of the seven villages displayed "model village" boards. Information on model village status was not available for the other villages.

Key points

- This is the first country strategy and programme evaluation for Lao PDR. It covers the previous COSOP (2011-2015) and the current one (2018-2024).
- The review covers a portfolio of nine projects over that period, two of which were ongoing at the time of this CSPE. It pays attention to the regional grants that funded non-lending activities.
- A thorough desk review and a large set of interviews with national and international stakeholders allowed reconstruction of changes and trends over this review period.
- All information was triangulated from at least two different sources. This is specifically the case for findings from the village visits.

II. Country context and IFAD's strategy and operations**A. Country context**

16. **Economic situation.** Lao PDR, or Laos, has been a lower-middle income country since 2011.¹² Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita grew rapidly during the 2012-2018 period, driven by hydropower, mining and tourism. Laos is a country without any coastline, or "land-linked" country, sharing borders with China, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. Its population trend stabilized in 2022, estimated at 7.5 million people and growing at only 1.4 per cent per year.¹³ The majority of the population, 62.4 per cent, remained rural in 2022. Employment in agriculture decreased from 70 to 60 per cent between 2007 and 2018. Migration, predominantly to Thailand, became an increasingly widespread diversification strategy for part of the rural population.¹⁴
17. **Post-COVID 19 financial and economic crisis.** In 2013, GoL anticipated its exit from the UN least developed country status in 2020. This target was postponed as GDP per capita fell from US\$2,549 in 2019 to US\$2,054 in 2022 due to restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of mid-2024, the country was facing high inflation¹⁵ and a fuel and food crisis, and suffered from high indebtedness (89 per cent of GDP in 2021).¹⁶ The share of GDP value added from agriculture, forestry and fishing fell from 20.8 per cent in 2011 to 14.9 per cent in 2022.¹⁷
18. **Diversity of rural areas and population.** Laos is a multiethnic country with various ethnic mixes and agricultural potentialities in the North, South and Centre regions.¹⁸ The Government recognizes various ethnic groups, organizing them in four ethnolinguistic groups; the Lao-Tai are the majority, while the Mon-Khmer, the Hmong-Mien and Chine-Tibet groups, that form the majority of the population in the North and South, have strong distinct cultural identities.¹⁹ There is increasing fluency in Lao among the younger generation.

Poverty and rural development issues

19. **Poverty prevalence.** Poverty continued to decline over the period after having halved during the 1990s and 2000s, but inequality increased. The national-level Gini index reached 38.8 in 2018.²⁰ Rural poverty remained significant, with an overall prevalence of 23.8 per cent in 2018; rural poverty incidence in the North, South and Central provinces was respectively 27.0, 19.9 and 25.0 per cent. The

¹² This is under the World Bank definition of economic development country levels.

¹³ World Bank Group Open Data.

¹⁴ IOM. 2023. Migration in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: A Country Profile 2023.

¹⁵ The Bank of Lao PDR reported that inflation was at 23 per cent in 2022, 31.2 per cent in 2023, and 26.1 per cent in 2024 based on the January-July period (<https://www.bol.gov.la/en/inflation>).

¹⁶ In purchasing power parity, GDP per capita has stagnated since 2019 at US\$7,800.

¹⁷ World Bank Group open data.

¹⁸ The Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) defines which region each province is part of.

¹⁹ IFAD and AIPP. 2012. Country Technical Note on Indigenous Peoples' Issues: Lao PDR.

²⁰ World Bank Group. Open Data.

lagging provinces have been catching up but within the provinces, upland areas and remote districts and villages remained significantly poorer.²¹

20. **Land uses.** Laos is a resource rich-country. The country's population density was only slightly above 30 inhabitants per square kilometre in 2021, the lowest in the Mekong subregion.²² Extractive industries and agricultural concessions have been competing with forest conservation uses and smallholder agriculture. Lao PDR increasingly exports agricultural commodities and livestock to its neighbouring countries, generally through international contracts.²³
21. **Smallholder agriculture.** Outside of agricultural concessions, agriculture is fully based on smallholders. Around two thirds of the estimated 644,100 farming households farmed less than 3 Hectares (Ha) of land in 2020.²⁴ Most of them had mixed land uses with cropping, livestock, fish culture, and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Smallholders grow a diversity of crops that are partly or fully for sale, except for rice that smallholders grow primarily for their self-consumption. Cropping systems evolved rapidly over recent decades but retained a combination of paddy fields and upland cultivation of rice and cash crops. Smallholders' animal raising practices also rapidly evolved as growing fodder grass became more common.
22. **Gender and youth.** Women accounted for 50 per cent of agricultural labour in 2021.²⁵ In the Lao-Tai ethnic group, rural women manage local sales of farm produce. There are otherwise strong cultural gender norms. These influence women and girls' nutrition and health in all ethnic groups including the Lao-Tai majority. Overall, only 47.7 per cent of adult women had completed primary school in 2021, compared to 67.4 per cent of adult men.²⁶ Girls' access to school remains lower than boys' in several non-Lao Tao ethnic groups and women of all ages in non-Lao-Tai groups retained lower command of the Lao language. The country also has a strikingly high rate of early marriage and adolescent pregnancies,²⁷ which contributes to the gender gap.
23. **Food security and nutrition.** The rural population faces food and nutrition insecurity challenges. In 2017, 33 per cent of Lao children under the age of five experienced stunting, while 21 per cent were underweight.²⁸ The southern provinces recorded the highest rates of acute malnutrition, or wasting, for children under five.²⁹ Among contributing factors, the lack of dietary diversity and protein intake of young children and their mothers remained a significant concern.³⁰
24. **Vulnerability to climate change impact.** Upland areas and their valleys are increasingly exposed to floods, storms, landslides, drought and heat waves. Upcoming threats from climate change and vulnerabilities among the rural population are highly variable depending on livelihood systems.³¹ Secure access to

²¹ World Bank Group. 2020. Lao PDR Poverty Assessment: Catching Up and Falling behind, and Government of Laos 2021 and 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSED). These figures are based on the 2018-2019 Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS). In this survey, the national poverty line is estimated at approximately US\$1.1 a day or US\$2.4 a day in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms (2011 basis).

²² World Bank Group open data

²³ World Bank Group. 2022. Developing the Agribusiness Potential in the Laos-China Railway Corridor: Opportunities and Challenges.

²⁴ LSB. 2021. Third Lao Census of Agriculture 2019/2020.

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ World Bank Group open data.

²⁷ Epprecht et al. 2018. Socio-economic Atlas of the Lao PDR - Patterns and Trends from 2005 to 2015.

²⁸ Merid Mehari Woldemariam et al. 2024. Women in low- and middle- income countries receive antenatal care at health institutions, yet not delivered there: a multilevel analysis of 2016-2021.

<https://tropmedhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s41182-023-00532-w#> accessed 28/11/2023.

²⁹ Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021a. National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN) 2021-2025.

³⁰ LSB and World Bank. 2020. Poverty Profile in Lao PDR. Poverty Report from the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey 2018-2019.

³¹ MoNRE and WFP. 2016.

agricultural land and diversification of livelihoods are recognized to be primary drivers of resilience among rural households.

Policy framework

25. **Overall and sector policy framework.** Lao PDR has a one-party governance system. The five-year national socioeconomic development plans (NSED) define priorities and targets.³² The four pillars of the longer-term strategy of the agriculture, forestry and rural development sector recognize the role of smallholder agriculture and gives equal weight to food production and commercial production for export, while highlighting the importance of environmental protection and keeping attention on rural development and poverty reduction.³³ The sector's five-year plans provide operational direction for provinces and districts under MAF. They support the establishment of formal agricultural production groups (APGs) and designation of model farmers. The 2024 law on cooperatives confirmed that APGs are an intermediary step towards the creation of farmer cooperatives.³⁴ Formal rural finance groups are to be established as distinct from APGs.³⁵
26. **Poverty reduction.** Poverty eradication is a national priority that cut across sectors throughout the CSPE review period. The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES), first issued in 2004, called for continued focus on poorer districts in the North and South where diversified ethnic groups live.³⁶ Poverty eradication criteria were redefined in the 2013 NGPES, and more recently in 2017 with the issuance of Decree 348 "on the criteria for poverty graduation and development" that provided a detailed definition of households, villages and districts listed as poor.³⁷ The 9th NSED incorporates the poverty eradication strategy and links it to the Sam Sang devolution policy. Under this policy formalized in 2016, the districts have become implementation units for national policies across all government sectors and villages are basic development units, while the provincial level retained strategy-level responsibilities.
27. **Nutrition improvement.** Improving nutrition became a national priority in 2008 when a legally binding national nutrition policy was introduced, parallel to the NGPES. In 2016, the national nutrition strategy to 2025, consistent with the UN global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, defined a multisectoral convergence approach among the health, agriculture and education & sports sectors.³⁸ The second action plan (2021-2025) was under implementation as of 2024.³⁹
28. **Climate change adaptation.** National policies have so far prioritized disaster risk reduction and awareness over other dimensions of climate change adaptation. A single national climate change action plan (2013-2020) was issued. The Plan of Action for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in Agriculture, designed as a focused effort over the 2014-2016 period, recommended adjustments in agricultural extension and research.⁴⁰

³² The 7th, 8th and 9th NSEDs were successively under implementation during the period covered by the CSPE. They covered respectively the 2011-2015, 2016-2020 and 2021-2025 periods.

MAF. 2015. Agricultural Development Strategy and Vision to 2030. <http://maf.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/MDS-2025-and-Vision-to-2030-Eng.pdf> 2015-2030 strategy. The four pillars of the strategy are entitled: Foods and Nutrition, Commercialization, Climate Change Adaptation, and Rural Development.

<https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/>. After the 2010 decree on cooperatives, only a few cooperatives were established for commodities such as coffee. Development partners such as ILO have now boosted cooperative development initiatives <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/raising-awareness-cooperative-model-among-coffee-farmers-lao-pdr>

³⁵ 2020 decree on groups and cooperatives.

³⁶ Government of Lao PDR 2013. National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy.

³⁷ Government of Lao PDR. 2017. Decree 348 on the Criteria for Poverty Graduation and Development.

³⁸ In the institutional approach to nutrition convergence, the health sector is responsible for overall coordination and access to drinking water and sanitation. The education sector is responsible for school meals, school gardens and the introduction of nutrition in the school curriculum. The agriculture sector is responsible for nutrition-oriented agriculture. The Deputy Prime Minister chairs the National Committee for Nutrition (NPAN 2021, *ibid.*).

³⁹ SUN. 2022. 2022 Scaling Up Nutrition Country Profile: Lao PDR.

⁴⁰ UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2021. Disaster Risk Reduction in Lao PDR: Status Report 2019 in Lao PDR. The plan of action for agriculture is available at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-at540e.pdf>.

29. **Gender.** The national gender equality policy was defined under the 2030 Vision, with successive five-year plans of action since 2006.⁴¹ The policy was confirmed through issuance of the 2019 Law on gender equality. Targets for opportunities and women's rights were included in the current 9th NSEDP. This NSEDP gave a recognized role and budget to the Lao Women's Union, one of the country's three mass organizations.

Development cooperation

30. Net ODA in Lao PDR accounted for 3.2 per cent of the gross national income in 2021.⁴² In 2019, 159 technical cooperation and development projects were on-going in the field of agriculture and food security.⁴³
31. **Coordination among development partners.** The successive Vientiane declarations have requested enhanced coordination between development partners in all sectors.⁴⁴ A round table process is in place under MPI, which started prior to the CSPE period. The Sector Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development (SWG-ARD) is one of the working groups that form the roundtable process and is under the leadership of MAF. The Vientiane declaration lists civil society and the private sector as development partners.⁴⁵ International non-government organizations (INGOs) and Lao civil society organizations (CSOs) have been implementation entities in European Union (EU) and bilateral ODA.⁴⁶
32. IFAD is a signatory to the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF, 2022-2026) in relation to three strategic priorities, prosperity and environment, climate change and resilience.⁴⁷ Of the three UN Rome-based agencies (RBA), IFAD is the only that does not have a resident mission in Laos.
33. In addition to ODA, the country is a recipient of investments from China, Vietnam and Thailand in the form of both development aid and foreign direct investment. It also benefits from preferential tariff policies for exports to the three countries. China is active in South-south and triangular cooperation (SSTC) with Laos, for example in the field of poverty reduction policies.⁴⁸

B. IFAD's strategy and operations for the CSPE period

IFAD's evolving strategy

34. The 2011 COSOP period covered the five years of the 7th NSEDP and followed the 2006-2010 COSOP.⁴⁹ The first two years of the 8th NSEDP (2016 and 2017) were an interim period without a formally approved extension of the 2011 COSOP.⁵⁰ The 2018 COSOP was designed for a seven-year period (2018-2024) and was extended to end 2025 during which the CSPE took place.
35. **Under the 2011 COSOP,** the goal of the IFAD programme was to "ensure that poor rural people have secure and sustainable access to food and economic livelihoods" (Table 3). The strategy included three objectives. The first one was

⁴¹ Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2021c. The Fourth-Five Year National Plan of Action on Gender Equality (2021-2025).

World Bank open data. Given the increasing gross national income, the value of ODA increased by 50 per cent between 2011 and 2021.

⁴³ Centre for Development and Environment (CDE). 2019.

⁴⁴ The first Vientiane declaration was issued in 2006, the second one in 2015 (Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2015. Vientiane Declaration on Partnership for Effective Development Aid).

⁴⁵ Lao People's Democratic Republic. 2015.

⁴⁶ CDE 2019, *ibid*.

⁴⁷ United Nations 2021. Lao-PDR United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026.

⁴⁸ See for example Laotian times 2020: <https://laotiantimes.com/2020/10/15/china-announces-more-assistance-to-laos-during-official-visit/>

⁴⁹ 2011 COSOP.

⁵⁰ The 2011 COSOP completion review (IFAD 2017) that "in January 2016 the COSOP was extended for another year to cover the 2016-18 investment cycle but the CSPE did not obtain this document. A consultation workshop had taken place in December 2015 for the design of a 2016-2020 COSOP (IFAD 2015. 2015. IFAD-Laos Annual Country Portfolio Review. Consultation for Designing the New COSOP). The actual design of the COSOP was delayed to 2018. The 2011 COSOP completion review stated in 2017 that "in January 2016 the COSOP was extended for another year to cover the 2016-18 investment cycle". The CSPE identified absence of a formal IFAD document approving that extension.

centred on land and natural resources, the second on support services and farming systems, the third on access to markets. The COSOP's targeting approach had a relative focus on districts with high poverty rates and was to reach out to a diversified ethnic population. Youth was a specific target group. The COSOP was structured around three areas that it identified as IFAD's comparative advantage: its targeting capacity, experience in participatory approaches to livelihood improvement, and its proactive approach to institutional partnerships.⁵¹

36. **The 2011 COSOP completion review** highlighted how IFAD has been active in the fields of policy dialogue, knowledge management and partnership building. It recommended putting farmer groups at the core of IFAD's strategy for community-based management and market access to improve effectiveness. It also indicated a need for differentiated approaches between pre-market villages and market-ready villages.⁵²
37. **The 2018 COSOP** explicitly referred to smallholders as a target group. It called for more stringent focus on areas with higher poverty incidence. It announced a shift from a gender mainstreaming approach to a women empowerment strategy. These differences with the 2011 COSOP were reflected in the COSOP's goal, "rural transformation for resilient livelihoods among men and women" (Table 3). The two strategic objectives respectively related to resilience, food security and nutrition, and to market access and rural finance. Youth continued to be a target group.

Table 3
COSOPs 2011-2015 and 2018-2024

	COSOP 2011- 2015	COSOP 2018 – 2024 (2025)
<i>Goal</i>	Ensure that poor rural people have secure and sustainable access to food and economic livelihoods.	Contribute to rural transformation by building resilient livelihoods among women and men in rural Lao People's Democratic Republic.
<i>Strategic Objectives (SO)</i>	SO1: Community-based access to and management of land and natural resources are improved. SO2: Access to advisory services and inputs for sustainable, adaptive and integrated farming systems is improved. SO3: Access to markets for selected products is improved.	SO1: Smallholders have enhanced resilience to natural shocks and improved food security and nutrition. SO2: Smallholders have enhanced access to financial services and markets.
<i>Targeting Approach</i>	Geographical targeting (district poverty ratios). Self-targeting for specific activities. Geographically organized farmer organizations.	Provinces and districts with high poverty rates and poor nutritional status.
<i>Target Groups</i>	Ethnically diverse poor households in rural areas, with two subgroups: (i) highly vulnerable food-insecure households with limited or no access to markets; and (ii) poor households that are moderately food insecure, have a greater potential to access markets. The youth are a target group.	Poor women and men, youth and ethnic minorities, with a strict poverty and gender focus (B- and C groups). IFAD's Rural Youth action plan.
<i>Gender equality and women's empowerment</i>	Gender mainstreaming through gender sensitive action plans and raising gender awareness among staff and partners.	Empowering women in terms of decision-making in the household, participation in processes and institutions that affect their lives and equal access to assets, land, education, nutrition and health. Piloting the Household Methodology.

Source: 2011 and 2018 COSOP documents.

The terms of the 2011 COSOP were (i) fully utilizing IFAD's capacity to target poor and vulnerable groups in rural areas; (ii) improving the livelihood of beneficiaries using a participatory approach; and (iii) enhancing leverage by building responsive institutional partnerships with other donors and maintaining close partnerships with national and subnational government.

IFAD 2017. Lao PDR completion review. Altogether the 2011 COSOP review formulated 17 recommendations in the areas of project design, project implementation and COSOP management.

38. **Investments over the evaluation period.** The portfolio implemented four to five projects in parallel before 2020, and since then, two. Rural infrastructure, agricultural production and access to markets were three main areas of investment under both COSOPs. Investments into rural finance and natural resource management did not continue under the 2018 COSOP. IFAD's OBI data shows how the diversity of investment areas grew during the 2011 COSOP and was reduced under the 2018 COSOP. This trend was accompanied by a growing share of investment into nutrition and market access (Annex VI-1).
39. **Implementation approaches.** The Coherence section explains how the first 2011 COSOP project adopted a village-based project design that was thereafter replicated in all subsequent projects, while the three pre-2011 COSOP projects had each tested a contrasted approach. Across the reviewed portfolio of nine projects, each project differed in the detailed activities that were supported and in implementation modalities (Table 4). Specifically, rural credit was the sole activity in one project, one element in the design of other projects until FNML. Since 2016, the approach has shifted to group support in line with government policy, beginning with the FNLM Project, to enhance collective planning, decision-making, and sales.
40. **Project areas.** The portfolio took place in both the North and South regions, as well as the northernmost and southernmost provinces of the Central region (Xiengkhuang and Savannakhet). Five projects were located in the North, four in the South, and the remaining two both in the North and South (Table 4). Each project covered two to six provinces. The selection of districts is analysed under relevance (targeting strategy).

Table 4

Project areas and selected activities

Nr	Project acronym (1)	Project area	Selected new activities	Examples of continuing activities
1	RLIP	North and South (2 provinces)	Village banks Homegardens	Community infrastructure Agricultural production groups
2	NRSLLDP	North (1) (5 provinces)	Livestock production groups	District technical service centre
3	SNRMPEP	South (2) (5 provinces)	Land use planning Enterprise contracts	Animal health services
4	SSSJ	North (2 provinces)	Nutrition Farmer field schools	Small infrastructure
5	FNML	South (3 provinces)	Matching grants to farmer groups and enterprises Homegarden grants CCA training PAR	All SSSJ activities
6	NSLCP-RFSP	North (1) (3 provinces)	National refinancing facility	Animal health services
7	AFN I	North (1) (4 provinces)	Farmer nutrition schools	Matching grants
8	PICSA	North (1) (4 provinces)	Enterprise contracts for staple crops School gardens	Matching grants
9	AFN II	2022-2030 North (1) and South (6 provinces)	NFTP-based nutrition and management	All AFN I activities

Source: project district project activity databases reconstituted by the CSPE (annex VI-2). Information was assembled from the PCRs. Notes: (1) including Xiengkhuang in the Central region. (2) including Savannakhet in the Central region.

Acronyms: CCA: climate change adaptation; PAR: Participatory Action Research.

41. **Regional grants with a focus on Laos.** The initial desk review identified 39 grants that listed Lao PDR as a target country during the evaluation period. Three grants are currently under implementation, and another closed in 2023. The largest group of five regional grants (totalling US\$23.4 million) went to the Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development between 2013 and 2020 on a

variety of platforms, primarily the Medium-Term Cooperation Programme with Farmers' Organisations in Asia and the Pacific Region (MTCP) which focused on supporting and expanding farmers organizations in Laos and the greater region.⁵³ The Lao Farmer Network (LFN), now Lao Farmer Association (LFA) was the main participant from Laos.⁵⁴ One country specific grant to the MAF focused on building the institutional capacity to perform the second Lao Census on Agriculture and increase the availability of data in the country. Other relevant grants included the provision of studies on inclusive Business Models, pro-poor Value Chains and Forage-based Livestock Feeding Systems.

42. **Other non-lending activities.** (i) **Policy engagement.** The 2018 COSOP explained how IFAD would continue to participate in the activities of the SWG-ARD. It proposed five focus areas for policy dialogue: CCA, nutrition, pro-poor value chain development, rural finance, and access to land by the poor. Previously, the 2011 COSOP proposed the creation of a policy working group to provide feedback on on-going policies and facilitate scaling up.⁵⁵ (ii) **Knowledge management (KM).** The 2018 COSOP foresaw that each project would define a KM strategy based on its M&E activities and define linkages with partners. It also proposed connecting knowledge management with IFAD's SSTC activities at subregional scale.

Financing modalities

43. **Loan management and lending terms.** IFAD loans were financed under IFAD's performance-based allocation system (PBAS). Allocations remained stable over the review period, between US\$10.0 million and US\$13.2 million for each three-year cycle. Under IFAD12 (2022-2024), the base scenario allocated US\$ 8.7 million to Lao PDR, the management option increased this amount to US\$13.2 million. IFAD financing totalled US\$118.1 million, of which US\$64.5 million were loans. Projects were also funded through grants: a debt sustainability (DSF) grant (RLIP), an IFAD grant (RLIP) and an Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) grant (FNML).
44. Altogether five of the reviewed projects mobilized an IFAD loan, as project financing was a mix of IFAD loan and IFAD grant in the first project (RLIP), an IFAD loan only in three projects (NRSLLDP, NSLCP-RFSP and PICSA), and IFAD or GAFSP grant(s) in four projects (SNRMPEP, SSSJ, FNML and AFN I). IFAD financing per project was around US\$20 million in three projects (RLIP, PICSA and AFN II) and between US\$10 and 15 million in four projects (SNRMPEP, SSSJ, FNML, NSLDP-RFPS). It was only US\$3 million in NRSLLDP as ADB was the main financier, and absent in AFN I, which was fully financed from GAFSP.
45. At the end of the review period, two approaches to project financing were present in the 2018 COSOP projects: PICSA was fully financed from an IFAD loan, and the first project to which IFAD's blend term loans by currency loan terms applied given the country's economic development status. AFN II was financed with a GAFSP grant that softened the terms of the IFAD loan.⁵⁶ IFAD's first attempt to access GAFSP has taken place early on during the 2011 COSOP and had been unsuccessful.⁵⁷
46. **International cofinancing.** All nine projects were co-financed by international partners that provided loans and/or grants. ADB cofinanced NRSLLDP, SNRMPEP, NSLDP-RFPS and PICSA, totalling US\$144.8 million over the period. Two projects (NSLCP-RFSP and PICSA) took place as parallel operations with ADB. WFP

Activities under these grants were programmed under the Medium-Term Cooperation Programme with Farmers' Organisations in Asia and the Pacific Region (MTCP-2) and other platforms.

⁵⁴ The LFN was created in 2014 (<https://laofarmers.net>).

⁵⁵ The 2011 COSOP did not foresee that IFAD would become co-chair of the SWG-ARD in 2012.

⁵⁶ The GASFP fund has been active since 2010. The fund's strategy prioritizes joint initiatives for nutrition, agricultural development and value chain development (www.gapfsp.org).

⁵⁷ Interviews with country directors. IFAD and WFP jointly applied to GAFSP for AFN I and AFN II.

cofinanced RLIP and SSSJ for a total of US\$5.1 million. Germany's Federal Ministry for Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the German Technical Cooperation (GIZ) and the Swiss Agency for Development of Cooperation (SDC) cofinanced RLIP & SSSJ and NRSLLDP respectively. Outside of project budgets, cofinancing partners also provided grants dedicated to technical assistance (TA).⁵⁸ An international chief technical assistant consultant was present in all nine projects except for the cancelled NSLCP-RFSP. It was funded by a cofinancing partner starting from SSSJ.⁵⁹ PICSA was the first project in which the international CTA was funded by IFAD.⁶⁰ Cofinancing partners also provided technical assistance other than the CTA through parallel projects support by GIZ (RLIP and SNRMPEP), ADB (as post-project TA on small infrastructure sustainability), and LuxDev (on village development funds).

Cooperating partners

47. **Institutional framework.** MoF was IFAD's borrower and national counterpart. MAF was IFAD's direct counterpart starting from the second project of the evaluation period. Before that, MPI exercised oversight of IFAD projects, including the first project of the reviewed period, RLIP. Two subcomponents of the rural finance project, NSLCP-RFSP, were to be implemented through the Bank of Laos which was under management of MAF. Each project had a different institutional setting in terms of participating departments within MAF, and distribution of project offices (national, regional, provincial and/or district levels). The district project management offices cooperated with the government committees and their line departments on all project activities. Technical departments succeeded in accessing the position of national project coordinator in the three projects cofinanced with ADB.⁶¹
48. **Main national project stakeholders.** The 2018 COSOP expected the Lao Women's Union (LWU) and LFA, then LFN, to become key partners. It also sought to strengthen farmers organizations to access markets, while envisioning continued partnership with the National Agriculture and Forestry Institute (NAFRI) and the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) on the scaling up and institutionalization of integrated farming systems and extension methodologies. The most recent project, AFN II, was the first to call for proposals from CSOs, in the fields of climate smart agriculture, business and financial literacy, and youth involvement.
49. Three main events influenced the country programme: (i) definition by GoL of IFAD projects as sector projects under MAF, (ii) the Sam Sang devolution policy to district level and (iii) the rising importance of the national nutrition strategy, integrated into the NSEDP. The most important decision on IFAD's part was the reduction of its country presence. The Relevance and Non-lending sections identify other IFAD decisions that strongly influenced operations, but these took place at operational level, outside the scope of the strategy described in the 2018 COSOP document.⁶² The introduction of the nutrition-sensitive agriculture approach that has been at the core of the 2018 COSOP projects started at the beginning of the review period. So was the growing role of farmer groups, called agricultural

⁵⁸ International cofinancing decisions took place at various stages of the projects. LuxDev stepped in to cofinance SSSJ through a TA at mid-term. ADB's cofinancing of FNML was cancelled after project approval by IFAD. GIZ stepped out of FNML during implementation.

The SSSJ international CTA arrived at mid-term and was funded by LuxDev. The FNML CTA was replaced by a national CTA during the project (FNML PCR). AFN I and AFN II CTAs were international CTAs funded by WFP.

⁶⁰ Project design report and interviews.

⁶¹ The technical departments under MAF that oversaw the projects were the livestock department for NRSLLDP and the cancelled rural credit project, the irrigation department for PICSA (CSPE institutional framework analysis based on the IOE reports).

⁶² These include (i) the shift from policy dialogue under the 2011 COSOP to engagement into the operational implementation of the national policies during the 2018 COSOP, (ii) discontinuation of support to rural financial services starting from AFN I and (iii) a reduction in the number of programme partners.

production groups (APG) in the country programme. These changes are further explored in the following chapters.

Key points

- Laos became a lower-middle income country in 2011. It started to suffer from an economic and indebtedness crisis in 2022, that is unresolved to date.
- The national poverty eradication policy has long focused on the more remote and/or upland districts where diversified ethnic groups live.
- The national agricultural strategy recognizes the role of smallholders. It supports devolution of operational government responsibilities to the district level. Improving nutrition among the rural population is a national priority.
- IFAD financing of the portfolio was comprised of grants and loans. IFAD called for grants from international partners and GAFSP. A broad number of regional grants supported non-lending activities, with a focus on farmer organizations.
- IFAD reduced its presence in the country after 2015. The country office was formally closed in 2018, one consultant coordinator remaining present in country.
- The 2011 and 2018 COSOPs had contrasted statements of goals and strategic objectives, the 2018 COSOP highlighting support to nutrition security and value chain development while reconfirming that the poorest districts were targeted.
- IFAD's portfolio in Lao PDR was streamlined under the 2018 COSOP. Rural finance and natural resource management were two discontinued activities. Support to small infrastructure, farmer groups and market access took place throughout the evaluation period.

III. Performance and rural poverty impact of the country programme and strategy

A. Relevance

50. This criterion assesses the adequacy of IFAD strategies and interventions in line with: (i) the Government's development strategy and policies, (ii) IFAD's global strategy and (iii) the priorities and needs of beneficiaries. It also analyses the quality and targeting approaches in projects.

Alignment with national policies and strategies

51. IFAD's country strategy was adequately aligned with key national priorities, including the NSEDP and NGPES, as highlighted in the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs. This was a compulsory requirement for all development partners. The focus on supporting projects in poor areas emphasized a balanced approach to agricultural development and poverty reduction, reflected in the 2018 COSOP's theory of change. IFAD's strategy also contributed to all components of the national agricultural sector plan, promoting smallholder agriculture for both self-sufficiency and market-oriented production, while addressing environmental and poverty concerns. This alignment with the Agricultural Strategy to 2025 and Vision to 2030 under MAF was confirmed by 83 per cent of e-survey respondents, who identified smallholder agriculture as the top area where IFAD adapted to changing priorities, followed by nutrition and value chain development. Similarly, IFAD's 2021 corporate stakeholder survey noted strong alignment with GoL's poverty strategy.
52. **IFAD's strategies and mainstreaming themes added value to the implementation of national policies.** In the e-survey, 84 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that IFAD's approach seemed well-aligned with Lao PDR's development needs. IFAD supported farmer groups at village level in all nine projects, and LFA at national level. At that time, a shift in MAF policies from supporting individual model farmers and demonstrations to supporting farmer groups was taking place gradually, as highlighted in interviews, and became confirmed through a 2020 decree.⁶³ Stressing the importance of women empowerment and of giving the youth a stronger role added focus to the more general mandate of the country's mass organizations, the Lao Women Union and the Lao Youth Union. Access to rural credit was included in the two COSOP strategies and was pursued in project design until the end of the 2016-2017 interim period.
53. **Support to nutrition under the 2011 COSOP was timely vis-a-vis the national policy framework.** Improving nutritional balance in poor households, especially for women and children was a sub-objective in the 2011 COSOP strategy, that called for implementation starting from its first project, SSSJ.⁶⁴ This was before IFAD issued its first global Nutrition Action Plan (2016). The connection with the National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (NNSPA) and its entry point, behaviour change among women, was established in the 2018 COSOP.
54. **Cofinancing with development partners responded to the national policy for aid effectiveness** (Vientiane declaration). IFAD's partnerships with ADB and WFP during the previous and current COSOPs had been initiated before 2011. The 2011 and 2018 COSOPs reconfirmed this partnership strategy.
- Relevance of the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs**
55. **IFAD's COSOP documents evolved in line with its corporate priorities, such as gender, ENRM/CCA and nutrition, and policies.** The two COSOPs (2011, 2018) covering the review period were different in their presentation and in how they were developed. The 2011 COSOP was prepared based on extensive

⁶³ Government of Lao PDR 2020. Decree 606/GoL on Groups and Cooperatives.

⁶⁴ This followed issuance of the national nutrition strategy in 2008 but the 2011 COSOP did not refer to that policy.

stakeholder consultations, preparatory studies and a field mission.⁶⁵ This was at the time when IFAD had a country programme manager in Vientiane (until 2015). The process for preparing the following COSOP was initiated in 2015, but then restarted in May 2017, with participation of IFAD's technical specialists. Due to the time lapse, the 2011 COSOP had to be extended (in January 2016), to cover the 2016-2018 investment cycle when two projects were designed (NSLCP-RFSP and AFN I). The 2018 COSOP document mainly covers the continuation of the previous projects (FNML, AFN I, NLSCP) as well as the design of the new PICSA project (as an annex).

56. COSOP strategic objectives moved away from community-based management of land and natural resources (2011 COSOP) towards a stronger focus on value chains and financial services (2018 COSOPs). IFAD mainstreaming themes (nutrition, CCA and gender) were addressed through outcome indicators (2018 COSOP). The 2018 COSOP emphasized "knowledge and policy priority areas" more strongly, highlighting a significant upgrading of the knowledge management approach. The 2018 COSOP retained the issuance of formal land use rights as a milestone activity but gave it limited visibility.⁶⁶
57. **On the ground, IFAD's strategy was driven by continuous engagement with Government partners.** MAF was IFAD's sole government counterpart since 2011. IFAD's working through MAF meant that changing focus areas in the strategy were a response to government: early on smallholders, land and extension services, then on farmer groups. Increasing focus on nutrition starting from SSSJ (2011) followed the approval of the national nutrition strategy in 2008. Small-scale livestock production responded to MAF's policy for the upland areas that was the focus of the portfolio in the early 2010s. In line with the national strategy, IFAD supported the improvement of livestock raising techniques rather than the growth of production units.⁶⁷
58. **At times, the country programme was behind the evolving country context.** The project budgets, for example in AFN I, continued to indicate support to province and district agricultural extension despite these services being virtually closed. In rural finance, FNML continued to promote village development funds after they were confirmed to be non-sustainable options.⁶⁸ The 2018 COSOP introduced IFAD's public-private-producer partnership approach (4P), ensuring consistency with government policy. Beneficiary enterprises were linked up with APGs. The COSOP also requested the establishment of district level multi-stakeholder forums. This was based on Vietnam's experience where they were useful to coordinate among multiple stakeholders within a district.⁶⁹ Interviewees and district governments explained that the district level had little relevance in Laos given the very small size of this administrative unit.⁷⁰ They also highlighted that working through 4P grants to enterprises meant supporting Lao enterprises only, in accordance with the national policy framework, whereas Chinese and

⁶⁵ see Appendix I in the 2011 COSOP.

⁶⁶ The social, environmental and climate assessment procedures (SECAP) document attached to the COSOP provided the rationale for this, the main report rather described NAFRI's approach of encouraging integrated land use systems that concentrated labour on homegardens, paddy fields and animal grazing to reduce pressure on slopes from crop production (see ENRM-CCA section).

⁶⁷ For example, the pig raising groups visited raised local breeds of black pig, not hybrid pig, and had learned that these local breeds were more able to feed with local resources. Backyard production of poultry and pig was the activity most often selected in AFN I groups (WFP impact study).

⁶⁸ Starting from FNML, the portfolio provided grants to agricultural production groups, not credit. Some of the groups used part of their grant as a revolving fund, an approach that the country team saw as more sustainable than the previous village development funds. The villages visited during the CSPE had not established group revolving funds.

⁶⁹ Interviews with country directors.

⁷⁰ The six enterprises met during the CSPE were district level operations. The AFN I and PICSA M&E files of beneficiary enterprises indicate that each enterprise was operating in a single district project district. The country team confirmed that the selection of enterprises took place through the district procurement committee and followed a due diligence process. CSPE interviews highlighted that the outcome of that process was the selection of existing district level enterprises and that the selection process was to be improved in AFN II.

Vietnamese companies were the generally most active in contract farming in their districts.

59. **The 2018 COSOP's approach to rural finance proved unfeasible in the framework of agricultural sector projects.** The 2018 COSOP recommended continued support to village banks and the creation of a national refinancing facility. Village banks responded to farmer groups' demand for credit and IFAD's experience with GIZ. The CSPE document did not clarify how the village banks would be a complement to the grants that remained necessary to build initial APG capital. It also omitted the challenges encountered in NSLCP-RFSP in the creation of a national refinancing facility,⁷¹ and IFAD's capacity to establish such a facility remained unconfirmed.
60. Agricultural diversification was much less encouraged under the 2018 COSOP, before individual projects reintroduced it as an approach to mitigated economic and environmental risks. Under the 2018 COSOP, the portfolio refocused support to food crop production, including paddy rice and dry season vegetables for sale, and diversified homegardens for self-consumption. The SSSJ activity of promoting a "one village one product" approach or support to a specific upland value chain, such as coffee in FNML, were not continued, despite being seen by participants as useful for value chain development. Cash crops as environmentally sustainable alternatives were not examined in the COSOP. AFN I reintroduced support to non-food crops during implementation through enterprise grants. Crop diversification as a climate change adaptation strategy was only reintroduced at the project design stage during AFN II in 2022. A similar recommendation of supporting crop diversification was made at PICSA mid-term.⁷²
61. **The presentation of results frameworks improved in the 2018 COSOP.** The document presented a full ToC whereas the 2011 COSOP only included a simple objective tree. It defined output indicators with realistic levels as well as a small number of measurable outcome indicators. These are reviewed in the effectiveness section.
62. Before the 2018 COSOP, the project-level logical frameworks did not provide the level of detail that was needed to set up the M&E systems or support learning. A similar choice was made in the logical frameworks of all projects: the indicators included in the logical frameworks were outcome level indicators, while output indicators were absent. A similar choice was made in the results management framework of the 2011 COSOP. These indicators were more difficult to operationalize and provided limited information on the progress of project activities. For example, the FNML PPE identified in the project's ToC 8 long term outcomes and 13 intermediate outcomes, from the reduction of absolute poverty to integration into value chains and the development of sustainable rural finance services. As a result, the projects' M&E systems mostly became operational after clarification of indicators at MTR.⁷³
63. **Uptake of lessons from the 2011 COSOP.** The 2011 COSOP included a comprehensive list of relevant operational lessons. The COSOP Completion Report (2015) featured a similar exploration of lessons, some of which have been revisited during the 2018 COSOP design process (Table 5). The 2018 COSOP supported simpler project designs adapted to local capacities. The second lesson, supporting decentralization at village level, was relevant at the time of RLIP, but less so in 2018 for agricultural sector projects. The COSOP announced a strategy on rural credit but did not anticipate institutional obstacles to the implementation of NSLCP-

The mid-term review of NSLCP-RFSP took place in April 2019, only four months after issuance of the 2018 COSOP. The project was formally cancelled in 2020.

