

Nourish the World, Secure the Future



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Minister of Agriculture and
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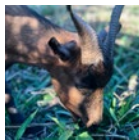
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Trust the Process



Message from the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Laos

Today we are celebrating a significant milestone as we have completed the first phase of the Agriculture for Nutrition project (AFN). Many stakeholders have received excellent support in boosting sustainable farming production, access to small-scale infrastructure and increasing their dietary intake to combat malnutrition. I've seen numerous benefits, including improved health and nutrition for pregnant women, mothers, children, adults and entire rural communities. In addition we can observe increased incomes for smallholder farmers and their families. Communities have started household gardens and boosted their dietary diversity and living standards. They have also been able to boost their commercial production of crops and livestock, with the added benefit of improved access tracks and water availability from irrigation schemes.

These achievements have had a tangible impact on the nutritional outcomes of our people. We have seen a reduction in malnutrition rates, and an improvement in the dietary diversity of our people. This is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our local farmers, who have been the backbone of this We say programme.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have been a part of this programme - our local farmers, our programme implementers, our partners, and our donors. Without your support, we would not have been able to achieve what we have. And while we celebrate our successes, we also recognize that there is still much work to be done.

With the same spirit of collaboration and dedication that has brought us this far, the Government of Lao PDR and AFN remain committed to the National Nutrition Strategy 2021 to 2025 as we shall continue to work in partnership with country stakeholders, to achieve its goal of zero hunger and leaving no one behind. Let's continue this progress together. Let's reduce malnutrition in children and improve our communities' health overall.

On a personal level, let's reduce sugar, fat and salt in our diets so all of us, young and old, can lead healthier, more active lives!

H.E. Dr. Phet Phomphiphak,
MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY, LAOS



Introduction

Agriculture is the backbone of many developing countries – it is essential for enhancing food security, reducing poverty, and improving nutrition.

In Laos, small-scale farmers constitute the majority of the population. They face challenges such as poor soil fertility, limited market access, a lack of knowledge and resources to improve their farming practices, and are frequently exposed to natural disasters such as drought and floods.

As a result, malnutrition is still prevalent and, on the national level, stunting affects 33 per cent of children under five years old*. The Agriculture For Nutrition (AFN) project in Laos was initiated in 2016 to address these challenges by providing training and support to small-scale farmers in improving their agricultural practices, increasing food production, and combating malnutrition.

* Source: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/brief/multi-sector-convergence-approach-to-reducing-malnutrition-in-lao-pdr>

The AFN project consists of three interlinked components: (i) Strengthened public services; (ii) Community-driven agriculture-based nutrition interventions and (iii) Sustainable and inclusive market-driven partnerships.

Some examples of AFN activities are home gardening, fruit planting, raising nutrition and hygiene awareness, supporting livestock and aquaculture, engaging and empowering women and men, building capacities on the ground, initiating public-private partnerships and supporting the construction of small-scale infrastructure schemes.

This publication contains some of the stories from the field, documenting strategies, techniques, and practices used by rural small-scale farmers in Laos, showing how they play a crucial role in improving nutrition security and fighting malnutrition among women and children. It also tells the stories of how nutrition “changemakers” emerge and drive change locally, by sharing practical ways to reach a better future. They provide a message of hope – that families can overcome malnutrition, increase their incomes and have better opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

Nutrition is essential to achieving each and every one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

AFN

Total impact

From **2016-2022**, the AFN project has successfully:

FN

Schools

400

Villages

Established farmer nutrition schools in all **400** villages under the project, facilitated by over **1,200** Village Nutrition Facilitators;

204

Village-level Facilitators

802

Grants

Trained **204** village-level facilitators and provided grants to **802** agriculture production groups with **13,915** members, **1,148** of them women;

22,970

Garder Grants

Disbursed **22,970** garden grants to women to implement vegetable gardens and poultry and fish raising activities;

400

Project Village

802

Grants

Organised cooking sessions as part of the project to show participants and interested villagers recipes using nutrient-dense foods grown and produced in all **400** project villages, with **34,628** participants, more than **90%** of them women;

467

Grants

Constructed and rehabilitated **467** small-scale infrastructure schemes, mainly access tracks, irrigation and drinking water supply facilities.



1,200

Villages Nutrition
Facilitator



13,915

Members



1,148

Women



34,628

Participants

The AFN has achieved its target of reaching 34,000 rural households with its interventions and lifted almost 18,000 households out of poverty, a remarkable achievement considering the COVID pandemic and current economic hardships have driven many households back into poverty in the country.

While no anthropometric measurements were taken during the project period as the data from the Lao Social Indicator Survey III was to be provided by the Ministry of Health, previous surveys indicate a reduction in stunting by 12.6% and underweight by 8.2% between 2011 and 2021. Between the period of the project and 2021, stunting decreased by 2.1%, and underweight decreased by 5.5%. The AFN project endline also reported that the proportion of households with more than 2 months of food insecurity decreased from 10% during midline to 5% during the endline survey.



