

STUDY ON INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG AKHA AND YAO COMMUNITIES AND PERCEPTIONS AND IMPACT OF LANN TRAINING



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While hopefully this report presents an accurate picture of the situation in sample villages which comprised this study, any errors contained in this report are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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Cover Photo: *An Akha mother preparing food for her family, Palao Village, Long District, Luang Namtha Province.*

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TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCL	Comité de Coopération avec le Laos
CLTS	Community-Led Total Sanitation
DoFA	Department of Forestry and Agriculture
DoH	Department of Health
IYCF	Infant and Young Child Feeding
GFWS	Gravity-Fed Water System
LANN	Linking Agriculture and Natural Resources and Nutrition
LOPA	Laos Organic Promotion in Agriculture
LWU	Lao Women's Union
<i>Mor Pee</i>	Shamans, shamanic healers
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NTFP	Non Timber Forest Products
RDA	Rural Development Association
SUPA	Scaling Up Convergent Program Approaches
<i>Tor Lor Nyor</i>	Poverty Reduction Fund (a Lao Government initiative)
ToR	Terms of References
ToT	Training of Trainers
VHC	Village Health Committee
VHV	Village Health Volunteer
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WATSAN	Water and Sanitation

Executive Summary

This study is part of a wider project, Scaling Up Convergent Program Approaches (SUPA), and was commissioned by one of the implementing organisations, CCL, in order to find out more about infant feeding beliefs and practices among target Akha and Yao ethnic groups in the Northern Lao PDR, as well as assessing the effectiveness and impact of training and other support for villagers provided by the SUPA Project. The study focussed on four villages - two Akha communities in Long District in Luang Namtha Province (Chachanam Mai and Palao), and two Yao communities in Nyot Ou District in Phongsaly Province (Souline and Huaypae Neua).

The methodology used was largely qualitative in nature - key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document review, and observation - though quantitative data was also gathered where available. A total of 131 people were interviewed, comprising 118 villagers and 13 Project and local Government staff.

The Context: There are over 100,000 Akha living in the Lao PDR, and approximately 32,000 Yao (or Lu Mien), mostly in the northern provinces of Luang Namtha and Phongsaly. Both ethnic groups originated in China. The language spoken by the Akha is in the Sino-Tibetan group of languages while the Yao language is classified as Hmong-Mien, neither of which use a written form. Most Akha and Yao villagers are farmers growing upland rice and corn, as well as hunting and gathering food items from the forest, and both societies are patrilineal with many, particularly older women having had little if any formal schooling and thus having only limited or no ability to speak Lao.

Two of the Akha villages that are the focus of this study are located in Long District, Luang Nam Tha Province while the two Yao villages are located in Nyot Ou District, Phongsaly Province. Both districts are mountainous, with populations of over 30,000 people comprised of several ethnic groups, and the majority are subsistence farmers. The sample villages (Chachanam Mai and Palao in Long and Souline and Huaypae Neua in Nyot Ou) are quite remote, though road access is being improved.

Overall Findings¹: In assessing the extent to which LANN training within the SUPA Project has influenced maternal-child nutrition, hygiene and changes in gender roles, several key factors need to be considered, including:

- *Traditional beliefs and practices* - Traditional beliefs and practices are not fixed, but are undergoing increasingly rapid change as villages become more closely linked to the outside world. Some beliefs and practices are more susceptible to change while others, particularly those more deeply rooted in spirit belief and patrilineal society, are less susceptible.
- *Language and literacy* - The fact that these communities are non-literate does create special challenges for training and information dissemination within these communities. The study found that during the LANN training, information was not always clearly presented in local languages - either there was no translator available or the translator had not been adequately prepared.
- *The quality of the LANN training as well as follow-up to each training session* - While the LANN curriculum has been well written and the content meets the standards of 'good international practice' regarding IYCF practices, the effectiveness of the training in conveying relevant information and encouraging its adoption, particularly by pregnant women and the parents of

¹ More detailed findings specific to each ethnic group can be found in the body of the report.

babies and small children, was constrained by a number of factors, including: Participants not carefully selected to ensure they were in appropriate target groups for training; No clear links between target group for the IYCF training sessions and the participants in the various livelihood activities; Too much 'theory' for village level training (especially for non-literate communities); Trainers and interpreters not sufficiently prepared in terms of both knowledge and skills; No monitoring or follow-up support after training through individual family visits and/or participant small group meetings.

- *Other SUPA supported activities (e.g. GFWS, provision of seedlings, home gardens, fishponds, etc.)* - Other livelihood related activities - e.g. family gardens, fish ponds, fruit tree planting, etc. - do not appear to have targeted the same parents of small children from the nutrition related *First 1000 Days* LANN training (sessions #2 and #3).
- *Poverty levels/potential to adopt changes proposed by the Project* - Poorer families in all villages visited often struggle even to obtain enough rice for year round consumption, quite apart from fruit, vegetables, fish and meat. Without specific support, pregnant women and mothers/small children from these families find it difficult to meet the nutritional requirements promoted by the Project through the LANN training.
- *External changes (e.g. road construction, access to markets, access to media, access to Chinese markets, migration, etc.)*- For many of these former isolated villages, change is happening at an increasing rapid rate. This is due to a number of external factors, including construction of improved roads which provide better access to markets and health care services, access to media, temporary migration, and Chinese investment in the villages (which has both positive and negative effects).
- *Previous and ongoing support from other projects* - In most cases, the SUPA Project is not the first outside support provided to these villages, particularly in Long District. For example, the Lao Government, through the Poverty Reduction Fund, has provided some GFWS in Palao Village in Long District. Other INGOs have also previously supported development projects in some of the same villages, including Norwegian Church Aid, who provided training in problem tree analysis, and gender roles as part of a livelihoods project, as well as life skills and community development trainings in Chachanam Mai.

As the above outline shows, multiple factors can influence the adoption of good IYCF practices within these communities, either supporting or inhibiting change. While several of these factors are largely beyond the scope of any project to specifically influence or change, the quality of training provided is the key factor that can be 'controlled', and the recommendations below relate mainly to this key factor.

Recommendations: Of all the factors that can influence IYCF and maternal nutrition beliefs and practices, the main factor that can be controlled is that of training and follow-up support. As a result, most of the recommendations listed below relate in some way to the LANN and livelihoods training provided by the project and may be applicable to similar training provided by other projects in future. These include:

- *Engage with village elders and spiritual leaders at the outset to learn more about relevant traditional beliefs and practices*
- *Selection of a core group of participants for IYCF training needs a targeted approach*

- *The core group would then be a focus for other relevant training (e.g. in livelihood related activities)*
- *The core group should receive follow-up support after training*
- *Develop more visual materials to support key messages in training for non-literate communities*
- *Ensure training curricula are practical and focussed: Where possible, integrate more practical activities into training*
- *Provide capacity development for both relevant District Government staff as well as translators.*

As mentioned above, the provision of training is one factor that can be controlled to a large extent by the implementing organisations, and the SUPA Project has had some success in improving IYCF and hygiene practices among families within the target communities. However, more can be done to enhance the effectiveness of these efforts, particularly in terms of how training is designed and implemented, together with subsequent follow-up to training, and hopefully this study will be of assistance in informing the design and implementation of similar projects facing similar challenges, in the future.

1. Introduction

This study is part of a wider project, Scaling Up Convergent Program Approaches (SUPA), and was commissioned in order to find out more about infant feeding beliefs and practices among Akha and Yao ethnic groups in the Northern Lao PDR, as well as assessing the effectiveness and impact of training and other support for villagers provided by the SUPA Project (see *Annex 4. LANN Training Sessions and Target Groups*). This project, which includes a focus on IYCF, also has a broader focus on improving livelihoods and hygiene practices and enhancing access to water and sanitation.

The SUPA project is being implemented by four organisations - CCL, CARE, LOPA and RDA - in close collaboration with relevant Government Departments at district level. It involves 50 target villages in the districts of Nyot Ou, Mai and Samphan (Phongsaly Province), and Sing and Long (Luang Namtha Province). While residents in more than 60% of target villages are from the Akha ethnic group, other groups - Khmu, Sila, Khui, Yao, Lao Seng, Lao Bid, and Leu - are also found in several of the target villages. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on Akha and Yao ethnic groups in four sample villages (two per ethnic group): Akha in Long District and Yao in Nyot Ou District.

2. Purpose

The study had two overall objectives:

- (1) To provide an in-depth assessment of IYCF beliefs and practices *vis-a-vis* the internationally accepted good practices introduced by the project through the LANN training. This includes socio-cultural beliefs and practices of each of the two ethnic groups being studied, the main barriers and constraints for women in applying IYCF practices, and perceived links to food and nutritional security.
- (2) To assess the impact of the LANN training in terms of villagers' understanding, perceived relevance and application of messages provided by the training. In addition, the study was also to explore the quality of the training provided as well as expectations around follow-up support from the project.

3. Areas of Focus and Scope

Within each of the two overall objectives outlined above, the study had four main areas of focus:

- The interaction between traditional beliefs and practices related to maternal-infant nutrition as well as hygiene beliefs and practices on the one hand and the 'internationally accepted good practice' being introduced into the communities by the project;
- The effectiveness and impact of the LANN training provided, particularly in terms of the intended beneficiaries, but also from the point of view of those responsible for providing the training;
- The follow up provided, particularly to pregnant women and parents of infants and small children who participated in the nutrition related training;
- Links between the wider training and livelihood activities and the IYCF focus of the project.

Regarding geographical and ethnic scope, the study focussed on four villages - two communities in Long District in Luang Namtha Province (Chachanam Mai and Palao) which are predominantly of the Akha ethnic group, and two communities in Nyot Ou District in Phongsaly Province (Souline and Huaypae Neua) which are predominantly of the Yao ethnic group.

