

COUNTRY YOUTH

CALL TO ACTION 2025

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Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence based solutions for the 2030 agenda and its SDGs for leaving no young person behind in Asia and the Pacific



Situational Analysis

Lao PDR is a beautiful landlocked country located in the heart of Southeast Asia but it still faces significant challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3, particularly regarding child mortality. The 2023 Lao Social Indicator Survey III reveals a neonatal mortality rate of 12 per 1,000 live births and under-five mortality at 28, meaning one in 35 children does not survive to age five. Geographic disparities are evident, with higher rates in Oudomxay and Xayabury, while Vientiane Capital fares better. Socioeconomic factors further complicate the situation, as children from the poorest households experience a mortality rate of 41 per 1,000, highlighting the need for improved healthcare and maternal education.

Gender inequality persists, with Laos ranking 137 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index. Women work longer hours but earn only 77% of men's income, with stark gaps in sectors like crafts and agriculture. Addressing these disparities is crucial for empowering women and promoting economic growth. According to the UNDP Lao PDR Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2026, Lao PDR ranks 137 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index but improves to 113 out of 162 countries when adjusted for gender equality. Despite this progress, significant gender disparities persist, particularly in income and workload. Women in Lao PDR work longer hours than men, spending 7 hours daily on productive and reproductive tasks compared to men's 5.7 hours. Yet, women's average monthly income is only 77% of men's. The wage gap is most pronounced in occupations like "craft and related trades workers" and "skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers," where women earn just 56% and 58% of men's incomes, respectively. Even in higher-paying roles like "managers"

and "professionals," where women outnumber men, they earn only 81% and 62% of men's incomes.

The Decent Work Country Programme (2022–2026) emphasizes the urgent need to tackle youth unemployment, which stands at 18.2%. With a NEET rate of 42.1%, many young people face barriers that drive them to seek opportunities abroad. Targeted policies are essential to create sustainable employment pathways. The Decent Work Country Programme for Lao PDR (2022–2026) underscores the urgent need to address the challenges faced by the country's youth in accessing decent work and education, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth (ages 15–24) constitute 22% of the labor force, yet the youth unemployment rate stands at 18.2% (female: 15.5%, male: 20.8%). More alarmingly, the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rate is 42.1% (female: 44.9%, male: 39.1%)—more than double the global average. These figures highlight systemic barriers such as limited access to childcare, women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, and a lack of labor market information. Additionally, the predominantly informal economy means many employed youth face decent work deficits, including skills mismatches, limited job experience, and insufficient access to capital. These challenges force many low-skilled youth to migrate to other ASEAN countries, particularly Thailand, in search of better opportunities.

According to the 2023 Lao Social Indicator Survey III (LSIS) highlights critical challenges in reducing child mortality in Lao PDR. The neonatal mortality rate is 12 per 1,000 live births, infant mortality is 25, and under-five mortality is 28, meaning one in 35 children die before

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their fifth birthday. Over the past 15 years, there has been no significant improvement in these rates. Geographic disparities are evident, with Oudomxay, Xayabury, and Attapeu having the highest mortality rates, while Vientiane Capital, Borikhamxay, and Champasack have the lowest. Socioeconomic inequalities further worsen outcomes: children in the poorest households face a mortality rate of 41 per 1,000, compared to 12 in the richest. Similarly, children of mothers with no education have an under-five mortality rate of 35, versus 5 for those with post-secondary education.

As a landlocked country, Lao PDR has shifted its focus from marine resources to freshwater ecosystems and inland capture fisheries. The Mekong River is crucial to Laos because it serves as a lifeline for food security, livelihoods, and cultural identity. As one of the longest rivers in the world, the Mekong flows through many countries, but its significance is particularly pronounced in Laos. The river supports a rich array of freshwater ecosystems, which are essential for the survival of countless species, including those that are vital for local fisheries. For many communities, the Mekong is not just a water source; it is a fundamental part of their way of life. However, the Mekong faces significant challenges that threaten its health and the well-being of the communities dependent on it. Increasing levels of overfishing and plastic pollution and inadequate waste management practices pose serious risks to the river's ecosystem. Plastic waste not only harms aquatic life but also contaminates the water that local communities depend on for drinking and irrigation.

Lao PDR has shown a strong commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 17, which highlights the importance of partnerships for sustainable development. The 2020 Progress Report: Lao PDR - United Nations Partnership Framework 2017-2021 illustrates the vital collaboration between the Lao government and the UN in shaping policies that promote sustainable development. The UN has provided essential policy advisory support and technical assistance during the finalization of the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP). A Multi-Stakeholder Taskforce, formed with expertise from the UN development system and various partners, assessed the pandemic's impact and proposed adjustments to the NSEDP's policy priorities, focusing on the needs of vulnerable populations.

Key recommendations addressed areas such as macro-fiscal frameworks, trade and private sector development, human capital, and green growth. The UN organized High-level Thematic Policy Dialogues to distill actionable recommendations aligned with national priorities. The UN

Country Team (UNCT), led by the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC), successfully coordinated contributions from the development community during the High-level Consultation on the NSEDP, further strengthening the partnership between the UN and the Lao government.

