



# POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN LAO PDR

Understanding Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Options  
for Socio-Economic Development



Delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted,  
every childbirth is safe, and  
every young person's potential is fulfilled.

# **POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN LAO PDR**

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO THE 8TH NATIONAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN PERIOD, 2016-2020

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## Foreword

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Awareness of the implications of population on socio-economic development has been increased as acknowledged in the 6th and 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP). This report in particular is produced based on the request from the Ministry of Planning and Investment to ensure that the 8th NSEDP could address population dynamics, taking into account the changes of population that needs to be considered in the 5-year period in order to achieve socio-economic goals.

The report indicates that Lao population will continue to grow despite a decline in fertility. The changing age structure of Laos population is leading to what is referred to as the “demographic bonus” or “population window of opportunity”, which will last over 30 more years and can contribute significantly to the economic growth and prosperity and long-term sustainable development of the country. However, this can only be achieved if the needs of young people are addressed today, i.e. ensuring young people are educated, healthy, skilled, and employed.

Population dynamics should continue to receive much more attention in Lao PDR, as this report makes the interlinkage between population and socio-economic development clearer. The changing of population structure of Lao PDR will provide both opportunities and challenges to the Government, communities and families. It is important for planners to monitor closely the population trends, including the fertility patterns, in order to modify policies or interventions that can maximize the benefits and mitigate the challenges posed by population changes.

It is our hope that this analysis and its recommendations raise understanding and stimulates actions and policy development around population dynamics in the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan, as well as the sectoral plans. This will maximize the benefits of Demographic Bonus for fast and sustainable economic development of Lao PDR.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Mohtashami', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Dr. Hassan Mohtashami  
UNFPA Representative, Lao PDR

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Lao PDR is facing considerable population growth. The official population projections show an increase of between 1.71 and 1.91 million between 2015 and 2030, and a population of between 10.25 and 10.72 million by 2050.
- Growth of different age groups within the population will vary sharply. Over the 8th National Socio-Economic Development (NSED) Plan period, the number of school-aged children (5-14) is projected to decrease by 3.7%, while the working-age population is expected to increase by 10.6% and the elderly population by 10.1%.
- Laos has not yet completed its first demographic transition – the decline of both mortality and fertility rates to low levels, though it has been moving in this direction. The under-5 mortality rate had fallen to 79 per 1,000 live births in 2010-11, and should be able to meet its MDG target of 70, but it is less likely that the infant mortality target will be met. The total fertility rate of 3.2 (in 2008-11) was still more than 50% above replacement level. It is estimated that TFR of Lao PDR would reach the replacement level of 2.1 in the next 30 years. However, effective family planning programmes could help bring the TFR to this level faster and allow women to participate productively in economic and social development.
- Because the age structure still reflects the high fertility of the past, there are successively large cohorts moving up through the age pyramid. This leads to growth through “population momentum” – meaning that population will keep increasing long after fertility falls to replacement level.
- The changing age structure of Laos’s population is leading to what is referred to as the “demographic bonus”, meaning that the proportion of the population in the working age groups will increase, so that there are fewer dependants for any one worker. Whereas in 2015 the dependency ratio will be down to 0.62, by 2030 it will have fallen to 0.51 and by 2045 even lower (0.43). It will start to rise slowly after 2050.
- Ageing of the population is not yet an issue for Lao PDR. The proportion of elderly is still very low (3.8%), and will only begin to rise rapidly after 2020. Even in 2050, the proportion of elderly in Laos will be lower than in Thailand today.
- Laos has a low population density (the lowest in ASEAN), but for good reason: much of the land is mountainous and cannot be cultivated. There appears to be roughly 1.1 hectare of arable land per household, or about 1.7 hectare of cultivable land per rural family; the latter will not decrease very much with population growth, as the population depending on agriculture is expected to remain roughly constant with increasing migration to the towns.
- International migration is a “black box” in the Laotian statistics. No effective

estimate of either outflows or inflows is available. However, it is known that there is considerable movement across Laos's borders, much of it undocumented. It is likely that such movement will increase (and perhaps be somewhat easier to document) with the building of more bridges and transport linkages to other countries.

- The share of the agricultural sector in total employment is slowly declining, and that of the industry and services sectors increasing. There are enormous differences in product per worker in the different sectors: almost 8 times as high in industry as in agriculture, and almost 5 times as high in services as in agriculture.
- Female labour force participation rates are very high, including in urban areas, even though fertility rates are higher than in other ASEAN countries. Very little of this employment is in the formal sector, making it easier for women to combine working with childrearing.
- Raising labour productivity levels through a shift in economic structure towards more productive sectors is crucial. The approach should be two-pronged: (a) raising productivity in

number of migrants from other parts of Laos. The majority of these migrants were from the northern highland provinces and from Vientiane Province. In the south, migrants were more likely to go to Thailand.

- Laos has been urbanizing rapidly, and this process is expected to continue. The population could reach 50% urban as early as 2030. This would imply no increase in the rural population. Vientiane's population could be close to 2 million in that year, and some of the other main cities could also grow very rapidly, particularly those with developing transport connections to other countries, thus serving to make Laos a land-linked rather than a landlocked country.
- The need to raise the educational level of the workforce is crucial for Laos as it becomes a more urbanized country, with growing international trade linkages. Laos is lagging the rest of ASEAN in enrolment ratios in primary and secondary education, in the completion rate in primary school, which is only 67%, and in levels of literacy of the school-going and adult population. Improving the quality of education is a pressing need.

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