The study prioritised finding out the perceptions of relevant people within each community, including parents, village leaders, traditional healers, and others. In addition, the views of those responsible for implementing the SUPA project were also sought, both project staff as well as District Government counterparts. A summary of those interviewed for this study can be found in *Table 1 Participants* below.

Table 1. Participants

	Long District*			Nyot Ou District**			All Districts		
	Total	Female	%	Total	Female	%	Total	Female	%
DAFO	1	0	-	1	0	-	2	0	-
DHO	1	0	-	1	1	100.0	2	1	50.0
LWU	2	2	100.0	1	1	100.0	3	3	100.0
SUPA Staff	2	1	50.0	4	1	25.0	6	2	33.3
<i>Sub-Total</i>	6	3	50.0	7	3	42.9	13	6	46.2
Village Admin	18	0	-	9	0	-	27	0	-
Parents with training	27	14	51.9	21	13	61.9	48	27	56.3
Parents with no training	0	0	-	3	1	33.3	3	1	33.3
Teenagers	23	10	43.5	15	3	20.0	38	13	34.2
VHVs/TBAs	1	0	-	0	0	-	1	0	-
Shaman Healer (<i>Mor Pee</i>)	1	1	100.0	0	0	-	1	1	100.0
<i>Sub-Total</i>	70	25	35.7	48	17	35.4	118	42	35.6
Total	76	28	36.84	55	20	36.36	131	48	36.64

Note: * = Informants belong to the Akha ethnic group; ** = Informants belong to the Yao ethnic group

4. Methodology, Instruments and Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted from 22nd to 30th December 2018 in Long District and from 21st to 26th January 2019 in Nyot Ou District². The methodology used was largely qualitative in nature, though quantitative data was also gathered where available. Methods used included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document review, and observation.

To develop the tools to be used for the study, an assessment matrix was developed. The objectives as outlined in the ToR were initially broken down into sets of key questions, and then these were further developed into specific questions to be incorporated in the various interview guides and other tools used. Potential sources of information were also included in the matrix.

The main challenge, apart from the delays due to rain, was related to communication with villagers, especially those who were not fluent in Lao, including elders, mothers and female young people. This required communicating through an interpreter which had the potential to have a negative impact on the quality of information being gathered. However, by asking similar questions of different informants and then comparing responses, it was possible to ensure as much as possible, the validity of the information gathered. Where the need for translation/interpretation did have a slightly negative impact was in the focus group discussions (FGDs), which generally require a smooth

² The one month delay before accessing sample villages in Nyot Ou District was because heavy rain prevented access.

flow of conversation if they are to be most effective. It was found that FGDs in sample villages in Long District were not particularly effective in gathering information because of this language factor, and thus the researchers came to rely more on individual interviews to ensure sufficient and more accurate information within the time available.

5. The Context – Ethnic Groups, District and Village Profiles

This section provides a brief outline of the context for the findings of the study, in terms of the ethnic groups that are the focus of this study, as well as the districts and the sample villages selected.

The overall profile of the sample villages visited for this study is characterised by change, both socio-economic and cultural. Communities that had been relatively remote and mostly comprised of subsistence upland rice farmers, are now increasingly becoming part of a wider socio-economic system involving a cash economy, particularly with the current development of closer economic links to China. While the ethnic groups largely retain many of their traditional beliefs, these are also undergoing a process of change in response to external influences, including those introduced by the SUPA project.

5.1 Ethnic Groups

5.1.1 Akha Ethnic Group

There are an estimated 100,000 Akha³ living in the Lao PDR, mostly in the northern provinces of Luang Namtha and Phongsaly. They originated in present day China and migrated south into what is now the Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam over the last 400 years, both to escape war as well as to look for land suitable for farming. There are many sub-groups of Akha, each with their own dialect. The Akha language is in the Sino-Tibetan group of languages and is not a written language. Most Akha villagers are farmers growing upland rice and corn, as well as hunting and gathering food items from the forest. Although they raise animals, especially pigs, they usually only consume these on ceremonial occasions or when they have guests. Akha society is patrilineal and traditionally, men have played a dominant role in society. As a result, many Akha women have had little if any formal schooling and are not able to speak Lao.

There have been very few studies related to IYCF beliefs and practices among the Akha of northern Laos. The most comprehensive was a study conducted in 2006⁴ of beliefs and practices among several ethnic groups, including the Akha in Phongsaly and Huaphan provinces. While that study was both wider in scope and more in-depth than this study⁵, the beliefs and practices identified in the two sample villages visited for this study were similar to those found in the earlier study.

However, it should be stressed that the findings in the two sample villages cannot be considered representative of the Akha ethnic group as a whole. The Akha comprise several sub-groups - including Lomi, Ulo and Pami Akha - and while sharing some common cultural traits, they also have their own distinct dialects and cultures.

³ National Census 2015 data (taken from UN Demographic Yearbook).

⁴ Holmes, Wendy, et al. *Influences on maternal and child nutrition in the highlands of the northern Lao PDR*. Macfarlane Burnet Institute for Medical Research and Public Health, Melbourne, Australia, 2006

⁵ In the study by Holmes et al, each research team spent three days in each village, involving a total of eight ethnic groups with two villages selected per ethnic group.

5.1.2 Yao⁶ Ethnic Group

There are an estimated 4 million Yao with over 50% found in Southern China and the remainder mostly in northern Thailand, Lao PDR and Vietnam. Many, perhaps most, of the Yao found outside of China emigrated from southern China between 1910 and 1950 to escape political turmoil and war. They are comprised of several sub-groups, with each having its own dialect.

In the Lao PDR there are an estimated 36,000 Yao⁷, primarily in two groups, the lowland living Lanten and the upland Lu Mien, each with their own language. In Phongsaly province, most Yao belong to the Lu Mien linguistic sub-group, and like others from this ethnic group, do not have a written language. They are mostly farmers, growing upland rice and other crops, both for consumption as well as for sale, particularly to China. Yao society is patrilineal with clearly defined traditional roles which put men in a dominant position, with only limited female involvement in decision making. Women are expected to both take care of the home, work in the fields and produce handicrafts and traditional clothing.

5.2 Long District

Located in Luang Namtha Province, Long District borders Myanmar to the west, and covers about 2,517 km², 85% of which is mountainous. The District has a total population of 36,990 people (18,125 females, 18,856 males) living in a total of 108 villages⁸. Originally, Long District was part of Sing District to the north, but due to a growing population, it was decided in 1973 to form a new district, Long. Previously Long District was identified as one of 40 poorest districts in the Lao PDR and thus a priority for development under the Government's National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES).

More than 75% of the population are farmers, growing mostly upland (dry) rice as well as some padi (wet) rice, raising livestock (pigs, cattle, chickens, etc.), and increasingly growing cash crops (corn, cassava, sugar cane, water lemon, and beans). Per capita income in 2017 was US\$1,044, with the major sources of economic growth being agriculture, followed by the service and industry sectors. The past decade has seen the expansion of Chinese managed plantations within the District, including sugar cane, banana and rubber plantations.

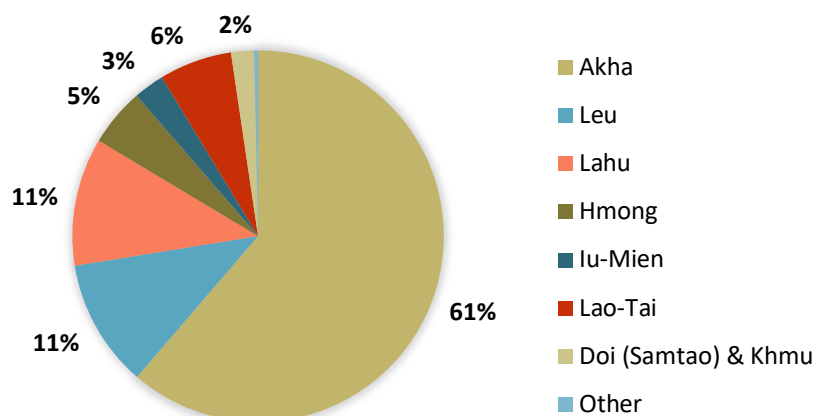
Akha are the main ethnic group found in Long District, and comprise 61% of the District population. The District is also home to at least 8 other ethnic groups, each with their own distinct languages and cultures.

⁶ The term 'Yao' originally came from Mandarin and was originally spelled to mean 'jackal' and considered derogatory (though the characters making up the word 'Yao' were later changed to the more positive 'jade'). Within the communities visited, the villagers refer to themselves as 'Moun' while the linguistic term is 'Lu Mien'. As most people outside of these communities are more familiar with the term 'Yao', that term has been used throughout this report, with no negative connotations intended.

⁷ National Census 2015 data (taken from UN Demographic Yearbook).

⁸ This includes 81 large villages and 27 smaller villages.

Figure 1. Ethnic groups, Long District



5.2.1 Chachanam Mai Village

This village, located in semi-remote hills about two hours by motorbike from Long District town, has a total population of 127 people, including 10 children under five years of age (seven of whom are under two years), all of the Akha ethnic group. It was established in 2014 when the Government encouraged families to move from Chachanam Kao, located a few kilometres away. The main staple food grown is upland rice, and while there is sufficient land, last year the rice crop was largely eaten by rodents, which means there are now rice shortages. In addition, villagers grow sugarcane and some cassava to generate income. The SUPA project helped with construction of a water supply system (GFWS) which was completed in 2018. 18 out of 24 households have latrines, and although the SUPA project did not provide the hardware, they did provide training using the CLTS methodology.

5.2.2 Palao Village

Palao Village, also located in hills about two hours from Long District town, has a similar population to Chachanam Mai Village - 139 people, with 12 children under the age of five years, all from the Akha ethnic group. The village was established in its current location in 2009. Upland rice is the main subsistence crop grown, together with some vegetables, and they also raise animals (pigs and chickens) for both home consumption and sale. Villagers also gather red mushrooms and grow cassava to generate income. The Poverty Reduction Fund (*Tor Lor Nyor*) constructed a GFWS in 2018, but there are no latrines in the village (though these are planned through a CLTS activity to be implemented by the SUPA Project).

