

Evaluability Assessment for UNICEF Country Program Laos CO (2022 - 2027)

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Laos CPD (2022 - 2027)

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Three United Nations Plaza

New York, New York 10017

April 2023

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PREFACE

This report aims to assess the logical framework of the Laos Country Programme with respect to the expected results for children. The report evaluates the design perspective, measurability and evaluability of the expected results. The primary objective of this analysis is to assess the relevance of the expected results for children in the context of the Country Programme and to identify any gaps or limitations in the design of the results framework.

The consultancy was conducted by an evaluation expert with vast experience in the region, and it was carried out using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The consultant reviewed the program documents and reports, conducted key informant interviews with program staff and stakeholders, launched an online survey, and analyzed available data on the expected results.

This report presents the findings of the consultant and provides recommendations to improve the design and implementation of the expected results for children. The report is intended to be used by UNICEF to make informed decisions about the program design and implementation.

We hope that this report will provide valuable insights into the design of the Country Programme and contribute to the overall improvement of the program's effectiveness in achieving the expected results for children.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The consultant wishes to extend his heartfelt appreciation to the UNICEF staff members who participated in this evaluability assessment and gave invaluable information and insights. During this process, he would like to thank the UNICEF Lao PDR staff for their help and cooperation. The consultant is appreciative to the PME personnel for facilitating his access to program documentation and data and for assisting him with logistics and interview scheduling. In addition, he conveys his gratitude to the staff members who participated in key informant interviews and provided valuable comments on the design and implementation of the intended outcomes for children to conduct this assessment.

Lastly, he would like to thank all the staff members who contributed to the Country Programme Document and Results Framework for their dedication and tireless efforts to improve the lives of children in the country. This report intends to contribute to this noble cause by offering recommendations to increase the program's efficiency.

ACRONYMS

ADAP	Adolescent Development and Participation
CO	Country Office
CPD	Country programme document
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSG	Child support grant
CYCT	Children and Youth Council of Thailand
DCY	Department of Children and Youth
DLA	Department of Local Authority
ECD	Early childhood development
GDP	Gross domestic product
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
HQ	Headquarters
IMEP	Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Plan
LCO	UNICEF Lao Country Office
KAPS	Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Survey
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MCH	Maternal and child health
MICS	Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
RO	Regional Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To be completed once feedback from LCO received.

CONTEXT OF THE EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT

Since 1946, UNICEF has been *'mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential'*. In September 2021, the country programme document (CPD) for the Lao People's Democratic Republic was approved by the Executive Board. The CPD includes a proposed aggregate indicative budget of \$10,730,000 from regular resources, subject to the availability of funds, and \$95,000,000 in other resources, subject to the availability of specific-purpose contributions, for the period 2022 to 2026.

The country faces multiple challenges due to its geographical location, high reliance on natural resources, and vulnerability to climate-related disasters. The population is young and diverse, with a significant proportion living in rural areas. Rapid urbanization and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further affected the country's development trajectory.

The 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) identifies key priorities such as improving health and nutrition outcomes, expanding access to quality education, strengthening social protection, and addressing environmental protection and disaster risk reduction. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for interventions to reduce poverty and enhance safety nets.

Despite significant progress in poverty reduction and living conditions, a substantial portion of the population remains at risk of falling into poverty. Inadequate safety nets limit households' ability to mitigate the impact of economic shocks, and disparities persist between rural and urban areas.

A majority of children in the country experience multidimensional deprivation, with high rates of under-five mortality and child malnutrition. Maternal mortality remains high compared to other ASEAN countries, and access to quality health and nutrition services is limited, particularly for marginalized groups.

According to the CPD, the country programme vision is that by 2026 more children and women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic – particularly the most vulnerable and at-risk – will have their rights realized so that they can survive, develop to their full potential and live in a safer environment. For this to be achieved, a series of core changes are necessary, including:

- (a) The Government at national and subnational levels has enhanced capacities to develop and implement systems-based, high quality and child and adolescent-centred development.
- (b) The quality, accessibility and inclusiveness of essential social services for children, adolescents and their families – particularly the most disadvantaged – are improved.
- (c) Parents and other caregivers practice healthy, caring, nurturing and protective behaviours and protective social norms, including using social services, in a supportive community environment.
- (d) Households and communities are more resilient and better able to resist shocks.

Based on the above challenges and priorities, the UNICEF program in Laos focuses on seven programme components: (a) health (maternal, child and adolescent); (b) nutrition; (c) education; (d) child protection; (e) WASH; (f) social policy; and (g) programme effectiveness.

At this early stage of CPD implementation, a proactive and forward-looking evaluability assessment is conducted. It will allow responsiveness to emerging realities, both opportunities and constraints, and where needed revisions in UNICEF's planning to increase success and permit the most thorough evaluation in due course of UNICEF's implementation of the CPD.

Table 1: Overview of the scope of the evaluability assessment

Project/programme title	Laos Country Program Document
Country	Laos
Total Budget <i>(indicative)</i>	<i>\$10,730,000 from regular resources, subject to the availability of funds, and \$95,000,000 in other resources</i>
Period	2022 to 2026
Components (outcomes.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More neonates, infants and children, including adolescents, and women, have equitable access to and benefit from strengthened high quality health interventions and improved behaviors. • More infants, children, adolescents and women have equitable access to and benefit from high impact multisectoral nutrition interventions • More children, including adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, are better prepared for school and have improved learning outcomes and skills to achieve their full potential. • Children are better protected from violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation and harmful practices, and benefit from a strengthened child protection system, services and positive behaviors. • More children and their families, particularly in rural and poor urban areas, are using resilient, safe water and basic sanitation facilities and practice safe hygiene behaviors with reduced natural disaster, climate and environmental risks. • More children benefit from quality child-sensitive policies and social protection programmes, which reduce their vulnerability to multidimensional poverty and the impact of economic shocks and disasters.
Partners	The Government, the National Assembly, the private sector, other United Nations agencies, non-governmental partners, the media, youth networks and influencers.

PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE

As per the ‘*Guidance Note for conducting Evaluability Assessments*’ prepared UNICEF Evaluation Office (Feb 2019), evaluability assessments are recommended to be conducted during Early Programme Implementation by an external RBM/evaluation expert. It is noted that the key focus of such assessments, as highlighted in the Guidance Note is to assess the validity of the Theory of Change (ToC) and the availability of data hence, will involve analysis of both the evaluability in theory and evaluability in practice of the CPD. It is noted that the main focus is on evaluability in practice, with a light focus on evaluability in principle¹.

The Terms of Reference state that the primary purpose of this Evaluability Assessment is to determine whether the causal pathways toward results for children are logical and to review the adequacy of the mechanisms to track performance and demonstrate results for children at different levels. The secondary purpose is to provide recommendations to LCO on improving the tools and systems to better implement, monitor and evaluate those results.

Specifically, the exercise will include:

1. Determine the **clarity of intent** of the CP in general and of its components to understand whether the planned **results for children are logical and achievable**.
2. Is there a well-articulated theory of change for the CP and is it flexible and responsive to external factors? The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the initiative’s strategy, design and activities will also be assessed.
3. Review the **availability and validity of quality indicators, baselines and targets**. This will determine whether the progress of different outcomes and outputs is adequately measured and will allow to identify any significant gaps in coverage. This will also provide inputs to improve the development of the monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The assessment of the **availability and frequency of data to monitor indicators will be an important part of the exercise**, based on the provided documents and results of the interviews.
4. **Review the evaluation readiness of the planned evaluation** by mapping the current situation in terms of alignment with the CP outcomes, availability of information, timing, conduciveness of the context, accessibility to and availability of stakeholders etc. This will be based on the planning documents and the knowledge and perception of internal staff and key stakeholders.
5. Provide an **indication of whether an evaluation of the CPD at the end of the cycle would be feasible**, credible and useful. It will identify what overarching questions the evaluation could focus on.
6. **Provide recommendations to adapt the CP design, monitoring and evaluation systems, M&E systems and capacity development**. The scope of the Evaluability Assessment will be limited to the Country Programme (2022-2026), the results that are aimed to be achieved, as well as the M&E framework associated with these results. The main user of this report is UNICEF Laos CO, namely, LCO senior management, PME, sections chiefs and staff members.

The Scope of the EA as per the terms of reference will be limited to the Country Programme (2022-2026), the results that are aimed to be achieved, as well as the M&E framework associated with these results. The

¹ p8, Guidance Note for conducting Evaluability Assessments

Country Programme comprises five components covering five outcomes and a mix of strategies. Each of the results was designed under the Theory of Change which explains the pathways towards changing the lives of children, starting from a situation analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment questions are drawn from the ToRs. There are two main areas of inquiry:

- **assessment of the design of the planned results for children, and;**
- **assessment of the mechanisms and systems to monitor and evaluate results.**

The report addresses the following questions:

Assessment of the design of the planned results for children

Logic

- Does the CPD have gaps in the causal pathway that would affect the likelihood of UNICEF achieving the planned outcomes?
- Have risks and assumptions been adequately identified?
- Is the design flexible and responsive to external factors?

Alignment

- Are the Country Programme's outcomes aligned to the country's priorities and based on an analysis of children's situation?
- Does the CPD have the potential to be aligned with the new UNICEF Strategic Plan and the Regional Headlines?
- To what extent does the CPD address equity (including gender issues), and will it progress towards removing bottlenecks to achieving outcomes for children?
- To what extent the agreements (Workplans, PCAs etc.) are aligned with the CPD and directly contribute to achieving results for children?

Mechanisms and systems to monitor and evaluate results

Measurability

- To what extent are there sufficiently measurable indicators for each programme component's expected output and outcome? Do they adequately capture the expected change?
- To what extent are there reliable sources of information? Are these captured and disseminated on a regular basis to be useful for programme managers to course correct as required in real-time?
- Do the performance indicators have the potential to be monitored regularly on quality and on time?
- Are there SMART performance indicators with clearly identified means of verification?
- Are there adequate baselines and targets? Are the formulated targets plausible and realistic? What is the strategy to obtain the baselines that have not been formulated?
- Are the monitoring systems of the partners in place to track the progress of the indicators according to the knowledge and perception of UNICEF staff and stakeholders?
- Are sufficient human capacities in place to monitor and evaluate progress towards the CPD?
- Are cross-cutting themes adequately measured?

Evaluation Readiness

- Is the necessary documentation, baselines and indicators available to conduct the planned evaluations? If not, are the mechanisms in place to collect the relevant information in the future?
- Does the timing of the planned evaluations allow the programme to accumulate enough implementation experience to enable useful lessons to be extracted?

The evaluability assessment used qualitative methods to generate data to answer the questions identified above. The key methods included document review and key informant interviews (KIIs) with UNICEF staff at the CO and the Regional Office and with key partners and government interlocutors (see Inception Report for more details on the methodology).

The EA incorporated a theory of change approach to understanding the causal model that outlines the sequences of events that are expected to lead to the desired outcomes of the CPD.

In general, the consultant adopted a participative approach with the goal of developing a report that is as informative as possible to learn about program design, results-based management, and possible enhancements to the CPD and CPD parameters.

Ethical Considerations

The evaluability assessment followed UNEG norms and standards, the [UNEG Ethical Guidelines](#) and [UNEG Code of Conduct](#) and the [UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis](#) ² and ensured:

- Respect for rights of individuals and institutions: The evaluator will accord informants the opportunity to participate voluntarily while maintaining their anonymity, and to make an independent decision to participate without pressure or fear of penalty (informed consent/assent). Also, interviewers will assure respondents that information would be confidential and that reports would be written such that responses/contributions would not be traced back to them. Interview notes and any recordings will be accessible to the team members only.
- Respect for cultural identities and sensitivities: Variances in ethnicities, culture, religious beliefs, gender, disability, and age will be respected.
- Professional responsibilities and obligations of evaluators: The evaluator will exercise independent judgement and operate in an impartial and unbiased manner. During data collection, any sensitive issues and concerns will be addressed through the appropriate mechanisms and referral pathways.

Children, vulnerable groups, marginalized groups, or members of households were not consulted, thus as per UNICEF rules and regulations, this EA didn't require external ethical approval. Nevertheless, an Internal Review Board was issued by UNICEF EAPRO before initiating primary data collection.

² https://www.unicef.org/supply/files/ATTACHMENT_IV-UNICEF_Procedure_for_Ethical_Standards.PDF

FINDINGS

Overview remarks: responding to the current crisis in the Lao PDR and the need to focus more on the basics

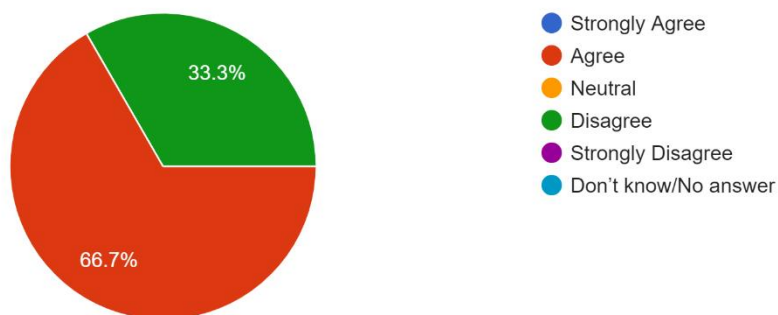
The CPD was developed under the ‘shadow of COVID’ as one interviewee put it, which in the Lao PDR as elsewhere was accorded a criticality which in retrospect can clearly be seen - it is suggested - as disproportionate, especially in terms of the broader and negative impact of the governmental responses to this perceived global health crisis as it impacted the country³. However, **as the country has moved into the ‘post-COVID’ period, the situation in the Lao PDR continues to be affected by multiple crises (‘polycrises’ as one interviewee put it) that are arguably far more serious in terms of their impact on the situation of children and development in general, and this is clearly affecting the implementation of the CPD and its associated programmes.**

Beyond the specifics referred to above, a more general opening remark can be made about the way UNICEF and the LCO ‘makes sense’ of the operating context, UNICEF’s value-adding role, its analysis of, and responses, to risks. This is the question of the degree to which a CO like the Lao PDR is empowered by the global planning system and its norms to develop a CPD, and/or adjust it, in ways that truly reflect the challenges, nuances, and demands of the context, rather than fit into a global planning system with its demand for standardization, including the use of non-specific ‘development language’, targets and indicators.⁴ This speaks to a broader challenge with the current CPD planning process in UNICEF: namely, the challenge of contextualization and, therefore, utility at the country office level, and the broader need to perhaps revise and streamline the CPD development process and structure to increase agility and relevance at the CO level.

³ This is seen in the focus on COVID-19 immunisation and initiatives such as the ‘safe re-opening’ of schools. A more objective risk analysis would perhaps have accorded less priority to these. For example, it is well known that children are not particularly vulnerable to COVID and the closure of schools and the impact this has had on children in the Lao PDR and elsewhere is very likely to be seen in retrospect as disproportionately damaging and unwarranted by any normal analysis. Equally, it is now very clear that the vaccines did not have the protective quality they were alleged to have had. It is of course accepted that the received wisdom at the time from all official sources made it practically impossible for UNICEF LCO to resist focusing on responding to the perceived COVID crisis. Donors, the government and indeed the WHO were driving the agenda to which UNICEF in Lao PDR responded. But if the purpose of the EA process is to engender an honest discussion where the team speaks ‘truth to power and to ourselves’ as one interviewee put it then it is important to have an honest reflection about these issues. Not least because it is clear that many other issues are, and were always, more seriously affecting child well-being in the Lao PDR than COVID ever did. Not only could it be argued that the Covid crisis was overbaked, it is clear that the responses to COVID have been extremely damaging in the Lao PDR, and for the situation of children in particular as this EA report will illustrate.








