



# Social protection in Lao PDR

**FRAMEWORKS, VULNERABILITIES,  
COPING STRATEGIES AND GAPS**



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COPING STRATEGIES AND GAPS



Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods is an Australian Government funded project implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and managed by Maxwell Stamp

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# About this report

This report is a synthesis of a comprehensive baseline analysis commissioned by the Lao-Australian Development Learning Facility and carried out by Rita Gerbert with support from the Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods (SPSL) component of the Lao-Australian Rural Livelihoods Programme. Its aim was to assist the Government of Laos in developing a national social protection system for Laos. The study provides evidence on the current situation and suggests future areas of focus based on these findings.

The study addressed three main questions:

- What are the key drivers of vulnerability across the life cycle?
- How do households and communities cope with these vulnerabilities?
- What formal social protection is available for these vulnerable groups?

The study involved a literature review encompassing qualitative and quantitative surveys carried out in Laos on a range of topics. The social protection elements were sieved out of this broad-based bank of research.

Key informants among the development partners in Vientiane were also consulted, including senior staff at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP), Save the Children Fund, the Swiss Red Cross, the World Bank and Luxembourg Development. Meetings were held with departmental representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and with the Director General of the Social Security Department. Discussions were held at the National Economic Research Institute and with ethnographic, gender and health experts in Vientiane. Although field visits were not possible, the author drew on her extensive research experience on rural livelihoods in Laos.

## Some limitations

The study was conducted largely as a literature review and is thus based on secondary sources which were, in turn, based on qualitative research. Qualitative assessments are often rigorous and highly informative but it is not always clear if the findings were triangulated and confirmed. Findings may hold true in one area or for one group but their broad-based applicability remains open to question.

While quantitative data is available for Laos, insights into the different groups' coping mechanisms in the face of vulnerabilities is not necessarily covered. Quantitative surveys can lack rigour and, without complementary behavioural and attitudinal studies, it is hard to tell if people themselves identify the same vulnerabilities. For example, in a baseline survey in Muang Sing of Luang Namtha province in 1995, malnutrition rates were high among young children but the villagers were indifferent to this issue since their children had always been small and thin. Also, little data of any kind was available on disability, old age and socioeconomic issues. Without a field work phase, the study could not update the information on villagers' vulnerabilities and coping strategies in the face of shocks and hazards.

Overall, however, the study made a valuable contribution to an overall picture of life cycle and structural vulnerability and coping strategies in Laos, drawing together all the available information.

This synthesis of the report summarises and highlights the main issues from the report and points the way forward in establishing an effective social protection system in Laos.





# 1 Background

## Commitment to social protection

The Government of Laos has a growing policy framework related to social protection, in line with its national development and poverty eradication goals and its international commitments. The country's constitution and its ratification of the main international human rights treaties and covenants that embody social protection reflect its determination to respect people's inalienable and equal rights to minimum standards of consumption, livelihood and basic services.

Laos is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in October 2013 the ASEAN Social Welfare and Development ministers signed the Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection. The declaration cites ILO Recommendation 202 of 2012 that defines a country's social protection floor as:

*... nationally-defined sets of basic social security guarantees which secure protection aimed at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion.*

Governments need to establish what those basic social guarantees should be.

The overarching policy and legal framework in Laos is drawn from different sources, including the constitution, the national socioeconomic development plan, various laws, decrees, instructions and policies, and strategic and action plans. The main ministries involved in social protection are the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW), as the lead ministry, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Additionally, the National Committee on the Advancement of Women and the National Regulatory Agency on Unexploded Ordinance (NRA-UXO) both have specific roles to play. Other ministries are peripherally involved but the Ministry of Finance (MoF) is key in determining the availability of funds for social protection programmes.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, however, is relatively small with a total staff of around 1,640 (365 in Vientiane, 610 in the provinces and 665 in the 145 districts) which limits its outreach and regulation of social protection activities. Finance is limited and the 2 percent official development assistance in 2011–2012 made up 85–90 percent of its total budget.

Over the past ten years and particularly within the past three years, the government has issued various decrees, laws and policies relevant to social protection and is gradually adopting measures cited in the ILO Recommendation 202 (see box). However, government faces a challenge in implementing these policies effectively, given the limited financial and human resources available.

In 2013, the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare set up a national committee to establish the national policy on social protection. Representatives came from the main ministries – Labour and Social Welfare; Health; Education and Sport; Planning and Investment; Agriculture and Forestry; Home Affairs; Information and Culture; and Finance. The 22-strong working committee comprises these ministries, plus representatives from the Poverty Reduction Fund and the Lao Federation of Trade Unions.

### Extract from ILO Recommendation 202

The social protection floor should comprise at least the following **basic social security guarantees**:

- (a) access to a nationally-defined set of goods and services, constituting **essential health care**, including maternity care, that meets the criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality;
- (b) **basic income security for children**, at least at a nationally-defined minimum level, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services;
- (c) **basic income security**, at least at a nationally-defined minimum level, **for persons of active age who are unable to earn sufficient income**, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and
- (d) **basic income security**, at least at a nationally-defined minimum level, **for older persons**.

(Quoted from ILO Recommendation 202; emphasis added.)

## Current social protection programmes

The Government of Laos is making serious efforts to expand formal social protection coverage in the country so that it is more comprehensive, coherent and rationalised. Current coverage is circumscribed and generally only civil servants, the military, the police, their dependents and retirees from these groups can look forward to regular and predictable cash transfers – even for temporary purposes such as maternity or sick leave. Those who served in the struggle for national liberation prior to 1954 and their families or descendants are entitled to special benefits in cash and kind as a reward for outstanding service. Some formal-sector employees also have coverage but most beneficiaries are in urban areas. The combined contributory schemes, administered until September 2014 by two semi-autonomous organisations—the State Authority for Social Security and the Social Security Organisation – under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, cover some 12–13 percent of the population.