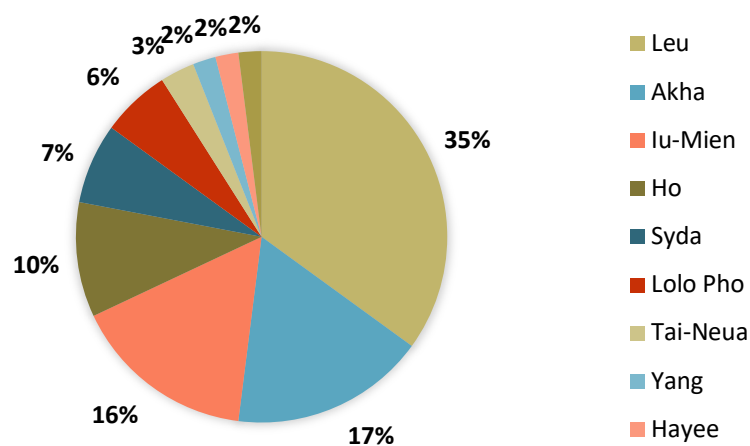
5.3 Nyot Ou District

Nyot Ou District is the northernmost district in Phongsaly Province and is bordered on one side by China (with a 151 km shared border) and on the other by Vietnam (with a 52 km shared border). It has the largest total population among other districts in the province (31,092 people), living in 79 villages, and covers an area of approximately 3,106 km². 97% of the land areas is mountainous, with 67% covered in forest and only 30% allocated for agricultural activities.

The majority of the population are farmers, growing mostly lowland (wet) and upland (dry) rice as well as raising livestock. However, there appears to be a slow shift in the economy from reliance on the agricultural sector to more services⁹ and industry related activities. As in Long District, recent years have seen the expansion of Chinese managed plantations within the District, including sugar cane, tea, coffee, rubber, rice and corn, with the products exported to China. In the district, 28 villages (35% of the villages) are considered as poor.

Leu are the main ethnic group found in Nyot Ou District and make up approximately 35% (10,882 people) of the total population. The District is also home to at least nine other ethnic groups, with their own distinct languages and cultures.

Figure 2. Ethnic groups, Nyot Ou District



5.3.1 Houaypae Nuea Village

Houaypae Neua is located in the mountains near the border with China and about 45 km.s from the District Town. Access is difficult during the wet season. The village has a total population of 296, all of whom are ethnically Yao. The village was established in the 1970s, villagers having moved due to a lack of water and frequent illnesses at the previous location. According to village elders, their ancestors migrated into Laos long ago from Guangdong and Quangxi provinces in southern China to escape war and political unrest. The village has access to water most of the year through a GFWS (constructed by the District Health Office), but only 15 out of a total of 45 households (33 %) have a latrine. The main subsistence crop is upland rice, as well as corn and some cash crops (mainly red mushrooms, tea and cardamom). In addition to the LANN training, the SUPA project has provided training in growing a variety of crops, including fruit trees, beans, cardamom, and tea, as well as establishing home gardens and fishponds, with each training involving around 25 participants. Because the village is closer to the Chinese-Lao border than to the District town, villagers often seek medical care across the border in China, and mothers often choose to give birth at a Chinese hospital.

⁹Taxes are the main source of district income.

5.3.2 Souline Village

Souline is located in the hills closer to the District Town (26 km.s) and more accessible than Houaypae Neua, with a new road currently under construction funded by the Lao Government. The village is also ethnically Yao and is larger than Houaypae Neua with a total population of 412. The villagers moved to the current location around 12 years ago in order to escape frequent illness, a lack of water, and remoteness. The village now has a GFWS provided by CCL, and an active water management committee. There is only one household with a latrine, though with CCL providing CLTS training, it is hoped that there will be more in future (though villagers say they lack money to buy the materials needed). Most villagers grow upland rice and vegetables, though they rely heavily on the forest for additional food, including bamboo shoots. The main cash crop is cardamom, which can earn as much as US\$24 a kg. The SUPA Project has provided the same training as in Houaypae Nuea, though with attendance fluctuating between 15 - 80 participants, depending on the topic.

6. Findings

Because of significant differences, particularly in terms of beliefs and practices, the findings are organised under the two ethnic groups which were the focus of this study - Akha and Yao. Within these two groupings, findings from the two main areas of focus - (1) Socio-economic and cultural influences on IYCF and; (2) The impact of the LANN training - are described and analysed in more depth.

6.1 Akha Communities - Chachanam and Palao

6.1.1 Socio-economic and Cultural Influences on IYCF - Akha Ethnic Group

6.1.1.1 Beliefs and Attitudes Related to IYCF Practices

There are numerous traditional beliefs and practices related to pregnancy, birth and maternal-child nutrition among the Akha ethnic group. Some of these are simply sayings that parents have passed on to their children, often with no clear rationale, such as pregnant women not mixing vegetables and meat in their diet, and these are more likely to change with exposure to ideas/information from outside of the community. Other beliefs, especially those related to the spirit world, are more deeply entrenched and less susceptible to change, such as the perception that giving birth to twins involves the spirit world and brings bad luck to the family (resulting traditionally in the twins being killed but more recently, being put out for adoption by people in other communities).

The study found that traditional beliefs related to pregnancy and mother and child nutrition are still quite strongly held among the Akha people in the two sample communities visited, though the reasons for these beliefs are not always clear. However, some of these beliefs and attitudes are undergoing change in response to increasing exposure to the outside world, including health, nutrition and hygiene information from the SUPA project and other sources. For example, the Health Department has long promoted adoption of the 'Three Cleans' (Live clean, eat clean, dress clean') at village level to promote hygiene practices, and encourages women to give birth at the District hospital rather than at home, with subsequent changes reported by villagers.

Table 2 below lists the traditional beliefs and practices that are still found among the Akha communities in the two villages visited for this study.

Table 2. Akha Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Traditional Beliefs and Practices
<p><u>During and After Pregnancy:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women should work harder than usual during pregnancy to ensure an easy delivery.• Women should return to work 13 days after delivery.• During and after pregnancy, women are prohibited from eating a variety of foods - e.g. fruit already partially eaten by animals or insects; Eating meat from a female pig can result in insufficient breast milk; Eating meat from any pregnant animal and some kinds of birds such as owls could cause a breech birth; Eating twin fruits may result in giving birth to twins (who traditionally were killed but are now usually put up for adoption); eating grilled meat or fish is not good (though the reasons or result is uncertain);• Eat only soups and vegetables, or eat only meat (not meat mixed with vegetables).• Vegetables with yellow flowers are strongly prohibited for eating (except the ones with white flowers) as these could negatively affect the small-intestine of the baby.• The birth of twins is considered shameful. Traditionally they would have been killed but now they are often adopted out.• Do not eat salty, spicy, oily, sour, and fermented food; eat only well-cooked food (meat, chicken, and eggs) and drink boiled water. Mothers with newborn babies should also eat fruit (but often not available in the village) and eat more of the climbing wattle (<i>Phak Kha</i>).• Alcohol and cigarettes are not permitted during pregnancy.• Once a new baby is breast feeding, the older child is prohibited to breast feed with his/her younger siblings.• During pregnancy, women are encouraged to eat 'soft-stone' (usually this can be found on the roadside)– this practice that has long existed among Akha ethnic groups. However, after giving birth, they are not encouraged to eat it anymore as it could affect the breathing system of the baby.• Using <i>Blumea balsamifera</i> can benefit recovery (which can be used for several medical purposes, including postpartum recovery 1st and 2nd phase, perineal healing, retraction of the uterus, and miscarriage recovery¹⁰).• During pregnancy, women are not encouraged to eat much as their unborn children will grow faster and larger than usual thus making delivery more difficult.• Pregnant women are often afraid of going to the hospital for registration, partly because they don't want other people to know that they are pregnant. Pregnancy is perceived as a private matter, even when a woman has been pregnant for 3-6 months. Young women especially do not respond to questions as to whether they are pregnant or not. Also, when pregnant, touching the pregnant woman's stomach is prohibited.

¹⁰See also the study on "Traditions and plant use during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum recovery by the Kryethnic group in Lao PDR". <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3120637/pdf/1746-4269-7-14.pdf>.

Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Infant Nutrition and Childcare/feeding:

- Previously mothers did not give colostrum at birth as they believed it would cause stomach ache in the newborn child and the liquid produced was regarded as 'unclean'.
- Parents often concentrate on work or agricultural activities thus having minimal time to spend for taking care of their infant and young children, leaving them with their grandfather or grandmother or older brothers and sisters, which can impact negatively on child nutrition, especially as the baby does not have frequent access to breast milk.
- Child feeding, apart from breast milk, should only be rice with water or sour green vegetables (e.g. mustard greens).
- A child can be given food and rice 3-6 months after birth.

Hygiene and Sanitation:

- Defecation of a husband should not be covered/topped by that of his wife. If so, the family must arrange a traditional ceremony, praying for forgiveness from the house spirit.
- Open-defecation is a common practice, even if there are latrines in the village. Human faeces are regarded as a good source of food for pigs, making them fat and healthy. Thus, construction of latrines is regarded by many as a waste of money/investment.
- Livestock should be kept in the house to prevent theft and for convenience for feeding and care.
- Many children drink water directly from tapstands as they believe it is fresh and clean (similar to what they use to drink from streams).

Gender:

- Clear labour divisions exist between men and women - men are responsible for heavy work outside of the house while women do chores around the house and take care of the children, as well as working in the fields.
- Reportedly, a man who undertakes women's work will be considered weak and not respected as the head of the family.
- In Akha communities, a family has to have at least one son. If not, women have to continue giving birth until they get sons in order to inherit the family assets.
- Women do not eat with the men. Generally men will eat first and then women afterwards.
- A daughter-in-law often works hardest in the family. She needs to serve her father and mother-in-law well. She and her husband have no right/authority to keep money/assets/income they earn by themselves. All income generated must be reported to and kept by the parents of her husband. A daughter-in-law must also strictly follow the instructions of the parents of her husband.

