



# Laos

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## Laos Country Profile



Figure 1: Flag of Laos <sup>1</sup>



Figure 2: Map of Laos <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Flag of Laos | National Symbols, Colors & Design | Britannica, [www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Laos](https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Laos). Accessed 4 Mar. 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Administrative Map of Laos - Nations Online Project, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/Laos-political-map.htm>. Accessed 4 Mar. 2026.

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# General Country Profile

## Geography <sup>3</sup>

Laos, officially known as Lao People's Democratic Republic, is a landlocked country located in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. The country, with an area of 91,429 square miles (236,800 square kilometers), is approximately equivalent to the U.S. state of Utah.<sup>4</sup> It is bordered by China to the north; Vietnam to the northeast and east; Cambodia to the south; Thailand to the west; and Myanmar to the northwest. The capital of Laos is Vientiane, located in the northwestern portion of the country on the Mekong River.

Laos' diverse topography is composed of mountains, plateaus, plains, and river valleys. The country is 70% mountainous, especially in the north and east. The Luang Prabang mountain range is in northwest Laos bordering Thailand, while the Annamese Cordillera mountain range runs along on the eastern border, its highest peak being Mount Bia at 9,245 ft (2,818 meters) above sea level. The mountains are forested, making them inhospitable and an impediment to travel.

The Mekong River runs for about 1,865 kilometers along the western border with Thailand. With its many tributaries, this river serves as the main waterway and a critical source of livelihood, transportation, and irrigation. The Mekong River valley and its surrounding lowlands are among the few flat areas in the country, making them suitable for rice cultivation and settlement. Located in central Laos along the Mekong River valley is the Vientiane Plain, one of the six rice-producing plains in Laos.

There are two major plateaus. The Bolaven Plateau in the south lies between the Annamese mountain range and the Mekong River and is covered by open woodland and has generally fertile soil. The Xiangkhoang Plateau, also known as the Tran Ninh Plateau, is in north-central Laos. In the Xiangkhoang Plateau lies the Plain of Jars, named for the hundred of large, carved stone jars found in the area by the French in the 19th century. Because of Laos' mountainous terrain and limited arable land (only 5.3% of total land is cultivated as of 2022), population density is low and concentrated in river valleys and plateaus.<sup>5</sup> Much of Laos remains remote and underdeveloped due to these topographical constraints.

## Climate and Seasonal Cycles <sup>6</sup>

Laos has a tropical monsoon climate characterized by two distinct seasons driven by shifting wind patterns: a wet season from May to October due to the southwest monsoon, and a dry season from November to April, influenced by the northeast monsoon. The dry season is further divided

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<sup>3</sup> Dommen AJ, Zasloff JJ. Laos. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Updated May 29, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Laos. *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Laos>. Accessed May 26, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank. Arable land (% of land area) – Lao PDR. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Blue Green Atlas. *The Climate of Laos*. Updated 2023. [https://bluegreenatlas.com/climate/laos\\_climate.html](https://bluegreenatlas.com/climate/laos_climate.html). Accessed May 30, 2025.

into a cool period from November to February and a hot, dry period from March to April, when temperatures can soar to 40°C (104°F). Average temperatures hover around 28°C (82°F), with the coolest mountain temperatures dropping to 5°C (41°F) in January. Humidity ranges from 70–80% on average, peaking during the rainy season and dropping in the dry months.

While rainfall varies significantly by region and year, on average, Laos gets about 1,750 mm (70 inches) of rain per year, primarily during the rainy season between May and October. In the lower elevation plains, total precipitation ranges from 1200 mm to 2200 mm annually, while the highlands and Bolaven Plateau can receive more than 3700 mm of rain annually.<sup>7</sup> Though the rainy season brings high precipitation, occasional years of severe drought can cut rainfall in half, affecting agriculture and water supply.

Laos is impacted by typhoons, tropical cyclones originating in the South China Sea, that can lead to flooding affecting the northern regions more frequently than the southern regions. On average, the country experiences nine typhoons annually, which bring intense rain, floods, landslides that damage villages and affect hundreds of thousands.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

## Population

The population of Laos as of May 2025 was 7,863,658, ranking 103 globally. The annual population growth rate is 1.33%, and the median age is 24.9 years. The country has a low population density, with about 34 people per Km<sup>2</sup> (88 people per mi<sup>2</sup>). A majority of the population resides in rural areas and an estimated 38.3% of the population lives in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

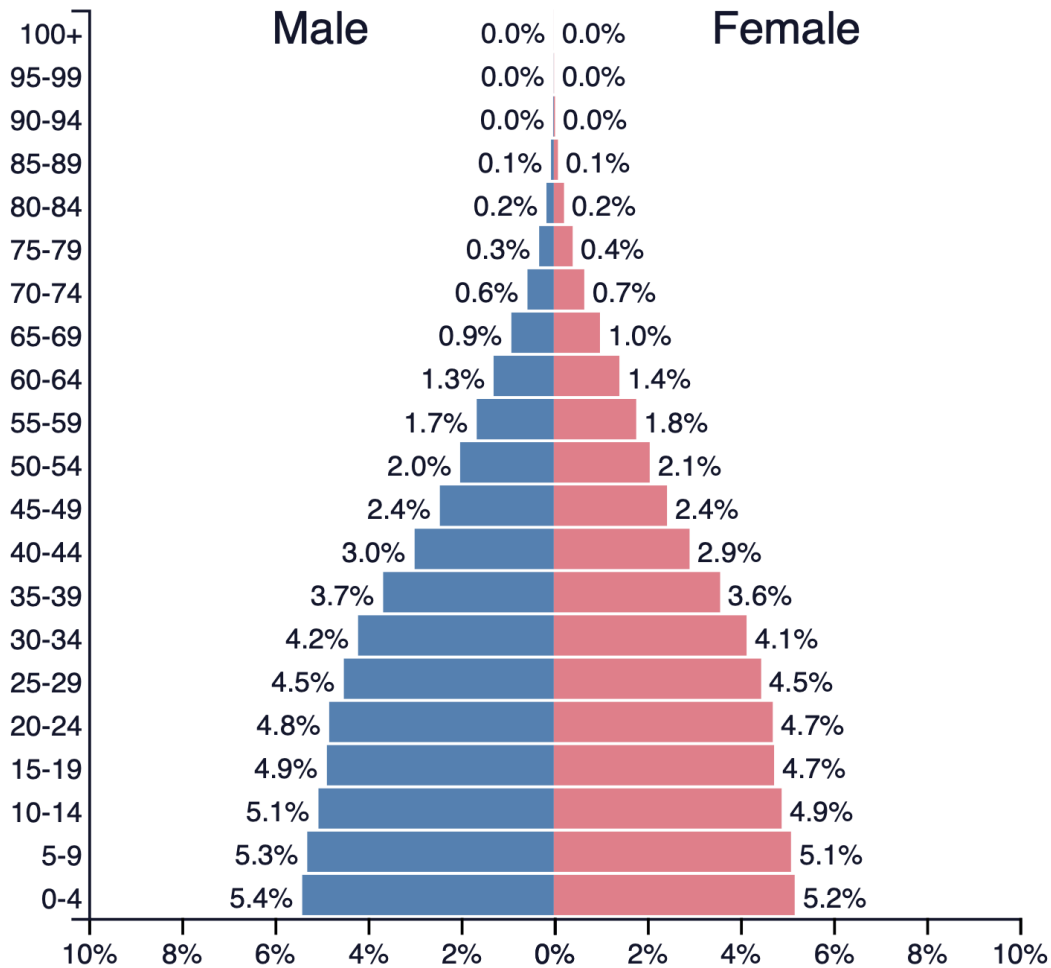
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<sup>7</sup> *Laos Travel. Laos Weather: Climate, Temperature, Tips for Traveller. Updated 2023.* <https://laotravel.com/laos-weather/>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> *WorldData.info. Typhoons in Laos.* <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/laos/typhoons.php>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF. Lao PDR Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2 (Super Typhoon Yagi): 26 September 2024. *ReliefWeb*. Published September 26, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/unicef-lao-pdr-humanitarian-situation-report-no-2-super-typhoon-yagi-26-september-2024>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> *Worldometer. Laos Population (2025).* <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/laos-population/>. Accessed May 31, 2025.



**Figure 3: Laos Population Pyramid 2022** <sup>11</sup>

Graph by: *PopulationPyramid.net*.

Source: [www.populationpyramid.net/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/2022/](http://www.populationpyramid.net/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/2022/)

Laos' Human Development Index value in 2022 was 0.620, putting the country in the medium human development category, ranking it 139 out of 193 countries and territories.<sup>12</sup> The population in Laos experiences a low unemployment rate of 1.218% as of 2024, steadily decreasing since 2017 when the unemployment rate was 3.27%.<sup>13</sup> Children in Laos complete an average of 10.6 years of schooling, however 98% of 10-year-olds cannot read and understand a

<sup>11</sup> PopulationPyramid.net. Lao People's Democratic Republic – 2022. <https://www.populationpyramid.net/lao-peoples-democratic-republic/2022/>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Development Programme. Launch of the Global Human Development Report 2023/24 in Lao PDR. *UNDP Lao PDR*. Published March 13, 2024. <https://www.undp.org/laopdr/press-releases/launch-global-human-development-report-2023/24-lao-pdr>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Trading Economics. Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) – Laos. <https://tradingeconomics.com/laos/unemployment-total-percent-of-total-labor-force-wb-data.html>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

simple text by the end of primary school, compared to 35% at the regional level (East Asia & Pacific region) and 61% at the income group level (low middle income countries).<sup>14</sup>

## History and Politics

### Early History (13th - 18th centuries)

Laos's history is deeply rooted in the establishment of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, or the "Land of a Million Elephants," in 1353 by Fa Ngum, a prince exiled from the Khmer Empire.<sup>15</sup> With support from the Khmer king, Fa Ngum unified various Lao principalities, introduced Theravada Buddhism, and established Luang Prabang as the capital, named after the sacred Buddha image, the Pra Bang. Under Fa Ngum's successors, particularly King Souligna Vongsa (1637–1694), Lan Xang experienced a golden age marked by peace, cultural development, and territorial expansion, once considered to be one of the largest kingdoms in Southeast Asia.<sup>15, 16</sup>

Following Souligna Vongsa's death, succession disputes and conflicts with neighboring countries led to the fragmentation of Lan Xang into three separate kingdoms: Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the center, and Champassak in the south.<sup>17</sup> This division weakened the region, making it susceptible to external influences, particularly from Siam (modern-day Thailand), which exerted control over the Lao territories by the late 18th century.

