



Converging for improved nutrition in Lao PDR

Enhanced Nutrition for Upland Farming Families (ENUFF)
Technical Brief no .1

SNV



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Summary

Reducing undernutrition requires convergent action from many sectors and stakeholders. There is a recognition that health; education; agriculture; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); livelihoods; women's empowerment and nutrition all contribute to improved nutrition. Though multi-sectoral convergence is not a new concept, this renewal of interest has led to many questions about how to do it and whether nutrition outcomes are improved if it is done effectively. In four districts in the two provinces of Oudomxay and Houaphan, SNV with support from Agrisud International and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), is working with government structures to implement a programme that integrates gender, agriculture, nutrition and WASH. From the baseline study, it was found that the nutritional status of children is strongly influenced by education, women's knowledge and awareness, market integration and the financial capacity of households to diversify their livelihoods and improve

their living conditions. Interventions in the food system can support agricultural livelihoods whilst also improving diets. This is especially true if the interventions do no harm to health or care practices and support integrated and multisectoral programming. A unique component of ENUFF is the coordination and alignment of the different sectors activities at district and community levels. Since its implementation, ENUFF has gained valuable insights to realise effective convergence across various sectors, in particular at the subnational levels, from district to community. This has been enhanced through participatory convergence planning with the use of village convergence tools. Drawing on the ENUFF experience, this paper provides key insights into the district level coordination and implementation of a multi-sectoral nutrition programme and provides a set of recommendations to consider in nutrition-sensitive programming.

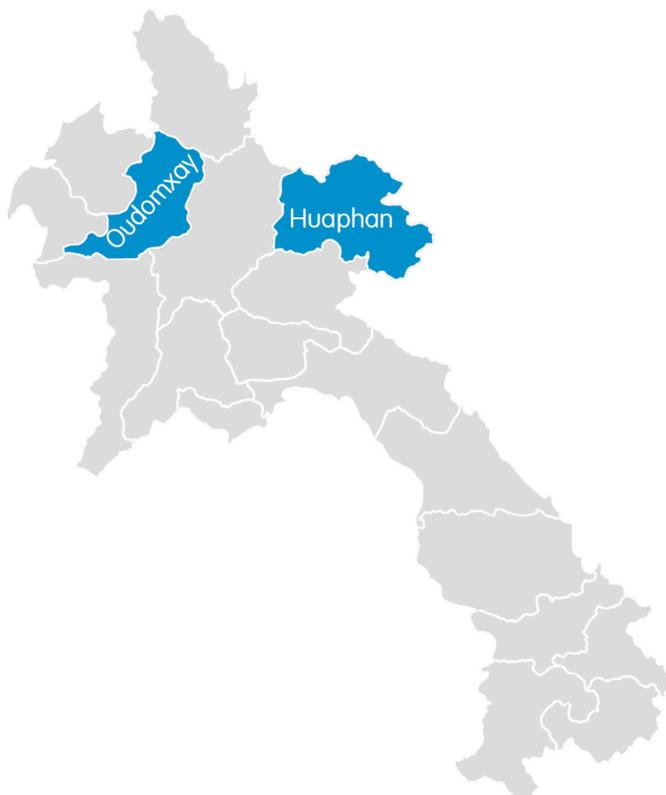


Figure 1: ENUFF programme locations

About ENUFF

The Enhancing Nutrition of Upland Farming Families (ENUFF) project is a multi-sectoral nutrition programme supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by SNV with support from Agrisud International. Together with Government partners, ENUFF combines nutrition-sensitive agriculture, gender, SBCC and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in one programme to improve family nutrition in remote and ethnically diverse upland farming communities.