Food culture:

- Animals are often not raised for regular consumption; pigs especially will be kept and killed only for traditional practices and cultural events (such as *Kin Jieng* – New Year celebration).
- Usually, each meal only includes a very limited number of items – chili sauce, steamed vegetables (or meat), and rice (sometimes only chilli sauce with rice).
- Any kind of beef (cow or buffalo) is not allowed to be eaten.

6.1.1.2 Evolution of Practices, Main Barriers and Constraints

There was evidence from the two sample villages visited that IYCF, hygiene and gender role beliefs and practices are starting to change as a result of both SUPA and other project inputs as well as due to a more general opening up to the outside world through improved road access, media access and other changes. At the same time, a number of barriers and constraints exist which inhibit these changes.

Reported Changes:

Although some of the more culturally embedded beliefs and practices are less susceptible to change, changes related to several practices regarding maternal-child nutrition and hygiene were observed and reported during the study. These included:

- More women are choosing to give birth in the local hospital than before (though many still prefer to give birth at home).
- Mothers are now giving their babies colostrum after birth - before they believed it was not clean milk and could cause stomach aches in the child.
- Twins (born to 5-6% of Akha families in Long District) are now usually given to other families, usually outside of the community, rather than killed as was the tradition before.
- Better hygiene in households due to construction of GFWS and availability of water.
- Changes in gender roles were reported by several villagers, with men now more willing to look after children than before and undertake tasks around the home.
- Children are more interested in going to school (partly because they received support from the project), and seem to be 'smarter' than before.
- Children are now taken better care of – wearing shoes and shirts, taking showers and washing their hands before eating.
- Parents have started to become more aware of the importance of nutrition (for example, several interviewed know about the six different food groups, whereas in the past they were not aware of the types of food they needed to eat).
- Project staff reported that families in approximately 40-50% of all 10 target villages have started to have improved nutrition and are eating a variety of food. In some of the target villages, latrine use is around 80%.

Barriers and Constraints:

Main barriers or constraints to the changing of IYCF practices are a mix of cultural beliefs and culturally embedded practices, simplicity of eating habits, limited variety of available foodstuffs, lack of knowledge/awareness regarding food and nutrition, limited access to markets, lack of resources and limited impact of training provided by SUPA and other projects (see Section 6.1.2 below). The main barriers and constraints identified in this study included:

- Traditional beliefs - While changes in traditional beliefs and practices are ongoing, particularly in Akha communities like Chachanam Mai which are less remote, traditional beliefs and practices are often firmly entrenched, and these can sometimes be in conflict with generally accepted 'good practices' in relation to maternal/child nutrition and hygiene.
- Traditional healing practices – people often opt for traditional healing practices when they are ill, partly because access to healthcare is relatively limited, especially during the rainy season, and partly due to lower cost.

- Oral language - Akha is largely a spoken language¹¹ and many Akha, especially women, have little if any ability to speak and read Lao. This makes conveying information and ensuring that key messages endure over time, challenging, and reduces the impact of key information related to nutrition and hygiene.
- Subsistence level agriculture - although poorer community members may agree with the need for a balanced diet for pregnant women and new mothers, as well as a special nutritious diet for children after the first six months of breastfeeding, they often do not have access to the types of food needed.
- Income generation among Akha in the sample villages has been largely based on collecting of NTFPs, with a small number of households growing and selling sugar cane, and is limited in terms of cash generated. Having a low-income impacts on the level of food access and ability to ensure adequate family nutrition.
- Lack of awareness that the increased use of pesticides can impact negatively on family health.
- Villagers that are from a relatively 'better-off' village such as Chachanam Mai seem more open and adaptable to change compared to those who are relatively 'poor' (Palao). For example, while it is reported that villagers from Chachanam Mai are increasingly following the instruction of doctors on how to feed and take care of the children, villagers in Palao are less likely to follow external advice, particularly from doctors, and, according to Project staff, this is a major challenge in promoting IYCF practices, as well as healthcare and good nutrition overall.
- Lack of household labour is considered as a major constraint in ensuring good IYCF practices. As parents have to go for work in the fields, they leave their children with grandfathers/grandmothers or with older siblings, who often don't provide adequate nutrition for small children.
- There is also an emerging issue in relation to land concessions for growing sugar cane and bananas by Chinese investment companies in the villages visited for this study. While, on the one hand, land concession has provided villagers with income generation opportunities, it has some negative impact on their food and nutrition security (limiting land areas for agricultural production, as well as causing soil degradation).
- Awareness of natural resource management and conservation is also limited among villagers. As the majority of populace in the sample villages rely heavily on NTFPs, poor management of natural resources can gradually impact on their food security in the near future. Conflict of land use is sometime reported to the concerned district authority.
- Awareness of what constitutes good nutrition is reported as very low in most, if not all, target villages under the support of SUPA. Change in their understanding (knowledge), attitude and practices will take time.
- Training and follow-up – The quality of training and limited follow-up are also constraints to the adoption of improved IYCF practices (see next section for details).

6.1.2 LANN Training - Akha Ethnic Group

Training was provided by the SUPA Project through eight planned sessions¹² over a period of 11 months (from March 2017 to January 2018) in each target village. On average, every month each

¹¹Although there have been attempts in the past, mainly by missionaries, to develop a written script.

¹² Some sessions were condensed into fewer sessions in some villages (i.e. the number of topics remained the same, with the content condensed to make it shorter and simpler).

target village received a training session. However, there was no training provided during the rainy season (June to October) due to difficulty in getting access.

Session one targeted all villagers, sessions two and three parents of children under five and families with pregnant women, and sessions 4 to 6, adult farmers, with the target participants for sessions 7 and 8 to be determined in consultation with village authorities. Trainers were primarily SUPA project trainers assisted/accompanied by District Government staff from relevant departments - Agriculture, Health and Lao Women's Union - depending on the topic.

Trainers were introduced to the training curriculum and methodologies to be used at a training of trainers (ToT) workshop held at the start of the program. The TOT of sessions 1 to 4 was held at district level¹³ over 4 days (including one day field practice) with master trainers from SUN Civil Society Alliance Laos¹⁴. The TOT covering sessions 5 to 8 was held in Vientiane for 3 days and only SUPA Project Coordinators/LANN Officers were invited to attend. Those trained then conducted a TOT at district level session by session – one day for each topic (before the district training team went to the target villages). Participants in this ToT included SUPA trainers and relevant District staff (including DoFA, DoH and LWU).

LANN training sessions were then conducted in each target village, with the SUPA trainer leading and District staff supporting. Translation/interpretation was provided by District staff (from DHO) who also attended the training (sessions one to four), and then it was by SUPA staff (but only sessions five to eight¹⁵).

Participants from each village were determined by the main topic of the training - i.e. The whole village for the first topic (malnutrition and food availability), parents of small children, pregnant mothers¹⁶ and mothers-to-be for sessions 2 and 3 (The first 1000 days); farmers for sessions 4 - 6 (food security, crop diversification and natural resource management), as well as for sessions 7 and 8 (on WASH and prioritising household resources for good nutrition).

However, the trainers appeared to have only limited control over who attended each training session, and the number of participants seems to have varied significantly from session to session. For example, attendance data from Long District shows the number of participants for the nutrition related sessions rose significantly in Palao Village between sessions #2 and #3 (from 34 to 51 participants) but dropped significantly in Chachanam Mai Village (from 31 to 13 participants).¹⁷ The selection of participants for each session is explored in more depth in section 6.3 *Main Findings*, below.

¹³ The workshop was conducted in Long District and participants from Sing District also joined.

¹⁴ SUN CSA is in partnership with SUPA Project providing LANN training support to all staff who implement activities at the district/village levels. More information about SUN CSA can be found at <https://www.suncsalaos.org/>.

¹⁵ Interpreters for the SUPA project had not yet been recruited during implementation of training sessions 1 to 4, and thus District staff who were ethnically Akha assisted with translation.

¹⁶ Akha often do not disclose (as it is prohibited to tell others) that they are pregnant. When gathering mothers for the training, the team observed those who already had a 5 - 6 month old child and then invited them to the training (without without mentioning pregnancy).

¹⁷ Though there does appear to have been more consistency in female participation. In Palao, there were 29 women for session #2 and 27 for session #3, while in Chachanam Mai, there were 10 women attending for session #2 and the same number for session #3.

6.1.2.1 Key Messages – Understanding and Relevance

As much of the training had been conducted approximately one year earlier, most participants said they did not remember details of the content of the sessions. However, the key points they could recall included:

- The importance of breastfeeding for the first six months before introducing solid food; breastfeeding is critical for child development.
- The need for a balanced diet involving a variety of foods, both for mothers/mothers to be as well as for children once they begin to eat solid food. Eating variety of food will ensure proper development of a child, especially brain and physical development.
- The importance of good hygiene practices in the home. e.g. washing hands before preparing food and eating, boiling water, bathing regularly, constructing and using latrine, etc.
- Gender roles - particularly the need for male parents to take a greater role in tasks that had formerly been regarded as 'women's work.
- Women should register a child after becoming pregnant for 2-3 months, and see a doctor at least three times before delivery; child delivery should also be in the hospital.
- Pregnant women should get enough rest, not doing heavy work, and eat sufficient food.
- Domestic animals should be kept far from the house so to keep the village environment clean and prevent disease.