### French Colonial Era and Laos Independence (1893 - 1954)

In the early 19th century, the French began to create colonies in the region, and in 1893, the French were able to force the Siamese to concede Laos to the French administration, integrating Laos into French Indochina.<sup>15</sup> The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907 defined the present Laos boundary with Thailand.<sup>17</sup> Under the French, infrastructure development was minimal, and the economy remained largely agrarian.<sup>16</sup>

During World War II, Japan occupied French Indochina, including Laos, and in 1945, King Sisavang Vong of Laos declared independence from France. This period saw a rise in nationalist sentiment, leading to the formation of two political movements. One, based in Luang Prabang, was anti-Japanese and aligned with the monarchy; the other, the "Free Laos" (Lao Issara) movement based in Vientiane, was anti-French. These factions remained in conflict until early 1946, when French forces returned and forced the Lao Issara into exile in Thailand.<sup>17, 18</sup> France temporarily recognized the internal autonomy of Laos under the king of Luang Prabang. Then in 1949, a

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<sup>14</sup> World Bank. Lao People's Democratic Republic: Human Capital Index 2020. Published September 2020. Accessed May 31, 2025. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/7c9b64c34a8833378194a026ebe4e247-0140022022/related/HCI-AM22-LAO.pdf>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Visit Laos – Untouched Nature. History. <https://www.visitlaos.org/about-laos/history>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Butterfield & Robinson. A Deep (but Brief) History of Laos. <https://www.butterfield.com/get-inspired/deep-brief-history-laos>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of State. Laos: Background Notes. Published September 2000. Accessed May 31, 2025.

Franco-Laotian convention granted Laos self-government within the French Union, though France retained significant control.<sup>18</sup>

The first Indochina war began in 1946 with France's attempt to re-establish colonialism in Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) after World War II. The primary conflict was between France and the Viet Minh, communist-led Vietnamese forces. In 1950, a radical political movement led by Prince Souphanouvong of Laos arose called the Pathet Lao ("Land of the Lao") and joined forces with the Viet Minh to oppose French authority.<sup>18</sup> In October 1953, France granted independence to Laos while still retaining control of all military matters in the kingdom. The French suffered a decisive defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which ultimately led to their withdrawal from Indochina.<sup>19, 20</sup> At the Geneva Convention in 1954, Laos was officially recognized internationally as a fully independent institutional state.<sup>15</sup>

### **Laotian Civil War (1959-1975) and establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic**

Following Laos's independence from France in 1953, the country experienced escalating political instability fueled by ideological divides between royalists, neutralists, and communists. These tensions culminated in the Laotian Civil War (1959–1975), a prolonged conflict between the Royal Lao Government, backed by the United States, and the communist Pathet Lao, supported by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The war, often referred to as the "Secret War," was deeply intertwined with the broader Vietnam War and included covert U.S. operations—most notably the CIA's support of Hmong guerrilla fighters and a massive bombing campaign that made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history.<sup>21</sup>

Despite U.S. efforts to prevent the spread of communism, the Pathet Lao gradually gained ground. The 1973 Vientiane Treaty, intended to establish peace and a coalition government, failed to stop their advance. In December 1975, following the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, the Pathet Lao captured the capital, Vientiane, and abolished the monarchy. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was established on December 2, 1975, with Prince Souphanouvong as its first president.<sup>21</sup>

### **Post Civil War**

Following the communist takeover, Laos adopted a socialist, centrally-planned economy, leading to economic stagnation. Repressive measures followed, including the incarceration of up to 30,000 former Royal Lao Army members and officials in reeducation camps. Harsh political conditions and economic hardship led approximately 10% of the population to flee Laos, many seeking refuge in Thailand after 1975. Recognizing the need for reform, the government introduced the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, transitioning towards a market-oriented

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<sup>18</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. History of Laos. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Laos>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian. Dien Bien Phu Falls, 1954. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> BBC News. Laos country profile. Published April 18, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15351898>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Laotian Civil War. New World Encyclopedia. [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Laotian\\_Civil\\_War](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Laotian_Civil_War). Accessed May 31, 2025

economy.<sup>18</sup> These reforms spurred economic growth and increased foreign investment: Laos began strengthening diplomatic relations with neighboring countries in the 1990s, and by 1995, the United States lifted its ban on providing aid to the nation.<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-1990s, Laos experienced notable economic growth, aided by a shift from Soviet assistance to support from countries such as Japan, Australia, and members of western Europe, along with international institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Thailand emerged as the largest investor, especially following the opening of the first Mekong River bridge in 1994, symbolizing Laos's shift away from Vietnamese influence. The economy diversified with increased tourism and a focus on hydropower and mining, which significantly boosted GDP growth—exceeding 7% by 2005. However, despite these reforms, Laos struggled with weak fiscal institutions and underdeveloped planning frameworks. Foreign investment, particularly from Asia and Europe, flowed into natural resources, fueling the nation's growth into the next decade.<sup>18</sup>

Laos pursued modernization of its rural economy by leasing large tracts of land to foreign investors, often displacing local farmers and prompting land disputes, which led to occasional moratoriums on new concessions. The country joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, achieving a long-held goal, but soon faced setbacks from the Asian financial crisis, which destabilized its currency and reduced foreign investment. While neighboring economies recovered, Laos's growth remained modest. Politically, the ruling LPRP clung to its revolutionary leadership, dominated by aging veterans of the pre-1975 movement. Foreign policy evolved after the fall of the Soviet Union, balancing continued ideological ties with Vietnam and China alongside growing economic engagement with Western nations and Japan.<sup>18</sup>

## Government and Legal System

Laos is governed under a one-party system dominated by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the sole legal political party. Key decisions are made by the party's powerful eleven-member Politburo and the 55-member Central Committee. While the head of state and government hold formal titles, real authority rests with the party leadership. Although a constitution was adopted in 1991 and the National Assembly was established through elections in 1992, legislative powers are limited, with the executive retaining authority to issue binding decrees.<sup>22</sup> The Party Congress takes place every five years, coinciding with the elections of the National Assembly and the selection of Government executives.<sup>23</sup>

While the legal system is gradually developing, governance continues to rely heavily on executive decrees, such as the 2002 Prime Ministerial Decree 92, which put in place restrictions on non-Buddhist religious practice. Despite the formal political structure, the country has experienced ongoing unrest since the Indochina conflict. Low-level insurgency has persisted, marked by

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of State. Laos. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/laos/94048.htm>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *National Human Development Report: Lao PDR 2022*. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-11/NHDR%20Full%20digital.pdf>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

periodic violence including bombings and attacks on infrastructure, with notable incidents reported in 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2007.<sup>22</sup>

### **Culture, languages spoken, and religious practices**

Laos, despite its small population of around 7 million, is one of Southeast Asia's most ethnically diverse nations—a diversity shaped by its geography, climate, and location. While the Laotian government officially recognizes only 49 ethnic groups and 160 sub-groups, estimates suggest there could be as many as 237 or 240 distinct ethnic groups based on language differences. The Lao government categorizes its many ethnic groups based on the geographic regions they inhabit: Lao Loum (lowland groups), Lao Theung (midland groups), and Lao Sung (highland groups). However, a more precise and widely accepted method is to classify these groups by the four major language families they speak: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Lu Mien, and Chine-Tibetan.<sup>24</sup>

The Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic group consists of eight distinct ethnic groups that primarily live in lowland regions. The Mon-Khmer group encompasses 33 ethnic groups. The Hmong-Lu Mien family includes two ethnic groups, while the Chine-Tibetan family comprises seven. Traditionally, both the Hmong-Lu Mien and Sino-Tibetan communities have resided in the mountainous upland areas (Figure 4 and Figure 5).<sup>25</sup>

Of individual ethnic groups, the Lao ethnic group (of the Lao-Tai family) is the largest, accounting for 53% of the total population of Laos. The Khmou ethnic group (of the Mon-Khmer family) accounts for 11%, with Hmong people (of the Hmong-lu Mien family) accounting for roughly 9% (Figure 6).<sup>24, 25</sup>