The contributory scheme for civil servants has been regulated through the State Authority for Social Security since 2007 while the scheme for the formal private sector has been under the Social Security Organisation since 2000. Employees and their dependants in private employment, including enterprises of all sizes and international organisations, such as embassies, development partners and international non-governmental organisations, are obliged to join the formal social security scheme.

However, many small enterprises have not joined the social security system and even some large enterprises have either not joined or have dropped out, preferring to make other arrangements for their workers. The percentage of formal-sector workers covered under the Social Security Organisation is not known but the numbers are rising slowly and currently stand at around 66,800 members, plus their dependants. The scheme was initially compulsory only for companies with 10 employees and above but in October 2014 this requirement was extended to all enterprises, starting with only one employee. The number of enterprises participating stood at around 1,150 in 2013.

The formal social insurance does not cover everything. In terms of health coverage, some treatments are excluded, for example, chemotherapy, heart surgery and treatment for other chronic conditions. Also, the maximum 12 months of unemployment benefits are only paid after a minimum of 12 years plus one month of contributions. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare acknowledges the challenge they face in that contributions and outlays do not balance, especially in the area of health, rendering the fund financially unstable.

### Health

One area of social protection that the informal work force can benefit from is health. Social protection in health covers more of the population than the contributory schemes on their own and is broken into three strands. The first is under the National Social Security Fund. The second is the Community-based Health Insurance, a voluntary scheme that has limited and skewed membership. Viable health insurance schemes are based on risk pooling but people tend to join this scheme only when they need additional health services and then they drop out.

The third and largest stream for social protection in health is the Health Equity Fund. On its own, this fund covers over 10 percent of the population although estimates vary and need to be seen in relation to the reality on the ground (use rates, quality and accessibility of services). The Health Equity Fund provides free health care and pays associated costs, such as transport, at health centres and designated hospitals for households identified as poor. These households are sometimes identified using the government's poverty criteria and sometimes using additional criteria, depending on the source of the official development assistance. The Health Equity Fund is not a transfer or contributory programme but rather a welfare measure. Poor patients are not guaranteed free services, however, as facilities decide



whether or not to provide services free. Out-of-pocket expenditure as a percentage of overall health expenditure in Laos remains high at around 50 percent of the total (MoH, 2014: xvi).

From its inception in 2004 the Health Equity Fund was funded almost entirely by four donors: the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, Luxembourg Development and the Swiss Red Cross. However, a health welfare scheme is ideally funded by government revenues and government is also contributing to the fund with revenue generated by the Nam Theun Two (NT2) hydropower scheme. These funds were earmarked for environmental and poverty reduction purposes. At the time of writing, the NT2 funds covered 13 southern districts but this was set to increase to 19 districts. Overall, these programmes provide adequate funds for 93 of 145 districts in 12 provinces (updating from Schwartz, 2013: 2). In the priority poor districts with World Bank support, the entire population of the district is entitled to Health Equity Fund coverage, although this may not hold true in other areas.

Recent decrees issued by the Ministry of Health (2013) and the Prime Minister (2014) provide for free maternal, neonatal and child health services. This is also a type of health social protection and is to be universal. The initial ministry policy and guidelines were aimed at women and their families in rural areas where there is no health insurance coverage and the number of deliveries at health facilities remains low. These decrees were a reaction to the ongoing high maternal mortality rates and under-five malnutrition rates in Laos. Funding to cover maternal, neonatal and child health services for those with no other cover, should also come from the NT2 funds if they are adequate.

As the decrees on free maternal, neonatal and child health services were issued in 2013 and 2014, no statistics are available yet to establish their effects on people's health-seeking behaviour or on health outcomes.

### Education

The Ministry of Education and Sport is committed to promoting universal education and it has set up the Department of Inclusive Education. Primary education is free and compulsory up to grade five. Nonetheless, net enrolment rates remain below the level needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. With assistance from the World Food Programme, the ministry initiated a school feeding programme as a social protection measure in 2005. The programme covered six provinces and 30 districts but in 2012, the ministry rolled out the National School Meal Programme that now includes an attendant policy issued in 2014, so current coverage is not clear. The programme also benefits from NT2 funds. All children at school receive the food, so it is like an in-kind conditional transfer programme although its effect on enrolment and attendance is not yet quantified.

The Ministry of Education and Sport also has a scholarship programme to support poor students, especially those continuing on to secondary school, but detailed data on it is not currently available.

An innovative social protection measure in education provides primary schools with a block grant to cover some of their basic operating costs so they do not need to ask for informal fees from parents.

Since this school grant programme was introduced relatively recently, information is not yet available on its efficacy in curbing the imposition of unofficial school fees.





In this Xieng Khouang village two fish ponds were dug, 49 men and 22 women got work for 20 days and received 3.45 tons of rice.

## Economic growth and development goals

## Poverty and vulnerability

## Social welfare and benefits

Although the concepts of disadvantaged groups and social benefits exist in Laos, the scheme for revolutionary heroes is the only substantial government programme so far. Some donor-funded projects help with programmes for vulnerable children (SOS Children's Villages International and Friends International), victims of unexploded ordnances (UXO) and disabled persons (Handicap International and COPE). If disasters occur, such as flooding, limited emergency assistance is also provided but largely through donor assistance.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare has also run Food for Assets programmes with World Food Programme assistance in villages throughout the country (WFP, 2014). These provide temporary support for villages experiencing grain and food shortages while helping to develop a community asset. In 2012–2013, the Food for Assets programmes actively assisted around 5,400 people in six provinces with 285 tons of food (WFP, 2014).