⁷² Five out of 7 beneficiary enterprises under AFN I were specialized in commercial cardamom post-harvest and trade climate change adaptation strategy. Banana, cardamom, galanga and forage production were identified as potential cash crops in addition to dry season vegetable in paddy fields.

⁷³ The M&E system of the PICSA project was the first one to become operational early on during implementation.

RFSP. It stated support to value chains with large volumes of product without explaining how this was relevant in the country's targeted upland areas. And it called for renewed attention to policy outcomes without the means to pursue it.

Table 5

Lessons from the 2011 COSOP in the 2018 COSOP

COSOP 2018 analysis	PPEs and CSPE findings
Design simpler, more cost-efficient projects suited to local capacities.	Project design needs to balance the breadth of activities, implementation capacities and depth of outreach (FNML PPE).
Decentralization through a community-driven development approach was effective.	Build capacities through both communities and farmer organizations (RLIP PPE).
The GIZ rural finance approaches can be scaled up.	Tailoring activities to the context and needs of the poor who have potential to scale up livestock development (NRSLLDP PPE).
Pro-poor value chain development requires substantial volumes of a commodity.	A more explicit and tailored targeting approach is required (NRSLLDP PPE).
Defining policy outcomes in SNRMPEP was useful.	Focus on food and nutrition (FNML PPE).

Source: 2018 COSOP and three PPEs.

Relevance of project designs

64. **The quality of project design clearly improved over the review period along with a simplified menu of activities.** The decision to streamline the project portfolio coverage and focus on more salient areas of irrigation and nutrition while continuing to support smallholder animal raising was a relevant adaptation to local capacities. Before that, project designs were assessed as overambitious. FNML was especially complex as it included a very broad range of activities including the first matching grants to enterprises. Reducing the complexity of project design meant focusing on some issues at the expense of others. Three were less frequently addressed in the projects: (1) village-level capacity building; (2) sustainable natural resource management and secure land tenure; and (3) access to rural credit. In addition, starting from SSSJ (and excluding the cancelled NSLCP-RFSP) the portfolio avoided the development of project approaches, retaining a single delivery model based on groups as the main entry point and mixed government-project staff at district level.
65. **The portfolio's approach to address low government budgets and capacities was also stabilized.** First, capacity building targeted only two levels, the district governments and the groups, not the provinces. Supporting the capacity of district multisector teams within a sector project was aligned with the regulatory framework. Second, an international chief technical assistant (CTA) consultant acted as central-level coordinator alongside a national project director for each project. Previously coordination had been provided by GIZ in RLIP or a full TA team had been hired. This was consistent with the approach used by most development partners in Laos, although the government formally stated its commitment to opt for transfer to national capacities.⁷⁴ Third, the project budgets supported the operational costs of local government staff, especially for travel to project villages. This had negative implications in terms of efficiency but positive ones in terms of ownership as it generated a well understood project management framework. Previously, in SSSJ, limited ownership of the project by sub-national agencies had been reported alongside inadequate incentives for government staff to participate, as salary disparities between technical assistance teams and government employees caused resentment.

⁷⁴ 2015 Vientiane declaration. PRF is one of the government agencies that operates international projects without full time international TA.

Targeting strategies

66. **The COSOP targeting strategies were aligned with GoL priorities.** The 2018 COSOP's stated strategy of "targeting provinces and districts with high poverty rates and poor nutritional status" aligned with the 2017 Decree 348. This was applied as a project-level targeting strategy for AFN II that identified districts and villages based on Decree 348 data. Before that, the selection of provinces and districts responded to GoL choices with priority to the poor districts listed in the NGPES. Table 4 shows how the government sought to balance the participation of Northern and Southern provinces.
67. Under the 2018 COSOP, IFAD adopted an ambitious dual geographical targeting approach (AFN and PICSA), which the 2018 COSOP only partly acknowledged. The COSOP document introduced PICSA, explaining how IFAD would first work in less poor communities that owned paddy fields, and would gradually move to poorer villages. This was a relevant response to the 2011 COSOP completion review that had recommended a dual targeting strategy, differentiating pre-market and market ready locations given rapid and differentiated development of the country's rural areas. This geographical strategy was also consistent with IFAD's global targeting strategy. The 2018 COSOP could have clarified participation of better-off and poorer communities in the PICSA approach would be balanced, considering the very small number of poor households in the better-off communities. The statement of geographical targeting strategy in the 2018 COSOP document, targeting "provinces and districts with high poverty rates and poor nutritional status" was in contradiction with this approach. Implications from this lack of clarity on actual outreach, coherence of the entire portfolio and rural poverty impact are reviewed in subsequent sections.
68. During the COVID 19 pandemic, these project areas allowed faster disbursement and were therefore prioritized.⁷⁵ Although PICSA gradually covered village and districts outside these schemes, the village visits clearly revealed a self-targeting bias towards better-off communities where the ADB irrigation schemes were being renovated and their better-off community members. The target groups of nutrition activities in PICSA were active community members, not vulnerable groups, and there was less intensive input of facilitators. Partnering with ADB also influenced the approach of IFAD projects to gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) and climate change adaptation.⁷⁶
69. **IFAD's portfolio built in sufficient flexibility to avoid "one size fits all" approaches in recent projects.** For example, although PICSA was an irrigation project, farmer groups could choose between improving irrigation schemes or developing livestock production.⁷⁷ In their answers to government scorecards, the PAFOs clearly stated that IFAD projects responded to the need of small farmers, and district respondents highlighted how IFAD project combined nutrition with agriculture. Project design continuously included drinking water, as this remained a priority need in remote and generally poorer villages. One PAFO explained how farmer groups served two purposes, access to value chains in less remote villages, exchanges of experience and sharing of equipment in the more remote villages.

Institutional arrangements and capacities

70. **The projects' implementation arrangements evolved in alignment with progress in the Sam Sang devolution policy.** Coordination at provincial level (RLIP) or regional level (FNML) was tested before opting for the national level.

⁷⁵ July wrap-up meeting.

⁷⁶ CSPE review of WFP and ADB strategy documents on gender and climate change adaptation: WFP 2022 gender strategy, WFP 2017 climate change adaptation, ADB gender action plan in safeguards, ADB climate change action plan.

⁷⁷ Village visit in Luang Prabang and Xayaboury provinces.

Implementation responsibilities gradually shifted from the central government to the provinces in the 2011 COSOP projects and from the provinces to the districts in the current COSOP projects. The PAFOs played a coordination role and provided technical support to the districts as expected, while the DAFOs effectively coordinated with other district level departments, consistent once again with the regulatory framework.⁷⁸ Supporting coordination within district multisector teams was aligned with the regulatory framework for sector projects and therefore implementable. The 2018 COSOP projects mobilized up to nine government institutions in each district. FGDs with six district governments demonstrated that this arrangement was adapted to local capacities and responded to village needs. Capacity building was organized at two levels only, the district governments and the groups.

71. Following consistently with the ODA regulatory framework in Lao PDR⁷⁹, DOPC under MAF was designated the lead counterpart. Technical departments succeeded in accessing the position of project coordinator in three more technical projects (livestock for NRSLLDP, rural credit for NSLCP-RFSP, irrigation for PICSA). With one main partner, the specific institutional arrangements required for a dedicated rural finance project were not in place at that time (2016) and NSLCP-RFSP was cancelled. MAF's livestock department, which oversaw the project, requested small loans for livestock development only to answer producer needs instead of building a sustainable credit line. There was an unsuccessful attempt from IFAD to establish a partnership with the Bank of Laos and KfW to maintain the village bank system. The few loans that were delivered were mostly not recovered.⁸⁰
72. **Government capacity building focussed on creating government services, which became less relevant over the period.** The 2018 COSOP recommended supporting district extension centres, a proposal that was not in line with the rapidly changing institutional framework for agricultural extension. One of the milestones indicators was to build 30 technical service centres that would operate sustainably without clarifying which resources would be mobilized to sustain them. Several interviewees stated that this approach was shared among IFAD and other development partners but was not well-adapted to the country context. Instead of building support services, the AFN I and PICSA projects were designed to boost village capacity during the project implementation period through project-funded district and village facilitators. Building sustainable public support services was not a government strategy anymore, and these services were instead increasingly provided by development partners and the private sector as highlighted in several interviews. This became more acute at the end of the review period due to the country's economic and financial crisis.
73. **Overall relevance.** The programme aligned with national policies while adding value through IFAD's corporate priorities. The 2018 COSOP introduced the PICSA approach rather than collating all existing lessons and consultations. How to continue to support financial services or to create value for smallholders in parallel with a nutrition-sensitive approach remained outside the scope of IFAD's strategy. Issues of government capacity building and technical assistance were mostly unaddressed. Strategic decisions were made at the level of individual projects. The CSPE rates relevance **moderately satisfactory (4).**

⁷⁸ The cancelled NSLCP-RFSP was an exception as the Department of livestock channelled credit to livestock production only, which contributed to failure of the rural credit scheme. (Interviews during CSPE mission).

⁷⁹ Decree 357/2019 on the Management and Utilization of Official Development Assistance.

⁸⁰ MAF defined its new Rural Development and Cooperatives Department as being responsible for rural finance services in the agricultural sector in 2024 when it restructured, and the Bank of Laos delegated responsibility over village banks to District governors. This has allowed other development partners to engage into rural finance through MAF and District governments, without direct interaction with the Bank of Laos (interviews).

B. Coherence

74. This section assesses coherence, which covers external and internal coherence. External coherence relates to the consistency of the strategy and programme with other partners' interventions in the same context. Internal coherence refers to the internal logic, synergies and linkages among different elements of the country strategy and programme. In accordance with the IFAD Evaluation Manual (2022), this section also assesses aspects pertaining to knowledge management, partnership-building, and policy engagement.

Internal coherence

75. **The country programme did not develop a coherent approach on poverty reduction through the 2011 COSOP.** While the COSOP was consistent in its focus on smallholders and on upland, more remote and poorer areas, it did not have a coherent approach. Contrasting approaches were tested from RLIP to SSSJ. RLIP was the last in a series of multisector Community-Driven Development projects. NRSLLDP was a commodity development project as it promoted livestock production. SNRMPEP was a programme of three thematic subprojects in three fields: commercial agriculture, natural resource management, and poverty reduction. NSLCP-RFSP only supported rural credit. While some activities such as small infrastructure were present in all projects, the detailed menu of activities differed across each of these projects. Implementation arrangements were also specific to each project.⁸¹ The design of the 2018 COSOP projects rectify this to some extent with more complementary approaches addressing the needs of different target groups.
76. Under the 2018 COSOP, the differences in project approaches became more pronounced. AFN I and II continued to focus on poorer, remote and upland project areas, and did so with increasing attention. Nutrition activities focused on vulnerable groups, reinforced in AFN II. The geographical entry points for PICSA were lowland districts where ADB was funding rehabilitation of large irrigation schemes. Group formation was a consistent part of IFAD's portfolio from early on, both through direct grant support to the LFA and project APGs.
77. **The earlier grants covering Laos were mostly detached from the lending portfolio and increasingly had a regional focus.** A flurry of research grants was undertaken during the 2011 COSOP⁸² on relevant subjects, such as livestock forages,⁸³ cassava,⁸⁴ and energy access⁸⁵, though with little documented uptake in the portfolio. During the 2018 period, the approach shifted focus to more high-level knowledge sharing and market-focused approaches and to regional policy engagement. The Agricultural Transformation and Market Integration in the ASEAN region grant (ATMI), Network for Agriculture and Rural Development Think-Tanks for Countries in Mekong Sub-Region (NARDT), and the Consortium of Unfavourable Rice Environments were highlighted for trying to raise the impact of grant programmes beyond the generation of new knowledge products to support regional integration of markets and knowledge centres. This shift was coherent but still appeared to lack mechanisms to integrate activities directly into the lending portfolio.
78. **IFAD's visibility in country-level processes has been limited by the absence of a stable country representation.** After IFAD closed its country office in 2018, the former CPO became a consultant coordinating stakeholder interactions and supporting project implementation processes within the country. This internal

⁸¹ CSPE project activity databased based on PCRs.

⁸² 30 grants were under implementation during 2011 COSOP versus 8 grants during current the 2018 COSOP.

⁸³ Grant title: Improved Forage-based Livestock Feeding Systems for Smallholder Livelihoods in the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle (2011-2015).

⁸⁴ Grant title: Inclusive Business Models to Promote Sustainable Smallholder Cassava Production (IBC) (2012-2015).

⁸⁵ Grant title: Climate risk management in Agriculture with demonstration sites in Indonesia, Laos, and Bangladesh (2012-2015).

arrangement has caused uncertainty within the government regarding IFAD's commitment and presence. The country coordinator maintains a desk at the UN house for use in project supervisions, which allows for some degree of participation in UN events and informal exchange. Collaboration with UN partners, particularly the RBAs, through contributions to the Roadmap from Pathways to Action on Food Systems Transformation in Lao PDR was highlighted as strong. According to the CSPE e-survey, half of the respondents saw IFAD as participating actively in multistakeholder discussions on rural and agricultural development in the country and highlighted smallholder agriculture and nutrition sensitive agriculture as the areas, which IFAD is most well adapted to and where it could provide the most knowledge. Rural finance and sustainable land management were seen as less prominent in IFAD's country programme, also in stakeholder interviews.

External coherence

79. **IFAD approached the two COSOP periods differently vis a vis its relationship to GoL.** Under the 2011 COSOP, IFAD moved from a more operational orientation of government policy implementation⁸⁶ towards leading initiatives to add value to the GoL's agenda. IFAD's investments in the creation of the Policy Think Tank and its facilitation of the SWG-ARD reflect this ambition. During the 2018 COSOP, IFAD's role once again became more operational, focusing on sector projects (AFN, PICS), while consistently incorporating elements of earlier interventions, such as nutrition activities and group formation, in line with other development partners, demonstrating that development partners can act coherently under the Vientiane Declaration.
80. Discontinuing participation in the SWG-ARD has impacted IFAD's pivotal role in promoting exchanges and coordination between development partners. IFAD was not always visible as a partner for high-level policy engagement.⁸⁷ Respondents to the e-survey and interviewees clearly indicated that they remembered IFAD's active role when it co-chaired the sector working group for agriculture and rural development. Between 2012 and 2016, projects funded international TA for SWG-ARD facilitation which kept the process active and robust.⁸⁸ IFAD's national coordinator consultant, who continues to ensure presence in meetings and raising the importance of smallholder agriculture, no longer has the former institutional presence.⁸⁹ In the e-survey, 13 respondents felt that IFAD proactively mobilizes partnerships, while ten disagreed or strongly disagreed on this.
81. **IFAD's contribution to the UNSDCF is mainly through lending operations.**⁹⁰ The UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2022-2026) provides the basis for collaboration among UN agencies.⁹¹ As a signatory of this framework, IFAD was designated to contribute to Strategic priorities [1] people's wellbeing, [2] inclusive prosperity and [4] environment, climate change and resilience alongside UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, WFP and ILO. The 2023 Annual Results Report indicates that IFAD has moved away from the latter strategic priority, contributing to priority 1 through AFN, and Priority 2, through Irrigation and commercialisation of smallholder agriculture.⁹² Despite this contribution to the framework, IFAD has not been able to participate in the UN country team meetings as a full member, due to its non-resident status, curtailing the ambition to engage at a deeper level.⁹³

⁸⁶ IFAD. 2005. Lao PDR: Country Strategic Opportunities Paper. Executive Board – Eighty-Fifth Session.

⁸⁷ Confirmed in interviews with partners, GoL.

⁸⁸ Interviews with stakeholders, E-survey

⁸⁹ Overall e-survey respondents have mixed views on the participation of IFAD's staff in multistakeholder discussions on rural and agricultural development in Laos with only 54 per cent of positive answers.

UNCT Configuration Assessment COOPERATION FRAMEWORK 2022-2026 - Agency-specific assessment for planned contributions to the UNSDCF.

United Nations 2021. Lao-PDR United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022-2026. Before that, the UN Development Assistance Framework guided interventions with two successive action plans during the period, 2012-2015 and 2017-2021.

⁹² Annual Results Report 2023

⁹³ Stakeholder interviews

82. **The country programme was coherent in its contribution to the nutrition convergence approach.** This approach was championed by the World Bank⁹⁴, the EU⁹⁵ and others through the implementation of the NNSPA. Overall, IFAD worked to align its positions within the greater development community at the right times, particularly on the implementation of the nutrition strategy in Laos. The portfolio was adapted to the changing landscape of development partners during the evaluation period, with some partnerships repeatedly influencing the programme's activities.⁹⁶ The portfolio's approach on nutrition was developed by partnering with WFP, who had a broader network with UNICEF and individual experts, and as part of the community of development partners in Laos. This evolved with the same network into the AFN projects. Agriculture and nutrition were similarly a joint approach in PICSA although with differentiated activities.
83. **With its grant support, IFAD positioned itself in the institutionalization and growth of national farmers' organizations.**⁹⁷ The Medium-Term Cooperation Programme with Farmers' Organizations in Asia and the Pacific, Phase II (MTCP-2) grant and APFP provided foundational and ongoing support through the regional partner, AFA, enabling the Lao Farmer Association (LFA) to engage in policy dialogue and exchange experiences with other farmer organizations in Asia.⁹⁸ This support allowed LFA to partner with other projects, such as Helvetas through the Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service (LURAS), facilitating broader engagement and policy influence.⁹⁹ LFA participated as a regular member of the IFAD country programme management team (CPMT) for Lao PDR and engaged with the IFAD country programme in developing new projects such as AFN II, and has coordinated with PICSA for capacity building and knowledge sharing among the APGs of PICSA and LFA's member farmer groups working in the same project areas. There is a strong potential for LFA to play a deeper role in supporting knowledge sharing and filling a gap in extension services.

Partnership building

84. **The country programme streamlined its partnership approach over the evaluation period.** The 2011 COSOP defined IFAD's partnership approach as driven by the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, noting important partnerships with cofinanciers, implementation partners and grant recipients, and the government, highlighting the need to enhance support for government partners' capacity building. The COSOP completion review noted that these should have been better adapted to the landscape of projects and the myriad overlapping areas of intervention.¹⁰⁰ The 2018 COSOP slimmed this landscape by pushing for greater collaboration with established partners and government agencies. IFAD's portfolio was largely implemented through three main partnerships: one ministry, MAF, and two development partners, ADB and WFP.
85. IFAD's positioning vis a vis its two main partners indicate that its work has been more productive when addressed in the context of collaborative efforts. The CSPE's timeline analysis showed that the two approaches evolved gradually, with projects alternatively implemented alongside either ADB or WFP. The influence of ADB and WFP was less due to their financial contribution (high for ADB, low for WFP) than to their human resources and strategic presence in the country.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/brief/multi-sector-convergence-approach-to-reducing-malnutrition-in-lao-pdr>
Sustainable Change Achieved through Linking Improved Nutrition and Governance (SCALING) is a multi-sector Nutrition project funded by the EU as part of the Partnership for Improved Nutrition in Lao PDR.
<https://suncsalaos.org/resources/documents/projects/scaling/>

⁹⁶ Partnership analysis based on project design, supervision, and completion reports.

⁹⁷ Formerly known as the Lao Farmers Network, LFN

⁹⁸ (MTCP-2), aimed to strengthen the capacities of farmers' organizations to deliver better services to their members and engage in effective dialogues with governments.

⁹⁹ MTCP2 Project documents, interviews with LFA, AFA, IFAD Grant Manager

¹⁰⁰ 2011 COSOP completion review, 2017

¹⁰¹ highlighted in interviews with the agencies and with the government.

86. **IFAD's partnership with ADB has been primarily to address the need for smallholder access to larger investments,** such as funding small irrigation infrastructure and water user groups for ADB's large irrigation schemes.¹⁰² The partnership with ADB was initiated by a former outposted Country Programme Manager (CPM) with ADB agriculture staff based in Laos. IFAD brought expertise in animal production, which ADB did not have in its Lao PDR portfolio.¹⁰³ The partnership then evolved to parallel funded projects (NSLCP-RFSP and PICSA). NRSLLDP demonstrated the complementarity and comparative advantage of each partner for infrastructure (ADB)¹⁰⁴ and targeting, institutional capacity and inclusive value chain development (IFAD). Some joint supervision missions and project steering committee meetings supported this partnership. PICSA and the ADB-funded Sustainable Rural Infrastructure and Watershed Management Sector Project (SRIWMSP) were being implemented through a single national PMU¹⁰⁵ within MAF's Department of Irrigation (DoI), which facilitated partnership and coordination among the projects' complementary activities.¹⁰⁶ Partnering with ADB influenced the approach of IFAD projects to gender empowerment and climate change adaptation. The joint IFAD-ADB evaluation of NRSLLDP highlighted the need to further consider IFAD and ADB's different target groups, though this lesson does not appear in the 2018 COSOP.¹⁰⁷
87. **The partnership with WFP enabled IFAD to tap into an active network of district staff and village facilitators.** Collaboration with WFP evolved from WFP providing food for work in RLIP and subsequently joining through its food for assets programme in FNML, to the AFN I and AFN II projects that mobilize WFP for a comprehensive set of nutrition activities, as co-implementers of the GAFSP grants. Applications to the GAFSP demonstrated that joint WFP/IFAD operations have been seen as a good fit to jointly address nutrition and food security in Lao PDR. Modalities of cooperation evolved, adapting to each partners' respective strategies. In the AFN I and II projects, IFAD and WFP contribute distinct but complementary strengths—IFAD focuses on farmer groups, while WFP concentrates on nutrition and behaviour change. The projects also feature a well-integrated M&E system that leverages best practices from both partners, including WFP's village profile production at project launch. Targeting in AFN projects is coherent with IFAD and WFP priorities. AFN I focussed on vulnerable groups in poorer, remote and upland project areas, which will be reinforced in AFN II.
88. **Partnerships with NAFRI as a main service provider has seen some capacity gaps.** NAFRI has been the main service provider in applied research and agricultural extension since the 2011 COSOP. IFAD projects supported NAFRI's technical capacity for the creation of PAR methodologies in value chains.¹⁰⁸ Earlier on, a Central Resource Mapping Centre was established through SNRMPEP, but the CSPE found no evidence that this centre remained active. In FNML, issues with partnership arrangements led to slow delivery in its partnership with NAFRI for implementation of the smallholder adaptation to climate change component.¹⁰⁹ Over-centralization of their operations also caused challenges in the cancelled NSLCP-RFSP. Dependant on resources from internationally funded projects left NAFRI with less capacity for high level policy work through the projects. Interviews

¹⁰² PICSA design documents.

¹⁰³ IFAD 2023. Corporate-level evaluation of IFAD's decentralization experience. IOE

¹⁰⁴ Also noted in the CSPE Decentralization

¹⁰⁵ The PICSA PMU is called programme governance team (PGT).

¹⁰⁶ The GIZ-managed ERP was implemented through MAF's Department of Forestry, which made communication with PICSA implementing entities less straight-forward. Interviews suggested that this was a less tangible partnership in practice. Operational difficulties were less marked with ADB due to strong complementarities in project management between the two organizations.

The village nutrition committees in PICSA were comprised of active community members, not vulnerable groups, and there was less intensive input of facilitators.

The 29 PAR modules can be found on the AFN II website at <https://www.afn2.org.la/index.php/participatory-action-research-modules/>.

¹⁰⁹ FNML PCR and PPE.

revealed misalignment between project partners' interests and government priorities regarding smallholder agriculture or pro-poor technology.

89. **Other implementation partnerships anticipated in the COSOPs did not materialize.** While RLIP collaborated effectively with WFP, the GIZ collaboration was poor, and no appropriate handover took place after its completion.¹¹⁰ FNML sought to partner with UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) for financial services provision and UNICEF for nutrition activities, but this did not prove possible after the project began. Partnership with UN-Habitat to build clean water infrastructure, part of the FNML project, was discontinued after the mid-term review.¹¹¹ Of the other two RBAs, both of which have strong country presence, IFAD cooperated with FAO in an uneven manner: it joined SSSJ, i.e. in the first half of the 2010s, where it attempted to introduce the farmer field school approach to agricultural extension.¹¹² The cooperation was discontinued after that.
90. **There were missed opportunities in partnering with different agencies for incorporating grant-funded research.** Integrating loan projects with regional grants supported knowledge generation but did not appear to lead to veritable partnerships. While the IFAD Laos programme worked closely with WOCAT for a grant funded project on extension methodology on sustainable land management innovations, including sharing publications on the corporate website and involving investment projects as study participants, further follow-up did not occur, impacting the collaboration between the implementing agency and IFAD projects in Laos. Other opportunities came up, such as The Agro-Biodiversity Initiative (TABI), through the same partner CDE, but concrete benefits of this investment in the IFAD portfolio could not be found.

Knowledge management

91. During the two COSOP periods, there was an explicit approach to knowledge management. The 2011 COSOP initially focused on disseminating good practices and engaging in working groups to identify innovations. From 2015, a well-developed plan was established with objectives to mainstream knowledge management and strengthen learning and sharing processes. As foreseen in the 2018 COSOP, individual projects drafted KM strategies with allocated resources. In 2020, the country office implemented the Mekong Hub KM strategy and Action Plan, aiming to increase the capacity to capture and publish good practices, strengthen knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and increase IFAD's visibility and influence in agricultural and rural development.
92. **IFAD's move to the MCO in Hanoi led to greater emphasis on knowledge exchange between projects within the region.** Some country directors placed substantial emphasis on KM through dedicated budgets and staffing resources. Projects benefited from IFAD staff interactions during annual portfolio reviews and knowledge management training, which led to the prolific creation of knowledge products. Project staff reported strong cooperation with the country team in Hanoi, highlighting that IFAD staff were responsive to field needs and provided KM strategies that served as templates for project-level initiatives. Lessons from earlier projects were occasionally highlighted in corporate knowledge products within the sub-regional framework covered by the MCO.¹¹³ Activities included the documentation of good practices and success stories, sharing them in local newspaper, government meetings and regional events such as the World Food Day or UN Day.¹¹⁴ Larger regional grants saw IFAD technical divisions support sharing of

¹¹⁰ RLIP Completion Report

¹¹¹ PPE FNML

¹¹² <https://www.wfp.org/news/healthy-diets-vital-progress-lao-pdr-say-un-food-agencies>

¹¹³ For instance, *STORIES FROM THE FIELD — INNOVATIVE AGRICULTURE*: Unlocking opportunities for rural entrepreneurs and farmers in sub-Mekong region. IFAD. 2020.

¹¹⁴ Interviews with country team.

knowledge from the Laos portfolio.¹¹⁵ In 2018 and 2019, the Mekong Knowledge and Learning Fair served as a hub for sharing knowledge from the portfolio and regional grant programmes, including the Value Chain Capacity Building Network (VCB-N),¹¹⁶ ATMI¹¹⁷ and the AFA/LFA¹¹⁸ grants, but was ultimately suspended due to COVID-19.¹¹⁹

93. **Laos provided several case studies for the IFAD website.** The products featured on the website seemed to have met IFAD's demand, and they benefited from the participation of technical divisions (SKD) during the 2018 COSOP period.¹²⁰ Documents served primarily to exhibit project successes, particularly from the well-covered AFN project. Laos was featured six times as of writing in corporate blogs, since 2021. Efforts of interest by IFAD's strategy and knowledge department, SKD, alongside the regional division, APR, to highlight the programme and extract usable lessons are evident. Several grant results sheets and reports generated through grants were shared, though, as found in the CLE on Knowledge management, there did not appear to be a mechanism for use or uptake tracking. Most recently, results from of a rapid assessment of the implementation of the RPSF shared lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. A country technical note on Indigenous peoples in Lao PDR was produced in 2012 for use within the portfolio, but evidence was not found during the CSPE to determine any influence on project implementation.
94. **A major gap was the effective incorporation of knowledge generated through grants into the loan portfolio.** Many opportunities to utilize this valuable knowledge were missed. The projects lacked a built-in mechanism or mandate to absorb and integrate the knowledge produced by IFAD's grants portfolio. Although IFAD has funded numerous research grants focused on Laos, the projects did not have the mandate or budget to implement or continue working with the knowledge generated. This has led to significant silos and weak connections between research and practical application.¹²¹ Early projects also faced fragmented digital repositories and collection systems and limited collaboration prior to completion. While some projects completed policy research in coordination with NAFRI, these happened only at end-line stage, and so were not useful for adapting or supporting ongoing implementation.
95. **There was a shift towards more accessible knowledge products generated in the projects.** Earlier projects like NRSLLDP and RLIP struggled with poor local capacity collaboration and low uptake of rigid training materials, particularly among non-Lao speakers in upland ethnic groups.¹²² With the 2011 COSOP, projects adapted their methods to include more accessible formats like YouTube video series, comics, and infographics. Fact sheets and participatory M&E approaches in SSSJ helped to improve the collection and sharing of knowledge with other stakeholders.¹²³ Project websites for FNML, AFN I, PICSA and AFN II, and the use of social media pages for provincial project teams, enabled on-the-go knowledge sharing and personnel management in remote areas. Little evidence was found that earlier KM products were still used or useful in later projects.

¹¹⁵ For instance, the ATMI grant facilitated SEARCA's presentation on farmers' registry and organizations' resilience in the South-East region during IFAD's APR Webinar Series, drawing lessons from the Laos country programme. Source: ATMI Completion Report.

¹¹⁶ https://www.helvetas.org/Presence-of-VCB-N-in-the-Mekong-Knowledge-and-Learning-Fair-Organized-by-IFAD-Mekong-Regional-Office_pressrelease_4306

¹¹⁷ <https://www.searca.org/news/searca-participates-in-first-ifad-mekong-knowledge-and-learning-fair>

¹¹⁸ Funded by the AFOSP-MTCP2 grant Programme.

¹¹⁹ <https://asianfarmers.org/afa-mklf-2019/>

¹²⁰ See list of knowledge products included in Annex X.

¹²¹ High-level grant-funded activities, such as the ATMI project, faced delays due to prolonged review processes, frequent leadership changes, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which further exacerbated the situation. These delays hindered the project's timely implementation and overall progress, illustrating the systemic issues that prevent effective knowledge scaling and utilization within the government's framework. (Completion Report)

¹²² Supervision and Completion Reports, RLIP, NRSLLDP

¹²³ Supervision and Completion reports, SSSJ

96. **The CSPE noted the trend towards incorporating local knowledge into more practical, community-based applications as positive.** Knowledge exchange at the local level was most notably facilitated through farmer-to-farmer approaches. While the SSSJ project used the Farmer Field School method for training and extension, later projects reverted to an approach better suited to the needs of remote villages, combining the government's model-farmer approach with support to household groups. FNML piloted a "learning by doing" approach with support through a PROCASUR Learning Route¹²⁴ that was replicated later.¹²⁵ In PICSA, young active farmers were selected as models and received additional training and small grants to share successful production techniques. In AFN, farmer nutrition schools adapted their approach to share demonstrations, with young facilitators sometimes overcoming poor road conditions with motorbikes.
97. **Partnership with NAFRI enabled more systematic knowledge sharing.** Projects set up a knowledge exchange approach over three pillars, NAFRI for technical inputs, model farmers and agricultural production groups. As the only sectoral research institute in Laos, NAFRI has been the primary partner for technical knowledge in the portfolio. IFAD-funded projects as well as regional grant programmes like NARDT,¹²⁶ or the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) provided capacity building and supportive integration of NAFRI systems to bring in technical knowledge from outside the portfolio.¹²⁷ NAFRI implemented PAR methodologies in the production of 29 commodities in AFN I, using the same for technical assistance in PICSA and AFN II.¹²⁸ On-farm demonstrations, especially in the AFN I project, facilitated knowledge transfers that were more aligned with local capacities and interests.¹²⁹ Extension leaflets and posters appear to have been broadly disseminated in field visits.¹³⁰ This was a positive contribution on technical aspects in the portfolio, as these activities focused on low-input and climate-resilient agriculture.
98. Project knowledge generation focused on agricultural production at the expense of value chain development, despite the portfolio's focus. NAFRI was not equipped with in-house expertise on value chains. While several grants, such as the SSCVC grant and the AFN I project ostensibly helped to develop value chain PAR within NAFRI, studies focused on production aspects (goat, fish raising, ginseng production)¹³¹ and did not address marketing or value addition. One grant supported a potential service provider to join the VCB-N¹³² as a centre of excellence linked with other experts, but no evidence was found of the country programme contracting them for capacity development or knowledge generation on Value Chains in the portfolio.¹³³
99. **The country programme did not reveal a clear vision for SSTC in the context of Laos.** The 2018 COSOP emphasized expanding SSTC activities in three areas: market integration within ASEAN¹³⁴, policy engagement through networking among national policy think tanks¹³⁵, and knowledge management initiatives such

¹²⁴ Strengthening Knowledge Sharing and Scaling up of Sustainable Innovation Using Learning Route Methodology - Phase II (2014-2016)

¹²⁵ Completion Report FNML

¹²⁶ https://nardt.org/vn/tID4375_Regional-workshop-Agricultural-development-policy-review-in-Mekong-subregion-countries-Vietnam-LaosCambodia--30th-October-2023.html

Model farmers were a key target group before the policy framework started to encourage APGs. They continued to play this role as members of APGs when these groups became a core element of MAF's strategy and the IFAD portfolio.

¹²⁸ <https://www.afn2.org.la/index.php/participatory-action-research-modules/>

¹²⁹ The mission confirmed that farmers particularly valued the knowledge gained through interactions with their peers.

¹³⁰ Village visits and direct observation of leaflets. The NAFRI director became the national coordinator of FNML.

¹³¹ China – IFAD South-South and Triangular Cooperation Facility: South – South Cooperation for Scaling up Climate Resilient Value Chain Initiatives (SSCVC). Project Completion Report. 2022.

¹³² Asia Training Programme for Scaling Up Pro-Poor Value Chains, Completion report. 2021.

¹³³ The completion report notes one training conducted by the partner EDC, on value chain development and related facilitation skills, but other information about participants was not available.

¹³⁴ The ATMI and NARDT Grants have been the priority areas for the grant portfolio in this COSOP.

¹³⁵ NARDT Grant documentation.

as learning fairs and exchange visits. The IFAD MCO coordinated SSTC activities across its five country programmes. Cross-country visits and study tours to Vietnam, Korea¹³⁶ and Cambodia¹³⁷ allowed project staff and government to engage with successful practices. Events organized through the MCO in Hanoi provided engagement opportunities for farmer groups, the LFA and partner organizations, contributing to knowledge exchange. More recently, grant funded exchanges, such as through the SSCVC project were curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the flagship Mekong Knowledge and Learning Fairs, central to the MCO KM strategy, were suspended. The SSTC centre's involvement in other initiatives appears to be limited. Exchanges of experience outside the scope of SSTC took place in IFAD's 4P approach but then resulted in importing from Vietnam an approach that did not fit the Laos context.

Policy engagement

100. Lao PDR maintains high levels of ODA and a broad landscape of development agencies contributing to its development agenda. The space for policy engagement has gradually opened and this has allowed for some deeper engagement. The government's round-table process since 1983 has also provided some space for policy engagement with development partners. Due to the formality of these processes, incorporating project lessons into the policy sphere has been challenging and was often influenced by bilateral relationships and personalities, thus difficult to clearly assess. Following the closure of the country office in 2018, presence of an in-country coordinator has helped to maintain IFAD's relationship over time.
101. The approach and thematic focus for policy engagement shifted between the 2011 COSOP and the 2018 COSOP, moving away from centring policy ambitions. The 2011 document was ambitious, specifically focused on land rights, tenure, and participatory land use planning and a focus in restoring forests and watersheds, and the management of NTFPs. The 2011 COSOP included clear institutional and policy objectives in its results management framework. The strategy aimed to support farmers' organizations and enhance farming systems through participating in policy dialogues, developing farmers' access to private services, mainstreaming the LEAP methodology,¹³⁸ improving contract farming, and removing trade restrictions. Additionally, the strategy sought to support establishing apex organizations for producer groups through technical assistance and financing.¹³⁹ The 2018 COSOP refocused policy dialogue on (i) mainstreaming climate change adaptation, (ii) nutrition – implementing the NNSPA, (iii) pro-poor value chain development through the Agricultural Development Strategy, (iv) a conducive policy environment for inclusive rural finance, and (v) access to land by the poor.¹⁴⁰ The intention was to generate results and analysis from on-going projects. The 2018 COSOP did not include indicators on policy outcomes in its results management framework and removed related indicators on securing land titles (1.1) and rural financial services (2.1) by 2022, showing a shift in the areas where IFAD thought useful to engage. While the 2015 COSOP completion review reported several concrete achievements from policy engagement, similar outcomes were not reported in the 2024 COSOP Results Review Report.
102. **Initial support for SWG-ARD and PTT was effective but did not continue.** Under the SWG-ARD, IFAD supported an effective forum through the GoL's Round Table Mechanism. From 2012 until 2016, it funded designated technical advisory to this process through SSSJ. This process allowed for knowledge sharing among

¹³⁶ Exchange on good practices for public policy consultations in Lao PDR, Policy Case Study, 2015

¹³⁷ The FNML PPE notes that Knowledge generation among the PRCO and key governmental staff was facilitated by relevant to FNML.

¹³⁸ LEAP referred both to the Laos Extension Agricultural Project (SDC) and to the Learning, Evaluation and Planning methodology for agricultural extension.