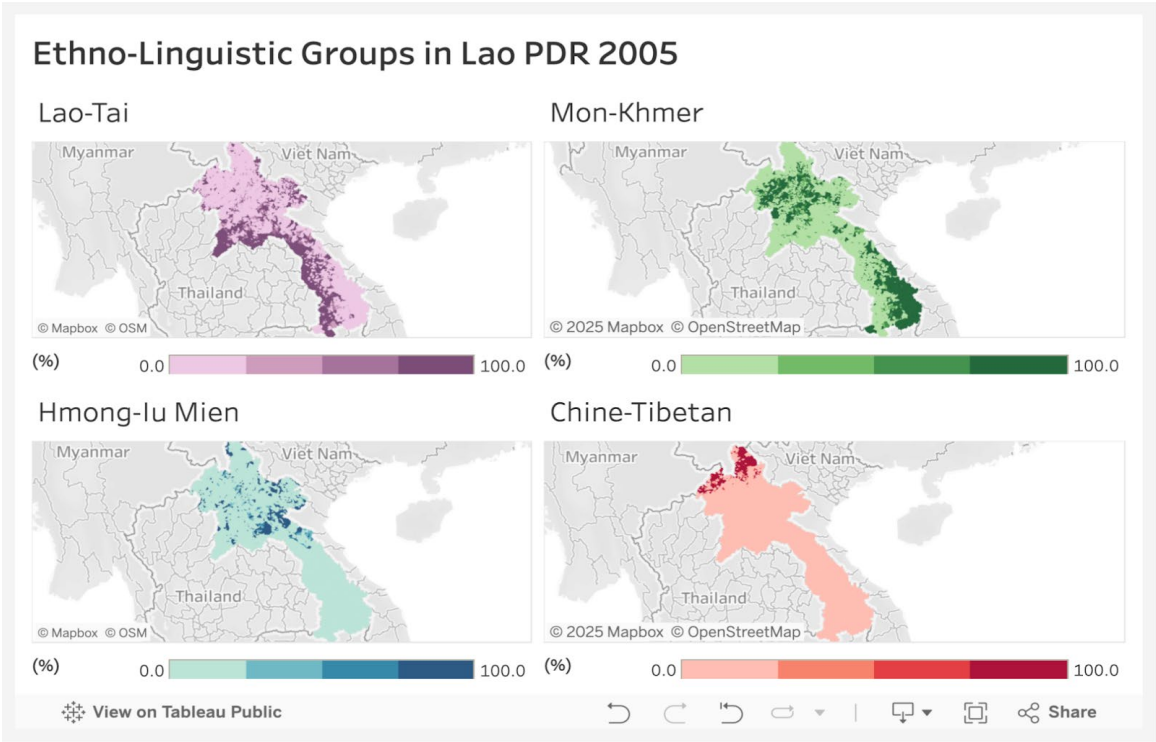
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<sup>24</sup> Minority Rights Group International. Laos. Minority Rights Group.

<https://minorityrights.org/country/laos/#:~:text=The%20numerous%20ethnic%20groups%20are%20officially%20distinguished,Theung%2C%20and%20the%20highland%20groups%2C%20Lao%20Sung.&text=Officially%2C%20the%20Laos%20government%20only%20recognizes%2049,does%20not%20recognize%20them%20as%20indigenous%20peoples>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Open Development Laos. Ethnic minorities and indigenous people. Open Development Mekong.

<https://laos.opendevlopmentmekong.net/topics/ethnic-minorities-and-indigenous-people/>. Accessed May 31, 2025



**Figure 4: Geographic regions of the four ethno-linguistic groups in Laos** <sup>25</sup>

Chart by: *Open Development Laos*. Source: [www.decide.la](http://www.decide.la)

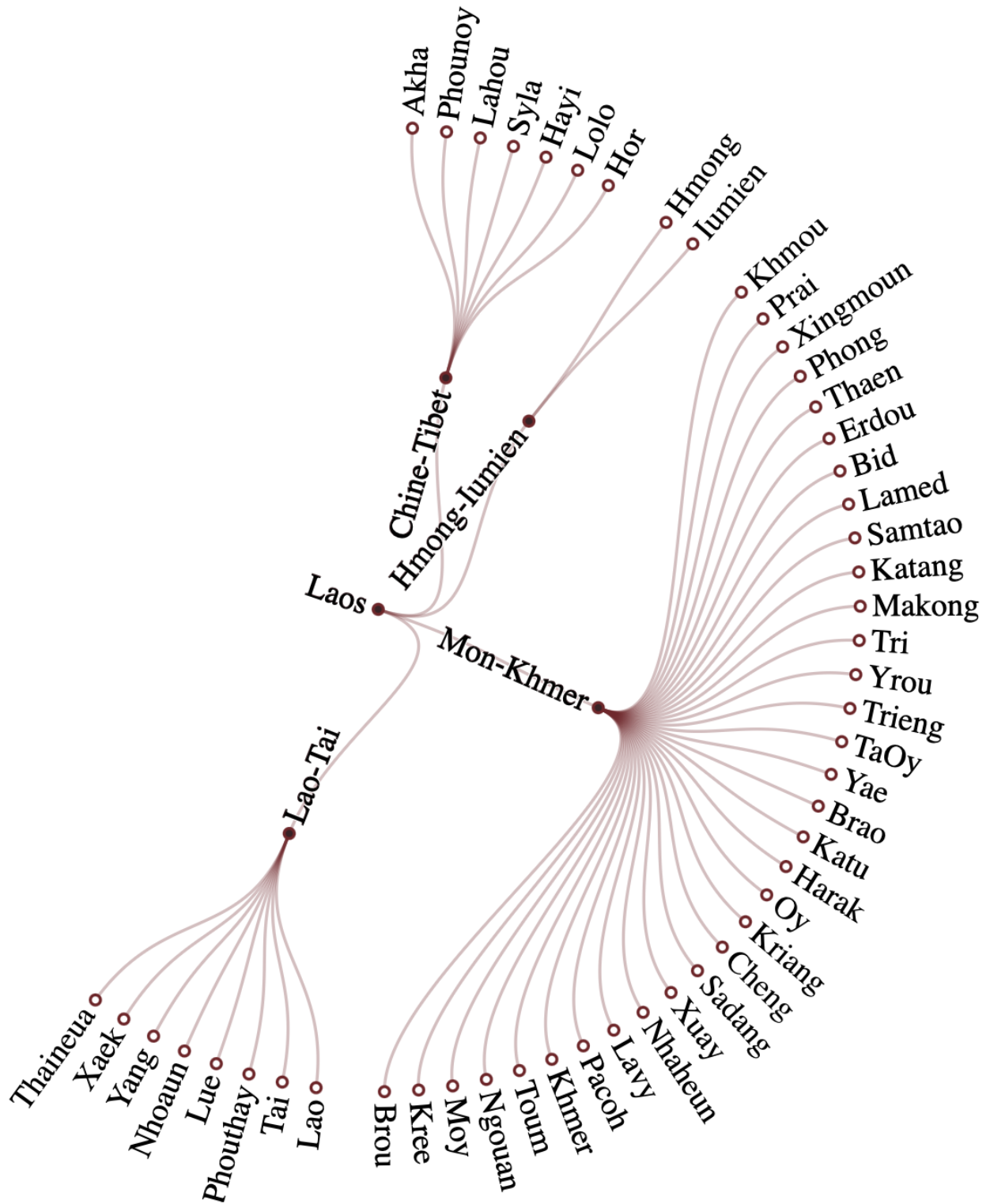
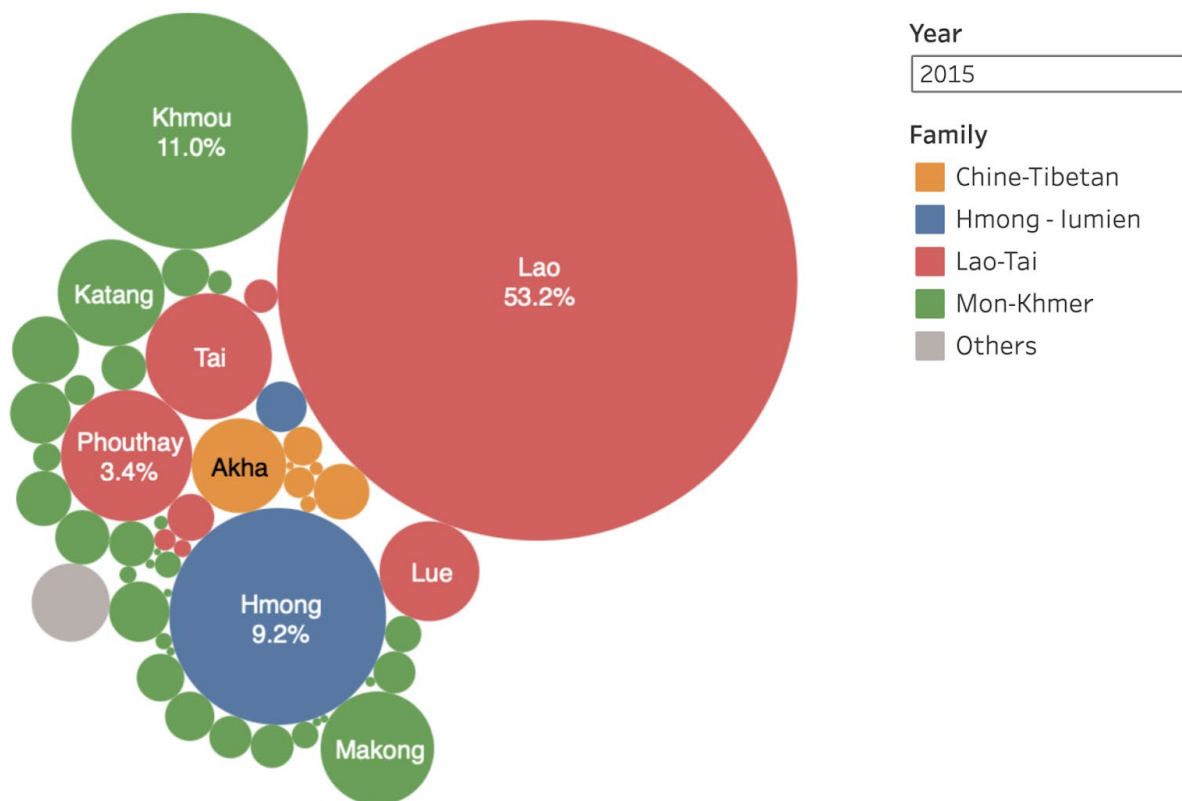


Figure 5: Trees of ethno-linguistic groups in Laos 2018 <sup>25</sup>

Created by: Open Development Laos. Source: Douangtavanh Kongphaly. 2018.



