

## Lao People's Democratic Republic

### Update on the context and situation of children

The first year of the new Country Programme Document – 2022 – coincided with an intensely critical situation in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Despite gaining control of the public health dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fall-out from the two years of lockdowns and tenuous global conditions had severe impacts in the form of the food, financing and fuel crises. With substantial increases in the cost of living, existing inequalities in the country intensified, causing progress towards development objectives to stall or reverse.

This situation presented serious challenges to realizing and protecting the rights and well-being of children and adolescents.[1] Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 70 per cent of children suffered from multiple deprivations, with 50 per cent suffering from three or more deprivations concurrently.[2] In 2022, the continued absence of adequate social safety nets and child protection systems contributed to the increased vulnerability of children and adolescents, especially girls, to multidimensional deprivation.

The significant rise in food prices in 2022 limited the ability of families to consume adequate and nutritious food, especially the most vulnerable households.[3] The price of rice went up by 29 per cent; for more nutrient-rich foods, such as meat and poultry, it increased by 22–79 per cent, and for vegetables it went up by 88–333 per cent.[4] An estimated 20 per cent of female-headed households and 17 per cent of rural households were food insecure as of October 2022,[5] and nearly all young children aged 6–23 months (79 per cent) lived in ‘food poverty’, meaning that the minimum dietary diversity requirements to support healthy growth and development were not met,[6] with the main diet-related causes associated with the quality rather than the quantity of food.[7]

The continuing rise in prices will likely impact households’ ability to afford a healthy diet and thus increases the risk of micronutrient deficiencies, diet-related non-communicable diseases[8] and stymieing the progress made in the past decade on stunting. The National Institute for Economic Research estimated a loss of US\$481.66 million, or 2.7 per cent of GDP, annually as a result of malnutrition in Lao PDR.

Progress towards the educational development objectives also deteriorated in 2022. Already low student learning outcomes pre-pandemic have been exacerbated by learning losses related to school closures, lower enrolment rates and increased drop-out rates. Pre-primary enrolment dropped by 2.7 points, to 80.1 per cent, while the primary net enrolment rate slightly dropped by 0.7 points. The lower-secondary net enrolment rate dropped by 1.5 points, to 67.8 per cent. Drop-out rates in primary and secondary education increased, with more boys than girls leaving. More alarming is that the survival rate to Grade 5 decreased to 77 per cent from 80.7 per cent, a regression to the 2015/16 level. This represents a major setback and threatens national socioeconomic development achievements to date. To support transforming education, UNICEF supported the government to help children continue learning through other media, including the award winning TV series “My House,” and the globally recognized digital teaching-learning platform of Learning Passports, “Khang Panya Lao”

Despite the positive COVID-19 vaccination roll-out supported by UNICEF, funding, access to primary health care and routine immunization remained limited in 2022.. In Lao PDR, systems and resources were stretched, leading to a trade-off between good coverage of COVID-19 vaccination among eligible groups (more than 80 per cent),including vaccine equity for children and low coverage of routine immunization, which might lead to future outbreaks. While situation monitoring revealed a slight increase in all antigens between January 2021 and October 2022, routine vaccination coverage

declined year on year,[9] with the proportion of children fully immunized by their first birthday decreasing from 68.7 per cent to 56.7 per cent.

Vientiane became the first open-defecation-free capital city in the ASEAN region in 2022 and national open-defecation free coverage reached 65 per cent of all villages. Although considerable progress is needed in terms of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to improve the health and well-being of children in Lao PDR,[10] the open-defecation-free status in Vientiane is illustrative of national momentum and political buy-in that will support positive health outcomes and ultimately contribute to the realization of the rights of children and vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, sanitation continues to be a great challenge. While access to basic sanitation continues to improve, progress among the poorest households indicates that it will be 40 years before the country achieves open-defecation-free status.

[1] Some 59 per cent of the population are children and young people younger than 25.

[2] UNICEF, *SDGs and Children: Measuring progress on child wellbeing in Lao PDR*, Vientiane, 2018.

[3] The UN Common Country Analysis and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework cite 11 vulnerable groups: (i) non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, (ii) women, (iii) children, adolescents and youth, (iv) migrants, (v) internally displaced persons, (vi) persons at risk of statelessness, (vii) LGBTIQ+, (viii) persons with disabilities, (ix) people living with HIV, (x) older persons and (xi) persons in informal settlements and camps.