⁴ Indeed, one interviewee suggested that with minor track changes, the Lao CO CPD could easily be substituted for that of many other LDCs (Haiti was suggested).

1. 2. Are the CPD outcomes and outputs realistic?



Survey respondents do not come to an agreement on how ambitious the CPD is, but during consultations, there was widespread agreement from many interviewees in the UNICEF LCO that there is a need to urgently review the CPD and to reflect on the degree to which the CPD still fits this context, especially in terms of the assumptions that underlay it, and its risk analysis. **While the CPD is still broadly relevant and logical in its efforts to support development and the situation of children, there is in short a need to focus more on delivering the basics**, especially when it comes to the vision of leaving no child behind (i.e. focusing on the most vulnerable) and making sure that their development carries them 'the last mile'. The analysis that the situation in the Lao PDR has got significantly worse in many important areas since the UNCF was first developed is one shared within the RCO, and it was noted that there is little in the current joint work plans that really responds to the changed situation. It was agreed by the RCO that this is something that needs to be urgently addressed. In this sense, not only is the current logic of the UNICEF CPD called into question in terms of its 'fit' to problem solving and prioritization in the context, but the degree to which it is aligned to the UNCF when that is revised, will also be an issue if UNICEF does not engage in a strategic change at this stage. Indeed, as one of the UNCT's leading actors, and the one expected to lead by example, given its relatively high numbers of technical specialists in core programme areas, there is a sense in which the RCO is reliant on UNICEF's leadership within the team of UN agencies in this regard⁵. The 2022 CCA graphically illustrates this point with regards to Outcome 1, *Peoples' Wellbeing*, with education, nutrition and food security in particular facing serious and significant reversals.

⁵ Email from the RCO to Paul Davies, 2nd July, 2023

Legend - Traffic Light System	
	Dark green means that a substantial development progress was observed
	Light green means that some development progress was observed
	Yellow means that the development situation has remained relatively unchanged/ the situation is mixed
	Orange means that the development situation has regressed and/or challenges have increased
	Red means that the development situation has substantially regressed and/or challenges have substantially increased
	White means that there was insufficient evidence available
	No inputs received

Outcome 1 – People’s Wellbeing

	Baseline (2021)	2022
Overall		
Education		
Health		
Nutrition and Food Security		
Protection		
Shelter		
WASH		

The CCA notes, ***‘Leaving no one behind and ensuring people across the country see their basic rights fulfilled is increasingly threatened as a consequence of mutually reinforcing challenges. Rights to food, health, education, the right to work, equality and inclusion are at risk due to the economic challenges depriving significant portions of the population from basic necessities and impeding the Government’s financial capacity for investments which would ensure socio-economic needs are catered for. Other risk factors include largescale infrastructure investments (e.g., in cases where insufficient impact assessments and safeguards fail to guarantee adequate consultation and compensation with local populations), and increasingly frequent and severe extreme weather events (i.e., which may undermine agriculture-based livelihoods, increase disease prevalence, deprive households of shelter and forced relocation)’.***⁶

While most interviewees still defer to the MTR next year as the moment to make such changes, the intensity of the current crises is therefore felt to require more urgent attention, with this EA providing an appropriate opportunity to start the process of strategic reflection and course correction to ensure a better fit to the context, and more effective support to children, their rights and development. Indeed, it was noted that the value of such an EA lies not only in the final report but also in the participative process of producing the report and the associated discussions between the consultant and UNICEF LCO staff. This provided an opportunity for honest strategic reflection to some extent free from the constraints and requirements of

⁶ p.3 2022 CCA, UN, Vientiane, Lao PDR

organizational planning demands that are associated with the CPD development process itself, and its somewhat formulaic approach to meet upwards facing, standardized global requirements.

Rather than COVID-19 being a catastrophic health crisis, it has been the COVID restrictions implemented in the Lao PDR which exacerbated existing structural issues and weaknesses that have led to amongst other things, rampant inflation. The 2022 CCA notes, *'While the health impact was limited by strict mitigation measures, the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 are important and still tangible. The global and local disruptions of COVID-19 have led to a deceleration of economic growth - the lowest in three decades – at 0.5% and 2.5% in 2020 and 2021 according to the World Bank² and, at 3.3 and 3.5% by Government accounts⁷.* The negative economic impact of Government COVID policies had a multiplier effect on the already massive debt burden, and resulted in large scale cuts in public funding, including for health and education, two key partner ministries for the LCO. While donors are focused on the Lao PDR's expected transition from LDC status in the near future, a cause for concern across members of the UNCT, many development indicators are reversing. **Critical indicators in nutrition and education present a very disturbing picture** such as the rates of childhood malnutrition and stunting, the atrocious levels of literacy, student drop out and enrolment rates and poor teacher quality. New government initiatives, driven by resource constraints and budget cuts, to increase the 'autonomy' of both schools, health centres and hospitals will inevitably lead to services becoming less accessible for the poor, as 'autonomy' in effect represents partial privatization where services need to be paid for. In practice, the LCO is to be commended for already responding to the fact that the most vulnerable in the poorest districts are already in crisis, implementing for example cash transfer programmes (mother and early childhood grants) which are a programming modality more typically associated with humanitarian emergency contexts⁸.

In short, the severity of the current situation in the country is not adequately captured in the CPD's situation analysis, nor indeed was it adequate, some suggested, for the situation at the time the CPD was developed. Many of these issues and development challenges affecting children are long term and systemic, and ultimately reflect governance issues and capacity limitations of the Lao PDR, both in government and the LCO itself. In this regard too, questions can be asked about the CPD development and its risk assessment in not identifying these in a more open way, since critical problems such as teacher quality cannot be blamed on the short-term impact of Covid or the growing debt crisis etc but clearly have been systemic issues for many years, if not decades. It is acknowledged that there is a tension between ensuring that UNICEF promotes regional good practices, and progressive initiatives, such as the focus on digitization and e-learning, but this also needs to be matched by a renewed – increased – commitment to, and focus on, meeting basic needs and challenges. This last point received broad support in interviews conducted within UNICEF, other UNCT members and other stakeholders.

Part of the reflection also needs to acknowledge that the aspirations of the current CPD needed to be more firmly embedded in the current capacity of the CO and its partners – especially government - to deliver the vision, more in terms of human resources and systems than financing. It was noted that while UNICEF has some of the best national staff available in country, there are still capacity gaps in that regard. Equally, while the CO has some excellent and extremely committed (and as became evidence in the interviews) honest international staff prepared to share their concerns in a candid manner, it was noted (not only by UNICEF staff but by interviewees from other UN agencies) that some key positions have gone unfilled for extended periods, impacting the COs ability to deliver. In particular, it was freely acknowledged that internal monitoring and evaluation was weak, and in need of improvement, more rigorous systematization and mainstreaming, and more training for staff at all levels i.e. field missions should seek to understand not just the situation of children as related to the section from which personnel come, but rather a more holistic approach to gather information on the broader context. The recruitment of a Chief of Planning is seen as

⁷ p.2 2022 CCA, UN, Vientiane, Lao PDR

⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/laos/mother-and-early-childhood-grant>

critical in this regard. Equally, it is worth noting that UNICEF is still seen as one of the strongest and most important members of the UNCT, with many technical specialists. The organization chairs the Monitoring and Evaluation Learning Group (MELG), and as one interviewee put it is expected to 'lead by example' which, given the internal admission about this function being weak, rather begs the question of the quality of M & E in other UNCT members.

In short, several interviewees felt that the current CPD was overly ambitious as currently formulated, not only in terms of the critical situation in the country but in terms of the internal capacity to deliver the CPD's vision. There is clearly, therefore, a need to reflect on these challenges and adjust the CPD and associated PSNs to better align the organisations' efforts to the external context and internal capacities for the remaining period of the current CPD, as well as to provide a more solid basis for the next CPD development process.

Evaluability in principle - Assessment of the design of the planned results for children

Logic

- Does the CPD have gaps in the causal pathway that would affect the likelihood of UNICEF achieving the planned outcomes?
- Have risks and assumptions been adequately identified?
- Is the design flexible and responsive to external factors?

The CPD includes a vision statement for 2026 and expected changes: *The country programme vision is that by 2026 more children and women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic – particularly the most vulnerable and at-risk – will have their rights realized so that they can survive, develop to their full potential and live in a safer environment. For this to be achieved, a series of core changes are necessary, including:*

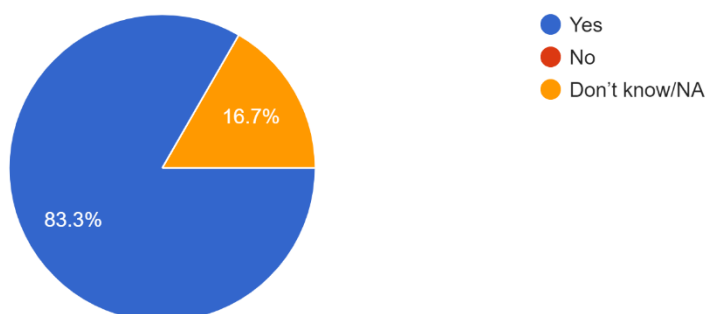
- (a) The national and subnational governments have enhanced capacities to develop and implement systems-based, high-quality and child and adolescent-centred development.*
- (b) The quality, accessibility, and inclusiveness of essential social services for children, adolescents and their families – particularly the most disadvantaged – are improved.*
- (c) Parents and other caregivers practice healthy, caring, nurturing and protective behaviours and protective social norms, including using social services, in a supportive community environment.*
- (d) Households and communities are more resilient and better able to resist shocks*

This vision sets a horizon with expected results, but it is a very broad ToC that outlines the expected outcomes and pathways of change. The theory of change presents a vision of the desired outcome: more children and women in the Lao People's Democratic Republic will have their rights realized, survive, develop to their full potential, and live in a safer environment. The focus on the most vulnerable and at-risk populations is important, as it highlights the need for targeted interventions.

However, the ToC lacks specificity in terms of defining how the program will achieve its intended outcomes. The theory of change does not explicitly outline the causal links between the core changes and the desired outcomes. It would be beneficial to clearly articulate the assumptions and logical pathways connecting the different elements of the theory of change. The theory of change does not explicitly mention stakeholder engagement and participation. Engaging key stakeholders, such as government agencies, civil society

organizations, and communities, is crucial for effective implementation. It would be beneficial to provide more specific and detailed explanations of the core changes and their intended strategies to improve the theory of change. Additionally, incorporating clear causal links and assumptions, defining a monitoring and evaluation framework, and emphasizing stakeholder engagement would strengthen the overall clarity and effectiveness of the theory of change.

2. Was the CPD and the results framework designed in a participatory manner with UNICEF colleagues and external partners?



According to the interviewees, the Theory of Change (ToC) is considered to be somewhat adequate and broadly still relevant, despite the changes in the context, which, as argued above in the overview, may require revisions at the section level ToCs and associated PSNs. The TOC broadly describes where UNICEF needs to influence and use its leverage and where it actually has to implement. It is commendable that each section received training in the concept of ToC in the context of the CPD in order to make the development process more participative and 'hands-on'. Each section was asked to reflect on problem identification, key achievements in the recent program cycles, challenges encountered, and the critical areas that needed to be focused on in the coming years. Discussions moved on to consider the if/then logic for each of the problems identified. Significant participation was invited from the Regional Office, and each section had discussions with its partner ministries. The developing ToC and CPD were then formally discussed with the Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The approach sought to be evidence-based, put in place the required partnerships, and, therefore, logically ensure that the LCO would be able to achieve the results based on the problems identified both as a country office and at the level of the individual sections.

The development process is therefore considered to have been marked by high levels of participation internally within the country office to ensure agreement about the program logic, and also highly consultative with the government, and of good quality, following the standard global guidelines for CPD development. **However, some externals – including donors - interviewed suggested that their participation was limited to receiving updates on the CPD development rather than being involved as partners in the process.** The CO hired a well-respected consultant to assist in the development process, which can be seen as an indicator of a relative lack of capacity in-house. The development process drew on the mid-term review of the previous CPD and UNICEF's own analysis of the context and involvement in the CCA process, which was ongoing at the same time. Whilst some suggested there was plenty of data available to inform the CPD development, others, as noted above, felt that the situation analysis was, in the end, relatively weak, leaving the CPD feeling a bit too generic, in part perhaps attributable to the use of an external consultant without a depth of country-specific knowledge and a limited degree of participation in the process by non-government external actors.

The CPD struggles to some extent in terms of identifying the key areas where UNICEF has comparative advantage and in terms of prioritization, attributed in interviews in part related to the need to

respond to Government requests and expectations, as well as a tendency to be overly ambitious, in terms of some initiatives that have already proven challenging (such as e-learning), an issue that is amplified given the capacity issues in the office, as noted above. Some attributed this over-ambition to a desire to be aligned to the Global Strategic Plan, which perhaps accounts for a disparity where although there is focus on the basics, for example, equitable access to basic social services for the most vulnerable, there is arguably not enough weight given to these things, given the context of the country's development trajectory and the long-standing systemic challenges and issues, which have now manifested in various crises, again as noted above. Overall, however, the objectives are logical, reflect UNICEF's core business, and focus on the progressive attainment of children's rights.

Some suggested that the prioritization challenge was also amplified by the LCO being a donor-driven program which has shaped the programming footprint and created a tension between the desire to focus on key strategic areas where UNICEF can best *'move the needle and bring systemic change'* which given the Lao polity and governance issue is always going to be a long term challenge moving at a slow pace, as opposed to the desire of donors such as the EU to focus on specific areas. The EU has been a significant partner, not least a major contributor to the LCO's education and nutrition work, but changes in donor policy led to impacts on programming focus which resulted in *'...diverting the resources and attention and also the capacity efforts of the country office.... This is why I feel that on one hand, it is necessary to have the resources, but then the danger is that if ever as some of the key donors withdraw or drop or change the policy, then there is a real risk that the entire country program can collapse or become extremely reduced because they don't have that diversified donor base'*.

At the CPD level, the results are seen as being acceptable, but it becomes more problematic at the output level, particularly with regard to measuring changes in aspects like knowledge and skills, and there are questions about the degree to which it is possible to monitor such changes, and the data collection and research required to support this. Overall, it is considered that the CPD has very specific smart KPIs, targets, and objectives. It is measurable and time-bound, on paper at least.

In general, having evidence around results was seen as a real struggle that left the CPD looking more at tracking access to services and very little in terms of changes in systems or behavior. Concerns were raised about an over-dependence on the LSIS as the basis of the monitoring of the results, the SDGs, and Child Rights monitoring. Indeed, it was noted in the course of interviews that the data used for CPD development was based on the 2017 LSIS, in part a reflection of the delays in getting data in the Lao PDR, and it is suspected that new data will highlight significant and negative changes in the context (for example that 98% of 10 years olds in Laos can not read, as detailed further below), and that the conceptualization of problems to which UNICEF needs to respond may shift in response.

While the CPD focuses on areas of shortfall in core sectors, and within these specific pockets of vulnerabilities, especially among the ethnic minorities, this was not reflected in the indicators as in the results matrices, there is poor disaggregation, including crucial aspects like gender. Even within the LSIS, the data is available to allow better monitoring of results of work that seek to address such disparities. Indicators are set at the national level and ignore the fact that there is disaggregated data available by specific geographical area where there are concentrations of ethnic minorities. As one interviewee put it *'.... that's where I see there is a particular weakness in the results matrix. So then if they want to go back and then evaluate this. Especially on the aspect of whether education has been inclusive, whether it addressed disparities, then they can because there would be data. But they'll be constrained by the fact that these were not specifically put in as their own indicators at the level of the CPD'*.