¹³⁹ 2011 COSOP.

¹⁴⁰ 2018 COSOP

various implementing partners and interviews indicated that IFAD's contributions bolstered evidence-based exchanges between development partners and the Ministries. However, engagement in the working group was reduced from 2016 onwards.¹⁴¹ The SWG-ARD was beneficial for coordinating individual partners but did not consistently lead to consolidated policy approaches that could support the government. The more recent iteration was described in interviews as ad-hoc and lacking in-depth policy discussions. A notable instance of effective collaboration was the support for a new Agricultural Development Strategy, though this was ultimately abandoned due to the closure of MAF's Department of Policy and Legal Affairs.¹⁴² Under the 2011 COSOP, SSSJ funded the formation of a policy think tank (PTT) under the SWG in 2012,¹⁴³ and later through the NARDT grant programme. PTT brought researchers from MAF, NAFRI and the NUoL, to provide policy recommendations for dialogue on critical issues at multiple levels. The PTT conducted research on topics such as food security, livelihoods, commercialization, and land concessions for rubber and banana¹⁴⁴, cooperating with various institutions. While one study did lead to the halting of contracts for banana plantations due to environmental impacts, greater impact was hampered by a poor understanding of hierarchical policy processes and operations ended in 2020, with a dispersal of researchers to other offices.¹⁴⁵

103. **Grants supported capacity building for policy engagement.** According to the 2011 COSOP completion review, the FAO-implemented grant "Pro-poor Policy Approaches to Address Risk and Vulnerability at the Country Level" contributed to the implementation of the Agricultural Master Plan 2011-2015 through policy formulation workshops for researchers and policy makers. A grant to PROCASUR financed a learning route for members of the National Assembly to South Korea to learn about public consultations for policymaking.¹⁴⁶ The regional ATMI grant also provided an opportunity to engage on regional value chains, but its overall impact in Laos has been limited.¹⁴⁷ Through the portfolio, the MTCP-2 grant supported the LFA, allowing the organization to become a recognized participant in national stakeholder meetings during the design and completion of IFAD projects. According to interviews, this approach and coordination with other development partners led to increased recognition of the role of organized farmer groups within the government.
104. **In one instance, practices piloted in a loan-funded project influenced policy processes.** SNRMPEP piloted a public private community partnership approach, leading to Decree No.1791 on 31 July 2015 on group contract farming.¹⁴⁸ This reflected growing interest by GoL in contract agriculture with smallholders. Conversely the CSPE was told that active support to APGs in IFAD projects had not contributed to the 2020 Decree on groups and cooperatives. Interviews with the RBAs noted there remained the need for a more coordinated effort in policy dialogue and that IFAD's small in-country presence had limited its impact.
105. **IFAD in partnership with WFP supported the implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy (through GAFSP funding).** Following a formal request by MAF to support the proposal for GAFSP funding in 2011, IFAD became

¹⁴¹ The ICO was officially closed down in 2018, but the role of the CPM moved to the MCO in Hanoi in 2016.

¹⁴² Decree No. 603/PM on Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Organizational Structure and Operations. Unofficial Translation. 2021 <https://www.laofab.org/document/view/4900#>

¹⁴³ A total of USD 302,179 was disbursed to support activities of the Policy Think Tank (PTT), and USD 258,628 for the Sector Working Group (SWG) of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Building an Evidence Base for Policy Formulation in the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector in Lao PDR, NAFRI, 2020

¹⁴⁵ Phounvisouk, L., Victor, M., Sonethavixay, S. 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Exchange on good practices for public policy consultations for public policy consultations, Policy Case Studies, IFAD, 2015

¹⁴⁷ Interviews with grant recipients

¹⁴⁸ SNRMPEP PCR.

active in implementing the strategy, as also evident in the design of SSSJ.¹⁴⁹ At the provincial and district levels, IFAD projects coordinated with district and provincial nutrition committees as part of the government's nutrition convergence approach to bring together related sectors on nutrition. As a UN agency, IFAD contributed to the National Plan of Action on Food Systems (NAP-FS), informed by the nutrition strategy, leading Track 3¹⁵⁰ alongside MAF and others.¹⁵¹ Committee members felt this approach to malnutrition was effective. Interviews indicated that the central government's capacity to independently implement this policy have remained low, in a context where nutrition indicators nationwide were significantly backsliding.

106. **There was little movement on land related policies and rural finance.** These were stated as priorities for policy engagement in the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs. Land policy issues were struck from the results management framework of the 2018 COSOP at mid-term.¹⁵² Before that, the delivery of land titles to participating households had been piloted in SNRMPEP in connection with the development of the country's policy on contract farming.¹⁵³ IFAD, according to interviews, agreed not to plan this activity anymore starting from FNML (2013) when the government indicated that its involvement was unwelcome. There was no evidence that IFAD mobilized the COSOP priorities to maintain engagement in this field. Policy engagement on rural finance anticipated in the 2018 COSOP through NSLCP-RFSP and FNML support to the Bank of Lao was also largely unachieved.¹⁵⁴
107. **Overall coherence.** While IFAD was consistent in its support of smallholder agriculture and upland areas, the programme was not coherent in its approach to poverty reduction. Internal coherence was hampered by the lack of country presence. Grants supported relevant institutions and processes in the country but lacked linkages to the lending portfolio. IFAD' gradually built a coherent project approach covering agriculture and nutrition, developed jointly with the development partner. **Overall coherence is rated moderately satisfactory (4).**
108. IFAD's partnership approach in Laos has slimmed to focus on collaboration with MAF and co-financing partners (ADB, and WFP). Long-term support of the in-country consultant has helped to provide some continuity in engagement with partners in government. The lack of higher-level continuity in country presence has been perceived as disruptive, undermining a consistent relationship with GoL and other development partners, and limiting opportunities to work with other agencies. Formally, IFAD has been part of the UNSDCF, although has become less visible over time. Partnership with NAFRI primarily on agricultural production, has to some extent, helped to address limitations of local capacity. Partnership-building is rated **moderately satisfactory (4).**
109. Knowledge management activities multiplied over the review period, incorporating different formats and focusing on farmer-to-farmer exchanges which helped sharing of local knowledge, but higher-level lessons on the value chain approach were not always taken up. The Mekong hub MCO provided some opportunities for exchange with other country programmes. There was little evidence for the use of the prolific grant-funded studies in project design and implementation. Considering the need for government partners to better take up knowledge generated from the portfolio knowledge management is rated as **moderately satisfactory (4).**

¹⁴⁹ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Department of Planning, Formal Request from MAF to seek IFAD's Assistance in Formulating a proposal for GAFSP. Ref.No. 2835/MAF.DoP. June 2021

¹⁵⁰ Pathways to Sustainable Food Systems: Food Systems Summit 2021: Member State Dialogues in Lao PDR

¹⁵¹ IFAD contributions to Food System Summit and Government and DPs' key Consultation Events. DRAFT. ND. IFAD

¹⁵² Additionally, the FNML PPE noted, "The logframe reports that two of three targeted studies on value chain development were implemented and shared at the sector working group on agriculture and rural development. However, no such studies were shared with the evaluation team, so this could not be verified".

Under this project, a "Policy Gap Assessment of Farmers' Land Certificate Issuance" was conducted, but the CSPE could not find evidence of its further uptake or use.

¹⁵⁴ PPE FNML

110. IFAD's use of an in-country coordinator was instrumental for the spotlight on smallholders in multi-stakeholder processes. Nutrition became a strong entry point for policy engagement through the Nutrition Strategy, but other areas, like land and rural finance fell from focus under the 2018 COSOP. IFAD's engagement overall with policy processes has waned since its support for the PTT and the sector working group. Its ability to act strongly on sensitive, critical challenges was rather limited due to its small presence and the complex policy landscape. There is considerable scope to enhance collaborative approaches as well as uptake of knowledge from the portfolio for policy engagement, which is rated **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

C. Effectiveness

111. The effectiveness criterion assesses the extent to which the country strategy and programme achieved or is expected to achieve its objectives and outcomes at the time of the evaluation, including any unplanned achievements. The CSPE reviewed the achievement of the 2011 and 2018 COSOP objectives through contributions from closed projects and the on-going PICSA project that had reached mid-term.¹⁵⁵ This section starts with an overview showing reported achievements of outcome indicators from the project's logical frameworks (Table 6). The methodology for this analysis is presented in Annex VI-3.¹⁵⁶ Output and outcome-level effectiveness, contributing projects and other factors for effectiveness are then analysed for each of the ToC's development pathways.

Achievement of the 2011 and 2018 COSOP objectives

112. **Overall, the country programme made positive contributions under each of the development pathways.** Weaker points are visible in Table 6 for one or two elements of the ToC in each of the three pathways, while over-achievements were reported in two pathways: smallholder resilience, and food security and nutrition security. An increase in projects' contribution to outcomes is visible over the 2011-2023 period.¹⁵⁷ Table 6 also confirms a change of focus in projects' contributions to strategic COSOP outcomes, consistent with the evolving hierarchy of COSOP objectives.¹⁵⁸ Positive contributions were made to the third pathway throughout the portfolio.
113. **Under the 2018 COSOP projects, all activities were implemented as foreseen and at scale.** PICSA and AFN I activities (both investments and capacity-building) were effectively in place in all districts and villages visited, including in remote ones, since project start and despite the COVID challenge. This was a noticeable improvement over the first 2011 COSOP project, SSSJ, in which many activities were only implemented at the end of the project, impacting efficiency, sustainability and progress towards outcomes. It was also a marked improvement over the second 2011 COSOP project, FNML, under which activities

¹⁵⁵ This section is structured along the ToC reconstructed for the CSPE, that combines the 2011 COSOP and 2018 COSOP logics of intervention. Evidence mobilized for contribution to programme effectiveness includes: the CSPE's outcome and output indicator analysis based on PCRs and PCRVs (annex VI-4); the CSPE's project activity table reconstructed from PCRs; direct observation of effectiveness in 15 villages and contracts with 6 enterprises; and qualitative observation on conditions for effectiveness. Evidence mobilized to analyze targeting effectiveness includes: the CSPE's reconstructed project district database; the AFN I and PICSA MIS files shared by the PMUs; and the CSPE's analysis of outreach data reliability.

The methodology assembles as many indicators as possible some being measures indicators, others coming from beneficiary perceptions or M&E. This allows to compensate the weakness of some indicators.

¹⁵⁷ FNML and PICSA at mid-term met or overachieved the same number of outcome targets and underachieved two outcome targets each. SSSJ had a more limited contribution. AFN I had a slightly higher contribution among the four projects. There is a clearer improvement in effectiveness when comparing these four projects with the three pre-2011 projects, which showed an equal number of outcomes met or overachieved, and underachieved.

There were positive contributions to the first development pathway, which was explicit under the 2011 COSOP and In pre-2011 projects, under the 2018 COSOP including in PICSA. The second development pathway had more positive contributions under the 2018 COSOP. FNML also contributed to that pathway.

other than for nutrition improvement had limited outreach to the remote villages.¹⁵⁹

114. **The ToC for this CSPE illustrates synergies between development pathways regarding grassroots capacity building.** Village development plans, a crosscutting activity that contributed to capacity building, were delivered as foreseen in all projects except PICSA, where they were not planned. They remained effective in terms of participation. Training for producer groups covered both technical training and organizational training (group formation, accounting). Working through producer groups facilitated the adoption or reinforcement of integrated technical improvements that allowed higher and more resilient crop and livestock production, thus contributing to improved food security. An additional synergy between development paths 1 and 2 were the district facilitator teams in AFN I, which ensured frequent presence in the villages, covering both APGs and nutrition.

Table 6

Reported achievements of country programme under the 2011 COSOP and 2018 COSOP (and before the 2011 COSOP)

Pathway	Outcome-level indicator	Status	Contributing projects
Smallholders have Enhanced Resilience to Natural Shocks (2018 SO1)	Adoption of Climate-Smart Technologies	Overachieved	FNML RLIP;
	Adoption of Sustainable Natural Resource Management practice	Underachieved	NRSLLDP; SNRMPEP; FNML; PICSA
	Climate-resilient infrastructure	Underachieved	RLIP
	Climate-Smart Agriculture and Land Management	Met	SSSJ; FNML; PICSA
Improved Food Security and Nutrition Security (2018 SO2)	Community driven nutrition interventions	Met	AFN I
	Growth and diversification of Income	Met	AFN I
	Improved MDDW	Met	PICSA; AFN I
	Improving food security	Overachieved	RLIP; FNML; AFN I
	School Based Nutrition Interventions	Met	PICSA
Smallholders Benefit from Access to Services and Markets (2018 SO3, 2011 SO)	Sufficient food production for home consumption	Overachieved	RLIP
	Adoption of Productive Technology	Met	RLIP; NRSLLDP; SSSJ; AFN I; PICSA
	Increased Market Volume and Value for Crop and Livestock	Met	NRSLLDP; SSSJ; FNML; AFN I; PICSA
	Physical access to markets	Underachieved	SSSJ; PICSA
	Production groups	Met	NRSLLDP; SSSJ; AFN I
	Sustainable Rural Financial Services	Underachieved	RLIP; NRSLLDP; FNML

Source: analysis of logical framework outcome indicators (Annex VI-4).

Smallholder resilience

115. Improving paddy fields was a core activity throughout the reviewed period, increasingly coupled with resilient rice production techniques. All projects invested in small irrigation schemes and had areas improved 25-30 per cent above target (when the indicator was available).¹⁶⁰ This was in continuity with the pre-2011 COSOP projects.¹⁶¹ As indicated in the relevance section, the rice production

¹⁵⁹ FNML PPE.

¹⁶⁰ SSSJ, AFN I. The proportion of new versus rehabilitated schemes was not available in the logical frameworks. The field visits indicated that there was a fair proportion of rehabilitation.

¹⁶¹ RLIP.

techniques disseminated were increasingly low cost and labour reducing, therefore contribution to stable production increases.

116. Before and including PICSA, there was no indication that the climate resilience of infrastructure, a condition for effectiveness, was improving. IOE's validations and evaluations of various projects observed weaknesses in operations and maintenance (O&M) throughout the period. For O&M of irrigation schemes and drinking water, the FNML PPE reported O&M issues affecting both, despite project attention to setting up WUGs.¹⁶² For this CSPE, it was too early to confirm the effectiveness of the WUGs. There was anecdotal evidence in the visited villages in PICSA that WUGs with prior experience in O&M of irrigation schemes were more effective. There was anecdotal evidence that recommendations for a more resilient design and construction of small irrigation was not taken on board.¹⁶³
117. **The dissemination of sustainable land management practices at group and landscape level took place at a larger scale.** At group level, FNML disseminated environmentally friendly crop and animal production practices. The 2018 COSOP projects were effectively disseminating improved integrated paddy, vegetable and small livestock land use systems through both the APGs and the nutrition groups. The leadership of DOI has been critical in this respect.
118. **Evidence on actual adoption of improved practices was overall weak.** Whether on land management or agricultural practices, the endline surveys obtained high adoption rates for the improved technologies, which was a core indicator in the logical frameworks, but there was no visible distinction between being producer of a given crop or type of animal and having adopted new practices.¹⁶⁴ During the village visits, group members stated they had readily adopted the use of organic manure for example. Confirming the adoption of what was a new practice would have required direct observation, going beyond respondents' self-declaration.¹⁶⁵
119. **The land and natural resource-related activities defined as COSOP milestones were mostly not implemented or cancelled.** Only one pre-2011 COSOP project among the nine projects reviewed undertook registration of farmer land use rights and on a modest scale.¹⁶⁶ Allocation of land use rights was planned but not implemented in SSSJ and in NSLCP-RFSP. Land use plans were only piloted in SSSJ and dropped at mid-term in FNML.

Food security and nutrition security

120. **Community driven nutrition interventions were delivered in accordance with targets and proved their effectiveness.** School garden activities and small nutrition groups were delivered in accordance with plans in PICSA and FNML. In the visited PICSA villages, these allowed participation of village teachers, members of village nutrition groups and other young parents.¹⁶⁷ FNML introduced the garden grants, whose targets in terms of participants were overachieved.¹⁶⁸ This continued in AFN I, which also exceeded its targets for participants in the farmer nutrition school activities.¹⁶⁹ In SSSJ, nutrition training reached only two thirds of the target number of households.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶² The proportion of new versus rehabilitated schemes was not available in the logical frameworks. The field visits indicated that there was a fair proportion of rehabilitation, reflecting fragility of the previously built infrastructure. The PICSA project implementation manual recommended reduced use of cement in irrigation weirs. One district irrigation office was unaware of that recommendation.

¹⁶⁴ AFN I endline survey.

¹⁶⁵ Direct observation during the village visits focused on infrastructure, nutrition practices and linkage to value chains.

¹⁶⁶ District land suitability plans were completed in 42 districts and village land use plans in 254 villages. 5,238 land use certificates were issued to farmers (PCRV), both temporary and permanent (PCR). The number of beneficiary households was not recorded.

¹⁶⁷ PICSA MTR.

¹⁶⁸ The target was exceeded by more than 50 per cent in AFN I (PCR).

¹⁶⁹ The target was exceeded by 25 per cent (AFN I PCRV).

¹⁷⁰ SSSJ PCRV.

121. Combining backyard poultry, vegetables and herbs, and drinking water improvement was effective for both nutrition security and food security. The FNML PPE in the South observed small garden plots developed through the garden grants. The CSPE team observed that diversified poultry and small vegetable containers accounted for most of the homegarden activity in the North, along with some pilot integrated homegardens,¹⁷¹ while school gardens were devoted to dry season vegetables for school meals. Villagers said they consumed more eggs and gained income from poultry. The improvement of drinking water schemes was overachieved in FNML and AFN I.¹⁷²
122. **Beyond learning about diversified diets, the evidence for effective improvements in nutrition practice was weak.** Women participating in AFN farmer nutrition schools gained good understanding of dietary good practices and obstacles resulting from cultural norms.¹⁷³ The nutrition committees and farmer nutrition schools met monthly in AFN I and the PICS districts visited. This contributed as per project design to the effectiveness of the approach. In the South where poverty rates were overall higher, the FNML PPE found that it was unlikely that nutrition practices would have evolved beyond the project's lifespan.
123. The portfolio gave balanced attention to both agriculture and nutrition, even though it focused primarily on the agricultural sector. Respondents to the government scorecards clearly saw how IFAD projects combined nutrition with agriculture.¹⁷⁴ Activities promoting food security and nutrition generally reached or exceeded their targets, particularly under the 2018 COSOP. As an indicator, the minimum dietary diversity for women (MDD-W) received more attention, in the AFN I endline survey and PICS MTR. In AFN I, the indicator monitoring the number of households with improved food security was overachieved by more than 50 per cent overall, and 27 per cent among non-Lao-Tai beneficiaries.
124. **The effectiveness of promoting crop diversity outside of homegardens was limited.** Crop diversity was mainly promoted through a balance between the main staple crop, rice, and animal production. SSSJ did distribute bean seed for intercropping with maize and reached three times more households than foreseen. FNML promoted fully commercial crops, not diversified food crops. AFN I supported cardamom cultivation through beneficiary enterprises.¹⁷⁵ Also in AFN I, only a very small share (three per cent) of APGs focused on beans as a field vegetable. The diversity of vegetables and herbs in AFN I supported homegardens was distinctly higher than in non-beneficiary villages.¹⁷⁶ Farmer nutrition schools in AFN I promoted crop diversity in homegarden production and saw a higher rate of households growing vegetables like mustard greens, herbs, chilis, and bananas for household consumption than non-project villages.

Access to markets and services

125. **Production groups were effectively set up, became functional and were financed in accordance with project design.** The number of groups set up – a milestone indicator under the 2018 COSOP – was overachieved under that COSOP but this reflected a modest value of the indicator at project start – 500 groups. This was more ambitious in AFN I, which set up around two groups per village as foreseen, compared to PICS's one per village. The number of groups receiving a

¹⁷¹ One integrated homegarden was visited. It was set up by a model farmer household with support from NAFRI's PAR and integrated a fishpond, poultry, fruit and other trees and vegetable containers.

¹⁷² Beneficiaries were 131 per cent of the appraisal target for AFN I. SSSJ and FNM funded drinking water schemes were respectively 197 per cent and 108 per cent of the target (SSSJ PCR and FNML PCR).

The AFN I endline survey demonstrated this through its knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) section on nutrition. "IFAD projects pay attention to both crop/livestock production and nutrition" is the statement that received the highest score, 4.6 out of 5 (see Annex VII-2).

¹⁷⁵ AFN I beneficiary enterprises M&E file.

¹⁷⁶ The endline survey provided data on the presence of 13 crops in AFN I villages compared to control villages.

grant increased per project design: only mature groups did so in FNML, while all effective groups in AFN I received grants.¹⁷⁷

126. **The projects paid attention to progress in the maturity of agricultural production groups, which was unsurprisingly uneven.** The initial indicator retained for the logical frameworks – numbers of operational groups – was optimistic since it was 30 per cent above targets in SSSJ. Instead, only one third of households joined a group and stayed with that group for the duration of the programme. Starting from FNML, three levels of effectiveness in production groups were monitored.¹⁷⁸ There was a clear improvement in AFN I: 74 per cent of the groups were at the initial “learning” stage at the end of FNML compared to only 14 per cent at the end of AFN I, whereas only 17 per cent were advanced groups for FNML compared to 28 per cent for AFN I.¹⁷⁹ Evidence for PICSA was not available yet. To what extent this reflected improved group development methods or more experience in the North compared to the South is unconfirmed. There was anecdotal evidence in one of the villages visited of decades-long experience in production group development.¹⁸⁰
127. **Groups including “model farmers” were an effective vehicle for the adoption of productive technology.** Model farmers as heads or active members of the producer groups were selected and trained. They occasionally acted as village vets in livestock group as observed in the villages visited.¹⁸¹ Capacity building was delivered directly through the groups in the form of participatory demonstrations by NAFRI as well as more classical training. Low-cost technical packages allowed yield increases and reduction in animal mortality starting from RLIP.¹⁸² Effectiveness was confirmed despite a context of decreasing capacity of public extension services.
128. **Contracts with enterprises expanded with PICSA.** As of mid-term review, in June 2024, 49 enterprises were beneficiaries of small, medium or large grants and 33 additional ones were identified.¹⁸³ As foreseen, they signed contracts with beneficiary farmer groups. This was sharp contrast with FNML and AFN I that had each disbursed only seven enterprise grants.¹⁸⁴ In PICSA, more than half of listed enterprises (54 per cent) collected and dried field crops and 20 per cent worked in livestock. Enterprises also worked in vegetable post-harvesting (10 per cent) or provided services such as agriculture inputs, veterinary services, slaughterhouse or meat storage services for local butchers (10 per cent).
129. **Beneficiary enterprises had activities that generated limited or no added value for the groups contracting with them.** Four value chains were observed during the country visit (goats, pigs, maize and rice) (Annex VI-5). Farmer group contracts with a goat collector having invested in a new animal shed improved convenience as collection could take place all year round. A pig slaughterhouse provided value to local butchers (though not the farmers), as well as safer meat to consumers. A rice collector could purchase larger amounts of product but only if quality standards were met, which was not the case in 2023. Finally, the maize value chain was already well developed raising the question of added value from

¹⁷⁷ There were 872 APGs set up under AFN I of which 802 (92 per cent) received a grant.

¹⁷⁸ FNML PPE and AFN I APG endline assessment.

¹⁷⁹ This monitoring was outside the projects’ logical frameworks (FNML PCR, AFN I PCR). The PICSA MTR confirmed the importance of nurturing group maturity but information was not available yet at PICSA MTR. The MTR report focused on the inclusion of women and poor in the groups (PICSA MTR).

The members of a cow-raising group supported under AFN I explained their group was set up through an NGO project more than 20 years ago.

¹⁸¹ The projects directly funded veterinary services before the 2011 COSOP. Since then, continuing training of “village vets” was reported in the FNML PPE. Information on that activity was not readily available in the indicator base. Only SNRMPEP did not provide a related indicator. It reported overall subproject performance, 67 out of 71 subprojects were considered satisfactory whereas the target was 40 to 50 subprojects.

¹⁸³ PICSA enterprise grant MIS.

¹⁸⁴ FNML PPE and AFN I PCR. The target of beneficiary enterprises was also 7 for AFN I, it was not reported for FNML.

support to additional enterprises for drying and storage of maize for export.¹⁸⁵ Another approach, capacity building for farmer groups to negotiate successfully with enterprises, had been effective before the 2011 COSOP.¹⁸⁶

130. **Insufficient information was available on the outcome of small road works.** The length of small roads built or rehabilitated was the main indicator available. SSSJ reported the establishment of village road maintenance groups for improved O&M, AFN I for roads as well as irrigation and domestic water supply. The road assessment completed for AFN I found that one third of the O&M groups were not active. Self-reporting of road status by the groups was unlikely to be reliable. The issue of improvement of physical access is reviewed under efficiency.

Outreach and targeting

131. **The majority of projects were effective in their outreach to upland and poorer districts.** The nine projects took place in a total of 90 districts in 14 provinces (table 7), in effect, almost all districts in provinces other than those closest the capital city. As a result, 49 per cent of project districts were in the North region, 30 per cent in the South, and the remaining in the two central provinces (Table 4). The three pre-2011 projects made contrasted choices, with NRSLLDP reaching more upland locations, and SNRMPEP having less than 20 per cent of upland villages. The two 2011 COSOP projects equally reached upland villages, FNML being the project with the highest focus of non-Lao Tai ethnic groups.

Table 7

Portfolio outreach (districts, villages, households)

Project name	Project districts	Project villages (actual)	Beneficiary households (target)	Beneficiary households (actual)
RLIP	8	207	26 200	33 761
NRSLLDP	18	300	12 000	13 100
SNRMPEP	40	295	11 000	11 000
SSSJ	9	225	17 000	24 565
FNML	5	173	12 000	14 175
NSLCP-RFS	12	200	20 000	-
AFN I	12	400	34 000	31 775
PICSA	19	353	36 900	29 369
AFN II	20	500	28 000	N.A.
9 projects (cumulative)	143	2 653	197 100	157 745
9 projects (without overlap)	90	2 000 (1)		

Source : Annex IV-2. Notes: NRSLLDP villages: post MTR reports. SNRMPEP: the report claimed 256 to 1044 villages. The CSPE figure for SNRMPEP is the average of other projects. NRSLLDP household targets: 11250 to 15000 in reports. (1) Assumption

132. Under the 2018 COSOP, AFN difference was in the actual outreach to non-Lao Tai communities: the average non-Lao Tai population in project districts was 42 per cent for PICSA, 72 per cent of AFN I and 88 per cent for AFN II. AFN I had only 21 per cent of villages (project or non-project) that had already fulfilled all Decree 348 criteria in 2017; the share was higher for PICSA districts, where more than 50 per cent of villages had already reached these criteria (CSPE analysis presented in Annex VI-2).

¹⁸⁵ See Relevance section on the portfolio's value chain development strategy.

¹⁸⁶ In NRSLLDP, activities fully implemented including training in negotiation skills with traders and study tours on marketing (NRSLLDP PPE).

133. **Districts that took part in more than one project were poorer, upland districts.** Among the 90 districts, 55 districts (61 per cent) were targeted by a single project, while the remaining districts were targeted by two to four projects. There is a clear correlation between the number of projects a district accessed and district-level vulnerability indicators. (Annex VI-2). This shows how GoL effectively implemented the national policy targeting poorer districts in its selection of project areas until AFN.
134. **Delivery to a large number of villages and farmer groups was a distinctive feature of the portfolio.**¹⁸⁷ More than 2,500 villages were cumulatively reached.¹⁸⁸ Given the number of districts that took part in more than one project, the CSPE estimates that the portfolio reached out to 80 per cent of this figure, i.e. around 2,000 villages. This is a remarkably high figure.¹⁸⁹ Maximizing the number of villages covered was achieved through supporting only one group per project village in PICSA, two in AFN.¹⁹⁰ A contributing factor to this broad outreach was the facilitators system of the 2018 COSOP projects. Before that, the 2011 COSOP projects had only district-based facilitators and encountered difficulties to reach remote villages as reported in the FNML PPE.
135. **The reported portfolio outreach, 158,000 households or 90 per cent of the target, was a realistic figure.** These are direct beneficiaries that do not include indirect beneficiaries from small infrastructure. AFN I, for which most solid figures are available from the MIS and endline survey, reached 93 per cent of its target for beneficiary households. Around two thirds were members of an APG, which had an average of 25 households per group.¹⁹¹ The endline survey found that 81 per cent of respondents had received at least one of the two grants available, the APG grant or the homegarden grant, a number consistent with average village size.
136. **PICSA effectively implemented a batch approach, from more lowland to more upland villages.** Batch 1 villages were 50 per cent upland villages; 88 per cent already had all weather roads and all had at least partly irrigated paddy fields in 2011. Batch 3 villages were 80 per cent upland; only 40 per cent had access roads and 40 per cent only had rainfed paddy fields in 2011(Annex VI-2).¹⁹² There was a shift towards more lowland villages than envisioned at design for Batch 1 to catch up on disbursement as the COVID 19 pandemic restrictions had delayed project implementation.¹⁹³ The Batch 1 villages visited were overall stronger communities with a very small number of poor households. As of 2024, Batch 3 villages were expected to benefit from significantly lower budget allocation that would limit project effectiveness.
137. **Poor households and non-group members had fewer opportunities to participate with the important exception of AFN I.** APG members were the main group of direct beneficiaries. Village visits confirmed that poor households generally lacked labour and land to become members of these groups. AFN I

The figure is based on IOE documents when available, and IFAD documents otherwise, avoiding double counting within individual projects. However, due to overlapping project areas over time, some double counting may occur in the total sum.

The CSPE checked consistency of village numbers in various project documents. Actual village numbers were unclear for NRSLLDP (it was lowered in the MTR report) and very unclear in SNRMPEP (it ranged from 256 to 1,288 depending on reports). The total number of villages is 2,653 the project end figure for NRSLLDP, the average of the other 8 projects for SNRMPEP.

There was a total of 8389 villages countrywide in 2022 (LSB online population data) of which 6944 were rural villages, 5951 in the 14 provinces with IFAD projects. The average number of households per village in the IFAD project provinces ranged from 75 in Huaphanh to 191 in Xayabouly.

¹⁹⁰ The AFN I and PICSA MIS show this number of groups, the village visits confirmed it.

¹⁹¹ The logical frameworks, starting from FNML, provided outreach figures that avoided double accounting. These projects monitored separately (i) persons trained in production practices and/or technologies, (ii) households provided with targeted support to improve their nutrition, and (iii) persons accessing rural finance services. The CSPE confirmed that the total numbers of beneficiaries were less than the addition of these three indicators and was consistent with group numbers.

Village level data was only available to the CSPE from the 2011 agricultural census. Village connectivity overall markedly improved since then (2021 agricultural census).

¹⁹³ Country team feedback to the country visit completion wrap-up.

effectively reached a larger number of poor households through its broad coverage of nutrition activities, with 69 per cent of households receiving a garden grant.¹⁹⁴ All poor households were members of nutrition APGs in the villages visited. The use of garden grants was flexible, allowing poor households to invest in their gardens and/or raise poultry, an activity that required little land and labour. In PICSA, a small number of households around 20 beneficiaries per village, could benefit from homegarden grants. The activity targeted the school and parents, not poorer households.

138. **Non-Lao-Tai villages and households had appropriate access to the projects.** FNML reached a largely Mon-Khmer population, these groups accounting for the most disadvantaged in the country. 70 per cent of AFN I beneficiaries were non-Lao Tai. The target was 74 per cent, a figure above the average non-Lao Tai population in project districts (71 per cent) and therefore unrealistic. In PICSA, the proportion of non-Lao Tai beneficiaries were lower in the first two batches: it reached 31 percent at mid-term whereas the end target was 40 percent. This proportion improved after mid-term.¹⁹⁵
139. **The inclusion of young people only became important and monitored in the PICSA project.** The effectiveness of the 2018 COSOP's recommendation to use IFAD's Youth action plan started to take shape with PICSA. IFAD supervision had a consistent focus on targeting and the project recorded 35 per cent of young direct beneficiaries by mid-term, distinctly above the target of 25 per cent. For AFN I, data on youth were not available at project end.¹⁹⁶ Young people were also mobilized as village facilitators and as candidate model farmers. The IFAD 2021 stakeholder survey conducted in Lao PDR noted that opportunities for youth was rated lowest, which contrasts negatively with the APR average.

Innovation

140. **IFAD supported technical and non-technical innovation, through a step-by-step approach.**¹⁹⁷ The CSPE identified four types of innovation in the portfolio: the operational definition of agriculture for nutrition (jointly with WFP and applied in both the PICSA and AFN approaches), farmer group development, appropriate agricultural technology packages for crops and livestock (in partnership with NAFRI), and project M&E (in parallel with other development partners). These innovations were developed across the portfolio, each project building upon the previous one. They were a mix of novel, appropriate technologies that were new in the context of beneficiary villages. Of note were simple productive innovations such as improving backyard poultry production, and project management innovations like opening group bank accounts and group member decision making for use of these grants. The CSPE observed that this continuity contrasted with a perception of IFAD in the country as starting every new project from scratch. In non-lending activities, IFAD's support for LFA was innovative. Until recently only a very small number of cooperatives had been established in Laos and only at the subnational level.¹⁹⁸
141. **Combining improved small-scale crop and livestock production with nutrition behaviour change was one of these innovations.** Homegarden improvements started as early as RLIP. It continued in SSSJ when the farmer

¹⁹⁴ AFN I endline survey.

¹⁹⁵ At mid-term (end 2023), PICSA had already reached out to 101,813 persons, of which 31,888 were non-Lao Tai (MTR logical framework). The CSPE's analysis by project batch confirmed that the first two batches had covered a higher proportion of lowland villages (Annex VI). MAF reported that PICSA's targeting strategy had significantly improved six months later, the number of non-Lao Tai beneficiaries having grown to 39,078 people.

¹⁹⁶ PICSA MTR and AFN I PCR.

¹⁹⁷ Across the portfolio, innovation was the criterion that received the highest average score (4.5) after relevance. Innovation was the only criteria scored at 5 in the FNML PPE, one point above the PCR. SNRMPEP and AFN 1 were scored 5 on innovation both in the PCR and PCR.V.

This was all the more innovative as the two neighboring countries with a similar country system have built instead a mass organization for farmers (in Vietnam) or do not have national farmer organizations (China) (see Policy engagement section).

nutrition school approach was tested under the government's nutrition convergence approach.¹⁹⁹ AFN I went a step further by launching Social and Behaviour Change Communication, an activity reinforced in the design of AFN II. AFN II also continued to innovate with a project activity focused on wild foods and nutrition, and with the introduction of open pollinated seed for vegetable production (Annex VI-6).

142. **Directing grants to farmer group bank accounts was a second innovation.** E-survey respondents identified direct support to farmer groups as a main area of innovation in IFAD projects.²⁰⁰ SSSJ piloted block grants to farmer groups grants starting from MTR, in partnership with LuxDev. FNML started delivering grants through individual group bank accounts but limited this option to mature APGs. Grants were delivered to all producer groups starting from AFN I as a mainstreamed and secure disbursement process. The bank accounts also facilitated groups' access to the latest new equipment from local markets. In the villages visited, grass mowers and improved plastic pipes were example of this newly available equipment.
143. **In the grants, joint capacity building and bottom-up financial management were innovative approaches.** Discussion with groups demonstrated how having their own bank account right after training was an incentive for group ownership of project activities. The project design documents had instead stated that the incentive was provided by a matching grant scheme whereby beneficiaries were to contribute to the investment. The village visits demonstrated that none of the matching contributions to APG grants were in cash and that villagers expected to provide labour contributions to in-village construction work.
144. Technical packages for animal raising, paddy cultivation and vegetables included innovative practices that were increasingly fit for broad adoption. In AFN I, backyard agriculture was a focus, which made these technical packages even lower cost and easier to adopt. PICSA extended a novel technique in rice transplanting using a bamboo pole or plastic pipe, a labour-saving technique that was easy to adopt and extend to non-group members.²⁰¹ This approach to paddy cultivation was a marked improvement from pre-COSOP 2011 projects.²⁰² Multiple Water Use Systems (MUS), used for both irrigation and drinking water, were another example of appropriate technology. One technical innovation was described as unsuccessful in group discussions: pesticides processed from local plants proved less effective than the widely available chemical pesticides and could not replace them.
145. **Monitoring and evaluation was a focus in the introduction of new features in project management.** The introduction of social media and the use of a digital monitoring system are among these new features. Subnational government agencies learned related project management skills with support from experts. This contributed to their adoption of IT communication tools and the use of digital datasets.²⁰³
146. **Overall innovation.** Innovation was encouraged throughout the review period and was successful in three domains, linking agriculture and nutrition behaviour

The farmer nutrition schools, introduced under AFN I, were semi-structured gathering promoting information sharing and interactive discussions about nutrition through village nutrition facilitators, with the aim of encouraging social behaviour change, combined with incentive to develop village-based homegardens (source).

One e-survey respondent wrote: "IFAD has developed very innovative approach to successfully finance directly farmers organizations. This is a major breakthrough in the context of Lao PDR".

In this technique for rice transplanting in paddy fields, a bamboo pole or plastic pipe with a metal scoop attached at the end is used to dig holes, drop seeds into the holes and cover them with soil. This method has significantly reduced production costs for farmers (FGD, Xaysathan District).

The System of Rice Intensification was introduced in RLIP despite its being labour-intensive and inappropriate to upland environments and failed (RLIP PPE). SNRMPEP piloted mechanized weeders but there was indication but this expensive equipment proved to be fit for adoption by a small number of farmers.