**Figure 6: Proportions of ethnic groups in Laos 2015** <sup>25</sup>

*Created by: Open Development Laos. Source: Lao Statistics Bureau 2016 and Lao Statistics Bureau 2006.*

While Lao is the official and dominant language in Laos, more than 80 languages have been documented to be spoken by the different ethnicities. Laos is also home to Southeast Asia’s second largest Francophone population after Vietnam. Approximately 35% of students in the country receive instruction in French, which is the preferred language among the elite, professionals, diplomats, and older generations. French in Laos has adopted certain Lao words, giving it a distinct local character.<sup>26</sup> English is increasingly being spoken, particularly in tourism-related areas and by the younger generation.

Theravada Buddhism is deeply embedded in the state, practiced by an estimated 64.7% of the population (2015).<sup>27</sup> Christianity is practiced by 1.7% of the population, while the remaining 33.6% report having no religion or being animist.<sup>27</sup> A 2016 law, Decree 315, expanded government control over all religious practices, including Buddhism, requiring state approval for religious activities and materials. This marked a shift from the previous Decree 92, which mainly targeted non-Buddhist groups. While religious freedom exists in theory, ethnic minority Christian Protestants—especially Khmou, Brou, and Hmong—often face persecution through arrests, detentions, forced church closures, and re-education efforts.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Kiprop J. What Languages Are Spoken In Laos? WorldAtlas. Published August 31, 2017. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. The 4th Population and Housing Census of Lao PDR, 2015. Vientiane: Lao Statistics Bureau; 2015. Available from: [https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PHC-ENG-FNAL-WEB\\_0.pdf](https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PHC-ENG-FNAL-WEB_0.pdf). Accessed May 31, 2025.

Ethnic minorities in Laos, often living in remote areas, face limited access to education and healthcare. Schools and clinics are often understaffed and under-resourced, leading to low enrollment, high illiteracy—especially among women—and higher infant and maternal mortality rates. Education in the official Lao language, rather than native languages, makes learning harder for ethnic students.<sup>25</sup>

Ethnic minority groups rely on traditional land practices and often lack access to legal information in their languages, as many ethnic groups do not have their written scripts, limiting their understanding of official land rights. As foreign investment increases, land seizures have risen, and minorities have few means to challenge them, deepening inequalities between them and the majority Lao population.<sup>25</sup>

## Economy and Employment

Laos is a lower middle income country. As of 2023, Laos's nominal GDP was approximately \$15.84 billion, with a real GDP (adjusted for inflation) of about \$20.3 billion. The GDP growth rate for that year was 3.75%. GDP per Capita (with a population of 7,664,993 people) was \$2,649, an increase of \$60 from \$2,589 in 2022; this represents a change of 2.3% in GDP per capita.<sup>28</sup> While the poverty rate in Lao PDR has more than halved in the past two decades, 18% of the population lives below the national poverty line (US\$2.15/day).<sup>29</sup>

### Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing

Agriculture is the backbone of the Lao economy, contributing nearly half of the GDP and employing about three-quarters of the population. Rice is the main crop, grown in irrigated lowland paddies and through slash-and-burn methods in upland areas, with household members sharing responsibilities divided by gender. In wet rice farming, men handle plowing, water control, and threshing, while women transplant seedlings, weed, and carry harvested rice. In upland rice farming, men clear the land, and women sow and weed. Wet rice is grown from April or May through October or November, while upland rice fields are prepared in February or March and harvested in November. Secondary crops, such as vegetables on riverbanks, are grown between rice cycles, often timed with seasonal water level changes. However, expansion is hindered by unexploded ordnance from the Vietnam War, frequent natural disasters like floods and droughts, and limited modern technology in rural areas. Other important crops include sweet potatoes, corn, sugarcane, tobacco, coffee (especially from the Bolovens Plateau), fruits, and

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<sup>28</sup> Worldometer. Laos GDP. <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/laos-gdp/>. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>29</sup> World Food Programme. *WFP Lao PDR Country Brief, February 2024*. Published February 2024. [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000165743/download/?\\_ga=2.108731275.863119715.1748776366-1487056625.1748776366](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000165743/download/?_ga=2.108731275.863119715.1748776366-1487056625.1748776366). Accessed May 30, 2025.

vegetables. While opium production was once common, it has declined significantly due to government intervention.<sup>30</sup>

Forestry is another key sector, with about 40% of Laos covered by forest. Although timber processing is important, concerns about deforestation have led to periodic logging bans. Fishing and aquaculture—especially of tilapia and carp—are expanding, particularly in lowland areas, and livestock such as pigs, chickens, cattle, and buffalo play a significant role in rural livelihoods.<sup>30</sup>

### **Natural Resources and Power**

Laos possesses valuable mineral resources, including tin, gold, copper, gypsum, granite, and limestone. Mining activity has increased significantly due to foreign investment, particularly from Asian countries, with gold mining being a key area of growth. The country's most important natural asset, however, is hydroelectric power. Large-scale hydroelectric projects, such as dams on the Ngum and Theun rivers, generate electricity for domestic use and export, especially to Thailand. While hydropower is a major revenue source, it also poses environmental and social concerns related to displacement and ecosystem disruption.<sup>30</sup>

### **Manufacturing and Industry**

Although the manufacturing sector is still relatively small, it is currently the fastest-growing part of the Lao economy. The main industries include food processing, garment production (primarily for export), wood processing, and the manufacturing of light consumer goods such as plastics, detergents, and cigarettes. Handicrafts remain an important source of income, especially among ethnic minority communities in rural areas.<sup>30</sup>

### **Finance and Banking**

Laos's financial system was once entirely government-run, but since the late 1980s, it has opened up to include private banks and foreign joint ventures. The central bank, Banque de la RDP Lao, oversees monetary policy and manages the national currency, the kip. Public confidence in the banking sector remains low, partly due to past crises such as the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, during which the kip lost more than half its value in one year. As a result, many people prefer to save in more stable assets like gold, foreign currency, or livestock rather than using bank accounts.<sup>30</sup>

### **Trade and Investment**

Laos has actively pursued regional and global integration, joining ASEAN in 1997, gaining normal trading status with the United States in 2004, and joining the World Trade Organization in

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<sup>30</sup> Laos: Agriculture, forestry, and fishing. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos/Agriculture-forestry-and-fishing>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

February 2013.<sup>31, 30</sup> Its major exports include garments, electricity, coffee, timber, and minerals, while its main imports consist of food, machinery, construction equipment, and fuel. Key trading partners include Thailand, China, and Vietnam, with smaller volumes of trade involving Japan, South Korea, Germany, and others. Despite growth in exports, imports still outpace them, resulting in a persistent trade deficit that is primarily offset by foreign aid.<sup>30</sup>

## **Service Sector and Tourism**

The service sector accounts for about a quarter of the GDP. Tourism has emerged as a growing industry, leveraging Laos's rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes. However, its development is constrained by poor infrastructure, limited accommodations, and safety concerns. Most tourists are from neighboring countries like Thailand and Vietnam, although there is a growing number of visitors from the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan.<sup>30</sup>

## **Labor and Taxation**

Approximately 75% of the adult population is economically active, with many people working outside the formal sector in subsistence agriculture. The labor force includes nearly equal numbers of men and women.

Government revenue comes primarily from excise and turnover taxes, with timber royalties—once a major income source—declining due to reduced logging activity.<sup>30</sup>

## **International Development Support and Economic Reform USAID**

In 2011, USAID resumed operations in Laos after a 35-year absence, allocating \$8 million in 2014 to programs focused on health, environmental protection, and economic development. Health initiatives include monitoring pandemics and controlling diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and dengue. Environmental efforts support sustainable forestry, endangered species protection, and climate adaptation along the Mekong. Economic development programs assist the Lao government with trade reforms and integration into global and ASEAN markets.<sup>32</sup>

## **Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)**

Japan, through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), provides extensive Official Development Assistance to support Laos in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and graduating from the United Nations' Least-Developed Countries list. JICA's approach promotes

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<sup>31</sup> World Trade Organization. Lao People's Democratic Republic - Member information. [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/countries\\_e/lao\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/lao_e.htm). Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Embassy in Laos. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Laos. <https://la.usembassy.gov/u-s-agency-for-international-development-usaid-in-laos/>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

sustainable and balanced economic growth while addressing potential social and environmental challenges. This assistance spans several key sectors. In economic and social infrastructure, JICA funds the construction of roads, bridges, airports, and electricity networks to enhance regional connectivity and attract private investment. In agriculture and forestry, it supports irrigated farming and commercial crop cultivation to raise rural incomes and reduce poverty, while promoting sustainable forest use and conservation. In education, JICA works to improve school infrastructure and teaching quality—especially in science and mathematics—and supports higher and technical education to strengthen human resources. In healthcare, JICA helps to develop human capacity and improve medical facilities, with a focus on maternal, neonatal, and child health.<sup>33</sup>

## United Nations

The UN entities in Laos are: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Trade Centre (ITC), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP), United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Nations Volunteers (UNV), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), and World Bank Group.<sup>34</sup>

## World Bank

The World Bank Group partners with the Lao government to reduce poverty and support sustainable development, aligning with the country's Ninth National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021–25) and the 2021 National Agenda. Launched in 2023, the Country Partnership Framework (2023–26) focuses on protecting vulnerable populations from economic shocks and promoting long-term reforms for economic stability. Currently, the World Bank funds

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<sup>33</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency. JICA in Lao P.D.R.: Priority Areas and Approach. <https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/laos/activities/policy.html#:~:text=JICA%20supports%20numerous%20infrastructure%20projects,local%20communities%20and%20wider%20society>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Lao PDR. UN entities in Lao PDR. United Nations in Lao PDR. <https://laopdr.un.org/en/about/un-entities-in-country>. Published 2024. Accessed May 30, 2025.