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Nutrition Landscape in Lao PDR

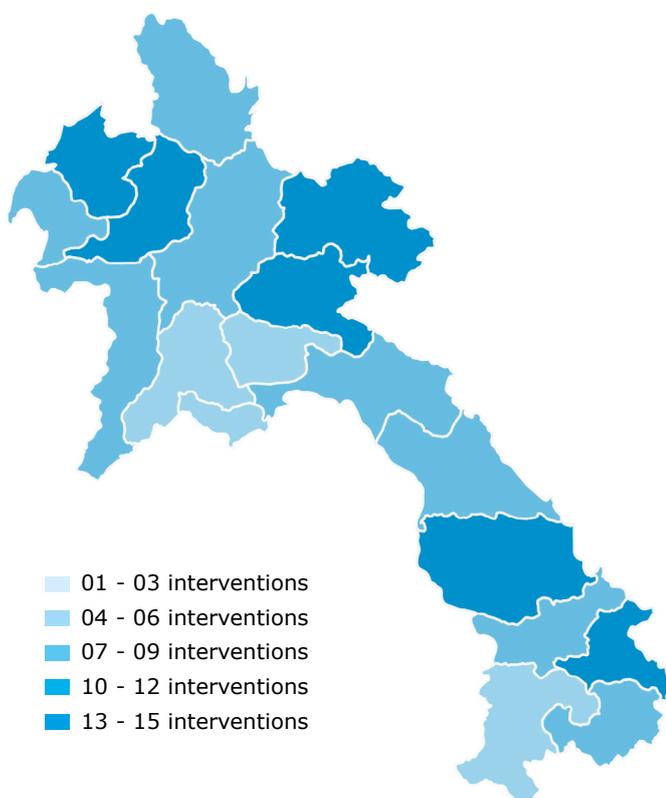
Although Lao PDR has achieved impressive economic growth in recent years, the country's progress is impeded by high malnutrition rates. Lao PDR strives to graduate out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status in the 2020s. Nutrition, in particular of children and women of reproductive age is an issue of particular importance in determining LDC graduation. Although progress has been made in addressing malnutrition, the 2015 Lao Child Anthropometry Assessment Survey (LCAAS) reports stunting of children under five as 36.5%². National statistics can often mask regional variations, and the LCAAS report indicate that child undernutrition showed strong inequalities across regions and groups, particularly in communities living in remote upland areas.

Strong political will to tackle malnutrition

The political commitment to tackle the issue is strong as reflected in the implementation of the National

Nutrition Policy (NNP) and the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan (NNSPA) 2010-2015. The NNSPA is designed to be synchronous with and fully complementary to the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDPA). It embodies a multi-sectoral convergent approach, with the primary goal to reduce chronic malnutrition to 25% by 2025. It is also consistent with the global World Health Assembly nutrition targets and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in that subsidiary targets aim to reduce acute malnutrition (wasting), underweight children, and anaemia and to promote breastfeeding.³

A co-ordinating body, the National Nutrition Committee (NNC) and its Secretariat was established in 2010 to establish all the institutional arrangements and modalities needed to address malnutrition. The NNC Secretariat is chaired by the Vice-Minister of Health and co-chaired by the Vice-Ministers of



Total number of interventions	29
Multi-sectoral	4
Health sector	10
Agriculture sector	4
Education sector	4
Strategic Objectives (SOs)	11
Activities	145
Priorities interventions	
Priority 1 interventions	22
Priority 2 interventions	7

Figure 2: Nutrition Stakeholder and Action Mapping Lao PDR¹

Agriculture and Forestry, of Education and Sport and of Planning and Investment. The NNC includes representatives from Health, Agriculture-Forestry, Education, Planning, Commerce, Finance, National Poverty Eradication and Rural Development, National Commission for Mother and Child and other relevant line ministries. Lao PDR's multi-sectoral approach includes 22 priority actions, including improving nutrient intake; improving food access and availability; improving mother and child care practices in nutrition; and improving environmental health. Although the Ministry of Health is primarily responsible for facilitating nutrition activities, other ministries have been mandated with responsibilities. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry will coordinate food and nutrition security efforts, with a focus on dietary diversity. Government, with support from development actors are building capacity in nutrition at all administrative levels.

Converging sectors for improved nutrition

The NNSPA endorses the need to tackle the underlying causes of malnutrition at the household and community levels. This warrants improvements in food and nutrition security; maternal and child health practices; access to clean water systems/practices; sanitation and healthy environments as well as access to health and nutrition services. This in turn requires supportive management and administrative systems, coordination mechanisms, cooperation, communication and collaboration between and within many relevant sectors. A confluence of factors can exacerbate malnutrition and hence, the NNSPA emphasises multi-sectoral unity with common efforts, goals and timeframes. There are 22 priority interventions to be implemented through a convergence approach at national and sub-national levels. A recent stakeholder mapping exercise illustrates the current coverage and implementation of the 22 interventions (figure 2).

