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Evaluation of the MoES-EU-UNICEF Partnership to Strengthen the Education System in Lao PDR

Volume 1-Main Evaluation Report 2024



Evaluation of the MoES-EU-UNICEF Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR

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Company and evaluation team



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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASLO	Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes
BEQUAL	Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CwD	Children with Disabilities
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DESB	District Education and Sports Bureau
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
DoF	Department of Finance
DoI	Department of Inspection
DoP	Department of Planning
DTE	Department of Teacher Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESQAC	Educational Standards Quality Assurance Centre
ESSC	Education and Sports Statistics Centre
ESSDP	Education and Sports Sector Development Plan
ESWG	Education Sector Working Group
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FQS	Fundamental Quality Standards
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GPI	Gender Parity Index
GoL	Government of Lao PDR
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
iTEAM	Project for Strengthening Teacher Capacity to Improve Primary Mathematics Lessons
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KII	Key Informant Interview
KPL	Khang Panya Lao platform
KRA	Key Result Area
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LESMIS	Lao Education and Sports Management Information System
LSRHS	Lao Reproductive Health Survey
LSIS	Lao Social Indicator Survey
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Pedagogical Advisor
PAF	Performance Assessment Framework
PBMIS	Planning and Budgeting Management Information System
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PESS	Provincial Education Services
PMIS	Personnel Management Information System
PSES	Partnership to Strengthen the Education System
PSESE	PSES Evaluation
QA	Quality Assurance
RIES	Research Institute for Educational Sciences
RTPMIS	Request Teacher Plan Management Information System (RTPMIS)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDP	School Development Planning
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Section 1. Executive summary

Overview of the intervention, purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

The Evaluation of the MoES-EU-UNICEF Partnership to Strengthen the Education System in Lao PDR (PSES) was implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and co-funded by the European Union (EU) and UNICEF in close collaboration with the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). The purpose of the PSES was to provide credible evidence, lessons learned, challenges and recommendations to inform and guide the decision-making processes of UNICEF and stakeholders related to systems strengthening work in the education sector. The programme was designed as a catalytic fund to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the MoES Education and Sport Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2016–2020, in harmony with EU budget support and support by development partners, including the EU, UNICEF and other international and bilateral organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The PSES targeted administrators, education planners and other relevant staff at the central level in the key line departments of the MoES as well as Provincial Education Services (PESS), the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) and principals and teachers in 40 districts prioritized by the MoES in the ESDP 2016–2020 for having low learning outcomes. The duty bearers were MoES staff at central, provincial and district levels plus principals and teachers in schools nationwide. The intended rights holders were parents, community members and children throughout Lao PDR.

The PSES was originally designed to be operational from November 2018 to 14 November 2023 but was extended under a second amendment to 31 October 2023 and then through a third amendment to 31 July 2024. The last extension brought the total duration of the PSES programme to 5.7 years (68.6 months) to cover the period from November 2018 to 31 July 2024. The amended PSES programme had a total budget of €11,008,650, which consisted of €9,650,000 from the EU and €1,358,650 from UNICEF.

The PSES consisted of a mixture of upstream and downstream work and had four Key Result (Strategic) Areas (KRAs):

- I. Strengthening the education system (KRA 1). This included support to: i) Strengthening the system for planning, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (KRA 1.1); ii) Strengthening the system for financing (KRA 1.2); iii) Strengthening the system for quality assurance (QA) (KRA 1.3).
- II. (Enhancing) Teacher management and quality (KRA 2). This included: i) Teacher management, allocation and deployment (KRA 2.1); ii) Teacher quality (KRA 2.2).
- III. (Promoting) Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue (KRA 3). This had one main component: Evidence-based strengthening of sector analysis and policy dialogue (KRA 3.1).
- IV. (Strengthening) COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness (KRA 4). This included: i) Prevention and control of COVID-19 (KRA 4.1); and ii) Support for continuity of learning (KRA 4.2). This KRA was added in October 2020.

The purpose of the evaluation is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of UNICEF's activities to strengthen the education system in Lao PDR and to identify areas for improvement. The evaluation is both formative and summative in nature and aims to generate insights that are useful for the design and implementation of future initiatives on systems strengthening in education in Lao PDR, as well as to foster accountability for the performance of the intervention and the results achieved.

The evaluation concerned itself only with the programme's objectives and outcomes and did not assess impact. The objectives of the evaluation were to: i) Assess the relevance of the programme objectives, intervention logic, strategy and approach as well as its collaborative comparative advantage or added value in this area; ii) Assess the programme's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the planned outputs and factors affecting implementation and results (positively and negatively); iii) Assess the programme's management efficiency, partnerships, governance and coordination mechanisms; iv) Assess the programme's outcomes where annual reporting has indicated that they have been achieved, particularly the overall achievements and results that the programme has produced against the objectives and the performance indicators and targets during the programme period; v) Review the strategies and mechanisms for sustainability of the results achieved through the PSES programme support; vi) Assess the coherence of the programme with other interventions at the country level, particularly those implemented with support from UNICEF and the EU, as well as coordination and harmonization with government and other sector players, institutions and programmes to add value while avoiding duplication of effort; vii) Assess the extent to which the programme was informed by child rights and gender-sensitive approaches and contributed towards these related transformative changes.

The **evaluation's scope** at **geographical** level covers the PSES activities nationally and across **all the focus districts**, and at **temporal level** it covers the entire implementation period of the intervention.

The **key users** of this evaluation are the UNICEF Country Office in Lao PDR (UNICEF LCO), the EU, the MoES in Lao PDR, the EU Delegation, the Education Sector Working Group (EWSG) and the wider group of education stakeholders.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation used a **mixed methods design** that combined a theory-based approach rooted in a contribution analysis, **based on the programme's Theory of Change (ToC)**. This ToC was developed during the inception phase to investigate all evaluation questions for all the evaluation criteria mentioned in the evaluation's Terms of Reference (ToR). The evaluation followed a participatory, utilization-focused and theory-based approach of data collection, analysis and triangulation. This meant approaching and engaging evaluation users to ensure that all relevant parties had input and the opportunity to engage in feedback throughout the evaluation. This work included UNICEF LCO, the respective education ministry and departments at national and subnational levels, the EU, other partner organizations and programme beneficiaries as well as other United Nations organizations working in the education sector. There was participation throughout all phases of the evaluation, including evaluation design (inception phase), data collection and analysis, and validation of recommendations.

As such, the evaluation team used a **mixed-methods approach to data collection**, including primary qualitative data from **key informant interviews (KIs)**, **focus group discussions (FGDs)** and an **online survey**, plus **secondary qualitative data** from the review of **relevant documents** and programme data.

At the subnational level, data was purposely sampled in regions and schools that had participated and engaged in PSES activities. Two provinces and two districts were sampled: Xiangkhouang Province and Nonghaet District, and Suvannakhet Province and Phin District. FGDs were conducted in six primary schools and three secondary schools. The evaluation utilized **appreciative inquiry** to shape its data collection tools in order to help interviewees and FGD participants uncover existing strengths and opportunities, as well as to explore challenges and issues constructively. The approach to data analysis incorporated a **realist evaluation approach**, as this approach is designed to understand how and why interventions work in a given context. The evaluation design and tools received ethical clearance from an Ethics Review Board prior to the beginning of the data collection. Taken together, these approaches helped to ensure the rigour of the data gathered and thus the strength of the evaluation findings.

Key conclusions on the findings

The PSES demonstrated alignment with national priorities and global education standards, such as those outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The programme's strategic design, which included extensive consultations with the MoES and other stakeholders, ensured that the PSES addressed the Government's education objectives and complemented other development initiatives. The PSES design addressed equity, but the focus on **vulnerable and marginalized children could have been enhanced**. **The PSES demonstrated strong coherence with national education plans, the EU's budget support framework and ongoing initiatives by development partners like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL), both in the design and during implementation**. The alignment of the PSES with the Education and Sports Development Plan (ESSDP) underscores how the programme was integrated into national and subnational planning, supported by strong engagement with MoES line departments, and was built on sound research, evaluations and continuity of prior work. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19 and leadership changes, the PSES maintained its alignment and focus throughout.

The PSES has made significant progress in achieving its expected results across various KRAs and has achieved almost all of its outcomes. This signifies that the PSES is likely to achieve its overall change or impact. **The systemic reforms which have progressed under the partnership between the PSES and the MoES are in the process of helping to improve the structure and resourcing of the education and sports sector in Lao PDR. This progress should create greater opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports**. The focus on 40 districts with low learning outcomes and the work undertaken on studies and research – combined with reforms to planning, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance – should enable progress towards achieving the vision of the PSES, which was to ensure “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”. These outcomes have been achieved as part of the MoES overall strategy defined under the ESSDP (2021–2025).

The PSES has implemented and piloted a broad range of reforms intended to strengthen the planning, monitoring, evaluation and budgeting of the education system from national to school level: these reforms have **been mostly successful**. Reforms like this form a coherent strategy. Although significant progress has been made

towards improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning, monitoring and evaluation, further work will ensure that tools are completed and adopted and that systems are further enhanced to fully meet outcomes. This has included work on the Lao Education and Sports Management Information System (LESMIS/EMIS) and enhancing information systems for budgeting, planning and accounting, which has made data more accessible at all levels of government. The work on monitoring and evaluation standards, frameworks and tools has helped to align monitoring at all levels, but further efforts are required to fully institutionalize the changes. A significant achievement is the completion of **National Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO)** for Grades 5 and 9: this has helped to focus attention on learning outcomes and formative assessment, and Fundamental Quality Standards (FQS) tool for schools has been piloted and is useful for school development planning (SDP). However, it will be important to link these standards to monitoring at higher levels.

The PSES has strengthened teacher management, allocation and deployment through redevelopment of the Personnel Management Information System (PMIS). External Pedagogical Advisors (PAs) have been integrated into the DESB structure and have built the capacity of external PAs to support continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, including adaptation to the new curriculum. There are still notable gaps in the capacity of PAs; UNICEF is working with the MoES and partners to help address these by contributing to the development of CPD operational guidelines and continued work in capacity development.

The PSES' evidence-based support to sector analysis and policy dialogue has generally been well received and effective, particularly at highlighting disparities in the education system and focusing attention on vulnerable and marginalized groups, including ethnic children, children with disabilities (CwD) and those in remote and rural areas. The equity studies undertaken through the PSES have helped to focus the MoES on issues of equity and have been used by development partners to inform programming. These studies include the **Data Must Speak Positive Deviance School Research**, the **Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study** and the **Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) III**. The contributions made towards the Mid-Term Review of the ESSDP and the Joint Sector Review helped to develop the 9th ESSDP.

One significant success was the work undertaken by the PSES to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on child well-being nationally and in focus districts. Support given to the reopening of schools and school safety was very effective in returning children to school. UNICEF demonstrated strengths in leadership and leveraged PSES funding plus funding from other partners such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Japan and other development partners to enhance epidemic/pandemic preparedness and strengthen the focus of COVID-19 transmission prevention in schools. UNICEF also played a key role in coordinating partners and sector responses, including in health and education. The digital online platform Khang Panya Lao (KPL) helped to ensure learning continuity and inclusivity during the pandemic. It currently supports CPD and provides a wide range of educational resources. It will be important to develop affordable ways of ensuring that KPL is accessible in remote and rural schools as well as to teachers and children lacking digital capacity to access content. Hard copy materials, TV and video series also helped to engage children in learning during and after the pandemic.

UNICEF LCO demonstrated effective engagement in prioritization, leading to strategic adjustments within the PSES framework in response to evolving contexts, including the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The constant adjustments made in coordination with line departments, allowed for the adaptation of outputs and activities to address emerging needs and they helped to ensure sustainability through the inclusion of PSES outputs in line department budgets.

Most PSES interventions are sustainable following completion of the programme, but some will require further work, such as FQS and support to PA strengthening. It is likely that development partners will need to support the MoES to adapt information systems to future needs and to conduct further studies to adapt programming to changing needs in the post-COVID-19 context. **The PSESE determined that a continued focus on capacity-building, systems integration and resource allocation is essential to sustain and build upon the progress made towards enhancing educational planning, monitoring and overall sector performance in most KRA activity areas.**

The PSES focused on 40 districts with low learning outcomes. These districts are considered vulnerable and are likely to have a higher proportion of vulnerable children. While UNICEF's efforts through the PSES considered equity and in general the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children, these groups were not always explicitly the focus across all programme activities. **Emphasizing vulnerable children's needs, especially in rural and remote areas and areas with high proportions of vulnerable groups, and ensuring inclusive educational resources, remains critical for future programme enhancements.**

Lessons learned

General lessons learned

- I. **Cautious approach to technology solutions:** The reality of the grassroots situation should be considered when developing programmes reliant on information and communication technology (ICT). Overreliance on technology in environments where ICT capacity at school level is very low can result in challenges and unforeseen consequences. Efforts to bridge the digital divide in schools and districts through procurement of ICT equipment can result in challenges to sustainability, for example, the inability to repair or service ICT equipment or provide ongoing funds for internet access. A comprehensive assessment to ensure that the programme's goals can be met should be made at the start of any initiative. As in the case of the PSES, piloting different approaches in diverse settings helps to ensure that the most vulnerable and remote people are not left behind; but these approaches should be considered with future costs to sustainability assessed.
- II. **Sustainability planning and reporting against sustainability goals and benchmarks should be mainstreamed through all phases of programming.** Sustainability in education development programmes is crucial for ensuring long-term success and impact. Evaluations conducted during and at the end of a programme should be working from clearly defined sustainability benchmarks, which should also be reported in annual progress reports. Prioritizing sustainability in education development programmes ultimately fosters a culture of responsible local ownership and stewardship.
- III. **Establishing school FQS to inform SDP can be effective in mobilizing local resources, but this needs to be linked to higher-level planning and monitoring to be most effective.** FQS is an effective tool to help schools identify areas of weakness, translate these into school development plans and communicate needs to local authorities. Strengthening the relationship to district and provincial education plans can further enhance effective support to schools by synergizing DESB and PESS plans with school development plans.
- IV. **The Importance of strategic alignment and stakeholder direction.** Strategic alignment of an education programme with national plans and sectoral goals enhances the relevance and effectiveness of programme outcomes. This also emphasizes the importance of robust national strategic plans that can align and coordinate diverse stakeholders. Such plans must be supported by robust communication mechanisms. Technical working groups and the informal partner group help to further facilitate communication and coordination. The PSES also demonstrates the importance of empowering line departments to coordinate partners' contributions, while at the same time ensuring regular communication and coordination between partners to ensure synergies and reduce redundancy and duplication.
- V. **The provision of digital content can help to bridge learning deficits, but it is important to develop mechanisms to ensure inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized persons.** The development and dissemination of digital content via digital learning or content dissemination platforms was likely effective during COVID-19 and following the pandemic to help bridge the learning deficit. Digital content also helps in situations where insufficient learning materials, such as textbooks, are available in schools, as in the case of Lao PDR post-COVID-19. Challenges in internet access and resource distribution highlighted the need for innovative, accessible solutions and inclusive planning for future emergencies in order to ensure that vulnerable groups and those in remote and rural areas have access to digital resources.
- VI. **For future evaluations, ethical approval and the voices of children:** It is important to ensure that the voices of children are heard in evaluations of UNICEF programmes. The ethical approval process for UNICEF is robust and rigorous, but almost always entails one round of feedback to ensure that tools and processes are sufficient to foster the safety and protection of children participating in the evaluation. Sufficient time must be allocated in the evaluation prior to conducting field work, to allow responses to feedback to be submitted and approval granted.

Main recommendations

- I. **Enhance project management, coordination and communication within the MoES (UNICEF LCO).** The capacity of the Department of Planning (DoP), a key line department, to (co)-coordinate and manage programmes should be enhanced to ensure full ownership throughout the MoES and to help address coordination issues within the MoES. This can be facilitated by co-creating a ToC early in the programme design phase. This should involve jointly working on risk and assumption analyses that cover each KRA. Utilizing visual aids, such as risk maps and ToC diagrams, will further facilitate better understanding and communication of risks and assumptions across all involved parties. Also jointly identifying priority direct and indirect beneficiaries will help to clearly define the programme's achievements.
- II. **Enhance the focus on gender and vulnerable and marginalized children (UNICEF LCO, EU and MoES).** Strengthening the focus on equity and gender-related results is essential to ensure that educational programmes are inclusive and address the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. The PSES had an

equity focus and included significant technical work focused on vulnerable children. But marginalized children – especially those with disabilities, girls and ethnic children – were not specifically the focus under all activities. Future programmes should be designed with an explicit emphasis on these groups throughout the entire intervention.

- III. **Enhance synergies through alignment of geographic focus (MoES, UNICEF LCO).** The PSES piloted many activities in selected districts, but in the case of some activities, few districts overlapped. In some cases, this may limit opportunities to fully explore synergies between different components of the programme. This was also the case for other aligned partner programmes, which limited opportunities to explore synergies. To ensure deeper penetration and more effective support, future programmes should consider aligning the geographic focus of activities within the programme and also with other programmes, so as to ensure synergies can be fully explored.

There are areas of work developed under the PSES for which continued efforts will result in improved outcomes. **This is not to say that outcomes are not positive in these areas, but it does underline that additional work will achieve greater outcomes.**

- IV. **Recommendations specific to PSES KRA1 (MoES): Continue/complete working towards enhancing planning, monitoring, evaluating and budgeting at all levels.** This includes: i) The MoES should approve the M&E tools and operational guidelines and mainstream their use by MoES line departments; ii) Continue to develop LESMIS to align with ESSDP monitoring requirements and complete data sharing agreements to ensure appropriate linkages are developed; iii) Link FQS to national and subnational quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation and ensure that SDP is more strongly aligned with DESBs, PESS and ultimately national planning and budgeting before roll-out nationally.
- V. **Recommendations specific to PSES KRA2 (MoES): Continue/complete working towards strengthening teacher effectiveness through improved teacher management, allocation and deployment.** This includes: i) Ensuring the PMIS accurately projects staffing needs in schools; ii) Completing and approving the operational guidelines for Decree 3342 and continuing to strengthen external PAs to help address barriers and challenges to their effectiveness. The CPD guidelines should also help to identify ways in which external and internal PAs can be integrated more fully into FQS, SDP and school-based management processes and how they can be further supported by digital resources such as KPL.
- VI. **Recommendations specific to PSES KRA4 (MoES): Continue efforts to strengthen digital learning and content platforms and expand their access to vulnerable children and remote and rural schools and communities.** KPL has proven to be an effective means of providing professional development materials, lesson aids and other resources to teachers and digital learning materials to students. Continuous efforts should be maintained to reach children in schools with low digital capacity, thus ensuring that all children can benefit from KPL. There should also be continued dialogue to determine how learning management can be effectively incorporated into KPL in order to enable students and teachers to track their learning and guide both to resources based on their progress.
- VII. **KRA4: Strengthen (COVID-19) emergency response and preparedness.** The PSES undertook significant work to strengthen MoES emergency response capacity. There is scope to expand this work to include climate-change-related indicators as well as school safety indicators into tools such as the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and to further develop these indicators into national monitoring frameworks. In addition to quantitative data, there is an opportunity to collect qualitative information through discussions with education authorities, school staff, students and communities. The Emergency Response and Preparedness module should be used throughout Lao PDR and the module should be improved to ensure it monitors the impact of natural disasters and climate change on education effectively.

Section 2. Background

2.1 Lao PDR country and education context

This section contains a summary of the Lao PDR country context, education system and impact of COVID-19. For a more comprehensive summary, please refer to Annex 3.

Lao PDR is a stable, landlocked and mountainous country with a young and ethnically diverse population. It is home to an estimated 7.2 million people, of whom 42 per cent are aged 0 to 19 years. Of the total, there are an estimated 3.7 million females, equivalent to 50.6 per cent of the population. The majority of the population lives in rural areas (62.4 per cent), but urbanization was occurring at a rate of 0.7 per cent in 2022.² Lao PDR is classified as a lower-middle-income developing economy with an annual GDP per capita of US\$2,05 (2022)³ but there is significant inequality, with a Gini coefficient of 56.7, indicating high inequality.

The COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected the development objectives of the national Government in Vientiane, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and disrupting progress towards smooth graduation from least developed country status.^{4, 5, 6} The COVID-19 disruptions resulting from the containment measures, coupled with the impact of the pandemic on the local and global economy, negatively affected the country's prospects and deepened vulnerabilities.⁷ Although the MoES prepared an effective mitigation strategy against COVID-19's socioeconomic ramifications,⁸ reduced economic activity and a lack of remittances resulted in decreased income and constrained access to food and basic social services, which have impacted the capacity to deliver equitable education.⁹

A significant proportion of children are considered vulnerable in Lao PDR. Most children under 18 years old are multidimensionally deprived: 70 per cent suffer from at least two deprivations, and 50 per cent from three or more deprivations concurrently.¹⁰ The average duration of schooling is 5.3 years and low spending on education is reflected in low education quality and learning across the country.¹¹ Student comprehensive learning outcomes are worrying: On average, only one in three Grade 3 students meets literacy standards and nearly 40 per cent of children under the age of 5 (a crucial period for neural development) have no access to early learning opportunities.¹² Attendance in early childhood education (ECE) is low, with just 44.6 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 years old enrolled in ECE programmes in 2019–2020, and only 37.4 per cent completing them.¹³ Primary school participation stood at 97 per cent in 2022 (96 per cent for girls, 98 per cent for boys).¹⁴

The Law on Education (2015) (MoES 2015) determines principles, rules and other measures on educational activities to contribute to protecting and developing the country by enabling people to overcome poverty and socioeconomic barriers. The **ESSDP (2021-2025)**¹⁵ specifies the broad policy objectives for development of the education sector for the foreseeable future. The ESSDP ensures that the strategic directions and policies of the Government of Lao PDR and supporting donors, for better quality and more readily accessible education, are aligned into one overarching national plan for education development.

² Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, accessed 23 April 2024.

³ Source: World Bank.

⁴ Prime Minister's address during the United Nations General Assembly plenary on 3 December 2020.

⁵ United Nations Children's Fund, *Impact of COVID-19 on Children, Adolescents and Their Families in Lao PDR, 2021*, www.unicef.org/laos/media/4936/file/impactofcovid-9onchildrenadolescentsandtheirfamiliesinlaopdr.pdf.

⁶ UNICEF, *United Nations Children's Fund Country Programme Document Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2022*, www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/6876/file/2021-PL16-Lao_PDR_CPD-EN-ODS.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ministry of Education and Sports, *LAO PDR Education COVID-19 Response Plan, May 2021*, MoES, www.unicef.org/laos/media/5561/file/Lao%20PDR%20Education%20COVID-19%20Response%20Plan.pdf.

⁹ The strategy included the objective to 'Ensure continuity of learning through the implementation of diverse learning activities/opportunities aimed at quality learning and wellbeing of learners, teachers, caregivers/parents, school communities taking into account equity and inclusivity'.

¹⁰ UNICEF, 'Children in Lao PDR Continue to Experience Significant Levels of Deprivation', 2 November 2018, www.unicef.org/laos/press-releases/children-lao-pdr-continue-experience-significant-levels-deprivation.

¹¹ World Vision, *Lao PDR Impact Report, Our National Impact Report, 2022*. Available at: https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/WVI-L%20Impact%20Report%202022_online.pdf. Accessed on 26/09/2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Source: MoES EMIS Data.

¹⁴ Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRR.MA?locations=LA>, accessed 15 July 2024.

¹⁵ Ministry of Education and Sports, *Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*, MoES, 2021, www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2023-02-lao-pdr-education-sports-sector-development-plan-2021-2025.pdf.

The Government adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991¹⁶ and developed the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Child. It established the National Commission for Mothers and Children as well as the National Plan of Action on Mothers and Children (2021–2025)¹⁷ to monitor and coordinate children's issues across ministries. Lao PDR ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and adopted its second National Strategy on the Advancement of Women for 2011-2015, which outlines the nation's political commitment to CEDAW. Lao PDR ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in September 2009.¹⁸ The Decree on the CRPD was approved on 18 April 2014.

The ESSDP notes the challenges to the education system, which include: i) limited access to quality ECE programmes which impact the preparedness of children for primary education; ii) the low quality and efficiency of teachers and principals to undertake pedagogical support exacerbated by a lack of teaching-learning materials;¹⁹ iii) the low foundational learning of students in literacy and numeracy skills;²⁰ iv) lack of adequate facilities such as proper water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools, which has a more negative impact on girls, especially for their menstruation-related needs; v) a fragmented and limited child protection system constrained by inadequate human and financial resources; and vi) low preparedness for climate change and natural disasters.²¹ The situation is exacerbated by low expenditure on education (and health), compared to other countries. Article 60 of the Education Law (2015) states that 18% of the national budget should go to education. The Education Sector and Sports Development Plan (ESDP 2016-2020) uses a 17% annual target. Despite these commitments, the actual allocation to education has remained low and decreased from 15.8% in 2015/2016 to 13.7% in 2019 and 13.1 % in 2020.^{22 23}

¹⁶ United Nations, *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1991. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 and ratified on 2 September 1990, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf>.

¹⁷ Government of Lao PDR, 'National Plan of Action on Mothers and Children 2021–2025 (Brochure)', 2021, <https://suncsalaos.org/document/the-national-plan-of-action-on-mothers-and-children-2021-2025-brochure/#:~:text=To%20provide%20the%20conditions%20for,reduce%20multidimensional%20child%20deprivation%3B%20To>.

¹⁸ The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106) was adopted on 13 December 2006 at United Nations Headquarters in New York and was opened for signature on 30 March 2007. Source: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>.

¹⁹ Since 2019, Lao PDR has been rolling out a new primary curriculum with one new grade per year, and a new pre-primary curriculum is planned for roll-out from 2021. Pre-service teacher training is being revised to better align with the new curricula alongside strengthening the teacher trainee practicum requirements.

²⁰ According to the most recent findings of the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) assessment, which was done in 2019 among Grade 5 pupils in six Southeast Asian nations (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines and Viet Nam), Lao PDR placed lowest in both reading and maths. Only 18 per cent of Laotian students met the minimal reading proficiency level and only 12 per cent met the necessary mathematics competence level. These findings suggest that many Laotian kids are not acquiring the necessary knowledge and abilities for future schooling and life.

²¹ Disasters included storms, floods, landslides and wildfires. In 2023, more than 107,000 households in 125 districts across Lao PDR were heavily affected by these disasters. Source: <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/fl-2023-000139-lao>, accessed 23 April 2024.

²² UNICEF (2020) Investing More In Education to Boost The Economy, Graduate From Least Developed Country And Mitigate Covid-19 Impact. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/3921/file/Public%20Investment%20in%20Education_Advocacy%20Brief.pdf. (Accessed on 26/08/2024)

²³ The total education budget for 2020 was estimated at 186.88 million USD of a total national budget of 1,421.88 million USD. Source: [ESSDP \(2021-2025\)](#).

2.2 Overview of the Partnership to Strengthen the Education System in Lao PDR

Table 1 provides an overview of the scope, purpose, objectives, beneficiaries and duration of the PSES.

2.2.1 Summary of the PSES

Table 1. Snapshot of the PSES²⁴

Delegation Agreement	ACA/2018/399-344	
GRANT Reference	SC180-936	
Sponsored Programme / Country	Lao PDR	
Title	Partnership to strengthen the education system (PSES) in Lao PDR	
Donor	European Commission / DG DEVCO	
Duration	1 November 2018 – 14 November 2023 (extended via the second amendment to 31 October 2023 and the third amendment to 31 July 2024)	
European Union Contribution	Through to 14 November 2023	After extension to 31 July 2024
Total eligible costs in euros	€10,540,225	€11,340,730
Maximum donor contribution in euros (without Contingency)	€9,536,595	€9,536,595
Maximum donor contribution in euros (if Contingency approved)	€9,650,000	€9,650,000
UNICEF Contribution	Through to 14 November 2023	After extension to 31 July 2024
	€890,225	€1,690,730
Funding modality	Multi-Donor Action	
Duration of implementation	48 months extended to 68 months	
Period in which Country Office can sign contracts under the agreement:	48 months extended to 68 months	
Grant start date	15 November 2018	
Grant end date	14 November 2022 extended to 31 July 2024	
Reports officially submitted by	UNICEF Lao PDR Country Office	
Submission of Reports	In Vientiane to EU Delegation	
Location	Nationwide	
Purpose	The overall goal of the PSES is to contribute to achieving the overarching objective of the ESSDP 2016–2020, in line with the 8 th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. The PSES is designed as a catalytic fund to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the MoES ESSDP 2016–2020, in harmony with EU budget support and support by development partners, including the EU, UNICEF and other international and bilateral organizations and NGOs.	
Objective	The Education and Sports Sector in Lao PDR is appropriately structured and resourced to create opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports and to benefit from socioeconomic development, so that Lao PDR may graduate from least developed country status by 2020.	
Beneficiaries	MoES at central, provincial and district levels, schools nationwide, parents/community members and children.	