Ethnic women trained
at farmer nutrition schools

The AFN addresses the most vulnerable communities living in hunger. It offers a strategic pathway towards food systems transformation by establishing Farmer Nutrition Schools (FNS) at village level.

FNS are semi-structured get-togethers, focusing on essential nutrition information and interactive discussions about nutrition. Targeting primarily pregnant, nursing women and mothers whose children are under five years of age, FNS encourage social behaviour change and communication in women and communities. Practical learning sessions cover the following topics: household nutrition, diet diversity, basic hygiene, food preservation and processing techniques, raising fish, keeping small livestock and menu planning with nutritious foods, including food grown in household gardens.

Improving nutrition as a principle of poverty reduction is a key component of IFAD's mandate as poverty and nutrition are intrinsically intertwined.

Elements of Farmer Nutrition Schools

- Basic information
- Nutrition-related health problems
- Animal raising improved nutrition planting
- Household nutrition planting



Local facilitators go on to lead further training sessions as per their own instruction. They also conduct regular follow-ups at the households of FNS members. These follow-ups ensure members are practicing what they have learned. It also provides backup support for better production and consumption of nutritious food.

In a rural mountainous and ethnic context, a FNS is especially important. FNS operate in dedicated community buildings constructed by villagers with building materials from the AFN (Agriculture for Nutrition) project.

In each village, 2-3 village facilitators were trained to lead FNS activities and help families to apply their newly acquired knowledge. The facilitators used simple visual materials to illustrate and reinforce their messages. To date, over 1,217 village facilitator networks have been established.

After FNS beneficiaries complete learning sessions, they are eligible for a garden grant to invest in gardens, basic farming inputs, and small livestock, such as chickens, ducks or fish.

The numbers say it all

So far, learning sessions have been carried out in all **400** project villages with **34,628** participants, over **90%** of them women and over **80%** are participants from various ethnic groups.

34,628
Participants



90%
Women

80%
Various
Ethnic Groups

85%
Women

85% of women who participated in Farmer Nutrition School sessions and received a garden grant reported improving their farming knowledge.

95%
Women

95% of women who participated in Farmer Nutrition School sessions and received a garden grant reported their child's nutrition status improved. A majority of pregnant women were able to work less during their pregnancy.



FNS participants can apply for a garden grant of USD 120 to create or enhance their home gardens or buy small livestock, which can help diversify diets. As of December 2022, 22,970 grant applications have been approved.



Planting and eating vegetables with high nutritional value will help cut down on nutrition-related health problems.

Information given helps mothers understand the need for and preparation of quick, nutritious meals for their children – thus reducing their workload while ensuring healthy food for families.



FNS is an excellent entry point for learning new knowledge and skills related to nutrition in a sustainable and culturally appropriate manner that enhances local ownership by the participants.



The project prints technical modules containing key technical information on vegetable gardening, native chicken rearing, and pond fish culture. Households and communities adopt these models to improve the nutrition and health of women and children and increase year-round production.

Practical nutrition education, like food demonstrations, contributes to members acquiring the new skills required in terms of preparing new food products, proper storage and preservation of foods.



1 NO POVERTY 	5 GENDER EQUALITY 
2 ZERO HUNGER 	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 

Engaging men as fathers and spouses for healthy families

Growing enthusiasm

When Visith, a resident of Khua District, Phongsaly province, Laos, first heard his wife had enrolled in AFN's Farmer Nutrition School (FNS), he was skeptical.

"My immediate thought was not to let her join. I did not know anyone from there, and she normally stays at home. However, when local AFN staff told me there was an opportunity to learn new things, like techniques to improve home gardening, I changed my mind," Visith said.

As Visith became more involved in promoting nutrition and sharing household responsibilities, he began to notice positive changes in his family. His children were healthier and more energetic, and his wife was happier and more relaxed.

And as his wife continued to demonstrate the benefits of a balanced diet, he slowly began to change his perspective. He started to see the value of sharing household responsibilities and began to help his wife with cooking, cleaning, and childcare. He also began to attend nutrition workshops himself, and started to implement what he learned in his own household.



Active role of men and their transformation from skepticism to support has helped to create a more equal and healthy community, and their commitment to promoting nutrition and equal parenting serves as an inspiration to others.

Since then, Visith has gone from being a doubter to a supporter of the FNS. Now he is willing to assist his wife with FNS activities, especially the more physically demanding ones, whenever he can. Thanks to FNS training, his family can continue eating nutritious foods even when he's away from home.

It's good we've learnt the value of healthy meals and having a daily variety of food. We often feed eggs to our baby in the morning. The training has greatly impacted our lives".

DID YOU KNOW?

Gender inequality influences household dynamics, which in turn dictates the intra-household distribution of food and often places women and girls at a greater risk of poor diets and undernutrition.

In his interaction with other fellow men, he now encouraged them to take an active role in promoting healthy eating habits and sharing household responsibilities with their wives. He helps to create a supportive community of men committing to the better health and well-being of their families.

