

Strengthening Livelihoods, Nutrition and Climate Resilience in Lao PDR: A review of the Agriculture for Nutrition Project Phase II (AFN II) Project

REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

AsiaDHRRA and Lao Farmers Association, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP, led a review of the *Agriculture for Nutrition Phase II (AFN II)* project in Lao PDR, between 8 and 13 February 2026, using a participatory, qualitative and rights-based methodology.

AFN II is a US\$33.62 million, seven year initiative (2023–2030) designed to improve food and nutrition security, strengthen climate resilience and increase household incomes by at least 20% through an integrated and community-driven approach across six of the country's most disadvantaged provinces.

The review indicates that farmers are adopting improved agricultural practices through training, grants and extension support, resulting in increased crop yields, healthier livestock and rising incomes—already exceeding 20% in some cases. Strengthened farmer groups and market linkages facilitated by multi-stakeholder platforms have improved access to buyers and created new income opportunities, helping households transition beyond subsistence production. At the same time, nutrition-sensitive interventions, including home garden grants and farmer nutrition schools, are improving dietary diversity and promoting healthier practices, particularly among women and caregivers.

The project is demonstrating progress in building climate resilience by promoting agroecology, particularly biodiversity conservation and improved water management systems, enabling communities to stabilise production and adapt to environmental shocks. Gender-transformative approaches are a notable strength, with women playing central roles in implementation and decision-making, which is fostering more equitable household dynamics and increased control over resources. Community participation is strong, with inclusive planning processes, civil society engagement and coordination through government systems enhancing ownership, alignment and sustainability.

However, several operational and structural challenges could limit long-term impact. Farmer groups continue to face weak financial literacy and limited business management capacity, while delays in grant disbursement to CSOs are slowing implementation. Infrastructure investments remain underfunded and slow to materialise and training coverage and follow-up are uneven, particularly in remote areas. Persistent gender norms continue to constrain women's time, mobility and access to opportunities and the absence of a home-grown school feeding programme represents a missed opportunity to deepen nutrition outcomes and local market linkages.

The review makes the following recommendations to the supervising entity and project implementers:

- Accelerate MSME grant disbursement to enable faster expansion and stronger market links.
- Strengthen integration of gender transformative approaches, nutrition and markets to improve income and nutrition outcomes.
- Fast-track CSO approvals to speed up community implementation.
- Maintain flexible climate funding to respond to local climate needs.
- Scale up MSP models to strengthen coordination and value chains.
- Ensure intergenerational empowerment by engaging youth alongside the elderly.

To ensure sustainability of these results, the review also recommends that government should increase extension funding to scale agriculture and nutrition gains, while also institutionalising nutrition planning to embed village priorities in government systems

The Project Context

Vulnerable rural households in Lao PDR face multiple, interrelated challenges, including widespread poverty, low incomes and food and nutrition insecurity. More than half of babies and toddlers (6–23 months) do not meet the minimum acceptable diet (MAD). Climate-related shocks, limited agricultural productivity and depressed market access, resulting from weak linkages between farmers and markets, limit income generation.

The six provinces of Sekong, Saravan, Attapeu, Oudomxay, Phongsaly and Xiengkhouang face some of the most acute development challenges in Lao PDR. Saravan province is among the poorest provinces nationally, consistently ranked alongside Oudomxay for its high concentration of poor families. In Attapeu province, poverty has worsened significantly, more than doubling after the catastrophic flooding caused by the Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy dam collapse in 2018. Communities continue to struggle with chronic food shortages, limited infrastructure and low school attendance (around 61%), with only 60% of households having access to clean water. Sekong province is frequently cited as the poorest in the southern region, characterised by remote, mountainous terrain and severe food insecurity. It suffers from inadequate infrastructure, poor access to

markets and social services, and alarming health indicators. Xiengkhouang province carries a particularly challenging legacy, as it was among the most heavily bombed regions during the Vietnam War. The continued presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) poses a serious constraint, severely limiting agricultural development, land use and infrastructure expansion.

Cooperatives in Lao PDR have evolved from state-led, bureaucratic structures in the collective era (1975–1986), through informal voluntary groups during the transition phase (1986–2000s), leading to the modern cooperative movement since 2010, which emphasises voluntary, member-driven organisation. This shift was reinforced by the 2024 Cooperative Law, strengthening rural worker organisation and farmer-owned enterprises.

Gender inequality and violence against women remain persistent in some communities. Gender norms and social barriers still limit women's full participation and decision-making. Addressing these issues requires changing attitudes and perceptions toward women and promoting gender equality to gradually eliminate violence.

About the AFNII Project

The Agriculture for Nutrition Phase II (AFN II) project has a total funding envelope of US\$33.62 million, co-financed by the Government of Lao PDR (US\$4.81 million), an International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) loan and technical assistance grant (US\$14.68 million), and a GAFSP grant (US\$12 million). The seven-year project, running since November 2023 until 2030, is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) under the supervision of two entities: World Food Program (WFP) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). WFP provides oversight of community-driven agriculture and nutrition interventions, while IFAD supervises business partnerships, market access improvements and the enabling environment for nutrition-sensitive programming. The project's development objective is to improve food and nutrition security, enhance climate resilience and increase smallholders' income by 2030. In particular, the project aims to enable 28,000 vulnerable households and an estimated 168,000 individuals to increase their income by 20% by 2030.