Over the past decade Laos has had annual economic growth rates of 7–8 percent and higher. This was largely due to foreign direct investments in hydropower, mining and natural resources. In per capita income terms, Laos is a lower-middle income country but in terms of human development, it retains its least developing country status. The government's topmost concerns are to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and to graduate from this status by 2020.

Poverty in Laos has decreased but not in line with the country's economic growth. Wealth differences are widening between people in urban and rural areas but they are evident within rural areas as well. Some rural families have benefited from the commercialising economy while others have suffered with these shifts. Overall rates of consumption in Laos remain lower than in other countries in the region (preliminary Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey data – LECS V), showing that economic growth does not easily translate into better standards of living for the whole population.

Poverty is a multidimensional and dynamic concept with multiple causes that encompasses different types of deprivations. These deprivations may be overcome by people's assets and capabilities, and change with time, place, age and larger, structural factors. In Laos, poverty is officially defined by an income poverty line that is regularly adjusted in relation to inflation.

Vulnerability encompasses the idea of being at risk of a less secure livelihood or living conditions or of falling into poverty or deeper poverty. Risks come from shocks and hazards that arise individually, concurrently or subsequently, and may result in a person, family, group or even entire communities and regions becoming worse off. Variables such as location, gender, ethnicity, age and existing poverty make some people more vulnerable. Those less vulnerable may become worse off due to shocks but they are able to recover.

## Structural vulnerability

The concept of 'structural vulnerability' is key in the Laos context. According to the *2014 Human Development Report* (2014: 22):

*Structural vulnerability is rooted in people's position in society—their gender, ethnicity, race, job type or social status — and evolves and persists over long periods. A fuller understanding of such vulnerability implies that people who are otherwise endowed with equal capabilities may still face differing barriers based on who they are, where they live or what they do.*

The following can raise significant barriers for people and communities in Laos: geography and infrastructure; social exclusion; life cycle vulnerabilities and gender. These are discussed in more detail in the next section on challenges.

# 2 Challenges

As mentioned in the background section, many factors can raise barriers for people and communities in Laos and these factors often combine to compound the resulting deprivations. This section looks more closely at the factors of geography and infrastructure, social exclusion, life cycle vulnerabilities and gender issues.

A complicating issue in Laos relates to the exceptionally young population. While this youthful demographic is a source of strength for the country, it also poses some major challenges, especially when looking at social protection issues through the life-cycle lens.

## Geography and infrastructure

### Rural vs urban areas

The starkest location difference in vulnerability is between urban and rural areas (LECS V data). Geographically, the highland areas are the most difficult to access since they lack infrastructure and therefore they are the most problematic for the government to service. These are the most vulnerable areas in Laos.

The government has been developing policies to tackle these issues, resulting in some of the remoter villages being resettled or merged and new approaches to farming being introduced. Such major changes cannot occur without some knock-on effects and these policies have inevitably given rise to other less positive outcomes relating to disruption and displacement.

While location generally indicates where there is vulnerability, the depth of poverty and extent of vulnerability varies from village to village and household to household. Some households have benefited from the changes in livelihood systems introduced while others have suffered, resulting in desperate measures, such as selling off or neglecting their own land and being reduced to being farm labourers for their more fortunate neighbours.



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Overall, economic growth has resulted in a drop in poverty levels although this has been more significant in the urban areas (see table 1). The headcount poverty rate in urban areas dropped from 17.8 percent in 2008 to 10 percent in 2013 while the rural poverty rate dropped from 31.7 percent in 2008 to 28.6 percent in 2013.

The ongoing migration from rural to urban areas and insufficient employment opportunities in towns could, however, increase urban-based poverty in the future.

**TABLE 1: Urban versus rural poverty headcount rates, 2003–2013 (%)**

	2003	2008	2013	Change 2008–2013
Laos	33.5	27.6	23.2	-4.3
Urban	19.7	17.4	10.0	-7.3
Rural	37.6	31.7	28.6	-3.1

Source: Preliminary LECS V data

*Left: Two homes in the same Xayaboury village. Inequalities at village level are becoming more common in rural Laos*

### Border areas

People are likely to be more vulnerable in off-road and remoter village locations but this does not always hold true. The LECS V data underlines this with the surprisingly rapid improvement in Sino-Tibetan income poverty from 2008 to 2013. They are remotely located from the point of view of the rest of Laos but many of them are obviously well-connected with better-off relatives, traders or investors of the same ethnic group on the Chinese side of the border.

### Forests and mountains

The people in the uplands have traditionally depended on the forest for their livelihoods but in recent years their access to forests and forest resources has been compromised. There has been a loss of biodiversity which has negatively affected poorer families who often rely on forest products for their consumption needs. This issue has been exacerbated by the promotion of industrial tree crops and the introduction of new farming methods.