²⁰³ Direct observation during the district FGDs.

change, farmer group construction, and smallholder animal raising and staple crops. The CSPE rates innovation **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

147. **Overall effectiveness.** The portfolio achieved broad outreach of villages throughout the reviewed period. Effectiveness at activity level was an issue in the 2011 COSOP projects due to implementation delays. Conversely, effectiveness in delivering activities became a strength of the portfolio in the 2018 COSOP projects. Targeting effectiveness was in line with the strategy for district selection and household coverage, and therefore effectively diverged in PICSA while AFN II refocused on poorest villages. The CSPE rates effectiveness **moderately satisfactory (4)**

D. Efficiency

148. The efficiency criterion assesses the extent to which the strategy and programme delivered, or will likely deliver, results in a timely and economically efficient manner. It involves two areas: operational efficiency (which assesses how well the intervention was managed, including timeliness, and business processes) and economic efficiency (which assesses the conversion of inputs into results).
149. Efficiency was the criterion rated lowest on average by IOE (PPEs and PCRVS), with three projects receiving ratings in the unsatisfactory range (SSSJ, FNML and NRSLLDP). Low ratings were mainly related to delayed start-up, continued delays in implementation, slow disbursements of IFAD loans, high project management costs, and high costs for technical assistance.²⁰⁴ The CSPE further identifies weaknesses in more recent projects that were not mentioned in the AFN I PCR and the PICSA MTR, and are described in the following paragraphs.²⁰⁵

Financial performance

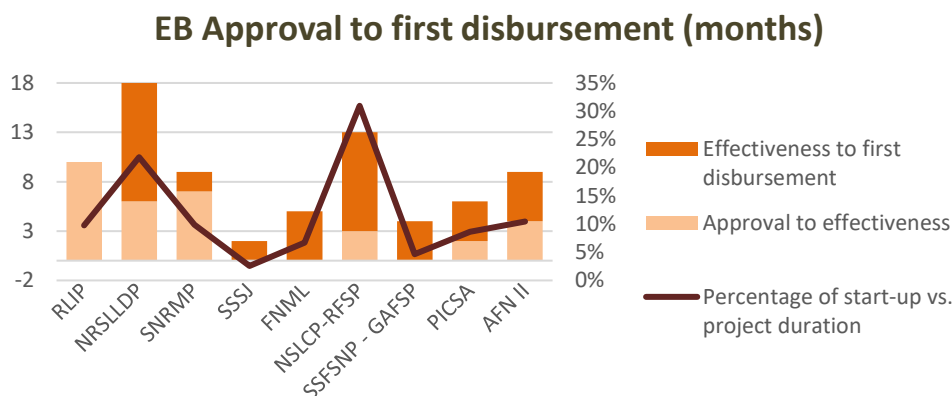
150. **Delays during project start-up reduced over the CSPE review period.** The average effectiveness gap between IFAD's executive board (EB) approval and projects entering into force reduced from close to eight months for pre-2011 projects to less than one month for the 2011 COSOP projects and AFN I, though it increased slightly to an average of 3 months for the two ongoing projects (see figure 3 below).²⁰⁶ The average percentage of the start-up period (from EB approval to first disbursement) against total project duration decreased from 14 per cent in projects designed prior to the 2011 COSOP to 10 per cent for ongoing projects. This improvement took place despite some degree of complexity generated by cofinancing with ADB or WFP. In PICSA, the most recent project for which the start-up period is completed, the project teams succeeded in catching up after an initial period of delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both the disbursement rates and annual workplan and budget (AWPB) target achievement increasing sharply starting from end 2021. In these various cases having technical assistance in place early on contributed to quick start-up.

Figure 2
Effectiveness gap over review period

²⁰⁴ Unless mentioned otherwise, information in this section was extracted from the PPEs for RLIP, NRSLLDP and FNML, and from PCRs and PCRVS for the other projects.

Efficiency was rated moderately satisfactory in the AFN I PCR, value for money was rated satisfactory in the PICSA MTR.

NRSLLDP (launched in 2007) took 18 months and the NSLCP-RFSP took 13 months from EB approval to the first disbursement. In NRSLLDP, contracts with the Lao Women's Union (LWU) were not finalized until January 2009 (two years later), delaying Community-Driven Development (CDD) activities and initial microfinance training.



Source: CSPE analysis based on IOE evaluation reports

151. **Delays in implementation contributed to reduce efficiency.** During the 2018 COSOP period, delays were compensated by project extensions (FNML and AFN I).²⁰⁷ Delays in implementation meant that operational costs were spent on fewer activities in the villages during the first years and activities were rushed in the later years of the project. Projects that were planned for less than seven years typically experienced delays during their first years that were covered through an extension of the project's timeframe. FNML experienced delays in the first four years and was extended by one year. The AFN I completion date was extended by one year.²⁰⁸ To prevent delays due to staff recruitment processes, AFN II used the same central office as AFN 1 and maintained some of the earlier staff.

Operational efficiency

152. **Project management costs were high throughout the period.**²⁰⁹ They exceeded the typical IFAD programme management cost ratio of 10-15 per cent in all projects other than RLIP.²¹⁰ RLIP and SNRMP had the highest efficiency ratings among IFAD's portfolio, with relatively low programme management costs at project completion (see figure 2 below). NRSLLDP, SSSJ and FNML had management costs above 25 per cent at project closure. For PICSA, the project management cost, initially estimated at 12 per cent of the total project cost,²¹¹ increased to 26 per cent at midterm.²¹²
153. **Government operational costs other than project management allocated to subnational levels added to high management costs.** PCRs and in-country interviews attributed high management costs to the remoteness of beneficiary villages. The complexity of institutional structures involved in programme implementation, including the sizeable coordination teams put in place at national and subnational levels also contributed to these high costs. For example, translation costs were high given administrative requirements.²¹³ Working through the existing socioeconomic development committees instead of creating ad hoc project steering committees at national, provincial and district levels to reduce costs was done in some projects but not extended to subsequent ones. AFN II was introducing the participation of provincial project staff to only focus on the district government.²¹⁴

²⁰⁷ With the exception of NSLCP-RFSP which was closed after MTR.

²⁰⁸ SNRMPEP, a project with a subproject approach and a planned duration of seven years, was an exception: it was completed months ahead of the IFAD completion date.

The reported project management costs other than in RLIP ranged from a minimum 17 per cent in SNRMPEP to a maximum of 44.9 per cent in SSSJ (IOE reports and PCRs).

The RLIP PPE reported project management costs of only 2.9 per cent, down from an estimated 8.4 per cent at design stage but did not provide an explanation for these low figures.

²¹¹ Source: PDR

²¹² Source: Mid Term Review Feb 2024

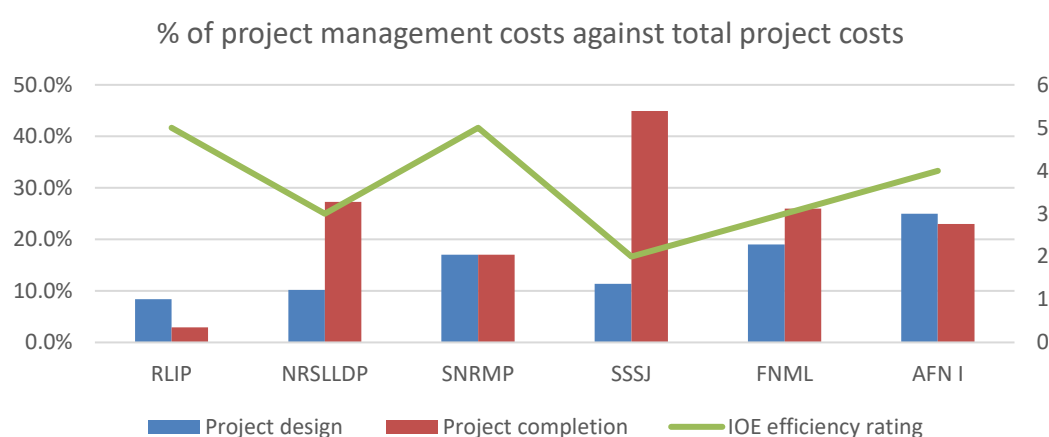
²¹³ This was mentioned in CSPE interviews.

²¹⁴ Project design report and PAFO interviews.

154. Inadequate incentives for government staff to participate, and salary disparities between technical assistance teams and government employees, had been reported as obstacles to implementation (in SSSJ for example). Under the 2018 COSOP local governments' operational costs were justified as a capacity building investment. The project budgets supported the operational costs of local government staff, especially for travel to project villages. Staff operational costs were paid in the form of daily subsistence allowances. CSPE discussions with district government revealed that part of these costs were simply to supervise the implementation of planned activities in the villages, not to deliver capacity building services. In AFN I, these operational costs were budgeted under the "strengthened public services" (11 per cent of total project costs). PICSA budgets included recurrent costs under each budget line.²¹⁵

Figure 3

Share of management costs and IOE efficiency ratings for closed projects



Source: CSPE analysis based on IOE evaluation reports

155. **Project costs per beneficiary were consistently low over the review period.** Average investment per beneficiary household at project end was around USD 1,300 in the pre-2011 COSOP projects and in AFN I. The two 2011 COSOP projects anticipated similar project costs at design stage. The investment per beneficiary in these two projects then decreased and was on average less than USD 1000 at project end. In PICSA, the CSPE observed that new villages being selected for batch 3 villages would have significantly lower unit costs than villages in the previous two batches.
156. **The proportion of total budget allocated to in-village activities was significantly low.** Altogether the share of project costs that were actually invested in the villages was only 55 per cent in SSSJ. Significant resources were used as decided at design stage in operational costs and equipment for support services from NAFRI and LWU.
157. **Inadequately low unit costs were in use for the construction of small rural infrastructure, compromising quality.** Compared to the pre-2011 COSOP projects, the planned unit cost for roads in project documents was US\$5,000 per kilometre or less in AFN I and PICSA, a third of what they were in RLIP and SSSJ (table 8). While roads built in more recent projects are cheaper, their questioned durability raises significant efficiency concerns. PICSA provided only US\$9,000 per

²¹⁵ Covering the operational costs of district governments responded to expectations. There was a trade off between effectiveness and efficiency at the expenses of the latter. At the beginning of SSSJ for example, limited ownership of the project by sub-national agencies had been reported as obstacles to implementation as a consequence of inadequate incentives for government staff to participate, as salary disparities between technical assistance teams and government employees caused resentment.

irrigation scheme. Construction work relied significantly on villagers' unpaid labour contribution as recalled in national interviews. In one of the PICSA provinces, this labour contribution was reportedly discounted at 25-30 per cent of its value to fit into the predefined matching grant contribution. Other factors that compromised quality of the roads are analysed in the Sustainability section.

Table 8

Road unit costs (USD / Km) across the portfolio

Project	Planned expense	Actual expense
AFN II	4,500	
PICSA	8,000*	
AFN I	n.a.	1,252
SSSJ	14,117	8,421
RLIP	15 296	12 173

Source: RLIP PCR pg. 45 and 62; SSSJ PCR pg. vii and 8; AFN Infrastructure Assessment Survey June 2022; PICSA SIS May 2024, pg. 5; AFN II PDR annex 4 table 4 (pg.6) * Increased from 5,000 USD at project MTR

158. **The issue of low unit costs gained in importance in the current context of the economic crisis.** Unit costs for infrastructure were defined by the departments in charge. In PICSA this was DoI for irrigation schemes, and the office of Public Works and Transport for access tracks and roads. IFAD formally allowed adjustment of scale to respond to inflation. The unit cost for roads was increased to US\$8000 per kilometre at PICSA mid-term. This had not started in districts visited and was a major concern during the district FGDs, with the principal cause being that unit cost establishment and guidelines are established by a central level MAF department.

Economic efficiency

159. Economic and financial analysis confirmed economic viability of small-scale crop and animal production, animal health services and access roads. An economic and financial analysis was undertaken in all projects regardless of loan or grant financing. Three projects (SNRMPEP, SSSJ, and AFN1) saw a higher Economic Internal Rate of Return (EIRR) at completion compared to the initial appraisal. SNRMPEP had demonstrated the economic viability of livestock health services. FNML demonstrated positive contribution from the rehabilitation of rural roads as well as income generated from homegardens and fishponds. In the North region, the economic viability of smallholder livestock production was dependent on variable market prices. In SSSJ, better road connectivity was a positive factor contributing to economic viability, but the Economic and Financial Analysis found this was due to the regional context, rather than project improvements. Of note, activities with fair EIRR only became fully operational on the final year in SSSJ, reducing actual returns to beneficiaries. In FNML, deterioration of drinking water schemes soon after construction also meant that economic returns did not materialize.
160. **Overall efficiency.** Efficiency has been a weak point at programme level despite efforts made to maintain progress in the implementation of individual projects during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Operational costs were high throughout the period until they were revised after PICSA mid-term. The true costs of implementation were often hidden in the project design budgets. The unit costs for infrastructure were unrealistically low and a major factor contributing to low quality and sustainability. The latter two issues were present in AFN I and PICSA. Implementation delays, although reduced under the 2018 COSOP, usually required project extension. Economic and financial analysis was available for all projects and confirmed the economic value of investing into small-scale productive activities,

even in remote locations. The CSPE rates efficiency as **moderately unsatisfactory (3)**.

E. Rural poverty impact

161. This section analyses the contribution of the country programme according to the following impact dimensions: (i) incomes, assets and productive capacity; (ii) household food security and nutrition; (iii) human and social capital; and (iv) institutions and policies. The analysis was conducted using available evidence sources on the programme's contribution to impacts, which includes robust impact analysis.
162. IFAD's contribution to poverty is challenging to ascertain within the country context, due to the following three factors. First, as noted in several interviews, improvements in the project areas came from market forces, especially in the North, and the combined action of development partners' projects. Second, due to the high proportion of co-financing in IFAD project budgets, project impact was the result of joint action by IFAD and ADB or WFP. Third, there were no rigorous impact assessments for any of the projects evaluated. The endline surveys struggled to identify counterfactual groups, given the high number of ODA projects within the same districts.
163. In the absence of rigorous impact evaluations, the CSPE relied on evidence from the following sources: (i) the three PPEs,²¹⁶ (ii) the FNML and AFN I endline surveys,²¹⁷ selecting their more rigorous findings, and (iii) a project partner's focused impact survey on nutrition schools.²¹⁸ The analysis examines the pathways shown in the ToC to identify the portfolio impacts.

Income and assets

164. **The portfolio's contribution to the on-going reduction of rural poverty during the review period was modest and uneven.** Poverty rates in FNML villages decreased from 73 per cent in 2014 to 53 per cent in 2020 – although this was less than the 42 per cent decline in the poverty headcount in the Southern region over that period.²¹⁹ Limited impact on poverty reduction was also documented in the earlier project, NRSLLDP, which built livestock production groups with selected households.²²⁰ In addition, the focus on paddy field improvement that took place in most projects and was the focus in PICSA, had a lower poverty reduction impact, as poor households were more likely to have no access to paddy land.²²¹
165. **IOE PPEs confirmed the increases in assets documented in the endline surveys.** The RLIP PPE observed a strong connection between participation in the project and the observed increases in assets. The average household asset index measured among FNML beneficiaries, very low at project start, increased by 85 per cent, with beneficiaries having purchased items such as motorbikes and improved their houses. This index, higher among AFN I beneficiaries at project start, increased by 20 per cent; ownership of motorcycles and mobile phones increased

²¹⁶ The PPES took place in 2015 (RLIP), 2016 (NRSLLDP) and 2023 (FNML). IOE also commissioned an impact evaluation of RLIP as part of the IFAD 9 Impact Assessment Initiative, but the report was not available to the CSPE. AFN 2020. Agriculture for Nutrition Project Endline Survey, MAF/DOPC 2023. Agriculture for Nutrition Project Endline Survey (report and database).

²¹⁸ WFP 2020. Farmer Nutrition School Household Impact Survey.

²¹⁹ FNML PPE.

²²⁰ The NRSLLDP PPE stated that "the project has not been able to engage and empower the poorest households adequately through LPG participation. In fact, the poorest households had less time available for group activities and have been less able to undertake the risks of intensified livestock production". The FNML PPE stated that, "from M&E data and field interviews there is also insufficient evidence to suggest that APGs were able to pull the poorest out of extreme poverty".

This was reconfirmed during village visits. Castella et al described poor households in the Northern uplands as being trapped in upland rice cultivation. (Jean-Christophe et al. 2012. Agrarian Transition in the Northern Uplands of Lao PDR: a Meta-Analysis of Changes in Landscapes and Livelihoods. 3rd International Conference on Conservation Agriculture in Southeast Asia, Hanoi).

by 9 percentage points and reached respectively 82 per cent and 74 per cent. One third of households (32 per cent) in the AFN I villages felt their financial situation had improved significantly compared to 13 per cent on the control group; only 5 per cent of beneficiary respondents reported their incomes were the same as before, compared to 20 per cent in the control group.²²²

166. **There were some evidence that higher and more secure animal assets also led to an increase in assets and incomes.** This was documented in the second PPE (NRSLLDP) that took place five years after project end. In AFN I, the endline survey calculated beneficiaries' incomes from their own crop and animal production and found it had increased by 30 per cent. However, crop and animal production accounted for only fifty per cent of AFN I beneficiaries' incomes. Casual work on other farms and full or part-time employment were the main sources of additional income.²²³
167. **Farmers were heavily affected by the COVID 19 crisis.** A rapid assessment conducted by IFAD's Research and Impact Assessment Division (RIA) found that out of the sample households (400 households), more than 80 percent reported a sharp decline in production, market sales and resilience due to COVID-19; women and youth headed beneficiary households seem to have been more affected compared to those headed by men and adults, respectively.²²⁴ Higher prices for inputs (e.g. fuel) have increased the production costs of farmers.²²⁵ Funding from IFAD's Rural Poor Stimulus Facility²²⁶ helped farmers to recover production, sales and asset ownership after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, total income and resilience did not fully recover.²²⁷

Food security and nutrition

168. **The endline surveys reported improved food security throughout the CSPE review period, from RLIP to AFN I.** In RLIP, paddy field areas were expanded by 32 per cent in the Southern project province of Attapeu, and 20 per cent in the Northern province of Xayaboury.²²⁸ Rice yields increased from 1.5 to 2 tonnes/ha under rainfed conditions.²²⁹ In SSSJ, 25 per cent of beneficiaries experienced a hunger season at project end compared to 50 per cent at project start. In FNML, food insecurity reduced between 2014 and 2020.²³⁰ In AFN I, the proportion of beneficiaries experiencing food insecurity over a period of three months declined from 10 per cent in 2020 to 5 per cent in 2023.²³¹
169. **In the North region, the AFN approach generated positive impact on children's nutrition.** The percentage of children from 6 to 23 months that met a Minimum Acceptable Diet (MAD) increased from 20 per cent before the project to 63 per cent at project end in AFN villages, whereas it only increased from 20 to 31 per cent in control villages. There was also a clear improvement in the IDDS indicator (Individual Dietary Diversity Score) for children under 5 years old, with

²²² The household asset index was a measurable indicator collected during the endline surveys. In the AFN I endline survey, this was combined with a survey on perceptions on changes in incomes.

²²³ AFN I endline survey. The survey took place in 2022 and took into account a 20% inflation to assess poverty reduction. It did not specify whether the 30% income increase was in current prices or constant prices. Remittances from family members based or working outside Laos were another income source but accounted for less than 34 per cent of AFN I beneficiaries' incomes.

²²⁴ IFAD. No date. Rapid Assessment: Assuring Resiliency of Family Farmers (ARISE-Farmers) amidst COVID-19.

²²⁵ During the village visits, farmers complained about the increased cost of fuel, not about difficulties to purchase food.

²²⁶ Laos benefitted from the Rural Poor Stimulus Facility (RPSF) through the national-level farmer organization (FO) platforms and IFAD's Asia-Pacific Farmers Program (APFP). The RPSF was launched in April 2020, as IFAD's multi-donor response to COVID-19. It sought to improve the resilience of rural livelihoods in the context of the crisis by ensuring timely access to inputs, information, markets and liquidity.

²²⁷ Only between 50 and 60 percent of households reported having maintained or improved on these indicators.

²²⁸ RLIP PPE

²²⁹ Increases from 4 to 6 tonnes/ha were reported under irrigation (RLIP PPE). These were likely to be yields under optimal conditions. Comparison data with provincial average was not available.

²³⁰ The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale showed a reduction in the prevalence of household food insecurity from a score of 9.5 in 2014 to 6 in 2020.

²³¹ Mid term end line. No significant difference with control groups but others also likely to have benefitted from other projects.

visible improvement in the uptake of all food categories other than starchy staples, especially eggs, legumes and milk products.²³² AFN II found a need to retarget homegardens for pregnant women and children under 2 years old, with the target being the whole family, to ensure positive impact on the nutrition of both children and their mothers.²³³

170. **In the South, chronic malnutrition did not reduce at the same rate.** Chronic malnutrition increased in the FNML project area: stunting and wasting of children under five were markedly higher than at project start.²³⁴ The FNML PPE noted this was at odds with a national trend of improvement and highlighted how malnutrition is a multidimensional issue as also reflected in the national nutrition plan of action.²³⁵ A similar negative trend was observed in both FNML and control villages, indicating that these restrictions and other external factors had some influence.

Human and social capital empowerment

171. **There was sporadic evidence of enhanced community capacity.** The portfolio projects strived to increase capacity at three levels: community, household groups and individual households as group members. Projects supported village development plans under the 2011 COSOP. All projects supported the construction of village meeting halls, often expanded and used as nutrition schools in AFN I villages. Young village volunteers from the communities themselves had a well-designed facilitator role in the AFN I project, a specific feature of that project.²³⁶ In several village visited by the CSPE team, the group leaders explained that they were empowered by being able to access a bank account for the first time and deciding how to make use of their bank accounts. PICSA placed a greater focus on producer groups. Small rural roads built by the projects primarily connected producer groups' land, as observed during the village visits as.²³⁷
172. Training by projects made positive contributions for district government staff and young village volunteers and retaining human resources. The government scorecards revealed that 80 per cent of PAFO and district level respondents were in the same position five years before, including government as well as project staff. Skills in interacting with villages had been built. For village-level project volunteers, this was joint impact of WFP (providing funding for some the staff and the nutrition improvement methodology) and IFAD (providing funding for other staff). The introduction and dissemination of the farmer group approach was supported through the portfolio; it followed the government's model farmer system and cannot be attributed to IFAD.

Institutions and policies

173. **IFAD engaged in the implementation of the district-level devolution policy, demonstrating the feasibility of working in remote villages.**²³⁸ From 2012, projects provided training for government staff in provincial and district-level institutions. Although challenges were met and dependency on ODA remained high, IFAD is one of the development partners that demonstrated how district governments could reach out to remote villages in this coordinated manner. Another contribution was continued encouragement of a step-by-step transition for

²³² AFN I endline survey. A decline in child stunting and underweight rates was also reported in this survey but it came from national surveys, not the project villages.

²³³ AFN II project design report.

²³⁴ The acute malnutrition rate (wasting) increased from 10 per cent in the baseline to 19 per cent in the FNML endline survey, chronic malnutrition (stunting) from 39 to 63 per cent.

²³⁵ FNML PPE.

²³⁶ The term "community facilitator" employed in other IFAD projects referred to facilitators working in the villages, not from the villages. AFN I facilitators were young men and women from the villages. They were selected by WFP and received an allowance of 65,000 Kip per month. In one visited district, each village benefitted from three village facilitators, each of them pairing with one village committee member.

²³⁷ It was noted in some district discussions that shifting communities' current attitudes of expecting support from government to instead community ownership of small infrastructure investments was a long-term perspective.

²³⁸ Confirmed through interviews at district level and field visits.

smallholders out of rotational agriculture while the national policy at that time was calling for accelerated transition.²³⁹

174. **Overall poverty reduction impact.** While rural poverty has overall been on a declining trend, limited evidence was available on progress in areas targeted by IFAD-supported projects. Despite absence of rigorous data on agricultural incomes, positive impact has been noted on household assets (RLIP, NRSLLDP, FNML, AFN I). Food production increased in several projects (RLIP, SSSJ, FNML, AFN I). Improvements in child nutrition were confirmed in the North (AFN I), but not in the South (FNML) where the reduction of chronic malnutrition was behind the national trend due to the challenging regional context. Evidence on enhanced community capacities was mainly anecdotal. By aligning with Government's decentralisation policy, IFAD helped building individual capacities at district level and among young village leaders. Given the scant evidence available on other dimensions of rural poverty, poverty impact can only be rated **moderately unsatisfactory (3)**.

F. Gender equality and women's empowerment

175. This section on gender equality and women's empowerment assesses the extent to which the three main objectives of the IFAD policy on gender equality and women's empowerment (IFAD, 2012) were achieved. These objectives are to: (i) promote economic empowerment (ii) enable women and men to have equal voice and influence; and (iii) achieve a more equitable balance in workloads and in the sharing of economic and social benefits. Before analysing these aspects, the evaluation has ascertained the relevance of gender aspects in the programme.
176. **The COSOPs incrementally focused on women and, particularly, nutrition.** The 2011 COSOP's targeting strategy had a strong focus on women, women-led households and youth, and IFAD would ensure gender mainstreaming activities by formulating gender-sensitive working plans and raising gender awareness among its staff and partners. Targeting included food insecurity as a dimension within its strategy and in strategic objectives, and the inclusion of women in production and marketing systems. The 2018 COSOP maintained this focus and remained in line with IFAD policies on gender and targeting. It expanded on the 2011 COSOP's focus on nutrition to include nutrition-sensitive agriculture and women-led dietary improvement through education, while maintaining support for women's access to production and marketing processes, and self/targeting measures such as microfinance. AFN II proposed the Gender Action and Learning System to empower women, generate common development visions, and address domestic violence.
177. The pre-2011 COSOP and the 2011 COSOP projects' GAPs and gender-sensitive strategies were weak in considering different ages, cultures and languages. The SSSJ PCRV and FNML PPE reported on the weak consideration of age, culture and language.²⁴⁰ The importance of GEWE initiatives affecting indigenous groups more disproportionately was already known to IFAD through its 2012 Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples' Issues for Lao PDR.²⁴¹ The CSPE mission observed that female extension staff and WFP's DAFO village facilitator system in AFN I were effective in communicating with non-Lao Tai communities. Likewise, younger APG members could translate for older women and vulnerable groups during the FGDs. The extent to which this was common throughout all non-Lao Tai villages in the 2018 COSOP projects is unknown.

²³⁹ ICIMOD. 2021. Ensuring seasonal food availability and dietary diversity during and after transition of shifting cultivation systems to settled agriculture. Policy brief. The CSPE report also refers to rotational agriculture as an extensive system and to settled agriculture integrated with animal raising as a more intensive system (see ENR-CCA section).

The SSSJ PCRV noted that male extension workers were not able to reach out to ethnic groups and communicate with women. The FNML PPE noted that staff was only able to communicate in Lao, reaching out to young women at the expense of older women.

²⁴¹ IFAD. 2012. Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples' Issues - Lao PDR.

178. There is **very little information on the financial resources dedicated to implementing GAPs in the projects**, and human resources have been poor. Staffing gender and nutrition experts was a recurrent problem during both COSOP periods.²⁴² Gender mainstreaming in PICSA is monitored by gender focal points at PAFO and DAFO, but since May 2023 there has been no Targeting and Social expert at the central level, who was to be either recruited externally or reassigned to a PMU member in 2024.
179. The principal partner institution to work across the portfolio was the LWU, who proved to be a **positive, versatile partner representing both implementing agency and vehicle of IFAD support for GEWE throughout the portfolio**. As an implementing agency LWU supported mainstreaming GEWE activities in RLIP as well as having RLIP support LWU activities in target villages through programme staff. In FNML, the project followed LWU's mandate on promoting gender equality and took the lead with rural finance in Women Development Funds. LWU was a highly competent implementing partner in supporting farmer groups, cooking demonstrations and evening nutrition class activities. LWU's role in the National Convergence Approach for Nutrition also made it a required partner for nutrition activities both at a national level as well as in district committees for nutrition.²⁴³
180. **Gender emerged as a distinct and successful entry point for targeting women through its nexus with nutrition** in AFN I and for the ongoing AFN II.²⁴⁴ Approaches targeting women have yielded positive results, particularly through the gender-nutrition nexus and the enrolment of women in APGs. Women were targeted for nutrition activities since the pre-2011 COSOP projects.²⁴⁵ Women's participation in production groups included crops and small livestock.²⁴⁶ Small livestock such as poultry and goats were observed in field interviews as having a particular popularity amongst women, who reported a positive impact on their income generation. Attribution to this success was also observed during field visits through district project staff who encouraged women to participate as APG committee members and project staff.
181. **The gender-nutrition nexus approach also contributed to changing gender roles**. This included nutrition activities such as homegardens and the Farmer Nutrition Schools.²⁴⁷ Projects reported that men participating in these were more knowledgeable of the importance of child nutrition, more involved in household chores, and in raising children. Women were responsible for managing productive activity income as well as household income. Survey data showed that pregnant women had more meals a day and were able to work less per day.²⁴⁸ Earlier projects collected data on intra-household violence and more equitable decision-making but positive changes in these indicators are not easily attributable to the projects.²⁴⁹
182. **Participation of women** was recorded in most project designs, and women have represented a substantial majority of beneficiaries throughout the portfolio. Among the pre-2011 COSOP projects, only RLIP collected data on women beneficiaries, who accounted for 50 per cent of all beneficiaries. Women accounted for 58 per cent of beneficiaries in the completed projects, and 52 per cent in the ongoing PICSA project.

²⁴² SSSJ PCR/V; FNML PPE; AFN I PCR/V

²⁴³ AFN I PCR; PICSA PDR.

²⁴⁴ See Annex VI-7 on the gender-nutrition nexus approach. This approach defines women and mothers as primary beneficiaries of nutrition activities, that in turn leads to improved gender-related activities and outcomes, including in improving the workloads of women and sensitizing men to household responsibilities. This has been an effective strategy in AFN I and will be replicated in AFN II.

²⁴⁵ RLIP PPE.

²⁴⁶ NRSLLDP PPE, FNML PPE

²⁴⁷ FNML PPE; observed in field visits in AFN I villages.

²⁴⁸ Farmer Nutrition School Household Impact Survey

²⁴⁹ SNRMPEP PCR/V; FNML PPE.

183. **Tracking gender disaggregated indicators improved in recent projects.** PICSA and AFN I tracked gender disaggregated indicators in the baseline and midline surveys, and in the Farmer Nutrition School Household Impact Survey. This survey confirmed that women had actively participated in the activity and produced disaggregated outcomes by gender of nutrition statuses and knowledge of nutrition.²⁵⁰ The PICSA M&E system also tracked participation of non-Lao Tai beneficiaries.
184. **One promising aspect of women's participation that was halted in the IFAD portfolio** was women's participation in and access to rural financial services, despite the 2018 COSOP identifying this thematic area as a self-targeting focus for projects. Previous projects (RLIP, NRSLLDP, FNML) saw women generating savings through IFAD-supported rural financial institutions. LWU was a consistent partner that encouraged women to participate in rural finance. This was no longer the case in 2018 COSOP projects due to the cancellation of rural finance as a programmatic approach.²⁵¹
185. **A noteworthy achievement was the enhancement of water infrastructure development that saved women's labour.** Water collection is typically a household responsibility assumed by women. Building or improving water supply infrastructure reduced women's time in fetching water, and irrigation infrastructure improvements which included lining canals with concrete saved time for women who were often responsible for repairing damaged earthen canals as observed by the CSPE mission.²⁵² Domestic water supply was supported in the pre-2011 COSOP projects. AFN I and II re-introduced this activity.²⁵³ Selection of irrigation sites in AFN I and PICSA also improved water supply with a positive effect on women's work loads. Other activities reducing women's workloads included planting forage for animal feed in NRSLLDP and PICSA, and of increased support from other household family members who had joined Farmer Nutrition Schools and associated activities in AFN I.²⁵⁴
186. The portfolio has gone from gender mainstreaming to gradually introducing more gender transformative approaches, improving their voice and representation. Mainstreaming activities included women but did not immediately address root causes of gender discrimination and inequality, nor challenge established gender roles. Examples included aiming to ensure women's access to resources such as financial services, APGs reinforcing gender roles such as men receiving veterinary training or large ruminants, or activities where both spouses received titles such as land certificates.²⁵⁵ However, participatory processes encouraged women's involvement in village-wide processes in both older projects and in AFN I.²⁵⁶ Women stated that joining APGs provided opportunities for networking and information sharing, which helped them gain confidence.²⁵⁷
187. **There is little evidence of any gender transformative action occurring at policy level.** The SNRMPEP PCR stated that the six policy documents incorporated GEWE, though there was no mention of follow-ups on these.²⁵⁸ DAFOs met in the field visits showed lukewarm support to the idea that IFAD supported women's

²⁵⁰ WFP 2020. Farmer Nutrition School Household Impact Survey.

²⁵¹ In village banks monitored through LTS, 51 per cent of account holders are women. It is encouraged that village bank bylaws have female village bank committee members (LTS 2024, *ibid*).

²⁵² RLIP PPE.

²⁵³ In AFN1, 120 "domestic water supply" facilities were constructed, benefitting 7,865 beneficiaries (AFN I PCR). With water scarcity growing, especially in upland areas, the AFN I PCR stressed that projects should increase efforts in increasing domestic water supply, including through the construction of multi-use water systems. These systems have been integrated in the design of the follow-up project, AFN-II.

²⁵⁴ AFN I PCR.

²⁵⁵ SNRMPEP PCR.

²⁵⁶ 89 per cent of women reporting being more involved in decision-making at the village level.

²⁵⁷ NRSLLDP PPE ; FNML PPE; village visits.

²⁵⁸ SNRMPEP PCR.

stronger decision-making in the family and community.²⁵⁹ The 2011-2014 grant to WOCAN grant worked with the LWU to support GEWE in 2 projects – RLIP and SSSJ.²⁶⁰ This consisted of training farmers directly in the field rather than on central level policy changes.

188. **Overall gender equality and women’s empowerment.** The IFAD projects have been successful in reaching out to women, and increasingly, a greater proportion of them. They have done this through successful approaches that have not only mainstreamed their participation but have started to also transform communities and gender roles of both women and men. Furthermore, more attention is needed to reach out to women and men in ethnic groups and of across different ages. The CSPE rates gender equality and women’s empowerment as **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

G. Sustainability of benefits

189. The sustainability criterion assesses the extent to which the net benefits induced by the strategy and programme continue over time. It includes issues of institutional, technical, social and financial sustainability. Other specific aspects are: (i) scaling up and (ii) environment and natural resource management, and climate change adaptation.

Institutional Sustainability

190. **IFAD’s efforts to sustain public extension services were unsuccessful.** Defining MAF’s departments in charge of agricultural extension as a focal point for project implementation did not deliver tangible results as frequent changes in administrative processes at the central government moved the national extension system away from technical branches.²⁶¹ This separation further complicated follow-up on pilot technologies and large-scale research implementation, unlike the more integrated approaches in neighbouring countries. District extension services were often viewed as temporary jobs heavily dependent on international funding, leading to severe operational inefficiencies. A WOCAT study highlighted capacity gaps at all levels of extension services in Laos, particularly a lack of experience with participatory methodologies at the local level.²⁶²
191. The CSPE did not find evidence of high-tech or e-extension services to facilitate knowledge sharing with more remote communities, which were often challenging to reach in person. Stakeholders met during the CSPE mission were critical of efforts from IFAD and other donors to sustain public agricultural support services.
192. **The approach to village banks was made sustainable through continued support from GIZ.** Rural credit activities (village banks in RLIP early on, village development funds in SSSJ and NRSLLDP, a mix in FNML) were effective when GIZ supported them through IFAD-funded projects (2008, 2012). There were two different approaches used in previous projects: (i) village-level microcredit coordinated through network support organizations, often through LWU, and (ii) village banks with independent facilitators. The semi-formal village development funds have shown weaknesses in financial management at village-level. The approach was discontinued after the cancellation of the NSLCP-RFSP. GIZ continued support to network of village banks after they were transferred under BoL

²⁵⁹ The statement “IFAD projects support women’s stronger decision-making in the family and community” received a mixed average score, 4.3/5 (see Annex VIII-2, CSPE government scorecards).

IFAD/WOCAN Grant 1347 Project Completion Report 2014. the grant was entitled Capacity Building for Women’s Leadership in farmer producer organization in Asia and the Pacific region.

²⁶¹ For instance, Decree on Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Organizational Structure and Operations, 2021.

²⁶² Supporting Extension Services to Scale Up Sustainable Land Management: The potential of WOCAT’s tools and methods. 2023. <https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/41804382/wocat.pdf/3de9d371-6fa1-97f5-6af6-f14f92a22e2c?t=1678869457997>

supervision.²⁶³ Data collected during the CSPE country visit reveals that today 57 village banks were still active holding IFAD funds (in total USD 4,770).²⁶⁴

193. **The sustainability of producer groups is uncertain without access to rural finance services.** Active engagement by group leaders and other members was observed in all the villages visited. The endline assessment of AFN I APGs found that 56 per cent showed average performance; 14 per cent of groups were well performing and showed good ownership.²⁶⁵ As a limitation for the sustainability of these groups, stakeholders indicated weak accounting and cash management practices, which undermined the O&M for small infrastructure. It is uncertain whether APG members in remote villages could consistently travel several hours to the next bank agency to access their bank account.²⁶⁶ Having a village safe to keep villagers' cash contributions would be an effective means to improve financial management.
194. To raise prospects for APG sustainability, IFAD and MAF decided that additional financing for both AFN II and PICSA would partly be allocated to further strengthening of selected APGs created under these projects. Some of the stronger APGs would be supported to reach graduation status or grow into farmer cooperatives. During that period, it is expected that IFAD-supported APGs will have the opportunity to become LFA members, which would contribute to their sustainability.²⁶⁷

Technical Sustainability

195. **The group-level services supported through IFAD projects seemed more sustainable, especially in smallholder animal husbandry.** IFAD projects helped to maintain and improve farmer-to-farmer services through APGs and model farmers. The village visits indicated that these, working together with APGs, remained active after project end, that selecting young farmers to become APG leaders and candidate model farmers reinforced scope for sustainability. The CSPE found that in all 15 villages visited, comprehensive packages of appropriate animal raising practices were being implemented, including animal sheds, fodder grass for goats or cows on up to several dozens of hectares, pig feed based on locally available resources, and vaccinations.²⁶⁸ The IFAD portfolio was one among several initiatives by development partners that contributed to the adoption of the packages in the North region.²⁶⁹ While the discontinuation of veterinary services at the end of NRSLLDP was reported as an example of unsustainable project benefits, it was observed during the country visit that these services have gained in sustainability and IFAD projects are likely to have contributed.
196. **Sustainability of small infrastructure remains a major and unresolved challenge.** The SNRMPEP post-project grants were dedicated to improving sustainability of small infrastructure,²⁷⁰ but there was no evidence that this had taken place yet. The projects did train villages about the importance of O&M, but

²⁶³ There are 924 digital village banks are on the digital LTS platform LanXangBanker. www.LTSVentures.com

²⁶⁴ The data provided by LTS also show that the village banks with IFAD funds had performed better than the comparison group (village banks without IFAD funds: they had More savings (+1.01 per cent) and less loans (-2.30 per cent, which is positive); a higher dividend payout (+9.144 per cent) and more customers (+7.59 per cent).