20 projects in Laos, totaling over \$966 million, primarily in infrastructure, the environment, and health-related sectors.<sup>35</sup>

The framework includes technical advice on macroeconomic and debt policies, along with funding for areas like nutrition, enterprise development, flood prevention, and community forestry. It builds on recent assessments of Laos's development challenges and opportunities, emphasizing inclusive growth by leveraging the country's strategic location and natural resources.<sup>35</sup> The International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private-sector arm of the World Bank Group, enhances access to finance for Lao businesses and has invested around \$150 million since 1998. The IFC is now expanding its support into renewable energy, agribusiness, logistics infrastructure, and green finance to foster low-carbon growth and regional trade connectivity.<sup>35</sup>

### **World Food Programme**

The World Food Programme (WFP) has been present in Lao since 1975 and instrumental in addressing food insecurity and malnutrition in Laos through various initiatives. In 2024, WFP expanded its school meal program, increasing the government budget allocation from 1,000 to 5,000 kip per day and constructing kitchens in schools. This enhancement enabled over 63,000 students across 702 schools to receive nutritious lunches. Additionally, more than 4,000 teachers and government officials received training on healthy eating practices.<sup>29, 36</sup>

To combat malnutrition, WFP initiated a large-scale rice fortification project aimed at improving the nutritional quality of a staple food. The organization also focused on community empowerment by completing 62 projects, including the construction of roads, irrigation canals, water systems, and vegetable gardens. These projects not only improved infrastructure but also enhanced food security and livelihoods. Training sessions on emergency preparedness, logistics services, and supply chain management were conducted to strengthen community resilience. Furthermore, WFP distributed coffee seedlings to farmers, promoting income generation and sustainable agriculture.<sup>36</sup>

Through these comprehensive efforts, WFP continues to support the Lao government's objectives of achieving food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger.<sup>36</sup>

### **Australian Support**

Australia and Laos have maintained diplomatic relations since 1952, making it one of Laos' oldest bilateral partnerships. Their relationship is built on development cooperation, business ties, and people-to-people links, and was elevated to a Comprehensive Partnership in March 2024. Australia will provide approximately \$53.2 million in official development assistance to Laos in

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<sup>35</sup> The World Bank. *Lao PDR Overview*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/overview#2>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> KPL Lao News Agency. *WFP Hands Over School Feeding Programme to Lao Government*. Published April 2, 2024. [https://kpl.gov.la/en/detail.aspx?id=91524&utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://kpl.gov.la/en/detail.aspx?id=91524&utm_source=chatgpt.com). Accessed May 30, 2025.

2024–25, supporting sectors such as education, health, water resource management, economic reform, and trade. Trade between the two countries reached \$812 million in 2023–24, with Australia exporting \$123 million and importing \$689 million in goods and services. The countries are partners in regional trade agreements like AANZFTA and RCEP. Australia supports Laos' economic reforms and business environment through development cooperation and initiatives like the “Invested: Australia’s Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040,” and has granted Lao exports duty-free, quota-free access since 2003.<sup>37</sup>

## Physical and Technological Infrastructure

### Telecommunication

Laos' telecommunications sector is regulated by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications and is led by four main providers: Lao Telecom, Star Telecom (UNITEL), ETL, and T-Plus Laos, with smaller competitors offering lower prices and innovative services. Government policy promotes competition and views information and communication technology as vital for socio-economic development and national connectivity.

In recent years, regulations have expanded to include monitoring internet use. The Ministry of Public Security created a taskforce to monitor social media for fake news, while the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism requires registration of popular online platforms. As of 2023, Laos had 6.45 million mobile connections—85% of its population. Facebook remains the top social media platform with 3.2 million users, followed by Instagram (488,000) and Twitter (238,000), with user demographics showing higher female representation on Twitter and Instagram.<sup>38</sup>

### Electricity

In 2023, Laos derived approximately 77% of its electricity from low-carbon sources, primarily hydropower, while 23% came from coal. This highlights the country's strong reliance on clean energy, though fossil fuels still play a role. Electricity use per person rose to 6,823 kWh, and low-carbon electricity generation per capita increased to 5,234 kWh, reflecting a steady improvement

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<sup>37</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Laos country brief. Published 2024. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/laos/laos-country-brief#:~:text=a%20Comprehensive%20Partnership,-Development%20assistance,health%2C%20economic%20reform%20and%20trade>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Logistics Cluster. Lao People's Democratic Republic: 3.4 Telecommunications. Logistics Cluster website. <https://lca.logcluster.org/lao-peoples-democratic-republic-34-telecommunications>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

in both consumption and sustainable energy production.<sup>39</sup> Access to electricity in Laos was reported at 96.5 % in 2023; with 95.2 % of the rural population access to electricity.<sup>40,41</sup>

## Transportation

Road connectivity is central to Laos' national development strategy and the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion vision, as road transport supports over 98% of passenger movement and 86% of freight transport in the country. While the road network expanded from 14,000 km in 1990 to over 44,000 km by 2012, only 17% of roads were paved, with many routes impassable during the wet season. Funding remains a major hurdle—large projects often depend on external donors, such as the Asian Development Bank, China, Thailand, Japan, and the World Bank. To address funding gaps, Laos has introduced land-based financing models like the 450 Year Road project, which involves selling expropriated roadside land to raise capital. Public-private partnerships are also being explored. However, road expansion has faced criticism due to environmental degradation and inadequate compensation for displaced communities.<sup>42</sup>

In 2016, motorbikes made up the majority (76.9%) of the vehicle stock in Lao PDR, followed by cars (20%), trucks (2.8%), and buses (0.3%). The road vehicle fleet was composed of 80% gasoline-fueled and 20% diesel-fueled vehicles. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of road vehicles grew rapidly at an average annual rate of 15%, with diesel vans and diesel pick-up trucks experiencing the highest growth rates at 21.4% and 18.4% respectively.<sup>43</sup>

The Laos-China Railway is Laos' first major railway system, spanning about 400 km between Vientiane and Boten on the Chinese border. Built under China's Belt and Road Initiative for \$5.9 billion with 70% funded by China and 30% by Laos, it is operated by the Laos-China Railway Company. Before its launch in late 2021, road transport dominated freight (90%) and passenger (63%) movement, despite widespread issues with poor road conditions and seasonal disruptions. Since opening, the railway has dramatically improved transportation efficiency—cutting travel time between Vientiane and Luang Prabang from six hours to two. In its first 10 months, it

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<sup>39</sup> LowCarbonPower.org. Laos. <https://lowcarbonpower.org/region/Laos>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Trading Economics. Laos Access to Electricity (% of population). Trading Economics website. <https://tradingeconomics.com/lao/access-to-electricity-percent-of-population-wb-data.html>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Trading Economics. Laos Access to Electricity, Rural (% of rural population). Trading Economics website. <https://tradingeconomics.com/laos/access-to-electricity-rural-percent-of-rural-population-wb-data.html>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Laos. Services. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Laos/Services>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Purwanto AJ, Setyawati CEN, Bhaskara RW. Sustainable Transport Systems in Lao PDR and Implications for ASEAN. In: *Energy Security White Paper: Policy Directions for Inclusive and Sustainable Development for Lao PDR and the Implications for ASEAN*. ERIA; 2024. [https://www.eria.org/uploads/5\\_Part\\_2-Ch\\_4\\_Sustainable\\_Transport\\_System.pdf](https://www.eria.org/uploads/5_Part_2-Ch_4_Sustainable_Transport_System.pdf). Accessed June 1, 2025.

transported 8 million passengers and 5.7 million tons of cargo, including 1.4 million tons of cross-border goods.<sup>44</sup>

The Mekong River serves as a vital international waterway, connecting Laos with five other countries. Laos hosts 29 river ports, including the main Laos-Japan Friendship Port in Vientiane, as well as several provincial and local ports. Some northern ports, such as Xieng Kok and Ban Mom, facilitate international transportation among China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Despite the historical prominence of inland waterway transport (IWT) before 1996, its usage has declined due to factors like limited loading equipment, seasonal navigation challenges, and reduced cargo volumes. The current fleet comprises various cargo and passenger vessels, with capacities tailored to the river's navigation conditions. Efforts are ongoing to rehabilitate ports and enhance IWT infrastructure, aiming to bolster regional connectivity and economic development.<sup>45</sup>

Laos has 12 airports and 9 smaller airstrips, however not all are operational at the moment. The main airport is Wattay International Airport located in the capital city Vientiane. Several international airlines such as Air Asia, Bangkok Airways, China Eastern Airlines, Lao Airlines, Thai Airways, Korean Air and Vietnam Airlines provide international services.<sup>46</sup>