²⁴ Source: United Nations Children's Fund, *Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR Amendment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, September 2020. Updated with information from UNICEF LCO.

Implementing Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget Support Steering Committee to cover PSES Steering Committee • PSES Implementation Committee (led by DoP, with MoES line Departments, EU and UNICEF) • PSES Secretariat (DoP, UNICEF) • PSES Administrator UNICEF
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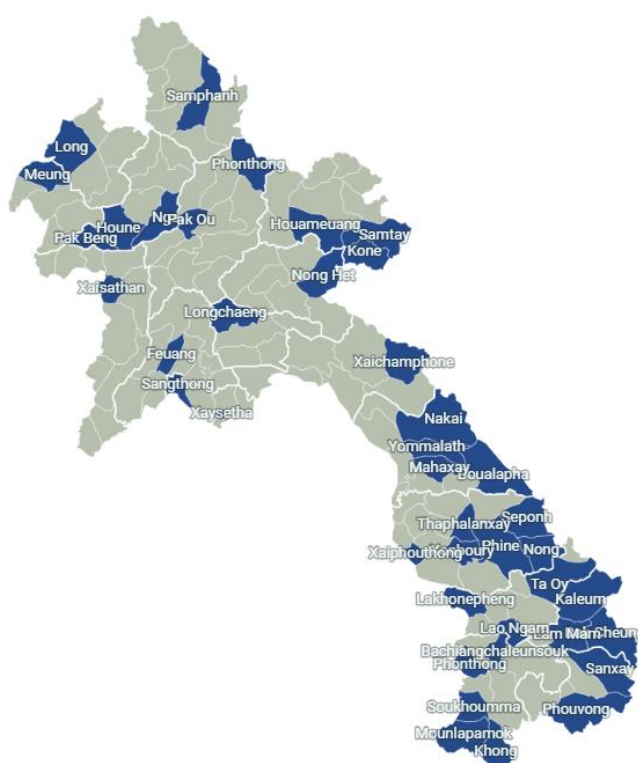
2.2.2 The PSES rationale

In response to the challenges of delivering quality education to all children in Lao PDR, and to support the implementation of the ESDP 2016–2020 and ESSDP 2021-2025, the Government of Lao PDR, the EU and UNICEF developed the PSES. The PSES was originally a four-year programme scheduled to conclude in September 2022, but it was extended twice: i) Due to the delays in programming caused by COVID-19, the programme was extended by an additional 12 months; ii) In December 2023 it was extended by 8.5 months to help ensure the sustainability of all key interventions being handed over to the MoES and strong ownership and capacity across all key departments.²⁵ The last extension brought the total duration of the PSES programme to 5.7 years (68.6 months) to cover the period from November 2018 to 31 July 2024. The amended PSES programme had a total budget of €11,008,650, which includes €9,650,000 from the EU and €1,358,650 from UNICEF.

Figure 1. MoES 40 priority poor districts²⁶

The PSES was designed as a catalytic fund²⁷ to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the ESSDP and to complement other ongoing and future support by development partners that contributes to the plan. This includes the support programmes of the EU, UNICEF, the Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)/BEQUAL, World Bank/ECE, GPE, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), JICA, and relevant NGOs (see Table 3).

UNICEF was responsible for complementary support to the PSES and contributed technical and financial support for capacity development of MoES staff at central, provincial, district and school levels.²⁸ This was in direct alignment with UNICEF Lao PDR’s Country Programme (2022–2026),²⁹ which supports the implementation of the 9th ESSDP (2021–2025) through a systems strengthening approach to ensure that: (a) coverage and quality of early learning opportunities are expanded; (b) children access and complete nine years of basic education with improved learning outcomes and 21st century skills; and (c) the quality of teaching is improved. The PSES contributes towards the UNICEF education outcome on: **“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”**. The work on the PSES aligns with the UNICEF Country Programme through:



²⁵ Amendment 1: 27 October 2020, Addendum N°1 TO EUROPEAN UNION DELEGATION AGREEMENT ACA/2018/399-344; Amendment 2: 13 November 2022, Addendum No. 02 ACA/2018/399-344, 13 November 2022; Amendment 3: 10 January 2024, Letter of Request LAO/REP/2023-192

²⁶ Ministry of Education and Sports, *Lao People’s Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity, Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*, Vientiane, October 2020, MoES.

²⁷ As a catalytic fund, the PSES was designed to provide seed funding and technical support to drive impact and mobilize additional resources, ensuring that sufficient domestic funding is available for effective and efficient implementation of the priority strategic areas of the ESDP/ESSDP.

²⁸ The main focus of the evaluation.

²⁹ Ibid.

- i) The collaborative work of UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other development partners to provide support to improve institutional capacities at national and subnational levels to accelerate reforms, plans, management and finances towards improved education sector performance, including promoting the greater relevance of learning for the future world of work. A focus will be on ensuring the system is more resilient and able to effectively respond to emergencies and the impact of climate change.
- ii) A needs-based, CPD system for basic education teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills, and for school principals to enhance their coaching, leadership and management skills.³⁰
- iii) The promotion and expanded use of digitally supported teaching-learning and hybrid models aimed at achieving better learning outcomes, as well as streamlining data collection.

The PSES was designed to complement the EU Budget Support Programme to Education, which focuses on basic education quality improvement for disadvantaged children and reforms in teacher management, education planning and financing. The PSES is designed to complement other ongoing support to the education sector by development partners, including international and bilateral organizations and NGOs.

The PSES was implemented under the leadership of MoES line departments at the national level, with the involvement of provincial and district level education authorities, VEDCs and school communities in implementation. The PSES works with NGOs at the subnational level to achieve this throughout the **40 priority poor districts** (see Figure 1 above).

2.2.3 PSES objectives and description of actions

The overall goal of the PSES was to contribute to achieving the objectives of the ESDP 2016–2020 and ESSDP 2021–2025, in line with the 8th and 9th NSEDPs and SDG 4. The PSES was designed as a catalytic fund to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the ESSDP 2016–2020 and the subsequent ESSDP 2021–2025, in harmony with EU budget support and support from development partners, including the EU, UNICEF and other international and bilateral organizations and NGOs.

The overall goal of the PSES was to be met by achieving the expected results in (originally) three key areas. An additional key area was added in light of the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **Strengthening the education system**
2. **Improved teacher management and quality**
3. **Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue**
4. **COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness**

Each of these KRAs was supported by the intermediate outcomes, as described below and as shown in the **Logical Framework** for the PSES programme (Annex 4). The Logical Framework aligns with the reconstructed ToC (see section 2.2.5 below) and provides a basis for monitoring progress towards outcomes. The Logical Framework gives a thematic breakdown of outcome areas and outputs; it also details the baselines, targets and means of verification for each output. The activities that were conducted by the PSES between 2018 and 2024 are shown in Annex 5.

The PSES originally focused on capacity and systems strengthening at all levels in the selected KRAs 1 to 3. However, in response to the pandemic, it was agreed through an amendment that the EU would allocate additional funding to the PSES to further strengthen the capacity of the MoES to respond to the emergency situation. A fourth KRA was added to the PSES for this purpose³¹ although there are links between the ESSDP strategies, The MoES COVID-19 Response Plan and all PSES KRAs (see Annex 6).

The expected results for each KRA are shown in Table 2 below.

³⁰ UNICEF is also promoting more active engagement from parents and communities in school management and monitoring, using communication strategies for demand creation and participation.

³¹ The adjustments for the amendment to the PSES programme in 2020 notably also allowed UNICEF and the EU Delegation to align the PSES with and help shape the design of GPE III programme/World Bank support to the MoES (US\$47.5 million); thereby serving as a good example of helping the MoES to promote stronger policy coherence and donor coordination and collaboration that the programme sought to realize.

Table 2. Four key areas of the PSES programme

Focus Area	Expected Results
Strengthening the education system (KRA 1). This includes support to: i) Strengthening the system for planning, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (KRA 1.1); ii) Strengthening the system for financing (KRA 1.2); iii) Strengthening the system for quality assurance (QA) (KRA 1.3).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in results-based subsector annual planning, budgeting and monitoring. • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in data management and utilization to inform monitoring, planning and budgeting processes. • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES in national accounting system operations. • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in QA and learning assessment.
(Enhancing) Teacher management and quality (KRA 2). This includes: i) Teacher management, allocation and deployment (KRA 2.1); ii) Teacher quality (KRA 2.2).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in operationalization of equitable teacher allocation and deployment. • By 2023, improved capacity of PAs to provide CPD to primary and lower-secondary teachers.
(Promoting) Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue (KRA 3). This has one main component: Evidence-based strengthening of sector analysis and policy dialogue (KRA 3.1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2023, improved capacity of the MoES in evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue.
(Strengthening) COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness (KRA 4). This includes: i) Prevention and control of COVID-19 (KRA 4.1); ii) Support for continuity of learning (KRA 4.2). This focus area was added in October 2020. ³²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2023, learners, educators, caregivers/parents and school communities supported to strengthen epidemic/pandemic preparedness and prevent and control the transmission and spread of COVID-19. • By 2023, learners in disadvantaged and COVID-19 high-risk areas have access to diverse learning opportunities ensuring continuity of learning. • By 2023, teachers and parents/caregivers have capacity to support remote learning, taking into account equity and inclusivity. • By 2023, the resilience of the education system for dealing with emergency situations has been strengthened.

Together these initiatives are designed to strengthen policy-based planning and implementation at province, district and village levels. Interventions have focused mostly on the primary level, with some focus extending also to ECE plus lower and upper secondary education.

Many of the programme sub-components were applied nationally, for example systems strengthening through LESMIS. A mapping of focal and pilot districts for each sub-component is shown in Annex 7.

The majority of activities in KRA 1 and KRA 3 were at the national level. UNICEF estimates that 1.3 million children were reached through the programme, primarily through KRA 4.2 in which digital learning materials were accessible to children throughout Lao PDR. Data on numbers of children reached in each specific component was not available during inception but was to be requested during the Primary Data Collection phase.

³² The partnership was amended in recognition of the changing education context in Lao PDR as the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally. As part of the amendment, the EU allocated additional funding to the PSES to further strengthen the MoES' capacity to respond to the emergency, with a fourth KRA (KRA 4) added to support the MoES COVID-19 response as outlined in the MoES COVID-19 Response Plan, developed with the support of UNICEF. UNICEF was also the Grant Agent for the GPE COVID-19 Accelerated Funding Grant, an 18-month funding to support the COVID-19 education response which ended on 30 September 2022. The total funding was US\$7 million. Activities under the GPE COVID-19 grant also complement activities under KRA 4 (see below).

2.2.4 PSES roles and contributions of stakeholders

This section outlines the mapping of the range of stakeholders involved for the whole intervention, across the entire implementation period. What is presented is a high-level mapping. Specific stakeholder mapping to activities under each KRA is shown in Annex 8. This section will continue to be updated as needed for the collection of data in later phases of the evaluation. Table 3 summarizes the stakeholders for the PSES and their roles and contributions.

Table 3. PSES roles and contributions of stakeholders

Description of stakeholder	Type of stakeholder	Role in the PSES programme
European Union	Donor	Provide financial resources to the PSES and supervise the overall design and implementation of the programme.
UNICEF	Direct implementer and co-financer	Responsible for the direct implementation of the PSES.
Education Sector Working Group (ESWG)	Implementing partner	Responsible for coordination with the MoES and development partners.
Development partners	Implementing partner	PSES coordinating with development partners and enabling potential contributions to each KRA as shown in Annex 8.
Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)	Primary duty bearers National government/ implementing partner	Leadership role including in designing the capacity-building and its implementation, overall ownership, monitoring and feedback on progress.
Other government line agencies	Primary duty bearers National government beneficiaries	Use available systems and data for planning, budgeting in the education sector and coordinating with COVID-19 mitigation measures.
Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) and District Education and Sports Bureaus (DESBs)	Primary duty bearers Subnational level government administrative offices	Provide the necessary infrastructure, systems and support for capacity development to access and use a functional system such as LESMIS; coordinate teacher training and COVID-19 mitigation measures / school reopening; undertake decentralized planning and sector analysis.
Teachers and instructors	Secondary duty bearers Direct beneficiaries	Ensure quality teaching, quality reporting into systems such as LESMIS, facilitate COVID-19 mitigation measures and school reopening.
Students in Lao PDR and parents, guardians and community members	Rights holders	Beneficiaries of the outcomes achieved with particular reference to KRA 2 (Teacher management and quality) and KRA 4 (COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness).

2.2.5 PSES reconstructed ToC

The draft PSES ToC (see Figure 2 below) was developed retrospectively by the evaluation team in conjunction with UNICEF LCO during the inception phase of the evaluation; it reflects the objectives and modalities of the PSES in the final iteration of the programme following its third amendment.³³ The PSES was used to provide a framework to help visualize relationships between the different contributions towards the programme's desired outcomes.

The PSES ToC aligns with the overall ESSDP 2021–2025, which includes: (i) consolidating and deepening the analysis of data on education (for example disaggregated, including by gender, ethnicity and disability, analysis of enrolment, completion rates, dropout, transition rates and quality indicators), literacy and numeracy levels; (ii) strengthening the linkages between education, employment and other socioeconomic dimensions to guide evidence-based planning and investment; (iii) improving the efficiency of teacher deployment and placement; and (iv) developing a strategy to allocate the non-wage budget allocation.

The ToC articulates the logic for achieving the overarching vision of the plan, which also aligns with UNICEF's strategic vision for education: **“More children, including adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, are**

³³ As noted in section 1.2, the PSES has evolved throughout its duration through three amendments.

better prepared for school and have improved learning outcomes and skills to achieve their full potential”. The PSES programme will contribute to this vision through its overall change/impact, which is:

The Education and Sports Sector in Lao PDR is appropriately structured and resourced to create opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports, and to benefit from socioeconomic development in order for Lao PDR to be eligible to graduate from Least Developed Country status.

The overall impact will be achieved through the **desired outcomes**: (KRA 1) Improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning, monitoring and evaluation of the education system, including streamlined, results-based annual subsector planning and budgeting and monitoring system; (KRA 2) Strengthened teacher quality, effectiveness, management, allocation and deployment; (KRA 3) Improved MoES capacity to undertake and promote evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue and conduct required studies and research; (KRA 4 added October 2020) Reduced impact of COVID-19 on child well-being and education and strengthened COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness.

The ToC acknowledges that these outcomes cannot occur by working in isolation and that coordination and synergy with other strategies, programmes and initiatives are key to ensuring that the outcomes and impact can be maximized. Therefore, the ToC notes the **common alignment** of the PSES with other initiatives and strategies including: i) the EU’s Education Programme objectives for Lao PDR (2021–2025); ii) the EU’s Development Cooperation in Lao PDR (2021–2027); iii) priority areas of the MoES-UNICEF annual workplans (2018–2023); iv) the broader UNICEF Country Programme Document 2017–2021 and 2022–2026 for education; v) the objectives of the ESSDP (2021-2025); vi) the NSEDP and SDG 4 on education quality; and vii) the MoES Budget Support Performance Assessment Framework (PAF).

The ToC follows the logic that each outcome can be achieved if the programme successfully produces the **outputs** applicable to each outcome. It is also noted that outputs may influence more than one outcome and that all outputs are required to achieve the programme’s impact. The ToC also highlights the main **barriers and challenges** applicable to each outcome area. **The PSES ToC does not detail inputs.**

The main **risks** applicable to the whole programme are shown in the ToC and they include: i) climate and disaster vulnerability, including epidemics and pandemics that can disrupt development paths; ii) longer-term socioeconomic and fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; iii) lack of sustainability and ownership by the MoES; iv) insufficient or reduced allocation of the education budget; v) limited human resources and organizational capacity of the Government (national and subnational levels) to support the effective intervention and reporting of the programme; and vi) limited openness on the part of schools, school principals, teachers and communities to receiving information and supporting changes in education.

External assumptions can be decisive for programme performance if not realized. **External assumptions** present a given critical context that needs to be fulfilled for the programme to take place as planned. The key external assumptions for the PSES logic may be determined on the basis of the programme modalities and funding and they are: i) conducive political environment; ii) national ownership; iii) commitment from implementation and strategic partners; iv) continuity and reform of government policies; and v) continued economic growth enabling continued investment in children.

There are also **causal assumptions** which present the underlying logic of the generation of the changes in the ToC. If these assumptions are not realized, this will have an impact on PSES performance; but contrary to external assumptions, causal assumptions can be changed by programme management, for example based on the results of monitoring and evaluations. The key **causal assumptions** include: i) Implementation of results-based planning, budgeting and monitoring at national and subnational level leads to improved quality of education service delivery; ii) Increasing capacity in education policies, planning and budgeting will be reflected in the strengthening of the education system; iii) Improving teachers’ capacity will lead to enhancing their application of skills and behaviour changes; iv) Vertical and horizontal integrated approaches to system strengthening will improve service supply and demand and strengthen the enabling environment.

Figure 2. Reconstructed ToC for the PSES programme (over page)

Key External Assumptions

- I. Conducive political environment
- II. National ownership
- III. Commitment from implementation and strategic partners
- IV. Continuity and reform of government policies
- V. Continued economic growth allowing continued investment in children

Key Causal Assumptions

- I. Implementation of results-based planning, budgeting and monitoring at national and sub-national level leads to improved quality of education service delivery.
- II. Increasing capacity in education policies, planning and budgeting will be reflected in the strengthening of the education system
- III. Improving teachers' capacity will lead to enhancing their applying skills and behaviour changes.
- IV. Vertical and horizontal integrated approaches to system strengthening will improve service supply and demand and strengthen the enabling environment.

Key Risks

- I. Climate and Disaster vulnerability including epidemics and pandemics that can disrupt development paths.
- II. longer-term socioeconomic and fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- III. Lack of sustainability and ownership by MoES.
- IV. The allocation of education budget not sufficient or reduced.
- V. Limited human resources and organisational capacity of the Government (national and sub-national levels) to support the effective intervention and reporting of the programme.
- VI. Limited openness on the part of schools, school principals, teachers and communities to receiving information and supporting changes in education.

Overarching Vision: *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.*

Overall Change/Impact: The Education and Sports Sector in Lao PDR is appropriately structured and resourced to create opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports, and to benefit from socio-economic development in order for the Lao PDR to be eligible to graduate from Least Developed Country status.

Common Alignment with : i) the EU's Education Programme objectives for Lao PDR (2021-2025); ii) the EU's Development Cooperation in the Lao PDR (2021-2027); iii) priority areas of the MoES-UNICEF annual work plans (2018-2023); iv) the broader UNICEF Country Programme Document (CPD) 2017-2021 and 2022-2026 for education; v) the objectives of the Education Sector Development Plan (2021-2025); vi) the National Socio-Economic Development Plan and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality of Education; and vii) MoES Budget Support Performance Assessment Framework (PAF).

Outcomes

(KRA 1) Improved Budgeting, Quality Assurance, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation of the education system including streamlined results-based annual sub-sector planning, budgeting and monitoring system.

(KRA 2) Strengthened teacher quality, effectiveness, management, allocation and deployment.

(KRA 3) MoES' capacity to undertake and promote evidence-based Sector Analysis and Policy Dialogue and to conduct required studies and research improved.

(KRA 4 Added October 2020) Reduced impact of COVID-19 on child wellbeing and education and COVID19 Emergency Response and Preparedness strengthened.

Cross-Cutting Strategies: i) Strategic collaboration with United Nations agencies and other development partners; ii) Promoting evidence-informed policy dialogue; iii) Public advocacy and communications; iv) gender and disability; and v) disaster risk reduction and emergency response. children.

Outputs

1.1 Available and functioning streamlined results-based annual subsector planning, budgeting and monitoring system.
 1.2 Available and functioning improved EMIS data quality and utilization.
 1.3 Available and functioning QA support for PB MIS development and implementation.
 1.4 Grade 5 and Grade 9 national assessments available and meet national standards.

1.5 Online PMIS and LESMIS are used to inform teacher allocation and deployment.
 1.6 Available and functioning national PA upgrading programme under the framework of the national continuous professional development framework for primary teachers.

1.7 Mid-term and end-term review of ESSDP 2016-2020 to inform the new ESSDP 2021-2025.
 1.8 ESSDP 2021-2025 development.
 1.9 Strengthened Focal Group (FG) 1 and 2 (or equivalent) functionality through: the conduct of regular meetings based on the ToR and annual workplans; joint annual sector reviews; MTR and JRM.

1.10 All DESB effectively follow the Lao PDR Safe School Operations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
 1.11 Learning materials/resources for ECE/pre-primary, primary and lower secondary developed and disseminated via various platforms, including online MoES Teaching and Learning Platform.
 1.12 Reading materials printed and distributed to students in remote areas.

Barriers/Challenges/Constraints

- I. Challenges ensuring equitable access to education.
- II. Low culture of education data use.
- III. Low capacity at subnational level.
- IV. Low coordination between MoES agencies.

- i. Inadequate supply of teachers.
- ii. Inefficient sector management relating to capacity development of systems, institutional and human resource development.
- iii. Low capacity and motivation of teachers.
- iv. Deepening learning crisis.


- I. Low capacity and motivation for education planners and administrators to ensure policy and budgeting are evidence-led.
- II. Delays in govt planning and scheduling of MTR and ETR and ESSDP development.

- I. Lack of access to electricity, computers, smart phones and/or internet in rural remote areas.
- II. Lack of digital literacy skills among teachers and students.

Section 3. Purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

The ToR for the evaluation shown in Annex 1 defines the purpose, objectives and evaluation questions. The purpose, scope and objectives are detailed in Annex 9 and are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Key aspects of the evaluation

Intervention to be evaluated	Evaluation of the MoES-EU-UNICEF Partnership to Strengthen the Education System in Lao PDR (PSESE)
Purpose	Provide credible evidence, lessons learned, challenges and recommendations to inform and guide the decision-making processes of UNICEF and stakeholders related to systems strengthening work in the education sector.
Duration of the intervention under evaluation	5 years and 5 months (November 2018 – April 2024).
Duration of the evaluation	May to July 2024.
Geographic scope of the intervention to be covered by the evaluation	The PSES is a national programme active throughout Lao DPR (see Annex 7). The PSESE will focus on the national level and two provinces and two districts: Xiangkhouang Province and Nonghaet District, and Suvannakhet Province and Phin District.
Key stakeholders of the intervention	Central level: UNICEF Lao PDR staff, MoES, EU and other key development partners. Subnational level: PESS and DESBs. School and community level: teachers, school principals, parents, learners.
Intervention results levels	Due to its limited scope, the evaluation will concern itself with the contribution to the programme outcome objectives.
Evaluation level	This evaluation is to focus on the results chain elements of inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, while not trying to investigate the impact, which is beyond the scope in this complex context. The evaluation will assess the programme's outcomes where annual reporting has indicated that they have been achieved, particularly the overall achievements and results that the programme has produced against the objectives and the performance indicators and targets during the programme period.  <pre> graph LR Input[Input] --> Activities[Activities] Activities --> Output[Output] Output --> Outcome[Outcome] Outcome --> Impact[Impact] </pre>
Key users of the evaluation results to be consulted for the evaluation design and implementation³⁴	UNICEF Country Office in Lao PDR European Union MoES in Lao PDR EU Delegation Education Sector Group and the wider group of education stakeholders
Specific objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Assess the relevance of the programme objectives, intervention logic, strategy and approach as well as its collaborative comparative advantage or added value in this area. II. Assess the programme's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the planned outputs, and factors affecting implementation and results (positively and negatively). III. Assess the programme's management efficiency, partnerships, governance and coordination mechanisms. IV. Assess the programme's outcomes where annual reporting has indicated that they have been achieved, particularly the overall achievements and results that the programme has produced against the objectives and the performance indicators and targets during the programme period. V. Review the strategies and mechanisms for sustainability of the results achieved through the PSES programme support. VI. Assess the coherence of the programme with other interventions at the country level, particularly others implemented through UNICEF's support, those by the EU, as well

³⁴ ToR p. 5

Intervention to be evaluated	Evaluation of the MoES-EU-UNICEF Partnership to Strengthen the Education System in Lao PDR (PSESE)
	<p>as coordination and harmonization with the Government and other sector players, institutions and programmes to add value while avoiding duplication of effort.</p> <p>VII. Assess the extent to which the programme is informed by children's rights and gender-sensitive approaches and is contributing towards these related transformative changes.</p>
Evaluation questions	<p>Evaluation questions were clustered under the Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability (2009³⁵ and 2010)³⁶ and were derived from the evaluation ToR. Gender, equality, disability and social inclusion were often mainstreamed through evaluation questions; but given the importance to the PSES, these are given their own criteria (thematic area) for this evaluation. Evaluation questions are shown in the evaluation matrix (see Annex 10) and the ToR for the assignment (see Annex 1).</p>

³⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Guidelines for Project and Programme Evaluations*, OECD, 2009.

³⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, Quality Standards for Development Evaluation*, OECD, 2010.

Section 4. Evaluation methodology

4.1 Methodology and approach

4.1.1 Overview of the methodology and approaches

This section presents a summary of the methodology and approach used for this evaluation. A full and detailed overview of the methodology is presented in Annex 11.

Consistent with the United Nations Evaluation Norms and Standards (2016),³⁷ the purpose of this evaluation was formative and summative and followed a participatory and inclusive methodological approach. The formative component responded to the evaluation questions which are clustered under the OECD/DAC^{38 39} and UNEG criteria of relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, as well as gender, equity, and human rights. The summative component drew conclusions as to the likelihood of the programme achieving its objectives and outcomes, where annual reporting had indicated that they have been achieved, particularly the overall achievements and results that the programme had produced against the objectives and the performance indicators and targets during the programme period.

The evaluation was guided by UNICEF's revised Evaluation Policy (2018),⁴⁰ UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016), UNEG Guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation (2014),⁴¹ UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020),⁴² UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards and Research (2021),⁴³ Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis (2021) and UNICEF-Adapted UNEG Evaluation Report Standards (2017).⁴⁴ Moreover, the evaluation took into consideration the issues of equity, gender equality, human rights and rights of the child. This was done by undertaking an evaluability assessment to determine the human rights, gender equity and child rights dimensions of the intervention that can be evaluated.⁴⁵ The guiding questions included: To what extent was gender, human rights or child rights reported on? What were the benefits and opportunities of taking each into consideration? What were the gender, human rights or child rights objectives achieved (or likely to be achieved) and mainstreaming principles adhered to by the intervention? To what extent was it a missed opportunity? The evaluation methodology highlights benchmarks relevant to human rights and gender equity, which were expanded through the evaluation as a greater understanding of the interventions emerged.

The evaluation considered triangulation, sampling, ethical considerations (including ethical clearance) as well as methodological limitations and mitigation measures.

The evaluation questions were expanded into a draft **Evaluation Matrix (Annex 10)** which specifies the sources and types of information responsive to the evaluation questions and maps each question to the KIIs, FGDs, a survey and secondary data as well as analytical methods and other considerations where applicable.

The evaluation used a **mixed methods design** that combined a theory-based approach rooted in a contribution analysis to investigate all evaluation questions for all the evaluation criteria mentioned in the ToR. The evaluation followed a participatory, utilization-focused and theory-based approach of data collection, analysis and triangulation. This meant approaching and engaging evaluation users to ensure that all relevant parties had input and the opportunity to engage in feedback throughout the evaluation. This included the UNICEF Country Office, the respective education ministry and departments at national and subnational levels, the EU, other partner organizations, programme beneficiaries as well as other United Nations organizations working in the education

³⁷ United Nations Evaluation Group, *UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation*, 2016, www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/uneg-norms-standards-for-evaluation-2016.

³⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Guidelines for Project and Programme Evaluations*, OECD, 2009.

³⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, Quality Standards for Development Evaluation*, OECD, 2010.

⁴⁰ United Nations Children's Fund, *Revised Evaluation Policy of UNICEF*, 2018, www.unicef.org/evaluation/documents/revised-evaluation-policy-unicef-2018.

⁴¹ United Nations Evaluation Group, *Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation – Towards UNEG Guidance*, 2014, www.uneval.org/document/detail/980.

⁴² United Nations Evaluation Group, *UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation*, 2020, https://procurement-notices.undp.org/view_file.cfm?doc_id=302194.

⁴³ United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis', 2021, www.unicef.org/evaluation/documents/unicef-procedure-ethical-standards-research-evaluation-data-collection-and-analysis.

⁴⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF Adapted UNEG Evaluation Reports Standards', 2017, www.unicef.org/evaluation/media/816/file/UNICEF-Adapted-UNEG-Evaluation-Report-Standards.pdf.

⁴⁵ Child rights were defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989; entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49. Source: www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text.

sector. There was participation in all phases of the evaluation, including evaluation design (inception phase), data collection and analysis, and validation of recommendations.

These approaches were applied through the following methods, which are described in detail in Annex 11.

1. **Literature review** of background documents and other relevant data, including a literature review of implementation partner reports and PSES financing and design documents (see Annex 2).
2. **Review of the external environment** influencing the PSES, including other partner programmes and reports, and the external environment and education sector data as referenced throughout this report.
3. **Analysis of secondary data:**
 - a) **Financial process and cost-effectiveness analysis.**
 - b) Data on **enrolments, learning outcomes, teachers trained, schools** equipped, and other available data as presented in this report.
 - c) Analysis of data relating to programme **outputs and outcomes** as highlighted in the logframe (see Annex 4).
4. **Collection and analysis of primary data consisting of:**
 - a) **Discussions** with key implementing partners and stakeholders.
 - b) **KIIs** with UNICEF programme staff, PSES programme staff, implementing partners and government officials who had participated in or benefited from the PSES programme.
 - c) **FGDs** with principals, teachers and VEDC members who had been beneficiaries of the PSES programme.
 - d) **Online perception survey** for implementing partners, donors, government officials and other stakeholders able to respond.

4.2 Primary data collection: KIIs, FGDs and online perception survey

Primary data collection was undertaken between 6 June and 6 July 2024. **Two provinces and two districts** were purposefully selected for primary data collection based on their having implemented the most programme activities (see Annex 7). The regions selected were Xiangkhouang Province and Nonghaet District, and Savannakhet Province and Phin District. Four primary schools and one secondary school were visited in each district. The forms and tools used for primary data collection are detailed below.

- I. **Tool 1: Online perception survey:** To better understand stakeholders' appreciation of the programme, a perception survey was administered in Lao and English, then distributed to a total of 783 participants between 26 and 28 June 2024. Programme WhatsApp groups were used for distribution of the survey link and therefore the details of participants, for example gender, were only known for those responding. The results of the online survey are shown in Annex 12. A total of 137 respondents (97 female, 39 male, 1 not available, gender parity index: 2.49) completed the survey. Ten persons (9 female, 1 male, gender parity index: 9) were identified as persons with disabilities; 80 per cent (110) of respondents were located at the MoES at the provincial (PESS) or district (DESB) level. Sampling was purposeful and included all programme contacts available through WhatsApp groups and email. The list of participants was expanded by snowballing during the KIIs.
- II. **Tool 2: KIIs:** Key informants were interviewed to help bring in-depth knowledge and understanding to the evaluation using a semi-structured questionnaire, from which questions were contextualized according to the respondent's background and engagement with the PSES. Sixty-one persons (32 female, 29 male, gender parity index: 1.10) were consulted using KIIs. A list of agencies and numbers of persons consulted in each by gender is shown in Annex 14. Sampling was purposeful and included all heads of central departments and agencies with which the PSES had interacted, plus two focal provinces and districts in which the PSES had directly engaged in activities.
- III. **Tool 3: FGDs with teachers, principals and VEDC members:** FGDs were conducted with school principals, teachers and representatives of the VEDC in the surveyed regions of Xiangkhouang Province, Nonghaet District and Savannakhet Province, Phin District. The selection of schools was purposeful to ensure that programme activities had been conducted in the schools. Four primary schools and one secondary school were selected in Nonghaet District and three primary schools and two secondary schools in Phin District. A total of 72 persons (47 female, 25 male, gender parity index: 1.88) participated in the FGDs. The FGDs were conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and protocols in line with UNICEF ethical guidelines, and were vetted by a UNICEF ethical review. Sampling was designed to include primary and secondary schools located in focal districts in which the PSES had directly engaged in activities.

Table 5 shows the number of persons in each stakeholder category participating in each of type of primary data collection. A complete list of agencies consulted is shown in Annex 14 as is the gender disaggregated number of participants. A total of 270 persons (176 female, 94 male) participated in the primary data collection. More women

participated in the evaluation than men, by a factor of almost two (GPI 1.87). However senior government officials consulted for KIIs were predominantly men: GPI 0.71 at the national level and GPI 0.82 at the subnational level.

Table 5. KIIs and FGDs conducted for the evaluation

SN	Key category	Type	KIIs		FGDs		Online survey		Total	
			T	GPI	T	GPI	T	GPI	T	GPI
1	European Commission	Donor	1	0.00	0	NA	0	NA	1	0.00
2	UNICEF	Donor and direct Implementer	11	4.50	0	NA	3	NA	14	6.00
5	Other Implementing Partners (NGOs, etc.)	Implementing partner	6	2.00	0	NA	2	1.00	8	1.67
6	Ministry of Education and Sports at the national level	National government	12	0.71	0	NA	15	6.50	27	2.00
7	Ministry of Education and Sports at the provincial (PESS) or district (DESS) level	NA	31	0.82	0	NA	110	2.14	141	1.71
8	Other	National government	0	NA	0	NA	7	2.50	7	2.50
9	School	Direct beneficiary	0	NA	72	1.88	0	NA	72	1.88
10	Total		61	1.10	72	1.88	137	2.43	270	1.87

4.3 Data analysis

4.3.1 Data analysis techniques employed

For the data analysis, the evaluation used a set of standard analysis tools and frameworks, including:

- **Results and contribution analysis:** A systematic analysis of the contribution of different components and implementation strategies to the PSES's purpose and objectives as shown in the ToC. This includes consideration of any unintended results. Moreover, the evaluation team analysed data concerning the outcomes observed and determined if/to what extent the programme contributed to them. **Contribution analysis** focused on understanding the contribution(s) made by the intervention in **the four intervention areas** under assessment relative to the observed results, through an improved understanding of why the observed results had or had not occurred and the roles played by the intervention and other internal and external factors. The **ToC** was retrospectively developed as part of the inception phase and then used to guide examination of the linkages between activities, outputs and the results observed, and thereby to construct a strong contribution/attribution story for the programme.
- **Analysis of PSES programme coherence:** The challenging, heterogeneous and dynamic context for the interventions made it particularly critical that the implementation strategies and initiatives were coherent.
- **Gender sensitivity and vulnerable person responsiveness, and transformative analysis:** An overall assessment of the gender sensitivity and responsiveness of the PSES programme design, programming, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation was carried out. Given the context, the assessment gave special attention to protection issues concerning vulnerable persons.
- **Equity with special attention to equal access to basic social services** was assessed, with special attention paid to different vulnerability factors: disability, religion, indigenous peoples and poverty, and to different age groups of children and adolescents. When disaggregated data could not be obtained, the evaluation considered these limitations as important evaluation information.
- **Assumption analysis** was applied through a systematic analysis of the assumptions and hypotheses presented in the overall ToC. Special attention was given to the dynamic and diverse perceptions among key stakeholders regarding the assumptions.
- **Process analysis** was applied to analyse the impact of the PSES programme's processes on anticipated outcomes through each outcome area of the programme, taking into account the need to address challenges and a changing political and social environment.

The distinctions between **findings, conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations** were carefully observed and reflected in the structure of the final evaluation report. The findings were contextualized with reference to a timeline of events that occurred during the implementation of the PSES and may have positively or negatively affected implementation (Annex 15).

Validation and triangulation of results was achieved using the following methods: i) Asking similar questions to multiple respondents in each field site; ii) Asking the same questions in multiple field sites; iii) Integrating qualitative and quantitative findings; and iv) Research protocol for a well-developed methodology and evaluation matrix.

4.4 Data protection protocol and evaluation ethics

The ToR for the assignment detail the ethical considerations for the PSESE (see Annex 1). As specified in the ToR, the evaluation incorporated a human rights-based and gender perspective and is based on results-based management principles and logical framework analysis. The evaluation team identified potential ethical issues and approaches, as well as the processes for ethical review and oversight of the evaluation process. Any ethical issues which arose during the evaluation were documented, including how the evaluation team responded or addressed each issue.

As required in the ToR, the evaluation team strictly followed the UNEG ethical guidelines⁴⁶ and the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis throughout the evaluation process. The evaluation team ensured that the principles of integrity, independence and impartiality as well as accuracy, completeness and reliability were respected. The evaluation team prevented any form of potential conflict of interest and ensured that the evaluation was conducted in a transparent and accountable manner. The evaluation process, including quality assurance procedures, ensured that evidence in the evaluation cannot be traced back to any individual informant.

UNICEF required the evidence generation conducted to be in full compliance with ethical considerations, including during evaluations, research and data collection. Ethical considerations were assessed and documented, and clearance was sought before data collection could commence. Documentation for ethical clearance was prepared by the evaluation team in accordance with the requirements of UNICEF and United Nations guidance, including but not limited to the UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020); the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN System, 2008; and the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards and Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis. All data collection tools and procedures, including consent forms, underwent a review by UNICEF's Ethics Review Board before being approved for application in the field. The ethics certificate and informed consent forms are included in Annex 16.

The participation of all respondents was on a voluntary and anonymous basis and was conducted under strict protocols to ensure confidentiality and personal safety. When engaging informants, the evaluation team ensured the confidentiality, data protection and protection of vulnerable respondents, and the evaluators ensured that the evaluation process would not cause harm.

4.5 Management of the evaluation and the quality assurance process

The Quality Assurance System was implemented step-by-step, providing the most appropriate type of quality support according to the phase of the process and the activity taking place and in accordance with the standards upon which the evaluation is based (see section 'Overview of methodology'). Moreover, quality assurance of products occurred at each phase of the deliverable. The **Informal PSES Evaluation Taskforce** led by UNICEF was responsible for overall quality assurance of the deliverables at each phase of the evaluation and for assisting with logistical and other arrangements. **Cowater**, together with the **Informal PSES Evaluation Taskforce**, ensured the quality of the evaluation process. Quality assurance was also facilitated through a robust methodology, including triangulation of findings and a comprehensive review by UNICEF (and where applicable other stakeholders) of each phase of deliverables.

4.6 Limitations and constraints to the evaluation

The main limitations, constraints and mitigation strategies for this evaluation are shown in Annex 11. Children could not be directly engaged for FGDs or interviews owing to school holidays, the short turnaround time frame for the report and because insufficient time was allocated to approval of ethical guidelines. To help mitigate this limitation, teachers, principals and VEDC members were asked questions about child engagement with PSES initiatives and outputs during the FGDs. In addition, programme data, such as the number of children accessing KPL was analysed and where possible verified.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG).

⁴⁷ Kang Panya Lao is a digital content platform, hosting information such as documents and presentations for access by education administrators, teachers and students throughout Lao PDR.

Only two provinces and districts were visited for the evaluation: this could lead to bias, as some respondents may be reluctant to share information and the selected provinces and districts may not be representative of others. The evaluation team was small and so evaluator bias may influence interpretations of results. A number of mitigating measures were employed to help counter these risks. These included: i) development of culturally appropriate data collection protocols; ii) emphasis on anonymity and confidentiality to protect informants from negative personal or professional consequences; iii) use of the Appreciative Inquiry Approach; iv) selection of an expert team based on competence in the subject matter and country; and v) regular updates and discussions with UNICEF and MoES counterparts.

Section 5. Findings

This section presents the evaluation findings against the key evaluation questions, and their related judgment. The findings were guided by the questions and criteria from the Evaluation Matrix, which is included in Annex 10. The findings draw on the evaluation data collected and the team's analysis of that data, as detailed earlier in this report. The findings are organized by the evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and gender, equity and human rights approach. The first section assesses programme outcomes against objectives and performance indicators during the programme period: these outcomes are summarized under effectiveness.

5.1 Assessment of programme outcomes (relates to EQ5)

Assess the programme's outcomes where annual reporting has indicated that they have been achieved, particularly the overall achievements and results that the programme has produced against the objectives and the performance indicators and targets during the programme period.

This section assesses the PSES outcomes, noting the positive outcomes against the main activities and outputs; it also highlights the challenges and issues reported during the PSESE. Judgements are made using results and contribution analysis, incorporating feedback from stakeholders gathered through the PSESE, and assessments as per the quality of the output and its capacity to function or contribute as intended. Assessments are derived from PSES progress reports, the KIIs, FGDs and the online survey (Annex 12) conducted as part of this evaluation. The programme's latest updated logframe is included in Annex 4 and shows the progress against targets for the PSES. A summary of the number of direct and indirect beneficiaries impacted by the programme is shown in Annex 17. A table consolidating programme outputs, positive outcomes and challenges/issues identified through the PSESE is included in Annex 18.

5.1.1 Outcome KRA 1: Strengthening the education system

5.1.1.1 Assessment of outcome for KRA1: Strengthening the education system

KRA 1 had the objective of supporting the MoES to develop and strengthen policies, plans and systems to enable more transparent, evidence-based, education sector planning and management. The aim was to combine systems reform with organizational and individual-level capacity-building to effectively operationalize systems, focusing especially on the subnational level (PESS and DESBs). The main areas of systemic reform included planning, finance, statistics, quality assurance and M&E (see Table 6 summarizing the assessment of outcome KRA1).

Table 6. PSESE assessment of outcome for KRA1: Strengthening the education system

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
Outcome: Improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning, monitoring and evaluation of the education system, including streamlined results-based, annual subsector planning, budgeting and monitoring system		
Mostly achieved: The PSES has implemented and piloted a broad range of important reforms aimed at strengthening planning, monitoring, evaluation, and budgeting of the education system to school level and these have been largely successful. These reforms form a coherent strategy. Although significant progress has been made towards improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning and M&E, further work will ensure that the tools are completed and adopted fully and that systems are further enhanced to fully meet outcomes.		
Improved capacity of MoES (at all levels) in results-based, subsector annual planning, budgeting and monitoring	2/3	Mostly achieved: The Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Plan and draft M&E tools and operational guidelines have been developed for monitoring the progress of the 9th ESSDP and LESMIS/EMIS aligned with the reporting requirements where possible. The LESMIS/EMIS dashboard is still undergoing modification to ensure its compliance with the monitoring requirements of the ESSDP. Linkages between systems are not yet fully developed owing to the MoES not yet approving data sharing agreements, which is beyond the scope of the PSES to affect but also impacts the dashboard. The culture and practices of M&E require further capacity development to be effectively mainstreamed, pending finalization of the operational guidelines and toolbox. Integration of FQS and quality assurance needs to be clearly defined, and tools completed to enable integration.
Improved capacity of MoES (at all levels) in data management and utilization to inform monitoring, planning and	2/2	Achieved: LESMIS and EMIS have been strengthened to enable their use in PESS and DESBs and have improved capacity to generate required reports at all levels. The inclusion of ECE data and data on CwD and ethnic children has improved the capacity of LESMIS as a tool to identify and address issues relating to vulnerable children. ICT equipment procurements have strengthened the capacity for improved education system strengthening, teacher management, sector analysis and/or emergency preparedness and response.

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
budgeting processes		Linkages between information systems are not fully developed but this is because the MoES has not finalized data sharing agreements . There is further scope to adapt EMIS to the needs of school management and to ensure capture of individual student data: this will greatly enhance the capacity to identify and help vulnerable children.
Improved capacity of MoES in national accounting system operations	2/2	Achieved: The Planning and Budgeting Management Information System (PBMIS) is aligned with Ministry of Finance (MoF) standards and the Public Accounting System has improved the capacity to manage budgets.
Improved capacity of MoES (at all levels) in QA and learning assessments	2/2	Mostly achieved: Analysis of the ASLO for Grade 5 and Grade 9 students has helped to focus attention on learning outcomes and formative assessment and it has been widely referred to in policy briefs and forums. The FQS tool for schools has been piloted and the PSES determined that it is useful for SDP and to focus attention on learning outcomes and students falling behind. However, the link to PESS and DESB planning and national quality assurance has not been fully established, thus limiting its use at higher levels. It will be important to finalize the digital tools and ensure linkages to higher-level planning, quality assurance and monitoring.

5.1.1.2 KRA 1.1: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in results-based subsector annual planning, budgeting and monitoring.

The PSES aimed to strengthen annual sector planning and M&E at national and subnational levels to make it more evidence-based and results-based. This was designed to support MoES efforts to streamline the sector's annual business cycle led by the DoP and Department of Inspection (DoI), whereby the link between annual planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and reporting back to the planning stage could be further enhanced. The aim of this was to contribute towards enhanced equitable distribution of resources and monitoring by PESS and DESBs, especially in relation to underperforming provinces, districts and schools.

Reforms have been made to subsector annual planning, budgeting and monitoring but continued efforts are required to ensure full integration of innovations piloted and developed under the PSES. The situation and needs assessment conducted in 2019/2022 established a common framework with sector and subsector indicators and targets used for monitoring progress and the revised planning, budgeting and M&E cycle agreed upon by the DoI and DoP and was included in the 9th ESSDP 2021–2025. The situation analysis informed the MEAL Plan and draft M&E tools and the operational guidelines for monitoring progress of the 9th ESSDP. The MoES confirmed that key monitoring indicators have been partially integrated into monitoring dashboards in LESMIS and are readily accessible, but further work is required to complete the dashboard.

KIIs with MoES staff indicate that the culture and practices of M&E require further capacity development to be effectively mainstreamed, pending finalization of the operational guidelines and toolbox. The integration of FQS and quality assurance is also not clearly defined, and the tools have not been completed to enable integration. Delays were attributed to the need to obtain consensus between line departments and receive endorsement from the minister.

5.1.1.3 KRA 1.1: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in data management and utilization to inform monitoring, planning and budgeting processes

The PSES aimed to support improvements in the quality and utilization of disaggregated EMIS data for planning and monitoring at national and subnational levels. This was to be achieved through development of information systems such as LESMIS and EMIS to support planning and M&E at national and subnational levels, in order to make it more evidence-based and results-based.

The development of LESMIS and the redevelopment of EMIS have significantly contributed to improved capacity to monitor, evaluate and plan in the education sector. The inclusion of ECE data and data on CwD and ethnic children has improved the capacity of LESMIS as a tool to identify and address issues relating to vulnerable children.⁴⁸ Most MoES respondents acknowledged the changes in LESMIS and EMIS which occurred

⁴⁸ Confirmed through KIIs with PESS/DESBs and with central departments such as the ESSC.

between 2018 and 2024 under PSES funding.⁴⁹ The MoES Education and Sports Statistics Centre (ESSC) reported it had greatly improved its capacity to further develop and improve both EMIS and LESMIS through development of staff capacity and inclusion of a broader development team incorporating professionals from Lao PDR universities. Users at all levels believed they could use the new system following the roll-out and training under the PSES. An example of training received is shown in Figure 3. PESS and DESBs stated that the new EMIS had significantly improved capacity to generate reports required for provincial and district planning.

Figure 3. MoES MIS core team meeting with the Faculty of Natural Sciences for one of three LESMIS capacity-building trainings provided in 2023⁵⁰



However, LESMIS is not yet linked to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) EMIS or higher education EMIS. But PMIS, TVET and Teacher Education dashboards are visualized through LESMIS: this limits the availability of data for reporting against the ESSDP monitoring framework.⁵¹ EMIS does not capture individual student data, which limits its capacity as a tool to track or assist allocation of support to individual students, although the

ESSC has commenced a pilot in one district for individual data capture. EMIS was also not used directly in the schools visited and contains only limited reporting or functions useful to actors at the school level.⁵² The ESSC reported that data collection had been completed in 70 days and was shared with stakeholders. Development partners (three) did not understand the reasons why the PSES redeveloped EMIS and were not aware of the changes that had occurred.⁵³ This points to issues relating to communication and promotion of the work undertaken through the PSES with development partners and the EU.

5.1.1.4 KRA 1.2: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES in national accounting system operations

The PSES aimed to support the development of a national accounting system in the education sector to help ensure efficacy and transparency in education financial management. Support included (on-the-job) capacity-building on the utilization of the system for effective financial management in central MoES departments and PESS and DESBs.

The PSES supported the MoES to develop a **quality assurance plan for PB MIS**⁵⁴ and the MoES noted that this helped to ensure that PB MIS conformed with MoF standards.⁵⁵ The PSES also developed a Public Accounting System (program) which was linked to PB MIS. The MoES reported a high level of satisfaction with the Public Accounting System, emphasizing that it made managing budgets and storing data convenient and effective. Users of this system acknowledged the increased convenience and efficiency in processing tasks related to budget and accounting management and its role as a valuable tool. Many indicated that they had sufficient capacity to use the system effectively, but some respondents expressed the need for further training and guidance, e.g., educational videos on how to use the Public Accounting System more effectively, while pointing to a lack of sufficient support in this area. According to the MoES Department of Finance (DoF), users are not trained adequately to use the system effectively. While the PESS Finance Division was able to use the system, it noted that DESB staff required further training. DESB staff confirmed this, highlighting challenges that included lack of training in PB MIS and accounting, poor internet access and limited ICT knowledge and skills.

PB MIS is not linked to LESMIS as intended because the Department of Organization and Personnel did not agree to a link, so a data sheet must be manually imported. Each year the MoES DoF needs to pay the accounting department in the MoF to approve use of the software. The DoF has not factored in an ongoing budget for this and stressed the need for ICT in education strategy for its department in order to understand the ICT requirements and implications for future years, including PESS and DESB.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ 78 per cent of survey respondents (of those aware of LESMIS/EMIS) were at least very satisfied with the changes that have taken place since 2018 and 74 per cent were at least very satisfied that LESMIS was an effective tool for planning, monitoring and evaluating ECE and/or general education.

⁵⁰ Source: PSES 5th Progress Report 2023.

⁵¹ Although a link to the PMIS has been created, it has not been enabled because a data sharing agreement has not yet been reached between the relevant departments.

⁵² Having no functions relevant to school management.

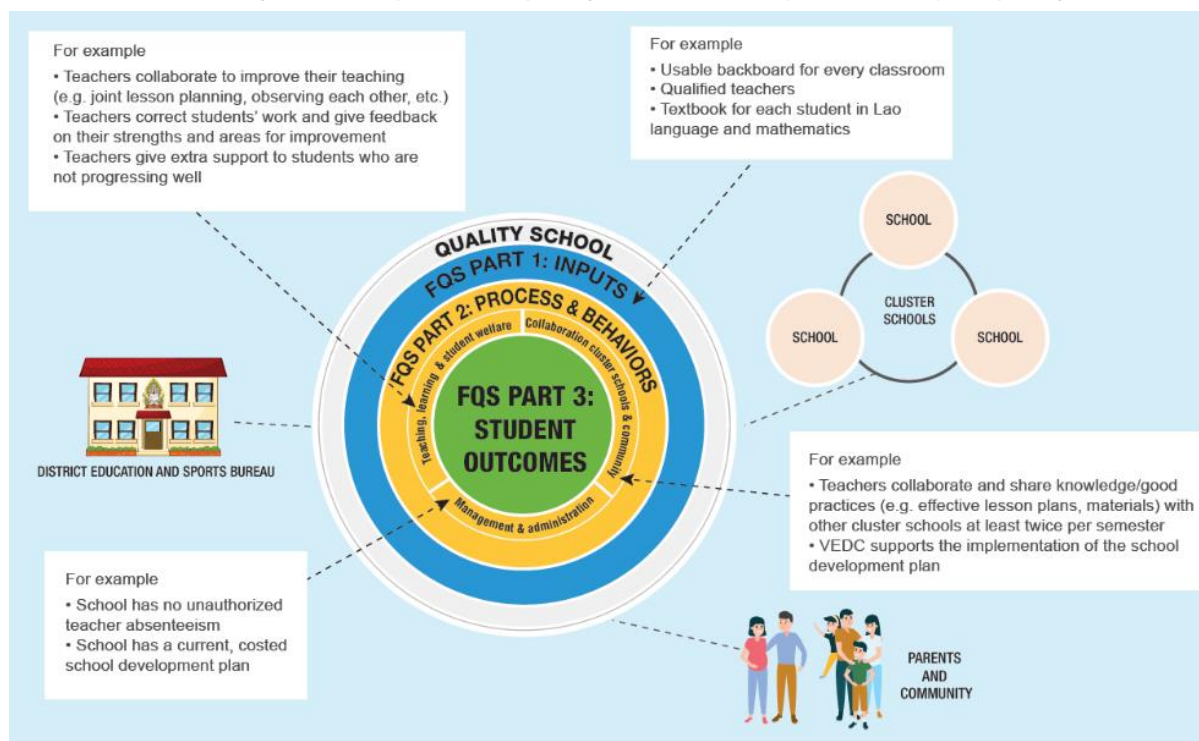
⁵³ It was redeveloped because a private company owned the previous source code and would not release it.

⁵⁴ The development of PB MIS was not funded through the PSES but was supported by the EU.

⁵⁵ Validated in KIIs with the MoES DoF.

⁵⁶ Reported by the MoES DoF in KIIs.

5.1.1.5 KRA 1.3: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in quality assurance



and learning assessment

The PSES aimed to build on the national learning assessment framework for general education⁵⁷ to support the Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES), Educational Standards Quality Assurance Centre (ESQAC), and other relevant departments, including the Department of General Education and the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) in implementing the national learning assessment framework. This was to be achieved through support for the capacity development of ESQAC, PESS and DESBs for national and subnational level quality assurance activities, focusing on strengthening school self-evaluation, development planning and quality assurance for schools, using FQS to inform district level monitoring, planning, budgeting and targeting of support.

ASLO standardized assessments: The PSES assisted the MoES to successfully conduct an ASLO for students in Grade 5 (2023) and Grade 9 (2022) in Lao PDR and built its capacity to manage and implement future standardized assessments. The Grade 5 ASLO was delayed due to COVID-19 and the full report will be published during the second half of 2024. An ASLO Grade 5 study brief was published by the MoES and presented at an ESWG Research Focal Group in December 2023. The ASLOs have had an impact on policy and planning and have raised awareness of the learning crisis in Lao PDR. Awareness and understanding of the assessments were highest among development partners and senior MoES officials at central level: they also found the ASLO to be very useful and emphasized its capacity to help identify and address issues relating to vulnerable children.⁵⁸ ASLO findings have been incorporated into ministerial addresses, policy dialogue and a budget advocacy brief presented at the National Assembly and are being used to inform the development of the next ESSDP. UNICEF has worked with the MoES to develop a pilot formative assessment.

The MoES stated that it lacks sufficient capacity to undertake further ASLOs and would require substantial technical assistance in item testing, item bank generation, and analysis and reporting. The MoES also underscored the difficulties in addressing the learning crisis with limited resources. Knowledge about and use of the assessments was very low in the PESS and DESBs visited; but FQS had brought greater awareness of the need to focus on student learning results in the Lao language and mathematics.

Figure 4. Fundamental Quality Standards Modules 1-3⁵⁹

Fundamental Quality Standards: The PSES piloted FQS in three provinces covering all districts (30 districts in total), including the training of 517 school principals in nine ICT-enabled districts. The general methodology of the

⁵⁷ The framework was, along with the accompanying implementation guidelines, finalized in the latter half of 2018. This was supported by UNICEF in coordination with other development partners, including DFAT/BEQUAL, JICA, ADB, the World Bank and the EU.