6.1.2.2 Impact - Behaviour Change

In both sample villages, respondents reported that there had been some changes as a result of the training, though it was difficult to precisely assess the extent of these changes as well as contributing factors due to the qualitative nature of the study. Changes reported were as follows:

- Most reported that hygiene had improved, both due to training as well as access to an improved water supply. The 'three cleans' campaign has been increasingly put into practice, especially among mothers and children, compared to five years ago.
- Changes were also reported in the extent of breast-feeding, as well as mother and child nutrition, with pregnant mothers eating more.
- Greater diversity of foodstuffs available in terms of food crops (e.g. fruit such as avocado, pineapple, citrus, as well as beans and peanuts) as a result of training and materials provided by the project.
- Level of awareness/knowledge of the importance of eating a variety of food has been increased.
- Gender roles - husbands help wives more around the home whereas in the past husbands never helped with their wives' work. There is a saying: "It is a women's work, not ours". Wives now have more voice than before. However, control of expenditure remains the role of husband or grandparents (who are the heads of the household).
- Domestic violence - it is also reported that domestic violence has been reduced partly because parents now have a better understanding of gender roles, division of labour, sharing of workloads in the family, resulting from the training received.
- There is some understanding now of the impact of early marriage on women' health, especially from a youth perspective. However, this cannot be attributed fully to LANN training as youth were not the main target of LANN training, and very few youth reported that they had participated in the training.

- Level of awareness on the negative impact of open defecation has also increased, especially in Chachanam Mai but not so much in Palao.
- SUPA training is regarded as an important source of learning for many villagers. The village committee in Chachanam Mai stated that: “we are very pleased to have SUPA supporting our village and are grateful to the training provided...– *knowledge is not only sold in the marketplace* –... We hope that the project will be continued”.
- A decrease in the illness of children, resulting from provision of GFWS, awareness of keeping things ‘clean’, and using latrines in Chachanam Mai.
- Changes from being a village without latrines but now having latrines and using them, such as Chachanam Mai, Ban Tindoy and Senkhankham Kao.
- Increase in the use of health services as evident in the number of mothers and children using vaccination services, measuring weight and height of their small children, etc.

6.1.2.3 Quality of Training

Interestingly, all the village respondents who participated in the LANN training sessions said that they thought the training was good and had few if any suggestions as to how it might be improved.¹⁸ The use of an interpreter was very useful helping participants understand the lessons. Some villagers suggested that there should be refresher training for those trained the previous year, as they often forgot the information provided, while others suggested that there should be training for those who had not yet been trained.

However, those from outside of the village who delivered/observed the training, SUPA project and Government staff, said there were several areas where improvement was needed. These included:

- A need to reduce the length of each topic to retain participants attention.
- A need for some kind of post-training assessment.
- Participants in the training should have been targeted more precisely.
- The ToT had more theory than practice - better if more practice in training for communities as part of ToT (e.g. by having the master trainer visiting and providing training at the community level).
- ToT should be longer to enable participants to absorb the information provided.
- District level trainers have limited experience and are limited in the knowledge and skills needed to motivate villagers to join in the training. District trainers also lack confidence and don't explain messages clearly enough.
- A need for a wider variety of training methods - e.g. drama - and more humour.
- Use of video in local languages could be uploaded to mobile phones would serve to reinforce the key messages from the LANN training sessions.

6.1.2.4 Project Support and Follow-up

While it was reported that there was informal follow-up of earlier training on subsequent visits (for further LANN training or specific livelihood training), it appears that this was not done in a structured way. For example, following training sessions #2 and #3 on maternal child nutrition and care, there

¹⁸ This lack of detailed response to questions related to the quality of training could perhaps be explained by the fact that they didn't have much if any other training as a point of comparison, as well as not wanting to appear critical of the project.

were no structured follow-up meetings with participants or visits to the homes of individual participants to discuss what they had learned and how they might implement this. For example, in Chachanam Mai, only 10 women attended the two IYCF and nutrition related sessions on The First 1000 days, which should have made follow-up meetings with the participants easy to organise.

A more focussed and structured way of following up after training was suggested by some SUPA staff and Government counterparts, as well as some of the villagers interviewed. This point is discussed in more detail in sections 6.3 *Main Findings* and 7. *Recommendations* below.

6.1.2.5 Other Suggestions for Improvement

In addition to the suggestions related to the LANN training mentioned above, villagers had some other suggestions that related more to requests for practical material support, including rice, kettles for boiling water, improvements to the school building, metal fencing for pigs, etc. In Chachanam Mai, villagers also requested support to establish health facilities closer than the district town.

6.2 Yao Communities - Huaypae Neua and Souline

6.2.1 Socio-economic and Cultural Influences on IYCF - Yao Ethnic Group

6.2.1.1 Beliefs and Attitudes Related to IYCF Practices

As can be seen in the table below, the Yao ethnic group have several beliefs and practices which are similar with those of the Akha ethnic group in Long District. These include, for example, some of the dietary restrictions for pregnant women, and avoidance of giving colostrum to a newborn baby as it is not seen as 'clean milk' and thus may cause stomach problems for the baby. Food restriction for mothers after giving birth are also similar between the two ethnic groups, often contributing to a lack of adequate nutrition.

On the other hand, there are some differences, particularly regarding traditional attitudes to women's work (traditionally, Akha pregnant women are expected to undertake heavier work in the fields both while pregnant as well as returning to work soon after giving birth, while Yao women are expected to rest more). Also, during pregnancy, Akha tradition practice prohibits women from eating a variety of foods, while the traditional practice of the Yao promotes women eating more, varied foods.

Relevant beliefs and practices related to IYCF, maternal/child nutrition and gender reported during the fieldwork in the two sample villages include:

Table 3. Yao Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Traditional Beliefs and Practices
<p><u>During and After Pregnancy:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mothers should avoid hard work. • Pregnant women should eat a variety of foods, including vegetables and meat. • Pregnant women should not eat any kind of insect (as newborn would become like insects - eating and biting things); Women with newborns are restricted in what they can eat – they should not eat fried food (as that could result in not having enough milk), spicy soup, ginger

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and male and white chicken, pork from wild pigs, female pigs, and domestic pigs (where the epididymis has not been cut), as well as beef, for up to 1-3 months after birth.

- They should not eat any kind of bamboo.
- They should not eat any crippled or malformed animals (as this could result in diarrhoea and sickness in the child).
- They should not put soil in front of their house (or the baby will be born with a disability).
- They should not drink alcohol.
- Newborns should not be bathed within 7 days after giving birth. Also, mothers with a newborn baby should not allow the baby to touch or take a bath in cold water (as the child might develop a disability, or pimples).
- New mothers should only eat boiled, non-spicy foods, eggs and female chickens (especially during the first 15 days); Vegetables (*Phakkard*), however, are strongly prohibited for eating (as it will affect the baby's intestine).
- There are only four kind of foods the Yao ethnic group usually eats – pork, (lard, or pig fat), vegetables, and sour vegetables (mustard greens).
- In case the baby is not moving around in the womb, pregnant women have to ask for *Mor Pee* to do traditional/shamanic healing.
- Some families believe that having a latrine can cause the baby to get sick easily.

Infant Nutrition:

- Do not feed colostrum to a newborn baby (as it can cause stomach ache - this has now changed due to encouragement by health and project staff)
- Mothers do not have enough time to look after their children/infants due to work. They are taken care by grandparents/ older siblings and often not being fed well, resulting in a lack of adequate nutrition.

Hygiene and Sanitation:

- Open defecation is a common practice among many Yao ethnic groups.
- Animals are kept in the house (easy to take care of, or feed them), making the house unhygienic due to animal waste (which could have an impact on family health).
- Vegetables are seldom cleaned before cooking (as people believe they are already clean); hand washing before eating and after using toilets has not been practiced.
- Only adults/ elderly people drink boiled water – children and youth do not like drinking it, they prefer cold water.

Gender:

- Mainly men attend meetings in the village, and it is not considered a woman's place to speak up at village gatherings.
- Clear division of labour - men are responsible for heavy work outside of the house, such as clearing the fields, while women do chores around the house and take care of the children, as well as planting rice.
- Men are regarded as the decision-makers in the family.
- Men have more freedom for socialising or travelling around outside of the villages; whereas

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women are expected to stay home.

- Though it is reported that men and women have equal rights to education, many Yao girls and women could not read and write and do not speak Lao language as much as men do.
- Men traditionally ate first in the household while women ate afterwards (but this has changed, except when guests are visiting a house - a wife usually serve the guests and they eat with her husband and parents, while the mother and children eat separately later).

6.2.1.2 Evolution of IYCF Practices and Main Barriers and Constraints

As in the two sample villages in Long District, there was evidence that beliefs and practices related to IYCF, maternal-child nutrition, hygiene and gender relations are starting to change, partly in response to the SUPA project as well as increasing exposure to the outside world. At the same time, there are several constraints on the extent and pace of change, including traditional beliefs and practices, poverty, and the quality of the LANN training provided by the Project.

Evolution of IYCF Practices:

As with the Akha ethnic group, traditional beliefs and practices related to maternal and infant nutrition among the Yao are undergoing a process of change, due to influences external to the village. With improved access to other villages and the district town (and, in the case of Houaypae Neua, travel to China), as well as television, radio and internet and training provided by projects like SUPA, villagers are being exposed to different ideas and ways of living, including those related to pregnant women and infant and young child feeding practices. Some of the notable changes identified in this study include:

- More deliveries at hospitals rather than at home. Traditionally women would give birth at home in the village, possibly assisted by a traditional birth attendant (TBA). Now, more women prefer to give birth at the local hospital, either in the District Town or, in the case of Huaypae Neua, across the border in China. In 2018 alone, for example, only 4 out of 18 pregnant women from Huaypae Neua gave birth at home, the rest delivered their children at a hospital.
- Women now give their babies colostrum from birth rather than waiting as before for the white milk to appear before starting breastfeeding.
- In the past, new mothers returned to work after 15 days of delivery; but now they do not do this until 30 – 45 days after delivery.
- Changes in gender roles – women often now eat meals together with husbands. Traditionally, husbands ate first, wives ate after their husbands had finished eating. Also, husbands reportedly consult more with their wives now, especially in relation to income generation and expenditure in the family. However, changes in gender roles are relatively minor. Some practices are unchanged. For instance, women are not eligible to take any leading role in traditional spiritual practice.
- Women do not work as hard as before, particularly heavy agricultural work.
- Respondents in the two sample villages said that children are healthier than before.
- Access to healthcare, electricity, water, and other services, as well as road access improvements, have resulted in improved livelihoods.