## Water and Sanitation

According to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2022), while 67.6% of the Lao population had access to a water supply, only 27% of the Lao population had access to a safely-managed water supply and 61.1% had access to safely-managed sanitation.<sup>47</sup>

# National Health Care Profile

## Overall Health Status and Mortality Rates

Laos has seen significant improvements in health outcomes over the past two decades. Life expectancy at birth is now around 68.2 years as of 2021 shown in Figure 7<sup>48</sup>, reflecting progress from earlier years. In 2023, the infant mortality rate is about 25 per 1,000 live births, and the

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<sup>44</sup> ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO). Railways help landlocked Laos embark a journey beyond borders. AMRO. Published September 27, 2022. <https://amro-asia.org/railways-help-landlocked-laos-embark-a-journey-beyond-borders/>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

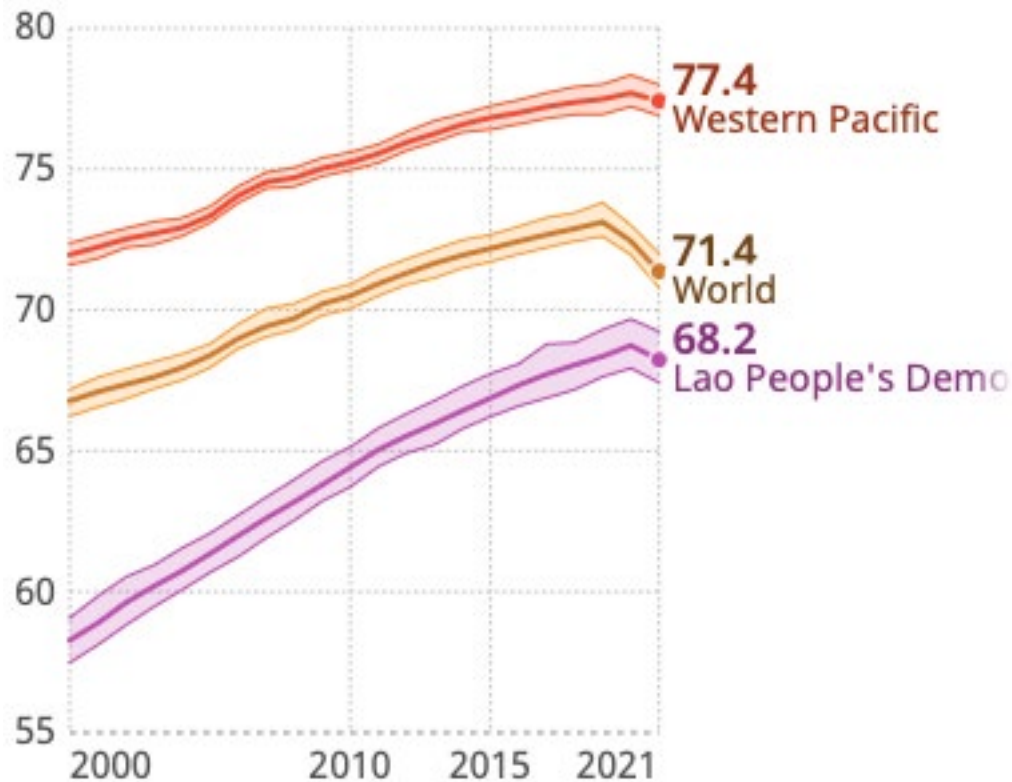
<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Department of Foreign Trade, Lao PDR. *Country Presentation - Lao PDR*. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Country%20presentation%20-%20Lao%20PDR%20%283%29-1.pdf>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Logistics Cluster. Lao People's Democratic Republic - 2.2 Aviation. Logistics Cluster website. <https://lca.logcluster.org/lao-peoples-democratic-republic-22-aviation>. Accessed June 1, 2025

<sup>47</sup> WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene. Laos: Household Data on Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. JMP for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene website. <https://washdata.org/data/household#!table?geo0=country&geo1=LAO>. Accessed June 1, 2025.

<sup>48</sup> World Health Organization. *Life Expectancy and Mortality Data for Lao PDR*. World Health Organization; 2021. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 13, 2025.

under-5 child mortality rate is roughly 28 per 1,000<sup>49</sup>, indicating that approximately 1 in 35 children dies before their fifth birthday. The maternal mortality ratio has dropped dramatically – from an estimated 609 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 down to about 112 per 100,000 in 2023<sup>50</sup> – yet this is still one of the highest in the Western Pacific region. Neonatal mortality (deaths within the first 28 days) is about 12 per 1,000 live births.<sup>49</sup> These figures highlight steady progress in reducing deaths of mothers and young children, although further improvement is needed to reach global targets.



**Figure 7: Life expectancy at birth - Laos/Western Pacific/World, 2000-2021.**<sup>48</sup>

Graph by: World Health Organization. Source: <https://data.who.int/countries/418>

### Major Health Challenges and Disease Burden

Non-communicable diseases now account for an estimated 63% of all deaths in Lao PDR<sup>51</sup>, reflecting the growing impact of chronic conditions and lifestyle-related illnesses. Cardiovascular diseases are the top causes of mortality with the most being stroke at 165 deaths per 100,000

<sup>49</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). *Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) 2023*. UNICEF; 2023. Accessed May 13, 2026

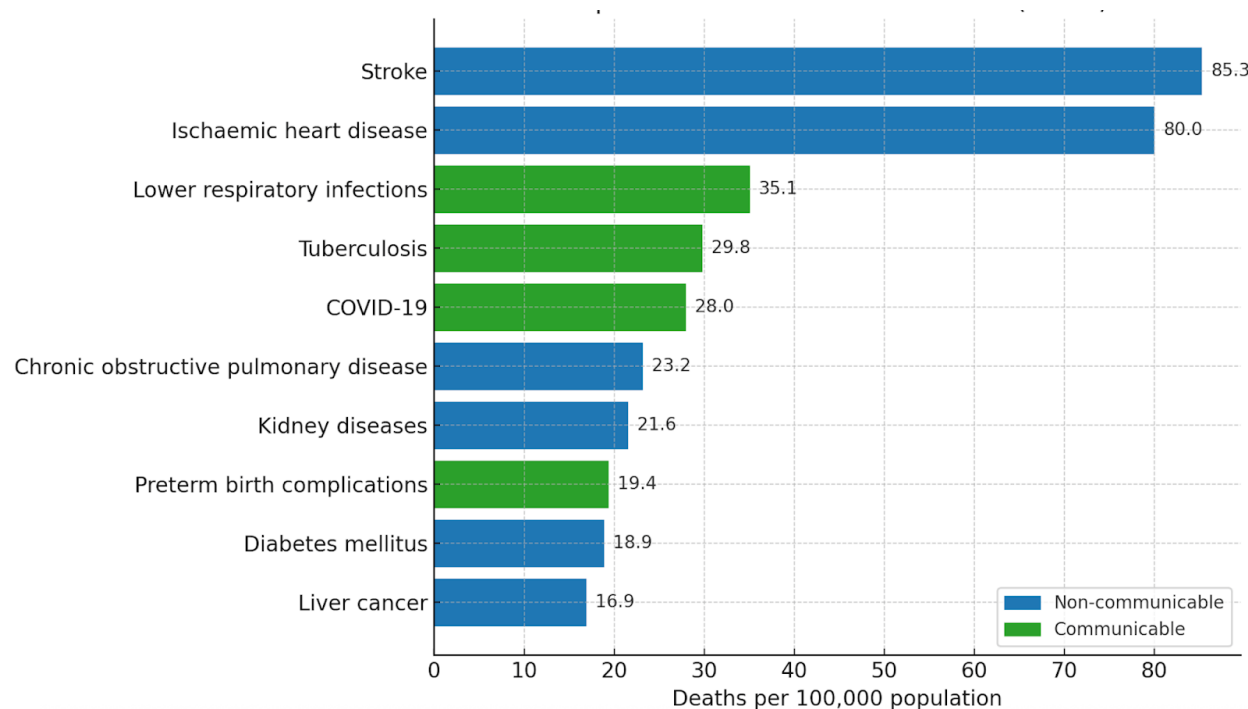
<sup>50</sup> World Health Organization. *Maternal Mortality Ratio (Per 100,000 Live Births)*. WHO Global Health Observatory. Accessed May 8, 2025.

<sup>51</sup> World Health Organization. *Noncommunicable Diseases Country Profiles – Lao PDR*. World Health Organization; 2023. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 5, 2025.

followed by coronary heart disease 140 per 100,000.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, cancers (e.g., liver, lung, and cervical cancer) and chronic respiratory diseases are also on the rise as lifestyles change.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this, infectious diseases remain major public health threats. Lower respiratory infections are significant causes of illness and death, especially among children.<sup>54</sup> Tuberculosis (TB) is still endemic, with an incidence of about 134 per 100,000 population in 2023.<sup>55</sup> Dengue fever outbreaks occur seasonally and can cause significant morbidity.<sup>56</sup> Malaria cases have declined dramatically, from 2,331 cases in 2022 to only 343 cases in 2024.<sup>56</sup>

Injuries and trauma, including road traffic accidents, also contribute to the health burden. Laos has a road traffic mortality rate of approximately 16–18 per 100,000 people.<sup>57</sup> Maternal mortality rates 1985 to 2023 have dropped significantly from 881 to 112 per 100,000, respectively.



**Figure 8: Top 10 Causes of Death, Laos, 2021, All ages.<sup>48</sup>**  
 Graph by: World Health Organization. Source: <https://data.who.int/countries/418>

<sup>52</sup> World Health Organization. *World Health Statistics 2023*. World Health Organization; 2021. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 5, 2025.

