

Final Report

Impact Evaluation of “First 1000 Days – Laos 2023” Project in Sekong and Phongsaly Provinces

Care International Laos – June 2024

INTRODUCTION

The CARE International in Laos' project entitled: "First 1000 Days – Phase II Laos 2023" was implemented in the Sekong and Phongsaly Provinces. The aim of the project is to contribute to the improvement of Reproductive Maternal Nutrition & Child Health (RMNCH) services focusing on 1) ensuring women's access to quality RMNCH services 2) economic empowerment 3) nutrition through the promotion of food security for mothers and children.

Project Background:

The project takes place in 85 villages in rural communities where health clinics and RMNCH services are not easily accessible, and children and their families may suffer from malnutrition. The project also aligns with the Laos Government's goal of increasing access to adequate health services for all Lao peoples. Many villages have limited or no access to basic services such as electricity, running water, phone service, healthcare, and education.

I. CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING SYSTEM LEVEL IMPACT

- Availability of women in target group for data collection; workload time, travel time, accessibility during rain/hot seasons, women needing ANC care.
- Assessment data/survey could be more aligned with global assessment indicators for better assessment of goals achieved.
- Assessing child nutritional needs; data collection of anthropometric data and reliability of nutritional data collected from mother's recollection.
- System norms are predominantly male dominated where high level decision-making roles are not widely considered appropriate for women.
- Social norms are also male-driven where men are the decision makers in regards to food security, income and family planning.
- More clear and direct follow-up questions to better assess the system level impact.
- Clearer definition of how implemented activities scaled up to improve RMNHC services.

II. FINDINGS

- a) An increase in women's access and enrollment in health care initiatives, particularly in RMNCH, personal hygiene and knowledge of nutritional food security due to the project's implementation of community-based training, technical training and information dissemination.

- b) An increase in women’s participation on the health care needs of children and family planning therefore empowering women’s decision making beyond social norms. Cooperation between Care Laos community action planning and government initiatives to provide national healthcare.
- c) Dedicated initiatives by the government to improve access to quality healthcare by increasing access and technical knowledge in health centers for the Lao people living in the Sekong and Phongsaly regions.

EVALUATION PURPOSE and OBJECTIVES

The evaluation aims to assess the system level impact and any structural changes achieved by the “First 1000 Days” project implemented by Care International Laos. The project aims are to a) improve women’s access health and RMNCH services b) promote healthy behaviors towards nutrition and gender equality through women’s empowerment and c) advocate for increased government commitment towards improving health and nutrition.

Evaluation questions asked

The aim of the evaluation is to determine the impact of the project’s goals and objectives on the systems that effect women’s empowerment in health care decisions. In addition, evaluation results of the “First 1000 Days” project can guide the organization and local contributors in assessing needs, design and implementation strategies for systems-level change and impact.

System Level Impact: To what extent, if any, did the activities implemented by the project impact system level pathways.

- What system level change(s) in access to health resources were impacted through the advocacy of policy change, how many policies were implemented regarding better access to health services?
- What system changes through the social norms pathway were achieved or not achieved by the project?
- How many people were impacted by system level changes across different pathways to improve women’s livelihood?

Methodology and Evaluation Design

The evaluation was primarily through the desk review of outcome harvesting actors from the “1000 Days” project to identify system and structural changes. Evaluation utilized outcomes data of the project from KIIs, FGDs, and individuals who participated in activities implemented by the “1000 Days” project.

Systems level impacts created by the project are assessed by a change in behaviors through implementation of knowledge, change in gender norms, change in community involvement and acknowledgment of social accountability and organizational or institutional change in policies:

Questions	Pathways	Observation Harvest actors
<p>Advocacy: What initiatives implemented by the government, Care and other partners in the area have impacted access to health care.</p>	<p>Cooperative participation from local government agencies in promoting access to healthcare resources</p>	<p>Care staff, technical healthcare staff, mobile clinics and local area clinics, other local partners in health care.</p>
<p>System strengthening pathways: How have the community level activities impacted the regions</p>	<p>Locally led adaptations and Community Planning to affect knowledge, attitudes, and practice</p>	<p>Community reflection on gender and social equality to overcome barriers to accessing support at the Provincial, District and Village level in RMNCH planning (Provincial Nutrition Committees (PNC) and District Nutrition Committees (DNC) and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Alliance</p>
<p>Social Movements: Has women’s participation and perception changed</p>	<p>Women’s empowerment in healthcare and economic decision making</p>	<p>VDCs, VSLA, capacity training for women, focus group discussions, feedback mechanisms</p>

Findings in Advocacy for Policy Change

Evaluation of the project's impact on advocacy pathways to improve access and participation in promoting health care initiatives found indications of success in both the target population awareness and government outreach.