Within the six geographic provinces, the project covers targets 500 (375 non-convergence¹ and 125 convergence) villages. The target population are mostly ethnic peoples (94%), with high poverty rates (63%) to ensure support reaches vulnerable small-scale farmers, especially poor and marginalised households. The selection criteria was influenced by poverty incidence, malnutrition status, climate vulnerability, access to water and sanitation, COVID-19 impacts, presence of ethnic groups, agriculture potential and agriculture production group (APG) maturity.

The project implements nutrition-responsive activities, gender-transformative and climate-resilient approaches that address the underlying causes of malnutrition, which are linked to inadequate household food security, maternal and childcare and environmental sanitation. The project targets groups of pregnant women, mothers of young children and children under 2 years old. Adolescent girls (aged 10-19) participate in various project activities, especially learning centre activities such as the gender action and learning system methodology (GALS) and nutrition lessons including food processing. GALS is a participatory methodology that empowers women and men to analyse and transform gender roles, power relations, and household decision-making. Using visual tools and facilitated dialogue, families create shared visions for income, nutrition, and well-being, which helps redistribute responsibilities and challenge traditional norms. Children under 5 years of age receive nutrition support to access fresh food through the home garden grant to their caregivers,

while adolescent girls (age 10-19), women of reproductive age and youth receive a production group grant.

The project implements gender-responsive activities that seek to improve mechanisms for promoting gender equality by addressing social patterns, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and value systems that act as barriers to the empowerment of women and young girls. The project also promotes climate-responsive activities that use appropriate policies, practices and new technologies to reduce people's exposure and vulnerability to extreme weather events and disasters and their economic, social, environmental and other impacts on the target population.

AFN II builds on the successes and lessons of the first phase (2016-2022), while addressing the persistent challenges faced by remote upland communities that have not shared in broader economic growth. As in earlier initiatives, the project provides funding to strengthen crop production, livestock raising, and essential infrastructure to improve food security. Peculiar to AFN II, however, is that it provides home garden grants in cash. These grants enable households to establish homestead gardens for crop cultivation and small livestock, complemented by training in basic agricultural techniques.

The project is structured around three interconnected components that together drive sustainable impact. It begins with community-driven agriculture and nutrition interventions, where farmer nutrition schools, home gardens, community rice banks and wild food management are complemented by women's empowerment through GALS and the strengthening of agriculture production groups (APGs).

Building on this foundation, the second component focuses on business partnerships and market access, leveraging multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) to connect producers with buyers, supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and investing in market-related infrastructure to expand opportunities. Finally, the project advances an enabling environment by embedding nutrition-sensitive village planning, fostering multi-sectoral coordination, engaging civil society through the Challenge Fund,¹ and strengthening oversight with the Project Management Information System (ProMIS).

The CSO Challenge Fund is a competitive, grant-based financing mechanism designed to mobilise civil society organisations (CSOs) to deliver targeted services within the AFN II project.

1. These are new districts in the AFN II that were not involved in the first phase of the project.

The Project Review Methodology

Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA) and Lao Farmers' Association, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP;² led the review of the AFN II project, with fieldwork conducted between 8 and 13 February 2026. The planning process involved thorough preparation and coordination, including meetings with the project team to confirm locations, participants and logistics. Interview guides, focus group discussion (FGD) tools, including community scorecards, and facilitation materials were carefully prepared to ensure questions were culturally sensitive and ethically appropriate.

A FGD was conducted with 46 (27m;19f) participants drawn from agricultural production groups in Lai Yai, Yor, Huay Lor and Na Ngua villages in Baeng district, Oudomxay province. The participants were among the most active in the village and had proximity to the meeting site. Key informant interviews (KIs) were held with seven participants including the AFN II National Project Coordinator and Deputy Director of the Agriculture and Environment Office, national and

provincial MAF Project Officers, and staff from Lao Women Union, WFP and Lao Farmers' Association.

Throughout the review, emphasis was placed on maintaining confidentiality, protecting vulnerable groups, and creating respectful, safe spaces, with local partners engaged to reinforce ethical practices and safeguarding measures. The review followed practical steps to ensure ethics, safeguarding and protection against sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse (SHEA). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for interviews, FGDs, photos and video recordings, ensuring they understood their rights and could decline participation at any stage. Field observations and documentation were carried out in a manner that respected participants' dignity, such as observing sessions, and capturing agricultural activities (harvesting, transporting and processing products). Case studies and video testimonies were collected in a safe and supportive environment, ensuring participants had the freedom to share their experiences voluntarily without coercion or pressure.

"Before the project, my family grew vegetables and raised animals the traditional way, just following the seasons. We never had enough vegetables to eat and had no income to speak of. I took part in nutrition training and received a home garden grant and got involved in vegetable growing and livestock raising – our lives have genuinely improved. Now we have vegetables to eat all year round. Our small livestock are well fed throughout the year too. Our overall quality of life is so much better than before. Looking ahead, I want to expand our production area to grow more than we have now, enough to eat and sell and build a steady income for our family in the future."

Ms Bouapho, Lai Yai village - a village facilitator and participant in the vegetable production group. [Hear more about her story in this short video.](#)



Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP

The Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP (the Partnership) is a consortium of civil society organisations that has been contracted by GAFSP to assess a selection of their grant-funded projects. The consortium is led by *ActionAid International*, together with the *Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF)*, *Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA)*, and *Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH)*.