²⁶⁵ AFN I APG endline assessment.

²⁶⁶ In Xaysathan district, travelling from the village to the bank agency where the account was held took four hours.

²⁶⁷ MAF confirmed that both AFN-II and PICSA-Additional Financing is to provide targeted support to Farmer Groups, support stronger market linkages, and development of Cooperatives for AFN I APGs. LFA, which was successful in receiving a follow-up grant from GAFSP (USD 2.75 million) is expected to further support AFN I APGs, providing capacity building and fostering market linkages with SMEs through Commodity Networks. According to MAF, this could be a precedent for how IFAD projects are handed over to non-government entities for further development.

²⁶⁸ The sustainability of fodder grass production was previously questioned. (RLIP PPE)

²⁶⁹ Several interviews indicated that this positive development of smallholder livestock production was on-going across the Northern provinces.

ADB 2017. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Supporting Decentralized Rural Infrastructure Development Project. Technical Assistance Number: 8086.

effectiveness was uneven.²⁷¹ The lack of post-project sustainability continued to be highlighted as a weakness in IOE reports. The FNML PPE observed a severe lack of sustainability of project investment into village infrastructure: project-funded drinking water schemes that went out of order soon after completion.²⁷² The quality of design and construction was questionable. Interviews and field visits indicated that rapid deterioration of access roads and need for rehabilitation by subsequent ODA projects were often seen as inevitable.

197. This issue was especially noticeable for access roads to production areas, which demonstrated an increasing need during the country visit. Paddy fields and fields appropriate for fodder grass were often several hours of walk from the villages, as the result both of rugged topography and past village relocation. The visits indicated that improving access to these fields was challenging given distance, terrain, unclear responsibilities (group or village), and villagers' preference for small roads, rather than tracks, since they used small tractors. No formula was found to pilot the construction of sustainable access roads in the scope of IFAD projects other than mobilizing labour contributions for roads that degraded rapidly after completion. Damage and degradation were exacerbated due to the increasingly frequent climate-change related disasters.
198. **Exit strategies as a tool for sustainability were rarely mobilized despite recognition of their usefulness at ministry level.** A senior government officer indicated during the CSPE mission that the early design of a project's appropriate exit strategy should fall within the scope of work of the international TA. Production of an exit strategy did not start until the final year of the second 2011 COSOP project. Several of the proposed actions in this exit strategy required a government budget for operational costs and were therefore not implementable in the country context.²⁷³ AFN I identified post-project activities that did not generate operational costs, including formal hand-over to the villages of small infrastructure and O&M responsibilities, with spare parts and tools, hand-over of training materials to PAFOs and DAFOs, and continuation of relevant activities through subsequent ODA projects.²⁷⁴
199. **Overall sustainability.** At individual project level, post-project sustainability was a weak point, both in terms of steps taken to improve it and in terms of actual continuation of activities. It was a main weakness in the South region, as the non-sustainability of small infrastructure design options and approach to O&M were an unresolved issue. In the North, farmer-to-farmer extension was more sustainable, especially in animal husbandry. Improvements were initiated more recently. AFN I was the first project that had a (budgeted) exit strategy anticipating the post project period. Additional financing is expected to raise sustainability prospects for project-initiated groups. Overall, sustainability is rated **moderately satisfactory (3)**.

Environment and natural resources management and climate change adaptation

200. **Environment and natural resource management.** This subsection analyses the extent to which the country strategy and programme contributed to enhancing environmental sustainability and resilience to climate change in small-scale agriculture.
201. Both COSOPs had strategic objectives linked to the environment and natural resource management. The 2011 COSOP had defined community environmental plans, registration of communal tenure, farmer training in NRM and improved

One of the less remote village communities visited nominated a person in charge of maintenance of the drinking water system and succeeded to collect maintenance fees.

²⁷² FNML PPE.

²⁷³ FNML PCR.

²⁷⁴ AFN I PCR.

management of upland fallows as milestones. The 2018 COSOP changed its **results framework indicators at mid-term, which made it difficult to ascertain to what degree smallholder resilience to climate shocks and natural disasters remained a priority.**²⁷⁵ The outcome measuring improved smallholder land access (land titles) was removed with the justification that it was no longer relevant. It was replaced with an indicator on climate-sensitive agricultural production. This indicator was at 51 per cent of the newly created COSOP target.

202. The portfolio had an increasing focus on gradual land and water use intensification, with the aim to reduce pressure on surrounding land. Gradual intensification of existing land use has been the principal hallmark, in a positive sense, since the start of the evaluation period. This was achieved through the development of small-scale irrigation and improved livestock rearing, coupled with NRM measures.²⁷⁶ Intensification contributed to the geographical concentration of activities, diversifying income sources, and reducing pressure on surrounding uplands and forests. Projects largely provided means for this in an environmentally sustainable manner. Considering the portfolio's development of water resources, measures to assess the sustainability of local aquifers have not yet been considered or deployed.²⁷⁷
203. Throughout the portfolio, IFAD attempted to balance efforts to have interventions improving NRM and at the same time improving crop production to reach the poorest or most vulnerable households. Improved techniques and methods, disseminated in conjunction with NAFRI and coupled with the intensification of livestock rearing,²⁷⁸ provided alternative sources of income that are claimed to have reduced pressure on forest resources and therefore the practice of shifting cultivation.²⁷⁹ Improvements in irrigation allowing for dry season irrigation were observed in PICSA and AFN I villages, but in PICSA these appear to have mostly benefitted less poor households with sufficient labour.²⁸⁰
204. The expansion of commercial crops generally grown put pressure on natural resources, with increased risks from inflation and food price crisis.²⁸¹ Instances of unsustainable practices related to some commercial crops were found throughout the portfolio.²⁸² The FNML PPE observed decreasing cassava yields and highlighted increasing intensification of livestock as an environmental sustainability risk with a potential of driving social conflicts over resource use. Inflation may be pushing smallholders in PICSA villages to grow more cash crops including cassava in the uplands, contributing to clearing forest land. For example, the CSPE mission observed PICSA supported access tracks being selected and improved to access upland fields where, among other cash crops, cassava was grown. PICSA beneficiary enterprises selected for the rice value chain also collected maize and

²⁷⁵ 2018 COSOP results review.

²⁷⁶ All projects aside from NSLCP-RFSP featured small-scale irrigation.

²⁷⁷ Interviews and project documentation review show that small-scale irrigation is assumed to have negligible impacts on local aquifers, and that DAFOs do not have the means to conduct studies to determine aquifer resource changes. Nonetheless increasing drought reported by villagers during the mission show this to be a looming issue to be taken seriously.

Intensification of livestock has also been informed or observed by the mission in NRSLLDP, SSSJ, NSLCP-RFSP, AFN I, and PICSA villages.

The SNRMPEP PCRVR discusses intercropping techniques, while the SSSJ PCRVR discusses benefits of new techniques on smallholders and extension agents.

This observation took place in two Lao Tai communities from the Tai Dam group, which maintained community-owned paddy fields. To which extent it also took place among other ethnic groups is not known.

²⁸¹ Cardamom, a cash crop grown under secondary forest, was an exception (AFN I beneficiary enterprise dataset).

²⁸² Reported for example in RLIP PPE FNML PPE and AFN I PCRVR. The FNML PPE documented direct project support to cassava and coffee. Part of the area contributed to clearing of forests for cultivation, the other to an extension of the permanently cultivated domain. The AFN I PCRVR found through its document review the possible contribution of the project to forest land clearance and correlated impacts of air pollution and issues of soil erosion, loss of fertility and water retention capacity. Agricultural intensification has put additional pressure upland areas and forests and projects encouraged the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticide (e.g. in PICSA villages).

cassava, providing smallholders incentives to grow more of these commercial crops.²⁸³

205. **Land use planning, an early hallmark of the portfolio, was abandoned.** Land use planning for agricultural land and forests was a feature of ENRM in the pre-2011 COSOP projects and the 2011 COSOP projects. These were eventually phased out in the implementation of the 2011 COSOP projects, despite grant resources having been deployed for the activity.
206. **IFAD lost expertise and potential policy advocacy it had in land tenure and management.** The portfolio's shift from land use planning in the pre-2011 period and 2011 COSOP to CCA in the 2018 COSOP meant that knowledge and expertise likewise shifted. In the earlier projects, IFAD deployed significant expertise in NRM through project supervision, but there were fewer specialists involved under the 2018 COSOP.²⁸⁴ The ongoing portfolio hired nine NRM specialists in total, whose expertise was in CCA and WUGs.²⁸⁵ The loss of expertise in sustainable land management is palpable in the CSPE e-survey, where perceptions by partners on IFAD being a good source of knowledge on sustainable land management is mixed. Interviews also suggested that IFAD lacked policy engagement in areas of NRM, land use planning, and WUGs. A refocusing in sustainable land management in Laos has been explored by IFAD through specific grants but it is absent in the portfolio and in IFAD's policy engagement.²⁸⁶
207. **Climate change adaptation.** The 2018 COSOP shifted toward CCA in its strategic objectives during which a wide range of institutional and practical climate-smart measures were introduced. The most common of these across the portfolio was the introduction or rehabilitation of dry-season small-scale irrigation schemes to assist in resisting natural shocks.²⁸⁷ Other measures included in FNML were ten crop models contributing to better land management, and environmentally sound practices.²⁸⁸ Grants were innovative in developing climate-smart practices such as improved rice varieties, improved livestock raising and fodder production methods, and intercropping of grain legumes. Only the latter, however, was integrated into the portfolio.²⁸⁹
208. There were multiple iterations of climate-smart practices, and differences in how they were defined and introduced. The RLIP PCR for example considered road building for market access a climate-smart practice. DAFO interviews highlighted irrigation and improved agricultural techniques leading to a reduction of pressure on surrounding land as a particularly good example of climate change adaptation. Meanwhile, PAFOs provided other examples of ADB introducing climate-smart practices (such as long-term climate projections on phone apps to assist with crop planning or canal designs that consider higher water volumes from flash floods) via climate change specialists. The dissemination of specific practices appeared to be considered climate-smart depending on the contexts.
209. At the programmatic level, climate sensitive irrigation systems and agricultural practices have positively built smallholder resilience to climate shocks and natural disasters were. Rural financial services offered the potential to cover liquidity gaps

²⁸³ PICSA beneficiary enterprise MIS.

²⁸⁴ The pre-2011 COSOP projects mustered 19 specialists in natural resource management, climate change adaptation, and/or water and irrigation across its supervision missions, the closed portfolio only hired 4. The ongoing project PICSA has mustered 5 to date.

Of the pre-2011 COSOP projects, RLIP had one specialist, NRSLLDP had 2, and SNRMPEP had 12; in the closed portfolio, FNML had 3 specialists and AFN I had one specialist; in the ongoing portfolio, PICSA had 5 specialists and AFN II has 4.

²⁸⁶ WOCAT grant

²⁸⁷ Despite this, there were no clear guideline on how to cope with flash floods, as irrigation weirs and canals eroded during the rainy season were observed.

²⁸⁸ Crop models were developed through PAR methodologies in conjunction with NAFRI and WOFAN in FNML. Environmentally sound practices in FNML included composting, biofertilizers, integrated pest control, intercropping, crop rotations, and plastic green houses.

²⁸⁹ ICRISAT grant

after an extreme climatic event.²⁹⁰ Measures that intended to build resilience were hampered by insufficient budgets for climate-resilient small-scale infrastructure, and absent, ineffective or insufficient O&M systems.

210. **SECAP processes, introduced with the design of AFN 1 (2016), remained mostly disconnected from the programme.**²⁹¹ The 2018 COSOP included a three-page SECAP summary that the CSPE found to be a quality document. The COSOP quality review identified a need for its improved integration, especially regarding land tenure security.²⁹² This was done to some extent. Nonetheless, interviews and e-survey comments showed that the country and project teams perceived the SECAP as disconnected from the strategy and the portfolio. Project staff found that AFN I's designation as a high environmental and social risk project due to its possible impact on ethnic group communities was a disconnected approach.²⁹³ Project staff specialised in SECAP or NRM and CCA were never hired in AFN I and resigned in PICSA.²⁹⁴ While AFN II has reportedly included IFAD's updated SECAP requirements in 2021, these required more resources to be fulfilled.
211. **Overall environment and natural resources management and climate change adaptation.** The COSOPs appropriately identified natural resource management as priority area, while the focus shifted from land use planning to climate resilience. The portfolio tried to introduce comprehensive approaches to balancing food and cash crop production with NRM, which proved too complex and were not further pursued. Pressure on natural resources, such as through forest clearance, and increased risks from inflation and food price crisis in project villages were frequent challenges in the portfolio. IFAD had lost expertise in land planning management when it is becoming an issue of interest once again. Support to irrigation helped lessening climate-related shocks. Otherwise, IFAD's contribution to CCA was more difficult to discern. Finally, SECAP processes were incoherent and required more support. The CSPE rates environment and natural resources management and climate change adaptation as **moderately unsatisfactory (3)**.
- Scaling up**
212. There was evidence of replication of the IFAD-WFP joint innovations in nutrition improvement started by development partners and the government. Attention to scaling up of the AFN approach started at when AFN I was designed. At project end, the ADB/EU Sustainable Rural Infrastructure and Watershed Management Sector Project (SRIWSMP) and the World-Bank funded Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF) III and Community Livelihoods Enhancement and Resilience (CLEAR) projects had taken up the AFN I approach targeting women and young children, with community-based nutrition facilitators, homestead food production and learning cooking sessions for women.²⁹⁵ Factors that contributed to successful scaling up included (i) AFN I being inserted into the Government's nutrition convergence initiative, which supported dissemination through government channels (ii) the respective communication strategies of GAFSP and AFN I, that enhanced visibility, and (iii) the international consultants who advised on the design of nutrition components in these various projects.
213. **Village banks, previously found in IFAD projects in the North, were scaled up with GIZ support.** GIZ developed the village bank networks in the North region with financial support from RLIP. FNML replicated the approach in the South

²⁹⁰ The FNML PPE had village beneficiaries report that village banks and village fund groups improved smallholder resiliency to natural shocks by supporting productive investments and instilling a savings culture (pg. 27-28)

IFAD's SECAP procedures emerged in 2014, replacing the 2009 Environmental Assessment Procedures with more stringent and comprehensive features including strengthening of social, environmental and climate risk classification of projects (IOE 2016. Environment and Natural Resource Management Evaluation Synthesis).

²⁹² 2018 COSOP quality assistance group (QAG) review.

²⁹³ The AFN I design report did not have the SECAP document for CSPE review.

²⁹⁴ AFN I PCR, pg. 23; PICSA SIS pg. 9

²⁹⁵ Scaling up in AFN I was rated at 5 in the PCR and the PCRV.

region, where the village banks replaced the unsustainable village fund model. GIZ cooperated with LTS Ventures, a Lao financial technology company created in 2019, to launch a digital platform for the monitoring of villager transactions in 2021, supported by a network of field agents who travel to the villages on a regular basis. GIZ transferred the village bank network to the Central Bank of Lao PDR and LTS Ventures in 2022. LTS Ventures services covered 247,162 clients (as of September 2024) clients in 924 villages in 2024, out of which 51 per cent are women (126,052) and 56 per cent belong to non-Lao Tai groups (138,410).²⁹⁶

214. **There was little consensus among development partners on direct grant payments to farmer groups, which limited its scaling up.** Development partners each promote a different approach to farmer groups: in some international projects, grants are conditioned by members' savings, not by in-kind contribution as in IFAD projects; grants may be disbursed at village level, not at individual group level; and grants may be used for group members for diversified initiatives, not only for the group's selected crop or livestock activity.²⁹⁷ Some development partners such as the EU channel group development grants to CSOs. Several development partners and national stakeholders perceive IFAD's current fully grant-based approach as reducing group members' ownership.
215. **Overall scaling up.** There was evidence of scaling up of the joint approach by IFAD and WFP to nutrition and agriculture as part of the national nutrition convergence approach, and IFAD supported financially scaling up of the village banks after piloting by GIZ. Scaling up the agricultural producer group bank accounts was not yet confirmed. The CSPE rates scaling up **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

H. Overall country strategy achievement

216. The beginning of the review period was marked by the new IFAD country presence, with a Country Director based in Vientiane. The 2011 COSOP had high ambitions to engage in both lending projects and policy dialogue through active in-country presence of IFAD. The 2011 COSOP also marked the launch of a new project approach: partnerships with ADB, WFP and NAFRI were streamlined, and farmer groups were given a growing role in the programme. IFAD projects became sector projects under MAF, covering a broad range of activities and value chains. Policy dialogue was effective and focused on policies for remote villages. Operations were less successful during that period as new institutional modalities and cofinancing partnerships were only gradually confirmed and required new implementation processes and skills. Commercial crops were supported without anticipating their negative environmental impacts.
217. IFAD became less present in the country during the 2016-2017 period but refined its partnership approach instead. Partnerships with ADB and WFP deepened through two new projects launched in 2016 and confirmed a joint approach to agriculture and nutrition. IFAD also refocused policy engagement to support decentralization and farmer groups. It successfully contributed to establishing the Lao Farmer Network as a strategic partner of MAF.
218. The launch of the PICS project under the 2018 COSOP confirmed the approach of parallel projects with ADB. It introduced a nutrition-sensitive agriculture approach that contrasted with the AFN approach, focusing on food crop markets in less poor areas. The AFN projects maintained IFAD's historical focus on upland and remote locations. This reduced coherence in the programme, and further reduced potential for engagement in policy dialogue with development partners in Laos. Both project approaches nevertheless proved to be equally effective. The gender approach evolved from mainstreaming to gender equality and women's empowerment. Three

²⁹⁶ LTS website: <https://ltsventures.com/software.html#software>

²⁹⁷ Interviews and World Bank. 2023. CLEAR project appraisal document.

weaker points in the portfolio were a stubborn low efficiency, an uncertain approach to creating value through farmer group-enterprise contracts and an unresolved low sustainability of small infrastructure works.

219. Innovations included the development of village banks, which IFAD financed alongside GIZ, and the agriculture for nutrition approach. Scaling up started for both in the early 2020s. Direct grants to farmer groups were innovative but consensus with development partners was missing on this approach. IFAD, in partnership with NAFRI, supported a distinctive approach of gradual, low-input land use intensification combined with small-scale livestock production. Experience sharing with the other countries covered through IFAD's multi-country office was limited. The introduction of the 4P model used in Vietnam was not relevant in the context of Laos.
220. Impact on poverty reduction could not be ascertained as data were missing on agricultural and non-agricultural incomes in project areas. From the available evidence it was not clear how projects contributed to the increase in assets observed in several projects. Projects have helped to increase food production, although malnutrition was not always reduced. Capacities were built at individual rather than institutional level. A strategic direction was missing on how to support exit from project dependence on international TA and IFAD funding local governments' operational costs and how to position IFAD in the country's context of insufficient government financial capacity and ODA dependence for agriculture and rural development.

Table 9
CSPE ratings

Evaluation Criteria	Rating
○ Relevance	4
○ Coherence	4
○ Knowledge management	4
○ Partnership development	4
○ Policy engagement	4
○ Effectiveness	4
○ Innovation	4
○ Efficiency	3
○ Rural poverty impact	3
○ Sustainability	3
○ Environment, natural resource management and climate change adaptation	3
○ Scaling up	4
○ Gender equality and women's empowerment	4
OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT	4
Partner performance	
○ IFAD performance	4

Key points

- The 2011 and 2018 COSOPs differed in their strategic options on country presence, lending portfolio, policy dialogue and other non-lending activities.
- Under the 2011 COSOP, non-lending activities thrived and became more active.
- Under the 2018 COSOP the focus was on streamlining the lending portfolio, resulting in more effective activities and broader outreach to villages.
- Throughout the period, focus remained in four fields: partnership building, alignment on country policies supporting smallholder agriculture while bringing value through IFAD mainstreaming themes, knowledge management methods, and pursuit of innovation.
- Through the period, the CSPE observed continued weaknesses in efficiency and building post-project sustainability.
- Progress on value chain development was lagging, a core issue being how to build value and climate resilience from crop diversification while preventing environmental impact from commercial crops.
- The 2018 COSOP effectively shifted to a gender empowerment approach, mobilizing the gender-nutrition nexus as an entry point.
- IFAD's presence declined step-by-step after 2012, leading to a lack of coherence between a continued stated strategic ambition and the absence of means to pursue it. Cross-country exchanges through IFAD added modest value.
- Two equally effective but contrasted operational approaches have been present in IFAD's portfolio since 2019, the first one with ADB as partner, building market-ready groups for food value chains, the second one with WFP, enhancing support to remote, upland communities.
- This has further strained IFAD's limited in-country capacity and limited engagement with development partners and the Government on selected issues beyond portfolio implementation.

IV. Performance of partners

221. In this chapter, the CSPE assesses the extent to which the two key implementing partners of the country programme, IFAD and the Government, have worked to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of financed operations over the period reviewed.

A. IFAD

222. **At operational level, IFAD's engagement was overall adequate and perceived as positive.** IFAD ensured operational design and management of its portfolio starting from the second pre-2011 COSOP project.²⁹⁸ During the earlier part of the evaluation period, the missions largely focused on routine operational support, such as planning and budgeting, M&E or group formation. Supervision missions were conducted with adequate frequency, with 1 to 2 missions conducted a year per project (see annex VI-7). Supervision missions geographically covered project districts well. The AFN I supervision missions visited all but the four less accessible districts at least once. The PICSA missions covered all target districts either once or twice. In the east, Huaphanh Province was less visited during AFN I, but this gap was resolved under PICSA.
223. **There was consensus among national and international stakeholders of insufficient country presence during the 2018 COSOP period.** Among six successive IFAD country directors, three retained their position for 3 years but only the first was based in country (Annex IV: timeline) and each had a varied focus in their approach to dialogue with the government.²⁹⁹ IFAD's country presence was strong during the early part of the 2011 COSOP period only, when IFAD had a country programme manager based in the ICO in Vientiane.³⁰⁰ This allowed setting up co-chairing by IFAD of the SWG-ARD. Since 2018, IFAD's presence in country has been further reduced to an in-country consultant, as coordinator. This was highlighted as an issue in most interviews with national and international stakeholders. The seniority of IFAD's in-country engagement was further reduced after 2022, with the country director working mostly remotely and supervision missions delegated to a programme officer in the role of Task Manager.
224. **There was little continuity in the staffing of project supervision.** After the Laos portfolio was covered from Hanoi MCO (2015), the country directors' presence in field missions decreased substantially, from a high of five missions with a country director within one year in 2013, to only two missions since 2017, notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic period (see Annex VI).³⁰¹ Supervision mission teams were comprised of consultants with regional and country expertise, IFAD country team based in Hanoi and national project staff. There were frequent changes of participants in the missions, leading to some inconsistency in recommendations, as noted in the e-survey and in interviews. A CSPE accounting of participants shows that at least 136 IFAD project staff and consultants took part in the design, supervision or project completion missions. Out of them, only 50 took part in more than a single mission. Only 7 out of 23 identified team leaders lead missions more than once.³⁰² There was no mention in the reports of a dedicated value chain specialist. The FNML PPE recommended providing stable support to projects to resolve management bottlenecks.

²⁹⁸ RLIP missions where through UNOPS. IFAD fully relied on GIZ for the development and implementation of the project.

One country director focused on policy dialogue, another one on knowledge management, and another one on sound financial management.

During the country mission, MAF recalled this period as useful. Engagement with MAF was not sustained at the same level beyond this period.

CSPE analysis of mission itineraries as described in project reports. The four districts that were not visited under AFN I were three districts in Huaphanh Province and one in Phongsaly Province.

³⁰² The CSPE compiled participants listed in the design, supervision, MTR or PCR missions.

225. **Engagement with co-financing partners improved the quality of project designs.** Under the 2018 COSOP, IFAD and its cofinancing partners devoted attention to simplifying project design. IFAD seized the opportunity of strong attention to agricultural production groups and nutrition within MAF to refocus on these themes in the project activities. IFAD was positively perceived in the 2021 corporate stakeholder survey as transparent in engagement with country partners and in decisions, seen as respectful and constructive. The GAFSP applications contributed to streamline project design.
226. **Financial management and procurement received increasing attention.** Stakeholder interviews highlighted the importance of sound financial management and procurement in Lao PDR at all levels, including village level.³⁰³ Prior to the 2011 COSOP, ratings for the quality of financial management were similar to ratings on other project management criteria. This contrasted with projects under the 2011 COSOP, indicating the dominant influence of individual project managers. Supervision ratings increased beginning with FNML (with the exception of the cancelled credit project). By MTR, PICSA had the highest rating from IFAD supervision missions for quality of financial management, 4.3. Financial management, procurement and M&E came under dedicated staff. Support on procurement and financial management from the MCO in Hanoi has slowly improved government capacity, and IFAD's expertise in this to support government has been recognized by international partners.³⁰⁴ Stricter financial management was described in FGDs as a primary characteristic of IFAD's approach. Procurement and financial management specialists in supervision missions made up a larger share of mission participants,³⁰⁵ and continued during the COVID 19 pandemic when supervision missions were conducted remotely. Focus on procurement and financial management was also reflected in supervision follow-up actions.³⁰⁶
227. **There was a noticeable improvement in project-level M&E with the arrival of monitoring information systems.** More comprehensive use of MIS started with FNML, along with presence of full-time project-funded M&E officers at central, provincial and district levels, leading to stronger performance ratings for M&E. The MIS maintained M&E databases of village information, beneficiary APGs and enterprises. With the support of FAO, AFN incorporated the ProMIS system. The M&E of PICSA and AFN remained managed as separate systems despite a largely shared structure.³⁰⁷ This contrasted with MAF's demand for additional support to design a comprehensive MIS structure covering development activities across partners.³⁰⁸
228. **Overall,** IFAD's support and supervision were mostly adequate at operational level although mission staffing was a weaker point. During the 2018 COSOP period, IFAD improved project design, M&E systems, financial management and procurement. The lack of continuity in IFAD's country management and in-country presence was a limitation that affected internal portfolio coherence and engagement with country stakeholders. IFAD remained appreciated as an institution offering worldwide opportunities for exchanges of experience on agricultural development. The CSPE rates IFAD performance as **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

³⁰³ In RLIP for example, issues were raised during implementation regarding the quality of financial management but no major actions were undertaken to rectify this situation (RLIP PPE).

Interviews pointed out that international partners (ADB and World Bank) are slowly improving procurement processes in Laos through the issuance of new guidelines, though this is still a slow process within MAF.

³⁰⁵ on average 22 per cent since 2016 compared to 16 per cent from 2011 to 2015

³⁰⁶ The largest number of available supervision follow-up actions were on financial management, procurement, M&E and project management.³⁰⁶ Follow up on supervision agreements was below 20 per cent in audits (11 per cent completed) and targeting and outreach (13 per cent).

³⁰⁷ The CSPE team received these datasets for AFN I and PICSA and found them to be of good quality.

³⁰⁸ MAF expressed early during the reviewed period demand for an MIS covering the various international projects under its oversight.

B. Government

229. **Government demonstrated ownership of its cooperation with IFAD, with continuity during the CSPE review period.** Government provided a venue for participation in the round table process and its sector working group in support of the Vientiane Declaration, which prioritized coordination among development partners.³⁰⁹ Limited clarity in government responsibilities affected project implementation performance, for example the unclear central responsibilities among MPI and MAF until after the launch of FNML. So did unclear definition of the respective responsibilities of MAF and the Bank of Laos in the NSLCP-RFPS.
230. **Provincial and district level coordination of the portfolio became better defined as the devolution policy made progress.** MAF decentralized oversight of the portfolio by setting up steering committees at all levels. It remained open to recommendations from IFAD for added value in the steering committees, including a more diverse arrangement of stakeholder participation. DOPC, which coordinated the various departments under MAF, confirmed the multidepartmental coordination arrangements through steering committees at district level. Over time, district governments took their own role in local implementation. This was visible as district governments participated actively in the country visit discussions, describing their actual roles during on-going and closed projects. Compliance with local covenants improved in the 2018 COSOP projects.³¹⁰ There was participation of government representatives at each level at project completion and stakeholder workshops, providing opportunities for institutional learning and reflection on project results. Project directors exercised their management role jointly with the international CTA.
231. **MAF could have more clearly articulated expectations for government capacity enhancement through IFAD projects.** Opacity in systems and frequent reorganization of government departments have diminished potential improvements, including the incorporation of knowledge from the PTT and NAFRI. Although stated in the Vientiane declaration, MAF did not actively pursue the integration of IFAD's portfolio into a single programme while expressing concerns about post-project sustainability. National coordination of projects through a CTA consultant was a supportive arrangement, with externally financed advisors having the greatest flexibility for advising, but capacity building outcomes were limited according to stakeholder interviews. The payment of operational costs for local government staff, a system that was maintained in the portfolio, also had limited capacity building justification.
232. **There was some engagement of local governments in building project management skills through IFAD projects.** The use of information technology (IT) facilitated project implementation and enhanced government staff skills. Increased access to IT and the improvement of M&E systems allowed some gains in transparency and efficiency. The use of tablets for data entry, Facebook and project websites to share outcomes of activities, began with FNML and continued thereafter. Capacity building in these areas at district level took the form of the central PMU providing step-by-step process guidance to district staff on procurement processes. Changes in IFAD processes required a more responsive training to assist local teams in meeting requirements. However, this led to repeated complaints in district FGDs about the amount of paperwork and delays, indicating limited recognition of the value of this process.³¹¹

The Round Table process includes 10 Sector Working Groups to coordinate actions among various stakeholders by theme. The groups serve as key links between local progress and national plans and policies. They cover health, education, governance infrastructure, macroeconomics, trade and the private sector, mine action, illicit drug control, agriculture and rural development and natural resource management and the environment. Several Sub-Sector Working Groups provide additional platforms for coordination around specific priorities within these sectors.

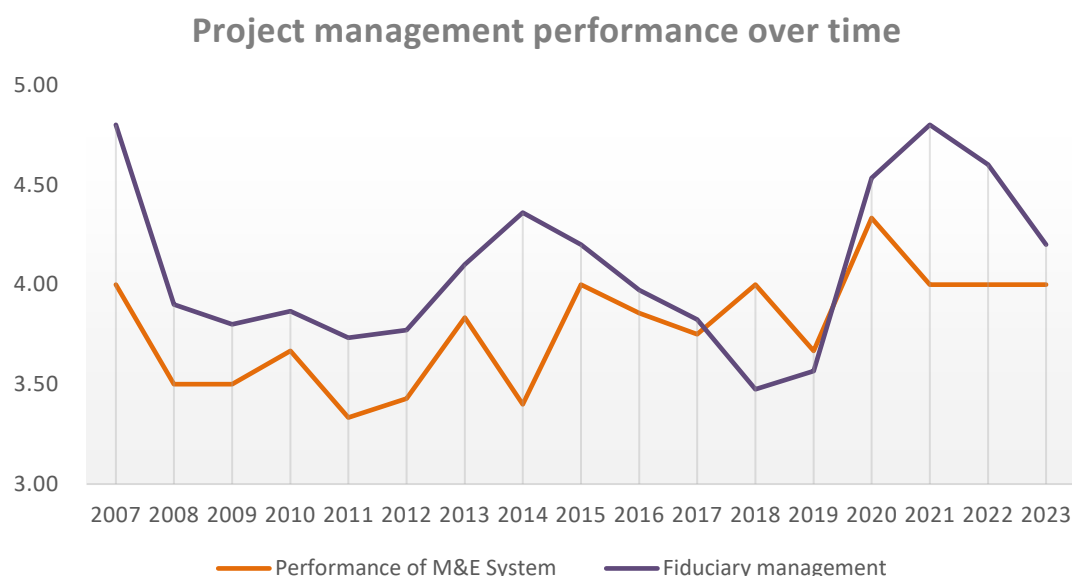
<https://rtm.org.la/about/round-table-process-2/>

³¹⁰ Supervision ratings.

³¹¹ In one district FGD, the DAFO's priority request for the remaining of PICSA was to simplify approval procedures.

233. **Financial management and procurement became stable during the 2018 COSOP.** Before AFN I, project management offices that performed well on other criteria also performed well on fiduciary management, financial management and procurement. Starting from 2017, the introduction of direct payments of project grants to village and group bank accounts, ending procurement at higher levels, was a visible improvement in financial management.³¹² Several steps were taken to improve this situation, evidenced in ratings for the quality of financial management and procurement improving from 2020 onwards.³¹³ Audit timeliness remained an issue as international firms had to be hired.

Figure 4

Supervision ratings for project management³¹⁴

Source: ORMS

234. **Overall,** Government at central and local levels exercised oversight over the strategy and portfolio through steering committees and in operational management. Institutional bottlenecks were gradually reduced. Projects providing operational costs for district government activities gave satisfaction to government stakeholders. So did the management of individual projects through a national coordinator and an international CTA, although the stated national ambition to depart from project specific management systems remained unaddressed. The CSPE rates Government performance at **moderately satisfactory (4)**.

³¹² Supervision ratings of project performance stabilized starting from AFN I at a moderately satisfactory level for financial management, satisfactory for fiduciary management.

³¹³ This culminated in PICSA at mid-term having the highest rating of 4.3 for the project's quality of procurement.

³¹⁴ Ratings from projects under review in each year were averaged for this graph.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

235. The CSPE covered a timeframe of 13 years, with two COSOPs set within a period of rapid development and change. The economy has seen strong growth since Lao PDR became a lower middle-income country in 2011. While overall poverty has declined, rural poverty incidence remains high in upland and remote areas. ODA accounted for 3.2 per cent of the growth in national income in 2021, and there is a high presence of international development partners in the country. Following the signing of the Vientiane Declaration on Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation in 2015, development partners took steps to harmonise and align their portfolios. The process has clearly benefited IFAD's portfolio, which became increasingly streamlined over the review period.
236. The MAF collaboration was an effective operational partnership that ensured alignment with evolving government strategies while allowing multisector coordination at district and village level. Experience showed that collaboration with more than one ministry had its challenges, and most certainly would not have enabled a similar consistency within the portfolio. Project performance was overall positive, with good output achievements. Gender sensitivity of the portfolio improved over time, with more recent projects going beyond equal participation and into some gender transformative approaches. The MCO helped to enhance fiduciary capacity building and oversight. The good output achievement came at a hefty price with high project management costs, extensive external TA support and 'hidden costs' such as DSAs for government employees.
237. Despite the limited size of its financing in Lao PDR, IFAD was able to make useful contributions by focussing on proven interventions that work best in remote upland areas. IFAD followed the approaches of its partners - ADB (irrigation), WFP (nutrition) and earlier during the period GIZ (rural finance) while adding value on smallholder agriculture development based on farmer groups, and effective project implementation at larger scale. Both ADB and WFP have been a good fit for IFAD. The AFN approach defined and implemented in partnership with WFP has scope for long-term engagement given the constraints of multiethnic upland areas in Laos. The number of groups per village, with activities that are tailored to poor men and women, has been a key factor for broader inclusion of poor households in AFN. The ADB partnership was an opportunity for IFAD to build its operational partnership with MAF in a broad number of provinces and districts, focussing on strategic alignment areas that included farmer groups, value chain development and gender equality, but with a less inclusive approach.
238. Building sustainable farmer groups and their access to value chains will require more than initial grants to groups and enterprises. Farmer group formation demonstrated its effectiveness at scale, thanks to direct payment of grants to group bank accounts. Sustaining group development over a longer period will necessitate members' access to rural finance. Support to village banks, seen in the earlier projects, was relevant and proved to be sustainable in the longer term. A village bank network is now operational, although IFAD is no longer facilitating project villages' access to that network. Access to rural credit was also an important entry point for women's empowerment that became absent in the portfolio. IFAD's coordinated 4P approach has so far been unsuccessful for crop value chains in the sparsely populated uplands. Technical solutions shared by the MCO were mostly limited to IFAD's 4P approach in Vietnam whereas diversified options were being developed in other ASEAN countries. Support to enterprises providing services to smallholder animal production was promising.
239. **The portfolio remained short of a comprehensive approach to small-scale infrastructure and climate resilience.** This reinforced the lack of sustainability of project results, especially in the South. Early project designs attempting to

address NRM and land use rights in upland villages were unsuccessful due to their complexity. IFAD moved to supporting staple crop value chains, but this was in contradiction with sound NRM as it encouraged the expansion of annual crops on sloped land. Small scale integrated improvements of homegardens and small livestock were a relevant but insufficient approach to climate resilience. Project investment levels, technical options for resilience and community-level governance approaches were all missing to ensure that access roads and water infrastructure remain in service after construction whereas extreme climatic events have made them more vulnerable. The newly started inclusion of civil society organizations through a challenge fund has potential to grow in these fields.

