

**NEEDS AND POTENTIAL  
FOR RURAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN LAO PDR**







## Acronyms

ADB Asian Development Bank  
ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations  
CIA Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America  
CL Comit de Cooperation avec le Laos  
CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women  
CLCs Community Learning Centres  
CRC Convention on the Rights of the Child  
CWS Church World Service  
DAFEO District Agriculture and Forestry Extension Offices  
EC European Commission  
FAO Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
GAA German Agro Action  
GOL Government of Lao PDR  
JVC Japan International Volunteer Centre  
HIV/AIDS Human Immuno Deficiency Virus/Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome  
ILO International Labour Organization  
IOM International Organization for Migration  
INGOs international non-government organizations  
Lao PDR Lao People's Democratic Republic  
LDC least-developed country  
LPRP Lao People's Revolutionary Party  
LPRYU Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union  
LYU Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union  
MOAF Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry  
MDGs Millennium Development Goals  
MLSW Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare  
MOE Ministry of Education  
Mt metric tons  
NAFES National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service  
NAFRI National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute  
NCAW National Commission for the Advancement of Women  
NGPES National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy  
NPADP North Phongsaly Alternative Development Project  
NPEP National Poverty Eradication Programme  
NTFPs non-timber forest products  
NUOL National University of Lao PDR  
IOs international organizations  
PAFEC Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Extension Centres  
PDDP Rural Development Project of Phongsaly district  
STDs sexually transmitted diseases  
UNDCP United Nations Drug Control Programme  
UNDP United Nations Development Programme  
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund  
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

# **Needs and Potential for Rural Youth Development in Lao PDR**

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## **Introduction**

Lao PDR was a landlocked country, since the regional economic atmosphere has been changed, now becomes landlink, situated in the centre of Indochina and surrounded by Cambodia in the south, China and Myanmar in the north, Vietnam in the east and Thailand in the west. The total area is 236,800 sqKm, of which approximately 87 % is mountainous with sloping hills ranging from 100m to 2.800 m above sea level and only 16 % of the total area is below 200 m.

Laos has a population of about 6.6 million, with a density of 27 persons per sqKm. The yearly growth rate is about 1.4% (2013). The life expectancy of the population is about 65 years (2013).

The population of Lao PDR is demographically classified as young, which is shared by age structure with:

- 41.6 % of aged 0-14,
- 55.2 % of aged 15-64 and
- 3.2 % of aged >65

The country has considered diversity in its ethnicity with 49 ethnic groups having different cultures, traditions and livelihood systems. Some 65% of the population has access to pipe water or protected wells. Electricity has covered 75% throughout the country.

Around 80% of the population lives in rural areas and is dependent upon agriculture and livestock rearing as their main source of incomes. There is about some 600 thousand households depend on agriculture, of which about some 400 thousand rely on subsistence farming.

Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries classified as “a least-developed country” with a cross domestic product per capita of USD 800 (2013).

## **National development policies**

The Government’s overall development priorities aspire “towards total eradication of mass poverty”, which has been declared since 2002 by the Committee of Planning and Cooperation (but now renamed as Ministry of Planning and Investment). The development of the Government’s objectives and guidelines for poverty eradication and sustainable economic growth has been stated since 1996 with the aim of reaching the overall goal of graduation out of the least-developed country status by 2020 through sustainable and equitable development. Two strategies for the development policies have been set since 2000 as:

- High economic growth with equity and
- Access to social services and markets for everybody, particularly those in rural areas.

These two strategies are to be achieved through the eight National Socio-Economic Priority Programmes for: 1) food production; 2) commercial production; 3) stabilisation and reduction of shifting cultivation; 4) rural development; 5) infrastructure development; 6) improved socio-economic management and foreign economic relations; 7) human resource development and 8) services development.

Acknowledging that most of the population is involved in subsistence agriculture, that they have limited access to health care and that some areas haven't access roads for some parts of the year, the National Poverty Eradication Programme NPEP targeted agriculture, education, health and infrastructure (especially rural road and electricity). The NPEP addresses as well trade facilitation and market linkages in most sectors (strategies of environment conservation, gender, information and culture, population, social security and capacity building).

The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) has captured the Government's policies in order to reach its Vision 2020 on Agriculture Development goals as well as to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The NGPES aims to improve livelihoods through rural development and access to markets, which includes developing the agriculture sector from subsistence production, with improved access to credit facilities and improved infrastructure. For agriculture sectors NGPES has three priority development objectives such as: 1) to ensure food security; 2) to enhance agricultural production with a focus on modernization and promoting commercial production and 3) to stabilize- eradicate shifting cultivation.

