

برنامج  
الأغذية  
العالمي



Programme  
Alimentaire  
Mondial

World  
Food  
Programme

Programa  
Mundial  
de Alimentos

**Executive Board  
Second Regular Session**

**Rome, 9–13 November 2009**

## **EVALUATION REPORTS**

*Agenda item 6*

*For consideration*

# **E**

Distribution: GENERAL  
**WFP/EB.2/2009/6-F**  
30 September 2009  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

## **SUMMARY EVALUATION REPORT LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC COUNTRY PORTFOLIO**

This document is printed in a limited number of copies. Executive Board documents are available on WFP's Website (<http://www.wfp.org/eb>).

## NOTE TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

**This document is submitted to the Executive Board for consideration.**

The Secretariat invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document to contact the WFP staff focal point indicated below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting.

Director, Office of Evaluation:            Ms C. Heider            tel.: 066513-2030

Should you have any questions regarding matters of dispatch of documentation for the Executive Board, please contact Ms C. Panlilio, Administrative Assistant, Conference Servicing Unit (tel.: 066513-2645).



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is a least-developed country with high rates of chronic malnutrition (underweight and stunting). WFP has assisted the country in addressing its hunger needs since 1975, and more intensely since 2000. This report evaluates WFP's country portfolio in terms of three questions: i) How well did WFP position itself strategically and align with government and partner strategies? ii) How did WFP make choices and how strategic were these? and iii) How did the portfolio perform, and what were its results? The evaluation was conducted by a team of eight evaluators, including four researchers from the Lao People's Democratic Republic, with field work taking place in April and May 2009.

The evaluation found that WFP's operations were generally well aligned with government policies and partner strategies. They could be placed more strategically by using the considerable analytical work undertaken by WFP in the country and by understanding better where WFP operations can make a greater contribution. Overall, the portfolio performed well in its outreach to the target population, and was generally relevant and appropriate, albeit leaving a gap in addressing chronic malnutrition issues. Effectiveness varied, depending on the objective, and was influenced by a range of factors that could be managed to increase effectiveness. The sustainability of school feeding seems secured through its inclusion in the Government's sector framework, as does that of community and household assets, when they are planned, designed and implemented with the full participation of community members.

The evaluation recommends that the country office continue to build on its analytical work to inform the strategic choices it will need to make when developing its country strategy; place greater emphasis on participatory approaches; and design monitoring systems that inform decision-making. At the corporate level, the evaluation recommends taking into account the consequences that the tonnage-based funding model has on choices at the country level.

## DRAFT DECISION\*

The Board takes note of "Summary Evaluation Report Lao People's Democratic Republic Country Portfolio" (WFP/EB.2/2009/6-F) and the management response in WFP/EB.2/2009/6-F/Add.1 and encourages further action on the recommendations, taking into account considerations raised by the Board during its discussion.

---

\* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the Decisions and Recommendations document issued at the end of the session.



---

## BACKGROUND

### Context

1. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the world's least developed countries, landlocked in the Southeast Asian region. The economy, although transforming rapidly, is still largely subsistence-based, with a large proportion of the population living in rural areas. Recent policies and investments to develop the economy have had an impact on rural communities, providing them with opportunities but also creating challenges to their traditional livelihood systems. Economic and particularly agriculture growth have contributed to increasing gross food production, thus reducing overall food insecurity, but access to and utilization of food are uneven. Underweight rates are as high as 38 percent, and stunting rates have reached 40 percent, without improvement between 2000 and 2006. These rates are more pronounced among ethnic groups, which live mostly in upland areas. Over the same period, wasting rates dropped from more than 15 to about 7 percent. An analysis of diet diversity shows that the frequency of intake of fats, proteins and fruits is low.

### WFP Portfolio

2. WFP has assisted the Lao People's Democratic Republic since 1975, and has expanded its programme since the opening of the country office in 2000. Relatively speaking, the portfolio is considered small by WFP standards. It included eight operations between 2000 and 2008. Currently, three operations are ongoing: two development projects (DEVs) and one protracted relief and recovery operation (PRRO).
3. There is no collective logical framework that would unify the operations towards a common goal at the country level. The objectives of the operations approved between 2000 and 2008 can be grouped as follows:
  - i) Food for relief (FFR) to address emergency needs, mostly in times of natural disasters and livelihood transitions. These operations have the objectives of providing immediate assistance to assist those facing severe food shortages in securing sufficient food for consumption and to prevent people from adopting negative coping strategies such as depleting their livelihood assets.
  - ii) Food for work (FFW) to improve the livelihoods or reduce the long-term food insecurity of food-insecure people, households and communities. These operations have the dual objectives of meeting immediate food needs while supporting the recovery of livelihood assets and the achievement of longer-term objectives such as strengthened livelihood assets and improved use of existing resources.
  - iii) School feeding. Contributes to the improvement of school enrolment and attendance rates in primary schools.
4. The main programme activities are FFR, FFW and school feeding. In addition, several smaller programme activities have taken place, such as support to people living with HIV and/or AIDS.