Learning new techniques

Athit has been assisting his wife with gardening activities for the last few years.

Athit, also from Phongsaly, echoed Visith's opinions. When his wife was pregnant and enrolled in the FNS, he helped prepare the garden bed to grow vegetables. His wife also told him about the benefits of water and sanitation and improved hatching pots for chickens. He had never seen them before and found their improved design fascinating, especially the two pits at the front of the pot for food and water.

Visith and Athit's stories are not unique; many husbands across AFN's working areas have shared stories of supporting their wives' efforts and their excitement about better nutrition.

Growing enthusiasm

The increasing involvement of husbands is an encouraging development as. Their initial scepticism has changed to interest and eagerness. The active participation of husbands provides much-needed support to FNS participants, helping them thrive during training sessions and after graduation. This support empowers women and puts nutrition and family health at the centre of household conversations, ensuring all family members focus on these vital issues.



Visith has become a supportive and equal spouse



Changing lives through
nutrition sensitive agriculture

Nalee used to be a poor farmer. In the past, her children -- six and 10 years old -- were among the many other Lao kids who suffered from malnutrition due to a lack of knowledge. Now, things are much better. The project has helped farming households fight malnutrition in the village since 2018 by providing them with farming skills, investment funds, equipment, and knowledge about food and nutrition. The farmer nutrition school is part of that effort.

“Now, things are much better. The project helps me in improving my understanding about food and good nutrition. I love to be part of the farmer nutrition school in the village.”

Through the FNS, Nalee learned about the importance of consuming a variety of vegetables and incorporating the five food groups into her family's diet. She also received training on good gardening techniques, including composting, crop rotation, and pest control, which helped her to grow a variety of nutritious vegetables in her home garden.

“I have learnt the importance of all six major food groups. It is exciting to be part of the mindset shift because women are putting what we learn to good use. Even children from other poor families are free from malnutrition,” she says.

As Nalee began to implement what she had learned, she noticed significant improvements in the health of her family.



Understanding the importance of the six major food groups, she now applies the basics for the benefit of her family's nutrition

Her children's stunting improved, and they became more energetic and better able to concentrate in school.

She also became assured in her ability to provide a healthy and balanced diet for her family.

Nalee has received full training in nutrition and agricultural skills. With other village facilitators in the farmer-to-farmer network, Nalee is now confident she can pass on her knowledge to fellow villagers so that together, they can eradicate undernutrition and welcome a healthy generation of children and adults in the years ahead.

IFAD's work brings the benefits of agriculture to bear on the problem of malnutrition. IFAD supports projects that help shape agriculture and food systems in ways that improve nutrition, incomes and productivity of smallholders, and the rural poor and put small-scale farmers at the centre, complemented by local midstream SMEs that link them with essential services and markets.


For Nalee, there cannot be a better return for her unique workload than seeing her children grow healthy.

“I feel happy when I see healthy children going to school or at play instead of being bedridden by preventable conditions, including malnutrition,” she states.

Her selfless attitude is creating a generation of children free from wasting and stunting, which remains a serious issue in most rural areas of Laos.



The nutrition lessons offered to her community are giving the children a healthy start in life



"Before the project, the villagers didn't know anything about nutrition. Our standard practice was to feed our young newborns mainly rice. We chilled the rice and fed our babies. The project taught us how to do gardening and raise poultry using good agriculture practices. We now know how to prepare proper meals, cook various foods, and eat diversified dishes. I am happy that my children and many others in the village eat healthy food and stay fit.

The main problem was our traditional food restrictions. In the past, we believed we could only do home gardening for one season. With project support, we've gained new techniques and best practices and can farm on our own and have a variety of vegetables".

"The practice used to be that a mum and her newborn baby were not allowed to eat chicken. Now we know it is good for the health of both. Besides selling maize, I also feed it to my poultry. Our family eat the poultry and also sell it for extra income."



Hygiene contributes
to a healthy home

Twenty-six-year-old Phi's house is perched on the side of a hill in Huaymone village, Muang Khua District, Phongsaly. To this mother of two, nutritious food means nothing without sanitation and hygiene.

"I spent a lot of money buying medicine because my children were weak and sick despite eating three different meals a day", she recalls.

Phi proudly explains that frequent hand washing with soap and water has become the new normal in her household. She insists her entire household wash their hands and keeps her home and its surroundings squeaky clean: *"As we experienced during a recent coronavirus outbreak. It's important to keep our homes clean and regularly wash our hands with soap to stop the spread of the disease,"* she says.

Phi washing her child's hands. Good hygiene is one of the interventions encouraged by the AFN.





Active role of men and their transformation from skepticism to support has helped to create a more equal and healthy community, and their commitment to promoting nutrition and equal parenting serves as an inspiration to others.

Frequent hand washing also helps reduce the risk of diseases such as diarrhea, which can cause malnutrition, as Phi learned through the AFN Farmer Nutrition School in her village, along with the importance of dietary diversification and the role of good hygiene practices in preventing malnutrition.