ENUFF recently conducted a mapping exercise at the district level and village level in Houaphan and Oudomxay provinces⁴. The study found that there is an uneven implementation of the 22 priority interventions in the four targeted districts of the ENUFF project. A number of priority interventions have more than one implementer, while other interventions are not being carried out (Table 1). The most common activities related to infant and young child feeding (IYCF), social and behavior change communication (SBCC), WASH, and post-harvest

storage/processing. There is limited coordination between Government and development partners implementing nutrition-related activities at the district level. This may result in an inefficient use of resources and overlapping or repetition of activities at the district and village level. Better coordination could lead to more efficient implementation of activities as well as greater overall impact.

The reasons for lack of coordination vary. They include an absence of formal and informal coordination mechanisms, a culture of top-down design and implementation of projects and interventions, limited incentives for horizontal coordination, limited resources to set up and maintain coordination mechanisms, and a lack of skills for effective coordination at the provincial and district level.

Multi-sectoral approach to nutrition

The political discourse about the challenge of malnutrition has ramped up, with the Scaling Up Nutrition movement paving the way in 2010. Now, in the era of Sustainable Development, there is a renewed impetus to develop and implement multi-sectoral strategies⁵. Addressing malnutrition requires a strong focus on governance, involving coordinated actions by many actors across sectors and levels of government. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) conceptual framework opened the dialogue on the respective roles of stakeholders in convergent approaches. At the individual level, poor diet and health status are immediate causes, where targeted nutrition-specific interventions can make a significant contribution. As reported in the Lancet Series on maternal and child nutrition, even at 90% coverage, the package of 10 nutrition-specific interventions would reduce child stunting by only 20%, hence to meet the other 80%, efforts must also be directed to the underlying factors that impact the quality and quantity of food, health services, hygiene, childcare and feeding practices. Sectors, such as agriculture and food systems; social protection; WASH and education all play a critical role and making them nutrition-sensitive and coherent can accelerate nutrition gains. The underlying factors of undernutrition are heavily influenced on the one hand by external factors in the food and sanitation environment, but also by behaviours related to food production and purchase, intrahousehold dynamics, care practices and hygiene. Behaviour is complex and one of the best know strategies for improving the impact of nutrition-sensitive interventions is SBCC^{6,7,8}.

In Lao PDR, a major SBCC programme is currently under development, however agricultural nutrition education, for instance producing diverse nutritious foods for home consumption/sale for improved food expenditure/health is not included as part of SBCC⁹. Moving forward, agricultural interventions, as highlighted in ENUFF baseline findings, would benefit from integrating a behaviour change component on nutrition.

In essence, the overarching national policy strongly advocates for the involvement of national and subnational levels, and the engagement of multiple sectors, beyond health, to combat food and nutrition insecurity. The inter-ministerial coordination mechanism involves two layers:

- At the central level, alignment of different sectors with the multi-sectoral plan; resource mobilisation; monitoring and reporting to the respective sector and to the NNC secretariat;
- At the provincial and district levels, implementation

of the 22 interventions. This involves a gap analysis of existing interventions and review and potential scale up.

Both levels warrant coordination, review and monitoring.

Decentralising the process

To achieve impact on the ground, the coordination process must also involve decentralisation. Currently Provincial Nutrition Committees are being established, which replicate the national level structure and provide a space to develop and review the Action Plan developed and implemented by the respective sectors. The roll-out of District Nutrition Committees is still in its infancy, but this layer along with a layer at the community level is essential for successful implementation of the 'convergence' model. This allows for tailoring the interventions according to the malnutrition need of the respective community. Plans need to be budgeted, implemented and monitored in every sector plan¹⁰.