## Social exclusion

### Ethnic groups

Ethnicity in Laos can also be linked to location in that certain ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in particular parts of the country. There are four major ethno-linguistic groups, with 49 sub-groups. The poverty rate among the majority Lao-Tai population (lowland or ‘river’ people) dropped from 25 percent in 2003 to 15.4 percent in 2013. In comparison, among the Mon-Khmer (the midland or hillside people) the poverty rate reduced from 53.7 percent to 42.3 percent and among the Hmong-Iu Mien (the upland or forest people) it reduced from 45.8 percent to 39.8 percent (see table 2). Human development indicators for non-Lao-Tai groups tend to be worse than for the dominant Lao-Tai, for example, they have higher child malnutrition, lower levels of education and literacy, higher adolescent birth rates and more poverty. Even though the poverty rates for the Sino-Tibetan group (the ‘border’ people), dropped to 16.4 percent, their human development indicators remain poor. The Lao-Tai are generally better off than the other ethnic groups but as they make up 65 percent of the population they still have 44 percent of the country’s poor population.

Not only are the non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups generally poorer (roughly 35 percent of the population accounts for some 56 percent of the poor population), they also have limited access to general services and to social protection. This means they often lack the education or training required to move into non-agricultural labour markets and do not have the social networks to help them overcome such barriers.

**TABLE 2: Poverty and ethnicity in Laos**

Ethnicity	Poverty headcount rate				Distribution of the poor			
	2003	2008	2013	Change	2003	2008	2013	Change*
Lao-Tai	25.1	18.4	15.4	-3.0	49.6	44.0	44.2	0.2
Mon-Khmer	53.7	47.3	42.3	-5.0	33.5	36.9	40.3	3.4
Sino-Tibetan	40.0	42.2	16.4	-25.8	4.0	4.8	2.4	-2.4
Hmong-lu Mien	45.8	43.7	39.8	-3.9	11.5	13.9	12.1	-1.8
Other	48.1	22.0	33.1	11.1	1.5	0.5	1.0	0.5
Lao PDR	33.5	27.6	23.2	-4.3	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0



*UXO Lao SEOD technician preparing UXO for destruction, 2007*

## Life cycle vulnerabilities

### Migrant workers

It is common for a member of the family to go to another area or even another country to find work. Even if people have limited training, they are able to sell their labour and help support the family back home. This phenomenon in the labour market has a number of side-effects. Migrant workers do not always speak the local language and they lack the natural community support available in their own areas. This, too leads to social exclusion issues and vulnerability.

### The disabled

Disability is an integral part of social exclusion. In Laos, as in most countries, disabled people are more vulnerable than others. Having a disabled child can be seen as a ‘shame on the family’ and although families are responsible for caring for a disabled family member, they may not know how to give the best support.

Considering that the country has a problem of unexploded ordnance that have caused 21,000 injuries (and 29,000 deaths) since the early 1960s, disability rates are likely to be higher in Laos. Specific programmes or support mechanisms have not yet been set up for disability but government is planning to compile an accurate database during the next census, as a good starting point.

Looking at people’s vulnerabilities through the life cycle lens reveals the pivotal periods that can determine the course of their lives. This section summarises the vulnerabilities of the different age groups and concentrates on people from rural areas, as this was the focus of much of the data available. The evidence suggests that social protection in Laos needs to target younger, rural women and men, and especially the non-Lao-Tai.

### Children under five: malnutrition and stunting

The levels of stunting in Laos have remained stubbornly high since nutrition status started to be measured nationally in the 1990s. The root causes of stunting lie in a combination of social exclusion, gender inequalities and women’s limited access to the resources to feed themselves and their families. These issues need to be addressed.

Poor nutrition has major implications for rural children as they get older and for the generations to come. The Lao Social Indicators Survey shows that 44.2 percent of all children are stunted and the rate for five year olds is over 50 percent.

Stunting affects cognitive development and functioning as well as physical development and it causes higher morbidity rates. A generation of stunted children may remain vulnerable for their entire lives, creating intergenerational vulnerability and poverty, and underscoring social exclusion.

UNICEF started a public–private partnership called ‘The 1000 day project’ in Savannakhet, Salavane and Attapeu in June 2014 which includes the distribution of ‘SuperKid’ sachets of vitamins and micronutrients. The free maternal neonatal and child health services should also make a difference although parents and other carers need to be aware of the problem and make use of these services.

### School age children: adequate opportunity for schooling?

Given the high chances of stunting and the non-Lao-Tai children not being able to understand the Lao language, these children start school with a double burden. The school meals programme starts too late for them as early childhood stunting is virtually irreversible.

The Ministry of Education and Sport’s Inclusive Education Plan 2011–2015 aims to achieve universal primary education and school attendance has increased in the last ten years. Development partners have supported school construction, curriculum development and teacher training to improve basic education.



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*Whether in the north or in the south, child nutrition problems need to be at the forefront of social protection programming*

The STEP Survey results and other findings show, however, that more needs to be done to retain boys and girls beyond primary school and to increase the relevance and quality of education. High drop-out rates from grade one to grade two underscore the difficulties of non-Lao children and suggest that teachers need training and support in dealing with language and multi-level class issues. Why children drop out and what they do afterwards needs further investigation.

An additional vulnerability of children in Laos (irrespective of location or wealth) relates to violence and corporal punishment which remain unacceptably prevalent.

Children's vulnerabilities continue into their school years as they leave school too young and are ill-equipped for an emerging, modern labour market.

### Adolescents: early marriage, migrant labour

Adolescents, especially girls, are among the most vulnerable in Laos. Although this is a critical stage in the life cycle, there are no programmes specifically designed to support this age group and it doesn't feature in the Millennium Development Goals, except in terms of adolescent birth rates.

Since children, especially rural children and non-Lao-Tai children, tend to leave school prematurely, they have little sense of their rights and are poorly equipped to protect themselves from exploitation or to choose their own work paths. Cultural determinants based on gender inequalities also leave adolescent girls with little choice but to get married and start to bear children before the legal age of 18.