Outcome: Increased awareness and access to health services was demonstrated by the project's endline results (increased accessibility of health services). Due to continued advocacy efforts by Care and other international organizations, the Lao government has commitment to provide universal health to all Laotians by 2025.

Significance:

The Lao government has recognized the lack of health care in rural areas, especially RMNCH access for women. In an effort to improve healthcare countrywide, the Lao government has committed to a policy of achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2025, focusing on improving access and affordability. This includes the rollout of expanded healthcare insurance and wider coverage to assist with the financial challenges of receiving health services.

Contribution:

Contributions from government agencies included technical experts and learning materials. Care Laos was able to coordinate with government agencies including; the Ministry of Health (MoH), Promotion for Family Health Association (PFHA) and the Lao Women's Union at both provincial and district level in implementation of the project. Due to the coordinated outreach from all implementing parties, more women in the target communities were able to access health care centers and information regarding health education and services provided. Advocacy efforts were in line with the Lao government's aim of providing access to healthcare and UHC nationwide.

Impact on individuals

Community outreach by agencies and organizations resulted in positive feedback and perceptions. As seen in a survey response on the perceived effectiveness of the project, nearly 100% thought the project was highly effective at reaching the overall goal. Communities now have more information on nutrition and health care services. Educational activities in nutrition, maternal health and early childhood development and information disseminated at the community level by technical staff contributed to the empowering of women in their health care decisions such as family planning (over 90% satisfaction). Care International Laos' continued effort in community-led planning a training of public servants and providing incentives to raise awareness was also big contributor to promoting the project's goals. A health center personnel's efforts were captured in a quote:

"I suggested that expectant mothers utilize the ANC services offered by the health center, outlining the advantages of speaking with the staff, including receiving vitamin injections, a prenatal

checkup, and guidance on nutrition and self-care. Pregnant women now have more access to health center services as a result.”

The increase of advocacy to improve awareness of access to healthcare initiatives has shown an impact at the community level as well as the potential to increase awareness at the provincial level. With contributions from government agencies to provide technical experts and learning materials, system level impact could potentially be seen throughout the province by the implementation, expanded health insurance coverage and extended clinic hours and community-based mobile clinics if implemented by national decree.

Although women in the target areas have changed health care behavior because of the increase in knowledge, along with the commitment of the Lao government to provide health coverage, the impact may be short term. Continued support in the communities by international organizations and government funding will be necessary for national system wide impact.

Limitations and Challenges:

Sustainability: While the Lao government has committed to improving healthcare access to all Laotians, long-term support of health care services and agencies are of a concern due to funding mechanisms, internal and externally as well as the availability of technical experts.

Accessibility: for those in rural remote areas where roads are not passible, seasonal limitations (rain, heat, harvest) will continue to be a factor due to lack of infrastructure and funding to build new or improve existing health facilities.

Gender norms: communities where the male is the primary decision maker in family planning and other healthcare issues continues to be an issue.

Findings in Systems Strengthening

How have the project's contributions lead to a system level social accountability? Are the project's activities increasing community-based participation resulting in a better livelihood pathway?

Outcome:

One of the key tools implemented by the project was the use of Village Development Committees (VDC) as a means for participants to improve their skills in leading community action plans but also increase their nutritional knowledge base. This contributed to the empowerment of participants, specifically more women, to be included in the decision-making process making everyone more accountable in improving their livelihood pathways at the community level. Although aim results at the provincial levels are mixed; improved RMNHC practices and improved decision-making power by women, but the nutritional status of children in both provinces remain at a similar malnutrition rate based global measurement standards.

Significance:

The outcome goals are in line with the Lao government's national plans of National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) and National Action Plan for improved national nutrition standards to reduce the malnutrition rate and stunting levels in children under 5 that has existed in Laos.

Contribution:

As the project's endline evaluation shows, health practices and behaviors increased positively from baseline assessment. Women have increased their visits to health centers and are practicing global standards with regards to maternal healthcare and child nutrition and hygiene. Activities implemented by Care Laos included collaborative participation in Village Savings and Loans Associations (VLSAs) to provide support for women and their communities; Provincial Nutritional Committees (PNC) and District Nutritional Committees (DNC) to provide nutritional guidelines and technical expertise. Cooperation with other CSOs and national organizations like "Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Alliance" (SUNCSA) assisted with providing best practices and technical knowledge in health and nutrition as a national standard. Altogether, the CSO's and local community organizations along with Care Laos' support are in line with the Lao government's national nutritional agenda (NNS) of improving nutrition standards countrywide.