- More children are bathing and more often than before, due to the availability of water in the village, but overall, there has been little change in sanitation and hygiene practices.
- Mothers are now listening to doctors' instructions more than the traditional advice of elderly people in the village in terms of health-related issues. For example, after returning from work, breast-feeding mothers squeeze out some breast liquid first before breastfeeding their child. In the past, they gave it right away, resulting in having stomach-ache due to the milk still being too hot.
- In the past, children under 1 month, would be taken to the fields by their mothers but now they don't do that until their children reach 3 months, with mothers remaining at home to take better care of their babies.
- The roles of men within the household have also reportedly increased, at least in some homes, with men helping out with chores and childcare, roles that had been traditionally a women's responsibility.

Barriers and Constraints:

There are several inter-related barriers and constraints that have inhibited the adoption of new practices related to maternal-child nutrition and hygiene. These relate to gender, livelihoods, hygiene and sanitation practices, as well as a reluctance to change traditional ways. Opium addiction is also a factor limiting change in several families. Barriers and constraints include:

- Limited knowledge and awareness of nutrition and early child care, especially among women, partly because they rarely attend the training provided by SUPA or DHO staff.
- This is linked in part to traditional gender roles in which Yao women are not expected to attend training or meetings, particularly with outsiders. When they do attend, they are not expected to speak up and also, many of them do not speak Lao language due to fewer educational opportunities in the past compared to men.
- Lack of access to markets, poverty, household labour shortages and a lack of family planning are considered to be factors inhibiting adoption of good nutrition practices. Children generally have enough rice to eat, but not sufficient vegetables and meat.
- Parents do not have sufficient time to take proper care of their babies as they concentrate too much on making a living (making money, working on their farms, etc). Families tend to compete with each other – for example, if someone in the village buys a car or builds a new house, others try to do the same and work hard in order to get sufficient funds. Child care may be neglected as a result.
- Keeping the village/houses clean is difficult due to traditional animal raising practices which they regard as more convenient than the alternatives proposed by the Project. Yao communities prefer raising pigs inside the house, as they are easy to take care of and feed. If they pen the animals away from the home then this increases the workload for the family as well as the risk of theft.
- Many villagers also prefer open defecation, even when they have a toilet in the home, because, according to SUPA staff, they are used to it and it is hard for them to change this habit.
- Addiction to opium is also a challenge for development and change at the household level, as well as in the village as a whole. It contributes to increased family poverty and poorer infant and child nutrition in affected families, as well as increasing the likelihood of theft by those affected by addiction. It is reported that at least 30 people in Ban Souline are addicted to opium.

- There is an issue related to lack of nutrition among some mothers and infants especially in the first three months after giving birth due to too many traditional dietary restrictions for new mothers. For example, most new mothers eat mainly rice, eggs and drink water. Currently there are three Yao mothers in the Nyot Ou District Hospital suffering from inadequate nutrition.

6.2.2 LANN Training - Yao Ethnic Group

LANN training in Nyot Ou used the same curriculum and a similar approach as in Long District, though there was a difference in the way Topics #5 to #8 were delivered, as these were integrated into other livelihoods training related to cardamom and tea production, inter-cropping, fish ponds and home gardens (thus the smaller number of participants recorded –between 15 to 19 for each session). As in Long District, trainers were primarily SUPA project trainers assisted/accompanied by District staff from relevant departments - Agriculture, Health and Lao Women's Union - depending on the topic.

Trainers were introduced to the training curriculum and methodologies to be used at two training of trainers (ToT) workshops held at the start of the program. The first TOT was held at district level¹⁹ over 4 days (including 1 day field visit/practice) with master trainers from SUN CSA. Participants in this ToT included SUPA trainers and relevant District staff (DoFA, DoH and LWU staff), and covered topics 1 - 4. The second ToT was for LANN staff only, covered topics 5 to 8, and was held in Vientiane.

LANN training sessions were then conducted in each target village, with the SUPA trainer leading and District staff supporting and observing. Translation was provided by CCL as well as District staff who attended the training, or at least attended review sessions and team preparation before going to villages.

It appears that in Houaypae Neua, not many women attended the training. This was reported by respondents and reflected in the attendance data provided by project staff. Reasons given were that the women were shy, non-literate and did not speak Lao, though traditional gender roles may have been the main reason for this, whereby participation in meetings is seen as a man's role.

6.2.2.1 Key Messages – Understanding and Relevance

As in the other villages, several respondents said they had forgotten the content of the training as it had been held the previous year. However, some were able to recall some of the more general information as follows:

- The need to eat a variety of food (though several respondents said obtaining food from the main food groups was difficult due to poverty and limited food sources).
- The importance of rest for the mother during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.
- Hygiene practices - hand washing and keeping babies and small children clean and penning pigs away from the home to prevent disease/illness among family members.
- The importance of giving birth at the hospital rather than at home, so that medical support would be available in case of complications.

¹⁹The workshop was conducted in Khoua District where staff from the three project target districts (Nyot Ou, Samphan and Mai) could easily meet.

- The importance of giving the baby colostrum from the beginning to ensure the baby's immune system is strong. Newborns should be breastfed within an hour of delivery.
- The importance of maintaining natural resources such as the forest as these are important sources of nutrition for children in the future.
- The cycle of infectious disease and the need for latrine construction and use to prevent disease.
- How to make biofertilizer and how to prepare food for raising fish.
- Using condoms to prevent pregnancy and diseases (from mothers interviewed, but not youth).
- Sleeping under a mosquito net to prevent being bitten and getting malaria or dengue fever.

While several respondents were able to recall some of the key messages from the training, this did not mean that these were necessarily put into practice.

6.2.2.2 Impact - Behaviour Change

Villagers interviewed reported that there had been some changes in some families as a result of the project (as well as other external influences²⁰), particularly in terms of:

- Improved hygiene and sanitation, due to availability of water because of the GFWS provided, drinking boiled water, washing vegetables before cooking, bathing, never directly eating food that has been dropped on the floor or giving it to a child to eat as before, etc.
- Improved diet - some families now consume a greater variety of foodstuffs.
- More mothers are using the health facilities available in the District town than previously.
- Some reduction in women's workloads, collecting wood for cooking fires and gathering of foods, for example, as men have started taking on these responsibilities more.

But they also pointed out that there has been little change among poorer families, particularly in terms of nutrition, due to the more limited food choices available to them.

Raising awareness of the importance of latrine construction and use is regarded as a good thing, but in practice, communities find it difficult to follow this, due partly to poverty - i.e. they are unable to buy the materials needed to construct a latrine - as well as a deeply entrenched practice of open defecation. Also, while the community is aware of the benefit of penning pigs away from home, it is difficult to put this into practice as it requires more time both to find food for pigs, as well as more time to take care of them. There is also the increased danger of theft. In Souline, however, at the time the study was conducted, the village committees reported that some households were collecting wood to build pens for pigs and they plan to encourage all households in the village to do so.

Both SUPA and District staff noted that there had been some, though no major changes as a result of the LANN training - more changes were apparent from the practical livelihood training among those who joined, in terms of cultivation and animal raising. However, some changes were noted, including exclusive breastfeeding up to six months (whereas before mothers often gave food to their babies), as well as improved hygiene (hand-washing, etc.). There have also been changes in terms of a wider variety of foodstuffs consumed, as well as more interest in establishing home gardens and taking care of food (e.g. covering food before and after eating to avoid flies contaminating food).

²⁰Including information provided by DHO as well as through media.

Project and District staff also noted that changes in hygiene and sanitation practices have been minimal. Communities in the target villages are now at the stage of absorbing knowledge provided through the series of trainings, but changes in their attitudes and practices will take time. One of the challenges in ensuring adequate food and nutrition is that though communities have domestic animals, they do not kill and eat them as a regular food source – animals (pigs) are often only killed and eaten during New Year celebrations, or for traditional events/ healings.

Not surprisingly, the main interest of villagers has been in receiving cardamom and tea seeds and expanding their fields to grow cash crops. As a result, livelihoods of several participating households have recently been improved with families having more food, clothes and improved housing.

6.2.2.3 Quality of Training

Overall, the villagers' perceptions of the LANN training were positive. However, several respondents in both villages felt that the content was too theoretical which made it difficult for villagers to absorb the new information provided. Also, some mothers reported that the lack of an interpreter/ translator for some of the sessions made the content difficult to understand. Villagers who had participated in the more practical livelihoods training were more positive about the quality, due largely to the practical nature of the training and support provided - e.g. seeds for establishing home gardens. Some villagers also reported that because there was repetition in the LANN training, some of the participants lost interest and preferred to use the time for other activities.

This view of 'too much theory and not enough practice' in the LANN training was echoed by some of the SUPA staff also, who also said that the knowledge of some of the staff delivering the training was also limited. This lack of knowledge, skills and experience made it difficult to interest the villagers in new topics and motivate them to make changes. For some sessions, there were also different staff assigned by the District departments to support training who had never received training from the project and had little understanding of the content of the training they were expected to help deliver.

There was also an issue related to regular participation in training sessions. Often different villagers attended different sessions, missing some, which limited their understanding of the topics presented.

Overall, it appears that the quality of the training was not sufficient to effectively communicate all the information contained in the curriculum. A perceived focus on theory, as well as limited training skills and familiarity with the LANN curriculum on the part of those delivering the training and at least for some sessions, the lack of translation, all limited the effectiveness of information transfer to those villagers who attended. This was also reflected in the attendance records kept by the project, with significant fluctuations in number attending, even among the group being targeted for each set of trainings.