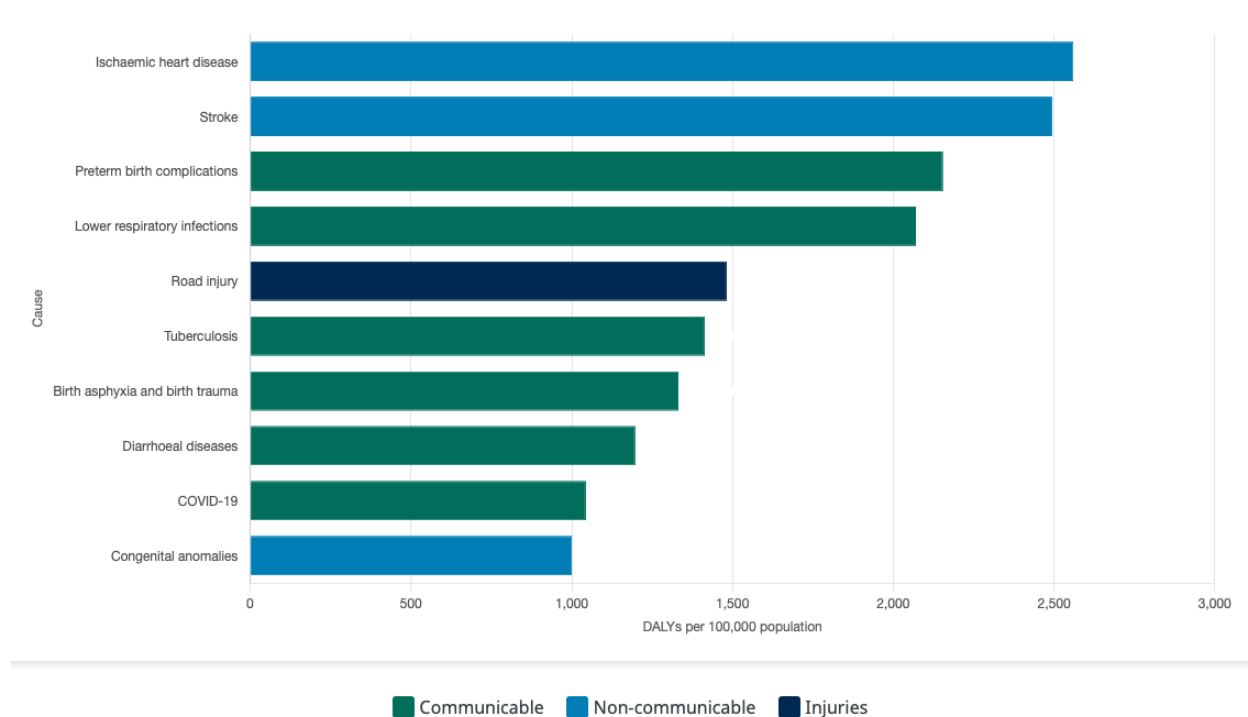
<sup>53</sup> World Health Organization. *Cancer Country Profiles – Lao PDR*. World Health Organization; 2021. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 5, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> World Health Organization. *Global Health Observatory Data Repository*. World Health Organization; 2021. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 5, 2025.

<sup>55</sup> World Health Organization. *Tuberculosis Country Profile – Lao PDR*. World Health Organization; 2021. <https://data.who.int/countries/418>. Accessed May 1, 2025

<sup>56</sup> Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. *Country Progress Report – Lao PDR*. Global Fund; 2021. <https://www.theglobalfund.org>. Accessed May 1, 2025

<sup>57</sup> Lao Statistics Bureau. *Lao PDR Demographic and Health Survey 2023*. Lao Statistics Bureau; 2023. <https://www.lsb.gov.la>. Accessed May 1, 2025



**Figure 9: Top 10 Causes of DALYs, Laos, 2021, All ages.<sup>48</sup>**  
 Chart by: World Health Organization. Source: <https://data.who.int/countries/418>

## Maternal, Child, and Nutritional Health

Maternal and child health has improved, but disparities remain. Facility births have increased by about 42% from 2011 to 2023,<sup>58</sup> contributing to lower maternal mortality. However, chronic undernutrition remains a major issue: roughly one in three Lao children under 5 is stunted (30–33%),<sup>59</sup> and about 10.7% suffer from wasting (acute malnutrition).<sup>60</sup> Notably, there has been a 42% increase in facility-based births attended by skilled health personnel between 2011 and 2023. This progress is attributed to enhanced antenatal care, improved counseling, and respectful maternity services, contributing to a substantial decline in maternal mortality.<sup>61</sup> Despite these advancements, chronic undernutrition continues to be a major concern. Approximately 30–33% of children under five are stunted, and about 10.7% suffer from wasting, indicating acute malnutrition.<sup>48</sup> Historical data from the 2007 Lao Reproductive Health Survey revealed that only 28.5% of women sought antenatal care, and 18.5% of deliveries were

<sup>58</sup> World Health Organization. *Lao People's Democratic Republic: Health System Review*. Manila: WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific; 2014. [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/208135/9789290616368\\_eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/208135/9789290616368_eng.pdf). Accessed May 8, 2025.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Health, Lao PDR. *National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan 2021–2025*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Ministry of Health; 2021. [https://ag.purdue.edu/departement/ipia/anrcb/\\_docs/resources/npan-2021-2025-min.pdf](https://ag.purdue.edu/departement/ipia/anrcb/_docs/resources/npan-2021-2025-min.pdf). Accessed May 8, 2025

<sup>60</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *State of the World's Children Report 2023*. UNICEF; 2023. <https://www.unicef.org>. Accessed May 7, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> World Health Organization. *Safeguarding Maternal, Newborn and Child Health in Lao PDR*. Published April 29, 2025. <https://www.who.int/laos/our-work/safeguarding-maternal--newborn-and-child-health>. Accessed May 8, 2025.

attended by trained birth attendants, with 84% of women still delivering at home during that period.

## Health Trends and Public Health Campaigns

Immunization drives, supported by Gavi and key international partners, have played a crucial role in increasing vaccine coverage and protecting against preventable diseases such as measles and rubella.<sup>62</sup> To combat widespread malnutrition and growth stunting, the government has organized National Nutrition Forums aimed at raising awareness and promoting multi sectoral interventions.<sup>59</sup> In response to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases, Laos has partnered with Vital Strategies to develop and implement prevention programs targeting risk factors such as tobacco use, poor diet, and physical inactivity.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the country continues to make significant progress toward malaria elimination by 2030 through targeted initiatives and surveillance efforts.<sup>64, 65</sup>

## National Health Care Structure and Policy

Laos operates a hierarchical public health system organized across three administrative levels—central, provincial, and district—coordinated by the Ministry of Health. Healthcare services are delivered through a four-tiered system comprising central hospitals, provincial hospitals, district hospitals, and community-level health centers. At the central level, there are eight national referral hospitals, primarily located in the capital city, Vientiane. These hospitals provide advanced tertiary care and serve as training, research, and policy implementation hubs. At the provincial level, each of the country's 17 provinces hosts one provincial hospital, which offers secondary-level care and acts as a referral point for district hospitals. At the district level, there are approximately 135 district hospitals that serve as the first level of hospital-based care. These facilities handle general medical and emergency care and refer complex cases upward to provincial or central hospitals. At the community level, the foundation of primary care consists of approximately 1,075 health centers, typically located in villages or clusters of villages. These centers provide basic health services such as maternal and child health, immunizations, health education, and management of common illnesses. They are often staffed by primary care providers and village health volunteers, though staffing shortages and limited infrastructure remain ongoing challenges. Patients typically enter the health system at the primary care level in a health center and are referred upward to district, provincial, or central hospitals as needed.

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<sup>62</sup> Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. *Lao PDR and Partners Commence Nationwide Measles and Rubella Vaccination Campaign*. Published May 17, 2024. Accessed May 27, 2025.

<sup>63</sup> Vital Strategies. *Improving Noncommunicable Disease Outcomes in Lao PDR*. Vital Strategies; 2022. <https://www.vitalstrategies.org>. Accessed May 7, 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Health, Lao PDR. *National Health Strategy and Action Plan for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) 2021–2025*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Ministry of Health; 2021. [https://nipn.lsb.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/1.-Revised-RMNCAH-Strategy-Document\\_Eng\\_final-20210823.pdf](https://nipn.lsb.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/1.-Revised-RMNCAH-Strategy-Document_Eng_final-20210823.pdf). Accessed May 7, 2025.

<sup>65</sup> Vilay P, Dunn JC, Sichanthongthip O, et al. Malaria risk stratification in Lao PDR guides program planning in an elimination setting. *Sci Rep*. 2024;14:1709. doi:10.1038/s41598-024-52115-2. May 12, 2025.