2. The review defines agroecology in terms of the 13 principles developed by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

Project Impact

I. Farmers' Productivity and Livelihoods

The project is helping poor families to improve their yield and grow their incomes. The review visited mushroom, pig and vegetable production groups in the Lai Yai and Na Ngua villages in Baeng district, Oudomxay Province. All groups attested to enhanced productivity and income resulting from improved production practices and training. Farmers are benefitting from improved income opportunities and sustainability from market linkages that connect them to MSMEs and buyers. Multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) workshops have been conducted establishing linkages for coffee, goat, pig and poultry value chains. Farmers work collectively, improve production techniques, access grants and strengthen linkages to markets.

The project is supporting the mushroom production group to grow Oyster and Khon Khao (local) mushroom varieties. Previously, the group's mushroom house lacked proper equipment; it was built of wood and they used bag collars (mushroom growing bags) made from bamboo. The project has helped them to improve the mushroom growing space by providing plastic bag collars and sealing caps for mushroom blocks, as well as their posts, corrugated roofing sheets, netting and shade cloth. The farmers attested that yield has improved, improving their income. While previously they could only sell a little each day, with the project support they are now earning much more, allowing them to build homes, finance their children's education and expand their businesses.

Mr. Sounasak Thammavongsa, Deputy Head of Agriculture and Environment at MAF and the AFN II Project Coordinator, noted that agricultural production has steadily increased, contributing to improved living standards across target villages. Household incomes have grown by more than 20%, surpassing project targets, while agricultural output has also risen by 20% compared to baseline levels. Families are now better able to ensure food security, with strengthened maternal and child health outcomes.

The project encourages local ownership and long-term financial viability of food projects by establishing APGs and providing them with equipment, pig breeds and chicken breeds.

Mr. Douagkham, a member of the chicken-raising group in Lai Yai Village, described how poultry production has evolved through project support. Previously, chickens were raised in a free-range manner without pens or shelters, leaving them vulnerable to disease outbreaks that farmers did not know how to manage. Through project training, Mr. Douagkham and his group learned improved techniques, including constructing chicken coops, preparing feed and vaccinating chicks against common diseases. As a result, mortality rates have dropped significantly, and families are now able to maintain healthy flocks. Surplus production beyond household consumption is sold, generating income that strengthens family livelihoods. Looking ahead, Mr. Douagkham plans to expand by building a larger coop to improve efficiency and quality, with the long-term goal of raising chickens as a commercial enterprise to further support his household and enhance income security.

"The benefits from mushroom growing have been real, production has increased and our family's quality of life has genuinely improved". For example, I am nearly finished building a new house and I am even sending my child to study abroad – all made possible by income from growing mushrooms. Everything has gotten so much better. There have been so many benefits, such as daily groceries for the family, paying water and electricity bills, all financed from selling mushrooms. Compared to before, our income has gone up by around 20%. We are putting that income back into building up our family's financial stability and wellbeing. Going forward we plan to scale up our mushroom growing from one mushroom house with 2000-3000 blocks to two with 5000-6000 blocks."

Mr Vard, whose household hosts a mushroom growing demo in Yo village, Pakbeng district, Oudomxay province. **[Hear more about his story in this short video.](#)**



The adoption of improved practices has allowed farmers to improve the health and quality of their livestock. Families now benefit from improved food security and livelihoods, while they are also determined to expand facilities to enhance efficiency and sustainability. Mr. Somnaen, a member of the pig-raising group, explained that before project support, limited knowledge of animal husbandry meant pigs were underweight and unable to meet market standards. With training on feeding techniques and animal health care, supported by the provision of three starter piglets and technical guidance from an appointed technician, the group adopted improved practices including preventive vaccinations, treatment methods, and preparation of locally sourced traditional feed. These interventions have led to healthier, stronger pigs that are readily accepted by buyers, resulting in significant income growth. Building on this foundation, members aim to transition toward more commercial production, ensuring long-term resilience and strengthened household incomes.

Project support in vegetable production has expanded market supply, grown household income and improved family wellbeing. Ms. Neephon, a 37-year-old member of the vegetable-growing group in Na Ngua village, Baeng district, shared how project support has transformed local production. Previously, vegetables could only be grown during the dry season, with limited techniques and frequent pest damage. With the provision of vegetable seeds and a shade house, and training on improved cultivation methods, including natural pest repellents, yields have increased significantly. Building on these gains, Ms. Neephon plans to add 12 more shade houses to ensure year-round production, including during the rainy season, strengthening food security and positioning the group for sustained market engagement.

Incomes have increased through higher productivity, supported by grants for home gardens. Home garden grants (HGG) are provided to vulnerable households to improve nutrition and food security, particularly for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under 5 years of age. Vulnerable households include those headed by women, with persons with disabilities, and ethnic groups other than Lao/Tai. Recipients are selected through participatory and community-based approaches, involving local authorities and village meetings, where village nutrition maps are drawn and households facing malnutrition challenges are identified. The grant is designed to be a “start-up” kit equivalent to LAK 2,646,145 (US\$120) to enable sustainable food production, which includes access to quality seeds and planting materials including vegetable seeds/seedlings. Participants receive training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture, climate-resilient farming,

and crop management. In practice, this means women determine which vegetables are reserved for household nutrition and which are sold to generate income.