240. **The lack of country presence during the second half of the reviewed period curtailed IFAD's ability** to maintain the earlier more strategic partnership with MAF. IFAD's engagement in policy dialogue sharply declined. Early non-lending activities were effective in supporting the emergence of the LFA while more recently IFAD's contribution to development initiatives was also mostly operational, for example on nutrition convergence.
241. **The CSPE shows a need to reconsider the strategy and programme approach** on (i) the portfolio and non-lending partnerships, (ii) the sustainability of farmer groups and the relevance of value chain development efforts, and (iii) climate resilience and natural resource management. A shared challenge in these three questions is how to maintain and enhance inclusion of the poor in the evolving country context while avoiding overlap with other development partners. More broadly, the role of IFAD loans in the country's ODA support and government capacity development will have to be reconsidered. IFAD covering government operational costs at local levels was effective but raises the issue of how to reduce ODA dependence. A fresh approach will be needed to direct these costs to supporting government capacity development at various levels.

B. Recommendations

242. Going forward, IFAD will have to further enhance its strategy, augmenting its engagement and demonstrating its added value, while addressing the country's development challenges and crises more directly. The upcoming COSOP (2025) will cover a period starting from 2026 and extend to at least 2030. The two on-going projects would continue implementation during that period (AFN II, until 2029, and PICSA additional financing). The recommendations cover the new COSOP, IFAD's strategic decisions on human resources and funding sources, and project-level adjustments. They consider both the CSPE results and opportunities and threats of special relevance to IFAD's action in Lao PDR in this new period. The COSOP should build on three opportunities: (i) the 2026-2030 five-year plan; (ii) the new Law on cooperatives, the growing capacity of LFA and the availability of a village bank network; (iii) cooperation and trade among ASEAN countries. Threats that deserve priority attention in the COSOP are (i) a delayed recovery from the on-going economic and indebtedness crisis, leading to continued dependency on ODA and grants in rural development; (ii) the growing climate change impacts in rural areas; and (iii) a reinforcing gap in productive assets among the rural population, particularly between those who have access to more fertile land and the others.
243. **Recommendation 1. IFAD should adopt a sustainable approach to ensure continued in-country presence and engagement.** Given the presence of UN organisations and IFIs in the country, IFAD needs to be visible, involved and represented at adequate levels. IFAD should strengthen in-country engagement with regard to non-lending activities, even if portfolio size and thematic focus could be maintained at current level, and continue its close partnership with MAF. Under the ongoing IFAD reforms (Decentralisation 2.0), responsibilities for managing the country portfolio in IFAD should be reviewed with the aim of ensuring proximity and continuity in engagement with Government. The position of the in-country coordinator should be formalised. The country director must be present in country

during strategic consultations and decisions with Government and international partners. These inputs should start in 2025 so that IFAD can meaningfully contribute to the RBA's interaction with Government on the upcoming five-year plan. Enhanced in-country presence would allow a renewed, more proactive approach to knowledge management exchanges between Laos and relevant countries. Finally, IFAD should mobilise additional human resources for applications to competitive project financing grants.

244. **Recommendation 2.** IFAD should take a strategic decision regarding co-financing partnership considering both coherence and potential trade-offs. IFAD should continue the joint WFP-IFAD project, while enhancing focus on IFAD's added value, production groups and market access, focussing on the needs and opportunities of the remote upland areas and paying special attention to higher difficulties of ethnic communities in the South. IFAD should carefully examine how to make its projects that are parallel to an ADB project (PICSA approach) fully aligned with its own targeting policy and should invite ADB to partner with IFAD on small rural infrastructure resilience. If both WFP and ADB partnerships continue, the COSOP should provide an explicit rationale: supporting smallholders in both upland areas and areas with more agricultural production potential. If this is not feasible, IFAD should consider alternative partners on farmer organizations and climate-resilient small infrastructure.
245. **Recommendation 3.** IFAD should redefine its approach to enhance the sustainability of farmer groups and make them more inclusive. Depending on the level of new country presence, the COSOP should decide or not to select support to inclusive farmer groups and emerging cooperatives as a focus, for example through PICSA and any new project. The partnership with LFA should be redefined to continue to support the growth of farmer groups while remaining open to other market-oriented local service providers. Women's participation in the leadership of farmer groups and their access to existing credit options should be supported. A partnership with a village bank service provider could be considered. Inclusion of economically active poor in the groups should be redefined starting with PICSA additional financing, building more groups in each village. Support to contracts between farmer groups and enterprises should incorporate best practice in pro-poor value chains in the region, while support to key value chain services in smallholder animal production should continue. This renewed approach to value chain development would gain from active strategic dialogue with value chain experts in Laos and in the region under the above second scenario.
246. **Recommendation 4.** The upcoming COSOP should specify the approach to climate resilience, natural resource management and the needs of those with limited land access. In remaining pockets of poverty, the COSOP should provide direction for AFN II's value chain development, helping smallholders to maintain diversified livelihood sources and upgrade production quality to access markets for environmentally sound products (small animals, selected NTFPs, fruit and vegetables). In areas with more agricultural potential (PICSA additional financing), sound NRM management should be promoted among participating enterprises, not only smallholders. Resilient small infrastructure in a changing climate should be a focus, through cooperation with other development partners and paying attention to both design and operations. The participation of CSOs should grow beyond what is already planned in AFN II and would benefit from focussing on community capacity to maintain access to the road network and drinking water sources, especially in the South. This would serve the economically active poor that have limited land access and will therefore benefit little from land intensification.
247. **Recommendation 5. IFAD should set up a transparent system for reporting operational costs with clear financial ceilings.** A structured capacity development programme should be developed with clear, achievable targets for both government and project staff. At national level, MAF's demand for a cross-

project M&E system should be considered. IFAD projects' MIS should be designed for that purpose. This would contribute to prevent overlap and inefficiencies and encourage cooperation among projects and development partners, as envisaged by the Vientiane Declaration.

Annexes

Definition of the evaluation criteria

Evaluation criteria

Relevance

The extent to which: (i) the objectives of the /country strategy and programme are consistent with beneficiaries' requirements, country needs, institutional priorities and partner and donor policies ; (ii) the design of the strategy, the targeting strategies adopted are consistent with the objectives; and (iii) the adaptation of the strategy to address changes in the context.

Coherence

This comprises two notions (internal and external coherence). Internal coherence is the synergy of the intervention/country strategy with other IFAD-supported interventions in a country, sector or institution. The external coherence is the consistency of the intervention/strategy with other actors' interventions in the same context.

Non-lending activities are specific domains to assess coherence.

Knowledge management

The extent to which the IFAD-funded country programme is capturing, creating, distilling, sharing and using knowledge.

Partnership building

The extent to which IFAD is building timely, effective and sustainable partnerships with government institutions, private sector, organizations representing marginalized groups and other development partners to cooperate, avoid duplication of efforts and leverage the scaling up of recognized good practices and innovations in support of small-holder agriculture.

Policy engagement

The extent to which IFAD and its country-level stakeholders engage to support dialogue on policy priorities or the design, implementation and assessment of formal institutions, policies and programmes that shape the economic opportunities for large numbers of rural people to move out of poverty.

Effectiveness

The extent to which the country strategy achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its results at the time of the evaluation, including any differential results across groups.

A specific sub-domain of effectiveness relates to:

Innovation, the extent to which interventions brought a solution (practice, approach/method, process, product, or rule) that is novel, with respect to the specific context, time frame and stakeholders (intended users of the solution), with the purpose of improving performance and/or addressing challenge(s) in relation to rural poverty reduction.³¹⁶

Efficiency

The extent to which the intervention or strategy delivers, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.

"Economic" is the conversion of inputs (funds, expertise, natural resources, time, etc.) into outputs, outcomes and impacts, in the most cost-effective way possible, as compared to feasible alternatives in the context. "Timely" delivery is within the intended timeframe, or a timeframe reasonably adjusted to the demands of the evolving context. This may include assessing operational efficiency (how well the intervention was managed).

Impact

The extent to which the country strategy has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.

The criterion includes the following domains:

- changes in incomes, assets and productive capacities
- changes in social / human capital
- changes in household food security and nutrition
- changes in institution and policies

The analysis of impact will seek to determine whether changes have been transformational, generating changes that can lead societies onto fundamentally different development pathways (e.g., due to the size or distributional effects of changes to poor and marginalized groups).

³¹⁶ Conditions that qualify an innovation: newness to the context, to the intended users and the intended purpose of improving performance. Furthermore, the 2020 Corporate-level Evaluation on IFAD's support to Innovation defined transformational innovations as "those that are able to lift poor farmers above a threshold, where they cannot easily fall back after a shock". Those innovations tackle simultaneously multiple challenges faced by smallholder farmers. In IFAD operation contexts, this happens by packaging / bundling together several small innovations. They are most of the time holistic solutions or approaches applied or implemented by IFAD supported operations.

Evaluation criteria

Sustainability and scaling up

The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention or strategy continue and are scaled-up (or are likely to continue and scaled-up) by government authorities, donor organizations, the private sector and others agencies.

Note: This entails an examination of the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain net benefits over time. It involves analyses of resilience, risks and potential trade-offs.

Specific domain of sustainability:

Environment and natural resources management and climate change adaptation. The extent to which the development interventions/strategy contribute to enhancing the environmental sustainability and resilience to climate change in small-scale agriculture.

Scaling-up* takes place when: (i) other bi- and multi laterals partners, private sector, etc.) adopted and generalized the solution tested / implemented by IFAD; (ii) other stakeholders invested resources to bring the solution at scale; and (iii) the government applies a policy framework to generalize the solution tested / implemented by IFAD (from practice to a policy).

*Note that scaling up does not only relate to innovations.

Gender equality and women's empowerment

The extent to which IFAD interventions have contributed to better gender equality and women's empowerment. For example, in terms of women's access to and ownership of assets, resources and services; participation in decision making; work load balance and impact on women's incomes, nutrition and livelihoods; and in promoting sustainable, inclusive and far-reaching changes in social norms, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs underpinning gender inequality.

Evaluations will assess to what extent interventions and strategies have been gender transformational, relative to the context, by: (i) addressing root causes of gender inequality and discrimination; (ii) acting upon gender roles, norms and power relations; (iii) promoting broader processes of social change (beyond the immediate intervention).

Evaluators will consider differential impacts by gender and the way they interact with other forms of discrimination (such as age, race, ethnicity, social status and disability), also known as gender intersectionality.³¹⁷

Partner performance (assessed separately for IFAD and the Government)

The extent to which IFAD and the Government (including central and local authorities and executing agencies) ensured good design, smooth implementation and the achievement of results and impact and the sustainability of the country programme.

The adequacy of the Borrower's assumption of ownership and responsibility during all project phases, including government, implementing agency, and project company performance in ensuring quality preparation and implementation, compliance with covenants and agreements, establishing the basis for sustainability, and fostering participation by the project's stakeholders.

Evaluation Cooperation Group (2017) Gender. Main messages and findings from the ECG Gender practitioners' workshops. Washington, DC. <https://www.ecgnet.org/document/main-messages-and-findings-ieg-gender-practitioners-workshop>

Evaluation framework

IOE's key evaluation questions for CSPEs are **in bold characters**. Other questions were identified during preparation of the approach paper.

Relevance

- **Were the country strategy and programme relevant and aligned to: (a) the country's development needs and challenges as well as national strategies; (b) IFAD's relevant strategies and priorities; (c) the needs of the beneficiaries and tailored to very poor or marginalized people or special categories.**
- **Was the design of the strategy and programme realistic in terms of the context and implementation capacity?**
- **To what extent did the COSOP evolving strategy take into account the changing country context?**
- Which approaches to agricultural transformation (producer groups, other), resilience towards external shocks (climate change, economy) and poverty reduction did the programme promote and how did this respond to the context of poor and marginal rural areas?
- To what extent did the 2018 COSOP strategy and programme incorporate strategic lessons from previous operations?
- How did the programme's geographical and social targeting choices evolve over the period and how did they take into account the strategies of programme partners?
- How relevant to local government capacities were multisectoral design options, the diversity of projects and technical assistance choices?
- How relevant to the country's financial capacity and availability of other development finance sources was the combination of financial instruments provided through IFAD?
- To what extent did the programme and project-level theories of change, logical frameworks and M&E systems follow good practice and supported implementation and learning?

Coherence

- **What is the overall coherence of the country programme? In particular: To what extent were there synergies and interlinkages between different elements of the country strategy/programme (i.e. projects, non-project grants, SSTC, policy dialogue)?**
- To what extent did IFAD's selection of programme partners in Laos influence programme consistency over the period?
- How coherent and effective was the collaboration with other actors working in the rural space (other than programme partners)?
- How coherent were SECAP processes this with government and with programme partners in relation to climate change, environmental and social risks?
- Were the (human and financial) resources for critical activities such as technical assistance or non-lending activities sufficient to achieve the COSOP objectives?
- How well was IFAD positioned among UN agencies and to what extent did the country programme contribute to the strategic objectives of the UN in Laos?

Partnership building

- **How effective were the partnerships with the government, the programme partners and other development partners working on similar themes (climate change adaptation, natural resource management, value chains, rural finance, gender and youth, nutrition)?**
- How effective was the partnership with MAF, its departments and local levels in relation to nutrition, agricultural support services and smallholders' access to land, with which results?
- How did IFAD loans and grants contribute to creating and supporting partnerships at different levels (national, Mekong region), with different types of organizations (private sector, research and universities, civil society, farmers' organizations) and to what extent did this contribute to brokering knowledge, enhancing policy dialogue and avoiding duplication of efforts?

Knowledge management

- **To what extent lessons and knowledge produced through IFAD-funded initiatives (both loans and grants) have been gathered, documented and disseminated? To what extent have lessons from success and failure been learned in IFAD's operations (e.g. exchange between different programmes and/or projects)? And how have these informed new strategies and project design?**
- Was there a explicit strategy on knowledge management during the 2011 and 2018 COSOP periods? To what extent was this implemented and what results were achieved?
- To what extent did the various parts of IFAD (SKD, APR and MCO) contribute to knowledge management? How coherent and effective were these contributions at project and COSOP levels?
- Which channels (government, programme partners, media, civil society) did the IFAD programme mobilize to share knowledge generated through IFAD's lending and non-lending portfolio, with what scaling up outcomes?
- How effective was the Government's role in scaling up knowledge from operations? To what extent did the Government own and use the knowledge from studies and research funded through IFAD non-project grants?

- What was the role and contribution of IFAD SSTC within the country programme? What were Government's priorities for SSTC? To what extent were practices from the country programme shared outside of Laos? How effective were the roles of the MCO and the regional SSTC centre in supporting SSTC in Laos?

Policy engagement

- Was there a explicit strategy on policy engagement in the 2011 and 2018 COSOPs, on which key issues? To what extent (and how) did partnerships support IFAD's policy engagement?
- To what extent did IFAD mobilize knowledge and resources (in-country and regional) to engage with government on the policy framework around these issues?
- To what extent was policy engagement effectively monitored and followed up? What are the documented results from policy engagement?
- To what extent did IFAD use operational and local knowledge to support policy engagement?
- How did IFAD engage with programme partners in policy discussions in Laos and how did it draw from its portfolio experience?

Effectiveness

- **Were the objectives of the intervention/country strategy and programme achieved or likely to be achieved at the time of the evaluation?**
- **Did the strategy achieve other objectives or did it have any unexpected consequence?**
- To what extent did the IFAD programme (lending and non lending) contribute in a balanced manner to the COSOP's two strategic objectives?
- To what extent were synergies present between the ToC's development streams and did this contribute to progress towards the programme objectives?
- How effective was the implementation of the targeting strategy and what was the resulting outreach?
- How effective were the means mobilized to include the rural poor and to reach out to remote and marginal areas?
- How effective was the involvement with government agencies and grassroot organizations in strengthening focus on poverty, nutrition, gender and youth?
- Which opportunities did producer groups and credit access groups provide to poorer segments of beneficiary communities and to what extent was elite capture minimized?
- To what extent did the programme or project support / promote innovations, aligned with stakeholders' needs or challenges they faced? Were the innovations inclusive and accessible to a diversity of rural producers (in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic groups)?
- Which types of innovations resulted in high project scores on this criteria?
- To what extent did IFAD generate innovations, technical or non technical, through the lending portfolio, on which key issues?
- Which innovations are being confirmed and scaled-up and why?

Efficiency

- **How did benefits and costs relate (e.g., net present value, internal rate of return)? How did this compare with similar interventions (if the comparison is plausible)?**
- **Were adequate unit costs used for the construction of infrastructure?**
- **Were programme management cost ratios justifiable in terms of intervention objectives, results achieved, considering contextual aspects and unforeseeable events?**
- Was the time frame of the intervention development and implementation justifiable, taking into account the results achieved, the specific context and unforeseeable events?
- Was the programme investment per beneficiary adequate, and how does it compare with similar interventions?
- What were the respective roles of technical assistance, government agencies and civil society and how were they deployed?
- How efficiently were the loans and grants processed and deployed, including: (i) project preparation and processing timeliness; and (ii) implementation/ disbursement timeliness (including project management performance)
- Which projects had lower scores on efficiency, for which reasons?
- Which factors led to contrasted performance of the project management units?

Impact

- **To what extent did the country strategy and programme had the anticipated impact on the target group and institutions and policies?**
- **To what extent were changes observed in the following and can be attributed to, the programme: incomes and assets; social / human capital; household food security and nutrition; and institution and policies?**
- **Have very poor / marginalized groups, special categories, benefited in a sizable manner?**
- What evidence do project surveys, by IFAD or its programme partners, provide on these changes?
- Did the programme lending and non-lending operations generate unexpected impact, positive or negative?
- What additional impact was generated through cofinancing or parallel interventions between IFAD and its programme partners?

Sustainability of project benefits

- To what extent did the country strategy and programme contribute to long-term institutional, environmental and social sustainability?
- What is the level of engagement, participation and ownership of the government, local communities, grass-roots organizations and the rural poor?
- Did the programme's operations include exit strategies and were they implemented?
- Did the lending and non-lending operations promote sustainable solutions to cover operations and maintenance?
- Why is there an important gap between PCR and IOE scores on sustainability?

Scaling up

- To what extent were successful innovations from IFAD lending and non-lending operations scaled up during and after projects, and through which channels and institutions?

Environment, natural resource management and climate change adaptation

- Which projects and factors contributed to low average scores on ENR and CCA?
- Did the 2018 COSOP achieve its objective of building smallholders' resilience to climate shocks and natural disasters?
- Did the lending and non lending operations introduce and/or disseminate climate-smart practices for smallholders?
- Did the IFAD programme support sustainable and resilient water and land use systems effectively, directly and through programme partners?
- Did the IFAD programme combine improvements in sustainable natural resource management with improved food production and nutrition for poor men and women, directly and through programme partners?

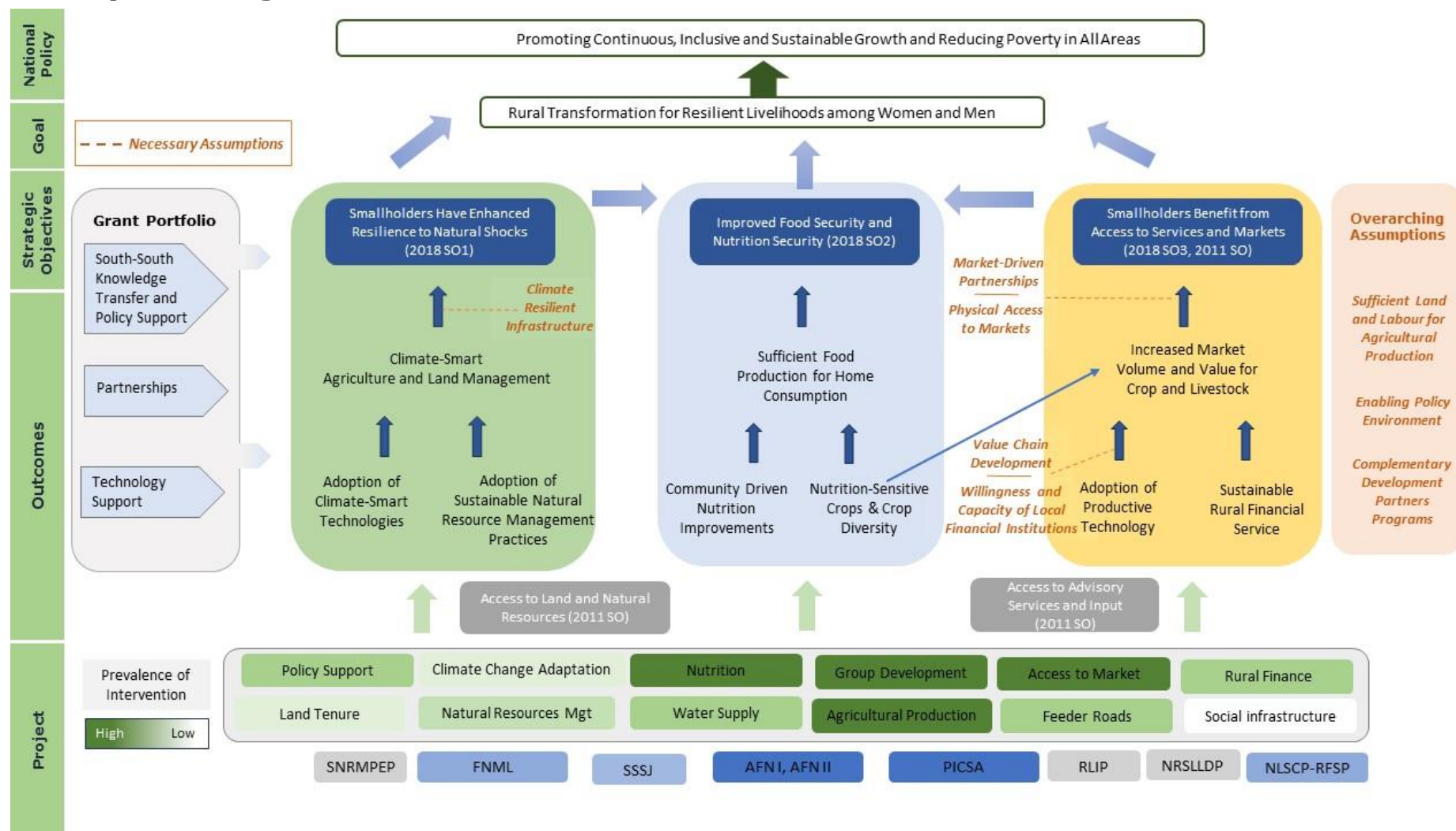
Gender equality and women's empowerment

- What were the project's achievements in terms of enhancing gender equality and women's empowerment?
- What evidence of enhanced attention and actual improvements is there in: (i) women's access to resources, income sources, assets (including land), agricultural support services and credit; (ii) women's influence in decision-making in the household and participation in processes and institutions that affect their lives; (iii) workload distribution (including domestic chores); (iv) education, nutrition and health?
- Were there notable changes in social norms, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs and policies / laws relate to gender equality?
- Did the programme (and projects) have gender strategies? How transformational were these strategies?
- How did IFAD partner with other institutions to support change in women's empowerment, and what was the added value of the IFAD programme?
- To what extent did these strategies take into account both women and girls, and local cultures and language gaps?
- Were sufficient (human and financial) resources allocated to implement these strategies?
- What was the quality of disaggregation of indicators according to gender (and age and ethnicity)?

Partner performance (IFAD and Government)

- Did the partners pay adequate attention to design quality (adhering to quality standards when available) and realistic expectations on targets and implementation capacity?
- Did they provide oversight and strategic guidance at design and during implementation? Did Government comply with the loan covenants and fulfil its fiduciary responsibilities according to the loan agreement? To what extent did the Government demonstrate its ownership of the programme (and in the relevant sectors)?
- Were management decisions supported by a functioning M&E system?
- How did IFAD support capacity building in the government on financial management, procurement, M&E (that have lower ratings)?
- How was coordination between the management systems of IFAD and its programme partners approached, with which results?
- Which factors allowed higher project management performance in the on-going projects?

Theory of change



IFAD-financed operations in Lao PDR, 2011-2023

Nr.	Project Name	Project acronym	Total project cost US\$ million	IFAD approved financing US\$ million	International cofinancing US\$ million	Counterpart US\$ million	Beneficiary contribution and other domestic financing US\$ million	Executive Board approval	Loan effectiveness	Project completion date	Cooperating institution	Project status
1	Rural Livelihoods Improvement Programme In Attapeo And Sayabouri (RLIP)	RLIP	28.4	20.5	3.3	3.4	1.2	4/19/2005	3/15/2006	3/30/2014	IFAD	Financial Closure
2	"Northern Regions Sustainable Livelihoods Through Livestock Development (NRSLLDP)	NRSLLDP	18.3	3.0	13.5	1.1	0.8	9/15/2006	10/15/2007	3/31/2014	IFAD	Financial Closure
3	Sustainable Natural Resource Management and Productivity Enhancement Project (SNRMPEP)	SNRMPEP	36.8	15.0	20.0	1.8	-	12/17/2008	7/23/2009	3/31/2017	IFAD	Financial Closure
4	Soum Son Seun Jai - Community Based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme (SSSJ)	SSSJ	19.3	14.0	4.2	0.8	0.4	12/13/2011	12/22/2011	12/31/2017	IFAD	Financial Closure
5	Southern Laos Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme Project Completion Report (FNML)	FNML	79.4	14.7	60.6	1.2	3.0	9/7/2013	9/13/2013	31/09/2020	IFAD	Financial Closure
6	Northern Smallholder Livestock Commercialization	NSLCP-RFSP	40.7	10.0	25.7	4.3	0.6	/	/	/	IFAD	Cancelled

Project: Rural
Financial Services
Programme
(NSLCP-RFSP)

7	Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project - GAFSP funds Project Completion Report (AFN I)	SSFSNP - GAFSP (AFN I)	40.3	-	31.5	5.4	3.4	4/13/2016	4/28/2016	6/30/2023	IFAD	Financial Closure
8	Partnerships for Irrigation and Commercialisation of Smallholder Agriculture Lao PDR (PICSA)	PICSA	30.3	21.0	-	2.2	7.1	9/9/2019	11/29/2019	6/30/2026	IFAD	Available for disbursement
9	Agriculture for Nutrition Project (AFN II)	AFN II	48.3	19.9	20.0	4.8	3.5	Mid-2023	Mid-2024	Mid-2030	IFAD	Available for disbursement
<i>TOTAL</i>			341.8	118.1	178.8	24.9	19.9					

IFAD non-project grants with Lao PDR as one of the target countries

IFAD unit	Project Id	Project Name	Recipient Country	Recipient Institution	Entry into Force	Current Completion	Total Amount	IFAD Contribution
APR	1000003085	Food, Feed, Fuel, and Fibre for a Greener Future (4FGF)	Colombia	International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)	1/14/2009	3/31/2013	2,250,000	1,500,000
APR	1000003362	Smallholder Poultry Development (FAO)	Italy	FAO	9/3/2009	9/30/2012	800,000	600,000
PMI	1000003893	Capacity Building on Agricultural data and statistics	Lao People's Democratic Rep	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	12/17/2010	12/31/2012	500,000	500,000
PMI	1000004067	Disseminating Challenge Program On Water And Food Innovations And Adoption Processes For Water And Food And Piloting Their Mainstreaming In The Ifad Portfolio (Cpww)	Sri Lanka	International Water Management Institute	5/7/2012	6/30/2014	2,874,000	1,000,000
PMI	1000004166	Capacity Building for Women's Leadership in farmer producer organization in Asia and the Pacific region	Thailand	Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management	12/22/2011	12/31/2014	500,000	500,000
RIA	1000004229	Sustainable Management of Crop-based Production Systems for Raising Agricultural Productivity in Rainfed Asia	India	International Crops Research Institute for Semiarid Tropics	5/7/2012	3/31/2017	2,500,000	1,500,000
APR	1000004302	Climate risk management in Agriculture with demonstration sites in Indonesia, Laos, and Bangladesh	United States	Trustees of Colombia University, Earth Institute	12/7/2012	6/30/2015	840,000	700,000
APR	2000000074	MTCP-2	Philippines	AFA	9/4/2013	6/30/2019	2,000,000	2,000,000
APR	1000003911	Leveraging Pro-poor Public-Private Partnerships (5Ps) for Rural Development — Widening Access to Energy Services for Rural Poor in Asia and the Pacific	Thailand	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	8/10/2011	12/31/2016	1,350,000	1,350,000
PMI	1000004000	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ASSISTANCE	Kenya	Maiynoito Pastoralists Integrated	7/27/2011	9/30/2014	405,670	405,670

				Development Organization				
APR	1000004001	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ASSISTANCE	Philippines	Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education	7/27/2011	12/31/2014	466,620	466,620
PMI	1000004003	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ASSISTANCE	United States	Madre	7/27/2011	9/30/2014	577,710	577,710
PMI	1000004008	Pro Poor Policy Approaches to Address Risk and Vulnerability at the Country Level	Italy	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)	2/13/2012	3/31/2016	2,400,000	1,500,000
APR	1000004070	Strengthening Knowledge Sharing on Innovative Solutions Using the Learning Routes Methodology in Asia and the Pacific	Chile	Corporación Regional de Capacitación En Desarrollo Rural	10/27/2011	7/27/2015	1,400,000	1,000,000
APR	1000004071	Improved Forage-based Livestock Feeding Systems for Smallholder Livelihoods in the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle	Colombia	International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)	9/16/2011	9/30/2015	2,000,000	1,500,000
APR	1000004256	DEVELOPMENT OF ACCESS TO REMIT	Switzerland	Universal Postal Union	5/22/2012	7/31/2013	537,039	-
APR	1000004356	Inclusive Business Models to Promote Sustainable Smallholder Cassava Production (IBC)	Netherlands	SNV NETHERLANDS DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION - LAOS	12/13/2012	6/30/2015	1,449,000	1,199,000
RIA	2000000094	Reducing Risks and Improving Rice Livelihoods in South-East Asia through the Consortium for Unfavorable Rice Environments	Philippines	International Rice Research Institute	3/13/2014	3/31/2018	2,400,000	1,500,000
APR	2000000165	3ie - Impact evaluations	United States	International Initiative for Impact Evaluation-USA	12/13/2013	12/27/2017	500,000	500,000
APR	2000000270	Strengthening Knowledge Sharing and Scaling up of Sustainable Innovation Using Learning Route Methodology - Phase II	Chile	PROCASUR	6/23/2014	6/30/2016	1,000,000	1,000,000
APR	2000000275	IIASA - Impact Evaluation - Project Monitoring & Policy Scenarios	Austria	International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis	12/19/2013	12/31/2016	500,000	500,000
ECG	2000000361	Agricultural Transformation	United States	International Food Policy	5/17/2016	6/30/2022	2,901,135	2,500,000

		and Market Integration in ASEAN Region: Responding to Food Security and Inclusiveness Concerns		Research Institute				
APR	2000000729	Technical support to four ex-post impact evaluations using mixed methods approaches	United Kingdom	University of East Anglia	11/1/2014	5/31/2016	500,000	500,000
APR	2000000760	MTCP-II - SDC	Philippines	AFA - Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA)	8/25/2014	9/30/2018	3,071,647	-
APR	2000001022	Asia Training Programme for Scaling Up Pro-Poor Value Chains	Switzerland	Swiss Association for International Cooperation - HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation	1/21/2016	3/31/2021	2,238,000	2,000,000
PMI	2000001103	Scaling-up Sustain. Land Mgmt (SLM) Practices by Smallholder Farmers: Working with agric. ext. services to identify, assess & dissem. SLM. - WOCAT	Non-specified	University of Bern, CDE - Centre for Development and Environment	2/29/2016	12/31/2020	2,404,000	2,000,000
RIA	2000001137	Direct Support to FO-Agricord	Belgium	Agricord	2/3/2016	3/31/2019	250,000	250,000
APR	2000001235	AFOSP/MTCP	Philippines	AFA	10/14/2015	12/11/2020	7,877,400	-
PMI	2000001276	FFP - EU	Belgium	Agricord	5/6/2016	12/11/2020	7,571,000	-
ECG	2000001514	Linking Research to Impact: Increasing the Effectiveness of Agriculture and Food Systems in Improving Nutrition Project	Italy	Bioversity International	7/31/2017	7/31/2022	3,395,000	2,520,000
APR	2000001650	MAHFSA Haze-free	Indonesia	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	4/29/2019	3/31/2025	4,000,000	3,500,000
GP R	2000001967	NARDT	Viet Nam	Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development	7/5/2019	6/30/2024	2,610,000	2,500,000
APR	2000002006	International Symposium	Nepal	International Centre on Integrated Mountain Development	1/14/2019	12/31/2020	155,000	125,000
APR	2000002023	Metrics & Technologies NS	Canada	McGill University - Public University in Montreal	4/18/2019	12/31/2023	1,374,000	1,050,000

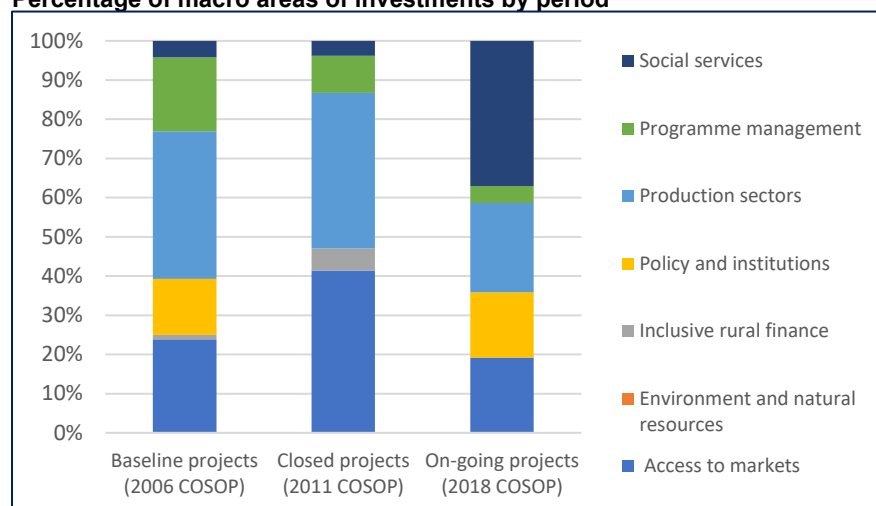
APR	2000002365	APFP	Philippines	AFA	7/5/2019	9/30/2024	33,700,000	3,000,000
APR	2000002380	Leveraging SSTC	Kenya	Alliance for a Green Revolution In Africa	1/22/2019	3/31/2022	1,099,750	500,000
RIA	2000002680	South – South Cooperation for Scaling up Climate Resilient Value Chain Initiatives (SSCVC) - SSTC facility	Viet Nam	Centre for Agrarian Systems Research and Development	4/10/2019	12/31/2021	500,000	-
APR	2000003473	ARISE RPSF	Philippines	AFA	9/30/2020	3/31/2022	2,000,000	-
							102,896,971	40,244,000

Supporting tables and grants

VI-1. Portfolio financial data

Table 1

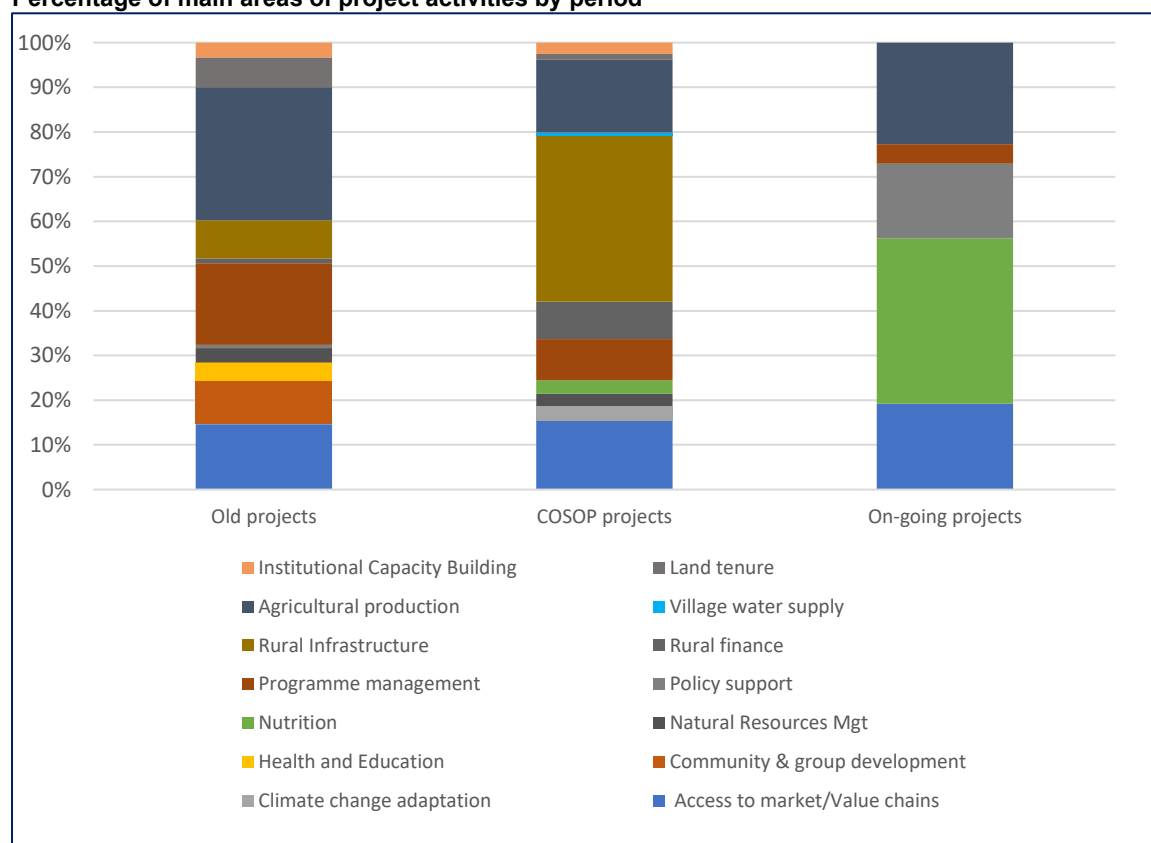
Percentage of macro areas of investments by period