Recommendations

Our recommendations for Lao PDR on selected SDGs to achieve optimum target are as follows-

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being – Child Mortality

- **Improve healthcare access:** Urgent efforts must be made to enhance the availability and quality of healthcare services in vulnerable communities. This includes increasing the number of healthcare facilities, ensuring they are well-equipped, and providing training for healthcare professionals.
- **Expand maternal education programs:** To empower mothers and improve health outcomes, it's essential to implement comprehensive educational initiatives that focus on maternal health. These programs should cover prenatal and postnatal care, nutrition, and family planning.
- **Reduce poverty:** Addressing poverty is crucial for creating equitable opportunities for all children in Lao PDR. This involves working collaboratively with governments, NGOs, and stakeholders to develop and implement strategies that target economic empowerment, job creation, and access to social services. By investing in sustainable development and community resilience, we can lift families out of poverty, ensuring that every child has the chance to survive and thrive in a supportive environment.
- Increase investment and funding for youth friendly, affordable, high-quality medical facilities and services, including mental health, Sexual and reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services, for young people particularly in rural, and hard to reach areas.

SDG 5: Gender Equality – Salary Gap in Lao PDR

- **Address the persistent wage gap:** To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on Gender Equality, it is essential for Lao PDR to tackle the ongoing wage disparities between genders. Policymakers must implement and enforce equal pay policies that ensure women receive compensation that is commensurate with their skills and experience. This includes conducting regular wage audits and providing transparency in salary structures to promote fairness in the workplace.



- **Reduce the burden of unpaid care work:** Many women in Lao PDR bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, which hinders their economic participation and personal development. It is crucial to implement policies that recognize and value this work, such as providing access to affordable childcare services and promoting shared responsibilities within households. By alleviating the pressures of unpaid care, we can enable women to pursue economic opportunities, contributing to their empowerment and the overall sustainable development of the community.
- Implement Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), for reducing adolescent pregnancy, and VAW that disproportionately impacts the lives of women and girls.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth in Lao PDR

- **Prioritize youth empowerment through education and training:** To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), Lao PDR must focus on empowering its youth by making targeted investments in education, vocational training, and skills development.
- **Implement gender-responsive policies:** Expanding labor market information systems and implementing gender-responsive policies are essential for enabling women’s full participation in the workforce. This includes providing affordable childcare options, flexible working arrangements, and promoting equal opportunities for women in all sectors.
- **Strengthen the formal economy and create sustainable jobs:** To ensure decent work for all, it is crucial to strengthen the formal economy by creating local, sustainable job opportunities. This can be achieved through support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), encouraging entrepreneurship, and fostering industries that promote sustainable practices. By reducing the reliance on migration for employment, we can ensure that Lao PDR’s youth have viable career paths within their own communities. Governments, private sector leaders, and development partners must collaborate to address these challenges.

SDG 14: Life Below Water – Freshwater Ecosystems in Lao PDR

- **Prioritize sustainable fisheries management:** To effectively protect and restore the Mekong River, Laos must prioritize sustainable fisheries management while actively combating pollution. This involves implementing policies that promote responsible fishing practices, such as setting catch limits and establishing protected areas to safeguard aquatic ecosystems.
- **Combat pollution through community-led initiatives:** Addressing pollution in the Mekong River

requires a multifaceted approach that empowers local communities to take ownership of their natural resources. Community-led conservation efforts can foster a sense of responsibility and advocacy for sustainable practices.

- **Invest in waste management infrastructure:** A critical component of protecting the Mekong River is investing in waste management infrastructure to combat plastic pollution. Improving waste collection systems and promoting recycling initiatives can significantly reduce the volume of plastic waste that ends up in the river.
- Additionally, raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution through educational campaigns will encourage individuals and communities to adopt more sustainable behaviors.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

- **Strengthen collaboration among stakeholders:** As we progress toward sustainable development, it is crucial for all stakeholders—including government entities, development partners, civil society, and the private sector—to enhance their collaboration. Increased engagement is necessary, with stakeholders actively participating in implementing the recommendations from the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Include youth in the development process:** A vital aspect of this collaborative effort is the inclusion of youth in the development process. We urge the government to prioritize the integration of SDG education into school curricula, ensuring it is both engaging and relevant for students. Initiatives such as school fairs, interactive workshops, and hands-on projects can foster enthusiasm and awareness about sustainable development among young people, empowering them to become active participants in shaping their communities and future.
- **Encourage innovative financing and strengthen capacities:** To ensure that no one is left behind, we encourage innovative financing strategies and partnerships that specifically address the needs of the most marginalized populations.

The APFSD country and sub-regional briefs were developed through collective discussions and engagements between youth advocates at the APFSD Youth Forum in Bangkok on 19-21 February, 2025. The Lao PDR Call to Action was drafted by Latdavanh KEODALA. Overall supervision was provided by the ARROW Call to Action team.