Increased crop diversity has provided more guaranteed access to food and income. Even if market prices are down for a specific vegetable, or it's affected by pests or disease, the prices and health of other vegetables will likely remain viable – hence ensuring household availability of food or cash income. Crop diversification is achieved through intercropping, mixed cropping and relay cropping. Most participants harvest wild food from the forest. Some of these plant species can be “domesticated”; similar to other plants, the current species are planted and cultivated. Participants are conducting field trials on domestication of wild food species and results will be shared after several cycles. The shift to the use of animal manure, farm-made compost fertiliser and recycling of plant biomass has also helped generate savings as farmers do not have to purchase expensive synthetic fertilisers.

APGs have been identified and supported with grants and training, enabling farmers to improve skills, adopt better practices and expand market opportunities, but organisational challenges constrain their potential. A total of 468 APGs have been organised as a mechanism for cooperation and product consolidation among farmers with similar agricultural product, e.g. APG of rice, pig raisers or vegetable producers. APGs in Lao PDR are primarily organised by government agencies under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), supported by international development partners, NGOs, and farmers’ organisations. The APGs are small cooperation groups with few members and small volume of products to consolidate. They remain rooted in low-productivity subsistence farming, however, constrained by weak infrastructure, poor market linkages and high vulnerability to climate shocks. Key bottlenecks for effective functioning of APGs include limited access to financing, technical skills (production), and reliable irrigation, alongside land tenure issues and both organisation and business management skills.

Financial literacy is paramount to ensure farmers’ sustainability, drawing on the experience an APG supported through another project. A thriving APG in Na Ngoua village recently received a grant from a Japanese organisation to install drip irrigation for vegetable production. However, when reviewing its operations, no information was available to the review team on production volumes, costs or other basic financial performance indicators, pointing to weak accounting and financial management systems, underscoring limited financial literacy among members. Without immediate training

in financial literacy and record-keeping, the group risks undermining the sustainability of its otherwise promising progress.

Agricultural extension is strategically advanced through a comprehensive capacity-building package that drives productivity. The extension system has been reinforced through district agriculture extension officers (DAEOs) and local service providers, ensuring that APGs and water user groups (WUGs) receive consistent technical guidance and tailored support. Implementation of the project has strengthened the district-level teams in providing knowledge and creating skills to be trainers in nutrition, gender roles, cooking, food processing, basic knowledge of planting and raising, especially district-level technicians from coordinating offices such as the Office of Education, Social Affairs, Women Affairs, Agriculture and among others. Production groups, and water use groups have been strengthened through a decentralised, participatory approach. Extension services are tailored to community needs, empowering farmer groups and reinforcing local systems. Extension support strengthens harvest and post-harvest operations to reduce losses and maintain quality, alongside training in technical and business skills such as safe tool use, farm waste management, record-keeping, and value chain engagement. Farmers are trained in sustainable crop production techniques including land preparation, nursery operations, planting, crop care, and pest management, while also adopting climate-resilient and nutrition-sensitive practices such as diversification, multi-cropping, and alignment with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) good agricultural practices.

Training activities have however been constrained by a combination of institutional, logistical, and social factors. Inadequate follow-up and limited coverage mean that only a small number of villages benefit from training, while male participation in nutrition activities remains low and many communities are still distant from engaging with nutrition concepts. At the community level, lengthy activities disrupt participants' regular work, discouraging engagement among those not directly benefiting, while difficult road conditions during both rainy and dry seasons restrict access. Finally, the predominance of older participants limits the uptake of new practices and technologies, underscoring the need for transgenerational inclusion for sustained support.

Dynamic exchanges between farmers and trainers, encouraging co-creation and onwards sharing of knowledge, is accelerating adoption of good practices and improving resilience. Participants not only learn

directly from the experiences of trainers through structured sessions, but also carry this knowledge forward into subsequent trainings, multiplying its impact. The project avails opportunities to farmers to study in other provinces and engage in cross-regional exchanges to broaden their perspectives and adapt innovations. Through these processes, participants gain new technical knowledge, build networks with fellow farmers, and in many cases receive training to become trainers themselves, ensuring sustainability and peer-to-peer diffusion of practices. Importantly, farmers acquire practical experience in the field while working alongside the project team, embedding learning in real production environments. This co-creation model strengthens ownership, accelerates adoption of agroecological practices, and cultivates a cadre of farmer-trainers who anchor resilience and innovation within their communities.

Agricultural advisory services have also been strengthened through MSPs, which now function as hubs for scaling up the project. These MSP platforms facilitate planning and implementation of diverse crop and livestock systems, while also serving as spaces for rural advisory services to exchange best practices for dietary diversity and climate resilient and sustainable approaches to agriculture. Through farmer-to-farmer and the rural advisory services, the project facilitates farmers' learning during shared lessons, field trips and visits to the vegetable gardens.

The project improves access to market infrastructure, and supports agribusinesses in processing and storage.

Through MSP-managed matching grants, agricultural value chains are supported to improve access to market infrastructure, and support agribusinesses in processing and storage. MSPs broker formal partnerships (contracts) between (APGs) and private/public entities. Matching grants finance productive assets like machinery, equipment, planting materials and infrastructure, such as storage collection points, greenhouses, food processing equipment, vegetable rain shelters, sorting and packaging stations, among others. Such collective infrastructure and processing are decreasing transaction costs and adding value to products.

