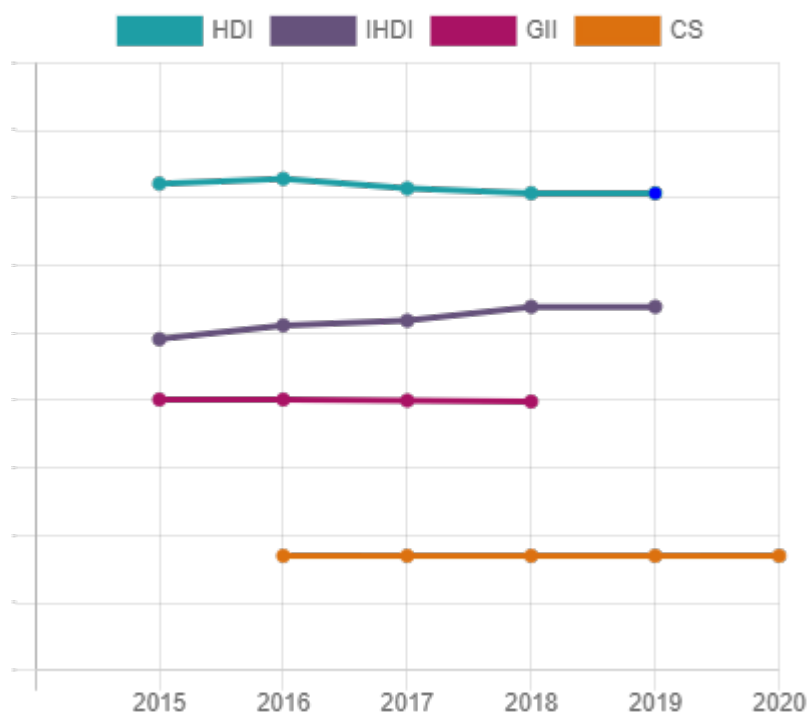


# LAOS

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), commonly known as Laos, is one of the four Southeast Asian countries where Voice is active. We live in a rapidly changing world - some changes may be for the better - others not so much. In order to continue to ground Voice in local lived realities, a country context analysis is organised every other year, engaging many stakeholders, grantees and rightsholders. The analysis is used to frame Calls for Proposals, to support the applications of grant-seekers and to advance the overall learnings. Below follows a summary of the exercise conducted in 2020, capturing the many views and perspectives of Laotians. The summary is structured by presenting the big picture and slowly but surely to zoom in on the voices and aspirations of the rightsholders and to zoom out again by sharing the way forward for Voice. This page can also be downloaded at the bottom of the page. A full report and previous versions can be availed to you upon request. Please contact [laos@voice.global](mailto:laos@voice.global)

## Zooming out

### The big picture



### Human Development Index (HDI)

The Human Development Index is an index that combines data on life expectancy, education, and per capita income to rank countries. Between 2016 and 2018 Laos' HDI has only slightly increased, but remained the same in 2019. In 2019 Laos ranked 140 out of 189 countries.

### Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI)

The IHDI measures the human development cost of inequality, or the overall loss to human development due to inequality. The closer to 1 the more equal a society is. The IHDI can inform policies towards inequality reduction. Between 2016 and 2018 inequality in Laos was reduced marginally, but stagnated in 2019.

## **Gender Inequality Index (GII)**

The GI is an inequality index, measuring the human development costs of gender inequality economically, health- and education-wise. The closer to 0 the better. Overall, gender inequality in Laos has only marginally improved since 2016.

## **Civic Space (CS)**

According to the independent Civicus Monitor which started in 2016, civic space continues to be closed in Laos. Opportunities for change in practices and attitudes exist especially at local level, like Voice grantees have shown.