Priority Nutrition Interventions	Target group	Houaphanh Xiengkhor									
		Bao	Hap	Houaylang	Houaypit	Khounkham	Nadua	Natong	Phonthong	Phouk	Sopdoug
1a Vitamin A supplements	6-59m										
1b Iron Folic Acid supplements - daily	PLW										
1c Multiple Micronutrient Powder	6-23m										
1d Vitamin B1 supplements	PPW										
2 Deworming	12-59m										
3 Food fortification incl USI	All Pop										
4 Promote IYCF and maternal nutrition	PLW										
5 Food supplement PLW	PLW										
6 Food supplement children 6-23 months	6-23m										
7 Food quality and safety	GoL										
8 Management of acute malnutrition	CU5										
9 Nutrition education and SBCC	All Pop										
10 WASH	HH										
11 Capacity building for nutrition	GoL										
12 Strengthen coordination and partnerships	GoL										
13 Information management for nutrition	GoL										
14 Communication advocacy, investment	GoL										
15 Increase production nutrient rich based prote RHH											
16 Increase production animal based protein	RHH										
17 Post-harvest storage and processing	RHH										
18 Agriculture based and NTFP IGA	RHH										
19 School feeding	SC & Pre										
20 School garden	SC & Pre										
21 Integrate nutrition into curricula	SC & Pre										
22a School-based deworming	SC & Pre										

Table 1: Example of interventions mapping exercise

Bringing sectors together through ENUFF

Bringing sectors together is at the heart of the ENUFF programme. In four districts in two provinces (highlighted in figure 1), ENUFF aims to improve the physical and economic access of nutritious foods through diversification of home production. Diversified home gardens are being established, in parallel with market development. Agriculture linked nutrition education promotes the intra-household use of diversified foods, incorporating the man's role in nutrition and the use of income for improved health and nutrition. Community driven SBCC will involve the promotion of IYCF, breastfeeding, care and hygiene practices in parallel to Community Led Total Sanitation (WASH intervention). ENUFF fosters sustainable food systems and hygienic environments for improved diets and health status and in turn nutrition outcomes. Underpinning the activities is the coordination and support of the district nutrition teams and the establishment and functional support of the District Nutrition Committees and Village Nutrition Teams (VNTs).

Investigating local diversity and linkages between livelihoods and nutrition

One of the key challenges addressed by ENUFF relates to the diversity of local livelihood systems encountered in the uplands of Lao PDR, the implications of this, diversity for nutritional issues and possible ways to address the latter. Especially, at the premise of the project is the idea that, in order to have sustainable impacts on the nutritional status of upland farming families, interventions must be designed to fit with the local circumstances and account for the constraints and opportunities that shape local livelihoods, farming systems and health and hygiene conditions. As a first step towards addressing this challenge, efforts were made to gain an understanding of the local communities' contexts in the project's target areas, i.e. Beng and Nga districts in Oudomxay Province and Viengkay and Xiengkho districts in Houaphanh Province. Village typologies were developed building upon statistical analysis of population and agricultural census data. Three typologies emerged in each district with villages being differentiated according to their level of

agricultural intensification, market integration, access to the lowlands and urbanisation. In coordination with local authorities, ten target villages per district were selected as representative of typological patterns. A comprehensive baseline survey was conducted in these villages to gather reference data for assessing project outcomes and guiding project intervention.

From the baseline findings, linkages between current food crop production, dietary quality and the nutritional status of the children appear to be weak. Findings suggest that integration of SBCC, broader food system activities including market development and improved accessibility of diverse foods as well as improvements in living conditions, could be strategic. Activities to diversify food production for home consumption can play a role in improving diets, particularly at the intra-household level, however there is also a need to consider how market development can enhance nutrition outcomes, through income generation for improved food expenditure and enhancing market access to more diverse, healthier food.

Typological analysis shows that remote villages are generally characterised by large households with high dependency ratios and high poverty rates reflected in limited household assets and poor quality of the housing. Chronic malnutrition is also comparatively higher in remote areas as reflected in high CU5 stunting prevalence (i.e. 47% of CU5, compared to 34% in more accessible villages).

Food Systems Lens

Supporting food crop diversification and value chain development may contribute to the emergence of associated off-farm activities for e.g. service provision, processing and trade, creating new opportunities for income generation around food products and contributing indirectly to tackle the remoteness-poverty nexus. The food system may also contribute to diversify the food environment, i.e. markets, hence, offer potential impacts beyond the project's target villages.