⁵⁸ Of those surveyed and aware of the ASLO, 91 per cent found it to be very useful and 86 per cent found it very useful for identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (girls, CwD or poor children).

⁵⁹ Source: PSES 4th Progress Report 2022.

FQS is shown in Figure 4 to the left. A module has been developed in LESMIS to store and report on FQS, but it has not been completed and thus is not fully active. PESS/DESBs and school actors believe FQS can be a very effective tool for identifying school development needs and prioritizing those needs for district planning and the allocation of resources to schools: most also felt it was a very effective tool to help identify and address the needs of vulnerable children.⁶⁰ The colour-coding system for categorizing school performance was widely adopted and is understood in the schools that were visited. It has helped principals to effectively assess the status of their school, focus on necessary improvements and identify weaknesses, thus allowing them to prioritize and address these areas systematically. This prioritization was seen as essential for developing better school development plans and enhancing school management. Principals also considered FQS and school development plans to be useful tools to aid communication with DESBs and VEDCs concerning school development needs. Examples were cited of VEDCs providing resources to help address issues identified. The FQS guidebook was viewed as sufficient, and principals and teachers noted they had sufficient capacity to undertake FQS.

Most schools operate FQS on a paper-based system and submit forms to the DESB for data entry. Data would be available for use at DESB level faster and in a processed format if schools can be empowered to manage FQS and other data. Although tablets are available for data entry, weak and unstable internet connectivity and poor digital skills were significant challenges, with many people needing to use their personal data plans. Internet support previously provided by UNICEF (WiFi boxes and data packages) has since ended, creating additional obstacles. This also underscores the importance of operationalizing the ICT in Education Strategy to help resolve issues relating to ICT in schools.

FQS is mainly used at the school level and there is a disconnect with higher levels of planning. The electronic data entry modules and dashboard are not yet complete and thus are not used at DESB level. Schools submit paper forms to DESB for review, but the school development plans and FQS are not used by DESBs and PESS when generating district and provincial plans. Principals and teachers also commented that limited resources restricted their capacity to address all issues identified in FQS. These standards will be more useful with larger block grants to schools.

Despite not being fully completed, the Department of Quality Assessment reported interest from partners such as the World Bank and ADB to expand coverage of FQS, and BEQUAL stated the intention to support the roll-out of FQS in its priority districts as part of the BEQUAL Phase II (2022–2026) programme and the World Bank’s use of GPE funds.

5.1.2 Outcome KRA 2: Teacher management and quality

5.1.2.1 Assessment of outcome KRA 2: Teacher management and quality

KRA 2 aimed to improve the quality of primary and lower-secondary education by ensuring a better link between systems strengthening and its impact on teaching-learning at school and classroom level. This was to be achieved through a combination of ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ work in teacher management systems strengthening, allocation and deployment, and teacher education and support (see Table 7). The objective was to help the MoES ensure that teacher supply and demand were met, particularly in remote areas, in the pursuit of strengthening quality learning among students. This included focused support for CPD for teachers to help equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills.

Table 7. PSESE assessment of outcome KRA 2: Teacher management and quality

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
Outcome: Strengthened teacher quality, effectiveness, management, allocation and deployment		
Mostly achieved: The PSES has strengthened teacher management, allocation and deployment through redevelopment of the PMIS and the addition of a new module. Teacher quality and effectiveness have been aided by developments such as KPL. The direct work undertaken through KRA2.2 has helped to integrate external PAs into the DESB structure and built their capacity to support CPD for teachers, including to adapt to the new curriculum. There are still notable gaps in the capacity of PAs; UNICEF is working with the MoES and partners to help address these through the development of CPD operational guidelines and continued work in capacity development.		
Improved capacity of MoES (at all levels) in operationalization	2/2	Mostly achieved: The MoES has improved its capacity for equitable teacher allocation through redevelopment of the PMIS, including its new functionality and a new module for teacher requirement planning (Request Teacher Plan

⁶⁰ Of those surveyed and aware of FQS, most (74 per cent) felt that FQS can be a very effective tool for identifying school development needs and prioritizing those needs for district planning and allocation of resources to schools. In addition, a majority (80 per cent) believe FQS is a tool that can be very effective in helping to identify and address the needs of vulnerable children.

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
of equitable teacher allocation and deployment		Management Information System (RTPMIS)). Despite general satisfaction with the PMIS and RTPMIS, the systems are hindered by the lack of integration with other databases, capacity issues and issues related to predicting staffing needs. The redevelopment of the PMIS allowed its decentralization to DESB level, a significant achievement.
Improved capacity of PAs to provide CPD to primary and lower-secondary teachers	2/3	Mostly achieved: In 2022, the MoES issued Decree 3342 integrating PAs into the DESB structure, which was one of the objectives of the PSES. The PSES has improved the capacity of external PAs to provide CPD for teachers through multiple rounds of training and the provision of ICT equipment. Training materials for PAs are available digitally on KPL and have been modified to align more closely with changes under Decree 3342. The capacity development has helped PAs to support CPD for teachers, including adapting to the new curriculum. However, the DTE notes that the current capacity of external PAs is insufficient and that further training is required, particularly given the low capacity of teachers and the challenges they face with the new curriculum. External PAs are hampered by challenges that are beyond the scope of the PSES to affect, but which inhibit their effectiveness, including inadequate funding and infrequent visits to schools. UNICEF is coordinating with BEQUAL to provide necessary inputs to their ongoing development of the CPD guidelines to help clarify the roles and responsibilities of actors and it will be important to address these issues. It will also be important to integrate PA strengthening with school development plans and school-based management processes, including FQS and to finalize the CPD course for Teacher Training Colleges, as these were objectives of the PSES.

5.1.2.2 KRA 2.1: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES (at all levels) in operationalization of equitable teacher allocation and deployment

The PSES aimed to support the Department of Organization and Personnel in operationalizing the revised teacher allocation guidelines and protocol, focusing on the subnational level in order to meet the targets for ECE and primary teachers.⁶¹ The PSES focused on the development and deployment of the online PMIS to aid effective human resource management. Support was to be provided for subnational level capacity development in PESS and DESB.

The PSES has redeveloped the PMIS to enable it as an online platform, with data management decentralized to all PESS and DESBs. Capacity development was given to 527 (208 male, 319 female, gender parity index: 1.53) direct beneficiaries trained at the central (10 male, 12 female, 22 total), provincial (18 male, 36 female, 54 total) and district (180 male, 264 female, 444 total) levels.⁶² This includes relevant staff in all PESS and DESBs as part of a national roll-out. The PMIS replicates the functionality of the old PMIS but adds an additional Request Teacher Plan Management Information System (RTPMIS) module designed to determine the teaching staff requirements for each school, taking into account the number of students and teaching hours.

Most MoES staff (75 per cent) surveyed are **very satisfied** with the PMIS following implementation and most (78 per cent) found the RTPMIS to be useful in helping them to plan teacher allocation to schools. Staff noted that the revised PMIS saves considerable resources by enabling staff to engage with the system in DESBs, thus saving significant time and travel costs. An example of training in the online PMIS is shown in Figure 5.

⁶¹ Targets were established in the ESDP and ESSDP.

⁶² Source: UNICEF LCO.

Figure 5. Training in the online PMIS for central institutions and Vientiane Capital PESS and DESBs⁶³



The PMIS is linked to the MoES Wage Management Information System (WMIS). But some DESBs, including one visited as part of the evaluation, still use the older offline version, which they attributed to poor internet connectivity. This can result in data entry duplication and error. Moreover, the PMIS is not linked to EMIS and LESMIS. The linkages have not yet

been established due to the lack of a **data sharing agreement** and the fact that a budget has not been allocated by the concerned agencies. Staff reported that the system is often not available, which is not the responsibility of the PSES but it is a barrier to use for some users: this should be addressed. Staff also reported that the RTPMIS module is not fully effective at predicting school staffing requirements, particularly when subject specialization is considered.⁶⁴ The functionality which was included in the two development contracts for development of the PMIS have been completed and the resulting enhancements have improved the capacity of DTE to address staff planning and human resource management needs. Additional enhancements should be made to the PMIS after the conclusion of the PSES. For example, consideration could be given to recording qualitative information on teachers such as data on annual performance reviews and CPD needs. The company assigned the contracts for development of the PMIS has not yet submitted the source code to UNICEF, as is stipulated in the signed contract for development of the PMIS. It will be important to ensure the source code is submitted at the conclusion of the PSES.

5.1.2.3 KRA 2.2: By 2022, improved capacity of PAs to provide CPD to primary and lower-secondary teachers

The PSES aimed to support the DTE and Department of General Education⁶⁵ to establish and operationalize a systematic approach to PA upgrading and accreditation at primary level. This would involve PSES support for the development of training modules and their delivery under an overarching policy and competency framework for teachers and PAs. Furthermore, the PSES was to support the strengthening of structural support for the CPD of PAs, including their effective integration in the DESB structure. A key aim is to institutionalize a PA support system for primary education that complements the CPD support for teachers. This was to also involve providing complementary support to DFAT-BEQUAL in implementing internal pedagogical support for primary teachers. The PSES additionally aimed to support capacity-building of PAs at lower-secondary level through strengthening DTE support to lower-secondary PAs.

The PSES has developed the capacity of external PAs, who were trained in multiple modules in topics such as pedagogical support strategies in the classroom and running seminars for groups of teachers. In total, 698 persons (257 male, 441 female, gender parity index: 1.72) were trained prior to 2022, including PAs at central level (18 male, 12 female, 25 total), provincial level (28 male, 214 female, 401 total) and staff at Teacher Training Colleges. This exceeded the target of 560 PAs put forth in the PSES design and included all DESBs and PESS as intended. PAs received a tablet and projector to facilitate access to the MoES Teaching and Learning Platform to help support CPD for teachers as planned. The District PAs interviewed felt that the training had been useful but commented that “the training occurred some time ago” and “we do not feel it’s sufficient because some people have retired and others have been transferred to other positions”, adding that “there is a need for more training”. The DTE noted that the training had helped external PAs to help teachers adapt to the new curriculum, pointing out that “the style and approach of teaching has changed to become more interactive”; but they also highlighted the need for ongoing training, given the challenges that teachers face.

Most persons surveyed (98 per cent) felt that the PAs were at least moderately effective at supporting teachers through CPD. Many schools visited did not have an internal PA or a cluster PA due to their small size. In schools that were visited, cluster PAs pay a visit to schools annually, but District Level PAs do so infrequently and only upon request and provide support based on identified needs. Priority is often given to RED schools, defined as schools in specific priority zones. Most schools visited reported infrequent visits by PAs. Some teachers said that the district PAs were helpful, for example “supporting in areas we don’t understand such as Lao language, mathematics. They give good advice and can really suggest how we can develop in our teaching capacity”.

⁶³ Source: PSES 4th Progress Report 2022.

⁶⁴ Reported in both DoP and DESB KIIs.

⁶⁵ By a coordinated and collaborative approach by DFAT-BEQUAL.

DESBs noted that District Level PAs face significant challenges, including insufficient budgets and staffing, which limits their ability to provide support to schools that are beyond the scope of the PSES to address but which do inhibit the effectiveness of external PAs. While the support from District Level PAs is appreciated, it is often viewed as insufficient for the needs of the teachers, who desire more frequent and comprehensive assistance. Some schools visited stated “there are few PAs and they do not have enough budget to come and help us. Their priority is to help priority schools”. It is not clear how these challenges will be addressed in the new guidelines under Decree 3342.

In 2022, the MoES released Ministerial Decree no. 3342, which **officially integrated PAs as part of the DESB structure – an objective of the PSES.** The same Decree changed the role of external PAs to providing higher-level technical support and facilitating capacity-building for schools and school clusters to better manage school and cluster-based professional development for teachers. Internal PAs were to be located in each school to provide direct CPD to teachers. UNICEF respondents stated that the changes arising from Decree 3342 resulted in a realignment of support to external PAs, noting that the majority of PAs were integrated into DESBs, which was also confirmed by the DTE.

In early 2024, BEQUAL began development of operational guidelines for Decree 3342. UNICEF halted support to external PAs in early 2024 and assisted the development of the guidelines through consultation workshops. The PSES also reported a revision of the external PA courses to more closely align with changes to the roles of external (DESB) PAs. UNICEF and DTE both indicated that future support should be aligned with the CPD operational guidelines.

The PSES had planned to integrate PA strengthening with SDP and school-based management processes, including FQS, but KIIs and FGDs indicated that this has not yet been achieved, partially owing to the need for guidelines to be finalized in accordance with Decree 3342. UNICEF confirmed that all PA training resources were uploaded to KPL and referenced during training and District Level PAs confirmed they can access the materials; however, some noted that limited ICT capacity resulted in their referencing resources in hard copy format only. The CPD course has not yet been developed by Teacher Training Colleges.

5.1.3 Outcome KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue

5.1.3.1 Assessment of outcome KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue

KRA 3 aimed to support the MoES in fortifying its capacity for evidence-based sector analysis and policy decision-making at both national and subnational levels – strengthening the vertical link between the two (see Table 8). The PSES was to achieve this through support for the Mid-Term Review, the End-Term Review of the ESDP 2016–2020, and the development of the ESSDP 2021–2025 through the ESWG. The PSES also aimed to strengthen analysis and policy dialogue through the ESWG-Focal Group 1: ECE, and Focal Group 2: Basic Education. A key focus of this component was strengthening the technical capacity of the MoES to promote evidence-based and costed interventions to advocate with the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), the MoF and the Ministry of Home Affairs to secure sufficient capital, a recurrent budget, and human resources allocation to achieve the ESDP targets, with a special focus on equity and the quality of basic education, in particular where investments result in better education outcomes in cost-effective ways.

Table 8. PSESE assessment of outcome KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
Outcome: The capacity of the MoES to undertake and promote evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue and to conduct required studies and research improved		
Achieved: The PSES’ evidence-based support to sector analysis and policy dialogue has generally been well received and effective, particularly in highlighting disparities in the education system and focusing attention on vulnerable and marginalized groups (description below). The capacity of the MoES has improved, but capacity gaps exist that future programming should continue to address.		
Improved capacity of MoES in evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue	4/4	Achieved: The PSES conducted several significant equity studies/surveys including: i) the Data Must Speak Positive Deviance School Research; ii) the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study; and iii) the LSIS III. The first two studies were published and helped the MoES to focus on issues of equity and have been used by development partners to inform programming. The LSIS III is expected to play a vital role in future educational policy development. While the full report is yet to be published, the LSIS III key indicator report has been published and the data has been cited and used in various documents and is already informing education sector planning.

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
		<p>The PSES contributed to the Mid-Term Review of the ESDP and the Joint Sector Review, helping to align the planned objectives of the 9th ESSDP (2021–2025). The PSES also contributed to a Mid-Term Review of the 9th ESSDP. The MoES noted that these efforts helped to support the ministry in a post-COVID-19 environment of constrained education financing, thus recognizing the achievements of the PSES in addressing constraints and accelerating delayed activities.⁶⁶ UNICEF’s role in the ESWG and as co-chair of Focal Groups 1 and 2 was also appreciated, with its assistance in facilitating, coordinating and guiding work between education programmes and projects. Development partners acknowledged the capacity of the ESWG to help highlight issues and foster collaboration between partners. One shortfall highlighted was the reliance on consultants to achieve these results and the capacity gaps in the MoES to conduct similar efforts in the future.</p>

5.1.3.2 KRA 3.1: By 2022, improved capacity of the MoES in evidence-based advocacy and policy dialogue

Equity studies/surveys conducted: The PSES conducted several significant equity studies/surveys: i) the Data Must Speak Positive Deviance School Research; ii) the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study; and iii) the LSIS III. The LSIS III is based on the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the Lao Reproductive Health Survey indicators with the addition of new modules for children of ages 0 to 17. The new modules include data capture which can be used to assess educational investments, including foundational learning and disability modules



using Washington Group questions, and foundational learning modules.

Capacity development was provided to the PSES to conduct the Data Must Speak Positive Deviance School Research, including 120 persons (20 at central level and 100 at DESBs) and for the LSIS III, with 174 persons (31 at central level and 143 at PESS). The training was given to enable the MoES to conduct the study and thus included staff in the focus region, including enumerators who were teachers at Teacher Training Colleges. The MoES research team stated it was trained on the methodology, data collection tools and processes, but felt it lacked the full capacity to undertake further studies without technical assistance, particularly with regard to design, analysis and report writing.

Both studies were found to be useful by the MoES. Of the surveyed persons, 75 per cent were aware of the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study and almost all found it very useful (88 per cent) and very useful when identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (92 per cent). The MoES commented that there were delays in the release of the study and that COVID-19 had significantly altered the situation, which UNICEF attributed to the review process involving RIES and the time required to validate Lao language translations.

⁶⁶ KIIs conducted with MoES departments

Only 26 per cent of the surveyed persons were aware of the Positive Deviance Schools Research; however, almost all found it to be very useful (86 per cent), particularly when identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (84 per cent). The MoES also acknowledged the usefulness of the study, which informed the paper Data Must Speak: What we can learn from the practices and behaviours of the higher effective schools in Lao PDR. The study was also used to inform the agenda of the Human Capital Summit 2023, the Joint Sector Review and the ESSDP Mid-Term Review in 2023 and four additional policy briefs (see Figure 6). The MoES emphasized that LSIS III has the potential to be a vital resource for developing the next ESSDP and for helping to inform education policy. Development partners were aware and appreciative of all the studies conducted and considered them of high quality and useful in their own work.

Figure 6. Data Must Speak publications finalized in 2023⁶⁷

Mid-Term Review of the ESDP 2016–2020 and the ESSDP 2021–2025: The PSES contributed to the Mid-Term Review of the ESDP 2016–2020 released at the end of 2018. The PSES also contributed to a Joint Sector Review of the education sector in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and to a Mid-Term Review of the 9th ESSDP 2021–2025. The MoES reported that findings from the Joint Sector Review helped to inform the 9th ESSDP.⁶⁸ Most (85 per cent) of those surveyed and aware of the ESSDP Mid-Term Review conducted in 2023 felt that it was very effective in informing the development of priorities for the latter half of the ESSDP implementation. The MoES reported that the Mid-Term Review was useful in reorienting the implementation of the ESSDP in the post-COVID-19 environment given the constraints on education financing. However, it also noted that much of the review had taken place using consultants and that capacity development was limited. UNICEF and the EU also noted issues in the development of the Mid-Term Review and in the final report, citing problems concerning methodology and the lack of necessary inputs from partners not adequately addressing issues relating to vulnerable populations.

Development of the ESSDP 2021–2025: The ESSDP 2021–2025 was formulated with considerable contributions from UNICEF, including support from an international M&E consultant as well as written and verbal feedback and advice provided by the UNICEF education team throughout the development process. The MoES was generally appreciative of the quality of the feedback and inputs received. Development partners noted UNICEF’s contributions to the ESSDP, but they did not consider the contributions to be exceptional or significant beyond that required by development partners.

Additional – UNICEF’s role in ESWG participation and co-chairing of Focal Groups 1 and 2: Development partners acknowledged the capacity of the ESWG to help highlight issues and foster collaboration between partners.

5.1.4 Outcome KRA 4: COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness

5.1.4.1 Assessment of outcome KRA 4: COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness

KRA 4 was introduced through an amendment in October 2020 and aimed to support the MoES in the COVID-19 emergency response, enhancing sector preparedness, resilience and the capacity to respond to future emergencies. This was to be achieved by supporting the MoES in the implementation of its COVID-19 Response Plan, to guide and ensure a coordinated response to COVID-19 in the education sector. The PSES aimed to support the MoES, in close coordination with other development partners, in achieving the plan’s two main outcomes: 1) Prevention and control of COVID-19; and 2) Ensuring continuity of learning.

Table 9. PSESE assessment of outcome KRA 4: COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
Outcome: Reduced impact of COVID-19 on child well-being, and education and COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness strengthened		
Achieved: The PSES reduced the impact of COVID-19 on child well-being and strengthened emergency response and preparedness. Support given to the reopening of schools and school safety was very effective in returning children to school. The hard copy materials distributed to all schools for Grade 1 and Grade 2 created opportunities to continue learning and for remedial learning during the pandemic. Digital content available on KPL was also used by children and teachers, but this content was not easily accessible to many groups, including children and teachers in remote/rural areas without internet connection, children from poor homes lacking ICT capacity, and children with specific disabilities. Emergency response capacity has been strengthened, but further work is required to institutionalize emergency response through full deployment of the emergency response and preparedness module.		
Learners, educators, caregivers/parents and school	1/1	Achieved: UNICEF leveraged PSES funding and other funding including GPE to enhance epidemic/pandemic preparedness, focusing on preventing

⁶⁷ Source: The PSES.

⁶⁸ The MoES decided not to conduct an End-Term Review of the ESSDP 2016–2020.

Indicator	Quant. result	Summary of qualitative assessment
communities supported to strengthen epidemic/pandemic preparedness and prevent and control the transmission and spread of COVID-19		COVID-19 transmission in schools. UNICEF played a key role in coordinating partners and sector responses, including in health and education. Key initiatives included developing safety standards for reopening schools (Safe School Operations guidelines), the provision of COVID-19 prevention kits, and communication campaigns (#SafelyBackToSchool, #VaccinateLao PDR). Vaccination rates among teachers were reported to be high, and the campaigns and safety measures helped to facilitate a safe return to school.
Learners in disadvantaged and COVID-19 high-risk areas have access to diverse learning opportunities ensuring continuity of learning	1/1	Achieved: To ensure learning continuity and inclusivity during the pandemic, the digital online content platform KPL was developed and expanded. It currently supports CPD and provides a wide range of educational resources. KPL has been widely accessed and positively received for its effectiveness in teaching and learning. It can be accessed offline but requires equipment to fully realize the benefits of doing so, such as a projector and a device to store and access the materials. Direct access to KPL is limited by internet availability. Both of these are barriers to access, which will need to be overcome to ensure KPL is readily accessible to all students throughout Lao PDR.
Teachers and parents/caregivers have capacity to support remote learning, taking into account equity and inclusivity	1/1	Mostly achieved: The My House storybooks and My House TV series have effectively supported young learners. My House storybooks are accessible in all schools, but students often read them in groups owing to limited supply. The PSES met its supply commitments, but it is worth noting that additional provision in the future may have benefits and increase individual student capacity to engage. The My House TV series is not accessible in areas without access to Satellite TV, downloaded and played over a device locally, which was not always seen in the schools visited. In such cases storybooks were made available to fill the gap.
The resilience of the education system for dealing with emergency situations has been strengthened	1/1	Mostly achieved: Efforts such as the COVID-19 school reopening guidelines and capacity development have strengthened the capacity to respond to future emergencies. A GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness has been developed, but is not active or used. It will be important for UNICEF to work with the MoES to ensure its effective use in future emergencies. A 10-year ICT in Education Strategy has been developed and will be launched in in Q3-Q4 2024. UNICEF intends to support the MoES to develop a five-year operational plan based on the 10-year strategy.

5.1.5 KRA 4.1: By 2022, learners, educators, caregivers/parents and school communities supported to strengthen epidemic/pandemic preparedness and prevent and control the transmission and spread of COVID-19

The PSES aimed to support the MoES in implementing the Lao PDR Safe School Operations Guidance, in accordance with the global interim Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools⁶⁹ along with the Framework for Reopening Schools.⁷⁰ The PSES was to support the purchasing and distribution of thermometers for schools in high-risk areas identified by the MoES. This was to complement ongoing risk communication and community engagement efforts to share key information about COVID-19 prevention and control in schools as well as to support the provision of soap and water in schools. The PSES provided a small grant to all DESBs in the country to help them monitor and report on COVID-19-related response interventions.

UNICEF utilized both PSES funding and other funding, including from the GPE, to strengthen epidemic/pandemic preparedness and to prevent and control the transmission and spread of COVID-19. Initiatives undertaken included: the Safe School Operations Guidance; COVID-19 prevention kits including digital thermometers; advocacy posters to each PESS; and communication campaigns: #SafelyBackToSchool, #VaccinateLao PDR (vaccination of teachers).

All teachers participating in the PSESE stated that they received vaccination against COVID-19. Most (68 per cent) of those surveyed considered that the Safe School Operations Guidance was very effective in encouraging teachers and students to return to school. Teachers noted the positive impact of the communication campaigns (#SafelyBackToSchool, #VaccinateLao PDR) in facilitating preparations required for reopening schools safely.

⁶⁹ Issued by UNICEF, WHO and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC): it has been adapted to the Lao context.

⁷⁰ Issued by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and World Food Programme (WFP).

Teachers in the schools visited had received supplies (COVID-19 protective kits) and applied correct mitigating measures, such as physical distancing, hand cleaning and mandated temperature testing. Teachers felt these measures strongly motivated students to return to school and made them feel safe in doing so.⁷¹ Many teachers credited school attendance to the effectiveness of communication campaigns (#SafelyBackToSchool, #VaccinateLao PDR) and the use of various media (video, social media, loudspeakers) to disseminate safety information. However, some teachers noted an inadequate supply of materials, particularly digital thermometers and face masks, which were not sufficiently available to all students.

5.1.5.1 KRA 4.2: By 2022, learners in disadvantaged and COVID-19 high-risk areas had access to diverse learning opportunities, ensuring continuity of learning. By 2022, teachers and parents/caregivers had capacity to support remote learning, taking into account equity and inclusivity

The PSES aimed to ensure the continuity of learning during and after COVID-19 through a range of interventions. These included assisting the MoES in the development of a suite of educational TV programmes/short films for specific grades aligned with the primary and secondary school curricula. Also key were videos and other resources for parents and families to support children's learning and well-being during the pandemic, for example materials on mental health and psychosocial support and physical health. In addition, the PSES sought to support the development of an online and offline MoES Teaching and Learning Platform, KPL, with educational resources and materials for students, teachers, school principals and PAs. Also important was PSES support for the continuous learning of students in remote areas of the country through "low-tech" interventions, including the printing and dissemination of reading materials and improving the capacity for teachers, school principals and PAs to support students' remote learning.

The KPL digital online content platform: The PSES initiated KPL as a response to the pandemic in order to provide learning continuity. The platform's function and purpose were expanded from 2023 to 2024 to include the CPD of teaching and education staff, remedial learning and access a wide range of development partner initiatives, including the strengthening of PAs and FQS. A total of 1,146 persons were trained in the use of KPL (30 at central level, 199 at PESS, 221 at DESBs, 696 at schools)⁷² while 146,822 students (73,411 male, 73,411 female, gender parity index: 1.00) registered on the platform – accounting for 11.3 per cent of all students enrolled nationwide in general education.⁷³ Capacity development was provided for training to RIES staff on how to develop digital resources for KPL, enabling the creation of additional digital content.⁷⁴ Development partners confirmed they were invited to submit materials the platform, including curriculum, lesson guides and CPD tools. UNICEF reported that over 15 development partners have submitted resources and that currently over 6,500 course lessons are available through KPL.⁷⁵

KPL represents a significant development for the education sector in Lao PDR. For the first time, a centralized repository of all official curriculum and CPD materials is available and these have been translated into the Lao language. UNICEF noted this is a huge increase in efficiency in access to learning resources, which were often otherwise distributed in print only.

KPL is widely accessed, with 61 per cent of those surveyed using teaching and learning materials from KPL, with the same percentage rating the platform as very effective in exposing children and adolescents to digital learning and digital literacy skills development, both during and after COVID-19. KPL was widely appreciated, with 84 per cent of those surveyed of the opinion that KPL could be very effective for professional development and other activities related to their work. Teachers highlighted its usefulness in providing essential teaching materials, lessons, guidelines and exercises for both teachers and students, and said that it helped to improve their teaching techniques and to address specific problems, saving time and enhancing professional development. Teachers were pleased to find specific materials on the platform relating to gender, disability and teaching ethnic children, which is helpful for inclusive teaching practices, including diversity, and for language learning and cultural sensitivity. They also felt that KPL empowered learners to engage in self-directed learning, offering a range of resources for independent skills development. **The DTE noted that KPL is "very useful for the teacher, they can access it and see videos and**

⁷¹ Reported during FGDs conducted in schools.