## **Behind the numbers**

While the continuing economic growth in Laos has driven changes across several sectors, the question is whether the focus on numerous large-scale investment schemes facilitate the country's transition in a way that fairly distributes generated wealth among its citizens. Several development agencies highlighted continuing social discrimination, such as inequality, underrepresentation and lack of opportunities for certain types of citizens and groups. Engagement and ownership of rightsholders are continuing to increase particularly at community levels, but also at district and provincial levels. Furthermore, grantees and rightsholders emphasised a decrease of social discrimination across all five rightsholder groups. The wider accessibility of information and knowledge was mentioned as a key reason for these perceived changes from the central to the grassroots levels. Many grantees are already committing to work with intersecting issues affecting ethnic minority women, disabled elderly, gay youth and transgenders living with HIV/AIDS in Laos while intersecting vulnerabilities are often perceived as relating to being poor. The Government of Laos (GoL) has adopted several legal instruments since 2018, with varied (but mostly low) levels of progress in terms of their implementation in practice.

## **Political shifts**

The Vientiane Declaration and Country Action Plan will guide how development cooperation is monitored, evaluated and reported as far as 2025 while emphasising the predictability of development aid and its conditionalities, the increasing diversity of aid providers – with an emphasis on “south-south” cooperation and solutions – and the role of civil society as a key stakeholder for mutual accountability between the state and its citizens. The updated (2017) Non-Profit Association (NPA) decree is expected to affect the work of CSOs in many ways, due to closer monitoring of their management structure, their activities and their use of resources. Meanwhile, the agreement on the implementation and operation of Village Mediation Units (2018) and the Legal Aid Decree (2018) was adopted to improve legal protection and assist vulnerable groups when dealing with the justice system. Furthermore, the Resettlement and Occupation Law (2018) and the Law on Disaster Management (2019) put emphasis on the fair compensation and/or appropriate resettlement provisions to affected communities. During consultations, Voice grantees have confirmed better support from local authorities as well as more open acknowledgement of CSOs' contributions and credibility by the government. About half of the grantees also implied having good collaboration with government authorities, who would open up more opportunities to implement social development projects in their target communities, with the notable exception of some advocacy activities.

## **Economic shifts**

In the economical field, a number of large-scale infrastructure projects – such as hydropower projects and those projects under the Chinese-led “Belt and Road Initiative” – aim to turn Laos from a “land-locked” into a

“land-linked” country, exporting goods and resources to and via its neighbours. Furthermore, there is a growing interest within the business sector about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes in Laos. Some business leaders believe that the adoption of CSR measures can be a way to complement improvements to social services where relevant government bodies may lack necessary resources and/or institutional capacity. Additionally, the amended National Social Security Law (2019) aims to bring the majority of workers into the social security system.

## Social shifts

In the social realm, the government adopted the Law for People with Disabilities (2018), which entails rights and benefits of people with disabilities as per the minimum international standard, while aiming to enforce the rights and related public responsibilities were still lacking. Also, the promotion of LGBTI people’s rights is increasing as the community is growing and getting better organised. The government adopted its Law on Gender Equality (2019), that entails all basic gender aspects and the integration of gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting goal into the government’s work. However, it is yet to be confirmed whether this law can be enforced effectively. Most recently, the Decree on Ethnicity (2020) focuses on enabling ethnic communities in remote areas to more easily access state services and development opportunities, particularly in the education, professional and legal sectors. It bans all forms of discrimination against ethnic groups, while calling for all ethnic groups to be provided with equal opportunities in terms of national development.

## (Visible) Power shifts

It is notable that many youths that started as volunteers in CSOs over the last 20 years have now become leaders working with various CSOs and other organisations, government officials, and experts in particular fields of the development sector.

## COVID-19

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic threaten both financial and food security for the most vulnerable people in particular while increasing overall levels of poverty. In September 2020, the number of documented returning migrants from Thailand due to the COVID-19 pandemic has reached 134,404 people. The COVID-19 pandemic puts women migrants in particular at risk of increased vulnerability. The government and its development partners have engaged in discussions on how these women could reintegrate into their communities and what support would be needed for them to better ensure their livelihoods’ resilience in the future.