"Before joining the group, I knew little about hygiene and sanitation. Now I'm able to follow good hygiene practices. Since joining the Farmer Nutrition School, I have seen changes in my family's overall health. We no longer fall sick as often as we did in the past," she says.

The programme has made an enormous difference to Phi's family. She describes how she spent long hours nursing family members suffering from diarrhea and other water-borne diseases instead of working.

"The project taught us the need to wash our hands regularly to keep germs from spreading. I now wash my hands before preparing meals, after visiting the toilet and after working in the garden." Phi has more time to spend on activities that benefit her household. "I can do farm work instead of worrying about a sick child," she says.

She also understands the importance of clean water for good health. *"Before storing water for drinking, we boil it and sieve it with a clean cloth. Then we let it cool before putting it in a clean bucket—helping us prevent water-borne diseases," she says.*

Thanks to the AFN project, Phi also has a clean pit latrine and a bathroom, helping keep her home clean and disease-free. She and many others have found that a clean home is a healthy home. Handwashing with soap can help reduce infectious disease transmission. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of clean hands in reducing the spread of diseases.



The Sweet Taste of Success: How Tangerine Farming Transformed a Hmong Community

Any farmer can tell you that growing fruit is difficult and time-consuming. But done right, the rewards are well worth the effort, and for some of the poorest, most vulnerable Hmong ethnic people in remote Northern Laos, those rewards can be life-changing.

Taking a chance

When you bite into the flesh of a tangerine grown in the Namor District of Oudomxay, you know you are eating something special. In season, its sweet, juicy flavour is sought-after at the market.

Tangerines are a type of mandarin, the second-most cultivated citrus fruit after oranges in Laos. Like oranges, tangerines are orange-coloured, slightly smaller, sweeter and easier to peel by hand. They are rich in vitamin C and antioxidants which convert to vitamin A in the body, and an excellent source of potassium and B (B1 and B6) complex vitamins.

Although most previous attempts to grow tangerines in the area had failed, in 2017, the AFN project assisted a trial tangerine planting with Hmong residents. Unfortunately, this trial was unsuccessful. Not to be discouraged, AFN returned to Namor in 2018 and worked with the local District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and other district authorities, AFN provided technical and scientific information before beginning a second trial.

Local farmers drove the pilot task, and after initial positive results, nearly every village household saw the economic benefits of growing tangerines. Orchards now cover 12 hectares of land in the community.



Group members have made a significant profit selling tangerines.

Getting there

While this story has a happy ending, getting there wasn't easy. After planting in good soil and carefully nurturing each tangerine tree for 3.5 years, farmers can finally harvest the fruit.

Like any agricultural product, tangerine prices are linked to demand and supply. Following the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Laos' open market wholesale prices have increased up to 25,000 Kip (US\$1.4) per kilogram of tangerines, about 6 per cent higher than last year —excellent news for cultivating households.

Since 2017, 45-year-old farmer Yoeyang Vonoseangdeuan has been growing tangerines on one hectare of land. Before the project's support, he relied on shifting cultivation and livestock raising, which produced very little income. At first, Yoyeang knew almost nothing



For the local Hmong community, it means a lot to be able to grow these fruit trees in their own backyards.

about tangerines. Still, his orchards began paying off thanks to AFN's crop care and propagation instructions and Yoeyang's consistent hard work— just as they did for other poor villagers in his group. Although they earned just 4,100,000 Kip (US\$242) in the first crop season of 2020, the figure rose to 5,778,000 Kip per family (US\$340) on average a year later.

"These tangerines trees have been tremendously beneficial to me. I have access to highly nutritious fruit and make a good profit from its sales", Yoeyang joyfully says.

"Our family have a rich source of Vitamin C directly from the garden, and selling tangerines helps us buy necessities and other nutritious food", continues Yoeyang.

Going forward

Now an interest group of 15 farming households has been established and led by Yoeyang, who shares the joy and knowledge of growing tangerines. Dozens of buyers come directly to the farm to buy fruit. In the future, this farmer group plans to coordinate with the DAFO and interested businesses to make long-term contracts with “buyers” to secure the product price and access a broader market.

Mr. Bounhup Nouamoukdavong, another farmer in the group, states he is incredibly proud to see the villagers' achievements. They have gone through numerous learning, working, and failing processes, resulting in big, sweet, nutritious tangerines.

In the next couple of years, the tangerine orchard group will continue expanding its membership (from 15 to 40 people) and farmland (from 12 to 25 hectares). Revamping the water system is also part of their household consumption and irrigation plan.

This tangerine success story is a stepping stone for DAFO and AFN in Namor to replicate similar initiatives in other target villages and help rural farmers gradually emerge from poverty and malnourishment.



Fishing for income and nutrition
from own backyards

women and young children. Farmer Nutrition Schools (FNS) are making the most of this valuable natural resource by training Laos families to raise fish in their backyards.