[4] Results from a recent rapid assessment on the impact of the 2022 financial crisis on food security and livelihoods in Lao PDR by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in August 2022.

[5] World Food Programme, 'Remote food security monitoring', September 2022.

[6] UNICEF, *National Nutrition Surveillance Round 1*, Vientiane, 2022.

[7] National Institute of Economic Research, 'Economic Consequences of Malnutrition in Lao PDR – Updated projections' (2021).

[8] Torlesse, H., L. Kiess and M.W. Bloem, 'Association of Household Rice Expenditure with Child Nutritional Status Indicates a Role for Macroeconomic Food Policy in Combating Malnutrition', *Journal of Nutrition*, vol. 133, no. 5, 2003, pp. 1320–1325.

[9] Penta 3 coverage decreased from 86.8 per cent to 74.8 per cent, MR1 from 79.2 per cent to 66.8 per cent and BCG coverage from 81.1 per cent to 73.3 per cent.

[10] According to LSIS I and II, only 71 per cent of households in Lao PDR have access to basic sanitation facilities and nearly one in four households continues to practise open defecation.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

### ***Goal 1: Every child survives and thrives***

#### ***Health***

As a result of the UNICEF-supported National Vaccine Deployment Plan, 91.5 per cent of the eligible population (aged 5 years and older) was vaccinated with at least one COVID-19 dose, while 82 per cent received all recommended doses as of 14 November 2022. At least one booster dose was administered to 30 per cent of the population, while 4.3 per cent of the total population received a second booster dose. The proportion of priority groups with all recommended doses by year end was 95.5 per cent for health care workers and 74.6 per cent for adults older than 60. Despite the success of the Deployment Plan, the pandemic disrupted essential health services, including routine immunizations. The pandemic response took up a large percent of already limited funds yet UNICEF and partners successfully advocated for the Ministry of Finance to meet its co-financing obligation and allocate US\$1.6 million for routine immunization, thus keeping it high on the national agenda. Integrating key change strategies and enablers from UNICEF's strategic plan into health programming

(gender equality, community engagement, and system strengthening) facilitated UNICEF's efforts to scale up universal health coverage, including through increasing awareness for stronger sub-national health systems that serve vulnerable populations in hard-to-reach areas. This included technical inputs and support for the Ministry to develop the country's first Primary Health Care Law as a foundation for achieving universal health coverage by 2025, as well as supporting the implementation of the Community Health System Strengthening Plan in 12 target districts.

As part of this Strengthening Plan, UNICEF integrated messaging on health promotion and prevention into the village health volunteer toolkit on reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and focused support on vulnerable and marginalized communities and interventions at the community and national levels to move towards a more comprehensive life cycle, primary health care-oriented approach. This was expected to contribute to the sustainability of improved reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health outcomes.

To strengthen the health system, UNICEF expedited the deployment of technicians and quality installation of cold chain equipment. As of 21 November, 1,049 (96 per cent) equipment items had been installed (of 1,082 delivered). Four regional cold chain rooms and two cold rooms at the national store were installed, commissioned with quality assurance through direct UNICEF support. The renovation and refurbishment of the National Immunization Programme Central Vaccine Store to accommodate two 40 cubic metre cold rooms was completed. Cold chain capacity across the country doubled in 2022.

### *Nutrition*

UNICEF continued to provide leadership in generating evidence on nutrition, including through surveys, assessments, monitoring, surveillance and improvement to the routine data system as well as expanding access to National Information Platform for Nutrition. UNICEF advocated with senior government officials and broad stakeholder groups subnationally on nutrition, including for increased public financing and to share new evidence on critical areas for action.

The generation of evidence to inform nutrition programming and policy decisions included supporting: (i) the Lao Statistics Bureau and Health Ministry to conduct household surveys in four provinces (Bokeo, Huaphan, Phongsaly and Saravane) to generate district-disaggregated data on the distribution and underlying causes of malnutrition; (ii) data collection and analysis of the national nutrition sentinel surveillance post-pandemic, including the creation of an electronic data collection and analysis tool; (iii) diet-quality survey with Gallup, Inc.; (iv) Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food[1] acceptability study; (v) secondary data analysis on links between nutrition and WASH; and (vi) a review of multisector coordination.