Project participation is comprised largely of elderly individuals, while their involvement brings valuable experience, it also presents risks for sustainability and long-term impact as older participants may face physical limitations and reduced capacity to adopt new technologies which can constrain the uptake of project supported innovations.

Key lessons

- Linking training, inputs and market access – particularly through MSPs – is essential to translate productivity gains into real income increases.
- Farmer groups (APGs) are effective entry points for scaling production and market engagement but require stronger business and organisational skills. Without financial literacy and record-keeping, gains in productivity risk being unsustainable.

II. Climate Resilience, Adaptation and Agroecology³

The project's climate actions encompass a broad spectrum of interventions designed to strengthen resilience and sustainability. Through CSOs, communities are supported to adopt "climate-smart agriculture", while investments in irrigation and multi-use water systems expand access to reliable water resources. Villages themselves prioritise the establishment of drinking water systems, ensuring that local needs guide decision making. At the same time, efforts to conserve wild food biodiversity have identified 25 promising species, reinforcing ecological balance and food security. Complementing these measures, domestication plots for bamboo, rattan, galangal and aquatic systems are being developed, providing both environmental benefits and diversified livelihood opportunities. Together, these actions integrate ecological conservation, community leadership and sustainable resource management into a unified climate resilience strategy. Extension services also promote climate-resilient practices, guiding households to adopt sustainable methods essential for long-term food security.

The project promotes resilience and sustainability by encouraging biodiversity and reducing dependence on external inputs. Central to this approach is biodiversity conservation, ensuring that ecosystems remain balanced and productive. At the same time, efforts to strengthen

local food systems enhance community nutrition and food security by diversifying sources and reducing dependency on external inputs. These are complemented by integrated farming practices, such as fish-in-rice systems and the domestication of native species, which optimise natural synergies, improve soil health and expand livelihood opportunities. Together, these elements create a holistic framework that links ecological integrity with community wellbeing and long-term sustainability.

Upgrading climate-adapted infrastructure is a driver of resilience and productivity. The construction and improvement of irrigation and multipurpose water systems now provide reliable access to water, while greenhouse vegetable production systems are emerging as a key catalyst for sustainable agricultural development. Small farm ponds and rainwater harvesting during the rainy season ensure water availability in dry periods, significantly stabilising production. Improved water access is reducing vulnerability to drought and supporting agriculture productivity and ultimately climate resilience. Together, these investments are enabling farmers to sustain yields year-round, strengthen food security and build climate resilience for the long term.

Infrastructure upgrades, however, face funding gaps and procedural delays. Limited financing has left critical infrastructure investments underfunded, while slow CSO approvals and MSP matching grant disbursements have further held back progress.

Key lessons

- Agroecological practices (e.g. diversification, water systems, biodiversity) improve both resilience and livelihoods.
- Investments in water and climate-adapted infrastructure are critical enablers of productivity stability.
- Flexible, community-prioritised approaches are key to responding to evolving climate risks.

3. The review defines agroecology in terms of the 13 principles developed by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

III. Gender Responsiveness and Women's Empowerment

The project promotes gender equality and reduces the risk of violence by ensuring that all activities are conducted in a safe and supportive environment.

The project is actively transforming gender relations, positioning women as agents of change in nutrition, agriculture, and community governance. AFN II is explicitly gender-transformative, embedding women's leadership and participation across its core activities. Within villages, 75% of nutrition facilitators are women, ensuring that knowledge transfer and community mobilisation are driven by women leaders. Similarly, 69% of farmer nutrition school participants are women, strengthening their role in household nutrition and agricultural decision-making. The Gender Action Learning System (GALS) has been implemented in 10 villages and is expanding to 15 more, creating spaces where women and men jointly analyse power relations and design equitable livelihood strategies. Women are involved in setting up community rice banks, through monitoring, including accounting, treasury and mobilising people to borrow and pay. These rice banks are community-managed food security systems that store rice and provide loans during lean seasons, enabling households to access staple food year-round and repay after harvest. Women were actively involved, contributing ideas to inform the climate change adaptation infrastructure and irrigation upgrade, during village planning processes.

The project has generated significant economic benefits for women, enabling them to move beyond subsistence farming into more resilient and profitable livelihoods.

Through practical agronomic training, access to home garden grants and APG grants, women have increased their income. Women have increased their productivity and secured fairer prices for their produce through collective marketing.

Low financial literacy in Lao PDR, especially in remote, mountainous areas with limited access to formal education has, however, undermined the sustainability of savings and credit organisations. Many cooperatives and credit unions failed because members lacked the skills to manage funds responsibly. Financial literacy must be strengthened

alongside cooperative development; without it, rural financial institutions remain at high risk of collapse.

Even at an early stage, gender-transformative activities are translating into practical benefits for women and their families, reinforcing the project's impact on empowerment and livelihoods. Village planning processes have ensured at least 50% female participation, guaranteeing that women's voices shape local priorities and resource allocation. At baseline, the empowerment score⁴ stood at 71.5%. To strengthen this, the project adopted the GALS approach. Although the number of villages that have received training remains limited, the sessions have been described as highly engaging, with families not only enjoying the process but also applying the lessons within their own households. As Ms. Laiphone Southivong, Head of the Organisational Administration Unit of the Women's Union Office in Beng district, explained, the gender activities were "very good and were used by the families to produce results." She noted that families who embraced the training saw tangible improvements, including increased household income compared to before.