Besides adolescent birth rates, little statistical data is available on adolescent vulnerability in Laos although a number of qualitative studies have provided some insights. Studies on informal labour migration also indicate the vulnerability of adolescents. In research work on gender, poverty and ethnicity in northern Laos, a plantation labour gang name list included girls and boys from 15 years old. This employment can be hazardous for anyone but more so for young people and the young women would also be more at risk of sexual abuse.

Although migrant labour is not necessarily more exploited, young people, often with no documentation to prove their Lao citizenship, are more vulnerable. Trafficking of young people also occurs in Laos and when young people go to Thailand in search of work, they can be trafficked after they cross the border. Adolescents recruited from their village by a labour broker are not being trafficked but they could end up in forced labour or in other abusive situations.

### Poverty lines versus self-defined poverty

Poverty is measured in different ways but in subsistence-oriented farming and integrated farming and forest systems, villagers often look at poverty in relation to their labour, the main input in the traditional livelihood system. Villagers recognise the connection between stages in the life cycle and vulnerability. During field investigations in the northern uplands, villagers mentioned their own indicators of poor families as having:

- Too little land for cultivation and/or too little land of adequate quality (making labour unproductive);
- Unfavourable dependants to labour ratios (for example, many young children, with no adult male in the household, with elderly or with chronically ill household members);
- No livestock (especially if livestock died or were stolen);
- No investment capital (to buy livestock or land);
- Severe rice shortages, whether because of single or diverse shocks (sudden death in the family, bad weather, pest attacks, major drop in crop or forest product prices, no buyers for agricultural or forest products);
- An opium addict in the family (especially for the northern region).

Villagers divided working age into at least two stages. The first stage, a young family with less labour and more mouths to feed is more vulnerable than the second stage, a mature family with more members who can contribute their labour. The elderly are also recognised as a vulnerable group if they do not live with their adult children or if their families are themselves poor and cannot feed themselves.

*Source: Adapted from work by Rita Gebert done in northern Laos on various occasions from 2005 – 2010; reported in Gebert (2009)*



## Two studies on child labour

A qualitative case study (Molina, 2011) conducted in Savannakhet and Champasak on plantation labour described the potential difficulties for children. In the 13 villages studied, the following situations were found:

- School age children (as young as 11) were working on plantations, mostly in the company of their parents;
- Significant numbers of migrant workers from other districts and even other provinces had been recruited via labour brokers. Some of these migrants were young teens, not accompanied by parents or other relatives;
- Some working parents had brought young children with them (not to work but because they couldn't leave them in their home villages);
- Migrant children of any age did not have access to either schooling or health services.

A quantitative National Child Labour Force Survey carried out by the Lao Statistics Bureau in 2010, with International Labour Organisation support, also shows that for some children (girls more than boys), childhood ends early as they start to contribute to the family's income, most often as unpaid family labour. In the 5–9 age group, 4.7 percent of girls and 4.6 percent of boys are working, while in the 10–14 age group, 13.5 percent of girls and 10.4 percent of boys are working. This means that almost one in five girls is already working before they are 15. By the time the children reach the 15–19 age range, 54.3 percent of girls and 43.5 percent of boys are working. This underscores the gender inequalities in Laos.



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Programmes to encourage non-formal education for school leavers and to ensure young people have adequate information on reproductive health and health services need to be set up.

### Working age people and women of reproductive age: cumulative shocks

Rural women from non-Lao-Tai groups are socially excluded and highly vulnerable during their working lives. For example, they may have a problem with language due to limited schooling and literacy which isolates them from the mainstream. This in turn excludes them from training opportunities and they cannot easily participate in decision making or take up such roles. Women are also subject to the patrilocal and patriarchal structure of society which limits their mobility after marriage and denies them land and inheritance rights.

In terms of rural livelihoods, rural women and men, especially in the uplands, have been compromised by forest degradation. Their access to cultivable land is restricted, particularly in areas where concessions have been granted. When they produce crops, monopsonies may limit their choice of crop traders. In resettled areas, farmers may have to travel some distance to the fields and face competition for scarce resources. Rural landlessness is becoming an issue, making people vulnerable to exploitation in an environment where non-agricultural employment opportunities are hard to come by.

In terms of health, agricultural workers, especially men, may suffer from exposure to toxic chemicals. In general, the health services are not always accessible, adequate or affordable. Women tend to stick to traditional practices in pregnancy and childbirth and those attending clinics may be compromised by some insensitivity to cultural taboos. The maternal mortality rates in Laos remain high despite the government's determination to provide free maternal neonatal and child health care.

Since most of the Lao population work in the informal labour sector, they are vulnerable, regardless of gender, location and education. If a person has any kind of accident or illness, they have no social protection and have to depend on family and friends who may be in equally precarious work situations. Anything that affects an income earner can have serious effects on the most dependent members of the household: young children and the elderly.



*Migrant workers often leave their young children with their parents as they search for work elsewhere*

## The elderly: a forgotten group?

Elderly people in Laos, as everywhere, are increasingly vulnerable as their mental and physical condition declines with age but the youthful country demographics mean the elderly (65 plus) make up just 3.7 percent of the population (LSB, 2012).

According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare's strategic plan and vision for 2016–2030, families should care for the elderly and social welfare is only considered for those who are truly destitute (although not on a regular, pension-like basis). Accordingly, medical facilities are designed for acute care and do not cater for the long-term treatment or care that the elderly may need. Senior citizens are therefore particularly vulnerable if their families cannot provide this care.