Administered by the AFN and DAFO – the district agricultural and forestry office, training sessions include modules on topics such as preparing the pond for fish stocking, fish feed production, stocking the pond with juvenile fish, and regular fish harvesting. They also provide information on the importance of animal-source food and the nutritional content of fish. The schools promote nutrient-dense, small indigenous fish species, as these are easy to keep in a small pond and contain a wide array of the micronutrients such as iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin A, vitamin B12, fatty acids, and protein.

Phi washing her child's hands. Good hygiene is one of the interventions encouraged by the AFN.





Several small-scale farms are now established in Oudomxay, providing food for selfconsumption and small surpluses for the market.

Anouluck, an FNS participant from Oudomxay, first learned about fish farming in 2018. She says, *"I learned how to prepare the pond for fish stocking and to ensure there is enough fish feed throughout the production period. The topics about fingerlings stocking helped me a lot, too. I now know the characteristics of healthy fingerlings and where to find them."*

Since its founding in 2018, farmer nutrition schools have helped popularise tilapia fish. Participants are now aware of its positive impact on nutrition and health.

"I didn't truly understand consuming fish was so important for nutrition until recently. We make sure the children get enough of it now. My husband and I also have fish from time to time."

Women like Anouluck are not the only family members raising fish. Women are teaching what they've learned to their husbands. Anouluck says, "My husband can give you more information about our fish culture since he has been equally involved in this. I'm grateful he's been assisting and encouraging me at every step."

In addition to learning about fish farming, FNS participants discover why a diverse diet, including animal-source foods like fish, can bring better nutrition to their families. They also learn about complementary foods like fish for children under two years of age.

Lessons on fish culture—coupled with FNS teachings on homestead gardening, dietary diversity, infant and young child nutrition, and hygiene—are transforming how communities think about food consumption and nutrition in Laos.

With the help of the AFN, Anouluck is able to find markets for her fish, including local outlets and markets. "The income I earned from selling the fish allowed me to purchase nutritious food for my families, as well as other basic necessities", she said.

Lessons on fish culture—coupled with FNS teachings on homestead gardening, dietary diversity, infant and young child nutrition, and hygiene—are transforming how communities think about food consumption and nutrition in Laos.

With the knowledge and training provided by the AFN project, families are reaping the benefits of resources in their own backyards. Their success is a testament to the transformative power of local, sustainable solutions.



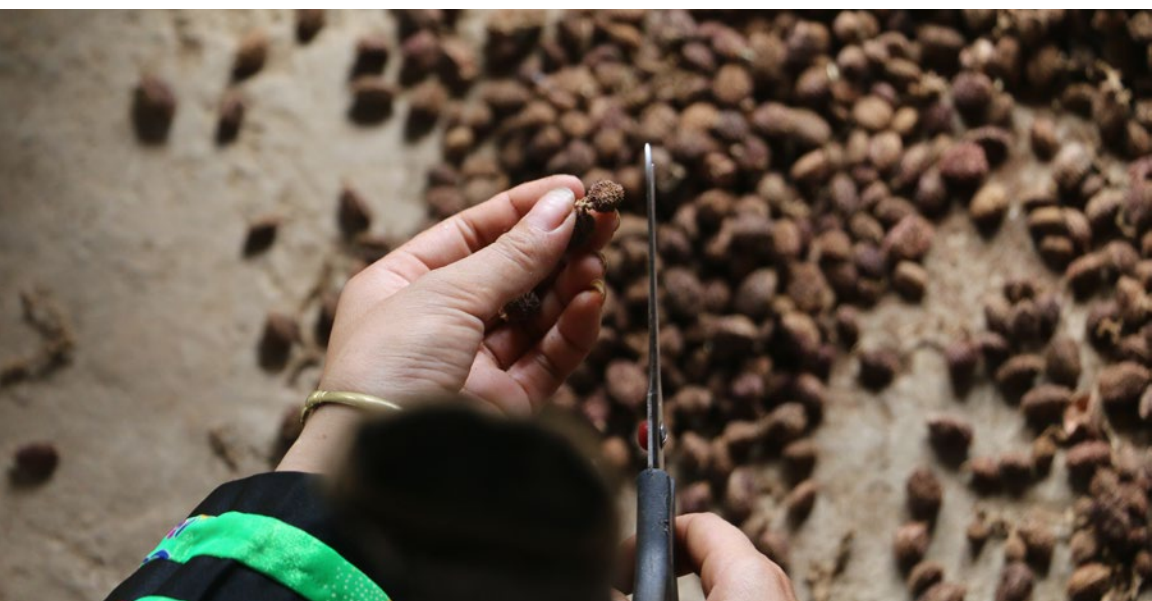
Fishing for income and nutrition
from own backyards

A former uplands rice farmer, Bounmi used to practice seasonal rice planting and shifting agriculture. She had a tiny home garden, which was inadequate to cover the household consumption for four persons. The family worked hard but was living under the poverty line. On average, they had three to four months of food shortage.

Having lived this way for a long time, Bounmi wanted to make a positive change.