Capacity-strengthening in service delivery included support for the first cohort of the Health Ministry's accredited breastfeeding counsellors and training of 213 health workers across seven provinces on curative and preventive interventions. Seventeen training videos and nine modules for the Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition e-learning course were completed, translated and pre-tested. UNICEF supported the procurement of essential nutrition commodities, including supplies to treat 6,100 children with severe acute malnutrition, supplements to 125,000 pregnant women with insufficient iron folic acid and technical assistance for managing nutrition commodities in the Ministry's supply system.

Despite a significant funding gap, UNICEF leveraged resources to develop a package of communication materials to increase the knowledge and awareness of the implications of the breastmilk substitute legislation for retailers and distributors. A national campaign of maternal, infant and young child nutrition messaging continued on social media, reaching 2.5 million people, 31 million impressions and 7.3 million views. Nutrition messages were integrated into the COVID-19

vaccination campaign to dispel misperceptions on safety for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

### ***Goal 2: Every child learns***

The development of Fundamental Quality Standards for the new pre-primary curriculum will help ensure education services meet quality standards, with emphasis on inclusion of children with disabilities and gender equality. The national system for monitoring and data use for planning and decision-making was strengthened with the launch of the digitally interactive LESMIS[2] and complemented with an online personnel management information system. These UNICEF- and European Union-supported interventions will help improve sector planning, monitoring and management.

To strengthen the capacity of education providers, UNICEF supported school principals and teachers to deliver better quality pre-primary education, remote learning, adapted digital pedagogies, catch-up remedial support, mental health and psychosocial support and preparedness for emergencies, at the national and subnational levels. Trainers across all 18 provinces, along with principals and teachers, now have enhanced skills on supporting digital learning through the Ministry's Khang Panya Lao tool [3], which it considers effective for expanding digital learning.

Khang Panya Lao now has more than 6,000 course lessons, from pre-primary to upper secondary and technical and vocational education and training. Registered users numbered 110,000 in 2022, up from 63,000 in 2021, with an estimated reach of 330,000 users. Quality learning materials were also provided through My House TV series for young children and families. The second season of My House won the UNICEF Team Awards 2021 and had reached an estimated 2,890,000 TV viewers and 962,734 online views since September 2020. The third season launched in October 2022. My House storybooks were printed and distributed to all early child education services and Grades 1 and 2 classrooms. All episodes include sign language, to improve accessibility for children with disabilities, and are shown across several TV channels and online.

### ***Goal 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation***

#### ***Child protection***

UNICEF Child Protection programming strengthened frameworks, tools and evidence to plan, coordinate, monitor and resource the delivery and expansion of quality services in 2022.

The Ministry of Justice and UNICEF conducted consultations with local authorities, government representatives, community members, parents and representatives from mass organizations to amend the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children[4] to better protect and respond to young people's needs. To ensure inclusion of all sectors in the review of the Law, UNICEF supported the Ministry to carry out consultations with young people, including students, children with disabilities, children from minority ethnic groups and abandoned children.

To improve legal recourse for children in conflict with the law, legal aid and community-based diversion programmes were rolled out in 20 villages, which included training of 100 village officials. To improve care and support to children with disabilities, a project was expanded to ten villages in Xiengkhouang Province.

A total of 903 (F327, M576) personnel at national and sub-national levels from social welfare, justice, health, education sectors as well as civil society organisations received training on various topics such as case management, psychological first aid and mental health and psychosocial support, counselling, child-friendly juvenile proceedings, child protection, violence against children, gender-based violence and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.

In 2022, 3,289 (F1,998, M1,291) people were reached through the Lao Youth Union helpline, while 477 (F278, M199) survivors of violence (including human trafficking) sought help through the Lao

Women's Union helpline.[5] To ensure quality services, UNICEF supported the Lao Youth Union and the Lao Women's Union in implementing the recently launched Manual on Youth and Adolescents Counselling for helpline volunteers, with a gender lens. The Youth Union also revised its Hotline Guideline for helpline workers to enable more effective provision of mental health and psychosocial support services to the most vulnerable women, children and youth. A total of 3,530 children experiencing violence were reached by health, social work/social services or justice/law enforcement services, through the Lao Women's Union shelter, helpline counselling, legal aid, social worker home visits. The engagement of, and strategic coordination among different sectors including social welfare, justice, health, and education have led to holistic responsive mental health and wellbeing services for children and caregivers. As a result, the needs of children and caregivers were more adequately met through multisectoral services.