With the surge in the number of migrant workers, the elderly sometimes find themselves in the position of caregivers. Young migrants may leave their children with their elderly parents or resettlement may split the family. This has knock-on effects in terms of the life cycle. An old grandmother may not be in a position to provide good nutrition or to supervise school-aged children, particularly if she relies on irregular remittances from her children.

Another risk for elderly people from any wealth quintile or educational level is possible depression as medical facilities to cater for this are limited in Laos. Anecdotal evidence suggests that elderly people may fall into depression due to resettlement as they mourn the loss of their traditional ways of life.

## Gender issues

Girls and women from many ethnic groups in Laos can be disadvantaged by the patriarchal and patrilocal nature of their communities. Women join their husbands' families on marriage so parents may be less likely to invest in their education. They may take girls out of school when they are under financial stress or to benefit from their labour. Unequal gender relations partly explain women's low access to health services and their tendency to work hard throughout their pregnancies.

Women who lack education are often denied access to information due to language and literacy. They may not know their rights unless these are explained by someone who speaks their language and has the correct information. The Lao Women's Union representative at village or district level may not always accurately convey important messages, for example, about the health services.

The Millennium Development Goals and Lao Social Indicators Survey data shows that young women's vulnerability is structural. Girls have less chance of studying beyond primary school, they are often married by 14 or 15 and have their first babies before 19. The United Nations defines high adolescent birth rates as 50/1000 but the rural rates in Laos are 114/1000 (GoL and UN, 2013: 111). Table 3 shows the rates according to ethnic, educational and income variations. The high adolescent birth rates give rise to persistently high maternal mortality rates, calculated at 357 but this hides significant urban–rural disparities (LSB, MoH, ILO, 2012).

The next section on coping strategies shows how shocks combined with social exclusion serve to deepen such structural vulnerabilities.

**TABLE 3: Girls and women: vulnerability indicators**

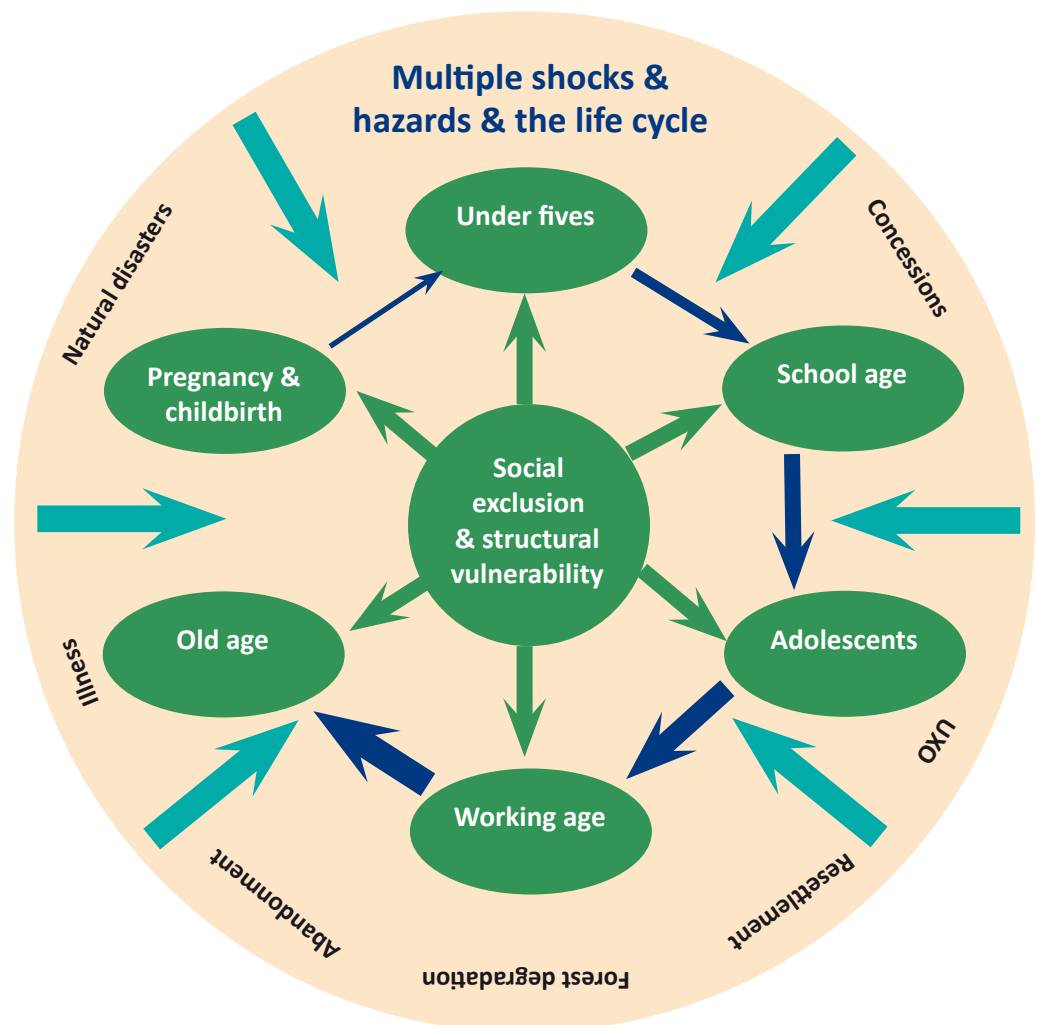
	Sec/school net attend. ratio	% women 15–24 who are literate	Early marriage %		ABR (15–19yrs) /1000	Total fertility rates	Acceptance of VAW	
			Before 15	15–19			M	F
Lao-Tai	58.2	81.6	6.5	20.3	69	2.6	48.6	59.2
Mon-Khmer	21.5	45.3	15.1	31.4	132	4.2	52.7	53.1
Hmong-lu Mien	28.3	48.6	17.2	35.1	161	5.5	49.2	69.4
Sino-Tibetan	25.7	30.1	11.1	30.1	141	3.6	34.6	47.7
Rural	35.0	59.7	11.3	29.6	114	3.6	49.0	58.7
Urban	74.3	90.6	4.6	12.1	44	2.2	49.5	57.1
Poorest quintile	8.9	28.7	16.3	36.6	183	5.3	50.7	56.2
<b>Lao PDR</b>	<b>44.6</b>	<b>68.7</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>58.2</b>