⁷² UNICEF reports that complementary funding through GPE enabled more teachers to be trained in KPL, estimated at over 5,000.

⁷³ An estimated 1,299,598 students were enrolled in general education throughout Lao PDR (source: ESSC 2022/23).

⁷⁴ Microsoft training in Lao PDR, comprehensive sexuality education as well as hundreds of learning modules on various science subjects (material processes, physical processes, life processes, etc.) by TigTag World and also a large volume of videos from TWIG World, including on biology, chemistry, experiments and human geography.

⁷⁵ Including Aide et Action, CRS, Humanity and Inclusion, Room to Read, Save the Children, UNESCO, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), USAID, WFP, Childfund, JICA, BEQUAL and the World Bank.

content for teaching and CPD materials” but that sometimes the internet is bad and teachers have issues accessing it or lack adequate devices. An example of a teacher using KPL to deliver a lesson is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. A teacher at Khork Peng primary school in Vientiane province using the KPL platform⁷⁶



KPL was used by some – though not all – teachers in most schools that were visited. Comments on the extent and frequency of use varied, highlighting the need to further understand who can most easily access KPL and which teachers and students face challenges and why.

Teachers and principals stated that access to KPL is difficult without access to the internet, smartphones, tablets, computers or laptops.⁷⁷ KPL can be downloaded onto smartphones and other devices, which is convenient for teachers with smartphones. However, many students may not

have access to appropriate devices and so schools will require a platform to store and project content once it has been downloaded. This is a barrier to use, especially for poorer schools, vulnerable or marginalized students and teachers or those in rural/remote areas. Teachers in the secondary schools visited reported that students used KPL, but it wasn't used by students in the primary schools that were visited, except when facilitated by teachers/parents. UNICEF noted that primary school students are also less likely to have mobile devices. The PSES has piloted ways to bring KPL to remote schools, including Tespack backpacks (estimated at US\$3,000 per unit) but these are costly and bulky and not likely feasible for widespread deployment. Finding low cost ways to bring the benefits of digital content to remote and rural schools will help to ensure that KPL benefits vulnerable children. The PSES has worked with partners such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to pilot cheaper, more feasible means to make KPL and digital content accessible to more schools. Low capacity to use digital resources hampers access for many persons. During FGDs, many teachers expressed the need for further training or stated that they needed more information on how to access resources specific to their needs.

Reading materials printed and distributed to students in remote areas: My House storybooks were distributed to all primary schools throughout Lao PDR. UNICEF estimates that a total of 297,795 children (154,854 male, 142,941 female, gender parity index: 0.92) were exposed to My House storybooks, including alphabet posters, flash cards, notebooks, pens, pencils and colouring papers.⁷⁸ Twelve episodes of the My House TV series were produced and reached an estimated 3.8 million children.

Most people surveyed said that the My House storybooks (63 per cent) and My House television series (57 per cent) were very effective in helping to support young child learning during and after the pandemic. Teachers reported that parents and children found the My House TV series beneficial and similar to having a teacher actually present. My House TV was seen as a valuable visual aid for children, stimulating critical thinking and offering positive behaviour lessons. The storybooks were popular with children, who found them engaging and enjoyed the colourful illustrations.

While teachers expressed appreciation for these books during FGDs, they noted that owing to limited supplies, students had to share books in groups and that the variety of books was limited. They requested a larger number of and more varied books. There are some challenges regarding the accessibility of the My House TV series due to limited access to satellite TV at home or in schools in some communities visited.

5.1.5.2 By 2022, the resilience of the education system for dealing with emergency situations has been strengthened

The PSES aimed to develop a GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness and response. Also through the third amendment, the PSES was to give support to the development of a 10-year ICT in Education Strategy.

The PSES has developed a GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness using the Kobo toolbox and integrated into the LESMIS dashboard.⁷⁹ Training was given to national trainers, who, in turn, extended the training to focal points of the PESS and DESBs across the country. Outside of the ESSC, the evaluation found no awareness

⁷⁶ Source: PSES 5th Progress Report 2023.

⁷⁷ Also confirmed through KIIs with PESS/DESBs.

⁷⁸ Complementary funding enabled distribution of My House storybooks and TV episodes to ECE and additional schools for Grade 1 and Grade 2 classes. Funding sources for My House Season II ECD TV/storybook were UNICEF Australia (this partly includes Australia/DFAT), the EU (the PSES), Japan, USAID and GPE.

⁷⁹ <https://ee-eu.kobotoolbox.org/x/tNXapL9x>.

of the GIS-enabled online platform, underscoring the need to monitor its use and enable feedback from users on its effectiveness.

Ten-year ICT in Education Strategy: Throughout the PSES, there was extensive procurement of ICT equipment to support the information systems rolled out at central, PESS and DESB levels and for FQS and piloting of access to digital learning materials in schools. Of the respondents surveyed, 82 per cent had received ICT equipment as part of the PSES. Of those, 88 per cent found the equipment to be very useful to facilitate their work and, by extension, the objectives of the PSES, including improved education system strengthening, teacher management, sector analysis and/or emergency preparedness and response. A key concern raised by the MoES at all levels was the increased maintenance and replacement costs of ICT equipment: these costs were not determined during the planning phase, and some of the equipment is very difficult to service locally, such as the Samsung tablets supplied to schools.

UNICEF and the EU amended the PSES to include support for the development a 10-year ICT in Education Strategy in response to a government announcement in late 2022. This Strategy, which has been drafted and should be launched in August 2024, addresses the recurrent budget required to maintain ICT throughout the MoES under four thematic areas. The MoES confirmed that the Strategy had been developed after extensive and inclusive consultation and that it aligns with the Government's Digital Transformation Strategy (Digital Economy Strategic Plan) under development. The MoES deemed the ICT in Education Strategy as necessary to support digital transformation within the ministry, to consolidate and organize digital interventions and equipment purchases throughout the education sector. The Strategy provides guidance on funding possibilities but will require clear financial and operational plans to drive digital integration efforts forward. The MoES said that some parts of the Strategy are not realistic, but noted that it will help to attract financing through public-private partnerships and other means. UNICEF stated that, following the PSES, it will assist the MoES to develop a five-year costed action plan for implementation of the Strategy to ensure its funding. UNICEF also noted that a focus has been on building partnerships with the private sector (internet service providers) to help resolve issues of connectivity in schools.

5.2 Relevance

Assess the relevance of the programme objectives, intervention logic, strategy and approach as well as its collaborative comparative advantage or added value in this area.

5.2.1 EQ1: To what extent has the programme responded to the national context, needs and priorities, and global standards? To what extent does the programme meet national priorities? How well did the programme design meet the needs and priorities identified by the Government?

The PSES was designed to align with the Government's education objectives and national strategies, focusing on areas considered to be national priorities in the ESDP and ESSDP. The PSES aligns with global standards, such as SDG 4 for quality education⁸⁰ and was developed following extensive consultation with the MoES and as a complement to other development partner initiatives.

The PSES was strategically designed to support the MoES in achieving the objectives outlined in the ESDP 2016–2020 and by extension the ESSDP 2021–2025.^{81,82} Alignment with the ESDP is mapped in Annex 19 and summarized in Table 10. The PSES was also aligned with other national strategies including: i) The NSEDP; and ii) The MoES Budget Support Performance Assessment Framework (PAF).^{83, 84} By directly supporting the Government's overarching education goals, the programme was closely harmonized with the national context and priorities.

The programme aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2022–2026) strategic priority for people's well-being, in which "All citizens will have equitable and inclusive access to and will benefit from... education and learning", including during emergencies and the United Nations contribution under Education.⁸⁵ Under this strategic priority, the Government and key stakeholders at national and subnational levels and communities have enhanced capacities, knowledge and resources to ensure that children, youth and adults have access to and complete inclusive, equitable and quality teaching-learning and skills development programmes.

Table 10. Mapping of PSES-KRA interventions against ESDP 2016–2020 strategies

ESDP 2016–20 strategies	PSES-KRA	Relevant SDG 4 Target
KRA 1: Strengthening the education system		
9.3.1 Strategy 1: Improve and align planning and budgeting systems for effective use of budgets.	KRA 1.1: Strengthening the system for planning, M&E	Target 4.1: Free primary and secondary education
9.3.7 Strategy 7: Strengthen the training system and upgrading of education and sports administrators to become professional.	KRA 1.2: Strengthening the system for financing	Target 4.1: Free primary and secondary education
9.3.4 Strategy 4: Strengthen inspection, M&E systems and quality assurance for the education sector.	KRA 1.3: Strengthening the system for QA	Target 4.A: Increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries Target 4.5: Eliminate all discrimination in education

⁸⁰ Specifically SDG: 4.1.1 on proficiency in Mathematics and English; 4.5.1 on parity indices; 4.6.1 on literacy and numeracy skills; 4.7.1 on global citizenship; 4.a.1 on learning environment (in relation to internet for pedagogical purposes); and 4.c.1 on teacher CPD.

⁸¹ Ministry of Education and Sports, *Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025*, MoES, 2020, www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2023-02-lao-pdr-education-sports-sector-development-plan-2021-2025.pdf.

⁸² The relationship to the ESDP 2016-2020 is shown in Annex 19. Source: United Nations Children's Fund 'Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR Extension and Amendment, Annex 1: Description of the Action, October 2023', 2022.

⁸³ The PAF presents Budget Support programme indicators and targets agreed by the Government of Lao PDR and the EU.

⁸⁴ The PSES was originally aligned at the strategic and operational levels with the ESDP 2016-2020 and NSEDP 2016-2020. With the development of the ESSDP 2021-2025 and the NSEDP 2021-2025, the PSES programme was also amended in late 2020 to ensure alignment along with an addition of a KRA on the COVID-19 response. The PSES programme will also contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 4.

⁸⁵ United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, *Lao PDF - United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022–2026*, 2022, https://laopdr.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/UNSDCF_18112021_0.pdf.

ESDP 2016–20 strategies	PSES-KRA	Relevant SDG 4 Target
		Target 4.6: Universal literacy and numeracy
KRA 2: Teacher management and quality		
6.3.5 Strategy 5: Plan and manage needs and teacher allocation, 9.3.3 Strategy 3: Improve management systems, the utilization of teachers and education staff at each level.	KRA 2.1: Teacher management, allocation and deployment	Target 4.A: Increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries
2.2.2 Strategy 2: Enhance learning and teaching quality for primary education. 3.3.2 Strategy 2: Improve quality of teaching and learning at secondary education. 6.3.3 Strategy 3: Provide systematic in-service training for continuing professional development programme,	KRA 2.2: Teacher quality	Target 4.A: Increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries
KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue		
9.3.6 Strategy 6: Study and research on the issues related to education policies, 2.2.4 Strategy 4: Enhance the ownership and participation of the VEDC and community in school development based on the National Quality Standards of Primary Education.	KRA 3.1: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue	Target 4.1: Free primary and secondary education Target 4.5: Eliminate all discrimination in education Target 4.7: Education for sustainable development and global citizenship
KRA 4: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue		
COVID-19 is acknowledged in the ESSDP 2021–2025, but the plan does not include interventions specifically addressing its impact, although they do support improved learning outcomes. Specifically: IO 1.2: Improved student learning outcomes measurement at G3, G5, M4 and M6. IO 1.3: Increased intake and progression rates at all levels leading to increasing graduation rates.	KRA 4.1: Prevention and control of COVID-19 KRA 4.2: Continuity of learning	Target 4.6: Universal literacy and numeracy

The alignment of the PSES with SDG 4 underscored its commitment to meeting global standards for quality education. By focusing on aspects such as equitable access, education quality improvement and governance, the programme contributed to the broader global agenda of ensuring inclusive and quality education for all.

The PSES was designed as a catalytic fund⁸⁶ to contribute to the effective and efficient implementation of the ESSDP and to complement other ongoing and future support by development partners that contributes to the Government's strategic plan. It was intended to be a flexible and dynamic programme, operating within the broad context of its stated outcomes, outputs and objectives, able to alter its specific approach in accordance with the country's changing context and emerging needs. The most notable example of this was the addition of KRA 4, designed to prevent and control the impact of COVID-19 (KRA 4.1) and to address the resulting learning crisis through the continuity of learning (KRA 4.2). The programme was amended in September 2020 as a resubmission of the original design document,⁸⁷ which also enabled alignment with the GPE COVID-19 Accelerated Funding Grant, for which UNICEF was Grant Agent through to 30 September 2022.

The MoES acknowledged the support for system strengthening through the activities under KRA 1 and KRA 3 as a design strength. It noted the lack of funding in the ministry for system strengthening and for evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue, and that the PSES had enabled a focus on and potential development in these key areas.

The MoES and UNICEF reported that the MoES played a central role in the programme's design process, which lasted many months. This process included engaging stakeholders at national, provincial, district, and school levels through extensive consultations, including a joint mission to provinces and districts to validate the design. This

⁸⁶ As a catalytic fund, the PSES was designed to provide seed funding and technical support to drive impact and mobilize additional resources, ensuring that sufficient domestic funding is available for effective and efficient implementation of the priority strategic areas of the ESSDP.

⁸⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, 'Annex 1: Description of the Action Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR, Amendment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic', September 2020.

extensive consultation ensured alignment and relevance to the varied needs across the educational system. One lead department shared that it was not involved in the design, but this was not a widely held view.

UNICEF and the MoES reported that throughout the design phase there was debate on the extent to which support should focus on system or school levels. The EU and MoES showed a strong preference for system-level support linked to results-based financing with nine indicators. Achieving these indicators annually was crucial for triggering EU budget support for which the ASLO was a key milestone. The addition of KRA 4 and attention to FQS enabled a school focus.

One concern raised by several key UNICEF staff was the programme's initial strong focus on technology. The ensuing simplification and a participatory redesign were fundamental to improving the programme's likelihood of successful implementation in areas such as FQS. The PSES noted that a related flaw in the design was the lack of consideration given to ongoing cost implications for technological innovations, such as depreciation costs for equipment supplied to districts and schools.⁸⁸ However, this consideration was included in the third amendment, which included the 10-year ICT in Education Strategy.

Efforts were also made in the design of the PSES to avoid duplication and to ensure that the activities complemented other ongoing and future support by development partners contributing to the achievement of the ESSDP targets.⁸⁹ A matrix mapping of current development partner support relevant to the PSES KRAs is shown in Annex 8: It demonstrates the efforts made to ensure opportunities for coordination, collaboration and harmonization between the PSES and other initiatives.⁹⁰ For example, in KRA 2 it was agreed that the PSES would address the upgrading of PAs in a manner that aligns with the wider support from BEQUAL on teacher education reform. It is also worth noting other partner strategies with which coherence was sought. These include: i) the EU's Education Programme objectives for Lao PDR (2021-2025); ii) the EU's Development Cooperation in Lao PDR (2021-2027); and iii) the broader UNICEF Country Programme Document (CPD) 2017–2021 and 2022–2026 for education.

Additionally, there was coordination with the priority areas of the Government/MoES-UNICEF Education Programme 2022–2026, which are: 1) strengthening government capacity for legislation, planning, budgeting, monitoring and management for quality and inclusive education; 2) strengthening the knowledge, skills and support systems of education service providers for improved learning outcomes; and 3) strengthening the knowledge and skills of children and their families to demand and contribute to quality and equitable education. This coherence and synergy with the design of the PSES is a result of the common values shared by the EU and UNICEF, as stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the EU Delegation and UNICEF in Lao PDR on the follow-up of the European Commission-UNICEF Partnership Dialogue on Health and Education Outcome Document: in other words, a focus on equity, sustainability, national ownership, development effectiveness, results, and transparency and accountability for the most disadvantaged children in Lao PDR.⁹¹

5.2.2 EQ2: To what extent has UNICEF ensured that the needs of children, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, have been taken into account in the planning and implementation of UNICEF-supported interventions under this programme?

By including 40 MoES disadvantaged priority districts,⁹² the PSES reached disadvantaged schools and children with a below-average performance, thus emphasizing equity and reaching vulnerable and marginalized children. Various studies helped to identify the different groups of vulnerable children. Nonetheless, the focus on CwD and children from ethnic minorities was less prominent.

The UNICEF-supported Mid-Term Review of the ESSDP emphasized the need to address vulnerable groups post-COVID, including CwD, ethnic children, poor children and those located in rural and remote communities who are also often economically disadvantaged. For example, the Mid-Term Review stressed the need to expand the provision of scholarships for disadvantaged students, including those from low-income families, students living in rural/remote areas, non-Lao Tai ethnic students and CwD.

⁸⁸ Depreciation is indicative of the costs for replacement and repair of equipment, which is often stored in humid, dusty and hot environments.

⁸⁹ As noted above, this includes EU and UNICEF support programmes, DFAT/BEQUAL, GPE, ADB and JICA, as well as relevant international NGOs and other UN agencies.

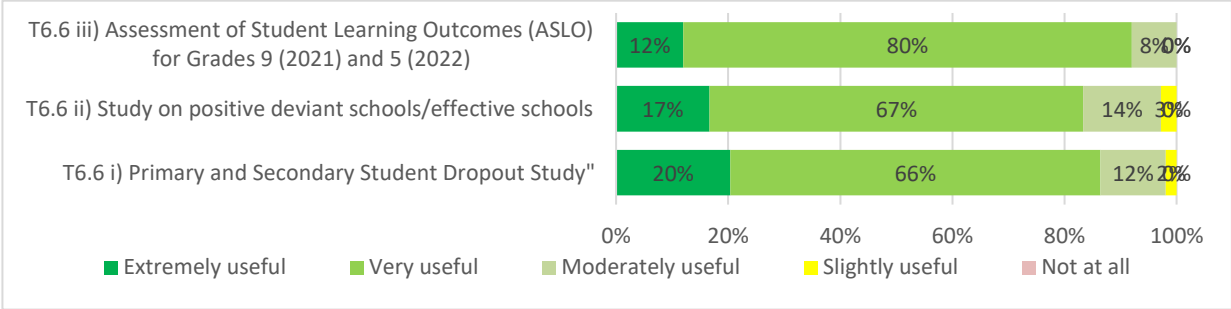
⁹⁰ This includes the support programmes of the EU, UNICEF, DFAT/BEQUAL, World Bank/ECE, GPE, ADB, JICA and relevant NGOs.

⁹¹ United Nations Children's Fund, 'Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR Extension and Amendment, Annex 1: Description of the Action, October 2023', 2022.

⁹² As stipulated in the Ministerial Decree (amended) for the MoES Quality Improvement in Remote Areas Project (April 2018).

Under KRA 3, several key studies were finalized in 2023, including the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study plus Data Must Speak research on effective schools using the Positive Deviance Research framework, including several policy briefs. The three studies supported under the PSES were designed to help identify vulnerable children defined as girls, CwD and poor children. The online survey determined that most respondents found the three studies to be very useful in identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children: i) 92 per cent found the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study to be at least very useful; ii) 84 per cent found the study on positive deviant schools/effective schools to be at least very useful; and iii) 86 per cent found the ASLO for Grade 9 (2021) and Grade 5 (2022) students to be at least very useful (see Annex 12 and Figure 8). The PSES also supported the LSIS III, which expands on previous surveys⁹³ by incorporating MICS and the Lao Reproductive Health Survey indicators and by adding new child functioning modules for ages 0 to 17, to assess educational investments, including foundational learning and disability modules using Washington Group questions and foundational learning modules.⁹⁴

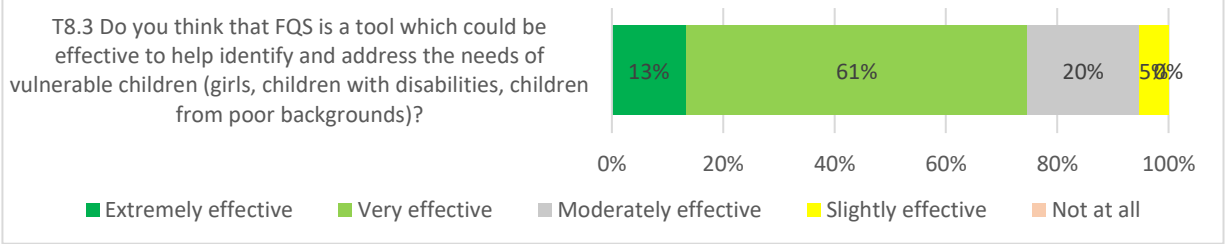
Figure 8. Percentage of respondents who find PSES studies useful in identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (source: PSESE online survey)



FQS (KRA 1) was also designed to highlight and address school development needs and to emphasize identification of underperforming students and schools. UNICEF noted that while specific measures for vulnerable groups were not explicitly included in the FQS methodology, it inherently promotes inclusion by identifying and supporting schools in the poorest areas and those with ethnic students. The absence of an explicit focus in FQS on disability highlights a potential area for further development, ensuring that all vulnerable children’s needs are addressed comprehensively. UNICEF disability inclusion policy and strategy presents a framework to help address this.⁹⁵

Many FGD participants found FQS to be highly effective in identifying and addressing the needs of vulnerable children, providing support, evaluating learning outcomes, and determining how to improve educational quality. The online survey confirmed these results, with 80 per cent of respondents believing FQS is a tool that could be very effective to help identify and address the needs of vulnerable children (see Figure 9). DESBs also noted that FQS enables a focus on schools with a higher number of red indicators – schools that are likely to have a higher percentage of vulnerable children.

Figure 9. Percentage of respondents who find FQS useful in identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (source: PSESE online survey)



The PSES also supported the strengthening of EMIS data collection and data entry at the local level, plus the reporting of disparities in data highlighting vulnerable groups (KRA 1). Furthermore, it supported inclusion of data on ECE and CwD. This additional data can be visualized in EMIS and LESMIS.⁹⁶ However, data is collected at aggregate level, which limits the capacity to focus on and follow individual children. Despite limitations, the MoES found LESMIS very useful in identifying issues relevant to vulnerable and marginalized children including girls and CwD, and disparities relating to children in rural areas. Of note, disability is classified under a limited number of general classifications, while aggregate numbers of students by gender are recorded for each classification of

⁹³ LSIS I and II from 2011/12 and 2017.
⁹⁴ To evaluate reading and maths skills in Grade 2.
⁹⁵ Source: www.unicef.org/unicef-disability-inclusion-policy-and-strategy-dipas-2022-2030.
⁹⁶ Source: <http://emisform.lesmis.edu.la:8880/>

disability. This limits the capacity to address the needs of each individual child. Individual student data would enable a more precise record of each child's disability, along with other data.

However, at times, the specific focus on vulnerable children was not deemed to be sufficiently strong. This was the case under KRA 4, where emphasis placed on CwD and ethnic children was not so prominent. In FGDs, teachers noted the lack of resources for CwD in the My House books and TV series and there were very few resources for CwD on KPL, although UNICEF clarified that My House episodes have sign language for the hearing impaired. Many respondents noted that KPL is currently not inclusive, with vulnerable children being the least likely to benefit due to lack of access to digital devices and resources. UNICEF acknowledges the challenges of reaching all children and is **working with partners such as CRS to develop solutions to bring KPL to all children, including making the offline version available on affordable devices locally.**

On the other hand, some respondents voiced the opposite, saying that CwD have benefited more from KPL because it provides voice-over, zoom in and zoom out functionality on script/text and alternative approaches to learning, including gamification, read-aloud storybooks and videos (with sign language), and so forth. This was perceived to have made KPL more inclusive than a traditional classroom environment.

Moreover, data on direct and indirect beneficiaries presented in PSES annual reporting and for this evaluation did not highlight parity indices outside of gender parity in accordance with SDG 4.5.1.⁹⁷

5.2.3 EQ3: Has the quality of the problem analysis and the programme's intervention logic been adequate?

To what extent are the proposed and implemented activities pertinent to the programme objectives? How good was the analysis of strategic options, the justification of the recommended implementation strategy, and management and coordination arrangements? How realistic was the choice and quantity of inputs (financial, human and administrative resources, and so forth)? How comprehensive and adequate was the analysis of assumptions and risks?

The mapping of the proposed activities to programme objectives was robust and logical. Analysis of strategic options was comprehensively undertaken in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, including the EU, development partners and MoES line departments. The management and coordination arrangements were robust and aligned with existing programme coordination arrangements, such as the Budget Support Steering Committee, the EWSG and informal partner forum. The inputs were aligned with the activities and reviewed annually through comprehensive annual workplans. The analysis of assumptions and risks could have been undertaken more comprehensively and applied to each KRA. Visual aids such as a ToC would have helped to better understand and communicate the PSES logic.

The main basis for the intervention logic for the PSES was to assist select areas of the ESDP as well as to align with and support EU budget support. The programme proposal presented justification for the implementation strategy and mapped timebound activities to each intervention area. Areas of support were agreed after extensive consultation with MoES line departments and they were agreed upon in the final programme proposal (see EQ1 above). The strategic options were constrained by the request of the MoES and EU to focus the PSES on system-level support and ensure stronger linkages between results-based financing and indicators relevant to ensuring that EU budget support could be maintained. This included indicators relevant to: Public Finance Management; Budget Transparency; Primary Completion Rate; District Operational Budget; Transparent and Equitable Teacher Deployment; and National Student Assessment. The focus on strengthening systems and improving public financial management aligned with these requirements under KRA 1 and KRA 3. The need to strengthen the deployment, management and capacity of teachers is reflected under KRA 2.

The logical framework shows the relationship between the interventions and the programme objective (see Annex 4). The PSES supported selected strategic objectives of the ESDP 2016–2020 and so the ESDP also shows the intervention logic. However, the ToC was not developed until the PSESE in June 2024, at the conclusion of the PSES, to help inform the evaluation. Many respondents indicated that they were unaware of the PSES full intervention strategy and scope. Development of a ToC early in the programme's lifespan would likely have helped to explain and communicate the PSES logic to stakeholders. This also relates to the capacity of stakeholders to visualize the whole intervention and its linkages and dependences, and therefore to help them make more informed decisions about its design.

Analysis of strategic options was extensive. Studies were undertaken to inform the programme design, which included joint review missions between UNICEF and the EU conducted between 2017 and 2019, analysis of the MoES 40 focus districts as well as analysis of EU Education Budget Support Programme indicative allocations, indicators and targets and sector analysis in preparation for the ESSDP 2021–2025. Specific analytical work was

⁹⁷ Indicator 4.5.1: Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data becomes available).

undertaken in some areas, which included a situation analysis and strategic plan for LESMIS.⁹⁸ In other areas the strategies employed built on prior relevant research⁹⁹ undertaken during the previous UNICEF Country Programme Document.

Management and coordination arrangements were agreed with the MoES and the EU. The Budget Support Steering Committee was used as the PSES Steering Committee and the PSES also reported to the ESWG and the informal partner coordination group. At the operational level, the DoP chaired a quarterly PSES Implementation Committee and engaged with relevant line departments, the EU and UNICEF. The PSES Secretariat, composed of designated DoP staff and UNICEF staff responsible for PSES implementation, provided quarterly reports to the PSES Implementation Committee and the PSES/Budget Support Steering Committee, respectively. The MoES also noted that UNICEF was in constant contact with line departments and that planning for each intervention occurred at the line department level. Most line departments felt that these arrangements were adequate, but some staff in the DoP expressed the view that they were not sufficient, noting that the reporting was not useful and that the PSES was being implemented as a UNICEF-driven initiative. The DoP also noted that staff in their department lacked the capacity to properly manage the PSES and that future capacity development should be undertaken in project management.

UNICEF and the MoES, in coordination with the EU, prepared annual reports and annual workplans (AWPs) as well as adjusted budgets showing disbursed funds and planned expenditure against macro budget lines. These were effective at facilitating adjustments to the PSES in accordance with changing circumstances such as the advent of COVID-19 and Decree no. 3342 issued in July 2022 on changes to the CPD of teachers. The AWP presented detailed plans for expenditure for each year and were in alignment with AWP for each responsible line department. AWP were also prepared in parallel to the MoES annual planning process coordinated by the DoP. The resources detailed in each AWP are realistically aligned with the activities and outputs.