The project works at multiple levels, individual, household, and community, to change the systems and rules that perpetuate gender-based discrimination. By linking nutrition education with agriculture training (e.g., home gardens, livestock), the project empowers women to improve dietary diversity for their households, particularly for pregnant women and children. The project uses interactive tools, such as community conversations, to foster self-reflection among both women and men, empowering them to identify and address gender issues themselves.

GALS has already begun to show encouraging progress. By creating spaces where husbands and wives study, talk and solve problems together, the approach has fostered more open dialogue and joint decision making within households. Families report positive changes, with couples working collaboratively to address challenges and plan for their futures. Instead of simply targeting women as participants, the project strengthens women's ability to make and act on strategic life choices, increasing their control over income, agricultural assets and household nutrition decisions. A key aspect is engaging men as allies and change agents to share household workloads and support women's participation, rather than bypassing

4. The project's composite indicator that reflects how empowered individuals are, based on factors such as decision-making power, control over resources (land, income, assets), participation in leadership or collective action and confidence and agency in applying new knowledge.

them. This shift demonstrates that gender-transformative methods are not only raising awareness but also reshaping relationships, strengthening cooperation, and laying the groundwork for more equitable household and community dynamics.

Despite progress, a critical gap remains in women's empowerment. The project is designed to be gender-transformative, moving beyond the provision of inputs to address the deeper social norms, power dynamics, and structural barriers that perpetuate inequality in nutrition and agricultural production. By integrating gender into its approach, AFN II works to shift roles and behaviours, aiming to sustainably improve household nutrition and empower women's decision making. However, despite these efforts, entrenched social norms, such as restrictions on women's mobility, preventing them from moving freely to access opportunities, services or decision-making spaces; limited authority in household decisions and unequal distribution of labour, continue to undermine progress. This underscores the need for sustained engagement and complementary interventions to ensure that transformative gains are not eroded by persistent cultural barriers. Sustained engagement is required through regular community dialogues, provision of safe transport and childcare support, and complementary interventions, including further linkages with social protection and youth engagement services.

Women continue to work long hours, often without adequate rest, and their diets lack diversity. This reflects persistent inequalities in workload distribution and access to nutritious food. While the project provides knowledge on nutrition, the causes and cycle of malnutrition, and the influence of gender roles, these efforts highlight the need for deeper transformation. Knowledge alone is not sufficient unless paired with structural changes that reduce women's time poverty, improve access to diverse foods, and redistribute responsibilities within households. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that empowerment translates into tangible improvements in women's health, well-being and agency.

Women autonomy over income is still largely tied up to decisions on priority expenditures to make at the household level. Although most women involved in the

project now have the ability to access, control, and make independent decisions regarding their own earnings, decisions are still largely related to the welfare of the family/households.

Women have attained leadership roles as village nutrition facilitators, which has strengthened their decision-making.

Women's leadership in nutrition facilitation and village planning has influenced planning outcomes ensuring inclusive priorities and strengthened community governance. Women are playing a central role in village leadership and collective decision-making, with 75% of nutrition facilitators being women. They lead in mobilising households and shaping nutrition priorities. In participatory sessions, women and men separately analyse community challenges and construct development objective trees, ensuring diverse perspectives are captured. Both groups then vote on village priorities, with results consolidated into village development plans. This inclusive process also generates nutrition maps that identify households facing nutrition challenges, reinforcing women's leadership in guiding community planning and resource allocation.

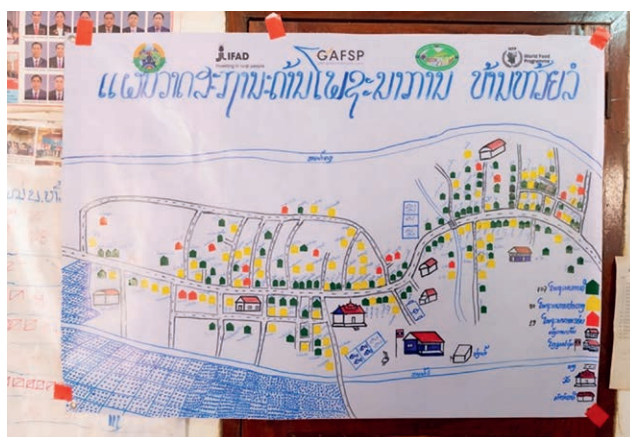
Key lessons

- Gender-transformative tools, such as GALS, can shift household decision-making and social norms when both men and women are engaged.
- Economic empowerment alone is insufficient without addressing structural barriers such as workload, mobility and social norms.
- Financial literacy must be strengthened alongside cooperative development; without it, rural financial institutions remain at high risk of collapse.

IV. Nutrition

The project has led to improvements in knowledge, behaviour and quality of life. Communities have learned more about nutrition, the value of local foods and how to grow vegetables and raise healthy livestock. At the village level, village facilitators, women of reproductive age including pregnant women, young mothers with children under five years old, vulnerable groups and village-level farming groups have gained knowledge on nutrition including malnutrition, food sources, eating variety of foods, and the basics of farming including raising livestock and in some villages changing behaviours rooted in gender norms.

Mr. Sounasak Thammavongsa, Deputy Head of Agriculture and Environment at MAF, noted that the project has shifted villagers' mindsets, encouraging healthier daily practices and more diverse, nutritionally balanced diets.