The AFN came to her village in 2017, and after an extensive survey on commodity suitability, the project suggested planting red cardamom, a spice prized for its culinary and medicinal properties. It used a model where the villagers could find the cardamom cuttings by themselves, as these were readily available in the forest.

Among the first participants, Bounmi decided to join the trial by establishing a small plantation. Together with other villagers, she planted the first crop in late 2017, then harvested and sold the first red cardamom harvest in 2019.



Initial support in technical planting proved critical for her, as was the market and pricing information she received. Her customers are not only local buyers but also Chinese and Vietnamese traders who visit her village during the harvest time and pay instant cash for her cardamom.

Today, life for Bounmi is very different from when she started production. As demand for cardamom continues to grow, the value of the product for export has increased. Up to a dozen of buyers visit her village each month, and she can earn up to 700,000 kip per month. Red cardamom production has replaced rice as her primary source of income.

As cardamom is mainly planted under forest cover, the added benefit of its production is the preservation of forests in an area where slash-and-burn shifting cultivation is still widely practiced.

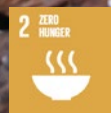


Expanding horizons

Perceiving a growing demand for cardamon, Bounmi expanded her plantation in 2020 and started commercial production. With seed funding from AFN, Bounmi built a drying facility for her red cardamom, adding value to her products. Now, she has a two-hectare red cardamom plantation.

“Now our lives are very different from when we started cardamon. With such support, things are much better. Our children can eat healthy food, go to school, and have a brighter future. I hope other farmers also enjoy the same happiness as us.

We have two additional hectares on the hillside and plan to expand this area for planting red cardamom in the next five years. Our dream is also to produce green cardamom as neighbour countries demand – this is an excellent opportunity for additional income and to increase food variety for our family.”



Healthy chickens growing happy,
healthy family income

Using the hills and sloping lands to their advantage, in recent years, many households in Muang Khua District, Phongsaly, have been focusing on developing a model for large-scale chicken farming. The model includes disease control to create clean, safe consumer products and has helped many families escape poverty by creating jobs and improving lives.

Long struggled to make ends meet and improve household nutrition, Bounakhone and her husband Koud are among the first to succeed with this model. In the past, they farmed on a small scale, lacked disease control, and produced only enough for their family's needs. As a result, her income was almost non-existent.

With the help of the AFN project implemented in 2018, Bounakhone learned that raising chickens bring much higher economic benefits than traditional farming. She invested money to raise around 50 chickens on



a one-hectare hillside garden. The project supported her with technical training, initial supply of food mix, chicken fencing, and, most importantly, how to prevent disease outbreaks. After about six months, the chickens had grown well and adapted to the local environment, with each chicken weighing between 1.6 and 1.8 kilograms and she could sell them all for an income of USD 450. This is quite significant in compared with her monthly of 430,000 Kip or about USD25 before raising the chicken.

Realising their economic potential, she bravely invested in raising a larger variety of chicken. Now her family can afford to raise chickens two times per year, with more than 100 chickens per time.

The chickens also produce eggs for her family's consumption. Bounakhone uses chicken waste as compost in her vegetable garden, where she grows a variety of food for the family, including onion, garlic, cucumber, peanuts and beans.



After five years of persistently following this model, her family has become a middle-income household, and her children can receive a proper education.

Today, Bounakhone's chicken and duck farm is a thriving model, providing her family with a reliable source of income and a diverse range of nutritious foods. By selling her birds at local markets, Bounakhone has been able to earn a steady income that has allowed her to invest in her family's health and education.

Poultry raising is one of the agriculture activities most in demand by rural farmers in the AFN project areas. It can be practiced on a relatively small amount of land, provided meat and eggs for household consumption and it allows for multiple cycles per year. With the correct techniques, taught by the project, it is one of the most lucrative businesses for smallholder farmers and especially for women.



"Chicken farming should follow production standards. There are fewer disease outbreaks, and the investment cost is less than in the industrial model. Raising chickens wasn't too tricky after we made a few sheltered sheds for the chickens to sleep in at night. They are fed twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. During the day, the chickens roam around, feeding on grass, insects, and maize near the forest. This freedom produces delicious and juicy meat that consumers prefer.

We feed our chickens primarily maize and leafy vegetables instead of industrial feed to produce substantial and delicious meat.

Last year my family sold about 400 chickens, weighing between 1.5 and 2 tons. We made about USD900 profit."

"I am happy! This chicken-raising model contributes significantly to agriculture growth here. We're making full use of our hilly lands, creating more jobs, increasing our income, reducing poverty and enriching our family's lives.

I want to expand fencing to the other side of the hill, where we can raise batches of up to 300 chickens. I hope future project activities support us with installing a pipeline to transport water for the chickens there."



Building capacity on the ground:
Partnership for success

passionate and proud of her work. Still, before 2018, she did not view nutrition or hygiene as part of her responsibilities. Her duties focused on helping to increase and improve food production but did not include delivering messages about nutrition, food diversity, and hygiene.