Integrating WASH and nutrition in SBCC

Poverty and limited economic opportunities are only one side of the coin. Poor attitudes, perceptions, habits and social norms may impede interventions in attaining their full nutrition potential. Hence, additional resources and capital may just be misused. In that sense, education, including participatory nutrition education, might actually be key to an even greater number of positive changes. This is reflected in the results of statistical analyses showing a series of positive correlations between education and women's knowledge and awareness on the one hand and household capital assets, access to improved water sources and sanitation, safe disposal of child faeces, and consumption on the other hand. Findings from the formative research also point towards health

and nutrition education as essential to avoid ill-informed, dangerous practices (e.g. use of sweetened condensed milk as breast milk substitute for infants was reported in several target villages). Again, typological analysis suggests a greater challenge in remote areas where 28% of household heads have never attended school, compared to 14% in more accessible villages. An important gender gap can also be observed with men attending school for a much longer period than women. These constitute key arguments in favour of SBCC and education programmes targeting not only women but also men and influential actors (e.g. local leaders, elders and traditional healers). Key issues such as gender and their potential impacts on child growth and development must be considered. Otherwise, the goal of triggering a local demand for healthier lifestyles



Teaching families to grow nutritious foods

and environments and more diverse and quality diets will remain out of reach^{11,12}.

Convergence Tool

In ENUFF, capacity is being strengthened in district nutrition teams to coordinate, implement and monitor a multi-sectoral nutrition project in line with NNP and NNSPA through:

- training and field practice in technical training, facilitation, counselling and follow-up in the villages
- supporting Village Nutrition Teams (VNTs) to take ownership of the initiative, and continue the community dialogue through convergence planning
- training in application of skills in other projects and programmes, for example mainstreaming gender
- support to apply skills according to the needs of the community.

Sustainability is anchored in the governance structure and in community ownership. Hence capacity is being strengthened in VNTs (i.e. people who live in the communities) to continue the community nutrition dialogue and work towards nutrition targets (i.e. reduction in stunting) to attain Model Nutrition Village status, a concept promoted nationally. To do this, communities are involved in convergence planning and take ownership of village nutrition targets and action plans. After actions have been set, VNTs are supported in their role as nutrition educators, influencers and implementers. Successes and milestones will be celebrated together with district team, and ENUFF project team work whilst also working on the challenges/barriers that impede positive nutrition behaviours.

A village convergence tool is used (figure 3). Data is shared with the communities, including how many