Community members generating a nutrition map (bottom) in Huay Lor village. The nutrition map indicates households with nutrition challenges (red – severe, yellow – moderate, green -fine; the red may change to yellow after a year) (top). PHOTO: LAO FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

Combining nutrition education with farming techniques is ensuring agricultural production leads healthier rural households.

By retooling personnel, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry ensures that extension workers integrate nutrition education with farming techniques, driving behavioural change so improved production translates into dietary diversity and better household nutrition, particularly for women and children. Participants learned about village development planning, establishing a learning centre, and methods for raising and storing food for long-term consumption.

Farmers and women's groups have been supported through comprehensive guidance, training and advisory services that extend beyond agriculture into family wellbeing. Village facilitators received lessons on childcare alongside farming techniques and management, ensuring that improved production is linked to healthier households. Practical skills in food processing and transformation were also delivered, enabling communities to add value to their produce, diversify diets, and strengthen resilience. By combining agricultural knowledge with nutrition and caregiving practices, these efforts are driving both livelihood improvements and better outcomes for families.

Community members are becoming more aware of nutrition and changing their agricultural and food preparation practices.

Community nutrition is being driven by targeted interventions that improve the nutritional status of women, children, girls and other vulnerable groups. Central to this effort is the establishment of farmer nutrition schools, which equip households with practical knowledge and skills to adopt healthier diets, diversify food sources and strengthen resilience against malnutrition. Agriculture training (56% women) and home garden grants have increased food production, increasing year-round access to vegetables and nutritious food, reducing reliance on market purchases.

Training-of-trainers at nutrition learning centres has equipped village facilitators with essential knowledge on nutrition, dietary diversity, vegetable production and the "one home garden, one household" approach that ensures that every participating household establishes and maintains its own home garden. Facilitators received practical training facilitated by extension workers and partner agencies in farming and livestock raising, food preparation and cooking, and household visits to reinforce learning. Onsite sessions covered basic agricultural techniques, food processing and preservation, ensuring that families not only gain knowledge but also apply it

directly to improve diets, strengthen food security and sustain healthier livelihoods. Results have been limited, however, by limited parental involvement for adolescent engagement, low participation and weak attention to lessons, compounded by traditional beliefs.

Women have gained practical knowledge on child feeding, hygiene and diversified diets. The project has strengthened community nutrition and food security through the establishment of integrated home gardens, which provide households with diverse and reliable sources of vegetables year-round. Efforts to enhance domestic food processing have added value to local produce, while the creation of community rice banks has improved access to staple foods and reduced vulnerability during lean seasons. At the same time, the project has strengthened community nutrition by improving the management of local and “wild” food sources, safeguarding biodiversity while expanding dietary options. These efforts are reinforced through the promotion of local foods, such as the distribution of bitter bamboo shoot seedlings, and the provision of home garden grants that enable households to diversify production and secure year-round access to nutritious foods.

The project’s nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions are tackling development problems with a focus on women, youth, ethnic groups and persons with disabilities. Most villages in Baeng district, including the project’s target villages, still have many malnourished children and a high percentage of poor families. By raising awareness among women, youth, ethnic groups and people with disabilities to grow more food the project is addressing food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty.

Rice banks are drivers of resilience, social protection and sustainability. Community-managed rice banks have emerged as vital food security mechanisms, ensuring households maintain access to rice throughout the year, particularly during the lean season before harvest. Functioning both as secure storage facilities and as social protection systems, they allow families to borrow milled rice during periods of scarcity and repay after harvest, often with a modest interest rate. By reducing hunger risks and stabilising household food supplies, rice banks strengthen resilience and solidarity within communities. The World Food Program (WFP) has reinforced this model by providing initial rice deposits, building on proven approaches in Lao PDR, and enabling communities to scale up a sustainable safety net against food insecurity.

MSPs are scaling nutrition-sensitive agriculture in a coordinated, system-wide manner. By bridging agriculture, health, and local government, MSPs create synergies that

directly improve food security and nutrition outcomes. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture is being scaled up as a coordinated, system-wide effort. At the district level, they convene government officials, community leaders, buyers, and producers to align priorities, pool resources and jointly plan interventions. This strengthens vertical linkages between village nutrition plans and district strategies, while fostering horizontal collaboration across sectors. In practice, MSPs embed nutrition into local development planning, build trust among actors who traditionally worked in silos, and link producers to markets and communities to services. By transforming nutrition into a shared responsibility across the food system, MSPs provide a clear pathway for institutionalising nutrition-sensitive agriculture and sustaining impact at scale.

Although home grown school feeding was included in the project design, there is no evidence of its implementation to date. This represents a missed opportunity to leverage school feeding as a direct pathway to address child malnutrition. School feeding programmes are proven to improve dietary diversity and reduce micronutrient deficiencies among children. Women, often central to food preparation and local production, could benefit from such structured market linkages, enhancing both income and agency. Local farmers supplying schools would gain predictable demand, reducing post-harvest losses and strengthening community food systems.

Key lessons

- Integrating nutrition education with agricultural production and sustainability measures is essential to translating food availability into improved diets and incomes.
- Home gardens, local food systems and rice banks are effective in strengthening year-round food security.
- Missing links, such as home-grown school feeding, represent significant opportunities for scaling nutrition impact.
- Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) transform coordination into collective action, enabling diverse actors to align priorities, pool resources, and embed nutrition into local development planning.