She had little knowledge about exclusive breastfeeding or complementary feeding for young children and was unaware of their critical importance in the first 1,000 days of life -- foundations for optimum health happen between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday.

In July 2018, Amphone attended an AFN training module. This module teaches nutrition to non-health community workers, like agriculture extension agents and others. After her initial training, she received yearly reinforcement trainings and materials to strengthen her skills.

Amphone Souangvilay provides messages on hand-washing practices and dietary diversity during her session.





Training on women's diet and micronutrient needs during pregnancy and lactation. The training included lessons on the importance of proper hand-washing to prevent diseases that can keep the body from absorbing nutrients.

Amphone learnt the relationship of agriculture to nutrition on topics such as hygiene, dietary diversity, and gender roles. As an agriculture extension agent, she can talk to women about proper hygiene behaviours and how they can use their gardens to improve their family's nutrition.

"After receiving training from AFN, I can now focus on nutritious and diversified food production. I enjoy motivating pregnant and new mothers for better practices in agriculture, nutrition, and hygiene", she said.

Following the training, Amphone took the initiative to help families in her community, explaining why hand washing is essential. She ensures everyone uses good nutrition-sensitive practices by working with the entire household.

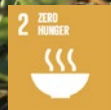
She now uses her agriculture extension work to link pregnant women to health facilities to receive antenatal care checkups and nutrition counselling. Her work helps pregnant and new mothers learn about the need for increased food intake and rest, which can lead to a safer delivery. She advocates for husbands and family members to help achieve these goals, so mothers have adequate time for self and child care.

Creating widespread impact

Amphone's hard work and dedication have inspired many other agricultural officers in the district to adopt similar approaches. Her tireless efforts to promote nutrition and hygiene for pregnant women have had a profound impact on the lives of many.

From 2017 to 2022, AFN supported nearly 200 agriculture extension agents like Amphone through basic training, refresher training, coordination meetings, and joint supportive supervision with government supervisors.

Partnerships with government agencies like DAFO help ensure the most significant number of people receive messages about good nutrition-sensitive agriculture practices. After the project ends, local structures continue integrating agriculture extension, nutrition, and hygiene.



A new life begins
with goat raising

The demand for goat meat in Laos has surged in recent years, and the Agricultural Development and Farmers Network (AFN) has been successful in helping small farmers benefit from this trend.

Take the case of Mr. Sy, a poor Khmu farmer from Phongsaly province. In 2020, the AFN project began supporting households in the area to raise cattle and plant trees, providing Sy and other villagers with a new source of income. With AFN's seed support and his own small investment, Sy purchased two good breeding goats. He received guidance on animal husbandry, disease prevention and cure, and was given access to bucks for breeding and suitable grass for feeding. The mother goats birthed 2-3 babies twice a year in spring and fall.

“In the past, my family never raised goats. Two years ago, the AFN project started teaching us how to raise small animals and take care of them. They gave us knowledge about how to raise goats, such as building a shed, administering vaccinations, and treating them when they are sick,” Sy said.



The neediest households received a revolving grant to buy two breeding goats each and were provided with training to take care of their goats.

Apart from requiring less labour than cattle, goats have several advantages. With assistance from AFN training experts in disease prevention and cure, the goats are strong and healthy. "We have nine families running animal-raising groups. We organize weekly group activities to share information and exchange ideas on good or bad experiences. We also share the burden of looking after the goats in monthly shifts," Sy added.

As they raised their goats, the members began to see the benefits of this work. Not only were they able to sell goat meat in the local market, but they were also able to use the goats' waste as a source of fertilizer for their crops. This led to improved crop yields and a more sustainable way of farming.



Due to the particular nature of the terrain, goats from the village are mainly raised for reproduction and meat. Thanks to their quality, goats from the village have an excellent reputation with traders who come from far and wide to purchase them. The price is also good, ranging from 70,000 kips per kilogram upwards. A 12-month-old breeding goat is generally worth around 2,400,000 kips, while a two to three-year-old goat can sell for around 3,200,000 kips.

“A new life has begun. My family has been much healthier over the last two years. We used to suffer from hunger for three to four months of the year. Now people have better access to roads, more food to eat, and fewer children getting sick. The goats we raise have changed our lives. Nutrition for our family has significantly improved,” Sy said.

Looking back on the project, Sy felt a great sense of pride. Taking a chance on goat raising had paid off in a good way. But perhaps the most significant impact of goat raising was on the lives of Sy’s family and others’. With a source of income from the sale of goat products, they were able to provide food for their families in ways they never thought possible. They were also able to buy essential household items and even save money for the future.



Women as agents of change

Jake Ponmanythith lives in Phongsali province with her husband and three children. As a participant of the local farmer nutrition school (FNS), Jake has become a family champion, and a village voice inspiring many other women in the village on following gardening techniques for nutrition and extra income.

During the FNS from 2019 - 2022, participants completed courses on gardening with learning how to grow nutrient dense food and other leafy greens. In one module, trainers used the community garden in Jake's village to teach participants how to create raised planting beds and how to use compost. In another, participants learned to differentiate between more nutritious vegetables—like okra, eggplant, squash, and beets—and less nutritious—such as shallots and winter peppers.

