

# Country profile

World Vision

# Laos

## GEOGRAPHY

Laos is located in southeast Asia and is approximately the same size as Victoria. It is one of the few landlocked countries in Asia with a landscape dominated by rivers and mountains. The Mekong River runs the entire length of the country and forms the national border with Thailand.

The climate is tropical, with high temperature and humidity levels. The rainy season is from May to November. The tropical forests which cover much of the country are rapidly being logged.

## PEOPLE

The official language is Lao, but French, English and other languages are also spoken. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion, although animist beliefs are also common, especially in the mountainous areas. The population of Laos consists of approximately 130 different ethnic groups and 80 percent of the population live in rural areas.

## HISTORY

Laos has its origins in the ancient Lao kingdom of Lan Xang, established in the 14th century. For 300 years this kingdom included parts of modern-day Cambodia and Thailand, as well as all of what is now Laos. From the late 18th century, Laos came under the control of Siam (now Thailand) before coming under the control of France in the late 19th century.

In 1975, communist forces ended the monarchy in Laos and ruled with a regime closely aligned to Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Isolation from the western world was a feature. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Laos has relaxed this



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

policy, but has struggled to find its position within a changing political and economic landscape. Despite tentative reforms, Laos remains poor and dependent on international donations. It became a member of ASEAN in 1997.

Laos is one of the few remaining communist countries. Choummaly Sayasone, the head of the ruling communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party, was appointed President by the National Assembly in June 2006.

## ECONOMY

Subsistence agriculture is dominated by rice production on the fertile floodplain of the Mekong River. Other crops include vegetables, fruit, spices and cotton. This subsistence agriculture accounts for 80 percent of total employment. The government began decentralising control and encouraging private enterprise in 1986, and economic growth has been steady except for the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Nevertheless, Laos remains one of the poorest countries in southeast Asia.

Infrastructure is inadequate, with no railroads, a basic road system and limited telecommunications. Electricity is available in only a few urban areas. The economy benefits from foreign investment and overseas aid, and is currently focused on road projects and hydro-electric dam construction. The dam is intended to generate electricity for export to Thailand. Other exports include clothing, coffee, tin and timber products. Tourism is also growing. The main export partners are Vietnam, Thailand and France.



Children in Laos benefit from World Vision education initiatives, such as the construction of this new primary school in a rural village.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

The staple diet for Laotians is rice with spices and fresh vegetables. Freshwater fish, poultry and pork are important sources of protein and are flavoured with lime juice, lemongrass, chillies, garlic, mint and coconut milk. However, many poor families are unable to afford nutritious food. Many rural families struggle to make a living on small plots of land and are unaware they are often using outdated farming techniques. Deforestation is a major problem, destroying arable land and making it difficult for farmers to produce healthy crops.

Many rural families live in one-roomed homes, made of bamboo or wood with a thatched or tin roof, built on stilts to keep cool and avoid flooding. Health services, especially in rural areas, continue to be poor. Lack of access to safe water and adequate sanitation means that communicable diseases like diarrhoea and malaria are major causes of illness and death, especially in young children. In the absence of adequate medical facilities, traditional spirit healers remain important.

## EDUCATION

Since 1985, primary school education has been compulsory and the majority of children now attend classes. However, a lack of schools and trained teachers, especially in remote rural areas, means that universal primary education is limited.



In Luang Prabang province, 25-day-old Anoi is weighed during a child nutrition clinic in his village.

## Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	LAOS	AUSTRALIA
Population	6.4 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	33.2%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$2,321	\$38,692
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	44%	0%
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	57%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	72.7%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	65.9 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	61	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme  
Human Development Report 2010

An intensive adult literacy program has helped to improve the ability of many people to read and write but the women's literacy rate still lags behind the men's literacy rate.

## WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN LAOS

- supports maternal and child health projects aimed at improving community health
- supports projects assisting communities to minimise food shortages
- supports agricultural research to improve crops
- supports projects that provide people with disabilities with access to physiotherapy services and prosthetic and orthotic devices
- works to provide communities with access to sustainable, clean water supplies
- supports programs employing a holistic approach to community development

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