However, many bypass this system, going directly to higher-level facilities for perceived better care.<sup>58</sup>

## Health Service Coverage

Preventive services (e.g., immunizations, antenatal care) are widely available but unevenly distributed, with better access in urban areas. Laos aims for universal health coverage (UHC) by 2025. Private healthcare, though growing, remains a smaller part of the system, with many patients seeking care abroad for more complex conditions. Laos faces a shortage of health professionals, with only about 0.35 physicians per 1,000 people. Nurse and midwife density is about 1.2 per 1,000. The country has roughly 1 to 1.5 hospital beds per 1,000 people. Infrastructure improvements are ongoing, but many facilities, especially in rural areas, lack basic resources like electricity and clean water.<sup>58</sup>

## Healthcare Expenditure

Healthcare in Laos is financed through a mix of government funding, donor support, and high out-of-pocket spending (about 41–45% of total health costs).<sup>348</sup> Total health expenditure is about 2.7% of GDP, or roughly \$69 per person.<sup>66</sup> Health insurance coverage remains low, with only about 20–30% of the population enrolled in any form of health insurance.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the World Bank is supporting healthcare improvements in Laos through the Health and Nutrition Service Access Project, running from February 21, 2024, to June 30, 2029, with a total budget of \$39 million, of which 8.4% has been disbursed, leaving an undisbursed balance of \$35.3 million. This project is implemented by the Ministry of Health with the objective of improving access to quality health and nutrition services.<sup>67, 68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> World Bank. *Lao PDR Health Financing Profile*. World Bank; 2023. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/cfeeed9cdc63cb1bf79d6cb58352d7e-0070042023/related/WBLaoPortfolioFactsheetJan2025.pdf>. Accessed May 10, 2025.

<sup>67</sup> World Health Organization. *Leading Causes of DALYs*. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global->. Accessed May 7, 2025.

<sup>68</sup> World Bank Group. *Lao People's Democratic Republic Portfolio Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC: World Bank; January 2025. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/cfeeed9cdc63cb1bf79d6cb58352d7e-0070042023/related/WBLaoPortfolioFactsheetJan2025.pdf>. Accessed May 8, 2025.

# National Radiology Profile

## Radiology Workforce and Training in Laos

Laos has on the order of 100 physicians practicing radiology nationwide.<sup>69</sup> These radiologists are heavily concentrated in Vientiane and a few major provincial hospitals.<sup>69, 70</sup> MRI is a rarity—until recently only one central hospital had an MRI scanner—and CT scanners are found mainly at central-level hospitals.<sup>69</sup> Many provinces have at most one radiologist (or none), leaving imaging interpretation to other doctors or via teleradiology support in rural areas. There is a severe shortage of formally trained radiologic technologists in Laos.<sup>70</sup> At some pediatric hospitals, nurses with no formal radiography training perform all X-rays and ultrasounds<sup>70</sup>, often resulting in suboptimal image quality due to limited education.<sup>71</sup> Laos has only two radiation oncologists, based at Mittaphab Hospital in Vientiane.<sup>72, 73</sup> There is also no formal radiology nursing track; nurses are rotated into imaging departments without specialty designation.<sup>69</sup> Two medical physicists serve the nation’s only radiotherapy center<sup>73</sup>, but none are available for diagnostic radiology.<sup>69</sup>

## Education and Training of Imaging Professionals

The University of Health Sciences (UHS) is the only national institution offering any structured radiology education.<sup>72</sup> There is no formal diagnostic radiology residency, and most radiologists receive advanced training abroad.<sup>70, 74</sup> Technologists are often trained on the job. RAD-AID and JSRT have supported early curriculum development efforts.<sup>74</sup> The country lacks in-country radiation oncology education. Practitioners must train abroad with support from organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency.<sup>72, 73</sup>

## Equipment Inventory, Distribution, and Rules and Regulations

LFHC was among the first RAD-AID sites to receive a “hybrid” PACS with cloud storage and remote consultation access.<sup>71</sup> CT support was provided to LPPH, and RAD-AID donated ultrasound units for both onsite and remote education.<sup>70, 71</sup> In 2024, LFHC received a Philips Affiniti ultrasound

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<sup>69</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency. *IAEA imPACT Review: Cancer Control Capacity and Needs Assessment – Lao People’s Democratic Republic*. Vienna, Austria: IAEA; 2022. <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/review-missions/lao-impact-review-0722.pdf>. Accessed May 8, 2025.

<sup>70</sup> RAD-AID International. *RAD-AID Laos Program Summary*. <https://rad-aid.org/countries/asia/laos/>. Accessed May 1, 2025.

<sup>71</sup> AuntMinnie.com. *PACS Brings Improved Quality of Care to Laos Hospital*. Published September 26, 2016. <https://www.auntminnie.com/index.aspx?sec=log&itemID=114921>. Accessed April 2025.

<sup>72</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency. *Prioritizing Cancer Care: IAEA, IARC and WHO Support Lao PDR*. IAEA News. Published May 2022. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/prioritizing-cancer-care-iaea-iarc-and-who-support-lao-pdr>. Accessed May 9, 2025

<sup>73</sup> Lao Friends Hospital for Children. *Ultrasound Training and Education Strategy Report 2023*. Internal publication. Accessed via RAD-AID Laos Regional Director; 2023. [https://rad-aid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023\\_RAD-AID\\_Annual-Report.pdf](https://rad-aid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023_RAD-AID_Annual-Report.pdf). Accessed May 5, 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Japan Society of Radiological Technology (JSRT). *Building Core Competency in Radiologic Technology Education: Collaborative Project with University of Health Sciences, Laos*. Published 2024. [https://kyokuhp.jihs.go.jp/eng/what-we-do/strategy\\_5/2024/25\\_JSRT\\_EN.pdf](https://kyokuhp.jihs.go.jp/eng/what-we-do/strategy_5/2024/25_JSRT_EN.pdf). Accessed May 1, 2025.

system through a donation facilitated by the Philips Foundation. This machine is equipped with smart exam protocols that automate workflow and require specific image acquisition steps before advancing. It also features “Collaboration Live,” which enables real-time remote coaching and screen control by off-site specialists. These capabilities are critical in bridging training gaps at LFHC, where ultrasound was previously performed on outdated Sonosite laptops. Echo is currently performed by physicians, but a transition to technologist-led echocardiography is a targeted area of growth.<sup>76</sup>

### **Professional Societies and Leadership Bodies**

There are no official national societies for radiologists or technologists. The Lao Medical Association lacks a radiology section. JSRT has supported national training in lieu of a local radiographer society.<sup>72</sup> Radiology leaders typically come from central hospitals and serve in informal advisory roles to the Ministry of Health.<sup>72, 75</sup> Laos is not yet an official member of AOSR, though regional collaborations exist.<sup>76</sup>

### **On-site Assessment**

The Lao Friends Hospital for Children (LFHC) in Luang Prabang has been the primary RAD-AID partner site in Laos since 2015, beginning with a Radiology Readiness Assessment led by Dr. Michael Reiter.<sup>70</sup> LFHC, operated by the NGO Friends Without a Border, models a U.S.-style hospital in a low-resource setting with inpatient/outpatient services, a surgical suite, NICU, and diagnostic imaging capabilities. Radiology services at LFHC include X-ray and ultrasound, with echocardiography currently performed by physicians. Technologists conduct scans and provide preliminary notes. Image interpretation is supported by a global network of volunteer radiologists via WhatsApp, primarily from the U.S. and Australia, utilizing a cloud-based PACS system.

RAD-AID’s role has emphasized both technology and education. All LFHC staff take weekly English instruction, though the absence of direct Lao translations for many radiologic terms complicates retention. Moodle is used for asynchronous learning, although pediatric content and Lao-language support are limited. The development of a standardized lexicon and a RAD-AID-issued technologist certificate remain top priorities. While previous plans to formalize sonography as a profession were paused due to training gaps, collaboration with the Ministry of Health on this front continues.

CT access in Luang Prabang has improved through cooperation with the neighboring Provincial adult hospital, marking a key area of growth. LFHC and RAD-AID are actively integrating CT into pediatric imaging workflows. Additionally, the hospital’s EMR system, Bahmni, currently does not

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<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Health, Lao PDR. *Health Workforce Strategic Plan 2021–2030*. Vientiane, Laos: Ministry of Health; 2021. [https://extranet.who.int/uhcpartnershiplivemonitoring/system/files/doc\\_attachments/Eng\\_Human Resources for Health strategy\\_23Jan2024.pdf](https://extranet.who.int/uhcpartnershiplivemonitoring/system/files/doc_attachments/Eng_Human Resources for Health strategy_23Jan2024.pdf). Accessed May 31, 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Asian Oceanian Society of Radiology (AOSR). *Member Societies and Affiliations*. Accessed 2025. <https://www.aosr.org>. Accessed May 30, 2025.

interface with PACS, but informatics teams are working to bridge this gap for seamless longitudinal imaging access. The RAD-AID Laos team meets annually with LFHC leadership to review strategic objectives across radiography, sonography, echocardiography, PACS, and CT. Typically, 6–8 volunteers rotate to Luang Prabang to support both short-term clinical goals and long-term sustainability of radiologic services.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

RAD-AID’s decade-long engagement with LFHC exemplifies a high-impact, site-specific radiology outreach model in Laos. By leveraging volunteer expertise, equipment donations, and sustained partnership, the program has dramatically enhanced pediatric radiologic capacity in Luang Prabang. The ongoing integration of advanced imaging systems, remote interpretation tools, and asynchronous education platforms reflects a creative adaptation to local constraints. At the same time, foundational challenges remain—most notably, a lack of structured technologist certification, non-existent MRI access, and systemic barriers to creating formal imaging professions within Laos.

Despite these limitations, the trajectory is promising. The implementation of standardized radiologic terminology, targeted echo training, and integration of imaging into the EMR system are tangible next steps. Continued investment in local capacity, including support for language-concordant educational resources, remains essential. For future volunteers, funders, and collaborators, RAD-AID’s presence at LFHC offers a robust foundation for scaling efforts throughout northern Laos and beyond. With proper support, this model could be replicated in other regions, helping address the country’s radiologic care gaps and contributing to the broader mission of global health equity.

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<sup>77</sup> Lenzen EM. Personal interview. May 2025.



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