Assumption and risk analysis in the PSES design was not comprehensive and likely did not consider the full range of dependencies and risks. Causal assumptions or risks specific to each KRA were not considered, although these would have been useful given the diverse approach to work needed under each KRA and sub-component of work.

5.3 Coherence

Assess the coherence of the programme with other interventions at the country level, particularly others implemented through UNICEF's support, those by the EU, as well as coordination and harmonization with the Government and other sector players, institutions and programmes to add value while avoiding duplication of effort.

5.3.1 (EQ4) To what extent is the programme coherent with national and local authorities, the EU's external funding mechanisms, and other development partners' work in education?

The PSES was aligned with the EU's results-based budget support and national plans such as the ESSDP and it built on some existing UNICEF initiatives. It complemented efforts across various subsectors, ensuring coherency with other partners such as JICA and BEQUAL. Coherence was maintained despite challenges from COVID-19 and leadership changes. The PSES piloted many activities in selected districts, but very few of the selected districts overlapped. Narrowing the geographic spread of each activity area would have reduced the number of districts; however, it would have enabled more opportunities to explore synergies between initiatives, including alignment between FQS and the formative assessment pilot (KRA 1).

Alignment of the PSES with the ESDP ensured its coherence with national and subnational planning. The operational modality of strong engagement with line departments helped to ensure its continued alignment throughout implementation. Moreover, engagement through line departments helped to ensure harmonization with PESS and DESBs, which also work through the line department structure.

The PSES was designed to align with and support the EU's budget support and built on lessons learned from prior collaboration between UNICEF and the EU.¹⁰⁰ The KRAs undertaken through the PSES aligned with the needs of the EU's budget support.

UNICEF integrated the PSES into the UNICEF country programme, which supports the 9th ESSDP, and has thus provided continuity with prior ongoing work. An example of this was the development of LESMIS under

⁹⁸ Ministry of Education and Sports, *Laos Education And Sports Management Information System (LES MIS) Ministry of Education and Sports, Lao PDR Strategic Development Plan 2018 to 2022 (5 years)*, MoES, 2017.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Education and Sports and United Nations Children's Fund, *Situational Analysis, Student Learning Outcomes in Primary Education in Lao PDR*, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ European Union and United Nations Children's Fund, 'The European Commission-UNICEF Partnership: Insights from implementation in education and health', 2015, an EC DEVCO B4 working document to inform discussions during the EU-UNICEF Partnership Dialogue 26-27 October 2015, Brussels Draft – 16 October 2015.

KRA 1. This was a continuation of the work that UNICEF had previously undertaken supporting the ESSC to develop the LESMIS Strategic Development Plan 2018–2022. The work undertaken on FQS is a continuation of Education Quality Standards, whole school planning and school-based management processes while KRA 2 was a continuation of UNICEF’s support to teacher capacity development undertaken prior to 2018. The direct scope of the PSES, which focused on primary and lower-secondary subsectors, has complemented UNICEF’s ongoing support to the ECE subsector. Together these contribute towards achieving the overall PAF objectives, including its ECE specific targets.

UNICEF demonstrated the capacity to mobilize and coherently align funding from different donor sources to achieve improved results. UNICEF served as Grant Agent for the GPE COVID-19 Accelerated Funding, supporting implementation of the COVID-19 education response and mitigation activities. This gave UNICEF the opportunity to ensure harmonization of interventions under the PSES, in particular for KRA 4 as well as GPEIII.¹⁰¹ Complementary activities included expanding the distribution of My House storybooks to ECE and additional schools and scaling up training in KPL to approximately 5,000 additional teachers. FQS is also being adapted for the ECE subsector and KPL is being used by upper-secondary students and for ECE.¹⁰²

The PSES piloted many activities in selected districts, but in the case of some activities, there were few overlapping districts. This might sometimes have limited opportunities to fully explore synergies between different components of the programme, for example between remedial learning support (KRA 4) and FQS. Narrowing the geographic spread of each activity area might have reduced the number of districts, but it would have enabled greater opportunities to fully explore synergies between initiatives.

The PSES was coherent with other partners’ work in education. The PSES proposal mapped the activity areas of the programme against those of other development partners (Annex 8). Mechanisms to enable coordination between the areas of work included the ESWG, the informal partner group and other working groups that were formed as required, such as the CPD working group. These mechanisms were partially successful at aligning the PSES with the interventions of other partners. While development partners noted that disruptions from COVID-19 and PSES leadership changes sometimes inhibited the capacity to fully realize opportunities to coordinate interventions more effectively, those interviewed generally felt that efforts to align work had been successful.

Examples of coherence included: i) Aligning the work undertaken by JICA on the primary education curriculum in mathematics through the Project for Strengthening Teacher Capacity to Improve Primary Mathematics Lessons (iTEAM) with the PSES work on FQS, ASLOs and KPL; ii) Attempts to align work on developing the capacity of external PAs with BEQUAL work on CPD using internal PAs; iii) Primary curriculum reform and development of approaches and tools for formative and summative assessments by BEQUAL made available through KPL and informed by ASLO testing; iv) The stated intention of BEQUAL to support the roll-out of FQS in its priority districts under the BEQUAL Phase II (2022–2026) programme and through the World Bank GPE programme; and v) PSES work on EMIS/LES MIS, budgeting, planning, the quality assurance process for PBMIS and the Public Accounting System facilitating grant allocations to schools (BEQUAL, World Bank) and more broadly general partner programming.

5.4 Effectiveness

ii) Assess the programme’s effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the planned outputs and factors affecting implementation and results (positively and negatively).

5.4.1 (EQ5) To what extent have the expected results been realized through the programme?

The PSES has mostly achieved its intended results in all areas, but challenges and issues remain and they will need to be addressed in future programming for the full realization of results. Stakeholders were generally satisfied with the results of the PSES. A comprehensive analysis of outcomes for the PSES is included in section 5.1, providing an assessment of outcomes under each KRA.

A summary of the main findings of the assessment of outcomes is shown in Table 11. Section 5.1 also highlights the issues relating to full realization of each work output that could affect its sustainability and the longer-term assessment of positive outcomes if not addressed. These issues are explored more fully under sustainability (EQ12). Some of the main outstanding challenges impacting the full realization of expected results are highlighted in Table 11.

Table 11. **Summary of the analysis of outcomes for the PSES**

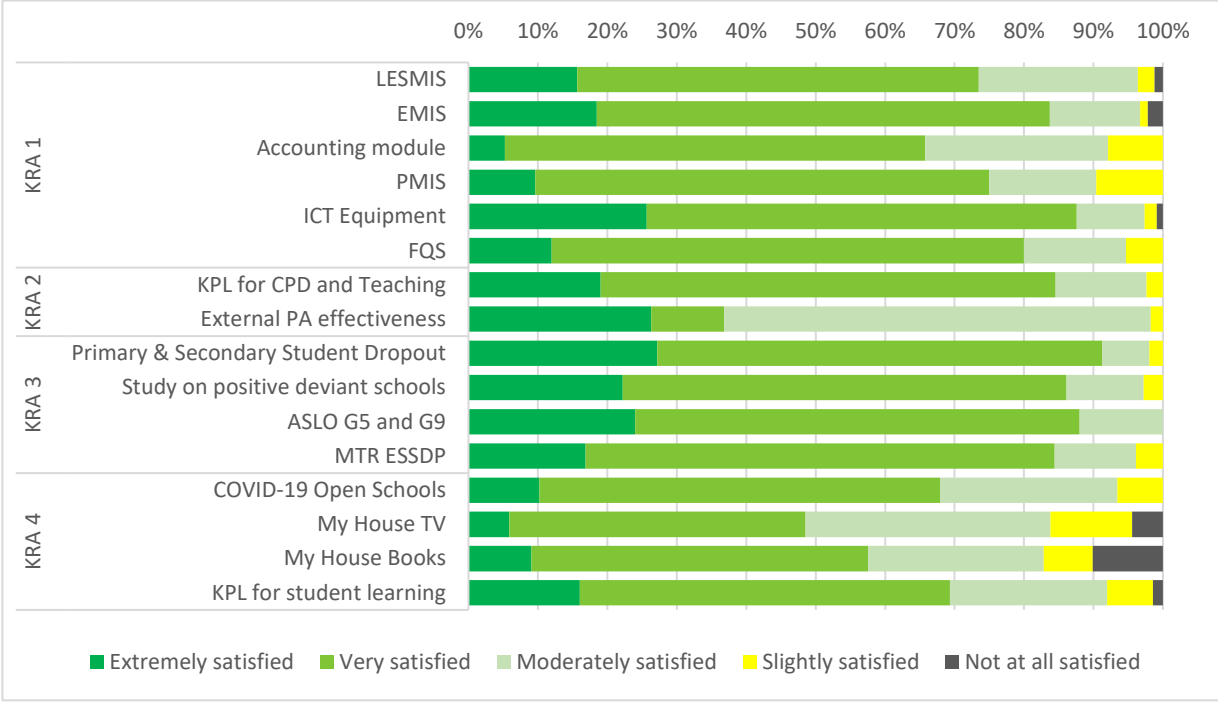
¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Confirmed in KIIs and FGDs in surveyed regions.

KRA (outcome)	Main issues/challenges impacting expected results
<p>(KRA 1) Mostly achieved: The PSES has implemented and piloted a broad range of important reforms aimed at strengthening planning, monitoring, evaluation and budgeting of the education system to school level and these have been largely successful. These reforms form a coherent strategy and while significant progress has been made towards improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning, monitoring and evaluation, further work will ensure that tools are completed and adopted fully and that systems are further enhanced to fully meet outcomes.</p>	<p>Incomplete integration of information systems due to the MoES not establishing data sharing agreements. Mainstreaming M&E tools and guidelines. Limited MoES capacity in some areas, including the ability to independently conduct ASLO tests. FQS not linked with higher-level planning/quality assurance. Limited MoES budgets/capacity for ICT repair and maintenance.</p>
<p>(KRA 2) Mostly achieved: The PSES has strengthened teacher management, allocation and deployment through redevelopment of the PMIS and the addition of a new module. Teacher quality and effectiveness have been aided by developments like KPL. The direct work undertaken through KRA2.2 has helped to integrate external PAs into the DESB structure and built the capacity of external PAs to support CPD for teachers, including on adapting to the new curriculum. There are still notable gaps in the capacity of PAs, and UNICEF is working with the MoES and partners to help address these through establishment of professional development operational guidelines and continued work in capacity development.</p>	<p>The PMIS has not been integrated with other databases due to lack of establishment of data sharing agreements by the MoES. Capacity issues relating to use of the PMIS. Issues in use of RTPMIS to predict school staffing needs. External PAs have limited effectiveness due to inadequate budgets, low capacity and low frequency of PA visits to schools: this is beyond the scope of the PSES but should be addressed in future programming. Lack of Integration of PA development into FQS, school development plans and school-based management processes. Need to finalize the CPD course for Teacher Training Colleges.</p>
<p>(KRA 3) Achieved: The PSES' evidence-based support to sector analysis and policy dialogue has generally been well received and effective, particularly at highlighting disparities in the education system and focusing attention on vulnerable and marginalized groups (description below). The MoES has had capacity developed, but capacity gaps exist that future programming can continue to address.</p>	<p>Reliance on consultants to achieve the results and capacity gaps in MoES agencies require similar studies in the future to be independently conducted.</p>
<p>(KRA 4) Achieved: The PSES has reduced the impact of COVID-19 on child well-being and strengthened emergency response and preparedness. Support given for the reopening of schools and school safety was very effective in returning children to school. The hard copy materials distributed to all schools for Grade 1 and Grade 2 pupils created opportunities to continue learning and for remedial learning following the pandemic. Digital content available on KPL was also used by children and teachers, but this content was not easily accessible to many groups, including children and teachers in remote/rural areas lacking the internet, children from poor homes lacking ICT capacity and children with specific disabilities. Emergency response capacity has been strengthened, but further work is required to institutionalize emergency response through full deployment of the emergency response and preparedness module.</p>	<p>Some issues relating to insufficient provision of equipment/supplies, such as insufficient supplies of digital thermometers and face masks: this is understandable given the scale of the emergency response and is beyond the scope of the PSES to affect, but should be considered in the future. Access to KPL is limited by internet availability, although it can be downloaded to a local device. Access is therefore challenging for schools that are not digitally enabled, which may be a barrier to access for remote/rural schools, which often have the highest proportion of vulnerable children (poor, ethnic children). The My House storybooks and TV series have effectively supported young learners, though limitations in supply and access still exist. A GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness has been developed but is not yet being used. It will be important to ensure its use. An ICT in Education Strategy has been developed and will be approved in by Q3-Q4 2024. It will be important to develop a five-year operational plan with realistic funding and implementation time frames.</p>

The achievement of outcomes is reflected by the degree of satisfaction among key stakeholders with each output of the PSES, as determined through the PSESE online survey as well as the FGDs and KIIs. The degree of satisfaction among those surveyed for the PSESE for the main outputs is shown in Figure 10.¹⁰³ In general, levels of satisfaction were positive, with on average 75 per cent of people surveyed being very satisfied with the outputs. These results align with findings from the FGDs and KIIs and they indicate a general level of high satisfaction among stakeholders knowledgeable about the initiatives undertaken by the PSES.

Figure 10. Percentage of people satisfied with the PSES outputs (source: PSESE online survey)



5.4.2 (EQ6) What factors have contributed to the programme results achieved?

How realistic were the assumptions and risk assessments that underlay the programme, and did these positively or negatively influence the effectiveness of the activities? What were the bottlenecks for the successful implementation of the PSES objectives? Assess the effectiveness of the various strategies and approaches employed by UNICEF and its partners during each stage of the programme life cycle.

The assumptions and risks were realistic, and risk mitigation strategies helped to address the challenges encountered. There were bottlenecks, including delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and these delays impacted the timing of some deliverables; however, they likely did not affect the results obtained. Some risks were mitigated through planning and engagement, such as working with line departments to adopt results from the PSES into annual budgets. Determining the risks and assumptions for each KRA would have further helped planning and implementation. Funding was timely, with no evidence that funds were withheld or delayed at any point in the programme. One shortcoming was that the priority direct and indirect beneficiaries were not defined for all components in terms of target numbers for capacity development, which would have helped to assess progress. Strong partnerships facilitated the PSES, particularly the relationship between UNICEF and line departments and with other development partners. This facilitated rapid mobilization in some areas, such as under KRA 4.

As noted under EQ3, assumption and risk analysis were included in the PSES design (2018)¹⁰⁴ and were updated in the amendment of September 2020 to include issues relating to the pandemic, including changes to the risk profile from reduced education budgets, and in each PSES annual progress report. Risks were considered for the whole programme but not for each intervention (KRA), thus limiting their application to each work stream. Assumptions were not contextualized as external or causal, which would have helped to identify strategies to address assumptions. Nor was a ToC available to visualize the relationship between assumptions, risks, programme interventions and outcomes.

¹⁰³ The survey Likert scale questions included the wording: Satisfied; Useful; Engaged; Effective.
¹⁰⁴ UNICEF (2018) *Annex 1: Description of the Action Partnership to Strengthen the Education System (PSES) in Lao PDR, Amendment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, August 2018, UNICEF.

Overall programme risks were accurately determined. Two risk mitigation strategies were well realized, and mitigation strategies helped to reduce the impact on the PSES. Notably the risk relating to “MoES to ensure allocation of resources for capacity development activities (recurrent activities) alongside PSES support in a progressive manner over the implementation period” was mitigated by strong interaction with each line department throughout the programme life cycle: this resulted in revisions to each line department’s annual budget to accommodate changes resulting from the PSES. However, issues relating to sustainability remain and are considered under EQ12/EQ13. The strong interaction with line departments helped to mitigate the risk of “Lack of sustainability and ownership by MoES”.

One notable risk evident at all levels is that “allocation of education budget is not sufficient or is reduced”. Although the PSES and the work of other development partners have helped to improve “planning, budgeting and monitoring and to justify budget allocation and utilization”, issues of underfunding remain, particularly at the DESB and school levels: these remain a risk to ongoing work, including FQS and school development plans. Continued partner support, such as through school grants and the provision of equipment and training to DESB staff, is likely to be required for the foreseeable future to achieve the objectives of the 9th ESSDP and to realize positive outcomes for work relating to FQS and SDP.

COVID-19 resulted in bottlenecks, including: i) challenges to capacity development activities using remote learning; ii) breakdowns in coordination with the MoES and other development partners owing to disruptions and changes in staffing and focus attributable to the pandemic; iii) limited capacity for international technical assistance; iv) realignment of funding, additional funding and changes to the PSES; and iv) delays to some surveys, including the ASLO for Grade 5 students. These delays did impact the PSES and capacity to deliver results on time. Although the pandemic brought challenges, it also created opportunities for UNICEF and the PSES to focus on support of digital learning for students and teachers, and for UNICEF to align partner efforts behind the COVID1-9 Response Plan with a focus on programme regions, thus helping to mitigate the pandemic’s impact.

Delays in the development of information systems under KRA 1 have meant that the dashboard to monitor the ESSDP is not complete. Delays in software development for FQS have impacted the capacity to integrate the standards into higher-level quality assurance and planning. Development of a Gantt chart showing dependencies, and risk planning, could have enabled understanding of when software would be ready to deploy and therefore when to schedule activities dependent on its deployment. This comment also applies to linkages between the databases (PMIS, EMIS/LESMSIS), which were not fully implemented due to **MoES departments not establishing data sharing agreements**.

Funding was timely, with no evidence that funds were withheld or delayed at any point in the programme. The broad strategic objectives were well defined and the activities were described in detail and designed to achieve the objectives. **One shortcoming was that the priority direct and indirect beneficiaries were not defined for all components in terms of target numbers for capacity development. The programme design and reporting highlight these in the narrative, but they were not included in the logical framework or summarized elsewhere for each reference.** This hindered the assessment of progress and was evident during the PSESE, as the data had to be compiled from multiple sources.

Strong partnerships facilitated the PSES, particularly the relationship between UNICEF and line departments and with other development partners. Clear roles were assigned to partners that aligned with their organizational strengths (see Annex 8). There were clear communication and feedback loops that informed an adaptive management strategy and incorporated the elements needed to foster a good working environment for the PSES. The exception to this, as previously noted, was the DoP, which felt it did not have a strong role in the coordination and management of the PSES. The evidence indicates that, overall, the PSES implementing partnership was a key factor impacting results. UNICEF’s strong network and pre-existing relationships with many key actors in Lao PDR at the subnational level; its good reputation among these actors and the resulting trust that had been built up over time; and its global, extensive experience in social sectors all contributed to achieving the positive outcomes obtained.¹⁰⁵ This evidence also indicates that these partnerships were key factors in facilitating rapid mobilization in some areas, such as KRA 4 on emergency preparedness.

5.4.3 (EQ7) To what extent did different groups, particularly vulnerable children and the most marginalized, such as girls, children with disabilities and children in rural areas, benefit in different ways from the programme? What are the major factors influencing the achievement (or not) of the programme results?

The PSES included significant technical work focused on vulnerable children, such as studies and reviews that highlighted the issues and disparities for vulnerable children and the inclusion of CwD in EMIS. Stakeholders stated that certain elements of PSES work benefited vulnerable children. Significant impact on vulnerable children has not yet been demonstrated, however, which was attributed to the recent

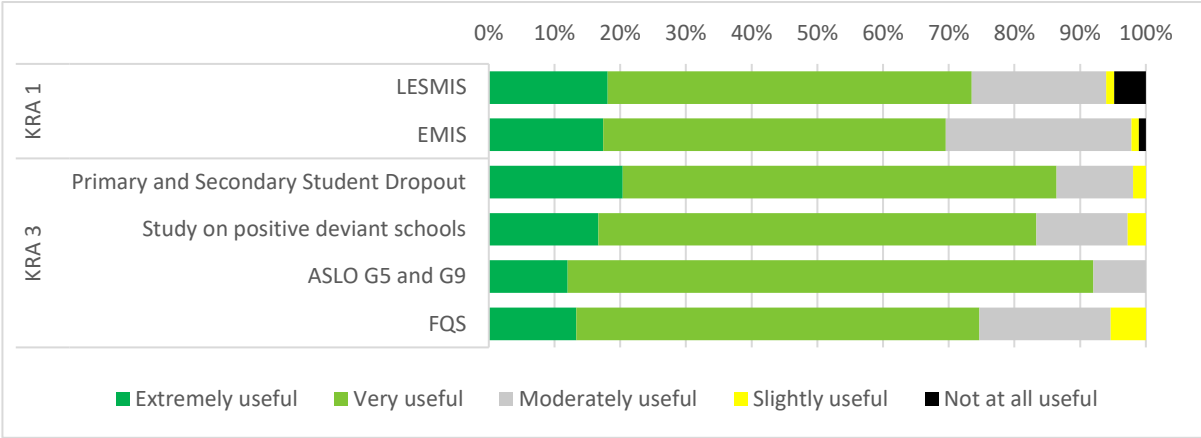
¹⁰⁵ Determined through KIIs with line departments and development partners.

implementation and the lack of detailed student data. At policy level, the PSES has helped to bring issues related to education for vulnerable children to the fore.

Most PSES activities were conducted in 40 MoES priority districts as stipulated in the Ministerial Decree (amended) for the MoES Quality Improvement in Remote Areas (April 2018) (see Annex 7). These districts were identified for their poor education performance and were included as focal areas in the ESSDP 2021–2025. Focusing on these districts was also undertaken as part of KRA 4 on COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness.

PSESE survey respondents were asked whether selected outputs of the PSES (under KRA 1 and KRA 3) had been useful for identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (girls, CwD and poor children). Responses were very positive over the six output areas, with on average 80 per cent of persons with knowledge of each component believing the output was very useful or extremely useful in identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children (see Figure 11). **This highlights the perception among beneficiaries that significant PSES activities have been beneficial for addressing the plight of vulnerable children.**

Figure 11. Perceptions of the PSES identifying and addressing issues relating to vulnerable children for selected outputs of the programme (source: PSESE survey)



The integration of a disability module in EMIS/LESMIS (KRA 1.1) aims to have a positive impact on the inclusion of CwD. However, it has only recently been implemented and does not record individual student data, thus limiting its effectiveness in pinpointing individual students for support.¹⁰⁶

For KRA 3.1, development partners noted that the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study, which focused on six districts, helped to identify the problems and causes of dropout among primary and secondary students. Issues identified helped partners to align programming with the needs of vulnerable children at risk of dropping out. The Data Must Speak positive deviance research led to four policy briefs, several of which were relevant for addressing the needs of vulnerable children, including a policy exploring the school climate and addressing the issue of bullying and violence in schools. As noted, these informed public forums and discourse, including the Lao PDR Human Capital Summit 2023. The ASLOs for Grade 5 and Grade 9 students were appreciated by the MoES and development partners for their ability to highlight disparities in learning outcomes relating to vulnerable children. The soon-to-be-published LSIS III also has the potential to highlight issues relating to vulnerable children, thanks to the inclusion of a child functioning module for ages 0 to 17 to assess educational investments and the foundational learning and disability modules using Washington Group questions.

Teachers and principals felt that FQS (KRA 3.1) was effective at identifying children who were falling behind and thus were more likely to be vulnerable and that it helped them to better provide support and evaluate learning outcomes. However, they did not think FQS had a strong focus on CwD, poor children or ethnic children. They emphasized the need for FQS to serve as a tool to ensure equal access to education for all children, including those from disadvantaged, disabled and poor backgrounds.

Teachers stated that KPL (KRA 4.2) had useful content on inclusion, gender and disability. For example, they cited teacher aids, which helped them to instruct children from ethnic backgrounds, visual aids for sight-impaired children and gender-sensitive material available on KPL, including for adolescent girls in response to demand for more content on comprehensive sexuality education. However, KPL is mainly accessible to teachers and students in

¹⁰⁶ ESSC reported that it is piloting the Lao Individual Student and Staff (LIST) system. LIST is being developed under ADB to give specific attention to individual students. ESSC has requested UNICEF to select focus ECE and primary schools for piloting LIST and has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Home Affairs to link LIST with the Birth Registration ID from the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System.

urban areas with good internet access and so is **not yet easily available to remote and rural students, who may be more likely to be classified as vulnerable, despite KPL being downloadable to local devices.**

5.5 Efficiency

ii) Assess the programme’s effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the planned outputs, and factors affecting implementation and results (positively and negatively). iii) Assess the programme’s management efficiency, partnerships, governance and coordination mechanisms.

5.5.1 (EQ8) To what extent did the Country Office engage in prioritization, resulting in strategic adjustments to the results framework and to key activities and outputs?

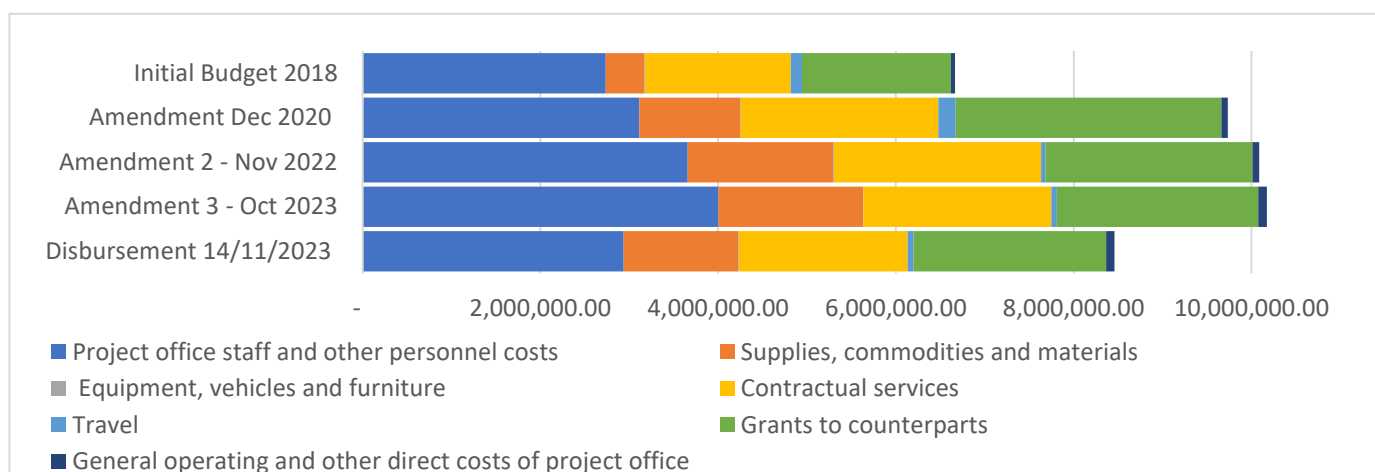
How effectively did the Country Office adapt the number and type of outputs to the evolving contexts, including the financial and operational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?

UNICEF LCO made constant adjustments to the PSES in coordination and dialogue with line departments and the EU. The COVID-19 pandemic did not result in any changes to the budgets of existing KRAs. The PSES was granted an additional budget and created a new KRA to address challenges imposed by COVID-19.

The PSES underwent three amendments between inception and completion. The first amendment, in December 2020, was the most significant and introduced the additional KRA 4 designed to provide COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness. This did not require a reduction in budgets of existing KRAs because additional funds were made available by the EU and UNICEF (via contribution in staff). The strategy for KRA 4 was partially synergized with GPE COVID-19 Accelerated Funding to provide support to focal regions. There was no evidence that this drew resources away from existing commitments.

Management and coordination arrangements are analysed under EQ3. Line departments expressed the view that these provided an ongoing opportunity to guide and adapt the PSES to changing circumstances. The PSES AWP and budgets show strong evidence of prioritization and strategic adjustments. These are evident at the macro level through adjustments to budget plans submitted during the PSES lifespan and the disbursement as of 14 November 2023 shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12. PSES planned budget in euros and disbursements to 14 November 2023, not excluding indirect and contingency budget (source: UNICEF LCO)



Examples of effective changes in strategy were given in KIIs and are evident in the progress reports. For example, under KRA 1.1, EMIS was going to be further developed to meet the needs of planning, monitoring and evaluation at DESB level. However, the EMIS source code was not available because a prior development had left ownership with an external software company. Therefore, in 2021, ESSC made the decision to redevelop EMIS through the PSES. ESSC expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the change in strategy. For KRA 2.2, Decree no. 3342 resulted in the decision to halt development of the CPD of PAs and channel efforts towards ensuring that the new professional development will be aligned with changes to the roles and responsibilities of external PAs. The Department of General Education and DTE expressed satisfaction with this decision. Near the end of the programme, additional funds were unused and so the MoES directed the PSES to supply video conferencing equipment to all DESBs.