## Purpose and Objective of the Evaluation

5. The purpose of this country portfolio evaluation was to generate evidence and analyses to support decision-making regarding the strategic positioning of WFP in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Its objective was to: i) provide accountability, by assessing and reporting on the portfolio's performance and results in the context of WFP's mandate and in response to the humanitarian and development challenges facing the country; and ii) support learning, by generating evidence-based analysis and insights that will inform the preparation and implementation of a country strategy, and the way in which the portfolio and its operations are planned and managed. The evaluation covered WFP's portfolio in the country for the period 2000–2008.
6. The evaluation addresses three main questions: i) How well did WFP position itself strategically and align with government and partner strategies? ii) How did WFP make choices and how strategic were these? and iii) How did the portfolio perform, and what were its results? The evaluation was conducted by a team of eight evaluators, including four researchers from the Lao People's Democratic Republic, with field work taking place in April and May 2009.

---

## PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

### Alignment and Strategic Positioning

7. The evaluation found the WFP portfolio generally well aligned with national policies, systems and processes. This alignment was particularly visible in the education sector, where school feeding is fully integrated into the national education sector development framework. WFP's FFW activities are aligned with two of the four priorities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, but could also be designed and implemented to support a third area: the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. Basic access roads built with FFW support government and partner efforts to develop the transport system, but only recently has a cooperation agreement been reached with the responsible ministry to ensure better alignment. In nutrition, WFP played an instrumental role – through its analytical and advocacy work – in raising awareness and contributing to a process that led to the formulation of a national nutrition policy. Geographically, the WFP portfolio is fully aligned with corporate priorities for food insecurity, while not matching perfectly the Government's priority districts for poverty reduction.
8. Ownership of the programmes is best at the higher levels of Government, particularly for school feeding, which has been integrated into the sector development framework, and FFR, which is implemented through the appropriate government structures. However, FFW is implemented through the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and lacks the ownership and technical support of relevant line ministries, such as agriculture and transport, preventing its use in the most strategic way. At the village level, ownership depends on the degree of participation and self-determination that communities could exercise in the choice and implementation of programme activities, especially for FFW. In addition, socio-cultural factors play a role in ensuring that schools and school feeding are accepted and locally owned. The difficulties observed with securing participation and empowerment are not unique to WFP operations, but were also observed in a number of the World Bank's community-driven development projects.



9. WFP participates in government-led processes for coordination and shares common objectives with other partners. In reality, however, challenges continue in translating these coordination efforts into programmes that have positive synergy effects. School feeding did well in this respect: it took place together with the United Nations Children's Fund efforts for schools of quality, and coincided with the Asian Development Bank's investment in basic education in the same districts and communities. Part of FFW is implemented in partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and this was well integrated into broader rural development projects. However, when FFW took place in isolation it lacked adequate levels of non-food items to maximize its effectiveness and was not linked to the ongoing projects of other partners.

### **Making Strategic Choices**

10. The country office undertook a surprising amount of analytical work, which was a clear indication of a desire to learn about the operational context, explore possibilities for implementing new initiatives, and inform decision-makers both within WFP and among partners. The comprehensive food security and vulnerability assessment (CFSVA) is the strongest example of this work, combined with effective advocacy, contributing to greater awareness of nutrition issues among government stakeholders and partners. A similar approach of effective advocacy was taken in the case of the rodent infestation and its implications for food security. However, the analytical work was of limited use for resolving systemic problems or for strategic decision-making. For instance, programme activities will be adjusted to the findings of the 2006 CFSVA only in the next programme design.
11. This lack of translating analytical work into strategic choices can be explained, in part, by the absence of country strategies – for WFP as a whole – as the basis for directing the portfolio and designing operational responses. The country office planned its current operations pragmatically, following a bottom-up approach based on its understanding of how programme activities can be implemented and which activities would be supported by donors. This approach corresponds to WFP's operating and funding model, but does not guarantee that programme activities are strategically placed to make the best possible contribution to hunger solutions for the people of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It also lacks a focus on results at the country level and synergies between WFP operations and those of partners.
12. Following corporate guidance and using the findings of this evaluation, the country office will develop a country strategy. It remains to be seen whether it will opt to focus and narrow WFP's operations down towards areas that make pivotal and discernable contributions to the country's development and humanitarian challenges, or decide to encompass a wide range of programme activities to permit responses to any demand, potential partnership or funding opportunity.