Source: OBI

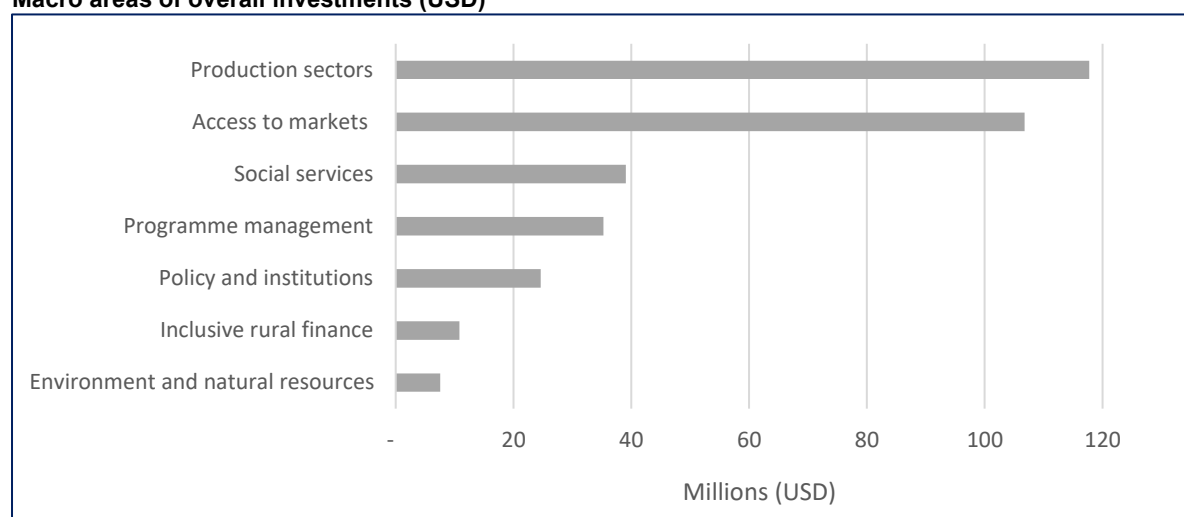
Table 2

Percentage of main areas of project activities by period



Source: OBI

Table 3

Macro areas of overall investments (USD)

Source: OBI

Table 4

Overall project activity investments (USD)

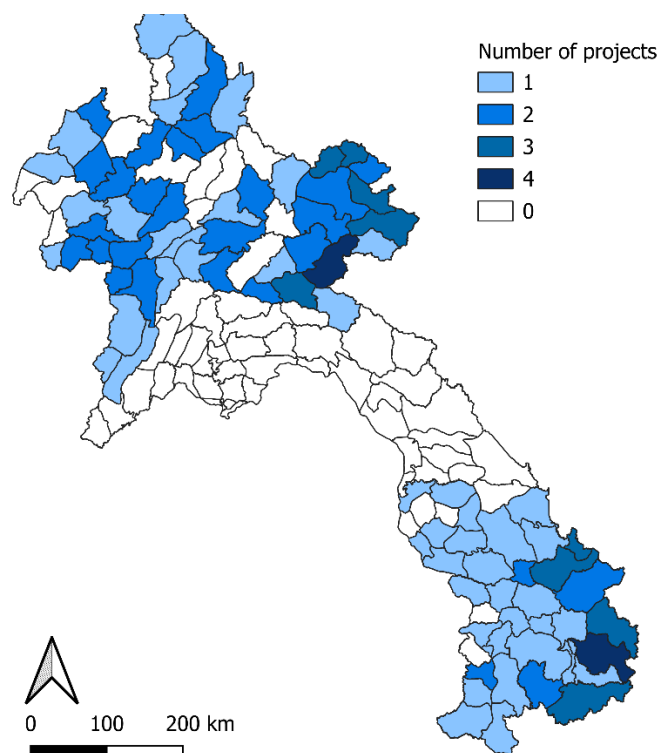
Source: OBI

VI-2. Outreach

District outreach

Map 1

Number of projects per district



Note: the CSPE recreated the list of project districts for the 9 projects from the PCRs. The map shows balance between the three regions. A large

Table 7

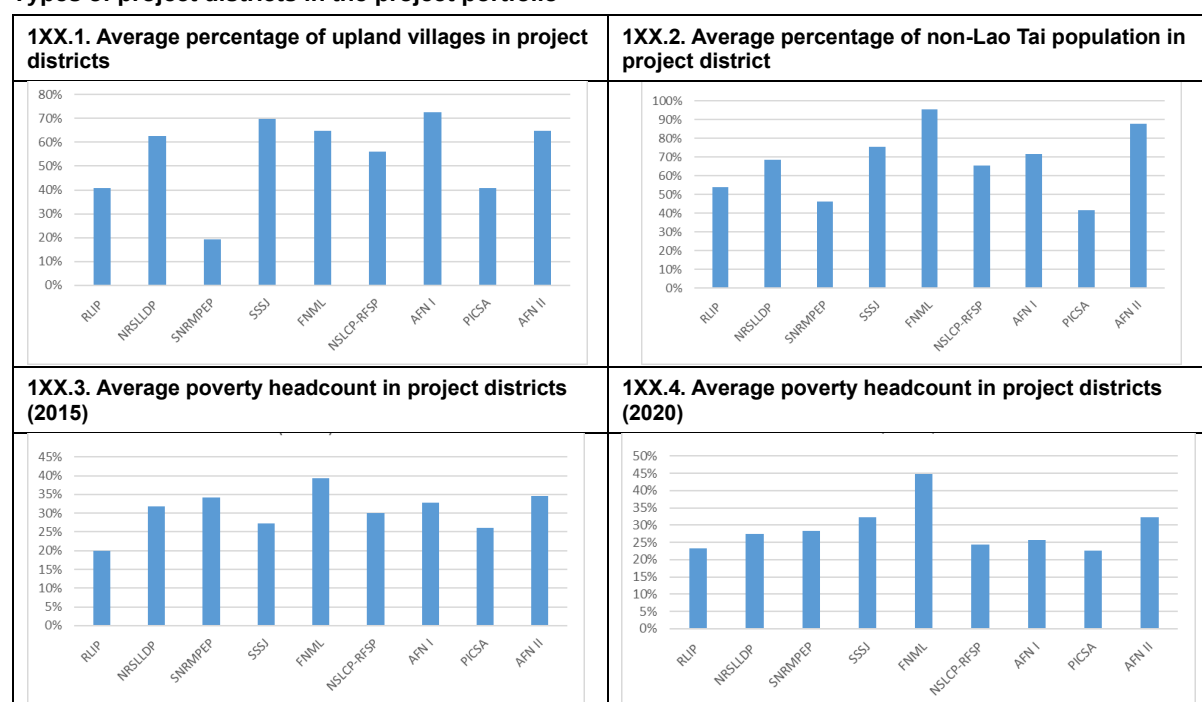
Poverty indicators of districts with one project or more

	Poverty Headcount (2015) (1)	Poverty Headcount (2020) (2)	% of developed villages in district (3)	% of upland villages (4)	Mean travel time from village to provincial capital (5)	Village(s) with road access (5)	Percentage of non Lao-Tai population (6)
Average in 90 project districts	30.44	26.12	55%	41%	184.5152	63%	57%
Districts with 1 project	29.99	24.24	67%	27%	143.35	70%	46%
Districts with 2 projects	28.20	25.59	42%	61%	241.63	55%	75%
Districts with 3 projects	38.83	35.61	31%	56%	239.56	50%	65%
Districts with 4 projects	32.00	41.53	17%	84%	370.89	26%	89%

CSPE analysis of project district database and district statistical data. The analysis shows a clear correlation between poverty indicators and number of projects per district.

Sources: (1) LSB and World Bank. 2016. Where are the poor? Analysis is based on the 2015 population census and the LECS 5 survey (2012-2013) (2) LSB and World Bank. 2020. Where are the poor? Analysis is based on the 2015 population census and the LECS 6 survey (2018-2019). (3) Number of villages having fulfilled all 8 Decree 348 criteria, including less than 30% of poor. (4) 2011 agricultural census. (5) 2005 population census. (6) 2015 population census. 3, 4, 5 and 6 were retrieved from K4D (<https://en.data.k4d.la/>). Village-level data from the latest agricultural census (2021) was not available during the CSPE.

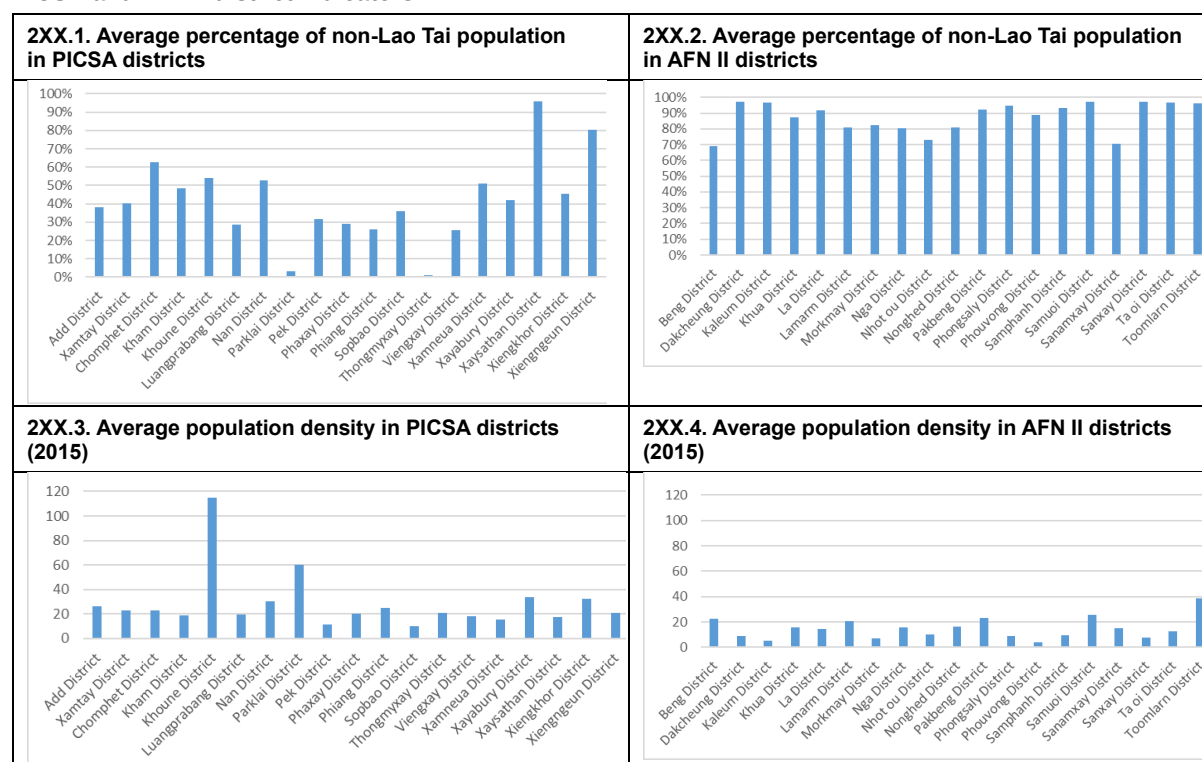
Figure 1
Types of project districts in the project portfolio



Sources: see Table 1.

Comparison of PICA and AFN II district

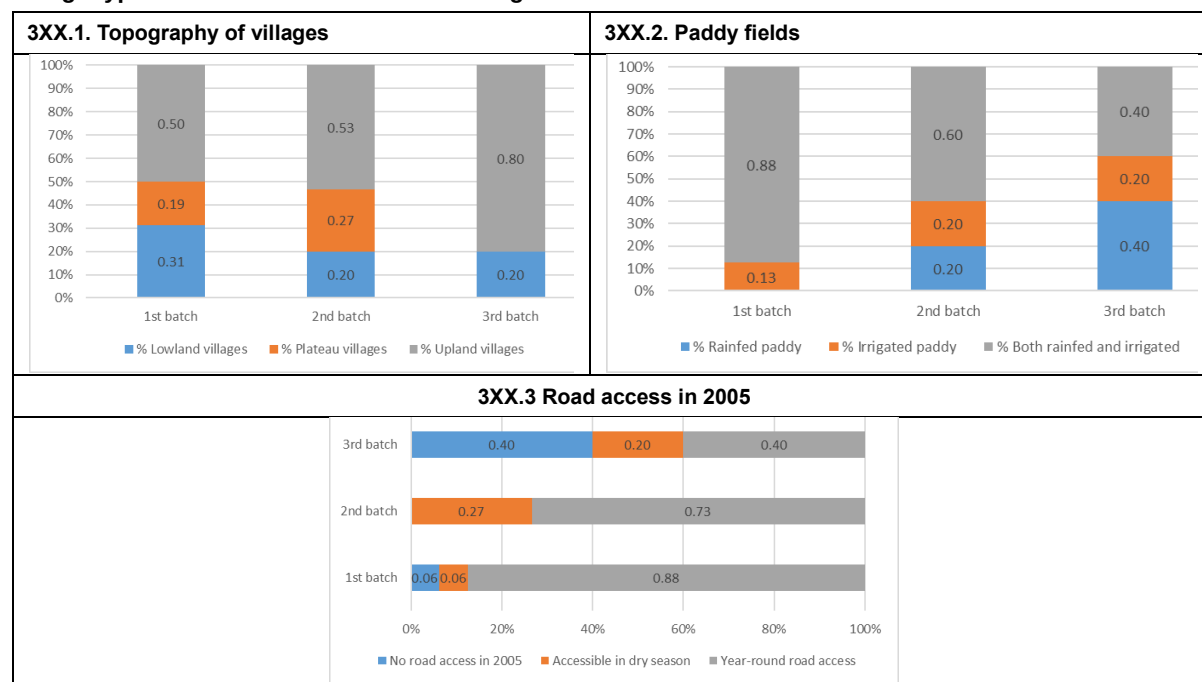
Figure 2
PICA and PAFN district indicators



Sources: CSPE analysis, from project district database and 2015 population census.

Village outreach in PICSA

Figure 3
Village types in the 3 batches of PICSA villages



Source: CSPE analysis of PICSA village dataset (from PICSA MIS) and 2011 agricultural census village data (retrieved from K4D).

Notes: the agricultural census classifies each village in three types of topography, lowland, plateau. The 2005 road access reflects village experience in market access. PICSA started in 2018.

VI-3. Project-level effectiveness

Pathway	Outcome-level indicator	Principal indicator from project logframes	Achievement status (number of indicators)			Contributing projects
			Underachieved	Met	Overachieved	
Smallholders have Enhanced Resilience to Natural Shocks (2018 SO1)	Adoption of Climate-Smart Technologies	2,000 HHs have implemented an innovative adaptive technology			1	FNML
		4,200 HHs report satisfaction with climate adaptation technical service support provided through line agencies		1		FNML
		Poor smallholder household members supported in coping with the effects of climate change			3	FNML
	Adoption of Sustainable Natural Resource Management practice	Households reporting adoption of new/improved inputs, technologies or practices			1	PICSA
		Households adopting improved technology promoted by the programme (upland and lowland areas). (Attapeu province)	1			RLIP
		Households reporting adoption of new/improved inputs, technologies or practices	3			FNML
		Efficient project management operational		1		SNRMPEP
		Women spend less than 1.2 hours per day on feed collection and preparation for pig production level.		1		NRSLLDP
	Climate-resilient infrastructure	Farmers with secure access to water. (Attapeu province)	1			RLIP
	Climate-Smart Agriculture and Land Management	120 villages with improved adaptation capacity		1		FNML
		Cropping intensity in lowland paddy fields (proxy for farming system intensity)		1		PICSA
		Households reporting adoption of environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient technologies and practices			1	FNML
		Land under climate-resilient practices			1	FNML
		Percentage of families provided with long term tenure / security of natural resources (families)	1			SSSJ
		Percentage of families provided with long term tenure / security of natural resources (number)	1			SSSJ

Improved Food Security and Nutrition Security (2018 SO2)	Community driven nutrition interventions	12 District Nutrition Committees hold at least two meeting per year to develop, coordinate and implement a convergence plan on food and nutrition		1		AFN I
		Number of Village Nutrition Facilitators trained and active		1		AFN I
	Growth and diversification of Income	21,000 HH out of poverty by increasing per capita income from the current level to more than \$270/yr by Project-end	2			AFN I
	Improved MDDW	Women reporting minimum dietary diversity (MDDW)	4	2	6	AFN I; PICSA
	Improving food security	6000 HHs with improved food security (HFIAS score of 7.0 or lower)			1	FNML
		At least 21,000 households with improved food security (measured as a HFIAS score of 7.0 or lower)			2	AFN I
		Households experiencing one hungry season			1	RLIP
		Reduction of the duration of the first hungry season			1	RLIP
	School Based Nutrition Interventions	Number of schools serving improved meals of adequate nutritional value		1		PICSA
	Sufficient food production for home consumption	Households reporting increased herd/flock sizes.			1	RLIP
		Households reporting increased production from their plots.	1			RLIP
		Households with access to safe drinking water supplies.			1	RLIP
		Households with access to safe drinking water supplies.			1	RLIP
Smallholders Benefit from Access to Services and Markets (2018 SO3, 2011 SO)	Adoption of Productive Technology	# of Districts with more than 15 staff trained in project implementation and management procedures		1		PICSA
		12 000 households adopted improved animal housing.		1		NRSLLDP
		6,000 households in project villages adopted livestock forage technologies.			1	NRSLLDP
		Families participating in at least two separate training events each year, with separate sub-training for women and ethnic groups			1	SSSJ
		Households reporting adoption of new/improved inputs, technologies or practices	1		1	AFN I
		Village action plans (development plans) prepared.		1		RLIP
		6000 households fully applied improved livestock management system			1	NRSLLDP
	Increased Market Volume and Value for Crop and Livestock	% of households reporting an increase in sales of farm products		1		PICSA

VI-4. Effectiveness and sustainability – Village-level observations



Chomphet District, Luang Prabang Province

households in a valley about 15 minutes from the district. It is a PICSA batch 1 village, with 2 pig APGs with 20 members each and a WUG. The project constructed a flow-over gabion weir that fed upper paddy fields (31 households), and 2 small reservoirs for dry season irrigation. Peanuts, beans and vegetables are grown in the dry season. A model farmer introduced fodder grass for pig raising which has been taken up by 6 APG members. Local geography limits paddy fields to 17 hectares, which poor households do not have access to. The water supply improvements allowed for better hygiene of pigs, irrigation of home gardens, and domestic consumption. Water accessibility reduced

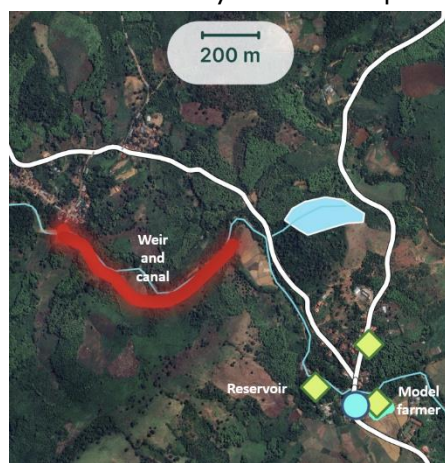
women's workloads from a few hours to 10 minutes.

Donxai (lowland, Khmu). 67 households, on a well-paved road about 10 minutes from the district centre, next to a rubber plantation, PICSA batch 2 relatively remote village, with 2 goat APGs created by the project. Irrigation improvements were envisaged when the



village was selected but the proposed location of a flow-over weir was not suitable following DAFO surveys, and would have benefitted 9 households only. The project used the small infrastructure funds to build improved goat sheds. Veterinary trainings and kits for goats were provided which has lowered animal losses significantly, and the APGs have contacts with middlemen also supported by PICSA. Goat sales supplement incomes. Households also sell their labour in the rubber plantation. Limited land for pasture – in part due to the concession for the rubber plantation – is an issue for participation in the APG.

are rice, corn, cassava and maize for feed, with commodity crops being maize, cassava and tree oil. Dry season crops are rice and mixed vegetables (for consumption and sale).

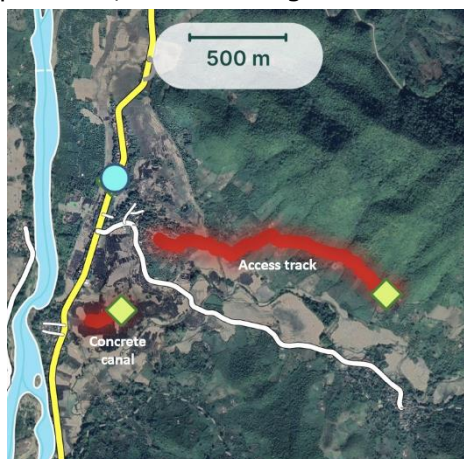


Houaymieng (upland, Khmu). 110 households on a dirt track about 45 minutes from the district centre, PICSA batch 3 village. The main crops in rainy season are rice, corn, cassava and maize for feed, with commodity crops being maize, cassava and tree oil. Dry season crops are rice and mixed vegetables (for consumption and sale). Forest goods for sale are above all honey (unprocessed). The project recently set up a vegetable APG and the group has opened a bank account. There are 2 WUGs from previous projects that set up a small weir above the village, and a larger weir and canals for paddy fields. The village aims for the former to have pipes repaired and a reservoir enlarged to provide water for WASH, home garden greenhouse irrigation, and to reduce women's workloads. The latter will be irrigated for dry season vegetable production and increase the number of households that can work on the dry season paddy fields from 10 to 20. *Irrigation rehabilitation scored only 1 on sustainability.*

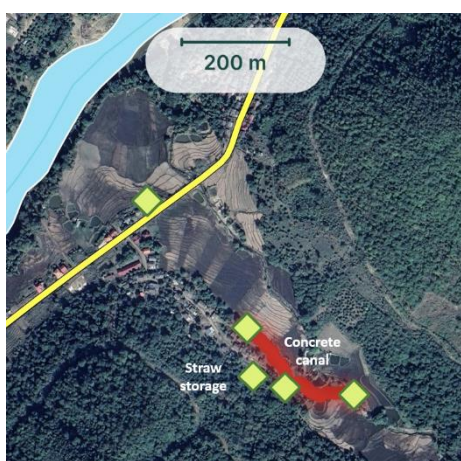
Huameuang District, Huaphanh Province

Pacha (upland, various groups), 40 households about an hour from the district centre on a dirt track, AFN I village. 3 APGs were set up, dedicated to goats, poultry, and vegetables, each with 7 household members. All remained active after AFN I ended. Goats are

marketed through middlemen, chickens are sold in the district town and the village. Vegetables are sold exclusively in the village. The goat APG constructs enclosures around pastures, which villagers found to be good at keeping out cows, but was of limited effectiveness in keeping goats in. Participants in the AFN farmer nutrition school were mainly women. Nutrition garden grants were used to supplement vegetable production in the vegetable APG. The improved access track connecting the village to paddy fields in the valley is not usable in the rainy season. A bridge constructed by the project was swept away by floods. No drainage was constructed and was of low technical standard.



Outhai (upland, Hmong), with 60 households, about 1.5 hours from the district capital. There is a nearby rare earth mine that ensures the road is in good condition. The mine construction represented a loss of forest resource and water for the village, with a new spring being tapped. It is an AFN I village with 2 APGs. One is dedicated to vegetables, with 7 members, the other to poultry with 6 members. Vegetables are sold within the village, while poultry is sold both in the village and to mine workers at city prices. A farmer nutrition school was built and had women and some men participate and learn from cooking demonstrations for family nutrition. Men were reportedly taking on more household labour and tending to children more. AFN I also built a bridge across a stream on an access track connecting the village to its production area. Villagers are very content with the bridge since it allows them to avoid crossing a stream that grows significantly in the rainy season. The bridge is in good condition but no O&M arrangements are in place, and the village is too far from local banks to have a bank account.



Add District, Huaphanh Province

Sod (lowland, Tai Dam). A village with 103 households very close to the district capital on a well-paved road. It consists of 3 hamlets. Crops in the rainy season include upland rice, cassava, paddy rice, and pasture. In the dry season rice is grown in the paddy fields and vegetables along the stream. There are 350 cattle, and 250 buffalo, on average 10 large ruminants per household. Every family has goats which fetch good prices in the market.



Farmers also raise pig and poultry for home consumption. Sod is a PICS batch 2 and a former NSLCP-RFSP village. PICS supported the village by building a concrete-lined canal to irrigate 8 of 30 ha of communal paddy fields, significantly reducing labour and ensuring water availability. This is significant considering that villagers identify drought as a future concern. This serves a dry season rice APG and the WUG that was set up for maintenance. The NSLCP-RFSP project supported with improved pasture irrigation via pipes, though these are no longer functional since parts to be replaced cannot be

obtained.

Dan (lowland, Tai Dam). A village with 110 households quite close to the district capital on a new well-paved road and on the Vietnam border. The village grows rice, watermelon and cucumber in the rainy season, rice in the dry season are grown. The water source is

a big irrigation scheme shared with a sister village across the border in Vietnam, with water emerging from Vietnam. In Dan it irrigates 10 ha of paddy fields. Upland crops are cassava, maize and fruit trees for sale, and upland rice for household consumption. Dan is a PICSA batch 1 village. Through the project, a watermelon, cucumber and dry season rice APG was established, a secondary 280 metre canal was lined with concrete, and a 1.7 km access track connecting the village to the upland fields was improved. Training to the APG included use of hormone growth factors for watermelons, fertilizer (compost and synthetic) and a pesticide sprayer. The canal reduced labour. The village already had fund-raising practices for maintenance of the irrigation system through a rice bank system.

Nahi (lowland, Tai Dam). A village with 40 households that is no longer remote thanks to a new government-built road, practicing two season rice cropping, commercial crops including rice, cassava and fruit trees. The village has 250 cattle, 34 buffalo, and sells pigs and poultry for market. The village is at the tail end of a government irrigation scheme involving 4 villages. The concrete flow-over weir has suffered structural damage over the past two years from flash floods that has villagers worried about its integrity and that of the irrigation system it feeds. Nahi is a PICSA batch 3 village, interested in joining PICSA for cash crop production. A rice APG has been created with its own pre-existing WUG. Irrigation improvements will focus on lining a secondary canal with concrete. Drought and being the last village in the irrigation scheme has been the principal driver for deciding the irrigation improvement. Women expressed wanting support for livestock, but rice was chosen with expectation that profit from rice sales can supplement livestock activities.



La District, Oudomxay Province

Na Laeng (lowland, Khmu ethnic group), 74 households, is in a valley 30 minutes from district town. Through AFN I, some 50 paddy owners benefitted from rehabilitation of a 20 Ha irrigation scheme. Beans are grown in the dry season. A cow raising group created more than 20 years ago invested into fencing, forage grass and water supply. Women created a black pig raising APG that replaced losses from African swine disease, and focuses on feed from local resources. Each APG leader coordinates animal vaccination and sales.

Most APG members were paddy field owners. All households benefitted from rehabilitation of gravity drinking water, and most took part in nutrition and homegarden activities. There was additional WFP support on vegetables before and during AFN I. Investment into cow raising was most useful, along with the AFN I management approach. Three bank accounts were operational, one for each APG and one for village infrastructure. Management fees allow good maintenance.

Seneluang (upland, Akha), is a large, remote old village (160 households) without paddy fields. It is a tourism village but tourists bring very limited benefits other than buying some food. There are several nutrition convergence projects. The village produced maize for a Chinese company under contract farming. That was a good arrangement but stopped after a few years. The AFN I project built a village meeting hall for both men and women (called nutrition learning centre) that is well maintained. Among the two APGs, goat raising and galanga, the goat APG was especially useful and is fully maintained, with both men and women members including 40% of poor households. Improvements include a goat shed, pasture for 6 household, and vaccination for pay. Galanga was useful for those households with individual sloped land. The APG bank accounts are maintained, are also used for savings, may contribute to village expenditures in the future. More than 100 households took part in the homegarden activity, only two thirds continue to grow vegetables as most young people left due the crisis to work away from the village. Vegetable species were adjusted to local preferences.

Hat Haen (lowland, mostly Khmu). This village of 63 households, close to district town, only has 6 poor households. It accessed a large range of project of which AFN I was the second IFAD project. A model pig and chicken farmer was the driving force for 2 pig APGs. Households improved sheds and were trained on feed, vaccination and egg sorting. Chicken are sold individually through middlemen with a coordinated price. Group member savings are used for vaccination and to help poor households. NAFRI provided training on chicken and set up an integrated homegarden demonstration on one family farm. The nutrition activities with two young facilitators from the village, one man and one women, were especially useful. The cooking lessons for young mothers have continued after the project. Conducting several activities at the same time through AFN I was effective compared to other projects. Irrigation rehabilitation is a priority but did not fit into the AFN I budget. The VDP needed updating, which was not done either.

Xamsathai District, Xayaboury Province

Phoutuy (upland, Phai). This village is 4 hour away from the district town but only one hour away from the neighbouring district. Part of the households gain most of their income from working in Thailand, the others continue to farm. PICSA set up a paddy group including 5 poor households. Renovated irrigation covers 8 Ha, reduced women's workload. It will allow a second crop of rice and vegetables, for sale. This is a first step as one third of households have paddies. Training included the introduction of animal manure. Various small tools were also purchased with the PICSA grant, for shared use among members, to replace older ones. Improved irrigation is also useful for homegardens since they are close to the river. Women found cooking lessons with the schoolteacher very useful, used the garden grant to buy hens and ducks. Remaining priorities not covered under PICSA included an access road to the paddy fields, that are far away. Coffee and Job's tears are being started through contract farming with Chinese companies.

Sama (upland, Phai). This 171-household village was relocated here in 2013. A goat APG was set up on 10 Ha of community sloped land, used the APG grant for an animal shed for 70 goats, water supply, fencing and growing fodder grass. Members are men, include 5 if the village's 30 poor households, including two women-headed households. Two persons per day rotate to take care of the goats, this saves time. Before, goat raising was individual and free ranging. The village head is in charge of vaccination. Training included a study tour in the district. Goat manure is used to grow vegetables around the animal shed. Cooking lessons and garden grants to purchase chicken were useful, under a nutrition committee made up of young people. To renovate the SSSJ built school vegetable garden, a fence and water tank were set up. Villagers grow tea, coffee and Job's tears under contract with a Chinese company, taro under contract with a Lao company that started under SSS, are starting cassava, and have 7 Ha of paddy. A remaining priority is a motorbike access road to the fields.

Phiang District, Xayaboury Province

Phonhin (lowland, Lao)

Navaen (lowland, Lao).

VI-5.1. Value chain development

Four value chains were observed during the country visit: maize and pigs in Oudomxay Province, and rice and goats in Xayaboury Province. Information was assembled from interviews with beneficiary enterprises (and non beneficiary enterprises for maize), direct observation of enterprise facilities, short discussions with retailers and FGD with APGs. These value chains were selected among those for which at least one enterprises had accessed a PICSA or AFN I grant in the districts visited. Cardamom and vegetable were

main value chains developed respectively under AFN I and PICSA but could not be observed in the districts visited.

Overview

In all four value chains, farmers benefitted from access to improved agricultural inputs, training and equipment. They shared knowledge, equipment and technology within the APGs and with non members. They benefitted from a guaranteed minimum price from enterprises, enabling them to expand production with reduced production costs.

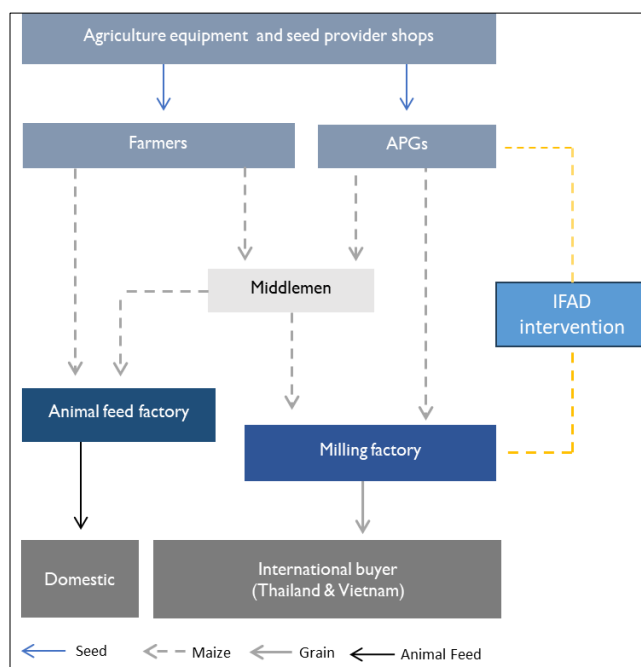
Beneficiary enterprises expanded their operations within a district and created links with some APGs. However, no post-harvest investment was observed other than drying of crops and seasonal storing of crops or animals, and no product differentiation. The enterprises provided more secure and convenient market outlets for farmers producing animals. animals. Added value was not visible for farmers producing crops. They did not value added for the farmers. Sales were expected to be more convenient for goats only.

Maize Value Chain

The value chain begins with enterprises providing agricultural inputs to farmers, often in the form of credit. Several non-beneficiary enterprises have been active for a number of years, sell hybrid seed, fertilizer, pesticides and small equipment to farmers and buying back maize via middlemen, drying the product before sale. These enterprises include Chinese investors located in various districts of Oudomxay province and one Lao company integrated into the Thai CP group. These enterprises are active province-wide, import maize seed from several neighbouring countries, and export maize seed primarily to Thailand and China. Animal feed factories within Laos are a separate channel.

Figure 4

Map of maize value chain and IFAD project interventions



Project support to a district enterprise to dry maize had limited connection to the project since few APGs selected maize as their focus. Should maize APGs be present, added value would have been in theory sustained prices from dried maize meeting export quality standards.

In practice, the enterprise grant appeared to arrive too late. In addition to active presence of similar facilities of provincial scope, the maize price was declining due to quota limits in exports to China due to sanitary and phytosanitary reasons. In addition farmers, independently from the project, were shifting from maize to cassava. The cassava area increased from 100 hectares in 2023 to 4,000 hectares in 2024. Whether the beneficiary enterprise would diversify into cassava or farmers would directly sell to the provincial starch

factory was unknown. **Value added to farmers was not visible.**

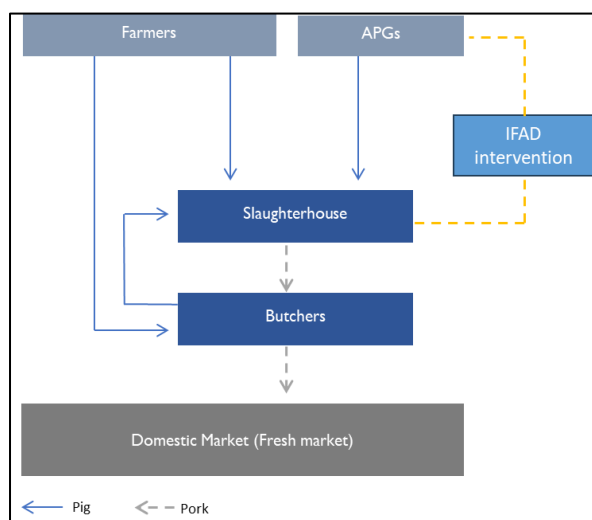
Pig Value Chain

The pig value chain consisted until recently in farmers, typically raising pigs using local feed, such as bananas, banana trees, taro, and maize, and often doing so without

dedicated pig pens, and butchers purchasing directly from farmers to process them at home, lacking proper hygiene and sanitation.

Figure 5

Map of pig value chain and IFAD project interventions



Pig APGs used their project grants to purchase animals from the local back breed and improve pig pens. Technical assistance encompassed vaccination, local pig feed production, and establishing contracts with the slaughterhouse. The contract ensured a minimum price, the actual price being based on market conditions.

AFN supported an enterprise setting up the district's first slaughterhouse. The slaughterhouse sold meat to butchers on the local and provincial markets. The APGs were under contract with the enterprise during the first few years.

Value added was confirmed for the enterprise and butchers. The butchers reported a 43% margin despite the Provincial Industry and Commerce Department controlling pork price and sales quotas.

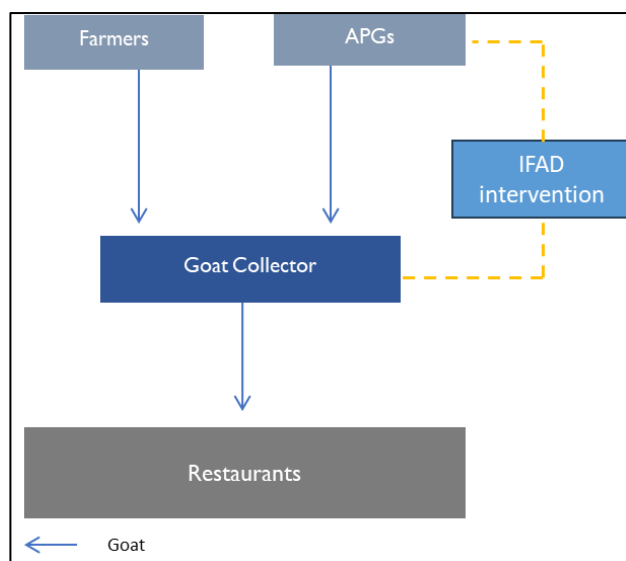
Value added to farmers consisted in a more secure and convenient market outlet.