6.2.2.4 Expectations - Project Support and Follow-up

From the villagers' perspective, they largely expressed satisfaction with the training that the project had provided as well as the level of project support, though their feedback tended to focus more on the practical livelihoods training provided, rather than the LANN training related to IYCF practices. It was also reported that some villagers were not satisfied with the relatively small amount of tangible benefits - e.g. seeds and equipment - provided by the project. The Village Committee in Souline felt

that the target groups for each training session needed to be identified more clearly by the project, particularly as only some villagers attended training sessions, and they were predominantly male, as due to perceived gender roles, women were less likely to attend.

This view was also expressed by SUPA Project and District staff, who felt that there had been a lack of monitoring and individual family follow-up after training sessions. After LANN training sessions, villagers were largely left to implement what they had learned or not, with no follow-up from the Project (This is discussed in more detail in sections 6.3 *Main Findings* and 7. *Recommendations* below).

6.2.2.5 Suggestions for Improvement

Villagers: Most of the suggestions from villagers related to future livelihoods training and included the following:

- More training in agricultural production and commercialisation, including supplying apple, cucumber, mango, banana and orange tree seedlings.
- Provision of tea processing equipment and training
- More training in maternal-child nutrition and disease prevention, with translation into local language.
- Training in animal vaccinations.
- More support for latrine construction.
- Re-establishing the Village Health Volunteers (VHVs)²¹ to help support basic health care in the village, especially for new mothers.
- Provision of loudspeakers in the case of Souline, as it is a large village, so that it is easier to give announcements for meetings and community gatherings, as well as sharing news and information to a wider audience.
- Helping village committees to further encourage villagers to pen pigs outside of the houses. Youth, especially, expressed strong views on the need to get pig waste out of the village.

Project Staff and District Partners: In addition to the need for follow-up after training and improved monitoring, other suggestions for improvement included:

- Work more with village leaders and elders to help them better understand the purpose and content of each activity so that they can help more with ensuring participation of appropriate villagers.
- Focus on a specific group of families with small children for training and follow-up to help them improve nutrition and hygiene practices. That way, they can become models for other families in the community to emulate.
- Provide a short training course on the importance of child immunisation for parents of under five years of age children.
- Work more with young people in the village, with a focus on safe migration.
- Provide training in the negative effects of using pesticides.
- Provide more support in marketing cash crops and fair trade.

²¹ The VHVs had previously been established by the local Government, possibly the District health Office, but there had been no follow up support or training, nor were any medicines provided, and as a result, they had never functioned effectively.

- Organise study visits to other villages where activities have been successful.
- Provide capacity building schemes for district partners to have a better understanding of project activities and objectives, as well as to take more responsibility and 'ownership', not only to enhance project effectiveness but also to encourage sustainability. This is because, in the past, project activities and implementation were regarded as 'outside of their normal work' and the responsibility of project staff.
- Local Government line departments need to be more committed to supporting project activities, both through ensuring the provision of dedicated staff (i.e. avoiding staff turnover) as well as regarding it as part of their ongoing work, rather than something external and 'added on'.
- Conduct a training needs assessment and add some more training topics that are relevant to the local context. For example, a topic on the importance of vaccination and its impact after vaccination (mothers sometimes do not want their children to be vaccinated as they believe (based on some cases previously) that vaccination can cause their children to become ill.

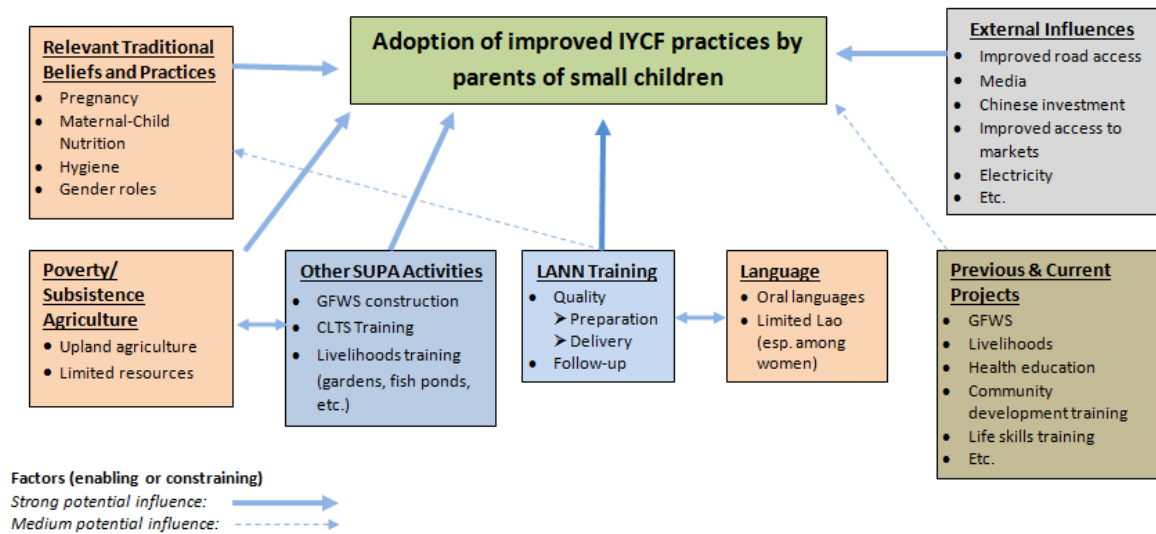
6.3 Summary - Main Findings

In assessing the 'success' or otherwise of the SUPA project, particularly in terms of the extent to which LANN training has influenced maternal-child nutrition, hygiene and changes in gender roles, several key factors are involved. These include:

- Traditional beliefs and practices
- Language and literacy
- The quality of the LANN training as well as follow-up to each training session
- Other SUPA supported activities (e.g. GFWS, provision of seedlings, home gardens, fishponds, etc.)
- Poverty levels/potential to adopt changes proposed by the Project
- External changes (e.g. road construction, access to markets, access to media, access to Chinese markets, migration, etc.)
- Previous support from other projects

These factors, both enabling as well as constraining, are summarised in Figure 2 and explained in more detail below:

Figure 3. Factors Potentially Influencing Adoption of improved IYCF Practices



6.3.1 Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Traditional beliefs and practices are not fixed, but are undergoing increasingly rapid change as formerly remote villages, including the four villages that were the focus of this study, become more closely linked to the outside world. Some beliefs and practices change more rapidly than others - for example, those related to nutrition, such as giving colostrum to newborns, or improved hygiene practices - when parents understand and can see the benefits. Others, particularly those more deeply rooted in spirit belief, such as the taboo against having twins, and the reluctance to kill animals for food, other than for ceremonial occasions (as found among both Akha and Yao communities), or attitudes toward gender in patrilineal societies, are less susceptible to change.

This study has found that some traditional beliefs and practices are starting to change in both Akha and Yao communities, in part due to inputs from the SUPA Project as well as exposure to and information coming from outside, through the DHO as well as through improved communication and direct exposure through travel. Improvements in maternal-child diets, hygiene practices and some shifts in gender roles, with lighter workloads for pregnant women, for example, are starting to be seen among some families in the sample villages visited for this study.

It was found that the village elders and spiritual authorities/shamans are the most influential in the village as the repositories of traditional beliefs and practices passed down from the ancestors, and that they often are perceived by villagers as having more authority than the village headman. This would suggest that in addition to working with the village headman and village committees, projects would also benefit from early engagement with the village elders and shamans to both learn about traditional beliefs and practices, as well as identify those which might be detrimental to maternal child health and could be a focus for change.

6.3.2 Language and Literacy

While there have been attempts in the past to produce both Akha and Yao in written form (primarily by missionaries), neither of these languages exist in written form in the villages which were the focus

for this study. The fact that these communities are non-literate does create special challenges for training with these communities, particularly the need for local language to be used (particularly to reach women who, due to limited opportunities for education for girls, may not speak Lao), and the need for good quality visual aids, including videos and posters, to ensure the information being transmitted is clearly understood.

The study found that during the LANN training, information was not always clearly presented in local language - either there was no translator available or the translator had not been adequately prepared. While the LANN training did use some posters, these were small in size (A4) which was not suitable for large audiences. There were also no ways of reinforcing the messages provided in training later, perhaps through posters and/or short video clips in local language that could be uploaded to mobile phones, or other resource materials.

6.3.3 LANN Training

While the LANN curriculum has been well written and the content meets the standards of 'good international practice' regarding IYCF practices, the effectiveness of the training in conveying relevant information and encouraging its adoption, particularly by pregnant women and the parents of babies and small children, was constrained by a number of factors. These included:

- ***Participants were not carefully selected to ensure they were in appropriate target groups for training.*** While different target groups were specified for each topic in the LANN curriculum, it appears that it was left to the Village Head to organise who would attend, following advice regarding the specific target group for each training given by the SUPA Project staff by phone. The trainers would then arrive in the village on the day specified provide training to whoever turned up, rather than taking a more 'hands on' approach to ensure the target audience was appropriate. This could also have helped address the more limited involvement of women, who were discouraged to attend training due to language barriers and poor communication skills.
- ***No clear links between target group for the IYCF training sessions and the participants in the various livelihood activities.*** As the 'First 1000 Days' sessions had a focus on nutrition and ensuring a variety of foodstuffs covering all major food groups, it would have been beneficial if priority for the livelihoods training (home vegetable gardens, fish raising, etc.) was given to including the parents of babies and small children to help them put into practice what they had learned regarding nutrition in the earlier LANN sessions.
- ***Too much 'theory' for village level training (especially with non-literate communities).*** This was reported by both some villagers as well as trainers, and suggests that the delivery of key information may need to be adapted - perhaps, for example, by integrating 'theory' with the more practical livelihoods training.
- ***Trainers and interpreters not sufficiently prepared in terms of both knowledge and skills:*** While relevant SUPA staff and some district counterparts underwent a ToT process, not all who were responsible for delivering the training in the village received this preparatory training (or only received some of it). Ensuring that particularly all District Government counterparts and interpreters/translators went through the ToT could have contributed to improvements in the quality of training delivery.
- ***No monitoring or follow-up support after training through individual family visits and/or participant small group meetings.*** It appears that there was no systematic follow-up, particularly of the parents who joined LANN sessions 2 and 3 on 'The First 1000 Days', in order to

monitor and support their ability to implement what they had learned. Ideally, this would have involved individual home visits or, if the numbers were too large, small group meetings (or a combination of both). As a result, there was no clear understanding of the challenges that each family faced in trying to implement what they had learned, particularly regarding maternal-child nutrition, or support provided. Individual family or small group follow-up visits would also have allowed for practical demonstrations - for example, food preparation.