### **Portfolio Performance and Results**

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



most vulnerable group identified in the CFSVA. There were no strong differences among the performances of programme categories, although among programme activities school feeding seemed to perform somewhat better on average, while FFW showed highly variable performance and outcomes.

14. WFP programme activities – FFR, FFW and school feeding – are in principle relevant and appropriate to people’s needs. The assistance was highly appreciated by all the beneficiaries the evaluation team spoke to, and WFP is recognized as a strong partner by the Government and the international community. The relevance and appropriateness of programme activities were influenced by: i) the degree to which they were selected, planned and implemented in a participatory manner – positive and negative examples of participation and ownership were found in the WFP portfolio; ii) their timeliness, whereby delays in delivery reduced the programme’s relevance to immediate food security needs, while maintaining its relevance as a resource transfer tool; and iii) the integration of programme activities into the programmes of other partners, to provide technical support or complementary activities. Positive examples centred on school feeding, which increased in relevance when it complemented other investments in the education sector, or FFW schemes that complemented the work of NGOs. Less successful examples derived from some FFW schemes’ lack of integration into government or partner programmes to ensure necessary synergies. Regarding nutrition, school feeding is the most relevant activity to nutrition needs.
15. Collectively, it is difficult to establish the programme activities’ relevance and appropriateness to hunger needs in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic without a goal at the country level. For instance, if WFP aimed to reduce malnutrition, the observations made in the CFSVA would call for a nutrition programme that targeted infants, pregnant women and lactating mothers and provided greater diversity in rations. A goal of reducing food insecurity would need to take stock of the root causes of food insecurity and determine the most relevant response strategy for them. The relevance of programme activities, alone and collectively, would then depend on the extent to which they serve such an overall goal.
16. The efficiency of the portfolio was hampered by low population densities and relatively high transport costs in relation to the quantities of food distributed; checks and balances that aimed to ensure proper use of resources but were time-consuming; and costs per unit delivered that were high in comparison with those of other providers of FFW roads and with WFP averages for school feeding.
17. The effectiveness and impact of programme activities were affected by difficulties in carrying them out in time. Objectives such as reducing short-term hunger and preventing negative coping strategies were not fully attained because communities’ alternative coping strategies made them less dependent on food deliveries and helped bridge periods until deliveries arrived. Households and communities were not devastated by the shocks they experienced and could therefore engage in alternative coping strategies to buffer the level of distress and initiate early recovery from their own resources. The effectiveness of creating productive assets and their economic spin-offs showed mixed results, with the evaluation finding successes and failures. These pointed to the importance of participation and local ownership, technically viable FFW schemes, and technical advice to ensure that assets are operated and generate returns. Socio-cultural assets were equally valued by many traditional communities. School feeding was recognized as contributing to educational outcomes, in combination with other factors within communities and investments by other agencies, and potentially has had a nutritional outcome, but these results remain unmeasured.



18. The sustainability of assets created through FFW schemes depends largely on local ownership and capacity to maintain the assets. FFW roads are known to have difficulties withstanding weather conditions because they lack hard surfacing, which is not unique to WFP-supported roads. These roads have deteriorated even faster in the cases where heavy trucks misused them. The sustainability of school feeding is supported by its inclusion in the Government's education sector development framework, but will require commensurate capacity development and financial allocations. The Government has expressed concern about the programme's dependence on imported foods, which would hinder hand-over to the Government and sustainability of the programme. The country office is considering this concern. The forthcoming medium-term expenditure framework will indicate whether the programme is financially sustainable or the extent to which it will require external financial support.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Overall Assessment

