



Lao PDR: Food for Education

REDUCED HUNGER AND IMPROVED LITERACY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR 36,000 STUDENTS

LEARNING AND ENGAGING ALL IN PRIMARY SCHOOL (LEAPS):

In September 2012, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) signed an agreement for a three-year McGovern-Dole Food for Education (FFE) award, Learning and Engaging All in Primary School (LEAPS). LEAPS' goal is **to improve food security, reduce the incidence of hunger, and improve literacy and primary education** within six districts in the Province of Savannakhet, Lao PDR. Working closely with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), LEAPS has been able to reach over **36,000 students in 308 schools** in the six covered districts through three main interventions: school meals, literacy, and inclusive education.

School Meals

To date, CRS has distributed 4.1 metric tonnes of food (rice, oil, lentils, and green split peas) to the 308 schools and has served over **11,000,000 meals**. CRS has **trained 736 cooks** on hygienic food preparation and **310 storekeepers** on methods of storing the food to prevent spoilage. While CRS provides the main ingredients of the meal, the community takes ownership of providing firewood for cooking, vegetables, meat, condiments, and herbs to make a nutritious meal. After cooking demonstrations by CRS staff, several schools developed creative menu items and even made milk out of the lentils.

QUICKFACTS	
Project Type	Food for Education
Funder/funding	USDA, \$12.3 million
Project location	Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR
# of people served	40,696 (direct) 135,718 (indirect)
Timeframe	2012-2016
Partners	Ministry of Education and Sports Room to Read University of Oregon

As a complement to the school meals, CRS has provided small grants ranging from \$250 - \$500 to the Village Education Development Committees (VEDC) to implement small scale priority school infrastructure projects. Currently, **over 200 grants have been completed** with the goal to complete 250 by the end of the project. The two main types of projects implemented through the grants are water, sanitation, and hygiene promotion (WASH) projects (48% of projects) and school gardens (18% of projects).



Student washes her hands at a new handwashing station provided by LEAPS through funding from USDA Photo: Tom Chaves

Handwashing before eating is one of the critical moments which can reduce the incidence of illness. At the start of LEAPS, none of the schools had handwashing stations and, currently, **53% of schools have handwashing stations** and **79% of children wash their hands before eating**.

School gardens not only provide vegetables that complement the USDA-provided commodities that make up the school meal, they also increase long-term sustainability. School gardens engage teachers, students, and parents in taking ownership of the school meal. Currently, over **50% of the schools** have a school garden with **360 principals and teachers** trained on best practices with school gardens.

Literacy

With the goal of improving literacy rates for students in grades 1 and 2 and teachers' capacity to teach reading and writing, CRS partnered with Room to Read to create **70 reading rooms** with over **99,000 books in the rooms**. As a way to strengthen the sustainability of the reading rooms, Room to Read trained **210 teachers and principals** on library management. According to a modified Early Grade Reading Assessment conducted by Room to Read, students who received the school meal, accessed the reading room, and had teachers who were part of the literacy education capacity strengthening components scored higher than their peers who only received one or two of the components.

Inclusive Education (IE)

According to the National Education Sector Plan 2010 – 2015, only 4% of children with disabilities are enrolled in school and those who are in school have teachers who lack the knowledge and skills to assist the child learn and develop fully. CRS, in

partnership with University of Oregon (UO), trained a core group of government staff and teachers on classroom strategies, management, and lesson plans for IE; the role of village leaders and parents in IE; and how to build community support for IE. Through collaboration with UO and MOES, CRS is finalizing a dual language English-Lao website that houses IE resources and online training modules (<http://laosuoregon.edublogs.org>). CRS also developed a hands-on training for Inclusive Education Plans (IEP), and, with MOES staff, rolled that training out to over 330 teachers and principals across 6 districts in order to help them better meet the educational needs of children with disabilities.

IMPACT TO DATE

The LEAPS project has positively impacted the lives of students, teachers, and families in the six districts of Savannakhet by improving food security, reducing the incidence of hunger, and improving literacy and primary education.

At the start of the project, 52% of parents said that their children were not hungry and, at the mid-term evaluation (MTE), this number increased to **87% of parents who said their children were not hungry**.

In addition, LEAPS has **increased student enrollment** in all 308 primary schools compared to before the project. The MTE found that 49% of teachers thought that **student attendance had improved** since before LEAPS. Approximately 96% of teachers attributed this increase to the **provision of the school meal**. They also felt that **teachers' improved capacity** in the classroom and **improved infrastructure** are two other factors that encourage students to attend.

Teachers also perceived that **student attentiveness increased** across all primary school grades and that students' overall **readings levels had improved**.



School cook preparing a healthy and nutritious meal with food provided by LEAPS through funding from USDA Photo: Tom Chaves