To facilitate the agriculture sector development, several areas are emphasized in the NGPES, among others the formal and non-formal education are seen as the decisive factor for farmers to gain knowledge about modern agriculture techniques. The government encourages rural farmer to diversify agriculture production through cash crops, horticulture and livestock raising rather than rice production only. The Government is to assist to farmers with better access to credit and proper infrastructure, especially access roads to intensify and sell their products. Provision of adequate training and capacity building to farmers is very needed to help them properly apply modern agricultural techniques aiming to improve yields and efficacy of their production inputs. Beside these, vocational and on-the-job training or farmer to farmer training are as well very considerable. The one who will play this crucially and lead important role is the national agriculture extension and cooperative department in firmly collaboration with local agencies.

### ***Important agricultural policies and strategies***

The MOAF (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) has promoted several strategies in line with the objectives of the NGPES. The most important ones are the Vision 2020 on Agricultural Development and the Strategy for the Agriculture sector (2001–2010).

These strategies aim to help farmers move from subsistence agriculture to market-oriented production with cash crops. Because of the dramatic differences between agricultural production in the Mekong Valley and the remote upland farming areas, the agriculture sector will have to be developed via two different strategies and in two tempi. The transition process in the Mekong Valley has started but needs further support to develop fully. When that is completed, the MOAF will shift to the rural uplands in which a very different approach is

needed because of the remoteness and the different problems encountered in the sloping areas.

Vision 2020 on Agricultural Development and the Strategy for the Agriculture sector (2001–2010) acknowledge that the present organization within the MOAF is insufficient and understaffed and points to a need for human resource development, especially the staff located in the provinces. Improving their capability is necessary to upgrade the knowledge and skills of the local staff and to ensure their direct contact with ethnic groups, which has been an obstacle to developing agricultural practices in upland areas so far.

### **NGPES (National Growth and Poverty Eradication) and youth issues**

The NGPES draws attention to the need for developing the potential of youth as a way to reduce poverty in the country. However, the main focus is on formal education, with improved equity and quality in education through improved access to primary and secondary education and quality improvement of the curriculum.

To fulfil the second goal of the MDGs, *achieving universal primary education*, the Government has introduced an Education For All (EFA) scheme. Increased access to attend and complete primary school should provide education for all. The scheme also aims to encourage parents to enroll their children, especially girls and children from ethnic minority groups. Because many of the remote villages do not have teachers or even children for each grade level, special training will be provided to teachers to work in these areas and to teach multi-grades.

The Government intends also to establish vocational training schools in poor regions and provinces to improve youth's technical skills and expand vocational, technical and higher education. The NGPES recommends improvement of women's and young girls' educational levels and opportunities for income-generation activities through skills training and microfinance.

Rural youth are only mentioned briefly in the agricultural policies, and the NGPES does not specifically focus on vocational training centres with agricultural development activities or other income-generating activities for rural youth. Nor does it give any immediate guidelines on how to contribute to the improvement of rural youth livelihoods.

### ***International agreements targeting youth***

Some of the national policies that are formulated and implemented in Lao PDR are anchored in international conventions of the United Nations or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Government has signed and ratified some of the following UN conventions focusing on children and youth issues:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (ratified in 1981)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (ratified in 1991)
- Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong subregion (signed 2004)
- The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (signed in 2005)
- The Minimum Age Convention (signed in 2005)

Within the ASEAN framework, the responsible ministers for youth issues developed "The Yangon 2000 declaration on preparing ASEAN youth for the challenges of globalization", with programmes targeting skills training for out-of-school youth, sustainable development and entrepreneurship (Aseanyouth, 2005).

By signing and ratifying such international and regional conventions, the Government has an obligation to promote and work within the spirit of the conventions, though it has been slow in some areas.

### **Institutional setting**

The Lao National Assembly is the primary governing institution and elects the president and the prime minister. The prime minister's office has its own secretariat and is responsible for the delegation of assignments to the different ministries. All ministries have the same organizational structure with their own offices and representatives at provincial and district levels. In addition to responsibility for the legislative functions, the National Assembly also has the overall responsibility for the executive functions within the national court system. Lao PDR is a one-party state with a constitution, which mandates the LPRP as the only political party allowed to exist.

LPRP has an extended organization with party representatives at all administrative levels of the country, from national down to the village level.

As LPRP is the only legal political party and thus controls the National Assembly, it has absolute power of the executive and the legislative functions (UNDP, 2001).

### **Government ministries**

There are a number of government ministries operating in the institutional setting, but the following ministries are the main actors regarding development of rural youth:

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has a specific role in promoting sustainable use of natural resources (soil, forest, water, fish, biodiversity and atmosphere), together with agricultural crop and livestock genetic resources through its network of research and extension.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is responsible for formal and non-formal education at all levels and also shares responsibilities with authorities at the provincial and district levels. The MOE is also responsible for higher education, technical schools and teacher training colleges.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has responsibility for managing and implementing health policies and for medical training nationwide.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW) is responsible for labour management and social issues such as human trafficking, people with disabilities and vulnerable children.