Source: LSB and MoH (2012) Notes: ABR = adolescent birth rates; VAW = violence against women – the data relates to surveyed people's attitudes to violence and its acceptability

# 3 Coping with shocks

Against the background of geographical and infrastructural challenges, combined with social exclusion, life cycle vulnerabilities and gender issues, the government has been striving to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and aiming to graduate from its least developed country status by 2020. Raising the quality of life for the rural population has been the most challenging goal and government instigated some major changes in its quest to meet this challenge. For example, to try to generate more productive farming practices and help people move on from precarious subsistence lifestyles, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farming introduced new commercial approaches to agriculture with more permanent and larger settlements, particularly in the uplands. This was not only considered a way to increase people's productivity, security and income but also to make it more feasible to offer health, education and welfare services that everyone could access. The country's gross domestic product was also boosted by foreign direct investments in hydropower, mining and natural resources.

Some of these planned solutions have inevitably had some unexpected side-effects which have in turn created further shocks and risks for the most vulnerable individuals and communities in the country. The diagram below depicts just some of the complexity affecting people in the rural areas of Laos.



The arrows between the stages of the life cycle are shown as thickening in order to portray the cumulative impact of the effects of shocks on people.

For example, a baby born underweight may result in stunting which affects school performance and skills levels in adolescence leaving the adult with a lifetime of penury.

The interactions depicted in the figure affect both coping strategies and potential social protection outcomes.

## Shocks and risk

The shocks affecting individuals or families are referred to as idiosyncratic shocks. These may include: an accident or illness affecting a family member's ability to work over a long time; unemployment; a woman and her children being abandoned by her husband; a fire that destroys the family property; and disability in old age. In the social protection ideal world, any family that suffers such shocks is rescued by an effective social safety net that supports them until they recover, leaving no permanent or long-term consequences.

Shocks that affect a large proportion of the population at the same time are referred to as covariate shocks. These include natural disasters and some major changes in policy. In the Lao context, however, these two types of shocks are often inextricably linked.

## Coping strategies or managing risk

Although the literature tends to refer to 'traditional coping strategies', 'risk management' may better describe people's foreknowledge of risk based on accumulated past experience. Traditional societies like those in Laos have developed socioeconomically to manage predictable risks such as droughts, storms, crop pest attacks and other natural hazards. These risk management strategies, based on principles of solidarity that also governed labour and land use, ensured at least a minimum of subsistence for the entire community. However, traditional risk management does not always resonate with change.

The term 'coping strategy' denotes a reactive rather than proactive measure in the face of hazard or shock. Some strategies are more traditional, such as borrowing rice from a relative, and others are more contemporary, such as borrowing from a village development fund. Coping strategies have differing degrees of 'reversibility' (Kabeer, 2002: 39). Some strategies have only a temporary negative effect on the family's wellbeing and may ultimately improve a family's situation whereas others may be difficult to reverse and may negatively affect a family's future. The different stages shown in table 4 were developed by Walker (1989) although these strategies may have evolved and may vary from area to area.

**TABLE 4: Typology of individual and familial coping strategies in rural areas**

Stage	Coping strategies
I Easiest to reverse, temporarily or seasonally invoked with no loss of productive assets, little diversion of labour from own land, no reduction in calorie intake	Reducing the preferred staple and eating more starchy forest foods (tubers, for example); Reducing non-essential purchases; Borrowing some food or cash from relatives or working for them in exchange for food; Share-rearing livestock for family members (and keeping the next calf); Hiring out labour for a few days here and there
II Deeper reductions in costs and temporary measures that don't involve losses of productive assets; some actions may have long-term impacts	Reducing calorie intake (eating less, less frequently); Selling or exchanging surplus items, including small livestock (for food); Drawing on savings in cash or kind; Further reducing costs, for example by withdrawing children from school; Avoiding normally essential costs (especially for health care); Borrowing from outside the kinship network or getting advances from traders; Borrowing from a rice bank (if there is one); Migrating for temporary, seasonal work; Splitting a family between a new and old location (when relocated); Boarding children elsewhere temporarily; Selling both non-timber forest products and wood that might not otherwise be sold; Cutting timber and poaching in restricted areas
III Difficult to reverse (more permanent losses of means of production, including labour)	Selling livestock or timber for house construction in times of distress; Leasing out land temporarily; Eating grain earmarked for seed; Migrating from the area permanently; Boarding children elsewhere permanently
IV May be impossible to reverse; fundamental upheaval in livelihood	Selling land in times of distress; Resorting to prostitution; Resorting to criminal behaviour (stealing); Begging



Resettlement village, Nakai Plateau, Khammoune Province, Laos

Coping strategies tend to involve the family and since families decide what to do in times of crisis, strategies vary with households. Within the household, the effects of the strategies also vary. For example, if a family decides to consume less food, this may bring into play the gender or life cycle issues discussed earlier as a mother may share her ration with her children or the children under five may miss out on the calories, vitamins and micronutrients they need for healthy growth.