Case Study – LANN Training

LANN Training at Village Level – Long and Nyot Ou Districts

Training approach:

There was a slightly different approach in conducting training at the village level in Long and Nyot Ou Districts. In Long, the training team conducted single sessions monthly in all target villages. However, In Nyot Ou, two sessions were conducted during the first month and then other sessions were incorporated with other activities implemented in target villages. The frequency of training varied among villages. In Souline, for example, training on sessions one and two were conducted in April 2017 (two sessions in one day), then sessions three and four in September 2017 (two sessions in one day), sessions five and six in September 2017 (two sessions in one day), session eight in May 2018 and session seven in September 2018. This meant there was a large gap between training sessions which may have limited villagers ability to recall what they had learned.

Preparation:

Each time, before going to the village, the team (four to six people – three or four project staff and one or two district staff) had a half day preparation meeting led by the SUPA District LANN Officer. Participants were project interpreters and District staff from DAFO, DHO and LWU depending on the assigned topics.

Instructions for the training were given, and clarifications of questions and concerns of the team were addressed. Materials (posters etc) were prepared and explained to ensure that everyone understood. However, the training teams interviewed felt that the preparation was not sufficient and sometimes was not done at all, resulting in poor training delivery at the village. This was especially the case when one of the team members had not been trained before and attended only a preparation session and then went to the village and delivered training, though there was support from other members.

Training in the village:

The team usually made advance arrangement with the village head by phone, advising of the topic and the date of the training. For some sessions, the village head was asked to invite specific participants, but for others, particularly ‘crop diversification and agricultural workloads’, it was up to the interest of villagers as to who would attend.

Generally, more men attended the training than women. Some youth attended the initial training sessions, but then dropped out. Reasons included workloads, language and literacy issues, and shyness.

The training usually began with an introduction to the topic (sometimes with a review of previous lessons), then provision of content, using A4 size posters, dividing the participants into small groups (by gender or age), sometimes using demonstrations or role plays.

Lessons learned/ feedback:

Despite having SUPA/district staff as interpreters (which helped make the training more interactive and effective), the team members interviewed felt that it would be more effective if it had been organised in a more practical way. For instance, visiting households and showing them how to cook nutritious meals. Practical training is regarded as a good strategy to apply in communities who do not speak Lao, or do not speak Lao fluently.

6.3.4 Other SUPA Project Activities

As already mentioned, other livelihood related activities - e.g. family gardens, fish ponds, fruit tree planting, etc. - do not appear to have targeted the same parents of small children from the nutrition related *First 1000 Days* LANN training (sessions #2 and #3). Including them in this training, together with other interested farmers, would have helped them to ensure they were able to obtain a range of foods from the major food groups as promoted by the training for both pregnant women/mothers and small children. Without this, some families would have difficulty to provide the range of foodstuffs promoted through the LANN nutrition component and thus would find it hard to put into practice what they had learned.

6.3.5 Poverty and Subsistence

Poorer families in all villages visited often struggle even to obtain enough rice for year round consumption, quite apart from fruit, vegetables, fish and meat. Without specific support, pregnant women and mothers/small children from these families find it difficult to meet the nutritional requirements promoted by the Project through the LANN training.

6.3.6 External Changes/Influences

For many of these former isolated villages, change is happening at an increasing rapid rate. This is due to a number of external factors, including:

- Construction of improved roads which provide better access to markets and health care services, with increased exposure to different ways of living.
- Access to media - this includes television as well as mobile phones, increasing exposure to health information, information related to market prices and opportunities, as well as different perspectives.
- Migration - Improved roads and communications also increase the possibility of temporary migration and thus exposure to new ideas and practices which are then brought back to the village.
- Chinese investment in the villages, which may have both positive and negative effects. For example, while their investment may have encouraged Akha and Yao ethnic groups to expand their tea, cardamom, and sugar cane fields, thus providing more income which has the potential to contribute to improved nutrition, this may have been at the expense of time spent on child care. There are also land use issues as well as environmental degradation related to the establishment of large plantations.

6.3.7 Previous Support - Other Projects

In most cases, the SUPA Project is not the first outside support provided to these villages. For example, the Lao Government, through the Poverty Reduction Fund, has provided a GFWS in Palao Village, Long District. Other INGOs have also previously supported development projects in some of the same villages, including Norwegian Church Aid, who provided training in problem tree analysis and gender roles as part of a livelihoods project, as well as life skills and community development trainings, in Chachanam Mai Village, also in Long District. There appears to have been little outside support in the form of projects in Nyot Ou District.

As the above outline shows, multiple factors can influence the adoption of good practices within these communities, either supporting or inhibiting change. While several of these factors are largely beyond the scope of any project to specifically influence or change, the quality of training provided is the main factor that can be 'controlled', and the recommendations below relate mainly to this key factor.

7. Recommendations

As the SUPA project has completed the main components of the project related to training, recommendations included here are more for future projects that are similar in design and have a key focus on addressing maternal-infant nutrition. While this study has looked at these aspects in relation to Akha and Yao ethnic groups, several of the recommendations listed below could also have relevance for village communities where there are other ethnic groups with different traditional beliefs and practices.

As was stated earlier, of all the factors that can influence IYCF and maternal nutrition beliefs and practices, the main factor that can be controlled is that of training and follow-up support. As a result, most of the recommendations listed below relate in some way to the LANN and livelihoods training provided by the project and could be applicable to similar training provided by other projects in future. These include:

- ***Engage with village elders and spiritual leaders at the outset to learn more about relevant traditional beliefs and practices:*** While it is important to work through the Village Head and the Village Committee and get their support for project implementation, it is also important to gain a good understanding of traditional beliefs and practices that may enable or constrain the planned activities and interventions. This can be done by meeting with village elders and spiritual leaders who are the repositories of this traditional knowledge. Planned activities can then be adjusted to ensure a better 'fit' with these beliefs and practices, and change encouraged where it would be beneficial.
- ***Selection of a core group of participants for IYCF training needs a targeted approach:*** Ideally Project and District staff will undertake the selection of participants for the workshops who meet the criterion of either being pregnant or parents of children under two years who are interested and committed to attending the training sessions. This could be done at a village meeting before the first training with names and home locations recorded for future support and follow-up. This would enable the Project to develop a core group of parents who can be seen by other villagers to be implementing good IYCF practices and they could then become examples for others in the community to emulate.
- ***The core group would then be a focus for other relevant training:*** While other interested villagers could be invited to join other more practical livelihoods training (e.g. growing fruit trees, establishing home gardens and fish ponds, etc.), the core group from the IYCF training would be given priority for relevant training related to diversifying and expanding food sources. This would give them the means to implement what they had learned earlier regarding nutrition.
- ***The core group should receive follow-up support after training:*** This could take the form of

both individual family and small group visits and support - to refresh information learned during sessions, to provide practical demonstrations, as well as monitor application of what was learned, and provide other help as needed.

- ***Develop more visual materials to support key messages in training for non-literate communities:*** While the development of new audio-visual materials needs time and money, these resources can make a big difference in ensuring the effective communication of key information. Posters and videos in the local language can be used in training as well as for dissemination after training (for example, short video clips can be converted to a format so that they can be uploaded to mobile phones). While it may not be possible to produce materials including short videos in local languages for all ethnic groups, particularly where there are several target beneficiaries within a single project, those ethnic groups where Lao is not widely spoken or understood can be prioritised. There are already a number of Lao consultants with experience in this area who could be contracted to produce these resources.
- ***Ensure training curricula are practical and focussed:*** Where possible, integrate 'theoretical' aspects of training related to awareness raising into more practical livelihoods training, so that villagers remain interested in the content. Also, try to focus on a smaller number of topics that are directly relevant to villagers' lives. While development practitioners may feel that all topics are important for villagers to learn more about, villagers themselves may not regard all topics as important to them and may feel overloaded.
- ***Provide capacity development for both relevant District Government staff as well as translators:*** More capacity development training is needed for District staff as well as translators, in the project purpose, the training curricula, and effective training techniques.

8. Conclusion

This study has attempted to explore what happens when what is considered 'good practice' nationally and internationally regarding IYCF beliefs and practices, as well as those related to hygiene and gender, are introduced by a project into remote and semi-remote subsistence communities where villagers are from an ethnic group that is different linguistically and culturally from mainstream society, and where these communities are undergoing relatively rapid change. In supporting these communities to adopt improved practices, projects also need to take into account traditional beliefs that may inhibit or prevent the adoption of these practices, as well as other factors that may enable or inhibit the transfer of relevant information.

As mentioned earlier in this report, the provision of training is one factor that can be controlled to a large extent by the implementing organisations, and the SUPA Project has had some success in improving IYCF and hygiene practices among families within the target communities. However, more can be done to enhance the effectiveness of these efforts, particularly in terms of how training is designed and implemented, together with subsequent follow-up to training. Hopefully this study will be of assistance in informing the design and implementation of similar projects in similar environments facing similar challenges, in the future.

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