### **National organizations with a focus on rural youth**

The Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LPRYU, although LYU is more commonly used) is a mass organization under direct guidance of the ruling LPRP. The LYU has youth member representatives in all government ministries and departments and is active at the national, provincial, district and village levels through LYU youth representatives and youth committees.

Today the organization has approximately 500,000 members aged between 15 and 30 years; of them, approximately 200 000 are female. This age group includes 50 percent of the total youth population. The Young Pioneers, youth aged 6–17, are also part of the LYU.

As an organization, LYU is mainly involved in educational training activities that focus on promoting LPRP's political ideology, including socialism ideals and revolutionary discipline, and is currently working towards the following objectives:

- To maintain solidarity among youth and children;

- To mobilize youth to implement national development goals, based on state and party policy guidelines; and
- To encourage youth to help safeguard national issues aimed at developing Lao PDR towards peace, independence, democracy, unity and prosperity (Aseanyouth, 2005).

LYU's mandate is to promote the physical, social and economic well-being of young people to promote national policies and youth issues, and to represent youth's views. The LYU is currently involved in nine development projects across Lao PDR, with emphasis on education and promoting sexual and reproductive health education. None of the projects that the LYU is involved in focus on rural youth in agriculture or rural development.

**The Lao Women's Union (LWU)** is a broad organization that includes non-Party members and concentrates on issues regarding the development of women in Lao PDR. The LWU is involved at the national, provincial, district and village levels. LWU's work centres on the development of women's rights and gender equality via skills training, income-generating activities, non-farming activities, health issues, family planning, financial support and awareness raising on women's rights. The LWU is also involved in rural development projects with various donors.

#### **International agencies and INGOs focusing on rural youth**

Several international agencies and international non-government organizations (INGOs) work with the rural community and agriculture development throughout the country. Most of the projects do not explicitly target rural youth, but they are implicitly targeted as the activities implemented include agriculture, animal rearing, income generating, primary health care, etc.

*The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)* has developed community learning centres (CLCs), with an emphasis on community development through education in basic literacy, vocational training and income-generating activities in remote areas. The Non-Formal Education Department (NFED) is the implementing agency and has set up, in cooperation with various INGOs and UN agencies, CLCs in 16 provinces to increase literacy and vocational training in rural areas, targeting poor ethnic groups and women. Establishing CLCs is one of the Government's priorities in rural development policies

*The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children Alliance* are working to provide improved education to all children and youth as part of their effort to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in which education is one of the key components. The cornerstone of this work includes formal and non-formal basic education and skills training for children and youth.

*The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Health Unlimited* are each promoting youth reproductive health projects in collaboration with the LYU. The projects aim at promoting sexual and reproductive health awareness among rural youth in some selected provinces. UNFPA works with the MOE on institutionalizing sexual health education through the formal and non-formal education system in ten provinces. And some others like **Church World Service (CWS), Oxfam Australia and Oxfam Hong Kong.**

#### **Situation of rural youth**

Some 80 percent of the population in Lao PDR engages in agriculture, which includes many young people. Agricultural techniques are traditionally passed on from generation to

generation, while modern techniques are difficult to implement or adopt because of poor communication channels and limited education levels of the farmers. This situation suggests that rural young people will, or are very likely to, have the same livelihoods and living standards as their parents – unless they are targeted in rural development and education projects.

The low rates among rural children are attributed to several factors. Rural youth have to contribute to agricultural production from an early age, especially girls who often must take care of siblings when their mothers go to work in the fields. Boys assist their fathers in ploughing fields and in other farm tasks. These family obligations contribute to a high drop-out rate and result in low literacy and general low educational levels in rural areas, especially among girls. Other reasons for children not attending school is the economic situation of the family, in which parents cannot afford to educate their children because they do not have money for clothing and school supplies. Additional reasons for rural youth not attending school are lack of parental support and understanding regarding education and the opportunities it may lead to, and the great distance or no road access to school facilities. Also, not all villages have a primary or secondary school.

### ***Rural youth and education***

In general, the education level in Lao PDR was low. But later on the situation have been gradually changed, up to 2013 the literacy rate has shifted up to 85%, from which 90% for male and 80% for women. For the youth population, the total literacy rate is 95 percent. However, there is a noticeable difference between the national level and ethnic groups. From 1991 to 2002, the primary school enrolment nationwide improved by 25 percent, from 58 to 83 percent.

### ***Rural youth and employment***

Information on agricultural child labour is difficult to obtain as children helping parents in the family business or production is not considered as child labour. However, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of child labour states: "*Child labour includes all work that harms children and keeps them out of school. They have no time to learn or play.*" Approximately 50 percent of rural youth work in the agriculture sector, primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture, where they either are helping the family in the fields or are working their own fields. Other work tasks include collecting water, collecting NTFPs, looking after and feeding animals, cooking and looking after siblings.