Could comparable results have been attained through alternative strategies or with fewer resources?

There are instances where alternative strategies could have been employed to achieve better outcomes. The PSES annual progress reports were not sufficiently well structured to communicate progress and enhance understanding.

There are examples where alternative strategies might have produced better outcomes. For example, (KRA 1.3) FQS links to school development plans, but it is not used to influence higher-level planning at DESBs or PESS. Central level agencies also have difficulty understanding FQS and its application to quality assurance or central planning. FQS does not yet strongly inform teacher CPD plans, as was intended. The slow development of the FQS software module was a main barrier to achieving these results. Ensuring that tools were fully developed prior to roll-out could have resulted in greater understanding and ownership at higher levels of government.

The intervention did not rely much on national consultants when this would have been suitable. For example, the ICT in Education Strategy was delayed because of challenges in finding a suitable international consultant, who subsequently struggled with language barriers. Partnering an international consultant with a national consultant, even one lacking the full range of skills required for this analysis, would have facilitated the process, improved sustainability and developed local capacity.¹⁰⁷

The PSES annual reports highlighted the reasoning behind strategic adjustments to the results framework and to key activities and outputs. However, the format of the progress reports could have been improved to better highlight the overall progress to date, expenditure for each KRA and total expenditure to date, the total number of direct or indirect beneficiaries reached and the targets and the risks and assumptions relating to each KRA.¹⁰⁸ These shortfalls were evident during the PSESE, when some effort was needed to review each annual report to try to determine the aggregate progress of the PSES to completion. The MoES also noted the challenges in trying to assess the overall progress in each intervention area: this was largely a result of issues concerning presentation and reporting.

5.5.2 (EQ9) What factors have contributed to increase/decrease the efficiency of the programme?

The factors that increased efficiency included:

- i. **Coordinating and consolidating MoES and development partner resources through digital content platforms:** KPL helped to coordinate the work of partners and provided a means to cost-effectively deploy digital material. JICA, the World Bank, BEQUAL and other partners have all added material to KPL,¹⁰⁹ and development partners and the MoES identified it as a useful tool for bringing together materials developed by different partners and coordinating their deployment and use. KPL is operated on a Microsoft platform and is free to deploy.
- ii. **Contextual adaptability:** The PSES demonstrated flexibility and efficiency by adapting to changing contexts, for example by shifting from a computer-based to a paper-based approach for FQS, ensuring continuous implementation without significant delays. Another example is the change in strategy to fully redevelop EMIS to ensure full ownership by the MoES.
- iii. **Consolidated training efforts:** Consolidating training programmes and materials for teachers and administrators allowed for a streamlined delivery of capacity-building activities, thus reducing redundancy and ensuring efficient use of resources. For example, LESMIS training was included in FQS training for principals.
- iv. **Efficient data systems:** Utilizing integrated data platforms like LESMIS and transitioning from manual to digital systems improved data collection, analysis and reporting efficiency: this is more likely to lead to timely and accurate decision-making.
- v. **Use of existing infrastructure:** Leveraging use of existing infrastructure, such as local schools and administrative offices for meetings and training sessions, reduced costs and logistical complexities, promoting efficient programme execution.
- vi. **Efficient coordination with development partners: The mapping of activities with those of development partners followed by** coordination with, for example, BEQUAL, JICA, and the World

¹⁰⁷ Suggested by the MoES.

¹⁰⁸ It is noted that UNICEF LCO is bound by reporting standards imposed externally, so parts of this conclusion may need to be considered at the regional or global level.

¹⁰⁹ Including: Aide et Action, CRS, Humanity and Inclusion, Room to Read, Save the Children, UNESCO, UNFPA, USAID, WFP and Childfund.

Bank ensured that efforts were complementary, preventing duplication and optimizing resource utilization across various initiatives.

- vii. **Flexible response to emergencies:** The programme's ability to adapt to emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic by quickly implementing remote learning solutions and distributing necessary health supplies demonstrated efficiency in crisis management.
- viii. **Strategic use of pilot programmes:** Implementing pilot programmes to test initiatives before full-scale roll-out allowed for fine-tuning and ensured that broader implementation was efficient and effective, as in the case of FQS.

Several notable factors inhibited the programme's efficiency. These included:

- i. **The advent of COVID-19 and the impact on capacity development.** The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in bottlenecks, which are described under EQ6. UNICEF, DESBs and teachers found that the need to train remotely, negatively impacted the quality of training. Digital capacity was generally low at the local level and staff noted issues when they trained remotely in KPL, including having low digital skills and poor internet connectivity.
- ii. **Reliance on technology solutions at the school level.** FQS was initially rolled out under the concept of schools managing their own data. This included the provision of WiFi boxes and tablets to schools and the training of principals. The digital capacity in most schools was too low, however, and so a shift to paper-based reporting at school level had to be made. This is also connected to efforts made to find cost-effective solutions to deploying digital learning in remote and rural schools.
- iii. **Reliance on international technical assistance without national consultancy.** International technical assistance often brings extensive experience and can introduce international best practice. However, in the Asian context, it is often best to pair technical assistance with good national consultancy to facilitate language and cultural barriers and to better understand the local context.¹¹⁰
- iv. **Lack of standards when developing information systems.** ESSC has developed standards for software development but these are largely ignored by development partners and the MoES.¹¹¹ As a result, different vendors, development standards and software platforms (technologies) have been used for the development of software solutions for the MoES (PMIS/LES MIS/FQS). One consequence of this has been higher costs in linking systems together. Another is more complex arrangements for vendor support for software systems and greater capacity needed for the MoES to adapt existing systems to future requirements.
- v. **Disparity in capacity at the subnational level.** UNICEF noted the large disparity in capacity between districts and schools, citing this as a significant challenge for interventions such as FQS.

5.5.3 (EQ10) To what extent can the resources in terms of financial, human and logistical be considered as: Enough (in terms of quantity) concerning the identified needs and the expected results? Adequate (in terms of quality) concerning the expected results? Timely, delivered on time?

Most activities under the PSES had sufficient resources and some activities demonstrated very effective use of resources, such as the work undertaken through KPL. There are a few areas where increased resource allocation might have resulted in better outcomes, for example regarding development of the FQS tools and approach. Ensuring that tools were completed prior to roll-out of training at DESB and school levels would likely have improved the learning outcome. But it is also acknowledged that systemic reform is an iterative process and that it is not always easy to identify when roll-out should occur. Resources were generally timely, but COVID-19 and slow mobilization did delay some international technical assistance. Most outputs were delivered within expected expenditure ranges. The cost-effectiveness of some, for example the development of PAs under KRA 2, can only be evaluated under longer time frames. For external PAs, the cost-effectiveness will depend on addressing capacity gaps within the MoES relating to PAs: this is beyond the scope of the PSES to influence.

¹¹⁰ There were several examples where efficiency could have been improved using this modality more effectively, such as regarding the development of the ICT in Education Strategy, the Mid-Term Review of the ESSDP and development of the M&E Framework, Tools and Operational Guidelines. National technical assistance can also help to build local capacity and facilitate more meetings and forums more cost-effectively.

¹¹¹ Reported by UNICEF, ESSC.

The budget assigned for PSES staff was \$4,240,356, or 37 per cent of the total budget of \$11,467,788 for the PSES,^{112, 113} which also included the majority of the UNICEF commitment of €1,690,730. As of 14 November 2023, these budget lines had collectively incurred \$3,424,449 out of \$9,562,951, thus 36 per cent, in line with the planned budget. This included 10 full-time programme staff engaged in the programme and five part-time staff during 2023. This was in line with similar programmes and projects of this scope, which typically fall under 40 per cent of the programme costs.

UNICEF and the MoES noted that slow procurement of equipment sometimes delayed capacity-building activities, but not significantly. Slow mobilization of international technical assistance during the pandemic was attributed to some delays in the studies conducted. Delays in recruitment of a consultant for the ICT Education Strategy were attributed to delays in development of the plan.

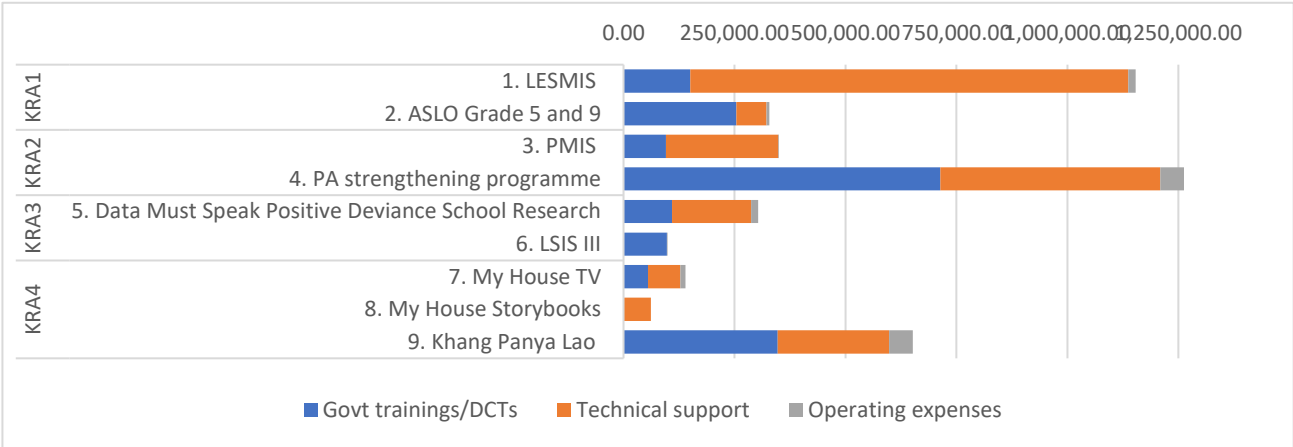
There was limited evidence to suggest that resources had been inadequate for the results achieved, although additional resources might have achieved better results in some areas. This is evident for FQS, which would have benefited from additional software development resources to ensure that tools were adequately developed prior to implementation of the pilot. Applying additional resources to ensure linkages between the different software systems, for example LESMIS and PMIS, would have greatly improved data coherency, quality and completeness. However, it is acknowledged that the main barrier was the lack of agreement between MoES departments.

Cost-effectiveness was analysed on a case-by-case basis, given the diversity of outputs under the PSES (see Annex 13). The following analyses the allocation of expenditure to the three largest cost outputs (see Figure 13), which were LESMIS/EMIS, the PA strengthening programme and KPL.

The cost-effectiveness analysis determined that:

- The costs for the LESMIS provision of equipment, development and training were equivalent to those in other comparable developments. Given the levels of satisfaction and usage reported for the PSESE, the cost-effectiveness was sufficient.
- The costs for the PA strengthening programme were reasonable and included provision of computers and other equipment. The effectiveness will depend on MoES capacity gaps, which were reported during the PSESE for external PAs; these gaps are beyond the scope of the PSES to resolve.
- The implementation of KPL has led to successful results, which are scalable without adding additional costs and can ultimately impact all teachers and students throughout Lao PDR. Costs per student will gradually be reduced each year as more students and teachers engage with the system. Preliminary outcomes indicate that KPL is successful in supporting learning in schools.

Figure 13. Expenditure breakdown by main output by trainings/direct cash transfers (DCTs), technical support and operating expenses in US dollars (source: UNICEF LCO 10 July 2024)



Expenditure for the other components – including studies conducted, publication of remedial learning materials and development of PMIS – is in line with comparable costs on other projects.

¹¹² Excluding contingency budget.

¹¹³ This includes the three budget lines: i) General operating and other direct costs of the Project Office; ii) Project Office staff and other personnel costs; iii) Staff assigned to the operations of the Project Office.

5.5.4 (EQ11) To what extent did the programme activities reinforce synergies with other initiatives to achieve optimal utilization of available resources?

The mapping of PSES activities with other programmes identified key synergies, facilitating better resource utilization and coherent coordination with national and local authorities. Significant collaborations included curriculum dissemination by BEQUAL and JICA, and UNICEF's coordination of COVID-19 funding and work under ECE. These demonstrated the coordination of resources to achieve better outcomes. In most cases, development partners operated in different focal districts, which limited the ability to fully explore further synergies between programmes.

The response to EQ4 discusses the extent to which the PSES was coherent with national and local authorities, the EU's external funding mechanisms and other development partners' work in education. As reported under EQ4, the preliminary design work undertaken by UNICEF mapped activity areas of the PSES with other programmes, helped to align potential areas of synergy and created a basis for building on these synergies during the implementation. In general, the areas of synergy also provided opportunities to ensure optimal utilization of resources: these are briefly listed below.

- i) BEQUAL and JICA have been able to disseminate content to a wider audience using KPL (KRA 4.2). This includes a curriculum developed under JICA and BEQUAL, plus CPD material developed under BEQUAL.
- ii) The quality assurance work undertaken on PBMIS has facilitated the work of the EU, which supported the development of PBMIS. The Public Accounting System also complements PBMIS to ensure accurate data for budgeting.
- iii) UNICEF's work on ECE is adapting the work on FQS undertaken in the primary sector through the PSES.
- iv) UNICEF utilized GPE COVID-19 Accelerated Funding and funding from the PSES and other sources to support implementation of the COVID-19 education response and mitigation activities, including My House storybooks to ECE and additional schools, and to expand training in KPL to approximately 5,000 additional teachers. It facilitated coordination between partners, for example WHO and between the health and education sectors on the COVID-19 response and safe return to schools. Funding sources included UNICEF Australia (includes Australia), the EU (PSES), Japan, USAID and GPE.

One significant area of work where greater synergy might have been possible was between the PSES PA strengthening programme (KRA 2.2) and the work BEQUAL was conducting on CPD. The disruption to the work in this area resulting from Decree no. 3342 was one barrier. Another significant barrier was that BEQUAL was piloting in one set of districts and the PSES in another: this further limited the capacity to coordinate and explore synergies between the two programmes. **Aligning the programmes in the same districts would have limited the geographic scope but would have enabled greater capacity to explore synergies.**

5.6 Sustainability

v) Review the strategies and mechanisms for sustainability of the results achieved through the PSES programme support.

5.6.1 (EQ12) To what extent are the intervention results likely to continue after the end of the current programme? What mechanisms were set up to ensure the follow-up of the programme's activities and results?

Most PSES interventions are sustainable after the programme's end, but some will require further work, such as FQS and support to PA strengthening. It is likely that development partners will need to support the MoES to adapt information systems to future needs and will have to conduct further studies to adapt programming to changing needs in the post-COVID-19 context. UNICEF has stated its intention to support the Government on PSES initiatives in line with its longer-term country programme education objectives. Continued collaborations with ongoing programmes such as BEQUAL will also help to ensure sustainability.

As detailed under EQ3, UNICEF worked closely with line departments to design and implement each PSES intervention. This likely increased sustainability because in some cases the reforms undertaken through the programme have been accommodated in line department recurrent budgets. However, line departments noted that they do not receive funding to undertake new areas of systemic reform, so it is unlikely that further investment in systems reform will occur without support from development partners.

Sustainability was a consideration in most areas of work, and discussions with the MoES and EU on sustainability have taken place. However, the progress reports did not focus on sustainability, and KRAs missed a section

dedicated to sustainability that would have assisted in sustainability planning. Sustainability for work undertaken for each KRA is summarized below, based on analysis carried out during the PSES.

KRA 1: Strengthening the education system: LESMIS, EMIS, PBMS and the Public Accounting System are all very likely to continue operating. Each system is embedded into MoES budgeting, planning and monitoring. Budgets for the operation of each system are included in the annual budgets for each line department. In the case of LESMIS and EMIS, ESSC believes it has the technical capacity to further modify and enhance the systems in future years. Reports generated from the systems are mainstreamed into central, PESS and DESB planning and monitoring. The reforms made to annual planning and monitoring are included in the 9th ESSDP and are likely to be continued in the 10th ESSDP, including adherence to the (MEAL) Plan and draft M&E tools and operational guidelines.

KRA 2: Teacher management and quality: PMIS is likely to continue operating. It is hosted locally at the MoES ICT Centre and is included in the operational budget of the Department of Organization and Personnel. Under KRA 2.2, external PAs had some capacity development but their effectiveness is hampered by inadequate budgets, low capacity and the low frequency of PA visits to schools. It will be essential to finalize the CPD operational guidelines and for UNICEF, BEQUAL and others involved in supporting development partners (such as JICA, the EU, World Bank/GPE-III) to refocus their support to ensure effective CPD support to teachers. Both UNICEF and BEQUAL have expressed their intention to continue support for CPD and to work in alignment to achieve this. BEQUAL intends to roll out FQS in its focal districts and UNICEF has stated its intention to support FQS technically and directly contingent on funding.

KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue: Support to this KRA has been integrated into the ESSDP and this has informed partner programming and policy dialogue. These efforts are likely to be sustainable with continued support from development partners. However, the MoES has limited capacity to undertake these studies independently and would likely require further technical assistance support to conduct similar surveys and policy briefs in the future. Conducting further studies will be important to adapt programming to the altering education landscape post-COVID-19.

KRA 4: COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness: The support to safe school operations, back to school and vaccination campaigns is no longer in practice or required. However, future emergency preparedness is important and can be ensured by enabling the GIS online platform for emergency preparedness and ensuring its use. The My House books and TV programmes are also sustainable but would require further funding to supply schools with new books or episodes. KPL requires no budget to host and deploy, but it does require operational costs for REIS staff to manage it and further develop content. The evidence indicates that KPL has reached a critical mass of users despite access problems for people in rural/remote areas or those lacking internet and mobile devices. UNICEF has indicated it will continue to work with development partners and NGOs to ensure the use of KPL in classroom learning in remote/rural or under-equipped schools. It will be important to update materials on KPL and to improve its capacity to monitor and facilitate learning. The MoES (REIS) can add and update content on the platform such as recently added interactive learning materials. However, there are some challenges in modifying the software, like removing the requirement for password validation, which was a barrier reported by teachers/principals during FGDs.

Table 12 summarizes the sustainability challenges remaining in each KRA, and mitigation strategies identified through the PSES are noted.¹¹⁴

Table 12. Sustainability challenges for each KRA

Challenges to sustainability	Mitigating strategies
KRA1: Improve planning, monitoring and evaluation of the education system	
The MoES has an inadequate budget to repair or replace ICT equipment supplied to all levels. Over time, the equipment is likely to fail, which will impede operations without a sufficient budget.	The ICT Education Strategy was finalized in August 2024, which will help. However, funding for the plan is not guaranteed. UNICEF and the MoES have committed to ensuring a more detailed shorter-term ICT Operational Plan, which will be developed following finalization of the strategy.
The dashboard through LESMIS is not finalized, thus impeding reporting against the ESSDP.	UNICEF has committed to completion of the dashboard and may support further work on LESMIS. ESSC has secured the appropriate agreements for data sharing from the Minister of Education and is planning to undertake linkages to required systems.
The MoES lacks capacity to operate future ASLO assessments without technical assistance.	BEQUAL, JICA and UNICEF continue to undertake work on formative and standardized assessment, which informed the work on ASLOs.

¹¹⁴ Summarized from KIIs, the PSESE online survey and FGDs.

Challenges to sustainability	Mitigating strategies
FQS only functions at school level to inform SDP. Sustainability is unlikely unless it is linked to higher-level quality assurance, monitoring and planning.	BEQUAL stated the intention to support the roll-out of FQS in its priority districts as part of the BEQUAL Phase II (2022–2026) programme. The World Bank will use GPE3 to help extend FQS to 32 additional districts. UNICEF has committed to completing development of the FQS software and operationalization of FQS in the target districts. UNICEF with development partners will continue working and advocating with the MoES to ensure its linkages to higher-level quality assurance, monitoring and planning.
KRA 2: Teacher management and quality	
Further work on RTPMIS is required to ensure it accurately predicts staffing requirements in schools.	None
Operational guidelines for teacher CPD need to be finalized. External PA capacity is limited, and external PAs are under-resourced. Integration of PA development into FQS, SDP and school-based management processes and digital resources was not achieved.	UNICEF, JICA, the World Bank and BEQUAL continue to work on CPD for teachers. UNICEF will likely continue to support external PAs (as part of the CPD framework) and BEQUAL will continue supporting CPD for internal PAs during the BEQUAL Phase II (2022-2026) programme. DTE is working on the development of a monitoring approach to ensure that trained staff perform their given roles effectively as well as to monitor any staffing changes so that ongoing training needs can be met and to ensure PA CPD.
KRA 3: Evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue	
The MoES reports that it lacks capacity to undertake studies and evidence-based sector analysis without further technical support. Further studies are likely to be needed and updated on the current situation.	UNICEF is continuing support to evidence-based sector analysis and policy dialogue, but it may lack the resources to undertake surveys and studies without additional funding.
KRA 4: COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness	
GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness.	None
Use of KPL in classroom learning in remote/rural schools and underequipped schools. Migration of KPL to a learning management system.	UNICEF has stated its intention to collaborate with CRS, BEQUAL, international NGOs, NGOs and other development partners to continue to promote KPL. UNICEF has assisted the MoES to develop a national ICT strategy for addressing access to internet/technology nationally, with a strong focus on the role of the private sector/internet service providers for expanding access to internet in schools. Collaborations with NGOs such as CRS to ensure affordable access in remote/rural schools.

5.6.2 (EQ13) To what extent have the programme strategies been designed in a way that will contribute to sustainability of equity and gender-related results?

Capacity has been built in the 40 focus districts under the PSES and many of the outputs will be sustainable in the focal regions (EQ12). The PSES has been effective at focusing education policy and planning dialogue on equity issues, including disparities relating to gender and gender-related issues for vulnerable groups, through the reviews, studies and assessments conducted and the reforms undertaken on quality assurance and M&E. However, many of these were carried out using international technical assistance and it is likely that continued assistance will be required in the future to advance this work.

Several areas of the programme will contribute to the sustainability of equity and gender-related results. These include:

- i. The focus on the 40 districts prioritized by the MoES for poor performance has strengthened capacity in the activity areas under the PSES. In many areas this will likely be sustained as detailed under EQ12, and this will contribute to equity.

- ii. The equity focus of the 9th ESSDP will likely be continued in the 10th ESSDP. The reforms to M&E have also ensured that these align with SDG 4 for inclusive and equitable quality education (KRA 1). The M&E operational guidelines plus the toolbox and inclusion of monitoring indicators into the LESMIS dashboard will help to standardize efforts to monitor and evaluate education throughout the education sector: this will highlight disparities and ensure that a gender lens is applied to key education indicators. The work undertaken in LESMIS/EMIS to record and report on CwD is likely to be sustained.
- iii. FQS highlights inequality in the delivery of education services, but further efforts will be required to ensure it is sustained and linked to higher-level quality assurance, monitoring and planning (KRA1).
- iv. The gender-related materials deployed on KPL will continue to be hosted there, but access and usage will depend on continued promotion of KPL content by the MoES (KRA 4).
- v. The studies undertaken through the PSES (KRA 3) are likely to have a sustained impact. The Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study was conducted before COVID-19 but has been informative about sector planning and development partner programming. The Data Must Speak positive deviance research is incorporated into the ESSDP and policy briefs. The ASLO Grade 9 assessment (KRA 1) has informed work undertaken through BEQUAL and JICA on the curriculum as well as the formative and summative assessment. KIIs conducted for the PSESE indicated that the ASLO helped to shift national and local policy and planning dialogue towards learning outcomes. However, the MoES indicated that technical assistance support would be required to conduct similar studies in the future. Preliminary feedback on LSIS III indicates that it will also be very useful for focusing policy and planning on equity issues and vulnerable groups.
- vi. The Mid-Term Review and Joint Sector Review emphasized the need to address vulnerable groups post-COVID-19 and were used to inform changes to policy and planning in the latter half of the 9th ESSDP; they are all being used to inform the 10th ESSDP.¹¹⁵

5.6.3 (EQ14) To what extent have institutions and stakeholders taken and shown ownership of the action objectives? To what extent are they actively engaged in the activities of the action?

The PSESE determined a strong level of ownership of PSES initiatives by central line departments and at PESS and DESB levels. Ownership of schools varied for some initiatives due to variations in capacity at grassroots level. There is a need to strengthen MoES (DoP) capacity to manage and coordinate programmes like the PSES so as to improve ownership, coordination and communication of programme initiatives.

Sustainability is discussed under EQ12 and EQ13, where issues around ownership are also analysed as these are fundamental to sustainability. Line departments interviewed for this evaluation confirmed ownership of the activities directed by their departments. Line departments consulted for this evaluation had adopted PSES initiatives into programming and line department budgets. This ownership was reflected at the PESS and DESB levels, where officers consulted for the PSESE took direction from central line departments and expressed a high level of engagement with PSES initiatives. There was also a high degree of ownership, in most schools visited, of initiatives that reached school level, such as FQS, learning materials and COVID-19 emergency response and preparedness measures. However, ownership varied for some initiatives, for example with some teachers lacking the capacity to digitally engage with KPL. Leadership at the PESS and DESB levels also expressed a high degree of ownership of PSES initiatives. Ownership is further reflected in the high levels of satisfaction expressed by respondents to the PSESE online survey (EQ5).

An exception on this issue was the sense by some staff in the DoP that ownership of the initiatives was limited: they expressed the opinion that many of the PSES initiatives were UNICEF-driven. This view did not align with the perception of other line departments and may relate to the need expressed by the DoP to enhance project management coordination and management skills. This view may also stem from a divide between line departments within the MoES, which was expressed by development partners interviewed for the PSESE. This highlights a need to enhance the capacity of coordinating departments such as the DoP to be able to manage and direct programmes like the PSES. One means by which this may be better facilitated is by positioning a key resource within the DoP to work with other line departments in order to better build capacity to manage and coordinate programmes like the PSES.

¹¹⁵ Development Partners reported that the first draft of the Mid-Term Review was very weak in terms of highlighting issues pertaining to vulnerable groups but that this was subsequently rectified in later drafts.

5.7 Gender, equity and human rights approach

vii) Assess the extent to which the programme is informed by a child's-right and gender-sensitive approach and is contributing towards these related transformative changes.

5.7.1 (EQ15) To what extent have human rights, child rights, disability, and gender equality and equity been addressed within the action? Have there been any entry points addressed on climate resilience for future consideration? How did emergency response and disaster mitigation impact the programme and how did the programme help the Lao PDR Government respond to the impact of COVID-19?

The inclusion of Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) in all programming is core to UNICEF's institutional commitments. This includes consideration for climate change. The PSES demonstrated some strengths in highlighting and addressing vulnerable groups, particularly through studies and research (KRA 3) and in other KRAs such as FQS, which helps to identify underperforming and under-resourced schools and students. However, in other areas gender equity and climate change project elements were weaker and were not strongly considered in the design or implementation phases. The advent of larger and more significant challenges such as COVID-19 can result in focus being diverted from these important issues, whereas it is often vulnerable groups who are most impacted by such events. The pandemic also magnified the number of vulnerable children over a short time frame, raising additional challenges. The PSES did have a significant positive impact on the Government's capacity to respond to COVID-19, particularly in the 40 focal districts that were considered vulnerable.

Responses to EQ2 concluded that many activities under the PSES were to be prioritized in the 40 MoES priority districts as interventions to address equity, and many of the planned studies and reviews were likely to address issues of inclusion. Responses to EQ7 determined that significant technical work focused on vulnerable children, including studies and reviews, which highlighted the issues and disparities around such children and the inclusion of CwD in EMIS. Gender-specific digital content and content for ethnic children is also available through KPL, including comprehensive sexuality education and guides for teaching ethnic children. Content produced as part of KRA 2.2 also demonstrated consideration for some types of disability, for example the sight-impaired, but apart from this, materials did not specifically target CwD.