The butchers were increasingly purchasing pigs directly from the farmers, the slaughterhouse providing a service activity. Value added was otherwise limited as pork from the local black breed sold at the same price as from commercial hybrid pig. The slaughterhouse delivered meat of lighter colour whereas consumers had preference for a darker colour.

Goat Value Chain

Figure 6

Map of goat value chain and IFAD project interventions



Farmers in Xayaboury typically raise free-ranging goats, selling them directly to collectors who cover various villages.

PICSA supported these farmers set up APGs, providing each member with two goats and funding to buy materials and tools to build shelters and fences for the goats. The project also offered training on vaccination and grass cultivation.

One established district goat collector accessed a project grant to build a larger goat shelter allowing collection of goats from the village all year round, under contract with farmers at market price with a minimum price. Goats remain sold live to restaurants in the provincial capital and

to households during events.

The added value for farmers was a reliable market outlet and price all year round.

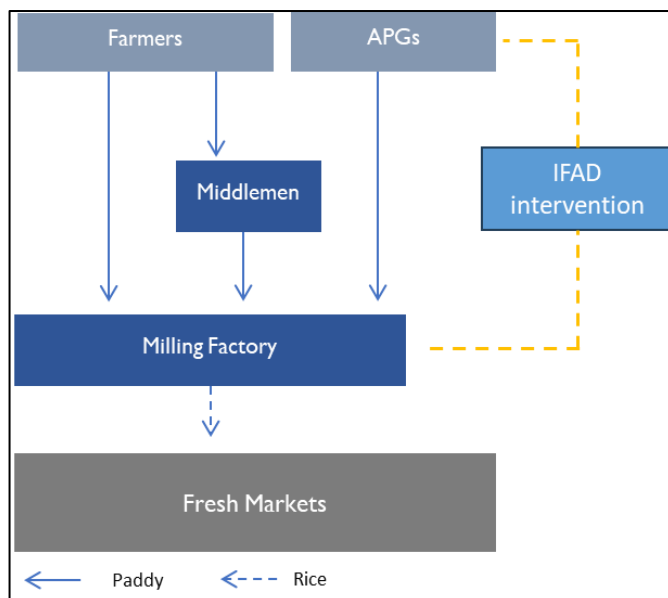
The goat collector had been working in the area for a long time and was already well known to the farmers and buyer.

Rice Value Chain

Rice farmers in Xayaboury province typically produce rice once a year, selling production beyond self-consumption to middlemen. With the support from PICSA, improved irrigation systems enable dry-season rice cultivation. Dry-season rice APGs have been established as a means to introduce the dribbling technique, significantly reducing production costs to farmers. The APG grant also covered purchase of equipment and seed.

Figure 7

Map of rice value chain and IFAD project interventions



One existing milling factory expanded its production capacity from 800 tons per year to 1,500 tons per year, with a PICSA grant covering 30% of the total cost. In addition to the grant, the enterprise accessed training and improved its business plan. The milling factory, which has contracted with the PICSA-supported APGs, sells rice to the local market and neighbouring Luang Prabang and Oudomxay Provinces.

Middlemen have retained their previous role in the collection of rice from remote villages.

Value added for farmers was not visible. The enterprise introduced quality standards. It did not purchase rice from the APG as the produce did not meet these standards.

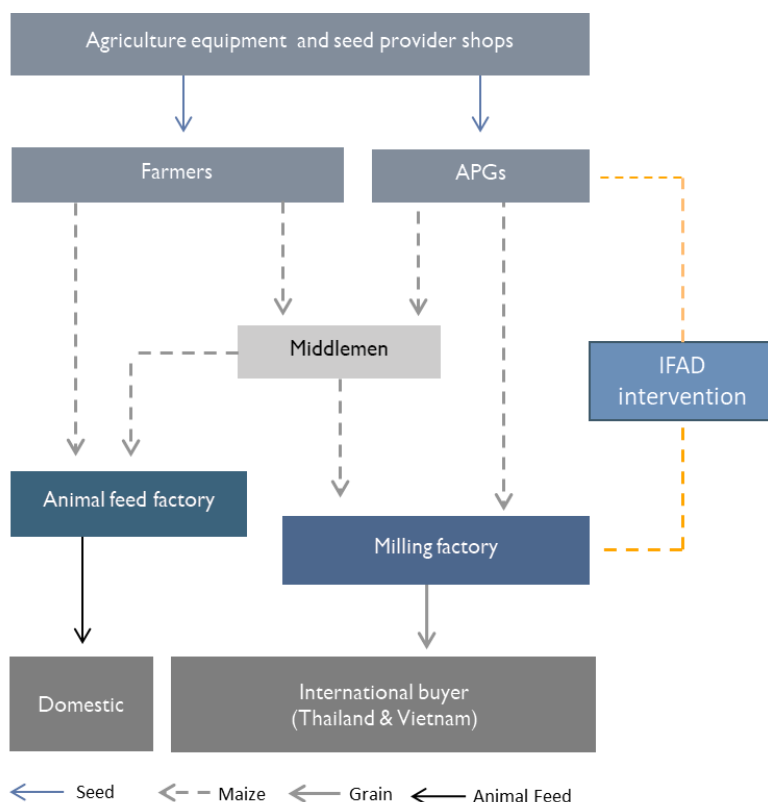
VI-5.2. Value chain AFN1

Maize Value Chain

The value chain of maize begins with agricultural equipment and seed provider shops selling seeds to farmers. Maize seeds are mainly imported from Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Seeds from Vietnam are prevalent, and the cheapest, while those from Thailand are suitable for highland growth. Several factories purchase maize from farmers, with most buyers being Chinese investors located in various districts of Oudomxay province. The agricultural equipment shops sell seeds, pesticides, herbicides, and equipment.

Figure 1

Value Chain Map of Maize



Maize farmers grow maize in the upland area. Many of them changed to cassava in the recent year due to price drop. Middlemen support the value chain through transportation from remote areas to animal feed factories and milling factories. Milling factories buy maize from farmers at a rate of 4,000-6,000 LAK per kg. However, the price of maize has dropped in recent years due to a limited export quota to China, caused by SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) restrictions. Meanwhile, cassava cultivation is booming in Oudomxay, following the establishment of a starch factory in 2023. The plantation area for cassava has increased from 100 hectares in 2023 to 4,000 hectares in 2024. Maize factories primarily dry and mill the maize into grain form and then export it to Thailand and China. Some of the grain is sold to animal food factories within the province, which produce feed for ducks, chickens, and pigs (See picture).

Figure 2.
Pig Feed



Figure 3.
Duck Feed



The AFN generates new value chains by developing APGs and linking them to milling factories through the contract (See Figure 1). The AFN supports maize farmers in establishing APGs and assists milling factories by providing necessary equipment and

facilitating contractual agreements. This collaboration aims to increase productivity, improve product quality, and ensure sustainable income for farmers.

Pig Value Chain

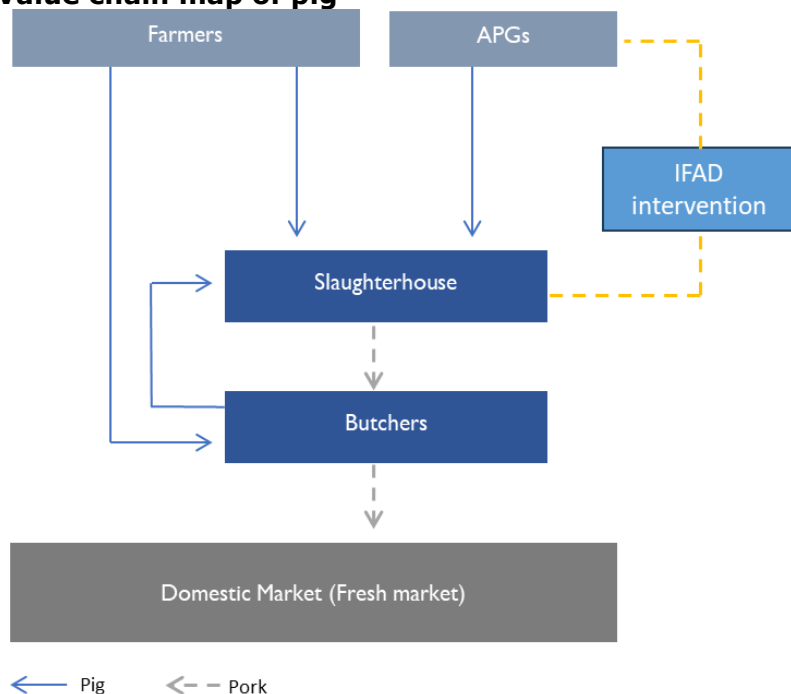
In the past, the pig value chain in La District was straightforward, involving two main actors: farmers and butchers. Pig farmers typically raised pigs using local feed, such as bananas, banana trees, taro, and maize, and often did so without dedicated pig pens, using local pig breeds. Pigs were commonly sold to butchers or buyers within the village, especially during cultural events. Butchers would purchase pigs from farmers and process them at their homes, often lacking proper hygiene and sanitation.

The AFN supports a new value chain by assisting pig APGs in several villages of La District, enhancing their ability to raise pigs and establish a slaughterhouse (See Figure 4). This support includes technical assistance, piglets, and materials for building pig pens. Technical assistance encompasses training on vaccination, pig feed production, and establishing contracts with slaughterhouses. AFN provides each APG member with two piglets and assists the group in opening a bank account. The contract ensures that pigs are sold to slaughterhouses at a minimum price, adjustable based on market conditions.

Butchers receive their supply based on quotas from several slaughterhouses. Some butchers may source their pork from nearby slaughterhouses, while others may get it from farther away. Prices among sellers in the fresh market do not vary significantly, as the Provincial Industries and Commerce Department controls them. Sometimes, butchers buy pigs from farmers and deliver them to slaughterhouses to obtain pork.

Figure 4.

Value chain map of pig



Slaughterhouses usually deliver pork to the butchers in the market for 56,000 Kip per kg, and the butchers sell it at 80,000 Kip per kg. In 2019, the owner of a slaughterhouse planned to develop a new facility in La District. However, due to the spread of COVID-19, the establishment was postponed. The initial idea was to invest in a small-sized operation to expand later. With the implementation of the AFN project in La District, it became an opportune time to establish the slaughterhouse in 2022.

Figure 5.
Slaughterhouse

Figure 6.
Slaughterhouse



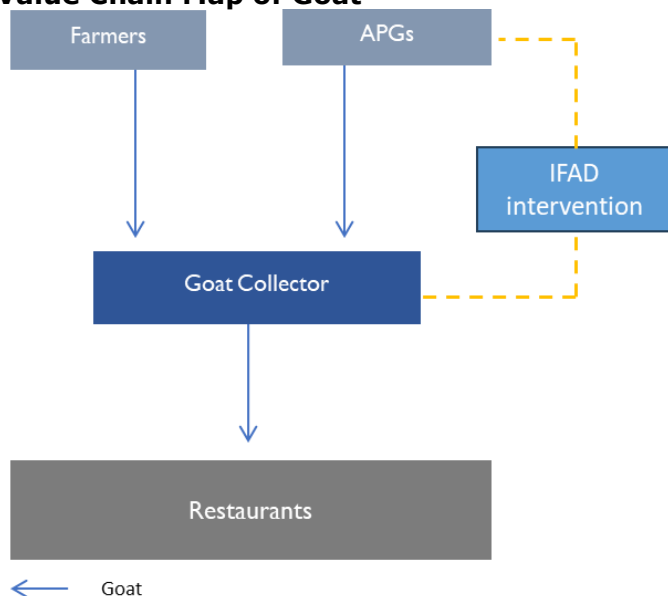
Initially, the slaughterhouse will contract with pig farmers to supply pigs at a minimum price not lower than the market price. After the end of the program and contract, farmers will sell to butchers who collect pigs from villages, under both AFN and non-AFN initiatives. The butchers will then supply the slaughterhouse, and the pork will be sold at a fresh market.

Goat Value Chain

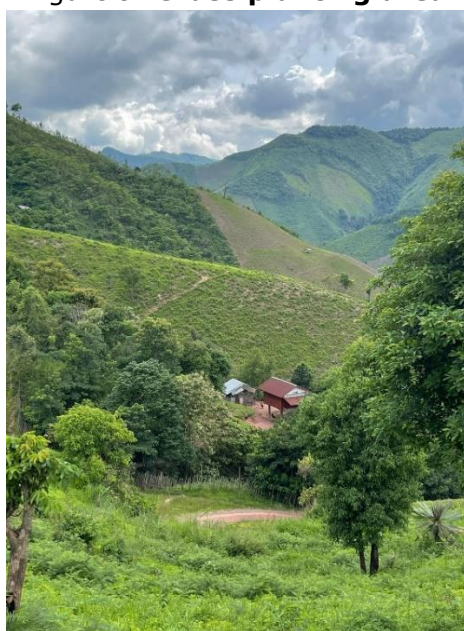
Goat-raising farmers in Xaysathan District typically raise goats openly without cages, which sometimes leads to problems for other crops. They sell goats directly to collectors who come to various villages. These farmers have no consistent market or price for their goats. The PICSAs support these farmers by setting up APGs and providing each member with two goats and funding to buy materials and tools to build shelters and fences for the goats. The project also offers training on vaccination and grass cultivation. In addition, the AFN supports goat collectors by helping them expand their areas, build shelters for goats, and establish contracts with goat farmers. This creates a new value chain in the district.

Figure 7.

Value Chain Map of Goat



Goat collectors have been working in this area for many years and are well known to the goat farmers and buyers. They buy goats from the farmers and sell them mainly to the restaurants in the Xayabouly province. Households also buy goats for food during events. The contracts guarantee a minimum price and are adjusted to market price for the goats. The market price of the goat is around 65000 LAK per Kg. There are no slaughterhouses for goats, so restaurants and households must process goat meat themselves.

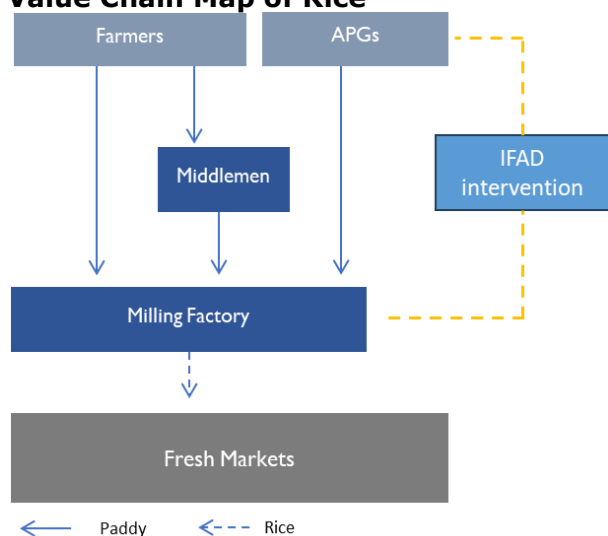
Figure 8. **Goat Shelter**Figure 9. **Grass planting area**

Rice Value Chain

Rice farmers in Phieng District, Xayabouly province, typically produce rice once a year. However, with the support of PICSA, irrigation systems have been introduced to enable dry-season rice cultivation. As a result, dry-season rice APGs have been established. These APGs have learned the dribbling technique, which involves using a bamboo pole or plastic pipe with a metal scoop attached at the end to dig holes, drop seeds into the holes, and cover them with soil. This method has significantly reduced production costs for the farmers. Additionally, PICSA supports the APGs by providing equipment and seeds. This support is facilitated through the opening of bank accounts for the groups.

Figure 10.

Value Chain Map of Rice



Middlemen have roles in collecting rice from farmers in the remote area to the milling factory. The dry-season rice APGs have a contract with a milling factory, which is supported by PICSA, to sell their rice. One milling factory received assistance from PICSA to expand its production capacity from 800 tons per year to 1,500 tons per year, with a grant covering 30% of the total cost. In addition to the grant, the milling factory also received business plan training from POIC, PWT, and PONRE. The milling factory, which

has contracted with the PICSA-supported APGs, sells rice not only to the local market but also to other provinces such as Luang Prabang and Oudomxay province.

Figure 11.
Milling factory



Figure 12.
Banner of IFAD support



Conclusion

The intervention of AFN and PICSA benefits various stakeholders within the value chain. Farmers receive substantial support, including seeds, training, and equipment. Through APGs, farmers can share knowledge, equipment, and technology, which is also extended to nonmembers. Farmers benefit from a guaranteed minimum price that is flexible with market fluctuations, enabling them to expand production and reduce costs based on technological advancements.

Businesses receive support to expand their operations, creating stronger links between farmers and production groups. However, the value chain of several products remains underdeveloped, with limited processing and, consequently, limited value added. The APGs also face challenges in managing financial and accounting tasks, which are crucial for the operations and maintenance of infrastructure such as weir, gravity and solar panel. To ensure the sustainability of the APGs, training in finance, accounting, and product design is essential.

VI-6. Nutrition interventions in the IFAD portfolio

Contribution to IFAD's 2024 thematic evaluation of nutrition³¹⁸. Data from this CSPE will also be used to inform a country case study on Nutrition in Laos as part of IOE's TE on Nutrition interventions. The findings have been incorporated into this CSPE and will be further elaborated in the forthcoming thematic evaluation. In its nutrition action plan, building on Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture (NSA) main nutrition pathways, IFAD has identified potential outcomes that can be considered entry points for improving dietary diversity which are represented in Figure 1 below.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ See Approach Paper for TE

³¹⁹ Based on the conceptual pathways between agriculture and nutrition, as described by Herforth, A. and Harris, J. (2014)³⁶, and desk review of IFAD's main nutrition documents, an attempt was made by the evaluation team to represent IFAD's main nutrition pathways through which investments are expected to result in improved nutritional outcomes.



Nutrition policy context in Laos.

Lao PDR has seen progress in lowering the rate of malnutrition since the launch in 2008 of the National Nutrition Strategy 2010-2015 and the follow up National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action (NNSPA) 2016-2020 and 2021-2025, consistent with the UN global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN)³²⁰ movement.³²¹ The National Nutrition Committee, established in 2013 and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, oversees key sectors involved, such as the

Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and Ministry of Education and Sports.³²² In recent years, Lao PDR has begun the development of a “convergence” approach, whereby multiple sectors, including health, education, agriculture, and others, work together in the same geographic locations (provinces, districts, and villages) through coordinated technical approaches to influence the multiple causes of malnutrition, and drive better outcomes for families and communities.³²³

Nutrition coverage in IFAD’s Lao PDR portfolio

The most recent UNSDCF strongly considers Nutrition in its Country approach, with IFAD contributing to the Joint output on Nutrition and food security: “Government has strengthened capacity to plan, deliver and monitor sufficient and equitable quality nutrition-specific and sensitive interventions and services across sectors, and communities are supported and have the knowledge and skills to meet their food security needs and practice optimal dietary, care and service seeking practices and behaviours.”³²⁴ IFAD has also been a part of the 2021 Food Systems Summit, specifically leading implementation of Theme III, Advancing Equitable Livelihoods & Value Distribution, and a partner on Theme IV, Building Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks & Stress.³²⁵

The 2011 COSOP addresses nutrition primarily within the broader context of agricultural productivity and rural development. Nutrition is acknowledged as a critical component of improving the well-being of poor rural households, particularly focusing on women and children. The document highlights that women play a dominant role in household nutrition yet face significant disadvantages in terms of leadership and opportunities within their communities. The strategy aimed to improve access to advisory services and inputs for sustainable, adaptive, and integrated farming systems. Among the anticipated outcomes is an improved nutritional balance in poor households, achieved through sustainable agricultural practices that increase production and resilience to climate variability and pest outbreaks. The emphasis is on integrating nutrition into the broader

³²⁰ <https://scalingupnutrition.org/>

³²¹ [SS Lao PDR National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action 2016-2020, December 2015](#)

³²² [NNSPA](#).

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Lao PDR UNSDCF.

³²⁵ https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/national-pathways/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/2021-09-16-en-synthesis-report_fss-2021-9-16.pdf?sfvrsn=616d85ac_1

goal of enhancing rural livelihoods, recognizing that improved nutrition is both a consequence and a driver of increased agricultural productivity and household resilience.

The 2018 COSOP places an emphasis on nutrition, recognizing it as a key area of focus for IFAD's work in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Nutrition is identified as one of IFAD's comparative advantages in the country, alongside smallholder agricultural technology and climate resilience. The document outlines a strategic objective to enhance smallholders' resilience to natural shocks while improving food security and nutrition. This was to be achieved through investments in climate-smart agricultural technologies with nutrition being systematically integrated into all investment projects in alignment with the NNSPA. The COSOP supports a convergence approach to nutrition, which involves coordinated efforts among multiple ministries in order to address gaps identified in previous projects, where a lack of coordination hindered the achievement of nutrition targets.

Since 2016, in line with the current NNSPA, there have been five Nutrition Sensitive projects in IFAD's portfolio: SSSJ, FNML, AFN, PICSA and AFNII. There was a gradual development of IFAD's approach to Nutrition in the portfolio, particularly within the partnership with WFP and along the lines of the Nutrition convergence approach. SSSJ, AFN, and AFN II have seen IFAD providing the support for the structures around the nutrition activities and building on a throughline in its approach. The Farmer nutrition school was piloted under WFP's *Livelihood Initiative for Nutrition* as part of SSSJ in the last two years of its implementation. A "Happy family" Video series combining entertainment with nutrition education was used as an extension methodology. The nutrition pilot, comprising of 22 villages in two districts in Oudomxay was the first effort to put the "National Strategy and Action Plan on Food Security and Nutrition" into practice using the convergence approach. The lessons from working with Nutrition Steering Committees at Provincial, District, and village levels provided a solid success story for other donors and the government to continue this approach.³²⁶ Some optimistic outcomes on child malnutrition reduction and food security were noted at the close, but the PCRV noted that there was little supportive evidence that it could be attributed solely to programme activities.³²⁷

The Southern Laos Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme (FNML) also attempted to bolster nutrition knowledge and improve nutrition by intensify farming systems to enhance cash crop production and market linkages. In this case, nutrition activities and trainings were implemented through LWU.³²⁸ Other agencies were expected to provide technical support to FNML on nutrition, including WFP and UNICEF but these were limitedly implemented.³²⁹ The PPE notes that, *"Ultimately, cooking and eating habits had not changed, and increased crop incomes had not resulted in improved household nutrition....there was no clear coordination with other nutrition programmes in the target area, which would have been crucial to address this issue. Women beneficiaries also reported that the cooking demonstrations and nutrition classes were not effective at changing cooking practices or eating habits. Activities were often not adapted to local conditions (including the availability and accessibility of food), house equipment and tastes/habits."* (PPE)³³⁰

³²⁶ IFAD. 2018b. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Soum Son Seun Jai - Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme. Project Completion Report – Main Report and Appendices.

³²⁷ IOE. 2019. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Soum Son Seun Jai - Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme. Project Completion Report Validation – Main Report and Appendices.

³²⁸ IFAD. 2021b. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) - Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. Project Completion Report– Main Report and Appendices.

³²⁹ IOE. 2023a. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) - Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. Project Performance Assessment – Main Report and Appendices.

³³⁰ IOE. 2023a. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) - Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. Project Performance Assessment – Main Report and Appendices. *ibid.*

Both SSSJ and FNML were burdened with overly ambitious designs³³¹, an issue which was streamlined through the second COSOP. IFAD has continued framing its nutrition activities along a similar intervention logic, with nutrition education providing the bulk of the focus, while being supported by group-focused production activities and the push for market linkages as both an avenue to sell excess production and a bolster for income generation. Water schemes and irrigation activities in FNML and PICSA have, to some extent, contributed to better nutrition.³³² The GAFSP-funded Agriculture for Nutrition Projects (AFNI/II) once again utilized the partnership with WFP to design nutrition training and approaches through specifically trained young extension agents, known as nutrition facilitators.³³³

In linking the project portfolio with the seven entry points identified in the TE, the Laos programme has had the greatest visibility and success with nutrition education which gradually developed over these projects.³³⁴ On the other identified entry points, IFAD's work has covered 6 the seven to some extent, and is beginning to more thoroughly consider indigenous food systems in the AFNII project through the promotion and protection of wild foods, in partnership with the CDE-maintained Pha Khao Lao Platform, which supports agro-biodiversity.³³⁵ During field visits, evaluators observed that the project beneficiaries recognized a strong value in the Farmer nutrition school approach, but still faced barriers in changing their diets and accessing diverse food from the market, especially proteins.³³⁶ A study on SBCC also noted the same, highlighting the challenge of building strong market linkages in the country, both for access to goods and for selling excess production³³⁷. This reflects the importance of the interlinking pathways in addressing nutrition.

Gender nutrition nexus

It was observed in the field that Nutrition has been a solid entry point for gender related activities, especially in improving the workloads of women and sensitizing men to household responsibilities. Women, particularly Mothers, were the primary target of nutrition activities throughout the portfolio, but later participation in trainings by men have also led to promising results.³³⁸ The 2018 COSOP emphasizes the empowerment of women as a critical strategy for improving family diets, particularly during the crucial 1,000 days following a child's conception. Additional priorities include preventing adolescent pregnancies and promoting nutrition-sensitive value chains. The COSOP underscores the Farmer Nutrition Schools to enhance rural families' knowledge and practices around better nutrition, healthy diets, and food processing and preservation, with particular attention to the heavy workload of rural women. Early projects like SSSJ included this approach but lacked a consistent gender strategy for the Nutrition activities to achieve meaningful results³³⁹. Later projects have had greater success in implementing gender-transformative approaches which have had emerging success in changing gender roles through the gender-nutrition nexus. These were pioneered through nutrition activities pioneered in AFN I and continuing in AFN II such as home garden grants and

³³¹ COSOP Completion Review.

IOE. 2023a. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) - Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. Project Performance Assessment – Main Report and Appendices. *ibid*, IFAD. 2024. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Partnerships for Irrigation and Commercialisation of Smallholder Agriculture. Mid-Term Review – Main Report and Appendices.

IFAD. 2016c. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project. Project Design Report – Main Report and Appendices..

³³⁴ Reflected in stakeholder interviews.

³³⁵ IFAD. 2022. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Agriculture For Nutrition - Phase 2. Project Design Report – Main Report and Appendices. , Interviews NAFRI.

³³⁶ Field Visits to AFN project sites in Huaphanh Province.

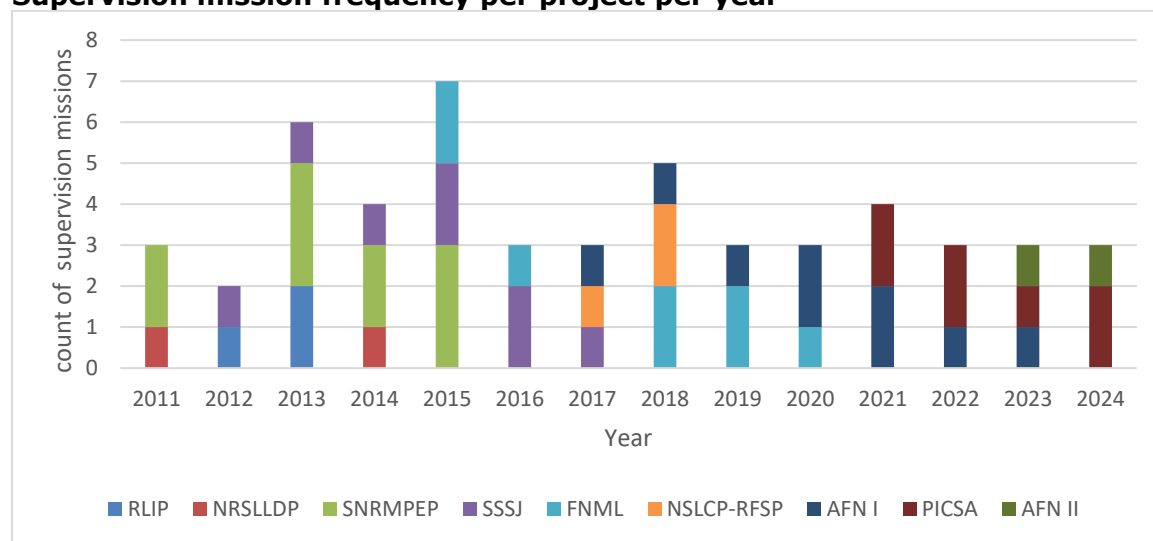
³³⁷ Nutrition education and social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) interventions, investment portfolios and best practices in the Asia and Pacific Region, Barnali Chakraborty, Md. Salah Uddin, Md. Mehedi Hasan and Kaosar Afsana, BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2023. Field interviews confirmed that in AFN, men were increasingly interested in participating in the Farmer Nutrition Schools.

IOE. 2019. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Soum Son Seun Jai - Community-based Food Security and Economic Opportunities Programme. Project Completion Report Validation – Main Report and Appendices..

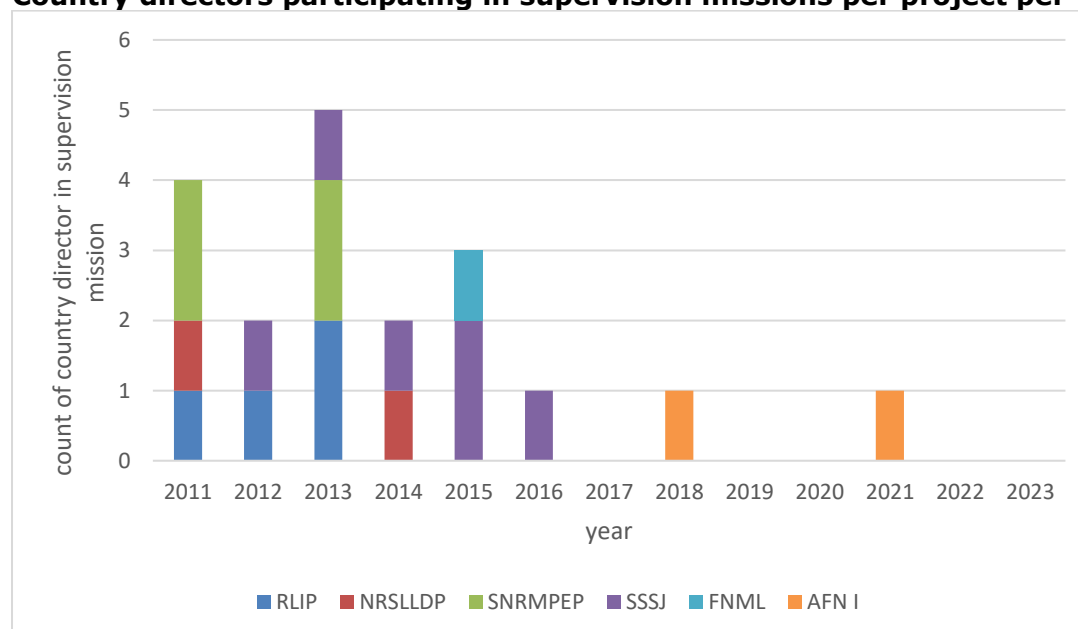
the Farmer Nutrition Schools³⁴⁰. The impact these activities have had, particularly in AFN I, is that men have been participants in activities and trainings in nutrition are brought back to homes, with men being more knowledgeable of the importance of child nutrition, more involved in household chores, and in raising children.³⁴¹

VI-7. Supervision frequency and CD participation

Supervision mission frequency per project per year



Country directors participating in supervision missions per project per year



VII – Results of stakeholder surveys and scorecards

VII-1. International stakeholder e-survey

Available upon request as an appendix from IOE

IOE. 2023a. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme (ASAP) - Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme. Project Performance Assessment – Main Report and Appendices. *ibid*; observed in field visits in AFN I villages

³⁴¹ CSPE mission feedback form villagers

VII-2. Local government scorecards

	All	PAFOs	Districts	AFN I	PICSA
Respondents					
Where did you work 5 years ago? (1)	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.0	1.2
Do you work with an IFAD project? (2)	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.3
What is your knowledge of IFAD in Lao PDR? (3)	2.3	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.3
Scores on 5					
IFAD projects are responsive to government priorities	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.5
IFAD projects respond to the needs of small farmers	4.4	4.7	4.4	4.3	4.5
IFAD projects support women's stronger decision-making in the family and community	4.3	4.2	4.4	4.2	4.4
IFAD projects pay attention to both crop/livestock production and nutrition	4.6	4.5	4.6	4.4	4.6
IFAD projects support climate change adaptation	4.0	3.9	4.0	4.1	3.9
IFAD projects support households' access to market for crop/animal produce	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.5
IFAD projects support households' access to rural finance	4.3	4.1	4.4	4.2	4.4
The technical capacity of IFAD projects is strong on irrigation	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.5
The technical capacity of IFAD projects is strong on other small rural infrastructure	4.3	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.4
The technical capacity of IFAD projects is strong on nutrition	4.3	4.6	4.3	4.3	4.3
The technical capacity of IFAD projects is strong on farmers' access to markets	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.0	4.4
IFAD projects provide resources to government staff to work in project villages	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.3
IFAD is interested in the knowledge generated in project districts	4.3	4.2	4.3	4.3	4.3
IFAD projects provide opportunities to share knowledge between provinces, districts	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.4
IFAD projects provides opportunities to share on project management with other projects	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.2
IFAD supervision missions allow project implementation to improve	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.3
IFAD projects have a specific role that doesn't duplicate other donor projects	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.2
IFAD projects use innovative approaches to agriculture and rural development in the project area	4.5	4.1	4.6	4.5	4.6

Score: 1 = Fully disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = fully agree

(1) 1 = Same location, 2 = Another location

(2) 1 = government staff participating in an IFAD project, 2 = staff or consultant of an IFAD project, 3 = currently not on IFAD project

(3) 1 = not familiar with IFAD project, 2 = somewhat familiar, 3 = very familiar

Ratings of IFAD portfolio in Lao PDR

Table 1

Compared IOE and PMD completion ratings

Evaluation criteria	IOE	PMD	RLIP		NRSLLDP		SNRMPEP		SSSJ		FNML		AFN I	
			IOE	PCR	IOE	PCR	IOE	PCR	IOE	PCR	IOE	PCR	IOE	PCR
Year (PPE/PCR, PCR)														
Relevance	4.67	4.67	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	5
Effectiveness	4.17	4.17	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Efficiency	3.67	3.83	5	4	3	4	5	4	2	3	3	3	4	5
Sustainability	3.83	4.33	4	4	3	5	5	5	3	4	4	4	4	4
Rural Poverty Impact	4.17	4.50	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	5
Innovation	4.50	4.33	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5
Scaling-up	4.00	4.33	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	4	3	4	5	5
GEWE	4.17	4.50	4	4	5	5	5	5	3	4	3	4	5	5
ENRM	3.83	3.67	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	4	3	3
CCA	3.67	4.17	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	3	4	4	4
IFAD performance	4.33	4.33	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	5
Government performance	4.00	4.33	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	4	4	4	4	5

Sources: PCRVs/PPEs, PCRs

List of People Met

Government

Central government – Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

Phommy Inthichack, Deputy Director General, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Alounxay Onta, Director of Department of Inspection and Cooperation

Somphathay Liengsone, Director of Department Forest Management and Cooperation

Khamsavanh Sisopho, Project Director, Department of Irrigation

Soukdethphone Souksayphanh, M&E office, Department of Irrigation

Khansavanh Sisopha, National Project Coordinator, AFN II, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Khonesavanh Vongxay, Former National Project Coordinator, SSSJ Department of Planning and Cooperation

Sisovath Phandanouvong, National Project Coordinator, AFN II, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Somphathai Liengsone, Director, Project Management Division, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Souksay Chanthasombath, Technical Officer, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Soulaphone Inthavong, Deputy Director General, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Thateva Saphanthong, Deputy Director General, Department of Planning and Cooperation

Theutthoune Soukaloun, Deputy Director General, DLAM

Visavanh Dainhansa, Technical Officer, Public Debt Management Department

Central government – other ministries and agencies

Khamphan Sipanya, Deputy Director, Department of Industry and Commerce

Somphong, Technician, Public Works and Transportations (PWT)

Kongdeung, Villages Coordinator, Public Works and Transportations (PWT)

Phengkhit Vongprasirt, Director of Division, Department of International Cooperation, MPI

Saliphong Chanthavongphan, Head of Bridge and Roads, Public Works and Transportations (PWT)

Saymonkham Mangnokmek, Deputy Director General, Department of International Cooperation, MPI

Sethouth, Deputy Head, DDIC

Thonparnssy, Deputy Head of Division, DDES

Vithanom Keokhouns, Director of Division, External Finance Dept MOF

Provincial governments

Houaphanh province

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Beneficiaries

Chomphet District, Luang Prabang Province

Bouamlao (QGIS; YES) 19 women and 12 men (31 tot)

Donxai (QGIS; YES) 20 women and 23 men (43 total)

Houaymieng (QGIS; YES) 4 women and 14men (18 total)

Houameuang District, Huaphanh Province

Pacha (QGIS; YES) 17women and 19 men (36 total)

Outhai (QGIS; YES) 15women and10men (est) (25 total)

Add District, Huaphanh Province

Sod (QGIS; YES) 18 women and 22 men (40 tot)

Dan (QGIS; YES) 10 women and 30 men (40 tot)

Nahi (QGIS; YES) 8 women and 13 men (21 tot)

La District, Oudomxay Province

Nam Leng: 4 women and 6 men (10 tot)

Seneluang: phone interview with village head and interview with district-based facilitators

Hat Haen: 2 women and 2 men (tot 4)

Xaysathan District, Xayaboury Province

Phoutuy: 15 women and 10 men (25 tot)

Sama: 2 women and 13 men (15 tot)

Phiang District, Xayaboury Province

Phonhin: 17 women and 13 men (30 tot)

Navaen: 3 women and 12 men (15 tot)

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