



Understanding dietary habits for healthier communities

Consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages amongst children 6-23 months in Lao PDR

Project Background

The Enhancing Nutrition of Upland Farming Families project is a multisectoral nutrition project that aims to improve family and child nutrition in remote upland farming communities by promoting improved infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, sanitation and hygiene practices and nutrition-sensitive agriculture production. The project conducts social and behavioural change communication activities to improve children's diets. These include cooking demonstrations, community-based growth monitoring and promotion, and nutrition radio spots.

Even with the project interventions, the consumption of unhealthy snacks is widely visible in the communities. A study was commissioned¹ to assess the prevalence of unhealthy snack and beverage consumption amongst children and its determinants.

Scope of the Survey

The study used a mixed-methods approach across 16 villages in two provinces to understand unhealthy snack consumption patterns among children aged 6-23 months. 305 household surveys, 8 focus group discussions, and 23 key informant interviews were conducted between October 19th and November 5th, 2023.

A 7-day food frequency questionnaire was used to ask caregivers the number of days in the previous week the child consumed unhealthy snack foods and beverages (USFB). The USFB were categorised based on the sentinel unhealthy foods and beverages identified as inappropriate for young children by the WHO IYCF indicators². The commercially packaged foods and beverages were categorised as sweet biscuits/crackers, savoury crisps/crackers, bakery items, confectionary items, soft drinks, sweet milk, juice drinks, malt/chocolate drinks and instant noodles.

¹ Civitas, a Lao based consultancy firm, was commissioned this study.

² World Health Organization & UNICEF (Eds.). (2021). Indicators for assessing infant and young child feeding practices: Definitions and measurement methods. World Health Organization.

Key Findings

More than three-quarters of children aged between 6 and 23 months had consumed unhealthy snacks and drinks in the past seven days.

87%

76%

Unhealthy snacks

Unhealthy drinks

Consumption Patterns

The frequency of consumption varied from once a week to every day. Children are given snacks after breakfast and lunch, with commercial sweet biscuits, crisps and sweetened milk or juice being the most popular options. The intake of sweet and savoury snacks increases significantly after the age of one.

Drivers of Choices

Caregivers prioritise accessibility, affordability, and convenience. Time constraints faced by parents limit their ability to prepare snacks and fuel a preference for commercially available snacks. Unreadable labels on imported snacks create concerns for health among caregivers. Motivations for offering snacks include making children happy and stopping them from crying. Children's draw towards vibrant packaging also influences caregivers' choices.

Cost and Expenditures

Despite limited incomes, 50% of caregivers spent between 10,000 and 50,000 LAK per week on unhealthy snacks and beverages, even with prices increasing over the last two years.

Barriers and Challenges

Despite their knowledge, financial constraints and the unavailability of fresh fruits in the local markets make it difficult for caregivers to provide healthier options.

In addition, local vendors find it difficult to find healthy and affordable options for children.

Recommendations

Social Mobilization

Reinforce Social and Behaviour Change messaging, educate on nutritional profiles, and align with cultural elements supporting healthy snacking.

Positive Parenting

Complement nutrition counselling with positive parenting sessions, reinforcing responsive child feeding and emphasising the use of unhealthy snack expenditure towards healthier snacks through culturally adapted games.

Food Environment

Create an enabling food environment by supporting formal and informal vendors to increase the availability of healthy options. Build capacity of local micro and small enterprises to process healthy snacks using locally available ingredients. Work with farmers to produce products for the vendors.

National Interventions

Encourage healthier snacking through subsidies and enforce taxes on unhealthy foods at the national level, assuming necessary funds and policy support. Advocate for systematic labelling and strengthen food safety mechanisms.



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