#### ***Goal 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment***

Despite programmatic challenges, the Government's strong commitment led to significant progress in the WASH programme. In response to challenges, UNICEF adopted a flexible approach to contracting and government support, which ensured that changing prices did not constrain programmes while maintaining accountability and due diligence.

Vientiane was declared open-defecation-free; schools at highest risk of COVID-19 were provided with safe water supply, group handwashing facilities and hygiene education; and national studies provided informed direction to achieve national sanitation and handwashing coverage and to reduce environmental and climate risks to children. The WASH in Schools programme continued its national roll-out of the Three Star monitoring tool,[6] which encourages incremental improvements.

The ninth National Socio-Economic Development Plan and the National Rural WASH Strategy cited gaps in the enabling environment in the WASH sector, including cross-sector environment, climate and disaster risk reduction challenges. These gaps are reflected in the UNICEF Country Programme Document and the 2022 workplan, with a focus on strengthening cross-sectoral government capacity for WASH in schools and health care facilities, financial management and coordination and understanding and planning of sanitation and hygiene behaviour change strategies.

The initiation of subsector working groups for WASH in Schools, disaster risk reduction and sanitation strengthened coordination mechanisms within the climate and disaster risk reduction sectors. UNICEF supported the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to facilitate the Climate Change Subsector Working Group. UNICEF began working with the World Food Programme and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to re-establish the Disaster Risk Reduction Sector Working Group. Support for the Deputy Minister of Health to attend the High-Level Sanitation and Water for All cross-sectoral meeting in Indonesia was a valuable learning experience for WASH cross-sector engagement.

#### ***Goal 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life***

UNICEF continued to co-create initiatives with the Government for strengthening social protection and evidence-generation (and use). UNICEF continued to work with provincial vice-governors through the government-led climate change and child poverty vulnerability assessment and a mapping study to understand the relationship between climate risk and child deprivation. The preliminary findings indicated that the report will be essential for assisting the Government in planning and responding to future climate-related emergencies.

UNICEF's fundraising strategy with donors and development partners ensured that the third round of the Lao Social Indicator Survey would be successful due to raising 90 per cent of the required funding. The survey findings will contribute to the mid-term assessment of the ninth National Socio-Economic Development Plan and other sectoral plans. Stakeholders participated in questionnaire review meetings to ensure they meet data requirements for reporting on the National Socio-Economic Development Plan and sectoral plans. Unlike the previous two surveys, this third survey will include child

functioning modules for ages 0–17 that estimate disability and foundational learning modules to assess reading and mathematics among Grade 2 students. The findings will help measure the impact of investments in the education sector.

Under the social protection UN Joint Programme,[7] UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to pilot the Mother and Early Childhood Grant. This is a scheme offering cash grants and positive health messaging to vulnerable pregnant mothers which reached 2,596 households in 2022 (more than 4,000 pregnant women, lactating mothers and children younger than 12 months). A nearly equal number of boys and girls benefited (15 per cent of pregnant women and lactating mothers were younger than 18). The pilot reached 90 per cent of the projected pregnant women in the three targeted districts, based on evidence from UNICEF's Frontier Data Initiative. According to the information system and programme evaluation, the scheme increased facility deliveries, vaccinations, antenatal and postnatal care and birth registrations. Additionally, the Joint Programme improved the capacity of more than 300 government partners at the national and subnational levels on the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection initiatives. The design of the disability grant pilot in Xiengkhouang province benefited from the lessons learned from the pilot.

[1] UNICEF, 'A wonder 'food' for the world's children'.

[2] The launch of the Lao Education and Sports Management Information System, or LESMIS, with GIS mapping and data visualization features accessible in real time was a major milestone for the Ministry. LESMIS' automatic reporting functions will diminish the time and financial resources spent on data collection, production and reporting and free-up the much-needed resources for analysing and using data to inform decision-making. LESMIS incorporates SDG 4 indicators, further supporting SDG monitoring and reporting. UNICEF efforts to ensure that LESMIS is incorporated as a variable indicator of GPE-III have paid off, making the Ministry eligible to receive US\$750,000 funding for the cash-strapped sector. Data collection on children with disabilities will be improved in 2023 and 2024, with the LSIS-III (MICS) in 2023 using the disability module.