It was, however noted that the indicators are an intimate part of the ToC development, and while these were focused on attempting to secure the best indicators to capture the systemic changes desired, they also needed to reflect the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP). The CO attempted to choose Indicators that could contribute at the level of overall impact, outcome and also outputs. They also needed to be congruent to the global strategic plan , which in turn are strongly rooted in the SDGs and linked to graduation from LDC status. As interviewees noted, these multiple demands were mutually reinforcing and in a dynamic relationship with each other, reflecting the competing demands at play during the process of CPD development. The CO was asking itself: *...how do we match especially child-related indicators in the NSEDP how do we contribute to those indicators.... There are also what we call standard indicators (UNICEF core indicators). But we also looked at how the indicators....will measure (not only) what we plan to do (but also).... how we contribute to the overall indicators of the SDG's, but also to the organization and the country..... But we also influence the NSEDP because we also engaged in the NSEDP process. So some of the indicators that were in the NSEDP, you'll find out that the data collection for means of verification is coming from UNICEFwe have some indicators that are linked to children that are under the Lao social indicator...(in)...the survey, which is a part of the MICS survey. So we tried to influence the indicators based on the problems we have identified and the evidence we have to support the Government to look at it from that perspective.* This quote emphasizes the way the CPD development process also contributed to systems strengthening with a desired focus on sustainability and UNICEF operating as a technical partner of the Lao government.

The process of designing the Country Program, as required by UNICEF headquarters, is rigorous and time-consuming. The corporate tools used to develop theories of change and metrics have some limitations as they attempt to standardize the planning process within a large organization. Top-down procedures and tools can affect the effectiveness of the results frameworks at the CO level as it could lead to reporting being perceived as an administrative requirement, with an element of 'box ticking'. Such perceptions see reporting as being done mainly to comply with HQ requirements, rather than being driven by the desire to provide a learning opportunity for strategic decision-making at the CO level. High-level indicators and results cannot fully capture how results were achieved at CO level. Equally, the ability to contextualize local realities and needs, particularly in middle-income contexts such as Vietnam, can be constrained by the need to conform to system-wide standards, processes and collective objectives. The Global SP's Evaluability Assessment (EA) also noted that, *'Resources invested in reporting on the previous SMQ and RAM are considered excessive, and hence can be reprogrammed in part without creating new gaps'*. Indeed, one interlocutor suggested the whole approach of top-down CPD's was a very outdated process approach to planning, and is in need of modernization. It was suggested that the main bulk of the CPD could be scrapped without discernable impact in terms of country-level performance and program implementation. All that is arguably required is a short overall strategic note with a results framework, results-based budgeting, etc. While interviewees felt the design process followed in the LCO on paper and in theory was perfect, it was noted that the UNICEF programming cycle is a problem because, in addition to the CPD design responsibilities that fall on staff, they still have to do their regular work meaning for almost a whole year staff are facing a 50% increase in work, resulting in a significant detraction from the delivery of results. As noted above, a less elaborate and more streamlined development process is therefore required.

Interviewees from the LCO suggested that they didn't feel overly constrained by the standardized requirements of the global planning system and that they tried only to select global indicators that made sense in the context of Laos and not to fit the context into the global UNICEF context. Ultimately it was suggested there is not much divergence between the global strategic plan and the CPD because'... we looked at three critical things which I think will not be far from the strategic plan. We looked at system strengthening, which is also part of our Lao generation 2030, we looked at reducing service delivery (with the government to be able to do (more) and the last one was also to look at capacity building generally, institutional and technical capacity building. **So it's all working to ensure that the government have**

enough evidence. Actually, the third one is evidence and the capacity to be able to make decisions for themselves as opposed to doing it for them. So it was mostly systems strengthening, ensuring that the system is more sustainable as opposed to getting consultants (to) ...establishing things for them.... But doing it with them rather than for them, so that was the new focus. It was shifting to system strengthening, ensuring that there's an enabling environment for that to happen, so there has to be either decrees, laws or policies, but also evidence enough to call for an investment case in those things... What we (were) try(ing) to do was to make them see the need...to increase investment on specific children (focused) areas if they wanted to graduate (from LDC status), so they all (in) essence was pushing towards human capital development for the LDC, graduation, sustainability and also to look at reducing poverty.

Nonetheless, UNICEF's global approach might be understood as something akin to what Rory Stewart called, the 'tyranny of abstractions'⁹ where top-down paradigms driven by donor concerns (in this case, HQ demands) force aid officials to fit their programming into pre-determined problem statements and solution pathways which are driven by *a priori* assumptions about 'development' that may not be sufficiently sensitive to ground conditions. In short, tension exists between top-down (HQ) planning processes and demands and bottom-up (CO) needs and the context's nuances at the national and sub-national levels.

Additionally, there are inherent risks associated with having 5-year plans, as there are numerous factors outside of UNICEF's control such as governance realities, political will, national and local priorities, market conditions, the economy, etc. In the context of the LCO EA this is particularly relevant as noted below. Having long-term plans makes the past decide the future, which can be problematic. It is important to consider future obstacles and devise strategies to overcome them, but UNICEF must be mindful of the return on investment (ROI) when allocating resources for planning. The COVID-19 'shock', or rather more accurately, the government reactions and restrictions resulting from the perceived crisis, is perhaps the classic example of the impact of unexpected events on long-term planning, even when such planning incorporates risk analyses which explicitly surface assumptions, and present contingency plans to reduce the impact of such programming risks. In the Lao PDR, the Covid-19 disruption has been closely followed by and exacerbated multiple crises as referenced above and detailed below.

While most interviewees from the LCO agreed that the ToC and CPD as a whole was logical at the time it was written and responded to the perceived needs in the environment, there was also widespread agreement that the worsening crisis in the country was likely to impact the achievement of the overall goals laid out in the CPD and the results targets established in the PSNs. **Consequently, the CPD needs urgent review, as do the PSNs and their associated ToCs in core sections such as education and health. The CCA notes, The budget for the health sector has been cut by 30% at the central and by 10% at the provincial level. The ongoing 4F crisis is expected to worsen health outcomes, and with limited fiscal space in the context of donor transition, there are substantial risks to sustaining essential health services in the coming years.**¹⁰

In education, as well, the current focus is on national-level systems strengthening, whereas greater focus is perceived now at the community level. In short, one more example of being more focused on the context, and the grassroots, is a bottom-up rather than top-down approach. One critical assumption that has proven invalid (as illustrated by comments from the CCA immediately above) is that the government would maintain its investment in these critical areas, such as health, nutrition and food security and education, and other

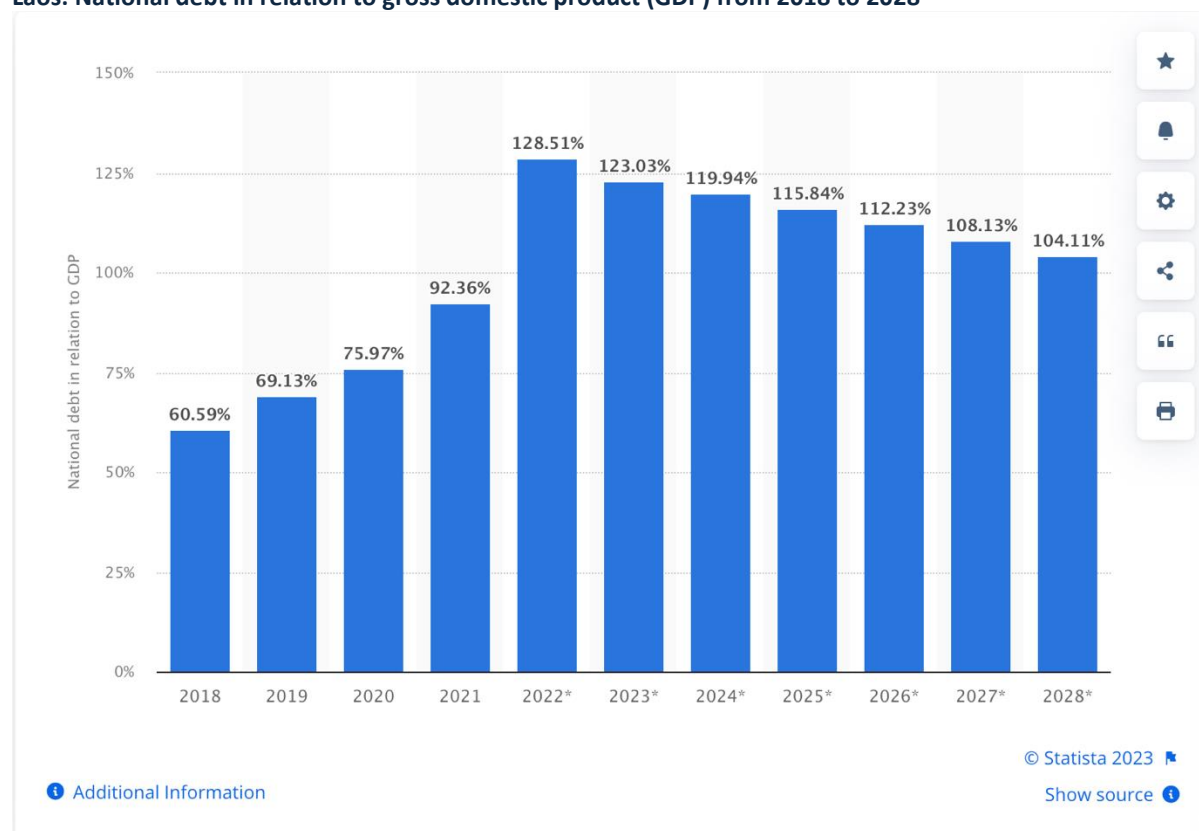
⁹ Rory Stewart, essay in 'Can Intervention Work', (Norton Global Ethics Series), Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, (2011)

¹⁰ p4. CCA 2022, UN Vientiane, Lao PDR

social services. While a reasonable assumption in most cases, the growing and critical debt burden and other long-term systemic constraints could perhaps have been more explicitly acknowledged in the risk assessment.

Macroeconomic factors have severely worsened since the CPD, with its associated assumption and risks, was written. Inflation has caused a massive devaluation of the Lao kip, which has lost half its value in the last three years, and the government debt burden is now over 100% of GDP, according to one interviewee.

Laos: National debt in relation to gross domestic product (GDP) from 2018 to 2028¹¹



Several interviewees referenced the high levels of malnutrition (33% nationally and as much as 50% in the most vulnerable – often ethnic minority – communities) as being of special concern given its potential to affect other sectors like education, health, and poverty as a whole. Concerns were also raised by several interlocutors about the crisis in education, with high levels of illiteracy and, for the first time in a decade dropping rates of enrolments and increased rates of student dropout, and lower completion rates (exacerbated by school closures during COVID with a significant number of children in the poorest areas now openly doubting the value of staying in the formal education system) and poor teaching standards. It was noted that while the quality of education and learning outcomes in the Lao PDR has been a concern for many years, one area in which Laos was doing well was accessing and securing universal primary education, **and now that's at risk**. As one interviewee put it, '*...I think it was almost taken as an assumption before that that would only continue to improve*'. Interviewees expressed concern that long

¹¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804959/national-debt-of-laos-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>. Accessed 2nd July 2023.

term systems level work while still important, needs to be complimented with greater focus on practical classroom level support to teachers around foundational learning, in terms of basic numeracy and literacy, and strengthening early childhood education.

Again the part of the issue is considered to be the tendency to be donor driven. As one interviewee put it....***some development partners are working on strengthening teachers' pedagogical processes because they do want the teachers to change to (a) a more child-centered approach to teaching... I think sometimes we ignore and forget the fact that their content knowledge is not there. You know they're teaching maths, but they can't pass the exams of what they're trying to teach the learners to do,....we have to start there before we even start...with...pedagogical processes and all of those higher order, higher level things. We've been implementing also around digital education, which we did as in a response to COVID, the biggest barrier to any program that we want to implement are the teachers. The same with digital.... we spend most of our time and resources on supporting the teachers to learn these things and it's not just about, you know, how do you use digital tools creatively in the classroom? It's just about, you know, how do you switch on a computer? It's really basic stuff.***

However, it was noted that the crisis in education, and more specifically the teacher crisis, pre-dates Covid and the current cuts in public spending. Budgets in education in real terms were shrinking *before* the current multi-faceted crisis kicked in. This again raises questions about the quality of assumptions and risk analysis in the current and previous CPD. This said, the quotas of public servants across all sectors have been facing further cuts since COVID, and education has experienced quite drastic cuts. *'.....historically the education sector has been seen as not being very efficient with their quotas and but the knock on effect has been the quotas are (now) very low, a lot of teachers are exiting the profession and the sector relies a lot on volunteer teachers who stay (as) volunteer for many years because they aspire to become a teacher eventually. And a lot of those people are leaving now because the quotas have reduced. So I think we're on the verge of a bit of a teacher crisis here and there's been some analysis (by) the World Bank....they're completing a public expenditure review and in their analysis, they say that so far there are enough teachers in the system.*

They're just not, you know, efficiently deployed, which I suspect I think it's true. But I also don't think it's as simple as that, and it's a very complex issue to solve....that also has to be something that we need as UNICEF.... need to be looking at if we're thinking about our policy and our advocacy we need to be more engaged on the issue of teachers and it's something that we haven't done as much because there's other development partners on the ground who work more in that space, including like UNESCO and the Australians, and EU I do think that this is something that we do need to engage in because I feel like there isn't enough of a sense of urgency on this issue and if we don't try to address it now, then 5 years down the line. We're gonna have a real problem, I think.

Donors interviewed also commented on the absence of attainment of even basic standards – such as potable water in schools in northern provinces – a critical situation which resulted in UNICEF receiving extra funding for its WASH programmes. The COVID response in education is illustrative of the broader tension discussed in the above with regards to the need to re-focus on delivering the basics, *in partnership with rather than doing it for* the Lao Government, and the need to continue to engage with and promote regional and international best practices in all sections and specialist areas. During COVID the shift to online teaching and learning, while still denying students the benefits of socialization at school, ensured that their formal education was still delivered to a certain degree. While this was a relative success in urban areas, it is clear the most vulnerable children, especially those residing in rural poor areas were excluded from the

benefits of this process since as various interviewees pointed out in many of the most vulnerable communities the poor may only have one phone per household, if any, and schools even if provided with a computer may have teachers who are only able to turn on the machine, but are in practice unable to use it effectively in a professional sense. Thus while e-learning and digitization in education might appear to offer exciting opportunities in theory, in practice there is a delivery gap which inevitably leads to the poorest children being left further and further behind. This situation is clearly anathema to the very core of UNICEF's vision and values globally, as well as in the context of the LCO and its programming.