Jake and her husband plan to expand their garden to an extra of 300 square metres next year



Jake also learned marketing techniques to raise her family income by selling extra crops. Jake has a 450-square meter household garden where she grows okra, eggplant, squash and other types of vegetables. In the cold season, she also grows shallots, lettuce, beets, and cabbage.

"The trainings I received from AFN has taught me about the benefits of the different crops we grow. Before, we didn't know their nutritional value", said Jake.

Encouraging women to diversify their crops and teaching them not only about the production, but also about sales and marketing, improves the lives of entire families by elevating mothers to the role of financial provider and enabling them to proactively improve family nutrition, even though the work can take time from women's usual activities.

"One of the great joys of growing our own vegetables and fruits is that we have complete control over exactly what you grow, and how you grow it. And then we can harvest and eat them when they're perfectly ripe and fresh", shared Jake.

"We have complete control over exactly what to grow, and how you grow it"



AFN encourages men to share labour-intensive household tasks with their spouses. This helps to avoid over-burdening women with time commitments and labour and enables them to incorporate what they learn into their daily routine.

Jake's husband, Nok Ponmanythith is doing his part in the physical labour of the household garden: raising plant beds, deepening the family's two wells, and transplanting plants. *"My husband really appreciates my contributions to the family. Our decisions are very much shared,"* she said.

The advantages of the new training go even further. Jake's compost-making and vegetable-growing process caught the community's attention. Her neighbors and relatives came to her to learn about better nutrition through compost making and vegetable gardening. By learning and applying this simple technique, Jake transformed not just her own backyard but also those of her neighbors.

"I have shared techniques from my training with some ten other women through the village farmer nutrition school, helping improve production and nutrition for their families and for the community at large."

A leader among her peers, she is also empowered in her own home, where she decides not only what is on her family's menu, but also helps to grow it. She is planning to expand her garden to an extra of 300 square metres next year.

Evidences have shown that when women's incomes rise they tend to invest more in the nutrition, education, and health of their family, causing a ripple effect that can benefit entire communities—Higher female earnings and bargaining power translate into greater investment in children's education, health and nutrition, which leads to economic growth in the long term.

Country Strategic Opportunities Programme 2018-2024

Stragic objective 1: Smallholders have enhanced resilience to natural shocks and improved food security and nutrition. Investments will be directed to climate-smart agricultural technologies and decentralized services. Nutrition will be mainstreamed in all investment projects, building on the results of the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP)-funded Strategic Support for Food Security and Nutrition Project (SSFSNP)/Agriculture for Nutrition (AFN) and the Southern Laos Food and Nutrition Security and Market Linkages Programme (FNML).



Local beneficiaries
become champions



AFN relies on the knowledge and insights of those affected to achieve the long-lasting impact of good nutrition for all. It works with the people rather than imposing solutions on them so that they can address the causes of the issues themselves. In most cases, AFN has carried out participatory needs assessment and planning workshops, asking villagers about their circumstances and developing ideas from their suggestions.

AFN's participatory process is very much appreciated. People have the right to understand, consider and discuss all the issues affecting them.

It also provides practical assistance in becoming self-reliant. Villagers actively participate during planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Capacity building for locals, particularly women, is a critical element of all our work. Local beneficiaries have become our champions of change.




Ms. Bouvone Keoamphone in her project office

As an AFN coordinator, I've seen significant progress in gender equality. Many women in our villages are more confident and empowered now, thanks to AFN's way of working and engaging. Traditionally, women play an inferior role to men. The men made the final decisions in the family and the community, but nowadays, women have more say and decide what is suitable for their families' health and nutrition. A good percentage of women joining the AFN as facilitators and beneficiaries have grown in capacity and self-esteem.

AFN is resounding success, and we are proud of the transformative impact it has had on the lives of the communities we serve. The impact of the programme has been felt here in Oudomxay and across the country, as demonstrated by the testimonies of beneficiaries who have seen tangible improvements in their lives.



Trust
the Process



Most people in the province are poor, from ethnic minorities and living in mountainous areas. Observing AFN for a few years now, I highly value the project work methods. The AFN programme has helped to increase the availability and accessibility of nutritious food, reduce malnutrition, and improve the overall health and well-being of communities. Community participation has been a key aspect of the AFN programme, and as it has helped to ensure that activities are always done clearly and collectively with other agencies in the province and effective in meeting the needs and priorities of rural communities. A survey always comes first to assess people's needs and concerns carefully. Then, during the planning process, people can discuss how best to implement the project, rank priorities and allocate work assignments. Ultimately, every household knows its rights, responsibilities and expected obligations. Thanks to such methods, people understand and trust that there will be many benefits in both income and health in the long term. This firm foundation is essential for sustainability.

The success of the AFN programme has led to the scaling up of its activities, where our department will be focusing on replicating its interventions in other districts where appropriate in Oudomxay province.



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