Although training data was captured as gender disaggregated, it was not always reported as such and the implications of gender disparities were generally not discussed in reporting, nor were the benefits and opportunities of taking gender into consideration. Gender equality and women's empowerment objectives and targets were not stated in the programme design and this is reflected in the annual reporting. Some initiatives took gender into consideration, for instance through materials uploaded to KPL and ensuring gender-disaggregated reporting through LESMIS; but a gender equality and women's empowerment strategy was not clearly explicit.

The most significant outcomes for vulnerable children are likely to be derived through the studies and reviews conducted. UNICEF and development partners ensured that issues relating to vulnerable children were included in the studies that have been used to inform policy papers and sector plans. The ASLOs also highlighted the disparities in learning outcomes between different groups of children and helped to focus dialogue and planning on improving learning outcomes for all children.

Climate change was not featured strongly in the PSES. There is a reference to digital content on KPL relating to the Climate Change Learning Partnership (UN CC: Learn) on climate change, gender, chemicals and waste, which is a relevant learning resource for both teachers and students. Participants in FGDs, however, were not aware of the content. The emergency response and preparedness module in LESMIS could be used for monitoring climate change events but it is not yet active and does not align with international climate change indicators.

The PSES COVID-19 mitigation strategy was largely successful. Support for the reopening of schools and school safety was effective in returning children to school. Hard copy and digital materials created opportunities to continue learning and for remedial learning following COVID-19 but were not easily accessible to vulnerable children.

The low focus on vulnerable groups is reflected in PSES reporting, which often does not gender disaggregate direct or indirect beneficiary groups or disaggregate by other parity indices.¹¹⁶ Nor are gender issues or issues pertaining to vulnerable groups highlighted in any depth in annual reporting.

¹¹⁶ In accordance with SDG Indicator 4.5.1: Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated.

Section 6. Conclusions and lessons learned

Document good practices and identify lessons learned about what works and does not work and provide a set of forward-looking, strategic and actionable recommendations on how UNICEF and key stakeholders can most effectively enhance education system strengthening and build on its comparative advantage as a key partner to government.

6.1 Conclusions

The PSES demonstrated alignment with national priorities and global education standards, such as those outlined in SDG 4. The programme's strategic design, which included extensive consultations with the MoES and other stakeholders, ensured that it addressed the Government's education objectives and complemented other development initiatives. By supporting key strategies outlined in the ESSDP and ESDP, the PSES design effectively contributed to system strengthening, teacher management, quality improvement, and evidence-based policy dialogue. The PSES also demonstrated commitment to global standards by aligning with SDG4, other key initiatives and collaborating with a range of development partners. However, the complexity of the initial programme design and reliance on technology has highlighted areas that require simplification to improve implementation efficiency.

The PSES was designed to focus on system strengthening and did have an equity focus, which included an emphasis on 40 districts with low learning outcomes and support for research on equity and vulnerable groups. However, the design's approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children could have been enhanced. In future programming, there is scope for delineating specific interventions for vulnerable students, including girls, poor students and those with disabilities.

The PSES intervention logic, while generally sound, could have been more clearly articulated and communicated through a well-defined ToC. Furthermore, a more comprehensive and nuanced risk analysis, potentially incorporating a causal loop diagram, could have enhanced the programme's ability to anticipate and mitigate potential challenges. A further shortcoming was that the priority direct and indirect beneficiaries were not quantified for all KRAs, in terms of target numbers by parity indices, and shown in the results framework for capacity development; yet a quantification like this would have helped to communicate and assess progress.

The PSES demonstrated strong coherence with national education plans, the EU's budget support framework and ongoing initiatives by development partners like JICA and BEQUAL. Its alignment with the ESSDP underscores its integration into national and subnational planning, supported by strong engagement with MoES line departments. Through continuity and leveraging prior efforts, like those related to LESMIS and Education Quality Standards, the programme maintained alignment with UNICEF's country programme and the broader educational landscape. Although the geographic spread of activities limited opportunities for synergy, mechanisms like the EWSG and informal partner groups facilitated coordination and collaboration. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19 and leadership changes, the PSES successfully aligned its interventions with broader donor initiatives, thus enhancing overall outcomes.

The PSES has made significant progress in achieving its expected results across various KRAs and has achieved almost all its outcomes. These successes indicate that the PSES is likely to achieve its overall change or impact. While the PSES evaluation does not include an impact assessment, it can be concluded that based on the logical structure of the ToC, progress towards achieving the desired change/impact has been made. **The systemic reforms progressed under the PSES and MoES partnership are in the process of better structuring and resourcing the education and sports sector in Lao PDR. This progress should create greater opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports.** The focus on 40 districts with low learning outcomes and the work undertaken on studies and research – combined with reforms to planning, budgeting, M&E and quality assurance – should drive progress towards achieving the vision of the PSES, which was to ensure “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”. These outcomes have been achieved as part of the MoES overall strategy, defined under the ESSDP 2021–2025.

These conclusions are made based on assessment of the outputs and outcomes under each of the four KRAs (1-4), implemented through the PSES between November 2018 and May 2024, with projections to the end of the programme on 31 July 2024.

KRA 1: The PSES has implemented and piloted a broad range of reforms aimed at strengthening the planning, M&E and budgeting of the education system from national to school level: these have **been mostly successful**. These reforms form a coherent strategy and while significant progress has been made towards improved budgeting, quality assurance, planning and M&E, further work will ensure that tools are completed and adopted comprehensively and that systems are further enhanced to fully meet outcomes.

The MEAL Plan, M&E tools and operational guidelines have been developed for monitoring progress of the 9th ESSDP and LESMIS/EMIS aligned with the reporting requirements where possible. The LESMIS/EMIS dashboard

is still undergoing modification to ensure its compliance with the monitoring requirements of the ESSDP. Linkages between systems are not yet fully developed as the MoES has not approved data sharing agreements to date: this issue is beyond the scope of PSES to affect but it still impacts the dashboard. The draft tools and operational guidelines still need to be mainstreamed throughout the MoES, but they are a good first step towards implementation of the MEAL Plan. The work undertaken to develop LESMIS and redevelop EMIS has improved the capacity to generate required planning and monitoring reports at all levels, along with extensive provision of ICT equipment. Linkages between information systems are not fully developed, but this is due to the MoES not finalizing data sharing agreements. PBMIS is aligned with the MoF standards, and the Public Accounting System has improved the capacity to manage budgets.

One significant achievement is the completion of ASLO Grade 5 and Grade 9 assessments, which have helped to focus attention on learning outcomes and formative assessment and have been widely referred to in policy briefs and forums. FQS for schools had been piloted and is useful for SDP while helping to focus attention on learning outcomes and students falling behind. However, the link to PESS and DESB planning or national quality assurance has not been fully established, thus limiting the use of FQS at higher levels. Furthermore, the tools are currently incomplete, hindering their use at PESS/DESB levels.

KRA 2: The PSES has strengthened teacher management, allocation and deployment through redevelopment of PMIS and the addition of a new module. Teacher quality and effectiveness have been aided by initiatives such as KPL. The direct work undertaken through KRA 2.2 has helped to integrate external PAs into the DESB structure and built their capacity to support CPD for teachers, including adaptation to the new curriculum. There are still notable gaps in the capacity of PAs; UNICEF is working with the MoES and partners to help address these through contributing to the development of CPD operational guidelines and continued work in capacity development.

The redevelopment of PMIS enabled its decentralization to DESB level, which is a significant achievement. However, PMIS must also be integrated with other databases, which requires the finalization of a **data sharing agreement by the MoES – an issue that falls outside the scope of the PSES**. The RTPMIS module has problems predicting teaching needs in schools based on subject specialization, which is an issue that must be addressed.

The PSES has improved the capacity of external PAs to provide CPD for teachers through multiple rounds of training and the provision of ICT equipment. The MoES noted that capacity development has helped PAs to support CPD for teachers, including adaption to the new curriculum. Training materials for PAs are available digitally on KPL and have been modified to align more closely with changes under Decree 3342. **Decree 3342 also integrated PAs into DESBs – a key objective of the PSES.** The DTE noted that the current capacity of external PAs is insufficient and that further training is required, particularly given the low capacity of teachers and the challenges they face with the new curriculum. Further barriers include challenges that are beyond the scope of the PSES to affect, but which inhibit the effectiveness of PAs, including inadequate funding and infrequent visits to schools. UNICEF is coordinating with BEQUAL to provide necessary inputs to their ongoing development of the CPD guidelines to help clarify the roles and responsibilities of actors and it will be important to address these issues. It will also be key to integrate PA strengthening with SDP and school-based management processes, including FQS, and to finalize the CPD course for Teacher Training Colleges: these were objectives of the PSES and they remain incomplete.

KRA 3: The PSES' evidence-based support to sector analysis and policy dialogue has generally been well received and effective, particularly at highlighting disparities in the education system and focusing attention on vulnerable and marginalized groups, including ethnic children, CwD and those in remote and rural areas. The equity studies undertaken through the PSES have helped to focus the MoES on issues of equity and have been used by development partners to inform programming. These include the **Data Must Speak Positive Deviance School Research**, the **Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study** and **LSIS III**. The LSIS III key indicator report was published in early 2024 and data from this publication is cited and used in various documents and events and is already informing education sector planning. The contributions made to the Mid-Term Review of the ESSDP and the Joint Sector Review helped in the formulation of the 9th ESSDP. In turn, the Mid-Term Review of the ESSDP 2021–2025 helped the MoES to realign commitments in the post-COVID-19 environment under constrained education financing, by recognizing achievements, addressing constraints and accelerating delayed activities. The ESWG participation and UNICEF's co-chairing of Focal Groups 1 and 2 were acknowledged to have helped in highlighting issues and fostering collaboration between development partners. One shortfall was the reliance on consultants to achieve these results and the capacity gaps in the MoES to conduct similar undertakings in the future.

KRA 4: The PSES has reduced the negative impact of COVID-19 on child well-being and has strengthened emergency response and preparedness. Support provided for the reopening of schools and school safety was very effective in returning children to school. UNICEF demonstrated strengths in leadership and leveraged GPE and PSES funding to enhance epidemic/pandemic preparedness with a focus on preventing COVID-19 transmission in schools; it also played a key role in coordinating partners and sector responses, including in health and education.

The digital online content platform KPL helped to ensure learning continuity and inclusivity during the pandemic. It currently supports CPD and provides a wide range of educational resources. KPL has been widely accessed and positively received for its effectiveness in teaching and learning. Direct access to KPL requires internet availability, although the platform can also be accessed offline. This is useful for teachers and students who have access to devices. However, those who do not must either access someone else's device or their school must have equipment like a projector and a device to store and access the materials. Such barriers to access will need to be overcome to ensure that KPL is readily accessible to all students throughout Lao PDR. To help address this obstacle, the PSES also distributed hard copy materials and books to schools and generated videos. The My House storybooks and TV series have effectively supported young learners, with the books accessible in all schools although in limited supply. The My House episodes are not accessible in areas without access to satellite TV unless downloaded and played over a device locally, which was not always apparent in the schools visited.

Initiatives such as the COVID-19 school reopening guidelines and capacity development have strengthened the capacity to respond to future emergencies. A GIS-enabled online platform for emergency preparedness has been developed but is not active. UNICEF should work with the MoES to ensure the effective use of this platform in future emergencies and it should align the platform with other information relevant to health and climate change monitoring. A 10-year ICT in Education Strategy has been developed and will be launched in Q3-Q4 of 2024. UNICEF has confirmed with MoES to support development of a five-year operational plan that will be vital for ensuring adequate resourcing and prioritization of objectives in the 10-year strategy.

Continued support and strategic alignment with partners has helped challenges to be navigated and led to enhanced positive outcomes. Addressing sustainability issues, improving coordination with line departments and enhancing the integration of various systems are all crucial for future effectiveness and success in achieving educational objectives, especially for vulnerable children and marginalized groups who could benefit from targeted interventions.

UNICEF LCO demonstrated effective engagement in prioritization, leading to strategic adjustments within the PSES framework in response to evolving contexts, including challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the inability to obtain a source code for EMIS, the challenges of digitally enabling schools for FQS and issuance of Decree 3342, which effectively halted the work undertaken to build external PA capacity.¹¹⁷ The constant adjustments made in coordination with line departments allowed for the adaptation of outputs and activities to address emerging needs. Alternative strategies could have potentially yielded better outcomes in certain instances. But overall the strategic adjustments and reallocation of resources, such as the introduction of an additional budget for a new KRA to address COVID-19 challenges, showcased a proactive approach to mitigating obstacles and optimizing programme effectiveness.

The PSES exhibited both strengths and areas for improvement in terms of resource utilization and efficiency. Factors contributing to increased efficiency included consolidating training efforts, leveraging existing infrastructure, and a flexible response to emergencies like the pandemic. However, challenges included a high reliance on international consultants in some areas, disparity in capacity at subnational levels, while a reported lack of application of standards in the development of information systems impacted efficiency.

The assumptions and risks were realistic and risk mitigation strategies helped to address the challenges encountered. There were bottlenecks, including delays resulting from COVID-19: these delays impacted the timing of some deliverables but likely did not affect the results obtained. Some risks were mitigated through planning and engagement, for example working with line departments to adopt results from the PSES into annual budgets. Funding was timely, with no evidence that funds were withheld or delayed at any point in the programme. **Strong partnerships facilitated the PSES, particularly the relationship between UNICEF and line departments, while UNICEF and other development partners facilitated rapid mobilization in some areas, for example under KRA 4.**

Most PSES interventions are sustainable following the end of the programme, but some will require further work, including FQS and support to PA strengthening. Development partners will likely need to support the MoES to adapt information systems to future needs and to conduct further studies to adapt programming to changing needs in the post-COVID-19 context. UNICEF has stated its intention to support the Government on PSES initiatives in line with its longer-term country programme in education. Continued collaborations with ongoing programmes like BEQUAL will also help to ensure sustainability. The PSESE determined that continued focus on capacity-building, systems integration and resource allocation is essential to sustain and build on the progress made towards enhancing educational planning, monitoring and overall sector performance in most KRA activity areas.

The PSES focused on 40 districts with low learning outcomes, as these districts are considered vulnerable and are likely to have a higher proportion of vulnerable children. While UNICEF's efforts through the PSES considered equity and in general the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children, these groups were not always explicitly catered to across all programme activities. However, in other areas gender equity and climate change

¹¹⁷ Decree 3342 realigned the role of District PAs (KRA 2) and resulted in postponement of the full capacity development of external PAs until guidelines specifying the roles and responsibilities are developed and agreed.

project elements were weaker and were not strongly considered in the design or implementation phases. The benefits and opportunities delivered by the programme did take gender into account through studies and research, but not to a significant extent through direct implementation of initiatives. While training data was captured as gender disaggregated, it was not always reported as such and the implications of gender disparities were generally not discussed in reporting, nor were the benefits and opportunities of taking gender into consideration. Gender equality and women's empowerment objectives and targets were not stated in the programme design, and this is reflected throughout the annual reporting. Some initiatives took gender into consideration, for example through materials uploaded to KPL, and ensuring gender disaggregated reporting through LESMIS, but a gender equality and women's empowerment strategy was not clearly explicit. The advent of COVID-19 may also have resulted in focus being diverted from these important issues, whereas it is often vulnerable groups who are most impacted by such events. The pandemic also magnified the number of vulnerable children over a short time frame, thus raising significant challenges for the PSES. In response, the programme did have a significant positive impact on the Government's capacity to respond to COVID-19, particularly in the 40 focus districts that were considered vulnerable. **Emphasizing vulnerable children's needs – especially in rural and remote areas and areas with high proportions of vulnerable groups and ensuring inclusive educational resources – remains critical for future programme enhancements.**

6.2 Lessons learned

General lessons learned

- I. **Cautious approach to technology solutions:** The reality of the grassroots situation should be considered when developing programmes reliant on ICT. Overreliance on technology in environments where ICT capacity at school level is very low can result in challenges and unforeseen consequences. Efforts to bridge the digital divide in schools and districts through procurement of ICT equipment can result in challenges to sustainability, for example the inability to repair or service ICT equipment or provide ongoing funds for internet access. A comprehensive assessment, to ensure that the programme's goals can be met, should be made at the commencement of any initiative. As in the case of the PSES, piloting different approaches in diverse settings helps to ensure that the most vulnerable and remote people are not left behind; but these should be considered with future costs to sustainability assessed.
- II. **Sustainability planning and reporting against sustainability goals and benchmarks should be mainstreamed through all phases of programming.** Sustainability in education development programmes is crucial for ensuring long-term success and impact. Evaluations conducted during and at the end of a programme should be working from clearly defined sustainability benchmarks, which should also be reported in annual progress reports. Prioritizing sustainability in education development programmes ultimately fosters a culture of responsible local ownership and stewardship.
- III. **Establishing school FQS to inform SDP can be effective in mobilizing local resources, but this must be linked to higher-level planning and monitoring in order to be most effective.** The PSESE has concluded that FQS is an effective tool to help schools identify areas of weakness, to translate those into school development plans and to communicate needs to local authorities such as VEDCs. In the case of the DESBs visited for the PSESE, the school development plans were not used to inform district and provincial education plans but they were effective at school level. Creating a relationship to district and provincial education plans may further enhance effective support to schools by synergizing DESB and PESS plans with school development plans.
- IV. **The Importance of strategic alignment and stakeholder direction.** Strategic alignment of an education programme with national plans and sectoral goals enhances the relevance and effectiveness of programme outcomes. This also emphasizes the importance of robust national strategic plans that are able to align and coordinate development partners, NGOs, civil society organizations and other government agencies. These plans must be supported by robust communication mechanisms, for example the ESWG, that facilitate horizontal and vertical communication between initiatives. Technical working groups and the informal partner group help to further facilitate communication and coordination. The PSES also demonstrates the importance of empowering line departments to coordinate development partner contributions, while at the same time ensuring regular communication and coordination between development partners to ensure synergies and to reduce redundancy and duplication.
- V. **The provision of digital content can help to bridge learning deficits, but it is important to develop mechanisms to ensure inclusion of the most vulnerable groups.** The development and dissemination of digital content via digital learning or content dissemination platforms was likely effective during and after the pandemic to help bridge the learning deficit. Digital content also helps in situations where learning materials such as textbooks are not sufficiently available in schools, as in the case of Lao PDR post-COVID-19. Challenges linked to internet access and resource distribution highlighted the need for innovative,

accessible solutions and inclusive planning for future emergencies to ensure that vulnerable groups and those in remote and rural areas have access to digital resources.

Lessons learned for evaluations

- VI. **Ethical approval and the voices of children:** The mission statement for UNICEF is 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. It is therefore important to include the voices of children in evaluations of UNICEF programmes. The ethical approval process for UNICEF is robust and rigorous, but almost always entails one round of feedback to ensure that tools and processes are sufficient to ensure the safety and protection of children participating in the evaluation. Sufficient time must be allocated in the evaluation prior to conducting field work, to allow responses to feedback to be submitted and approval granted.

Section 7. Recommendations

Document good practices and identify lessons learned about what works and does not work and provide a set of forward-looking, strategic and actionable recommendations on how UNICEF and key stakeholders can most effectively enhance education system strengthening and build on UNICEF's comparative advantage as a key partner to the Government.

Preliminary recommendations were drafted based on analysis of the main findings and were discussed with the MoES, EU and UNICEF staff at a workshop conducted in July 2024. These recommendations were further modified on the basis of feedback to the report from the same persons. Recommendations are prioritized as low, medium and high priority. An implementing time frame is included for each recommendation.

Recommendations for future Lao PDR Country Office programming:

- I. **Priority: Medium. Implementation timeline: When designing future programmes (relates to EQ14).**

Responsibility: EU, UNICEF LCO, MoES

Enhance project management, coordination and communication within the MoES and between the MoES, EU and UNICEF LCO. The PSES has demonstrated strong alignment with national education frameworks such as the ESDP and ESSDP as well as with global standards like SDG 4. Line departments also have strong ownership of programme initiatives. However, some staff within the DoP, a key line department, expressed concerns regarding direction and ownership of PSES initiatives. To address these gaps, future programmes should develop a robust ToC early in the design phase. This ToC should clearly articulate the intervention logic, strategic goals and the relationships between programme components. By co-creating the ToC through workshops that include all key stakeholders, embedding the ToC in all planning and evaluation documents and regularly updating it to reflect evolving contexts, the programme will enhance understanding and communication.

While the PSES identified some overarching risks and assumptions, these were not extensively applied to each KRA. This oversight affected the programme's ability to adapt and respond to emerging challenges. For improved programme resilience, it is crucial to conduct comprehensive risk and assumption analyses that cover each KRA. This approach involves developing a detailed risk management plan at the programme's inception, which includes specific risks and assumptions for each component. Regular reviews and updates to this plan, in collaboration with stakeholders, will ensure that potential issues are identified early and that mitigation strategies are effectively implemented. Utilizing visual aids such as risk maps and ToC diagrams will further facilitate better understanding and communication of risks and assumptions across all involved parties.

The annual reports generated by the PSES were marked by inadequacies in effectively communicating **overall** progress, beneficiaries impacted, progress towards established targets, financial disbursements by KRA and initiative, and risk assessments for each KRA. It is acknowledged that UNICEF was bound by EU reporting requirements. Consideration should be given to revising the reporting format to help ensure stakeholder understanding and to address points included under this recommendation.

A focus of future programmes should also be to strengthen the capacity of the DoP to undertake programme/project management and coordination.

- II. **Priority: High. Implementation timeline: When designing future programmes (relates to EQ15).**

Responsibility: UNICEF LCO, EU and MoES.

Enhance focus on gender, and vulnerable and marginalized children in all programme initiatives.

Strengthening the focus on equity and gender-related results is essential to ensure that educational programmes are inclusive and address the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups. The PSES focused on districts with low learning outcomes and included significant technical work concentrating on vulnerable children, such as the Primary and Secondary Student Dropout Study and the inclusion of disability data in EMIS. The design's approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children could have been enhanced, and in future programming there is scope to map out specific interventions for vulnerable students, including girls, poor students and those with disabilities. This would involve:

- a. Including tailored interventions for vulnerable children and resources specifically for children with disabilities, as well as targeted support for those in remote/rural areas.
- b. Setting specific objectives and indicators aimed at elevating educational outcomes for disadvantaged children and enhancing data collection systems to track individual progress.
- c. Continuous monitoring and reporting on the impact of interventions on marginalized and vulnerable groups will help to identify areas for improvement and ensure that educational programmes are effectively focusing on and meeting the needs of these groups.

III. Priority: Medium. Responsibility: UNICEF LCO, MoES (relates to EQ11).

Enhance synergies through alignment of geographic focus. The PSES piloted many activities in selected districts, but for some activities there were few districts that overlapped. In some cases, this may have limited opportunities to fully explore synergies between different components of the programme. This also applied to other aligned partner programmes, for example BEQUAL, which limited the opportunities to explore synergies such as between CPD for teachers and support from external PAs. To ensure deeper penetration and more effective support, future programmes should consider aligning the geographic focus of activities within the programme and with other programmes to ensure that synergies can be fully explored.

Recommendations specific to PSES KRAs and MoES (relate to EQ12 and section 5.1):

I. Priority: Medium. Implementation timeline: Commence immediately and continue through 2025.

Responsibility: MoES

KRA 1: Continue/complete working towards enhancing planning, M&E and budgeting at all levels.

Specifically this includes:

- a. Ensuring that the M&E tools and operational guidelines are approved and mainstreamed into use by MoES line departments.
- b. Ensuring the LESMIS dashboard is completed to align with ESSDP monitoring requirements. This requires completing the linkages between the disparate information systems, including between LESMIS, PBMIS, PMIS, TVET EMIS and higher education EMIS. The linkage between PBMIS and LESMIS is therefore essential to bring together these data elements.
- c. Linking FQS to national and subnational quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation. In line with this, SDP should be more strongly aligned with DESBs, PESS and ultimately national planning and budgeting. This also requires the tools through LESMIS to be further developed to support digitization of plans as well as aggregation and reporting of information to higher levels. UNICEF should work with the MoES to ensure that these objectives are achieved and that FQS can be rolled out to more districts to achieve full national adoption.

Also essential to realizing the full desired outcome for KRA 1 are the following issues:

- d. It will be important to integrate the findings of the ASLOs for Grade 5 (and Grade 9) students into future programming and the development of the 10th ESSDP. A continued focus on learning outcomes both at the school and policy level is necessary given the extent of the learning crisis evident in Lao PDR.
- e. The MoES should approve the 10-year ICT in Education Strategy and draft and adopt a five-year operational plan. The operational plan should actualize priority areas of the strategic plan and provide a realistic budget framework, with scope for contributions from partners and the private sector. Also related to the ICT in Education Strategy is the need to adopt common software development standards throughout the MoES and vendor standards. This will help to align

different software onto common platforms and standards while reducing costs and complexity in managing different systems and relationships with multiple vendors.

II. **Priority: Medium. Implementation timeline: Commence immediately and continue through 2025.**

Responsibility: MoES

KRA 2: Continue/complete working towards strengthening teacher effectiveness through improved teacher management, allocation and deployment.

- a. Enhance the RTPMIS module for use in planning teacher allocation to schools to ensure accurate projection of teachers required by subject specialization.
- b. Complete and approve the operational guidelines for Decree 3342. The guidelines will help to inform future technical and budget support which may be given to strengthen external PAs and may help to address issues including inadequate budgets, low capacity and the low frequency of PA visits to schools. The guidelines should also help to identify ways in which external and internal PAs can be integrated more fully into FQS, SDP and school-based management processes and can be further supported by digital resources such as KPL.

III. **Priority: Medium. Implementation timeline: Commence during 2025 and continue.**

Responsibility: MoES

KRA 4: Continue efforts to strengthen digital learning and content platforms and expand their access to vulnerable children and remote and rural schools and communities. KPL has proven to be an effective means of providing CPD materials, lesson aids and other resources to teachers and digital learning materials to students. However, many schools have reported low digital capacity, which has significantly impacted their ability to effectively use digital tools and platforms such as KPL. It is also very likely that vulnerable students have the poorest access to such content. To address this, a multifaceted strategy is necessary. An assessment should be conducted to determine the digital capacity in relation to the solution being considered, by identifying specific gaps and needs. Once these gaps are understood, capacity development should be provided or planned. Additionally, there should be significant investment in reliable high-speed internet connectivity as well as essential but affordable solutions to enable remote and rural schools to access digital resources, for example through the CRS Rachel devices.

KPL is a digital content platform, but not a learning management platform. Development partners and the MoES should continue dialogue to determine how learning management can be effectively incorporated into KPL so as to enable students and teachers to track their learning and to guide both to resources based on their progress.

IV. **Priority: High. Timeline: Commence during 2025. Responsibility: MoES.**

KRA 4: Strengthen (COVID-19) emergency response and preparedness. Emergency response in schools as well as monitoring the impact of natural disasters and climate change through schools is being integrated through EMIS systems in other countries.^{118 119} Such advocacy calls for working with national governments to include climate change-related indicators as well as school safety indicators into EMIS. There is an opportunity for EMIS to cover basic indicators, for example the reason for absences (including difficulty accessing school during climate-related disasters, government-mandated shutdowns due to extreme weather, inability to afford school expenses, and illness) and damage to schools due to climate disasters. In addition to quantitative data, there is an opportunity to collect qualitative information through discussions with education authorities, school staff, students and communities. The Emergency Response and Preparedness module should be used throughout Lao PDR and improved to ensure the module monitors the impact of natural disasters and climate change on education effectively.

¹¹⁸ United Nations Children's Fund, *It is Getting Hot. Call for Education Systems to Respond to the Climate Crisis*, 2019, www.unicef.org/eap/media/4596/file/It%20is%20getting%20hot:%20Call%20for%20education%20systems%20to%20respond%20to%20the%20climate%20crisis.pdf.

¹¹⁹ United Nations Children's Fund, *Programme Brief. Harnessing the Transformative Potential of Education for Climate Change Mitigation, Adaptation and Resilience Building in Europe and Central Asia*, 2023, www.unicef.org/eca/media/32381/file/Education%20for%20climate%20change%20mitigation.pdf.