## *Zooming in*

### Voices behind the picture

A year after the adoption of the Law for **People with Disabilities**, government implementation is still lacking and many persons with disabilities are not aware of their rights under the law. And engaging with the private sector is an immediate need, as discrimination in terms of accessing job placements has largely remained. Despite persistent job discrimination against **LGBTI people**, there was more openness of private employers in the garment industry and in the entertainment sectors, which were perceived as the only two fields widely accessible for LGBTI people. Almost all grantees confirmed working with women as one of their key priorities, and their empowerment was often visible across many projects. However, **Women facing exploitation, abuse and/or violence** have remained common in Laos, with many still not seek help regarding incidents due to discriminatory gender stereotypes coupled with the inadequacy related to available services. Additionally, the newly amended Land Law (2018) could curb land ownership by women, as it does not make it mandatory for

land titles to include women's names to show joint ownership. **Vulnerable elderly and youth** have gained more visibility since 2016. Many public and private initiatives to support youth participation have emerged in different sectors but are still limited largely to more urban areas. At the same time, there seems to be a notable gap between youth and senior citizens, with few regular social activities to allow the bridging of the two sub-groups beyond the level of individual families. The sustainable use of and care for natural resources is of great concern to **Indigenous people and ethnic minorities**, but have been threatened by the government's tendency to grant land concessions for the exploitation of natural resources without proper safeguards in place, while loopholes in customary right tenure have allowed for unfair negotiations among villagers and investors. It is also notable that some positive changes to cultural attitudes have been emerging within many ethnic minority communities, including the provision of more support by families for daughters to attend school and women actively participating in community governance.

## **Their aspirations**

Grantees and rightsholders confirmed that positive attitudes towards **People with Disabilities** must come from themselves first, before expecting any changes of societal attitudes in Laos, while creating better education and other social services as well as better job placements have been identified as key aspirations. Besides the LGBTI community in Laos working towards more social acceptance and government acknowledgement better social assistance provided, **LGBTI people** are specifically concerned about better access to specific health services for themselves. As **women facing exploitation, abuse and/or violence** have remained common in Laos, supporting them in seeking help, combined with advocating for an end to discriminatory gender stereotypes and for better availability of adequate social services, are key aspirations. Furthermore, discussions also focused on how women migrants, in particular, could reintegrate into their communities and what support they need to better ensure their livelihoods in the future. Grantees raised that enhancing the profile of the **elderly** in Laos may include encouraging a "caring society", where families and communities attend more to the health care and welfare of the elderly. At the same time, encouraging the provision of better public and private support services was identified as an essential measure to be taken. As for the concerns of **youth**, rightsholders generally emphasised the need for better employment opportunities in Laos, where the preference of many youths for certain jobs – particularly business administration – has also contributed to a mismatch between labour supply and demand. **Indigenous people and ethnic minorities** in Laos aspire both to ensure sustainable use of and care for natural resources and to lessen discrimination in terms of equitable access to essential services as well as development opportunities, particularly in the education, professional and legal sectors.

## ***Zooming out***

### **Fostering change**

This analysis has brought forward a number of issues of particular importance for Voice grantees and the rightsholder groups they are part of or work with. This is particularly the case for some forms of continuing social discrimination, such as inequality, underrepresentation and lack of opportunities for them. **Entering into the next phase, Voice in Laos is keen on furthering the following strategies in 2021-23:**

- To increase the support to the elderly in Laos through the design of Calls for Proposals, especially Empowerment grants, with a strong focus on reaching the elderly.
- To reach those that are furthest behind within the different rightsholder groups Voice works with. Therefore, Voice in Laos will actively select new interventions with a strong focus of intersectionality, especially those related to the LGBTI community, ethnic minorities, and migrants.
- To take advantage of the increasing interest from the private sector in corporate social responsibility,

among others introducing them to specific rightsholder groups and Voice grantees through their inclusion in Communities of Stakeholders.

- To build on the learning of the past four years, developing new Communities of Practice, including the use of the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), the conscious integration of elderly issues, storytelling as an advocacy tool, and bridging communities with ethnic youth.
- To diversify the grant portfolio and have a wider geographical reach, Voice in Laos aims to focus its outreach initiatives on rural areas and other locations aside from Vientiane and Luang Prabang.