There is clearly therefore a need to re-consider the CPD, its ToC, and the individual PSNs and associated ToCs against these fundamental challenges that while systemic and long term, have reached a critical point in the current context. Strategically, UNICEF's mission remains to work with the government to ensure increased rates of investment in such social services and to ensure that service delivery (supply side) is of sufficient quality. As one interviewee put it '...on an average it (government investment) is about 9%, the remaining 91% is (from) donors and you also know that once they (Lao PDR) graduate from LDC in 2026... if it is possible... then the country will have to have reduced ODA**if they are not able to invest in that particular problem and it's highly donor dependent what happens to the children afterwards. So some of those things we need to look at it critically now, given the macroeconomic situation and the possible food security crisis, that's likely to happen because of the COVID restrictive measures, the macro economy, the inflation and the general macroeconomic situation in the country, we need to put that in context. And I think this is for me the for the next, the midterm we need to look at it and ask ourselves our assumptions really continue to hold. And if they do continue to hold, what are the tweaks that we need to make to make sure that we can actually get to our goal and if possible....can we get to that goal?**

*I think that's what's important now is with what's happening with shrinking..budgets for education...and health.....now we already partnering with the World Bank and some other Asian Development Bank, **how can we ensure that we lobby government to ring fence education and health projects.***

We have to tweak things... Maybe the activities,(the)....but what are the things that will make us to achieve that? Maybe we need to tweak some and **we also need to look at our partnership mapping and probably shift a bit, which are the new partners that we need to bring on both the private sector, which we already identify, but also how different can we work with the private sector. So for me, I think it's not much as we can keep the impact with the level that we want to get to, but we need to ask ourselves with the resources that we have and the current context, how do we work differently to get them?**

Beyond this a number of critical questions need to be addressed. Again returning to the thoughts of one of the interviewees:

So how do we streamline? What are the new things that we need to do? What is the new evidence that we need to provide? We are already doing some of (this), but what is the new evidence that (we) can make government to look at? We know things have gone bad, but it can even get worse if we do not put some stringent measures in place and there are issues around monetary...and...fiscal policies, but how do we support government, with which partner can we support government to start to look at tax administration collection and all those things because it doesn't exist. How do we stop capital flight? So many thingswe haven't any NSEDP financing strategy, how do we bring it from that strategy to the implementation for UNICEF for children.

So for me, I think it's critically looking at that.....**what are the capacity gaps we have...** we tried to streamline because the resources have short, especially for regular resources.....But now it begs for us to have more specialized skillsI really would want more specialized skills on PFM.....**We need more people, people who can actually work with government and look at the children's part of public finance, which (we) we're now doing with the National Assembly....** But concretely, making sure that moving forward that the National Assembly understands, (and) the government's executive understands and that (a) difference can be made.

..... the Lao context is much different. The polity is different. Actions (decisions) are made ...(at a) higher level. If you are in other country offices at the technical level....budget decisions can be made, but in Laos it goes to the highest level. So you see, those are the things that I think we are now looking at ...in the mid-term. **We need to look at those things and ask ourself those questions. What do we need to do differently?**

Flexibility and Resilience

A shorter planning cycle may increase agility and adaptability to changing circumstances. Beyond the specifics of COVID-19, which although unprecedented in terms of worldwide governmental responses, was to some extent 'just' a shock to the system. Planning systems should be reviewed in light of management literature and best practice thinking on enhancing resilience in the light of unexpected events. Assumptions and risk assessments in the planning documents and CPD did not fully capture the risks from the current multiple crises described above, many of which are long-term and systemic, albeit exacerbated by the response to Covid-19. These could arguably have been better anticipated, it needs to be acknowledged that there is a mismatch between the CPD and an effective response to the contextual realities, something which is true of all UN agency plans. For example, UNDP are revising their indicators and plan Perhaps there was too much of a sense of 'business as usual' when the CPD was being prepared, in turn perhaps reflecting a kind of 'frog in the pot' phenomenon, with staff being so used to the way things are in Laos that its just 'accepted' how bad in absolute terms that things are. The root cause here is mostly weak and unaccountable governance, with little demand from the population for change (although as noted elsewhere the information revolutions associated with social media penetration etc may help to provide opportunities in this regard). Issues of accountability and alignment issues in governance, or more accurately the lack thereof, is a systemic challenge in Laos, not just something that affects UNICEF. Nonetheless, more effective focus on moving the dial for children in the worst affected areas, and in terms of basic indicators for children in nutrition, literacy and numeracy etc IS needed. It is noted and commended that the LCO is engaging in advocacy with the polit bureau and National Assembly to do so, and again I am not sure if this is adequately acknowledged in the draft. It was noted that Pia is an excellent networker and influencer upstream inside the country

New means of building organizational resilience and managing risk within UNICEF, and indeed to try and change the perceptions of risk and risk management amongst key Government of Lao counterparts may be required.

Alignment

Questions that guided the semi-structured interviews included:

- Are the Country Programme's outcomes aligned to the country's priorities and based on an analysis of children's situation?

- Does the CPD have the potential to be aligned with the new UNICEF Strategic Plan and the Regional Headlines?
- To what extent does the CPD address equity (including gender issues), and will it progress towards removing bottlenecks to achieving outcomes for children?
- To what extent the agreements (Workplans, PCAs etc.) are aligned with the CPD and directly contribute to achieving results for children?

The CPD is strongly aligned with national development priorities, as outlined in the National Social Economic Development Plan (NSDEP). Equally, the section level PSNs strongly align with the sector development plans. Indeed, as several interviewees pointed out UNICEF not only aligned its CPD with the NSDEP but was able to influence child-focused elements of the NSDEP. While reflective of the success of UNICEF's influencing and 'upstream advocacy work on the policy level' the degree to which UNICEF has been able to shape and influence the NSDEP can also be seen as reflective of a lack of pro-active engagement from the Government with UNICEF and its agenda. The government has been, it was suggested by various interviewees, overly focused on economic development – even to the detriment of developing an effective taxation system - whilst marginalizing the social side of development, an issue which is of concern for UNICEF and many development partners. **Indeed, there has been until the time of writing no financing strategy for the NSDEP.** This has led to joint efforts to encourage the Government to re-prioritise education and engaging in dialogue on the allocation of the budget for social services. As one interviewee noted, *'...the key is at the centre of government financial and economic decision-making processes....and we'll only be able to make very limited progress advocating for education, health, nutrition and so on independently. What is needed is a concerted effort to increase tax revenue...Laos has the lowest in the region... and strengthen the alignment between national development priorities and how the available resources are allocated. We've made some good progress on this over the past 2 years supporting a cross-government working group to develop a Financing Strategy for the national plan which includes some pretty crucial policy decisions....it was just signed by the Prime Minister at the end of last weekbut of course the real value will lie in its implementation and we're struggling a bit to build support for that within the UNCT as it falls a bit between the mandates of different agencies.'*¹² This issue was also commented on by several interviewees and is considered a key constraint / challenge in the operating environment. Given that UNICEF's current strategy focuses on governmental systems strengthening to ensure ownership not only of the concepts, but the implementation, and therefore sustainability, progress in this area is critical to the whole success of the CPD, and its viability. Realistically, the potential gap between agreement on the new financing strategy and its implementation (hinted at in the quote above), and the acute nature of the current development crisis in the Lao PDR clearly combine to further indicate the necessity for an urgent strategic review of the CPD and associated PSNs to ensure that urgent needs are met, and the basic needs of children are better served in the short and, perhaps, medium term.

Equally, the UNICEF CPD is strongly aligned with the UNCF, and by the same token, influenced and shaped that as well due to the RCO's reliance on UNICEF's scale and depth of technical specialists. However, beneficiaries had limited opportunities to contribute to the process of development, in part reflecting the weakness of civil society organizations in the Lao PDR. As one interviewee put it, *'It was very consultative at the level of partnerships and government. So basically, the duty bearers, but then not necessarily at the level of the rights holders too....there was an element of child participation. But then it was challenging because it was during the COVID time..'* Senior management was commended for strong networking and relationships

¹² Email to Paul Davies, 2nd July 2023

with key government and donors stakeholders, and the consultation process started well before the current CPD development process formally kicked off. While relationships and influence at the senior level with the LCO are seen as commendable, interviewees suggested that the quality of relationships between UNICEF's national middle level management and technical staff, and their direct counter-parts in Government needed to be improved, even to the extent that staff in the LCO may not always know who their key counter-part is. In part this was seen as being related to turn over of staff within the various ministries, but is also reflective of the capacity of national staff in the LCO, whilst at the same time acknowledging that in relative terms, they are typically some of the best available in the country. Some of this is cultural, and relates to the Lao polity and how incentives work in that system i.e. being too pro-active can be detrimental, especially if it is seen as 'trying to rock the boat'. This illustrates as a further aspect of the one size does not fit all reality of planning processes that are standardized globally, and does not adequately capture the systemic contextual realities. Greater attention needs to be focused (not necessarily at the CO level) on ensuring that capacity truly is congruent with the ambitions stated in the CPD, and that resources are – given the context – truly fit for purpose. One interviewee stated, *I fully agree onthe need for that contextualization as well as the agility, right, because again, the CPD kind of traversed a very strange period of pre COVID, the challenging COVID (period) and COVID recovery and **what's in the CPD is so broad that when you come to implementation you can you can of course tweak things to make sure that it fits.** But then we have to prioritize what we are going to be doing because all of the different challenges that came after....it was everything related to energy crisis.... to the government going very close to defaulting, and at one point we were very concerned that it will become the next Sri Lanka in the coffers are completely empty, there is a deficit and It's in a very, very fragile situation.....**And then how are they now going to be prioritizing their budgets? How are they going to carve out the physical space for social spending, etcetera, and those kind of risks were not fully reflected in the CPD as well? Because I think that the framework that we give in terms of TOC is so kind of general and not risk-informed enough, and not agile, and that's also the weaknesses that I see in the CPD's.***

As noted this relates more to a generic reflection on the CPD process in UNICEF *in general* but is clearly a reflected limitation in the current LCO CPD. Indeed, there are moves within the organization globally to modernize the whole process, and reflect on what's actually needed, perhaps simply a results matrix, a few pages on strategy to provide focus and direction, and an end results-based budgeting process. This would imply a lighter, more bottom-up process, and give the COs more agility and flexibility to respond to emerging realities, as has been the experience of the LCO in the recent past. Interviewees noted that the top down CPD process 'boxes us in': *So we I think there are two things that box us into. The CPD, one is what comes top down the strategic plan, the whole blah blah blah. And the second is we already have our staff organized in certain ways and that in some ways also feeds a bit how they want to organize the CPD, the results framework.....so I think the richness of the CPD is the ability to have the time to discuss... really think through a future we want. I think we ordinarily don't get to do that. I think this time around we were bit more boxed in because we also have to comply with the UNSDCF, the corporation framework of sustainable development. So now our CPD not only has to be boxed into what the Executive Board wants and the SP, but also we have to align totally with the broader United Nations Cooperation framework in the country. And that's not easy as well. Because the cooperation framework has to take into all entities big, small, you know entities that have a broad, mandate, specific mandate, it has to fit us all in and our results have to be sometimes almost verbatim with what is going to be put in the UNSDCF. And for agencies like UNICEF, that can be quite limiting because we*

have such a broad mandate, you know, we are touching across so many sectors, so many areas. In most countries, we are one of the biggest agencies and so when we write our CPD now, we have to fit it into an SD CF that has to be a one size fits all for whether you're a non-resident specialized unap, you need a or you are there.... **so I have to say that that was one of the challenges in writing our CPD, the degree to which we had to align to the UNSDCF and I feel it's a bit of a force fit for us honestly.** And then of course, as I mentioned you had mentioned the strategic plan and then the staffing structure and I think the staff are you know they hold their post here and the moment you change. So this time, for example, the biggest shift we saw was for child protection. **We really moved into a systems approach in our CPD, which means we had to relook at the organogram on the team, right, because originally it was just a child rights (violence?) focused program with the disability and a little things on the side.**

....I think there are two things that box us into. The CPD, one is what comes top down the strategic plan. And the second is we already have our staff organized in certain ways and that in some ways also feeds a bit (into) how they want to organize the CPD, the results framework.....**so I think the richness of the CPD is the ability to have the time to discuss...** (to) really think through a future we want. I think we ordinarily don't get to do that. **I think this time around we were bit more boxed in because we also have to comply with the UNSDCF, the corporation framework of sustainable development. So now our CPD not only has to be boxed into what the Executive Board wants and the SP, but also we have to align totally with the broader United Nations Cooperation framework in the country.** And that's not easy as well. Because the cooperation framework has to take into all entities big, small, you know entities that have a broad, mandate, specific mandate, it has to fit us all in and our results have to be sometimes almost verbatim with what is going to be put in the UNSDCF. **And for agencies like UNICEF, that can be quite limiting because we have such a broad mandate,** you know, we are touching across so many sectors.....In most countries, we are one of the biggest agencies and so when we write our CPD now, we have to fit it into an CF that has to be a one size fits all for whether you're a non-resident specialized (agency) or not.... **so I have to say that that was one of the challenges in writing our CPD, the degree to which we had to align to the UNSDCF and I feel it's a bit of a force-fit for us honestly.** And then of course,...(there is) the strategic plan and then the staffing structure and I think the staffthey hold their post here and the moment you change..... So this time, for example, the biggest shift we saw was for child protection. **We really moved into a systems approach in our CPD, which means we had to relook at the organogram on the team, right, because originally it was just a child violence? focused program with disability and a few things on the side.**

We had to change it to systems policies and that meant we were looking now at different JD's, different skill sets and that has a bit of an implication when you're writing your CPD because in the end people are also looking at their at their jobs.

There was evidence generated from the interviews that the LCO pro-actively attempted, within the constraints of the context, to engage with beneficiaries in the process of CPD development in order to achieve alignment. For example, the Communications department have been engaged with the Lao Youth Fund on a regular basis. In addition, there has been an initiative engaging Vice Governors at the sub-national level, with involvement of children to articulate and understand what their perception of poverty is and how it can best be resolved. One critical institution cited was the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and

Children ([#NCAWMC](#)) who have been working with UNICEF on how to engage with children on strategic issues that were reflected in the CPD. But this engagement is not limited to the design phase, but also the CO is committed to ongoing consultation and participation of beneficiaries in the implementation of the CPD. As one senior interviewee noted: *We also undertook a really extensive consultative process with all our different stakeholders because the network for children involves a whole range of stakeholders. So we did a very, very inclusive process and I actually think we did, we did a good job.....I felt **the process of doing this was very enriching in the end, of course we got boxed into a word count and whatever the templates are.** I think the process the thinking through the building of ownership of partners, I mean we received we received statements of commitment for our CPD from 20-30-40 partners. I don't know how many because our process of development had been so inclusive with the UN as well.*

Interviewees noted that during the current year, the LCO has picked up on some global mechanisms to involve youth in discussions around climate change which is a cross cutting theme that requires more attention. However, in general it is noted that the Lao PDR does not have quality platforms to engage youth, and those that do exist could be considered tokenistic. In part this clearly relates to the overall weakness of civil society in the Lao PDR, as noted elsewhere. This year UNICEF celebrates 50 years in Laos, and it is focused on developing ways of accessing more systematically the voices of youth and children. So the strategic intent is not merely to engage with beneficiaries more directly in the design process, but also – as noted above – during implementation using platforms like Facebook live, Tik Tok etc. which are already widely in use by young people in Laos. It was noted that the CO has brought expert consultants from the US to develop more effective ways to ‘workshop’ with young people and encourage them to express themselves more. It was noted that social media penetration (over 3 million Facebook accounts), and internet connectivity across even rural areas, is providing a novel opportunity to engage more with youth and children, and thereby capture more authentic voices. Equally, due to this information revolution/exlosion youth and children will be more able to analyse information, and more comfortable to articulate their concerns than previous generations whose access to information was restricted to more and officially controlled channels of communication such as state radio and the official party line delivered through village leaders etc

Overall, however, while there is the intent to develop these systems for increased beneficiary participation, and a strong commitment to this principle in the CO, interviewees accepted that participation from civil society remains limited, both now and in the design phase of the CPD. There is a need for example to develop a more coherent AAP (Accountability to Affected Population) strategy in the country office.