V. Community Participation & Cohesion

The project is based on community needs, creating a strong sense of ownership and sustainability among villagers. The project is implemented using a cluster approach that aggregates villages into functional groups to enhance scale, efficiency, and cohesion, supported by continuous monitoring and technical assistance. The project has prioritised inclusion, ensuring that no one is left behind by including female-headed households, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups who are actively engaged in all activities.

The project embeds participatory integrated climate services for agriculture (PICSA) as both a climate tool and a decision-making framework that helps farmers translate climate information into livelihood strategies that are practical, resilient and nutrition-aligned. By linking PICSA for MSME support with district, provincial and national nutrition council structures, and deliberately avoiding overlap with World Bank initiatives, the project ensures complementarity rather than duplication.

Building on AFN I's infrastructure and partnering with CSOs through the Challenge Fund further strengthens collaboration, creating a coherent ecosystem where government, civil society and development partners reinforce each other's efforts. Civil society engagement has been strengthened through the Challenge Fund, which mobilises local organisations to advance project outcomes. CSOs mobilised through the Challenge Fund deliver climate-smart, market-linked, and nutrition-sensitive services to empower rural households. To date, 36 CSO concept notes have been received, with six already approved and progressing toward IFAD endorsement. This marks a key step in expanding partnerships and ensuring grassroots actors play a central role, reinforcing the project's commitment to inclusive participation, transparency and sustainable impact.

District-level nutrition councils serve as the mechanism through which village plans on nutrition and food production are integrated upward to provincial and national levels. AFN II coordinates closely with these councils, ensuring two-way synergy: village priorities inform higher-level planning, while councils provide information on policies, programmes and financial resources. This alignment enables villages to access complementary support for plans beyond AFN II's budget, reinforcing

transparency, coherence and collective impact across government and community structures.

Some of the target villages (125 out of 500) had already participated in the IFAD-funded Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme (FNML) in the three southern provinces. Building on this foundation, the current project reinforces continuity and synergy by deepening nutrition-sensitive agriculture and market linkages, ensuring that earlier investments are consolidated and scaled for greater impact.

The project deliberately supports fragile communities through participatory planning. Through multi-sectoral coordination, community-based rice banks, strengthened farmer groups and inclusive targeting of ethnic populations, the project enhances participation while fostering social cohesion, improved resource management and collective action. Farmers and communities actively shape planning, implementation and monitoring through village plans and group structures. Orientation meetings require 80% household, and 50% female participation strengthening both inclusion and local ownership.

Community participation and transparency are reinforced through the project's information management system, regular monitoring and inspection and periodic evaluations by government and donors. These mechanisms ensure that communities remain informed and engaged while external oversight builds trust and credibility in the implementation process.



Village planning process in Huay Lor village. PHOTO: LAO FARMERS' ASSOCIATION



Generation of a seasonal calendar showing food abundance and scarcity, work abundance and lean months (right) in Lai Yai village.
PHOTO: LAO FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

Key lessons

- Participatory planning and inclusive design build strong ownership and sustainability at community level.
- Coordination through MSPs converts collaboration into practical, system-wide impact.
- Engagement of CSOs enhances outreach, innovation, and accountability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the AFN II project is only a year and a half into its seven-year timeframe, communities are still in the process of finding their footing, and although foundational activities have begun, deeper community ownership and active involvement are still emerging. The project is working towards promoting agricultural activities, providing funds to family groups to provide food for the household, encouraging the establishment of production groups to produce goods to create income, developing agricultural infrastructure and various facilities such as drinking water systems and irrigation for production areas. Recognising the project's focus on improving nutrition and gender equality, the review obtained evidence of strong female participation across activities, high engagement of ethnic communities and significant progress in training and group formation.

To support the realisation of the project's objectives, the review makes the following recommendations to the supervising entity, project implementation team and government.

Supervising entity and project implementation team:

- *Accelerate MSME matching grants (2026 Priority):* Expedite disbursement and processing to ensure timely support for MSMEs, enabling them to scale operations and strengthen value chain linkages.
- *Strengthen linkages between GALS-FNS and APG-MSP activities:* Foster integration between gender-transformative approaches (GALS) and farmer nutrition schools with APG and MSP activities to maximise synergies and reinforce both empowerment and market access outcomes.
- *Speed up CSO approval processes:* Streamline CSO approvals for the Challenge Fund to reduce delays, enhance participation and ensure that CSOs can mobilise communities and deliver interventions more effectively.

- *Maintain flexible funding for climate infrastructure:* Continued flexibility in financing will allow the project to respond to evolving climate risks and community-driven priorities, ensuring infrastructure investments remain adaptive and sustainable.
- *Support scaling of successful MSP models:* Expand and replicate proven MSP approaches to strengthen coordination, enhance market linkages and embed nutrition-sensitive agriculture across districts and provinces.
- *Balance demographic targeting to ensure intergenerational empowerment by engaging youth alongside the elderly:* While inclusion of older persons brings valuable experience, the project should actively target youth, who may be more likely to adopt new technologies and are better positioned to ensure sustainability.

Government:

- *Government budgets should sustain and progressively expand extension management services (EMS) budget increases:* Maintain and progressively expand allocations for EMS to ensure continuity, strengthen service delivery and support scaling of nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions.
- *Government should institutionalise nutrition-sensitive village planning:* Embed nutrition-sensitive planning into government systems and processes, ensuring that village-level priorities are systematically integrated into district and national development frameworks for long-term sustainability.

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