19. **Alignment and strategic positioning.** WFP's role and operations are well aligned with government policies. They share common objectives, and although government policies do not foresee the provision of food aid, they do not prevent food assistance from playing a role within the development process. In a number of instances, positive synergies were created with the operations of other partners, although not all opportunities were sought out and exploited. Ownership of programmes was generally strong, especially when they were well integrated into government priorities. The choice of partner agency plays an important role in ensuring ownership and should be adjusted depending on the objective of the programme activity. For instance, activities to support rural development or rural transport were implemented with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare rather than with more appropriate line ministries. The current choice of government counterpart would be reasonable if FFW was implemented as a social safety-net measure, as work creation programmes. At the community level, participation in the selection, planning and implementation of operations was essential to ensuring ownership. The operations are also well aligned with WFP's new strategic plan, and the country office undertook efforts to test and implement new programming tools, in spite of limited resources.
20. **Making strategic choices.** WFP and the country office performed well in undertaking analysis and reviews of its ongoing portfolio. However, the analytical work showed limited use for strategic decision-making, partly owing to the absence of a country strategy. It was also not effective in resolving systemic problems, which were repeatedly noted in several reviews and also observed by the evaluation. Monitoring systems are not designed or working to inform decision-making, strategic choices or operation management.
21. **Portfolio performance and results.** The portfolio performed well in reaching between 75 and 100 percent of intended beneficiaries and, on average, equal numbers of men and women. The age distribution of the beneficiaries reported in the country office's standard project reports shows that the programme is primarily targeted towards the adult population. It does not prioritize the groups found to be vulnerable in the CFSVA, namely pregnant and lactating women and infants up to 2 years.
22. The programme activities were generally relevant and appropriate to needs, and increased their relevance and positive synergies when implemented in collaboration with others and through participatory methods. It was not possible for the evaluation to





determine the relevance of the overall portfolio in the absence of a clear, unifying goal for WFP in the country.

23. Efficient delivery of the portfolio is a challenge; low numbers of beneficiaries and high transport costs require innovative solutions.
24. The effectiveness of programme activities varied according to the activity and the objectives it aimed to attain. School feeding contributed to the achievement of education outcomes, together with the efforts of other partners. The effectiveness of FFW in creating productive assets and their economic spin-offs showed mixed results, highlighting the following factors as essential for success: participation and local ownership; technical viability; and provision of technical advice in the design and implementation of schemes. The effectiveness of FFR and FFW in addressing short-term hunger was less pronounced, given the range of coping mechanisms available to communities and their members, which meant that food relief was provided and appreciated as a resource transfer, but often arrived after alternative coping mechanisms had been adopted.
25. The sustainability of assets created through FFW schemes depends largely on local ownership and capacity to maintain the assets. The sustainability of school feeding is supported by its inclusion in the Government's policy framework, but will require commensurate capacity development and financial allocations.

### **Lessons for the Future**

26. The portfolio evaluation in the Lao People's Democratic Republic demonstrated that choices regarding the portfolio are driven by very pragmatic considerations – how things work and what can be funded – but less so by the results that it aims to attain in the country. Programme activities are explained within the framework of WFP's Strategic Plan and matched to corporate Strategic Objectives before being linked to the objectives of the Government, partners and the people the programmes are to serve. The lesson to be drawn from this approach is that using a broad framework to justify activities reduces their focus on the specific achievements they aim to attain and dilutes choices. For instance, when FFW is implemented to create assets it is essential to partner the relevant line ministry rather than the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, which instead becomes a central partner if FFW is to serve as a public works/employment programme, as the equivalent of a social safety-net measure.
27. A second lesson the evaluation derived from its observations of the portfolio regards the fragmentation of programme activities and the implementation structure. In part, this is due to the lack of a unifying goal for WFP's assistance to the country, and in part to the funding model and its operational implications. A tonnage-driven model creates incentives to look for tonnage-based solutions, because other solutions – even if equally or more relevant – do not generate the resources that are essential to implement them. Although this is fully in line with WFP's rules and regulations, the operational realities meant that, for instance, monitoring systems were developed and running poorly and in parallel; staffing levels were very uneven and the responsibilities of sub-offices adjusted to fit funding structures rather than operational needs; and very little learning took place across operations.

28. The evaluation differentiated very little between FFW under the PRRO and FFW under the DEV, because the challenges that FFW schemes faced in terms of participation, ownership, implementation and results were similar for both. However, a significant difference existed when FFW schemes were implemented in cooperation with NGOs, which provided technical expertise, non-food items, supervision, training and technical advice to communities. As shown in the performance and results section of the evaluation, recipients of assistance considered these inputs essential for FFW success. The lesson to be drawn from this experience is the need to partner with relevant providers of technical inputs. WFP chose this partnering arrangement for the DEV, but it is not intrinsic to this category and could be employed in the PRRO as well.
29. Another essential success factor in the Lao People's Democratic Republic is recognizing the importance of ethnicity in the design of programme activities. While there are strong efforts to transform rural communities radically, the communities have adapted and adopted coping strategies to deal with system change in ways they find appropriate. Understanding ethnicity and the preferences and priorities of different ethnic groups, and supporting them in an ever-changing environment are essential to creating a real impact on people's lives. This is true of FFW schemes, but also of educational interventions delivered through formal or informal channels, and nutritional activities. For the latter, WFP has recognized the need for ethnic adaptation in its Feeding the Future programme, the effectiveness of which should be established once it has gone beyond the test phase.

