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# Overview of Internal Migration in Lao PDR





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## Lao PDR Context

- The total population of Lao PDR, as recorded by UNESCAP in 2016, stands at just under 7 million.
- Half of the population is under 23.5 years old (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016), giving Lao PDR a demographic opportunity to accelerate economic development. The country's population growth rate is 1.4 and its fertility rate is 2.7 (UNESCAP 2016).
- 59% of the country still resides in rural areas (UNESCAP 2016), where the poverty rate is 2.9 times that of urban areas (UN Lao PDR 2015). Farming is largely practiced at the subsistence level and productive conditions for farmers are generally poor (IFAD 2014), suggesting that rural poverty may be a key push factor for migration.



- Ethnic minorities (non-Lao-Tai) are particularly disadvantaged among rural populations, due to factors such as social exclusion, village resettlement, gender disparities, and lack of access to education (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016, IFAD 2014; 2011). Non-Lao-Tai are twice as likely as Lao-Tai to live in poverty, and a third of rural non-Lao-Tai girls had never attended school compared with under a tenth of Lao-Tai girls. Disparities persist between different minority groups too: 56% of rural Mon-Khmer boys and 53% of girls aged 6–10 were enrolled in primary school, but only 36% of rural Chinese-Tibetan boys and 30% of girls (King and Van der Walle 2010)<sup>1</sup>.
- Internal migrants constitute a significant population in Lao PDR. Approximately 17% of the population were considered “lifetime migrants”<sup>2</sup> in 2015, though this figure includes individuals migrating from abroad<sup>3</sup> (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016). By comparison, just over 1.3 million Lao PDR citizens are residing abroad as of 2017 (UNDESA 2017), representing around 18% of the population.
- In 2015, 7.4% of the population were recent migrants.<sup>4</sup> Of these migrants, 206,000 (4%) moved from one province to another (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).
- The Thai Deng, a lowland group with a large social network facilitating movement, as well as the Khmu, who originate primarily in the northern highlands, are the two ethnic groups most dominant in migration (UNFPA 2011).
- The primary destination for rural-urban migrants, especially those from Vientiane province and the north of the country, is Vientiane Capital, which has the largest proportion of all lifetime migrants of all cities. 4 in 10 people in the city were lifetime migrants, and population density is eight times the national average (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).
- The main migration suppliers are the northern highland provinces such as Huaphanh, Xiengkhuang, Luanprabang and Phonsaly. These areas are dominated by ethnic minorities and are still contaminated from the conflicts of the Cold War (Phouxay 2010).

<sup>1</sup> Note that the figures cited here relate to the years 2002–2003 and are unlikely to represent the precise proportions that exist today. Nonetheless it is possible that the indicated disparities persist.

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2015 census, if the district the person was born in is different from the district of current residence, the person is considered a lifetime migrant (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).

<sup>3</sup> UNDESA (2017) estimates that approximately 45,500 foreign nationals were residing in Lao PDR in 2017, which would account only for a very small fraction of this 17%.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2015 census “recent migrants” were defined to include those over the age of 10 who had moved within the past 10 years. Included in this are those who moved from one district to another within the same province, to a district in another province, or from abroad (the latter account for just 1% of the migrant population). Migrant numbers are likely underestimated as migrants who have died are not captured in the census (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).





- Lao PDR's economy has been growing at a high rate, at an average of 11.9% per year from 2011-2014 (UNESCAP 2017) but poverty reduction and consumption lag behind GDP and growth, while increased consumption has benefited the richer quintiles more than the poorer segments of the population (UN Lao PDR 2015). Lao PDR's GINI index in 2012 was 37.9 (UNESCAP 2017), and rural-urban inequalities are increasing: from 2007 to 2013 rural poverty rates declined by 9.8% while urban poverty rates fell 42.5%. However, gaps in access to basic public services have been narrowing (UN Lao PDR 2015).
- Over the past 30 years, the Government has instituted resettlement and agricultural policies to either keep people in place or to move them elsewhere, partially aimed at addressing rural inequalities (Rights-LINK Lao 2011). From 1975-1986 the government restricted internal in an effort at post-war stabilisation, while the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986 marked a transition from a planned to an increasingly open market-oriented economy (Phouxay 2010). Some evidence suggests that resettlement policies have posed challenges for ethnic minorities such as agricultural land shortages, decreased food security, cultural dislocation, forced migration, and discrimination (Lestrelin 2011; 2010, Petit 2008, Lestrelin and Giordano 2007).
- Lao PDR is highly susceptible to the effects of climate change. Around 80% of the population is dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, and predicted climate trends leading to longer dry seasons coupled with more intense rainfall in the Greater Mekong region are likely to push people to migrate from rural areas. Droughts in the country have already been observed to be increasing in intensity and frequency (IFAD 2011).

## Migrants' Characteristics

- Migration in Lao PDR is female-dominated; women constitute 59.2% of internal migrants (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).
- A small-scale qualitative study has suggested that significant numbers of Khmu women, constrained by both their status as women and as members of an ethnic minority, migrate to work in the sex industry. These women often do not migrate indefinitely but expect to return home to get married and contribute to rural work (Lyttleton and Vorabouth 2011).
- The proportion of lifetime internal migrants among adult males is 23-25%. Among females this proportion is lower, at 21-22% (ibid.).
- Individuals above the age of 15 are much more likely to migrate than those below this age. However, once they are 25, those who have never migrated are more likely to stay at their birthplace (ibid.).