Traditional coping strategies depended on the extended family who could rally in the event of harvest losses or health shocks, for example. However, currently, risks and shocks tend to be less localised and more widespread (climate change, policy changes, forest concessions), making these strategies less effective. For example, the extended family may be affected by a similar shock or hazard or may need to hedge against unknowable shocks and hazards. Also, relocation may affect kinship networks as families move farther afield.

Some families respond to relocation by splitting the family between old and new locations but this strategy deprives some family members of education, health and sanitation services, once again affecting their future security.

A new coping strategy has developed where farmers sell their harvests to traders in advance and thereby afford seed and fertiliser. This may mean they get a lower price but it helps them to survive. The risk arises if the harvest is not sufficient to pay off the debt which may spiral them into using other more drastic strategies.

Hiring out labour temporarily is an established coping strategy but the current widespread outmigration of labour is relatively new. A family member may find seasonal labour work on the plantations and in the small towns in their districts. Young people may also be recruited by labour brokers to work outside their home districts. Many people from the central and southern provinces, for example, look for work in Thailand. In the worst-case scenarios, entire families simply leave the area where it has become impossible to earn a secure livelihood.

When a family reduces its labour for its own fields, this has an immediate knock-on effect on the agricultural productivity of the family. They may increasingly need to buy food staples and so have to reduce their food consumption. They may save money but deferring health treatment can have long-term consequences. Taking a daughter out of school also reduces costs but excludes her from future options and often results in early marriage and childbirth. Her baby may be born underweight, thus carrying on a cycle of poor human development.

### Village development funds

Government and the Laos development partners have promoted village development funds and village banks as a new coping strategy for rural families. These are credit-based revolving funds whereby a development partner provides the seed money and interested villagers join and borrow money for income-generating activities or consumption. Group pressure should ensure that loans are repaid and the fund grows.

Some of these funds now offer savings services too. Savings can serve as a crisis fund, even if the sums saved seemed relatively insignificant. Some funds are also set up as solidarity groups that keep a small part of the fund to help members cover emergency needs.

A well-run and successful savings and credit service in the village itself provides villagers with one more opportunity to cope with the shocks that are so much part of daily rural life.

One of the most drastic coping strategies increasingly mentioned in the literature on labour migration and trafficking relates to adolescent girls, especially from northern and central Laos, working in informal beer shops where men may also buy sex. Young, single women feel more obliged than their brothers to take care of their parents so they become sex workers in the agricultural off season and return to their villages during the busy season.

Families often use several coping strategies at once and these strategies are so commonplace that they have virtually become the norm. Families may have to change livelihood systems but the effect may be positive in the long run if families are able to re-establish themselves through remittances from family members working elsewhere, for example. Some strategies are like a double-edged sword, however, and can have negative long-term effects.

# 4 Key focus points

The Government of Laos has a challenge ahead in ensuring equity in Laos and meeting the Millennium Development Goals. Some key issues that may affect the achievement of these plans and goals emerge from this report and could offer some guidance in terms of prioritising areas for action.

## Tackling inequalities

A dominant theme throughout this report has been social exclusion. Certain locations and groups are particularly vulnerable to this. For example, people in the rural areas are generally poorer and more vulnerable than those in the urban areas. Within the rural areas, some areas are more vulnerable than others, for example, resettlement areas and areas affected by natural disasters, policy changes or sales of concessions. People from non-Lao-Tai groups are also generally less advantaged and this often links back to location. Women also need special consideration as the report has highlighted the issues that arise in a patriarchal society where girls are sometimes deprived of the educational opportunities their male counterparts enjoy. Women from non-Lao-Tai groups can suffer from their location, ethnicity and gender, thus compounding their isolation and sabotaging their chances of ever achieving a better standard of living. Many men and women have opted to become migrant workers and while this decision can have positive rewards for the family, workers can be alienated in new environments and young people are particularly at risk of being trafficked or unfairly treated. New social protection and development programmes thus need to focus on people and groups that are at high risk of social exclusion.

## Using a life cycle approach

Another issue that emerges from the report is the importance of looking at development and protection issues through a life-cycle lens. Under-fives are essentially the future of Laos and as long as the high stunting rates persist, the future of the country itself is at risk. This issue cycles back to the problem of adolescents and particularly girls who end up in early marriages, bearing children when they themselves are still children. This inevitably causes the high maternal mortality rates and the low birth weights that create the vicious cycle of poverty from generation to generation. Adolescents need the opportunity to break that cycle. This means that another priority area is opportunities for young people to gain the right skills for the job market and then to be able to find employment once they are trained. This applies to both boys and girls who need to move on from merely selling their unskilled labour and being open to abuse and exploitation to being able to play a vital and productive role in developing the economy of the country.



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This report is a synthesis of a comprehensive baseline analysis commissioned by the Lao-Australian Development Learning Facility and carried out by Rita Gebert with support from the Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods (SPSL) component of the Lao-Australian Rural Livelihoods Programme.

The study provides evidence on the current situation with regard to social protection in Laos and suggests future areas of focus based on these findings.

The original analysis aimed to assist and inform the Government of Laos in developing a national social protection system for Laos and this synthesis will be useful for any organisation involved in social protection in Laos.

The report addresses the following key questions:

- What are the key drivers of vulnerability across the life cycle in Laos?
- How do households and communities cope with these vulnerabilities?
- What formal social protection is available for these vulnerable groups?
- What are the key areas of focus in expanding social protection in Laos?

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