[3] The UNICEF-EU supported digital platform, Khang Panya Lao, can be accessed via the web and as an application allowing for offline access, and serves to: facilitate the learning of children and adolescents, allowing for continuity of learning during school closures and as a supplementary learning resource to face-to-face classes and learning at home; enhance teaching by supporting the work of and professional development of teachers, principals, pedagogical advisors and education technical staff by providing resources and as a platform for blended trainings; enhance the digital skills of Lao children, young people, teachers and education staff.

[4] The amendment of the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Children is a concrete government action to implement the Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations of 2018.

[5] UNICEF supported the Lao Youth Union helpline, which focusses on delivering mental health and psychosocial support services for young people, as well as the Lao Women's Union helpline, which focusses on providing support to survivors of gender-based violence and violence against children.

[6] The Three Star Approach for WASH in Schools is designed to improve the effectiveness of hygiene behaviour change programmes. The approach ensures that healthy habits are taught, practised and integrated into daily school routines. Schools are encouraged to take simple steps to make sure that all students wash their hands with soap, have access to drinking water and are provided with clean, gender-segregated and child-friendly toilets at school every day.

[7]With the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Capital Development Fund.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

### *Partnerships*

UNICEF Lao PDR's donors for 2022 included the European Union, GAVI, the Global Partnership for Education, the National Committees for UNICEF in Australia, China, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea and the United States as well as the US Government (USAID). The Country Programme also benefited with significant support from global pool funding for Thematic Humanitarian Response, Health, Education, Child Protection and WASH and through Principal Stability Fund Ratings funds.

The Country Office continued working through COVAX Facility members and bilateral partners, including Australia, to provide COVID-19 vaccines to more than one third of the population. UNICEF coordinated with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Government of Japan and Japan International Cooperation Agency to procure and deliver cold chain equipment in a coordinated manner to expand the cold chain volume nationwide and build sufficient capacity for future immunization activities. The Country Office formed new collaborations with private sector organizations to fund vaccine purchases to increase private sector support for the national vaccination programme.

### *United Nations collaboration*

UNICEF assisted with the National Socio-Economic Development Plan's Financing Strategy, the Resilience Framework, consultations on the Call to Action, the Regional Monthly Review, COP27, Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Action Plan Gender Scorecard, the Business Operations Strategy 2.0, the UNSDG Information Management System survey, leading the Place-to-Place cost-of-living survey, the Hardship Survey, participating in the interim national staff salary survey and UN Daily Subsistence Allowance survey.

Under the United Nations Cooperation Framework, UNICEF co-leads two of four outcomes that focus on human capital, people's well-being and inclusive prosperity. Under these outcomes, UNICEF leads on the education, WASH and protection outputs.[1] In first quarter 2022, UNICEF led the development of joint workplans for the two outcomes. UNICEF chairs the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Group and has a leading role in the UN Country Team's annual reporting process.

UNICEF leads a UN Joint Programme with the Resident Coordinator's Office on High-Frequency Data that was set up in 2022 to fill data gaps and inform decision-makers on the food, financing and fuel crises impacts on vulnerable groups. UNICEF participated in two other UN Joint Programmes: the Social Protection Programme[2] to implement the Mother and Early Childhood Grant and the Reproductive Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Programme[3] to improve health outcomes by supporting the updated national strategy and action plan (2016–2025).

[1] UNICEF's outcome and output indicators are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework's results. At the outcome level, 71 per cent (39 of 58) of indicators are aligned to the national SDG indicator framework, and 45 per cent (26 of 58) are aligned to indicators of the ninth National Socio-Economic Development Plan. And 78 per cent (45 of 58) of indicators are at least aligned to one of these two national frameworks. UNICEF is custodian agency for 11 outcome indicators and 9 output indicators.

[2]With the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Capital Development Fund.

[3]With the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and the Ministry of Health.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

The pandemic spurred the Country Office to further innovate to adapt to new situations to continue deliver results despite the challenging circumstances, while providing a work environment that supported each staff. For example, the introduction of flexi-time and working from home arrangements targeted staff well-being. A follow-up survey found such arrangements did not affect staff productivity and created opportunity to improve digital literacy among staff. Following global guidelines, flexi-time has been instituted for use beyond the pandemic.[1]

Despite the pandemic-related constraints and restrictions to many office activities and processes (such as a harmonized approach to cash transfer assurance, travel and procurement and logistics areas), the office continued to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of operations by creating a safe work environment, adjusting work processes and standard operating procedures and using corporate systems and tools, such as eTools, e-PSB, eGRC and mAsset. Direct cash transfers and invoice payments were delayed during pandemic-related movement restrictions, and the office could not timely trace all FACE forms and invoices. To address the issue, three payment-related procedures were updated, endorsed by the Country Management Team and implemented in 2022. For instance, invoice tracking sheets were introduced; but regular refresher training on their completion is needed in 2023.