Resources: Adequate and aligned with the results?

- Are financial resources adequate to meet the expected results? Are resources in general aligned with the results?

As with other aspects of the CPD, while this was widely considered adequate at the time the CPD was written, shortfalls and concerns have since arisen. As one interviewee put it,**my concern is really the affordability analysis didn't really look at the risks and diversifying the other resources.** So*Human Resources (have) not been adequately financed in a sense way that some of the core position are on **other resources, so from donor money and then that kind***

of destabilizes the program in the sense that if this donor base then withdraws then it will become instantly unaffordable.But overall I think it's it is fine (however).... to this day there are many posts which left were kept vacant, and it's only quite recently that they started recruiting as certain key posts because they didn't have the money. But then at the end of the program, I think it would be fine because they have made a concerted effort in resource mobilization, although at the time of the development of the budget and to this day really they haven't really had a proper resource mobilization and financing plan..... So I think there'll be some portfolios in certain sectors and which would be a challenge and especially education. In some sectors, I think they have been switching their strategy to go more from resource mobilization to financing...As noted elsewhere, the inadequacy of financial resources being reflect in human resource shortages has been cited by others in the UNCT as detracting from joint initiatives and the delivery of the CPD in an efficient manner in the first few years. UNICEF staff noted that the reliance on UNVs to fill positions who lacked the capacity to really add value at the required level was leaving senior staff with an increased burden.

While resources are considered to be aligned with the results, and the office is investing in resource mobilization, the CO is suffering from donor driven programming to some extent. As one interviewee put it... *many of the development partners are shifting and they're earmarking a bit more closely what they would like to support and fund, which then has an impact on how we program. I think there definitely adaptations that we have to make to our programmatic work because of the reality of the funding....***We lost a significant percent of our RR, so we are more and more OR dependent which of course is less, less flexible. So I think on that element of of alignment, financial alignment, I would say the adequacy on paper still holds, but definitely does need some revisiting and the alignment for sure will not remain the same given the increase of dependence on OR and that development partners are shifting a bit there.**

This said it was felt that the CPD was sufficiently broad to accommodate these emerging donor interests, and it was expected that after the MTR more attention would be paid to climate change and the growing problem of drug use. In the education programme, for example, it was noted that the European Union funding whilst contributing substantial resources to the CO in recent years, was a good example of the way donor interests can dominate the programming agenda. What was described as a 'rigorous systems strengthening programme' was more appropriate for a middle income country, rather than one which was effectively responding to the very much more basic needs in the Lao PDR, as noted above. The ending of the EU funding was therefore seen as an opportunity and a threat to look at some of these other issues, and perhaps adopt different approaches. It was further noted that the education sector within UNICEF is going through a transformation from the traditional situation where there were large pools of thematic, unrestricted funding. Donors are now channeling that funding to the Global Partnership for Education, which was described as a 'real risk for the education programme'. Overall, it was felt that while education remains a core priority and need in the Lao PDR the large team presently employed is not sustainable given these funding challenges. Once again it was suggested that more could be done in terms of digital modalities, 'because that is something donors want to fund' and yet this once again illustrates the gap between donor interests (the tyranny of abstractions) and the need

to meet basic needs and address fundamental shortfalls in the country's education system. Interviewees also suggested that resources were not adequate in other sectors, such as WASH.

Finally, it was noted that while the office did have significant resources, albeit it with some shortfalls and potential gaps going forward, the other issues relates to the absorption or implementation capacity of the CO. As one interviewee put it,.... *if you have resources and you cannot use them, then ...it's like a bottleneck because you have on one hand ..the needs, things that you have to achieve, you know to improve the life of children in Laos.....And then let's say you do have the resources, but then if you don't have the implementation power capacity to do that....then that's a bit of a problem. **And this is a country office where capacity is an issue....That's something we need to look at. If we get more resources, I mean my question would be how are we going to implement them? Do we have the capacity? The human resources? That is my question.***

Evaluability in Practice: Mechanisms and Systems to monitor results

Measurability

- To what extent are there sufficiently measurable indicators for each programme component's expected output and outcome? Do they adequately capture the expected change?
- To what extent are there reliable sources of information? Are these captured and disseminated on a regular basis to be useful for programme managers to course correct as required in real-time?
- Do the performance indicators have the potential to be monitored regularly on quality and on time?
- Are there SMART performance indicators with clearly identified means of verification?
- Are there adequate baselines and targets? Are the formulated targets plausible and realistic? What is the strategy to obtain the baselines that have not been formulated?
- Are the monitoring systems of the partners in place to track the progress of the indicators according to the knowledge and perception of UNICEF staff and stakeholders?
- Are sufficient human capacities in place to monitor and evaluate progress towards the CPD?
- Are cross-cutting themes adequately measured?

The results framework includes clear outcomes, key progress indicators, baselines, and targets, allowing for monitoring and evaluation at the outcome level. There are six outcomes plus program effectiveness, with 18 outcome indicators that are specific and measurable, providing a basis for tracking progress over time. The baselines and targets are generally provided, enabling

comparison and measurement of progress. The means of verification are mentioned for all indicators, with a heavy reliance on the LSIS.

Nevertheless, the framework does not explicitly mention the specific outputs that UNICEF will deliver to achieve each outcome. It would be helpful to have a clear link between outcomes, outputs, and indicators to be able to assess UNICEF's performance and results. All indicators are very high-level and are highly aggregated, meaning that the results are due to a combination of efforts.

The framework does not mention disaggregation by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or geographic location. Disaggregated data is important for understanding equity and targeting interventions effectively. The framework does not mention the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms or data collection and reporting frequency. Including information on data sources, data collection methods, and the frequency of monitoring for each indicator would enhance the framework.

For outcome one, *More neonates, infants and children, including adolescents, and women, have equitable access to and benefit from strengthened high quality health interventions and improved behaviours*, there are two indicators: *Percentage of children < 1 year receiving diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis-containing vaccine at national level symptoms of pneumonia taken to an appropriate health provider*, *Percentage of newborns receiving postnatal care within two days of childbirth*. These two indicators are aimed at new-borns, leaving outside the other groups included in the outcome. While the indicators provided are relevant to specific healthcare access and utilization aspects, they may not be sufficient to comprehensively measure the outcome. Consideration should be given to including additional indicators that capture a wider range of health interventions, behaviors, and outcomes. This could include indicators related to antenatal care, child growth and nutrition, access to skilled birth attendance, family planning, health education, and preventive measures for common diseases.

It is important to ensure that the selected indicators collectively provide a holistic view of equitable access to high-quality health interventions and improved behaviors among neonates, infants, children, adolescents, and women.

Outcome two, *More infants, children, adolescents, and women have equitable access to and benefit from high-impact multisectoral nutrition interventions.*, has three indicators *"Percentage of children aged 6–23 months who received foods from four or more food groups, Percentage of infants 0–5 months exclusively breastfed, and Prevalence of anemia among women of reproductive age (15–49 years)*. While the indicators provided are relevant to specific aspects of nutrition interventions, they may not be sufficient to comprehensively measure the outcome. The indicators measure access to solutions but not the positive changes; consideration should be given to including additional indicators that capture nutrition-related health outcomes, such as stunting or wasting among children, which can provide a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of multisectoral nutrition interventions.

Outcome three: *More children, including adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, are better prepared for school and have improved learning outcomes and skills to achieve their full potential.* Has the following outcome indicators: Gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education, Percentage of Grade 5 children achieving the minimum level of proficiency in reading/Lao language and mathematics, Primary and lower secondary school completion rate. These indicators are useful to measure enrolment in pre-primary education, proficiency of grade 5 children, and completion rates for primary and lower secondary. However, the outcome statement is broader; hence, these indicators fall short. Enrolment and does not capture other dimensions of school readiness or learning outcomes. While the indicators provided are relevant to measuring certain aspects of the outcome, they may not be sufficient to comprehensively assess the full range of improved learning outcomes and skills among children and adolescents. It may be valuable to include indicators that assess other aspects of school readiness, such as cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, to provide a more comprehensive picture of children's preparedness for school. Monitoring attendance rates, teacher quality, availability of learning materials, and classroom environments can also contribute to a more comprehensive assessment of the education system's impact on learning outcomes and skills development.

Outcome four, *Children are better protected from violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices, and benefit from a strengthened child protection system, services, and positive behaviors,* has the following indicators: *Percentage of children 1–14 years who experience violent disciplinary practices, Percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a union before age 18, Number of children who experienced violence reached by health, social work/social services or justice/law enforcement services.* Indicators one can provide insights into the extent of violent disciplinary practices, or child marriage and the need for targeted interventions and behavior change programs. However, it primarily focuses on specific forms of violence and does not capture other forms of exploitation, harmful practices, or dimensions of child protection. The third indicator can provide insights into the reach and effectiveness of child protection services in identifying, responding to, and supporting children who have experienced violence. However, it focuses on the reach of services and may not capture the quality or comprehensiveness of the response.

Overall, this outcome indicators need more work to really capture the expected change. Considering that child sex trafficking is a significant problem in Southeast Asia, it is important to note that the provided indicators do not specifically capture this aspect. To comprehensively address child protection in the context of child sex trafficking, additional indicators could be considered. These may include the number of identified cases of child sex trafficking, the number of successful prosecutions and convictions of perpetrators, the number of children rescued and provided with appropriate support services, and the effectiveness of preventive measures and awareness campaigns.

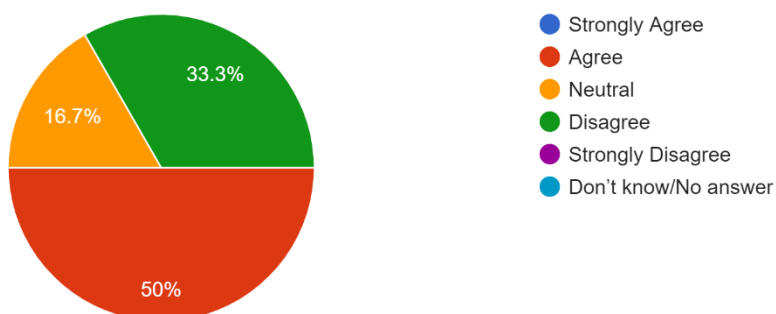
Furthermore, it is valuable to consider indicators that assess the capacity and effectiveness of child protection systems, such as the availability and accessibility of child helplines, the existence and implementation of child protection policies and legislation, and the coordination and

collaboration among relevant stakeholders and agencies. These indicators can provide insights into the overall strength and functioning of the child protection system.

Outcome five, *More children and their families, particularly in rural and poor urban areas, are using resilient, safe water and basic sanitation facilities and practice safe hygiene behaviors with reduced natural disaster, climate, and environmental risks*, has the following indicators: Access to basic sanitation facilities, Access to basic water supplies, and Percentage of population washing hands with soap. The outcome statement is clear, and these indicators are quite straightforward and of good quality in the sense that fully capture the outcome attributes in a comprehensive manner with SMART metrics.

Outcome six, *More children benefit from quality child-sensitive policies and social protection programs, which reduce their vulnerability to multidimensional poverty and the impact of economic shocks and disasters*. The indicators are: Percentage of children living in multidimensional child poverty, Number of children covered by social protection initiatives, Percentage of key performance indicators meeting scorecard benchmarks. This outcome and indicators are also quite good as provide valuable insights into the progress and impact of child-sensitive policies and social protection programs. They help identify gaps, track improvements, and guide policymakers and stakeholders in making evidence-based decisions to enhance the effectiveness of these programs.

3. Are the indicators and M&E systems of the CPD and workplans used for decision-making and programme improvements?



The survey shows a lack of agreement amongst respondents to whether the M&E is used for decision-making. During interviews, it was noted that the CPD results are not really used by the CO for management purposes, nor are they believed to be used by donors and partners. The latter is more interested in reports that tie more specifically to their programmatic work. The impression given is that in the LCO, as in other COs the CPD reporting is done more to satisfy top-down requirements, than to deliver value inside the CO and at the country level. As was noted in the recently conducted EA in the UNICEF Vietnam CO – cited here as these are systems-wide issues:

In the course of the interviews and document review, one theme that emerged was the tension between top-down planning processes and the need for localization and context-specific approaches that add value to the CO level as a strategic management tool, rather than a 'box-ticking' exercise (as it was referred to) to satisfy perceived needs or interests at the regional or HQ level. This relates to the cultural question of 'for whom is the reporting being done'. While interlocutors recognized the need for internal and external accountability, it was felt – as was reflected in other reports on the Global Strategic Plan – that much of what is done in the name of reporting has little practical utility at the CO level as a management tool. Reporting against top-down targets and indicators that lack relevance to local programme managers, and has limited utility for implementation and adjustment of activities to maximise results for children, is clearly an issue. In a context of relative resource scarcity, affecting staffing levels and the ability to implement quality programming, the transaction costs involved are substantial in real terms. The process appears to have become somewhat formulaic and tokenistic, focused on satisfying top-down reporting requirement, and interests of specialists removed from the field, rather than something that has real utility for monitoring progress and impact of programming, providing qualitative insights to enable adjustments based on real-time learning to ensure greater effectiveness, efficiency and impact of programming. It is worth noting that one of the five key characteristics of 'High Reliability Organisations' that can be seen to have resilient structures and cultures is 'sensitivity to operations', in other words that operations and the 'coal face' of where the work is done is 'King' (in cultural terms of what is truly valued) – in this context the CO rather than the regional or HQ layer. Everything should be focused on supporting and empowering the coal face of the work.

*Again, the global evaluability assessment of the SP found that, 'At country level, SP-related MEL processes are insufficient. CO actors highlight challenges in monitoring outcomes, perceive little value in monitoring SP indicators (for the CO), and call for further simplification of processes... **CO actors see reporting on SP indicators as a burden which offers little value (or feedback) at CO level**'.¹³*

*Reporting and monitoring is, therefore, mainly done for systems compliance reasons rather than due to a genuine belief in its ability to adjust and learn in real time. At the very least such work is therefore of limited value in real terms at the CO level and detracts from the opportunity for real learning that is focused on downwards programme focused adjustment to enhance delivery of change for children. **There is therefore an opportunity cost in terms of the alignment of the reporting and monitoring systems and organizational culture and systems that should be honestly discussed.** It was further argued that **a lot of the initiatives that were actually generating change were NOT being captured in these reporting mechanisms imposed from HQ.** Ironically, interlocutors made the same comments about some of the tools that were being imposed in the name of efficiency and effectiveness which were seen as incomplete, not appropriate for the local context (having been field tested in only one country) and simply a burden with no value-add at the CO level. This said, other interlocutors noted that the CO Sections do have monthly meetings to review the results being recorded by the monitoring systems, and the*

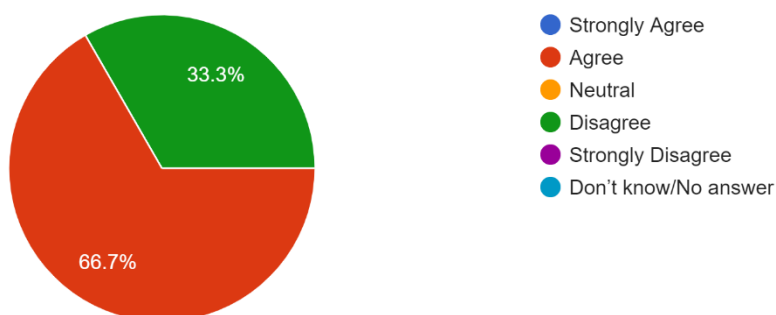
¹³ Evaluability Assessment and Formative Evaluation of the UNICEF Positioning to Achieve the Goals of the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 Evaluation Office

KPIs provide management information that is used in real time to adjust the work, including progress on cross-cutting issues’.