Impact on individuals:

The increased use of family planning services at the health centers shows that women have improved knowledge and access to health services. In line with the Lao government's commitment to improve access to healthcare services for all Laotians, the project's contributions improved the livelihoods of many of the participants. At endline, over 90% of respondents in both regions reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with family planning services and 66% of pregnant women reported having access to antenatal care near their home. Although this is a small sample size in 2 provinces, these results could be a model for implementation system wide, in line with Lao government nutritional goals.

Limitations and Challenges:

The outcome results were more in line with assessing the immediate impact of RMNHC practices. Long term follow-up on health-care practices by participants at the village level would be necessary to show local impact. For system-wide impact, continued support and follow-up by the project and other CSO's on knowledge retention and monitoring of practices by individuals at the local level. Also monitoring of metrics at health care facilities would be necessary to show impact on communities, aggregated up through the provincial level. Challenges include long-term financial and technical support for the health clinics not only in the 2 provinces of Sekong and Phongsaly but also country wide. Although the Lao Ministry of Health has nutritional goals outlined in the National Nutrition Strategy for 2025, long-term government funding continues to be questionable. Also, as demonstrated by the project's monitoring of key nutritional metrics and at health centers indicators, the government would have to include an accountability mechanism for healthcare centers at the provincial, district and community level, especially in RMNHC services.

System wide limitations exist throughout rural areas; low-level of education and access to information as well as technical personnel in languages other than Lao.

Findings in Social Movements

The project's impact on social norms is limited to the local level. Activities that contributed to women's empowerment were VDCs, VSLA, capacity training for women, focus group discussions and feedback mechanisms.

Outcome: Although the endline evaluation has shown a shift in attitudes regarding women's participation in community planning and livelihood decisions, system level impacts are more difficult to realize beyond the target group in this study. The results of this project provide a good model for extending social movements and capacity building beyond the 2 provinces. Contributions from CSO's along with Women's groups resulted in high satisfaction rates from women in the health services provided along with empowerment to make decisions that effect their livelihood.

Contributions

Gains in social movements were possible through the community planning groups and VSLA- Village Savings and Lao Associations organized by Care International Laos. Women's participation in VSLA showed an increase in both Sekong and Phongsalay. The VSLA supported women in various themes; financially, emotional, leadership, confidence support and support within the community to empower them to make decisions on their livelihood. VDCs also promoted community awareness campaigns on gender equality. Participation in these activities strengthened the empowerment of women decision making in their families and the community.

Significance: Promotion of gender equality and support for women's decision-making and planning has empowered more women to participate in their own personal and family's health care throughout the communities through social movements. This community level impact can be a model for other communities in the Sekong and Phongsalay provinces and potentially extend to other communities in Laos.

Limits and Challenges:

Continued support from local organizations and government agencies in participation, dissemination of information for women in the community and technical and financial support to improve access the local health centers. Some women in this target group, while they seem excited to participate initially, may feel that once the project comes to an end that they will not be as involved. Continued support and education for long-term success and scalability throughout Laos as per the Lao government's health care goals.

Additionally, traditional gender norms are difficult to address. Additional feedback and interviews (post endline) from individual participants, KIIs, and FGDs with more detailed and direct questions regarding the project's impact will show improved system impact across multiple pathways (social movement, social accountability, social norms, increased women's leadership and scalability).

Lessons Learned

System level impact will be limited in results due to low education and literacy rates in the remote, rural communities in Laos. Continued support for changes in gender-norms through education and community activities impacted the livelihoods of those in the target groups. With increased access to healthcare information and access to healthcare facilities, women felt more empowered to be able to increase the decision-making in their livelihoods.

Recommendations and future directions

The "First 1000 Days" project provided resources and increased collaboration with local organizations and the Lao government to increase access to healthcare for the Lao people, particularly RMNCH for women. System wide impact can be further improved through sustained activities to increase health care knowledge and funding for health care access such as mobile clinics, extended hours of existing clinics and creating more clinics in remote areas.

- Continued collaboration with the Lao government in achieving the national goals through implementation of the Nutritional Action Plan. In line with Care's Global Indicators of the right to food, water and nutrition; long term monitoring of the effectiveness of activities related to nutritional goals.
- Continued relationships with community level leaders and decision-makers to support and build upon the community planning and capacity building achievements.
- Cooperation with the Lao government to address and overcome gender norms as well as nutritional practices in RMNHC. Communication and collaboration with CSO's and civil society organizations to raise awareness beyond the community level.

While the system level impact is limited in scope to villages in Sekong and Phongsaly, the project's implementation in other communities could have similar effects at the community level if cascaded to other provinces. With the project's result in line with the Lao government, the goals of providing access to health care by 2025 and a National Nutrition Plan would ensure greater reach and wider impact.