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- Many migrants who plan to work in the garment sector choose to work in a factory where they already know someone working (World Bank 2012).
- Most migrants consider transferring workplaces, searching for employment, or pursuing a business as their primary motivation for migration (28%), followed by “family” (18.3%), access to educational facilities for themselves or family members (14.9%), and marriage (10%) (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016).
- Among female migrants, a small-scale qualitative study has found that financial difficulties are the primary reason for movement, specifically the inability to harvest and sell sufficient rice and the inability to provide for the education of either the migrant or her sibling(s). Female migrants also heavily weight the presence of family, friends, or acquaintances in the destination when deciding to migrate, and are often attracted to the prospect of city life (Gender and Development Group 2011).

## Working and Living Conditions in the New Setting

- Generally, female migrants are found in domestic work, beer bars, karaoke bars and discos, as well as the garment sector, which is dominated by female workers (LWU 2005) and is Lao PDR’s largest manufacturing employer (ILO 2015). Many also work in the sex trade and are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation given the illegality of their work, which also causes stigmatisation and marginalisation (UNFPA 2011).
- Among female ethnic minority migrants, engaging in sex work can help them to move beyond traditional gender roles in their communities. Some women save enough to start small business ventures such as small shops when they return which enables them to improve their social status (Lyttleton and Vorabouth 2011).
- Garment sector migrants often work in harsh conditions with compulsory overtime (Phouxay and Tollefsen 2011). Their situation is worsened by their inability to understand or use their contractual protections. In 2012, a garment factory worker earned between US\$46 to US\$71 per month. Those working in production lines can earn significantly more (upwards of double these base amounts). Low “fixed overtime rates” also do not reflect Labour Law guidelines. Many migrant workers in the garment sector generally take accommodation in factory dormitories, which are cramped, unhygienic, lacking in basic utilities (such as electrical sockets and water), and poorly ventilated (World Bank 2012).
- Due to extremely low salaries, female migrants try to escape overtime work at night and work part-time outside the factory in restaurants, karaoke entertainment clubs or gift shops (Phouxay and Tollefsen 2011).





- Most workers in the garment sector use their income to cover basic living expenses for themselves and their families, and/or try to save enough to start their own small business (such as a small retail business). Some workers hope to save enough to return to their studies (including to complete higher education diplomas) (World Bank 2012). Many female migrant workers explicitly perceive garment work as a temporary measure, but for many it becomes a longer affair (Phouxay and Tollefsen 2011).
- Female migrant workers, despite assuming significant familial responsibilities and undertaking difficult work, struggle against negative social perceptions, as they are often associated with sex work or “bad behaviour”. These stereotypes are projected not only by the surrounding urban society, but also by their employers and even their home villages (ibid.).
- Urban sanitation is poor, while public health and the environment are threatened by a lack of adequate drainage and sewerage systems (UN Lao PDR 2016). In addition to this Lao’s slum population as a percentage of urban population is 31.4% (UN Data 2017). This suggests that many internal migrants are living in unsatisfactory conditions.
- Many migrants work in informal settings and are therefore not registered to social security schemes. The reach of the Social Security Organization, which theoretically can cover internal migrants, is practically limited to urban areas. Migrants need to subscribe to health insurance to access coverage and few have done so. They are also ineligible for the scheme unless they have worked for three months (UNFPA 2011).
- Migrants in urban areas also face huge social barriers concerning access to information and services relating to contraceptives. They fear disapproval, stigmatization or judgment by clinic staff and worry about their medical decisions not being kept confidential (UNFPA LAO PDR 2015, UNFPA 2011).

## The Impact of Internal Migration on Those Who Stay Behind

- Migrant workers in the garment sector aim to send home 20% of their earning, a target they struggle to meet, especially when they have been recently hired or are earning only basic wages. Most remittances are spent on siblings’ education or the cost of agriculture (World Bank 2012). The remittances that women send home are contributing to a change in traditional gender norms. Migrant daughters are increasingly perceived as more reliable contributors to the household economy than sons. This has given daughters increased social standing, including daughters in minority ethnic families (Lyttleton and Vorabouth 2011).



- In Lao PDR, 84% of children 17 years and below live with both their parents; 6% live with neither parent<sup>5</sup> (Ministry of Health and Lao PDR Statistics Bureau 2012).
- The majority of the Lao population live in rural areas, but as a result of rural-urban migration, the percentage living in rural areas decreased from 72.9% to 68.0% between 2005 and 2009 (WHO 2013), while the percentage of the population living in urban areas as increased from 15.4% in 1990 to 37.6% in 2014 (UNESCAP 2014).
- Increased youth migration into urban centres can negatively impact agricultural productivity as the rural labour pool shrinks. High rates of youth migration have resulted in upland areas being inhabited almost solely by the older population (FAO 2006).

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<sup>5</sup> Disaggregated data on what proportion of these children have been left behind by out-migrating parents is unfortunately not available.





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