It became evident during the pandemic that parents were, in effect, first-line responders on a range of issues due to the curtailing of social services. UNICEF continued to work closely with the MoES, the MoH, the LWU and the LFND to roll out the pilot phase of the Love and Care for Every Child, with a multisectoral approach applying social and behavior change techniques. The aim of the programme is to stimulate community discussion and support parents and caregivers make positive child-rearing decisions. The parenting package, Love and Care for Every Child – the first for the region – will be used by trained teams to engage rural communities via home visits, group discussions and community information sessions to help promote good parenting behaviours.

UNICEF successfully pioneered the U-Money app in the Mother and Early Childhood Grant pilot, using innovative digital technology to achieve equity in outcomes, by reaching the most vulnerable women with young children. The app allows for cash to be transferred to women without a bank account via their mobile phone. This innovation compensates for the weak financial infrastructure in the targeted districts (no access to ATM machine, limited banking providers, etc.) For persons without a phone, cash was delivered to local health centres for collection. These two options made the cash grant more equitable and enabled UNICEF to promote social behaviour change communication by encouraging beneficiaries to access antenatal and postnatal health care and vaccinations with posters, brochures and radio scripts in local languages.

With UNICEF support and following the commitment of provincial governors, open-defecation-free coverage has accelerated rapidly since 2019, increasing from 11 to 65 per cent of villages in that time. Importantly, much of this progress was achieved using government funds. In 2022, Nambak District in Luang Prabang achieved open-defecation-free status solely with government funds. The commitment of the provincial governors was reflected by district governors at the Sanitation Forum in 2022 and was critical for the Ministry of Health to release district funds for Community Led Total Sanitation. Securing the political buy-in of provincial governors will likely continue to be a critical factor in leveraging the government's support for increasing national open-defecation-free coverage.

Although schools reopened in early 2022, learning loss of students due to prolonged school closure was a great concern. Catch-up programmes proved essential to supporting children's learning. UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education and Sports to develop and implement a four-week catch-up remedial literacy and numeracy programme focused on Grades 1 and 2 students. The remedial programme, implemented at this scale for the first time in Lao PDR, reached 8,320 Grade 1 and 2 students in six provinces due to funding support from the Global Partnership for Education, the European Union and the Government of Japan. School bags and stationery were provided to students as incentive to participate in the programme during the school break. The Ministry's Department of General Education plans to introduce the programme to all primary schools across the country in



January 2023.

The Government recognizes the increasing importance of expanding access to digital learning due to its benefits and the low cost of technology and the rapid pace of technological advancements. The Khang Panya Lao package now will complement in-class learning. The Ministry will use it as an integral component of the further digitization of the education sector. However, the expansion of digital learning is constrained by infrastructure challenges – electricity access and internet connectivity as well as the high cost of internet service and devices. If this is not addressed, there is a risk that the introduction of digital learning will perpetuate inequities for disadvantaged and underserved areas. The Country Office continued to advocate engagement by the Ministry of Technology and Communications and the private sector to address infrastructure constraints to expanding access to digital learning.

[2]

UNICEF conducted three evaluations, enhancing the capacity of senior government officials to develop a Lao evaluation culture, and becoming one of the very few countries in the UNICEF to reach 1% expenditure on evaluations. Continued investments required to ensure evaluation capacities of CO staff and national partners engaging in and leading evaluation processes.

[1] UNICEF Country Office supported staff throughout the pandemic, providing ‘pocket WIFI’, monitors and IT equipment during the work-from-home period. Building on this, the Country Office provided fuel coupons to national staff in December to help with the increasing costs of fuel and traveling to the office.

[2] A high-level meeting co-organized by UNICEF in November brought together the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Technology and Communications and telecommunication companies to discuss how to expand access to digital learning, generating a commitment from the Vice Minister of Technology and Communications to work with the private sector in this area and linking to the Government’s broader digital transformation plan.