



The recipe for success: how policy-makers can integrate water, sanitation and hygiene into actions to end malnutrition

Country profile: Laos



Key statisticsⁱ

- 43.8% of children under five are stunted
- 6.4% of children under five are wasted
- 80% of the population have access to at least basic drinking water services
- 73% of the population have access to at least basic sanitation services

Background

Undernutrition is a significant problem in Laos, despite rapid economic growth and reductions in poverty. Rates of stunting approach nearly half of all children under five and have only slightly decreased since 2000. Laos is therefore off course to meet multiple World Health Assembly (WHA) targets including those on stunting, wasting and anaemia. However, the Government has demonstrated strong political commitment to nutrition first through establishing the National Nutrition Committee chaired by the Vice-Prime Minister, and second aligning national planning cycles so nutrition objectives and indicators are included in relevant sector plans. The Government is a member of both the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership and has agreed to the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) framework for action.

Is water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) integrated within national nutrition plans?

National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016–2020 (NNSPA)

The nutrition plan is multi-sectoral, acknowledging the different factors contributing to malnutrition based on UNICEF's 1990 conceptual framework. WASH is recognised under the second strategic direction as an underlying cause of malnutrition and is included as the sixth of 11 strategic objectives. Seven indicators relate to WASH, including specific indicators for WASH in schools and healthcare settings, all with baselines and targets for 2020. Interventions focus on both infrastructural and behaviour change aspects of WASH, although the emphasis is more on water and sanitation infrastructure and the activities outlined are fairly broad. Some opportunities to coordinate nutrition and WASH

have been identified in the plan. However, there are missed opportunities to integrate WASH activities, particularly hygiene promotion and behaviour change activities, into strategic objective 1 which seeks to address the immediate causes of poor malnutrition.

The National Nutrition Committee (NNC) was established in 2013 to coordinate the NNSPA; however, its implementation remains unsystematic and disjointed. To address this, the NNSPA includes plans to create provincial, district and community coordination committees and to improve reporting to the NNC. A budget for WASH activities is included and is 3.4% of the Plan's total budget.

Is nutrition integrated within national WASH plans?

National Water Supply and Environmental Health Programme (2004) – The national strategy for the rural water supply and environmental health sector

The National Strategy was developed in 2004 and it is not clear whether a newer plan or policy is in place. There is no mention of nutrition within the strategy, aside from in the 'hygiene, prevention and health promotion law', which is included as an annex to the strategy. In this, nutrition is mentioned as a key component of health promotion. Opportunities to improve the nutrition-sensitivity of the strategy include adding nutrition as an indicator for determining priority villages for WASH interventions, and including nutrition behaviours within the approach to behaviour change, which is a large focus area of the strategy.

The National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply (Nat Saam), led by the Ministry of Health, is responsible for the coordination and implementation of the WASH strategy. It is not clear which ministries are involved in planning and coordination of WASH in rural areas. The strategy identifies the need for improved sector coordination and cooperation.

Recommendations for the Government of Laos

- The nutrition plan should identify opportunities to integrate WASH interventions within the delivery of nutrition-specific interventions (e.g. specific health interventions such as training village health volunteers to promote breastfeeding and integrating hygiene promotion within infant/young child care, and de-worming programmes). In addition, more emphasis could be given to the behavioural change aspects of WASH within interventions most relevant to nutrition (e.g. food and environmental hygiene interventions such as safe disposal of child faeces, creation of safe play areas for children, and provision of food in schools)
- An updated WASH plan should be developed, with specific opportunities to incorporate nutrition-related activities alongside nutrition objectives and targets.

Recommendations for all national governments

- Ensure policies align with the Sustainable Development Goals and their interconnected targets to strengthen WASH and nutrition coordination and collaboration, using opportunities such as policy reviews and joint sector reviews.
- Establish effective cross-ministerial coordination mechanisms championed at the highest level by heads of state, to support sharing of information and joint planning and implementation of policies.
- Ensure cross-ministerial coordination structures incorporate meaningful participation of and consultation with civil society and affected communities.
- Ensure up-to-date national WASH and nutrition plans and progress reports are easily accessible online, to allow civil society to monitor progress and hold governments to account.

Nutrition policy-makers and practitioners should:

- Prioritise nutrition-sensitive WASH interventions and include specific objectives to improve WASH within nutrition plans and policies. Clear entry points to integrate WASH and nutrition include: behaviour change promotion; improvement of provision of WASH in healthcare facilities and schools; and co-location of interventions to areas with lowest WASH access and highest prevalence of undernutrition.

WASH policy-makers and practitioners should:

- Increase the 'nutrition-sensitivity' of policies and programmes, including by: targeting geographical areas where undernutrition is most prevalent; prioritising women and children; and including nutrition-relevant interventions, such as improving WASH in health and nutrition centres.

This country profile is drawn from the global report '*The recipe for success: how policy-makers can integrate water, sanitation and hygiene into action to end malnutrition*' produced by ACF, the SHARE Consortium and WaterAid. Read the full report at www.wateraid.org/recipeforsuccess

ⁱ To ensure consistency and cross-country comparability, we have used the most recent figures published by global monitoring reports. In some countries, more up-to-date national statistics are available. Nutrition statistics from UNICEF, WHO & World Bank Group (2017) *Child malnutrition estimates*. Available at www.who.int/entity/nutgrowthdb/jme_dataset2017_final.xlsx?ua=1 WASH statistics from UNICEF/WHO Joint Monitoring Programme (2017) *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene: 2017 update and SDG Baselines*. Available at washdata.org/report/jmp-2017-report-launch-version1