The global evaluability assessment of the current SP found that ‘Doubts surround the use of evidence at HQ level and mechanisms are lacking for evidence-based decision-making and strategy management at GMT level. Too few CPDs include evaluation findings and lessons, and the use of evidence by COs is complicated by UNICEF’s fragmented evidence system (involving evaluation, research, and data)’. This is confirmed by the recent Evaluation Peer Review that says that evaluation is detached from other evidence-based functions such as research, communications, etc.

Several interviewees stated that they are concerned by the lack of an adequate M & E framework within the CO, and this was reflected in an inability to monitor implementation progress in real-time with national colleagues often merely stated that they would be able to provide information ‘once the project is finished’ and not being able to provide adequate progress reports during implementation. It is noted, as stated by many of those interviewed, that the CO is now working hard to improve its M & E systems, in part as the new Deputy Rep has a strong background in M & E. However, at present, as one interviewee put it, ‘.... I have been a little bit concerned about the country office’s capacity through their integrated monitoring evaluation framework....in tracking the output level indicators now they’re making a shift...to this **global, top-down country core strategic indicators. So then that kind of diverts them from some of the more...qualitative data collection they want to do in single changes in attitudes and knowledge** and that is something that builds up to systemic change and then addressing the root causes of the issues towards the output achieving outcome. So I do have a bit of concern about that, because **I do see a mismatch between what is in their research plan and what is actually being tracked as results indicators.** At the outcome level it was noted that ‘the box has been ticked’ in terms of contributions to SDGs etc, but some of the changes forecast are very minimal and unambitious. Equally, at the Outcome level as noted above, interviewees highlighted that there was too much dependence on the LSIS, and there is a need to be bolder and have more qualitative indicators. **‘But then again they have to be aligned to the SDG’s. They have to be aligned to the UNSDCF. So I guess there were no way out of that.’** Interviewees suggested that most of the indicators were taken from the NSEDP or SDGs, and the latter ‘are not measurable...(SDGs) are not indicators, they are just words’.

4. Are the indicators of CPD outcomes and outputs adequate to measure their achievement?



One-third of the survey respondents don't think CPD outcomes and outputs indicators are adequate. As stated above, a key concern noted by UNICEF colleagues and other members of the UNCT during interviews is the lack of effective disaggregation in the indicators, which are also described as being 'gender blind'. Again to quote one interviewee, '**....my concern (is) around disaggregation, because that's the change that we want to see....it's not the change at the national level. If it goes up 1% or 2% at the national level, it doesn't matter what we want to see is the change at the subnational levels where the vulnerable populations are residing and even there it could be there, what we saw from recent analysis is there is pockets. So it's not always indicative. But then to be able to measure that change and how you know UNICEF's interventions are increasing ...equitable access or better knowledge among the population that we want to be targeting.**'

Currently, monitoring data resides within the Social Policy section who are implementing the LSIS (hence the over-dependence noted above). There is therefore going to be a validated national household survey with sound statistics. Consequently, the CO is '**....able to measure (and) have the baseline and eventually to monitor the change at the outcome level and in some areas even at the output level. Now in terms of having data for monitoring changes at the lower level this is where I think the country Office has had challenges....the country office has gone through kind of a restructuring in terms of planning and monitoring function and there has been a gap in the monitoring function.....they're trying to reconstruct that and reinforce that right now. So the capacity hasn't been there....the framework which is incomplete is there. So what I would say is that in, spite of all the good intention to be able to monitor results and....have data, I don't think the country office has really embraced different options of doing so....including exploring more innovative ways of collecting data which is more intuitive which gives you the trends and which gives you a kind of cheaper and faster access to information which allows for continuation of program or not, influencing or changing policies....backed by survey data, which then allows you to change policies and then also to be able to evaluate programs at the end. So I don't think there's been a good equilibrium in the sense that when the data is all buried in social policy... they will be doing household survey and research, but then not necessarily doing that kind of more agile monitoring systems.**

There is also a reported issue with administrative data, and strengthening those systems has been described as 'an extreme challenge'. It was stated that, '**...some sectors are better than the others, but....it is (an) issue. There hasn't been a real concerted effort in linking systems and ensuring interoperability....also in terms of system strengthening around this, so that there is regularly collected administrative data upon which is (the) ideal (and) that the partners can bank on in making decisions.... there's an over dependence on surveys, because of the weak systems at the government level and it becomes kind of a vicious cycle**'. The LSIS while in principle being government owned, is seen in practice as being UNICEF commissioned and driven. This said it is acknowledged that there is a strong emphasis on capacity building so that it becomes a process that becomes part of the national statistical systems, and will hopefully be replaced by more 'regular' administrative data systems. Nonetheless, at the present time due to the weaknesses of the national systems and administrative data, there is an overdependence on donor funded surveys.

Administrative data has been used by the LCO to do initial selections for project locations, plans and design. But it always needs to be validated afterwards as it can't be seen as reliable. While data entered into the system at village level is considered of reasonable quality and accuracy, when it is later inputted into the system errors creep in, again a reflection of poor capacity in the government system. One solution is seen to lie in digitization of administrative data across sectors. As one interviewee put it, *...whatever data we collect, except for those ones that UNICEF is strongly involved with... we are ensuring ...that there is quality assurance so that we know that OK we can put our fingers up on this and say yes we know this data is it's eighty/ ninety percent correct right and....this is close to reality as it is but the other ones that are that are collected by government and put into a system...you can't really monitor....I think this is where we might be having a challenge but I think there's a lot of thinking in government, especially Ministry of Health, to use some of the systems that we have set up like for the mothers and the early childhood grant to track antenatal care and all those things are trying to make it a more digitalized system so that they can also track (the) women that come for the Ante-Natal care.... we need to try and include many sources before you can confidently say with some standard error that yes, uh, this data is close to reality'.*

A further concern, related to the political and governance realities in the Lao PDR, is the inability to talk openly about the results and conclusions coming from the data gathered. One example relates to what was described as the 'learning crisis' (it was mentioned that 98% of 10 year olds can't read), which has only this year been possible to speak openly about. As one interviewee put it, *'...I think the challenge is probably not so much in gathering the information, also maybe not in the analysis. I think it's more....in the analysis and presentation of it. That's I think where we are run into issues.* Staff noted that they are often too busy doing the work to be able to engage in more strategic discussions.

Quality varies between sections within the LCO, with nutrition and education being seen as the strongest. It was noted that in terms of education, a lot of data was available from the education management information system, and part of UNICEF's work has been focused on working with the Ministry to strengthen this. This generates regular information on things like enrolments, gender parity indexes, drop out and completion rates etc. This is seen as a direct outcome of the well-funded EU programme which is shortly coming to an end. This has enabled relatively expensive national surveys on things like learning outcomes i.e. Grade 5 learning assessments. The last assessment was in 2019, and a further one planned for 2024, but routine annual and reliable data on learning outcomes is still not available. However, *'....because of the resource constraints in Laos, it's completely dependent on development partner funding and that's not always available... learning outcomes is a difficult one. We are trying to put systems in place where teachers can easily do a quick assessment in their classroom, capture that data, and that data would be part of the management information system... we're trialing (that) at the moment...it's a longer-term kind of investment.* While indicators in the education section are considered to be sufficiently measurable, with identified means of verification that succeed in capturing the expected change, there remains a problem – as noted elsewhere with disaggregation. It was noted, *'....capturing....how well we're reaching the most disadvantaged (is a problem)...the other challenge that we have often with when we reporting our own results in*

*terms of the activities that we've implemented and that's something **we need to work on with the ministry, to really strengthen, their very bad at reporting disaggregated results....we need gender disaggregated. And.... any other disaggregation that we can do. So I think that's an area that we need to strengthen. But in terms of being able to to measure and capture the data, I think it's not so bad***'.

In terms of the WASH section, it was also noted that it is challenging to gather sufficient data from implementing partners, and that data is not systematically collected at the output level. At the outcome level it is necessary to rely on surveys, and even then the data is not easily available from central partners (Vientiane Ministry), as they would need to consult with the province, who would then need to contact the district level health centres. One interviewee noted, '**So it can be time consuming, but you get the data and then afterwards you have like some specific focal points at the central level....and if that focal point is out of the office, then you don't have access to the data, so there's no SharePoint or anything that that they keep the database. So I think this this is one of the challenges that we're facing with our implementing partners.** It was noted that administrative data is usually available only one year behind the time of collection, so it is only possible to monitor the broad trends. There was felt to be an issue with the indicators which become more in need of improvement the lower down the results chain one goes, and there is a need to make indicators more SMART to better capture the change.

Strategically the office is committed to establishing an M & E system where all staff are involved, and the recruitment of a planning specialist is seen as critical in this regard. Overall, it was noted that the CO is currently not adequately funded to provide the necessary information for evidence generation, and with the increased reliance on OR, donor funding, and reduced levels of RR, it is questionable whether sufficient resources will be forthcoming. The intention though is to have more real time monitoring data so that management can be updated on project implementation as well as providing more in terms of 'management data', including spending and ensuring that the resource framework is regularly updated. It is intended that field monitoring requirements, seeking to understand not just the particular requirements of the individual staff member's programme (a 'siloes approach'), but the situation of children as a whole in the locations visited, will be mainstreamed into standardized templates and processes for field visits, ensuring maximum efficiency in monitoring terms, including capturing data related to cross cutting themes. Such field visits in tandem with government officials equally have a capacity building function as well, whilst noting that there remains both a capacity gap and language barriers which remain a challenge.

In terms of monitoring cross cutting there was widespread agreement that these were not sufficiently monitored and this would be a focus of the improvements planned in mainstreaming M & E as discussed immediately above. Additional technical support has been brought in for climate change, which as noted above is a growing concern in the country, and an increased priority for donors. A gender consultant is currently working on developing a gender transformative approach. In terms of education, the parenting programme was cited as being the key cross-cutting area of work, and is implemented by the Communications team. But overall, staff interviewed reported being surprised by how little work had been done on the cross cutting

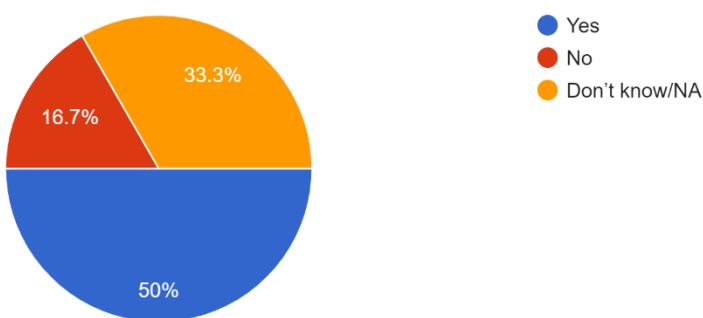
themes. One interviewee stated, *....thinking about climate change and that's something we haven't addressed. It's just that the reality is that we need to develop programming around climate change. I think in Laos thinking about greening of schools and other areas ...I think we need to articulate that better andI hope that we can raise additional resources from that*. It was stated that to date themes like gender, climate change and disability had only received lip service to date. Despite the commitment to increase the work in these areas, and develop systems to ensure it is adequately monitored and ultimately evaluated, it is also important to tailor ambitions to the capacity of the office, resources and the needs of children in the context. As one interviewee noted, *I also think that the cross-sectoral work needs to really make sense...for the context...we can't do everything either, right? So we need to also be able to have a prioritization process of what's really strategic and maybe that's what I feel is missing... apart from the parenting piece, which I think is quite well thought out, I think there hasn't been as much...joined up thinking around some of the other areas to really think about what's strategic and what are the areas that we should focus on. And then maybe set up the management structures around that*.

Evaluation Readiness

Questions that guided the semi-structured interviews included:

- Is the necessary documentation, baselines and indicators available to conduct the planned evaluations? If not, are the mechanisms in place to collect the relevant information in the future?
- Does the timing of the planned evaluations allow the programme to accumulate enough implementation experience to enable useful lessons to be extracted?

5. Does your programme area have a clear plan and an adequate budget for evaluations? If no, please elaborate.



Some interviewees felt there wasn't a strong appetite for, and culture of, evaluation in the UN system in the Lao PDR as a whole, and this was to some extent reflected in the UNICEF CO¹⁴.

¹⁴ This consultant experienced this personally on his last evaluation in the Lao PDR, in 2015, for UNDP on its contribution to mine action (support to the NRA and UXO Lao). Multiple donors pushed for evaluation over many months and the UNDP CO at that time only reluctantly accepted the demand, and then when the report was produced there was a reluctance to accept the zero draft in the usual way resulting in a protracted dispute. In part this reflects the issue of it not being 'safe' to 'speak truth to power' in the Lao PDR, however this was not necessarily the case in this example

In part this was attributed to limited staff capacity. One interviewee described the last UNDAF evaluation as having been 'catastrophic' and noted that the capacity for evaluation in the UN system in Lao PDR as a whole was extremely weak. Others noted that, as a direct reflection of donor dependency, that evaluations were built into proposals as long as there were sufficient resources. If resources were not available for evaluations then they will not take place. Past evaluations were leveraged in the development of the CPD, but apart from this interviewees suggested they were not used a great deal. Again limited human resources was cited as an issue, and the lack of some kind of 'knowledge management' position to extract, consolidate the information and inform management thinking. This has not been done systematically to date.

It was noted that the CPE, as part of the CPD process, establishes the importance of doing evaluations. However, a mixed picture on this issue emerged from the interviews. Some stated there were planned evaluations and budgets, while others stated that there was clearly a lack – or limited - of resources for evaluations. One interviewee described the overall situation as being 'opportunistic', and noted that unlike other UNICEF COs, there wasn't really a plan in use (despite what is stated in the CPD) for evaluations that clearly states what evaluations are planned, for which programmes and during which periods. This is perhaps a function of the lack of an M & E focal point it was suggested, and what evaluations were done were likely only done due to donor driven demands.

While the number of evaluations is to some extent determined by the size of the country, following UNICEF guidelines, and donor requirements, the CO is committed to spending more on evaluations in the future, even planning to do evaluations that are not mandatory according to the size of the CO, and the education programme or health programme have already been selected as likely candidates for evaluation and that is reflected in the CPE. Equally though, child protection issues (such as child marriage, described as a 'burning issue'), are seen as being important to be evaluate in order to assess how the CO is responding and what more can be done, or done differently. The interest in evaluation is partly driven by the awareness that the context has changed quite significantly in recent years, as noted above, and discussion are underway with evaluation specialists in the regional office to see how evaluations can contribute to this stock taking and strategic refocusing process. In part the key questions to be answered here relate to the idea of better meeting basic needs, as noted above. There is also a capacity building and sustainability aspect to the commitment to evaluation in the CO. As one interviewee noted, *'.....it's not just doing evaluation, but also strengthening government evaluation capacity to improve the evaluation culture. We also do invest using our own regular resources...last year, we sent people to the University of Singapore ... Faculty of Public **policy for them to learn on evaluation leadership, and there are so many things that they plan to ensure that the country has an evaluation culture enshrined....so they know to ask for it....We can't evaluate the government projects, but if they have the capacity, they can call out for evaluations as part of their own business'***.

since the evaluation was purely of the quality of UNDP's support to Lao mine action organisations, rather than an evaluation of these institutions per se. In fact there was widespread dissatisfaction from *both* the Lao institutions and the donors in UNDP's performance at that time. The reluctance to engage in open evaluation was seen as being indicative of the issues.