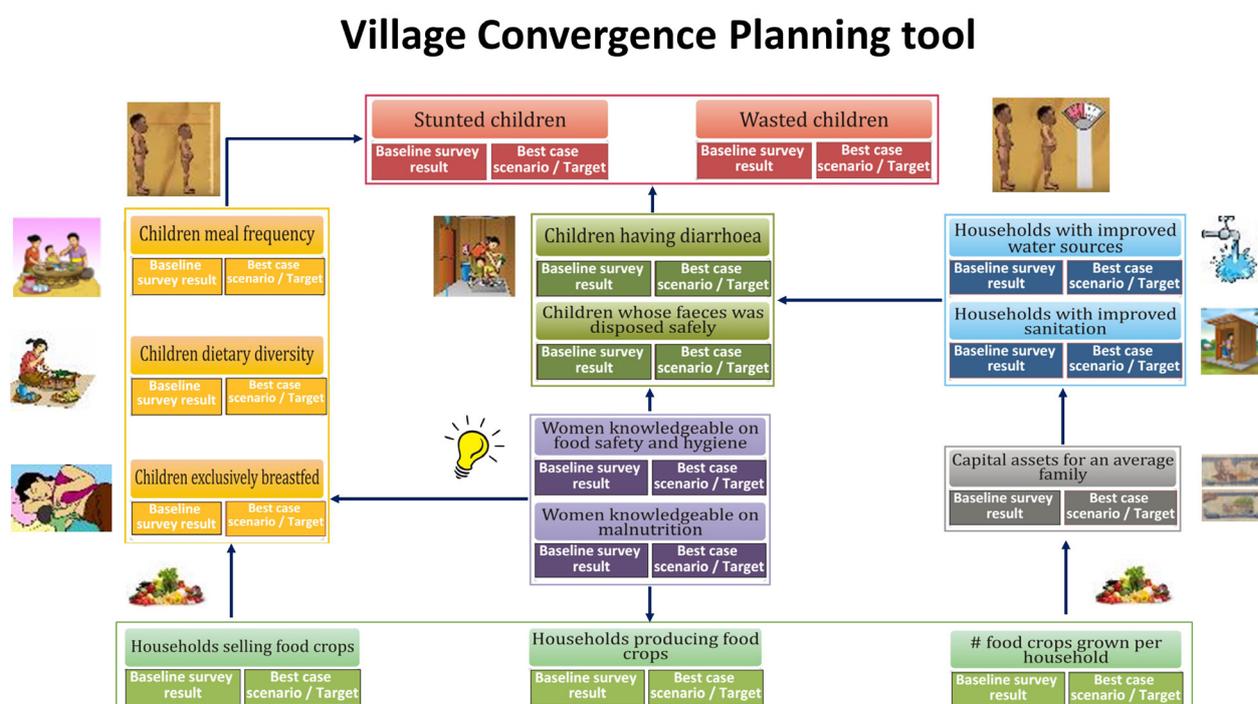


Figure 3 Village Convergence Tool

children are suffering from malnutrition or how many different types of crops are grown. The idea is that the communities will own the problem and work on solutions to address it. By tracking improvements over the course of the project, there is a stronger sense of ownership, and ultimately sustainability.

Challenges

Coordination among stakeholders, actors and donors and mapping of interventions and resources, implementation coverage and its outcomes is a challenge. Capacity development at all levels needs to be supported. New skills in planning convergently, joint monitoring with other sectors, and generally more active coordination and cooperation is needed. Fostering this skills development will build an enabling environment for continued cooperation. It warrants

the selection of coordinators and facilitators who can lead the process. Accelerating commitment and ownership, particularly at the subnational levels is key, and establishing mechanisms for accountability, from central to village and vice versa is needed. As stated in the NNSPA, "in order to ensure the assessment and measurement of the impact of the interventions, there must be surveillance systems, progress monitoring, scientific research, surveys, and information reporting and management systems along with the development and implementation of united multi-sectoral plans which cover the main NNS indicators and targets."