## Recommendations

30. **Recommendation 1: The country office should continue to undertake analytical work that informs the choice of hunger solutions that are most relevant to the Lao People's Democratic Republic.** Such analytical work would build on the work already undertaken by the country office. It would entail researching and integrating an understanding of the underlying causes of food insecurity and of the current transformation of rural areas with the findings of the CFSVA. This recommendation requires that the country office be provided with additional resources to complement the work it has already done in compiling and analysing existing research. Such information, together with this evaluation and WFP's pragmatic bottom-up planning approach, should form the basis for developing the country strategy. A certain level of analytical capacity should be retained in the country office, given the speed at which rural Lao People's Democratic Republic seems to be transforming and the reputation WFP acquired with the publication of the CFSVA.
31. **Recommendation 2: In developing its country strategy, the country office should define clearly a unifying goal for its portfolio in the country.** This goal should be based on priority needs and hunger solutions that make a strategic contribution to government and partner plans, and should be rooted in WFP's strategic directions and mandate. For instance, the analysis described in Recommendation 1 may conclude that reducing chronic malnutrition should be the overriding goal for WFP's portfolio in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This conclusion would have different implications for the programme from those of the conclusion that a formal social safety net is needed. The former would result in a programme focused primarily on mothers and infants, addressing their nutritional needs to reduce high stunting rates and break the inter-generational cycle of hunger, and involving strong engagement in the nutrition sector and corresponding partnerships. The latter would require the Government's decision to set up such a safety net, the placing of WFP programme activities within the context of this safety net, and an understanding of how food-based programmes complement other safety-net measures. The selected goal would provide the basis for prioritizing programme activities, identifying



strategic partnerships, designing corresponding programme activities to attain that goal, and setting up monitoring systems that help WFP manage for results.

32. **Recommendation 3: The country office, its partners and other stakeholders should determine ways of improving participation and increasing local ownership.** The experience of others – such as the World Bank study, findings of participatory poverty assessments, and other research on ethnicity and gender – should be taken into account in this process, and linkages built to other ongoing initiatives. Improving participation is likely to require political will from the central Government and provincial capitals, training for local officials, awareness-building for community members to help them make informed decisions, and the use of experienced support teams that ensure improved targeting of needy communities. As well as demonstrating good governance and being good practice, ownership is also essential for improving WFP portfolio performance and results and can build on WFP's comparative advantage of a strong field presence and a network of partnerships. A feedback loop should be created from these participatory approaches into a continuous analytical capacity (Recommendation 1) via WFP's monitoring system (Recommendation 5) to ensure that people's needs are incorporated into future strategic choices and planning. The participatory approach will require a different way of working from that typically used in food aid operations, and will require WFP to find different operating arrangements.
33. **Recommendation 4: At the corporate level, discussions of WFP's funding model should take into account how WFP's comparative advantage is affected by high-tonnage choices to generate funding.** The main challenge in implementing Recommendation 3 lies in the current tonnage-based funding arrangements. This model creates a vicious cycle whereby large, high-tonnage programmes are needed to generate sufficient direct support cost funding to pay for the necessary staff. Participatory approaches tend to be more time-consuming, so require higher staffing levels, but do not automatically necessitate or justify the high-tonnage programmes that would be needed to generate the necessary overhead charges.
34. **Recommendation 5: The country office, with the support of the regional bureau and/or Headquarters, should design a monitoring system that informs decision-making at various levels.** The information needs of decision-makers should be the driving principle in design of the monitoring system. Its development should be accompanied by training on how monitoring data are used to support decisions to continue or revise the portfolio's design and/or implementation depending on the results it is producing. Ideally, WFP monitoring systems would be built to inform continuously about changes in the operating areas so that analytical work (Recommendation 1) is corroborated and benefits from WFP's operational experience.

---

## ACRONYMS USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

CFSVA	comprehensive food security and vulnerability assessment
DEV	development project
FFR	food for relief
FFW	food for work
NGO	non-governmental organization
PRRO	protracted relief and recovery operation