Opinions were mixed as to whether the CO was meeting with 1% budget investment in evaluation, called for by global guidelines. One senior interviewee stated that they thought the LCO had met this target, whilst another senior colleague stated that was still an ambition. Nevertheless, the current senior management seems to have a clear commitment to the idea of evaluation and its utility as a learning tool.

In terms of learning priorities for the CPE, as stated above, interviewees agreed that it is critical to revisit the key assumptions and risk analysis that informed the CPD, due to the changed context. Education was again singled out as an important sector for evaluation, with the aim of assessing the work in terms both of equity and sustainability. It is seen as critical that the work contributes to strengthening systems that can deliver results into the future without external support. It was also noted that projects focusing on such systems strengthening, and also behavioural change, may only yield significant outcomes and true impact in the long term, and these achievements may not be captured fully even within the CPD cycles and certainly not within the lifetime of many donor projects. One interviewee cited a project on disability that started in 2019 and only now is delivering interesting results. In the short term, these results may not be immediately discernible. It was also noted that government ownership of systems, and the sustainability of such initiatives, and their continued implementation after the life time of any UNICEF project or programme is the real criteria of success of much of the work of the LCO. In order to deliver this vision the LCO needs a data collection and evaluation strategy that is mainstreamed and built in to take place on a rolling basis, constantly feeding into work planning and real time management decisions.

Other interviewees highlighted that the cross-cutting parenting programme, cited above, delivering behaviour change across sectors to build demand for service is a critical area for evaluation and learning. Social behaviour change is now a key strategy for systems strengthening, and it was noted, *'...we need to assess is how well are we doing on the demand side. Does it really play out to be making that difference in Laos or not? Or is it just a theoretical model of supply and demand? Maybe demand doesn't play such an important role? And do we have the right mechanisms in place to to promote and to really build demand through social behavior change, social accountability, etc'...*

It was noted that the commitment to undertake this evaluability assessment is an important exercise in helping the LCO to think about its learning priorities for the CPE and beyond. It was stated that overall it will be important to look at the efficiency (in terms of translating resources and inputs into outputs and outcomes) and the impact of UNICEF's work in the Lao PDR.. Is the best return on investment being generated? What areas of the work might need to stop, what might need to be expanded? What needs to be done better. For example, in education, it was suggested that really seeing how best to 'move the needle on learning outcomes', in terms of improving basic literacy and numeracy (back to basics), is a key learning priority. It was suggested that the focus on systems strengthening at the central level meant that this had become a little lost and there needs to be more focused on reaching the most disadvantaged children, including children with disabilities, in the poorest areas. As one interviewee stated, *'...I feel like we don't,*

we don't measure that (well enough) and we don't ask as many questions about (that)....I think sometimes we just say, oh, we're working in Ministry priority districts and then we think that that's enough. I think we need to improve ...on the equity, but that also quality of education and really and how much we're moving the needle on that.....(As) UNICEF, we're not going to be able to measure our impact on that by just the national assessments....we would have to do some more in depth assessment with the specific programs that we're supporting'. Others agreed that its very important to understand the constraints and opportunities in each sector, and to focus on the local level in doing so. For example, in WASH studies have been commissioned to look into understanding better information implementation approaches, and the challenges and barriers to scaling up. In what was described as the 'hardware component', the section is looking at the affordability of well water supply, and household sanitation. A fundamental review of the country programme, its assumptions and programming choices, focus and strategies, particularly in terms of its ability to deliver change for children at the grass roots level, was therefore being requested.

Finally, opinions were slightly mixed with regards to the degree to which the LCO has a learning culture? It was noted, '*....It depends how you define learning. If the learning is really focused on enabling people to do better in their day-to-day work, yes, there is a learning culture. You know how to use a certain UNICEF tool better? if we're defining learning as....grow in a new area, then I would say not really..... **what is the incentive to do that learning?** Is it going to help me with my career progression? What are the opportunity costs? So there's a lot that that goes into that....I don't think we really encourage reading and learning'. Others noted that the LCO is now trying harder to foster a learning culture, and this was something the current leadership team is very committed to, but that overall more could be done. Again capacity issues in the office were seen as a challenge. As one interviewee put it, '*....the vision leadership, enabling environment is there, but then matching it with capacity, prioritization and also to be able to (use) evidence..., having evaluations and (using) evaluation.... for decision making. That's still....a bit of a stretch and in the Country Office....* It was noted that within key programmes there was a learning culture, and also between the sections and the Ministry counter-parts (for example in education and WASH), in both informal discussion and in more structured ways (for example, online international learning exchange in WASH for schools, or the facilitation of government counter-parts going on evaluation trainings in Singapore, as cited above). Finally, cultural factors play a big part in this, both within the LCO and Government counter-parts and systems. Many national colleagues and counter parts in the Lao PDR appear happy with the status quo, and there are few incentives – in fact sometimes disincentives – to seek change and to challenge the status quo of how things have been done.*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is critical to recognize the Lao PDR is currently facing multiple challenges, these could arguably have been better anticipated in the assumptions and risks of the CPD. Indicators for nutrition and education in particular present a worrying picture of conditions for children. There is therefore an urgent need to revise the CPD in advance even of the MTR to ensure a better focus on responding to these crises, and meeting the basic needs of children, especially in the poorest communities. The RCO's office agree that the situation is critical and the UNCT as a whole needs to engage in a strategic refocusing on the needs of the context. The current aspirations in the CPD need to better reflect local realities and not down top-down demands and a more realistic assessment of LCO capacities.

Conclusions:

Evaluability in Principle:

Logic: The Country Program Document (CPD) outlines an ambitious vision aimed at improving the rights and well-being of children and women in Laos, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and at-risk populations. The program identifies core changes required to achieve this vision, including enhancing government capacities, improving essential social services, promoting positive caregiver behaviors, and building household and community resilience.

However, the Theory of Change (ToC) within the CPD has some weaknesses. It lacks specificity in defining the causal pathways connecting the core changes to the desired outcomes. Clear articulation of assumptions and logical connections is essential to understanding how the intended results will be achieved. Additionally, the ToC does not adequately emphasize stakeholder engagement and participation, which is crucial for effective implementation.

The development process of the ToC was participatory, involving internal UNICEF colleagues and consultations with the government and partner ministries. This strength fosters collaboration, ensures a shared understanding of program logic, and aligns interventions with national priorities. However, external partners and donors reported limited involvement in the process, which highlights the need for broader engagement to enhance the program's success and sustainability.

Further improvements are needed to address prioritization challenges. Balancing government requests, donor expectations, and long-term systemic change is essential for the program's success. A more context-specific situation analysis is required to tailor interventions to the unique challenges faced by children and women in Laos.

Alignment: The UNICEF Laos Country Program Document (CPD) demonstrates commendable alignment with national development priorities outlined in the National Social Economic Development Plan (NSED) and the UNICEF Strategic Plan. The CPD's vision of improving the rights and well-being of children and women, with a focus on vulnerable populations, reflects UNICEF's core mission. Moreover, UNICEF's influencing efforts have even shaped child-focused elements of the NSED. However, challenges remain, as the government's emphasis on economic development sometimes overshadows social priorities, leading to limited engagement with UNICEF's agenda. Efforts to involve beneficiaries in the CPD development process have been made, but weak civil society organizations and limited platforms for youth participation hinder meaningful engagement. Addressing equity, gender issues, and systemic bottlenecks to ensure equitable access to services requires greater focus. Balancing global directives with country-specific needs remains a challenge, and a more context-specific and agile planning process is needed.

Resources:

The resources allocated to the UNICEF Laos Country Program Document (CPD) were considered adequate at the time of its development. However, concerns have since arisen regarding the affordability analysis and diversification of resources. Human resources have not been adequately financed, leading to vacant core positions and reliance on donor money, which can destabilize the program if donors withdraw their support. The office has made efforts in resource mobilization, but a proper resource mobilization and financing plan is lacking, potentially leading to challenges in certain sectors, especially education. The CO is experiencing donor-driven programming, which can impact programmatic work due to shifting donor interests. The dependence on other resources (OR) has increased, making the alignment of resources with results less flexible.

Despite having significant resources, the CO faces absorption and implementation capacity challenges. The office's capacity to effectively utilize available resources is a bottleneck, and the implementation power may not match the need to improve the lives of children in Laos.

Evaluability in Practice

Measurability and Reporting:

The results framework in the UNICEF Laos Country Program Document (CPD) includes clear outcomes, key progress indicators, baselines, and targets, which allow for monitoring and evaluation at the outcome level. There are six outcomes, and each outcome is associated with specific and measurable indicators (18 outcome indicators in total). The baselines and targets are generally provided, enabling comparison and measurement of progress over time. The means of verification are mentioned for all indicators, with a heavy reliance on the LSIS (Laos Social Indicator Survey).

However, the framework has some limitations. It does not explicitly mention the specific outputs that UNICEF will deliver to achieve each outcome, making it difficult to assess UNICEF's performance and results comprehensively. The indicators provided are high-level and highly aggregated, which means that the results are due to a combination of efforts, making it

challenging to attribute outcomes to specific interventions. Furthermore, the framework lacks disaggregation by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or geographic location, which is essential for understanding equity and targeting interventions effectively. Additionally, the framework does not mention the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms or data collection and reporting frequency, which could enhance the overall framework.

The section also highlights specific feedback and recommendations for each outcome's indicators. For instance, for outcome one, it is suggested to include additional indicators that capture a wider range of health interventions, behaviors, and outcomes beyond the two indicators provided. Outcome two may benefit from including indicators that measure nutrition-related health outcomes, such as stunting or wasting among children, for a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of multisectoral nutrition interventions. Outcome three could be improved by including indicators that assess other aspects of school readiness and learning outcomes, like cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, to provide a more comprehensive picture. Outcome four could benefit from additional indicators that address child sex trafficking and assess the overall strength and functioning of the child protection system. Outcome five's indicators are considered straightforward and of good quality, capturing the outcome attributes comprehensively. Outcome six's indicators are also viewed positively, providing valuable insights into the progress and impact of child-sensitive policies and social protection programs.

Regarding reporting, there is a perception that it is done more to satisfy top-down requirements rather than providing value at the CO and country levels. The focus on compliance and lack of genuine belief in the ability to adjust and learn in real-time hinder the use of M&E for program improvement. While some CO sections hold monthly meetings to review results recorded by monitoring systems and use key performance indicators (KPIs) for real-time adjustments, doubts surround the use of evidence at the HQ level. The fragmented evidence system involving evaluation, research, and data further complicates evidence-based decision-making and strategy management.

The UNICEF Laos Country Office (CO) is facing challenges with its monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework, leading to an inability to monitor implementation progress in real time. National colleagues often provide information only after a project is finished, making it difficult to provide progress reports during implementation. The CO is aware of these issues and is making efforts to improve its M&E systems, especially with the involvement of the new Deputy Representative who has a strong background in M&E. However, there are concerns about the CO's capacity in its integrated monitoring evaluation framework, particularly in tracking output-level indicators.

The M&E system currently used relies heavily on the Laos Social Indicator Survey (LSIS), as the CO faces challenges in gathering administrative data, and strengthening these systems has been described as an extreme challenge. The lack of reliable and regularly collected administrative data has led to an overdependence on donor-funded surveys.

Monitoring cross-cutting themes, such as gender, climate change, and disability, has been limited, and there is a need to improve efforts in these areas. The CO intends to focus on mainstreaming

M&E in field visits to capture more comprehensive data related to cross-cutting themes and children's situation in different locations.

While the CO is aware of the M&E challenges and is working to improve its systems, there are still significant capacity gaps, language barriers, and resource constraints. Adequate monitoring of outcomes and outputs remains a challenge, and there is a need for more robust systems to measure changes effectively.

Evaluation Readiness: The evaluation readiness of the UNICEF Laos Country Office (CO) faces various challenges, as highlighted in the interviews. In sections above it was already mentioned that the M&E system needs improvements, the CPD ToC and output-level results needs revisiting, and some indicators need strengthening/adjusting to better reflect the CPD expectations. One major issue is the lack of a strong evaluation culture and appetite for evaluations within the UN system in Laos as a whole, which is also evident in the UNICEF CO. This lack of evaluation culture is partly attributed to limited staff capacity and weak evaluation capacity within the entire UN system in Laos. Evaluations are often driven by donor demands, and their occurrence depends on the availability of sufficient resources. While the CO is committed to increasing investment in evaluations, there is a need for a more systematic approach to evaluation planning and implementation. The current senior management shows dedication to evaluation as a learning tool, and there are plans to undertake evaluations that go beyond mandatory requirements

The CO recognizes the importance of building a learning culture, and although there have been efforts to foster it, capacity issues and cultural factors remain challenges. Incentives for learning and career progression need improvement. Despite these challenges, the CO is committed to strengthening evaluation and learning practices.

Recommendations:

For LCO

- Revisit the Country Program Document scope
 - It is important to urgently revisit the CPD and overall ToC, and ToCs in the different sections, with a general guiding principle being how can UNICEF work to ensure the basics are delivered across the sectors to respond to the current 'polycrisis' affecting the Lao PDR. In education for example it is important to look at strategies that will have a more immediate impact on learning outcomes.
 - Due to the multiple crises affecting the Lao PDR the process of review and adjustment of the CPD and PSNs, and possibly ToC, should start urgently, and the decision point for change should not be delayed until the MTR next year (or the MTR process should be brought forward).
 - Ensure that projects aiming for systems strengthening and behavioural change have realistic targets and timeframes (long term), and that donors and the UNICEF system align their expectations to reflect this.

- The LCO's revised CPD should establish clear strategic priorities to which donors should be encouraged to prioritise over their own particular interests or theories of what the Lao ODR needs. UNICEF should leverage its weight and reputation as a key and respected member of the UNCT and work ever more closely with the RCO's office and other UN Agencies to mobilise donors according to a revised CCA that acknowledges the current deep crisis in the country, and focuses funding according to commonly agreed priorities where the 'One UN' approach matches needs with UN agency comparative advantages.
- The Theories of change from the PSNs should be reviewed and revised, probably at the mid-term review to better reflect UNICEF's role (inputs and outputs) in achieving the expected results. Further details need to be envisioned on how change will occur in the different areas of intervention. Correspondingly, relevant metrics and indicators shall be adopted. It is important that within the PSNs and work plans, VCO includes output level indicators and short-term results indicators. When relevant, it is important to include specific gender activities, indicators, and targets.
- Adjust the CPD results framework and the M&E system
 - Outcome indicators should be reviewed to better capture more nuanced and locally specific changes, and the level of ambition should be revised upwards. The quality of the CPD indicators varies from one outcome to another. Please see the measurability section for more details.
 - LCO should revise the CPD outcome indicators to make sure that a comprehensive measurement of the outcomes can be reached. National indicators, especially those related to economic achievement, need to be complemented by output-level indicators that clearly reflect UNICEF's contribution to the expected results.
 - Indicators need to be revised with better disaggregation to ensure more effective monitoring of results, especially for the targeted most vulnerable communities.
 - All indicators from the CPD results matrix and the PSN shall have an indicator description sheet detailing basic information on the indicator, such as a description, justification, calculation formula, frequency, who oversees collecting/compiling/reporting the data, specific means of verification, baselines, and targets.
 - Efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation, and achieve standardization (workplan tracking, formats for field trips/visits) and mainstreaming (moving beyond silo'd monitoring and making all staff responsible), are to be commended and must be prioritized in the coming months
- Consider giving more support to the government in strengthening monitoring systems focused on policy implementation. LCO support can focus on improving data and information management, starting from a needs assessment on data management, assessing information gaps for decision-making, developing a monitoring framework, capacity building, and sharing international best practices.