Recommendations

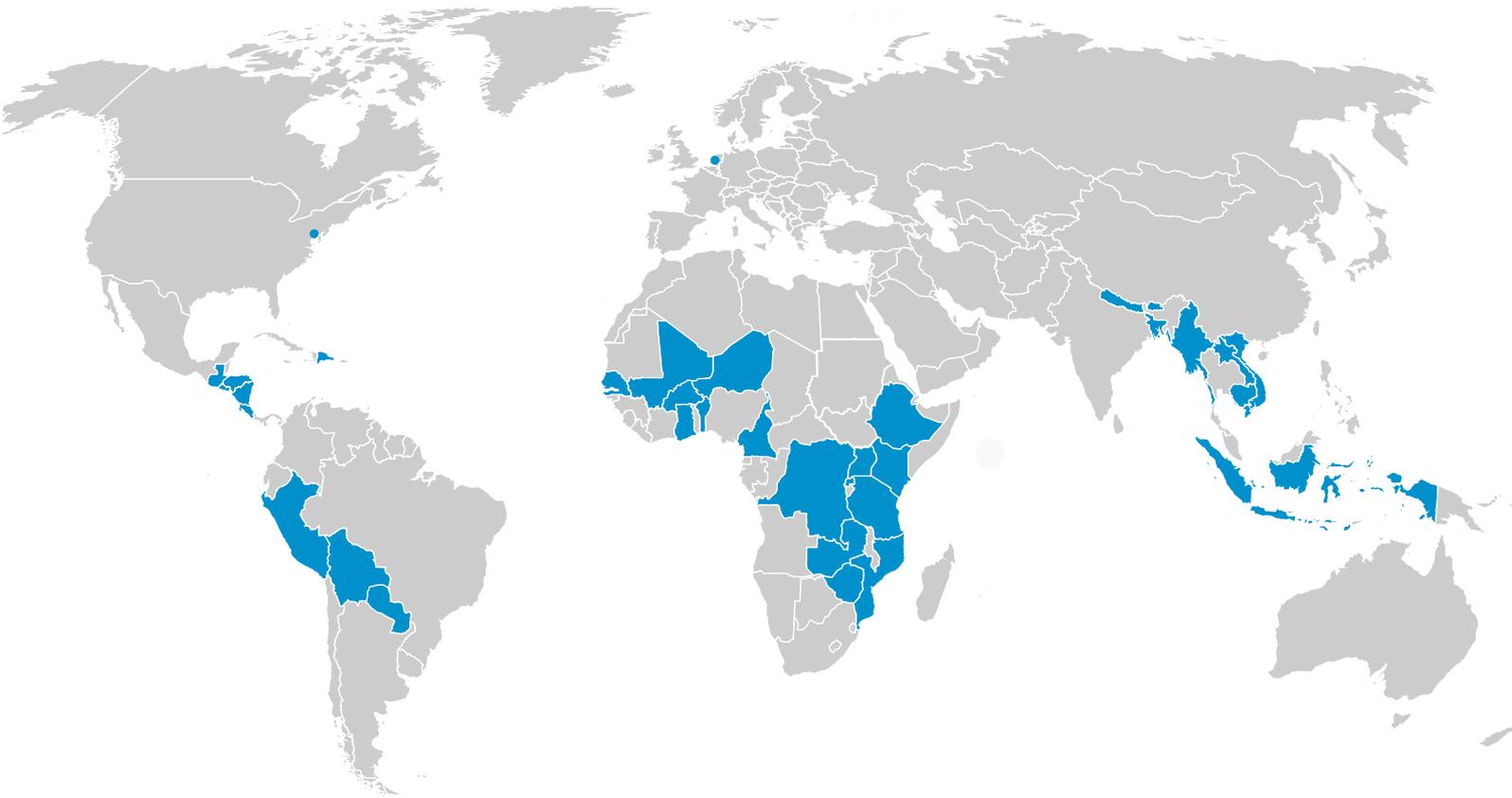
Ensuring that all key nutrition actions are implemented necessitates convergent action between the field of nutrition, health, education, agriculture, livelihoods and women's empowerment. The relationships between these fields and their potential for accelerating nutrition gains have been previously explained through multiple pathways. The pathways suggest that effective convergence is desirable and it can be developed through a set of strategic mechanisms related to policies and programs, something being initiated in Lao PDR. The key outcomes of effective convergence is a set of decisions and actions across different sectors that together will eventually lead to improved nutrition, in particular for women and children. The actions may or may not be joint, but at a minimum should be strategic and coordinated. Since its implementation, ENUFF has gained valuable insights to realise effective convergence across various sectors. Implementation of convergent actions at the community level has been enhanced through participatory convergence planning.

Valuable insights have been captured in intersectoral coordination and implementation. Nutritional issues appear strongly shaped by, if not entangled with local livelihood systems. Supporting agricultural development and diversification may contribute to create new opportunities for income generation, thus contributing indirectly to improve the local economic circumstances, while also improving diets. This is especially true if it does no harm to health or care practices and supports integrated and multisectoral programming. A unique aspect of ENUFF is the coordination and alignment of the different sector activities at district and village levels. From the comprehensive baseline data, four strategic avenues can be identified for nutrition sensitive programming to improve family nutrition in the Laotian uplands:

- 1. Engage in social and behaviour change communication, involving both women and men, in relation to:**
 - Exclusive breastfeeding of infants (0-6 months) and complementary feeding of young children (6-23 months);
 - Food sourcing and consumption towards a minimum acceptable diet for children under 2 years old;
 - Improved dietary quality including diversity by all members of the household, particularly women and infants;
 - Improved hygienic everyday practices such as safe disposal of child faeces and hand washing with soap;
 - Promote use of improved sanitation facilities by all community members.
- 2. Provide technical and organisational support to farm and small business operators aimed at enhancing local capacities to:**
 - Diversify food crop and small livestock production;
 - Process, store, market and generate income from food crop value chains.
- 3. Promote, support and engage in context-sensitive yet integrated initiatives across the health, agricultural, environmental and business sectors that account for the multidimensionality of livelihoods and nutritional issues.**
- 4. Support nutrition coordination committees, which involve recruiting the right coordinators; establish mechanisms for accountability; decentralise national level actions to the village level; strengthen capacity at all levels and introduce a process of learning and not just reporting.**

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