- Restructuring of the staffing structure, including of critical international positions, must be fast tracked to ensure the capacity of the LCO is fit for purpose to achieve the aims of the revised CPD and PSNs and also has the absorptive capacity to programme resources
- The LCO is to be commended on its efforts to engage more directly with children and youth, and these initiatives should be prioritized both as a means of monitoring change, but also to lay the foundations for more effective and comprehensive engagement with children and youth in the design phase of the next CPD.

For UNICEF HQ and /or RO

- RO and HQ should create a list of vetted CPD indicators, and good practices for the COs to use as a benchmark when designing CPDs
- To enhance the CPD design process, HQ and EAPRO could consider streamlining the planning process and requirements even more. A more adaptable approach could be more efficient and effective for certain CO contexts.
- The primary priority of performance and results metrics should set at the national level, and the secondary priority should be the global reporting needs.
- Transitioning from the if-then ToC format to a more comprehensive systemic format would greatly benefit UNICEF by effectively capturing the multifaceted nature of its programming.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Evaluation Matrix

Evaluability Questions	Sources		
	Document Review	Survey	KIIs
Assessment of the design of the planned results for children			
Logic			
Does the CPD have gaps in the causal pathway that would affect the likelihood of UNICEF achieving the planned outcomes?	X	X	X
Have risks and assumptions been adequately identified?	X		X
Is the design flexible and responsive to external factors?			
Alignment			
Are the Country Programme's outcomes aligned to the country's priorities and based on a Situation Analysis of Children?	X		
Does the CPD have the potential to be aligned with the new UNICEF Strategic Plan and the Regional Headlines?	X		
To what extent does the CPD address equity (including gender issues), and will it progress towards removing bottlenecks to achieving outcomes for children?	X		X
To what extent the agreements (Workplans, PCAs etc.) are aligned with the CPD and directly contribute to achieving results for children?	X	X	X
Assessment of the mechanisms and systems to monitor and evaluate results			
Measurability			
To what extent are there sufficiently measurable indicators for each programme component's expected output and outcome? Do they adequately capture the expected change?	X	X	X
To what extent are there reliable sources of information? Are these captured and disseminated on a regular basis to be useful for programme managers to course correct as required in real-time?	X		X
Do the performance indicators have the potential to be monitored regularly on quality and on time?		X	X
Are there SMART performance indicators with clearly identified means of verification?	X		
Are there adequate baselines and targets? Are the formulated targets plausible and realistic? What is the	X	X	X

strategy to obtain the baselines that have not been formulated?			
Are the monitoring systems of the partners in place to track the progress of the indicators according to the knowledge and perception of UNICEF staff and stakeholders?	X	X	X
Are sufficient human capacities in place to monitor and evaluate progress towards the CPD?			X
Are cross-cutting themes adequately measured?	X		X
Evaluation Readiness			
Is the necessary documentation, baselines and indicators available to conduct the planned evaluations? If not, are the mechanisms in place to collect the relevant information in the future?	X		
Does the timing of the planned evaluations allow the programme to accumulate enough implementation experience to enable useful lessons to be extracted?			X

The matrix describes the link between the information collected through each question/item of a data collection tool and the corresponding evaluation question. Based on the questions included in the evaluation matrix, the consultant will develop specific data collection tools adapted to each target population.

Annex 2. List of persons interviewed during the assessment

Proposed minimum list – maybe added to, or reduced (depending in availability)

UNICEF:

- UNICEF EAPRO Planning Chief (Asako and Xavier)
- CP – Le Hong Loan (SC)/Nguyen Y Duyen, OIC (whoever available)
- SPG – Nguyen thi Thanh An (OIC)
- CSDE – Muthu SC
- EDU – Le Anh Lan, OIC
- OPS – Ziad SC
- Comms – Nguyen Thanh Huong OIC
- PME – Hoa Ngo (SC)
- DR Lesley Miller
- Rana Flower (Rep)

COUNTER-PARTS / PARTNERS

Government:

- MPI – Mrs Nguyen thi Dieu Trinh, Deputy DG
- MOF – Ms Thu, External finance dept
- MOLISA – Mr Nam

UN agencies:

- RCO – Mrs Nguyen Bui Linh
- UNFPA – Mr Le Bach Duong
- UNDP – Mrs Han

Others:

VCCI: Laos Chamber of Commerce and Industries

NGOs:

- Save the Children
- World Vision

Annex 3. List of documents

- CPD
- Strategy notes
- Work plans
- Laos UNDSF-UNPAF
- Vision document
- SITAN
- UNICEF strategic plan
- UNICEF EAPRO regional headlines
- LCO Costed Evaluation Plan
- UNICEF evaluation guidelines
- UNEG evaluation guidelines
- UNICEF Evaluability Assessment Guidelines

Annex 4. Data collection instruments (such as survey questionnaires or interview guides)

4.1 Online Survey

We are conducting a survey to gather valuable insights into the monitoring framework and tools of the Country Programme Document between UNICEF and the Government of Laos. Your participation in this survey will help us better understand how to track results for children. This survey should only take a few minutes to complete and all responses will be kept confidential. We appreciate your time and effort in contributing to this important research. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

1. Does the Country Programme Document (CPD)'s overall Theory of Change (ToC) clearly describe the logic and pathways to expected results?

- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
2. Are the CPD outcomes and outputs realistic?
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
3. Are the indicators of CPD outcomes and outputs adequate to measure their achievement?
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
4. Are the workplans with implementing partners measurable with adequate SMART indicators?
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
5. Are the indicators of the workplans with implementing partners contributing to achieving CPD indicators?
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
6. Is data for CPD monitoring and evaluation readily available?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know/NA

7. Was the CPD and the results framework designed in a participatory manner with UNICEF colleagues and external partners?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't Know/NA
8. Are the indicators and M&E systems of the CPD and workplans used for decision-making and programme improvements?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't know/No answer
9. Does your programme gather any evaluative data with regard to gender equality, disability inclusion, social inclusion or equity amongst programme beneficiaries?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Dont Know/NA
10. Does your programme area have a clear plan and an adequate budget for evaluations? If no, please elaborate.
 - Yes
 - No. Why?
 - Don't Know/NA
11. Do you believe there is a demand both internally and externally for evaluation of your programme? If not why?
 - Yes
 - No. Why?
 - Don't Know/NA

Please let us know if you have any insights/recommendations to share on the data collection and analysis in UNICEF LCO.

4.2 Interviews UNICEF

Protocol for UNICEF staff ¹⁵

¹⁵. Individual responses acquired during the interview will be kept confidential, and the consultant will only share aggregated data and anonymous comments.

Hello, my name is Paul Davies, I've been contracted to conduct an evaluability assessment of the UNICEF Laos Country Programme 2022-2026.

The assessment will gather information about the programme design, the M&E system and available data, and how the programme should be evaluated. The information you share will be kept confidential, and no one else will know your responses to the questions. Our conversation should take about 45 minutes. You have the right to stop this interview and any time and you should not feel obligated to answer any/all questions.

Do you have any questions?

I would like to take notes and record our conversation, to help me capture everything that was said. These notes and recordings will not be shared with anyone else. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Tick () if respondent agrees to be recorded:

Opening question on any insights/concerns about CPD/results framework design and utility ?

Evaluability in principle - Assessment of the design of the planned results for children

Logic

1. Are you familiar with the overall CPD Theory of Change?,(probe) how useful do you find it? (probe) Is there a problem and a clear pathway to the expected results? (probe) How clear is the overall Theory of Change? Which areas of the TOC are unclear?
2. Do you believe that the TOC for your programme as formulated at the outset of the CP is still valid or is there need to adjust the TOC to better reflect adjustments
3. Are the expected results, objectives clear and feasible/realistic? (probe) how do you monitor progress/results?
4. What are the main risks and assumptions that could impact programme performance? Are plans in place to address important these risks and assumptions?
5. To what extent does the CPD address cross-cutting issues, including gender?

Alignment

6. To what extent is the CPD in line with UNCF, national priorities and beneficiaries needs? Can you comment on the ease of the process of securing alignment between these different stakeholders?
7. Are financial resources adequate to meet the expected results? Are resources in general aligned with the results?

Evaluability in Practice: Mechanisms and systems to monitor results

Measurability

8. How measurable are the results?

Responsiveness/standardization of reporting from sections? Challenges with implementing partners reporting process?

9. What challenges, if any, do you anticipate with gathering sufficient data on your programme to enable quality evaluation, including from beneficiaries, implementers and partners?
10. Are indicators sufficiently measurable, with identified means of verification, and do they capture the expected changes? Are baselines and targets clearly established?

11. Are cross-cutting themes sufficiently monitored? Are SMART indicators established for them?

Evaluation Readiness

12. Does your programme have a clear plan and budget for evaluations? Are the planned evaluations aligned to the outcomes and respond to the needs of the programme?
13. Will there be sufficient time for programme experience to be accumulated to enable useful lessons to be extracted? Will there be sufficient time to make adjustments to ensure outcomes are delivered based on evaluation learning?
14. Is there a learning culture within LCO? And with partners?
15. What are your learning priorities for the CPE? What elements of your work do you believe are most important to assess in the context of the CPE in order to provide you with useful lessons learned and recommendations?

UNICEF Senior Management¹⁶

Hello, my name is Paul Davies, I've been contracted to conduct an evaluability assessment of the UNICEF Laos Country Programme 2022-2026.

The assessment will gather information about the programme design, the M&E system and available data, and how the programme should be evaluated. The information you share will be kept confidential, and no one else will know your responses to the questions. Our conversation should take about 45 minutes.

Do you have any questions?

I would like to take notes and record our conversation, to help me capture everything that was said. These notes and recordings will not be shared with anyone else. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Tick () if respondent agrees to be recorded:

Evaluability in principle - Assessment of the design of the planned results for children

Logic

1. How satisfied are you with the overall CPD Theory of Change? (probe) how useful do you find it to describe LCO pathways to results? (probe)
2. What are the key problems the CPD wants to solve and what is the role of UNICEF in doing so?
3. Are the expected results and objectives clear, tangible and realistic?

Alignment

4. How well aligned is the CPD with country priorities? (probe) engagement with partners during CPD design
5. How sound is the design process of the CPD to capture the needs and priorities of children?
6. Are financial resources adequate to meet the expected results? Are resources in general aligned with the results?

¹⁶ Individual responses acquired during the interview will be kept confidential, and the consultant will only share aggregated data and anonymous comments.

Evaluability in Practice: Mechanisms and systems to monitor results

Measurability

7. How useful are the CPD reporting? (probe) How do you use the information? (probe) How do UNICEF's partners use/value the reports?
8. What challenges, if any, do you anticipate to gathering and analyzing performance and results information with LCO?
9. Is LCO adequately staffed to provide necessary information for the evidence generation gaps on a periodic basis?

Evaluation Readiness

10. What are the key strategic areas/projects that need be evaluated in this cycle? What elements are most important to assess to provide you with useful lessons learned and recommendations?
11. Is there a culture of learning within LCO?
12. Are there enough resources to conduct robust evaluations?
13. How are lessons learned from past evaluations being extracted? What are your learning priorities for LCO?

UNICEF PME team¹⁷

Hello, my name is Paul Davies, I've been contracted to conduct an evaluability assessment of the UNICEF Laos Country Programme 2022-2026.

The assessment will gather information about the programme design, the M&E system and available data, and how the programme should be evaluated. The information you share will be kept confidential, and no one else will know your responses to the questions. Our conversation should take about 45 minutes. You have the right to stop this interview and any time and you should not feel obligated to answer any/all questions.

Do you have any questions?

I would like to take notes and record our conversation, to help me capture everything that was said. These notes and recordings will not be shared with anyone else. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Tick () if respondent agrees to be recorded:

Evaluability in principle

Logic

1. How has the CPD designed (Probe: the process followed, who all worked on it). How were the challenges for children identified? How has LCO defined the CPD pillars, activities within these and their prioritization (Probe: criteria or parameters considered/not considered)
2. How were the CPD objectives and indicators established? (probe) design process/participation
3. How satisfied are you with the overall CPD Theory of Change? (probe) how useful do you find it to describe LCO pathways to results? (probe)

¹⁷ Individual responses acquired during the interview will be kept confidential, and the consultant will only share aggregated data and anonymous comments.

4. Are the expected results and objectives clear and tangible? (probe) How measurable are the results?

Alignment

5. How can beneficiaries give input about the programme? To whom? What actions are taken from this information? How do you know?
6. Are financial resources adequate to meet the expected results? Are resources in general aligned with the results?

Evaluability in Practice: Mechanisms and systems to monitor results

Measurability

7. How useful are the tracking tools for the CPD? (probe) usefulness of indicators/M&E tools for strategic decision-making
8. Are indicators sufficiently measurable, with identified means of verification
9. Do indicators capture the expected changes?
10. How is the monitoring data validated and quality assured?
11. What are the main challenges to monitoring?
12. How are technology-based applications or platforms utilized for monitoring?
13. What lessons have been learned as it relates to monitoring?
14. How is monitoring data used in LCO?

Evaluation Readiness

14. What are the key strategic areas/projects that need be evaluated in this cycle? What elements are most important to assess to provide you with useful lessons learned and recommendations?
15. Is there a culture of evaluation within LCO?
16. Are there enough resources to conduct robust evaluations?
17. How are lessons learned from past evaluations being extracted? What are your learning priorities for LCO?

Interviews Counterparts/Partners¹⁸

Protocol for government stakeholders

Hello, my name is Paul Davies, I've been contracted to conduct an evaluability assessment of the UNICEF Laos Country Programme 2022-2026.

The UNICEF country office in Laos decided to conduct an evaluability assessment of its Country Programme Document (CPD) 2022-2026. In doing so, UNICEF wants to know how well they planned for results and whether or not they will be ready to undertake evaluations. The CPD is a document describing the priorities of UNICEF and the Government of Thailand over a period of time. It describes expected results and resources required to achieve those results.

The current CPD is centered on four components: -

¹⁸ Individual responses acquired during the interview will be kept confidential, and the consultant will only share aggregated data and anonymous comments.

- every child and adolescent survives, thrives, and lives in a safe and green environment;
- every child and adolescent learns and acquires skills;
- every child and adolescent is protected from violence, exploitation, and abuse;
- and every child and adolescent benefits from child-sensitive policies and budgets.

The assessment will gather information about the programme design, the M&E system and available data, and how the programme should be evaluated. The information you share will be kept confidential, and no one else will know your responses to the questions. Our conversation should take about 45 minutes. You have the right to stop this interview at any time and you should not feel obligated to answer any/all questions.

Do you have any questions?

I would like to take notes and record our conversation, to help me capture everything that was said. These notes and recordings will not be shared with anyone else. Do you agree to be recorded for this purpose?

Tick () if respondent agrees to be recorded:

Background information on your experience with UNICEF

Can you please explain your role/position within the government and for how long have you been in this position?

1. Please describe your cooperation with UNICEF.
2. How aligned are the CPD expected results with the government priorities and children needs in Laos?
3. How was the programme of cooperation with UNICEF designed? (probe) participation levels, flexibility, openness
4. What are the main goals you hope to achieve through this cooperation?
5. Do you receive data from UNICEF on the progress toward achieving program goals? (probe) How satisfied are you with the information received? what are the challenges to collecting this data?
6. Do you have any other comments or recommendations on the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of UNICEF projects with which you are associated?

Annex 5. Terms of Reference

For further information, please contact:

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