As mentioned, Lao people's livelihoods are based on seasonal subsistence agriculture. During the off season, some youth look for jobs elsewhere to support themselves and their families. However, migration is not just reduced to the off season but is taking place all year round due to the general lack of employment opportunities, boredom and influences from the media about the seemingly prosperous or glamorous life in the city. Many youths migrate to urban areas in search of work; boys typically find employment in construction, and girls mostly become employed at garment factories and restaurants. If they do not succeed in the urban area, they might seek work in neighbouring countries.

Youth migration has hit such proportions that some villages in rural upland areas are inhabited only by the older population.

### ***Rural youth and health***

Health issues of special concern include HIV infection and drug addiction. The country currently has a low prevalence for HIV infection, with reported cases making up only 0.1 percent of the population, but still be an important concern to be seriously aware.

Due to socio-economic behaviour, such as rural youth migrating to towns and across the border to Thailand, the risk of an increasing HIV infection rate is apparent. Because of the reality of human trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls, addressing HIV and AIDS is becoming a very important concern in Lao PDR.

Drug addiction has become an increasing problem among school-aged children and young people in general during the past five years. The main drug of consumption among youth is amphetamine-type substances (ATS), also more commonly known as *ya baa*. Abuse of ATS is no longer an urban problem as it is slowly spreading to the rural areas. Where it is a problem, there are varied reasons for its popularity: Curiosity, desire for “fun” or peer pressure has a lot to do with the expanding use. Family problems also have been mentioned as a major reason for trying the drug. There is no evidence indicating opium addicts have switched to the amphetamines; considering that opium use is largely found among older people and that ATS is a drug mainly used by young people, this seems logical. The Government’s strategy regarding illicit drug use dwells on opium production while efforts against ATS abuse are limited to counselling and rehabilitation.

### **Conclusion: Obstacle and Opportunities**

In theory, rural youth have many opportunities to improve their livelihoods. In practice, many obstacles pose barriers or dire challenges to rural youth:

#### ***1a. Obstacles regarding rural youth and education***

Access is a primary obstacle for young people. There are not enough primary schools in Lao PDR to accommodate all school-aged children, and only 35 percent of all primary schools can provide teaching for grades 1 to 5. In many villages, the schools are located far away and children cannot attend unless they stay with relatives or in a dormitory. As well, primary schools are under-facilitated, which means they lack teachers in general, especially qualified teachers, and they cannot provide textbooks.

The situation is much worse regarding secondary education where there are fewer schools compared with primary schools. These schools also are located some distance from most villages, and there is a lack of teachers, especially in rural upland areas. There is also a significantly higher percentage of boys than girls who continue their education to secondary levels.

Another issue is the lack of parents’ support towards educating their children. They do not recognize education as necessary and thus do not give it any priority. Many poor families cannot support their children’s education financially given that they have to pay for school fees, uniforms and stationery supplies. When rural young people do complete secondary school, they have limited options to continue their education. There is a lack of technical and vocational training schools; and few vocational training centres or schools offer training in agricultural subjects targeting rural youth.

#### ***1b. Opportunities regarding rural youth in education***

As a large workforce, rural youth have the potential to contribute tremendously to the country’s development. However, due to their limited education, there is a need for them to pursue training in practical as well as entrepreneurial skills through vocational training schools. But that requires them to at least complete their primary education.

Certainly a higher formal educational level improves the possibility for higher-paying employment and a better life. But through improved access to vocational training schools, especially with a focus on agricultural knowledge and techniques included in the curriculum, youth can learn methods to intensify the agricultural production and improve their living conditions. Training in other practical skills, such as weaving techniques or silk production, also offers opportunities for rural youth. In the absence of formal education, alternative instruction is possible. In particular, on-the-job training through farmer-to-student or farmer-to-farmer training, allows rural youth to experience and learn from other farmers' agricultural practices beyond that learned from working with their family.

### ***2a. Obstacles regarding rural youth and employment***

Employment opportunities for those who have graduated formal or vocational school as well as those with limited or no education is a concern for rural youth. They worry about ending up unemployed, even though almost everyone is working, such as in the family rice field. But they do not consider subsistence agriculture as gainful employment because it does not provide a salary or regular income.

One obstacle for rural youth to enhance their agricultural or forestry production or start a business is the lack of access to financial support or credit. When asked, youth always mention lack of capital as a bottleneck in their attempt to start a business or an innovation process. In some cases, it forces or encourages them to migrate to urban areas where there are more chances of finding counterparts to assist them with their businesses aspirations and interests.

Another threat is the limited infrastructure and limited market access in rural areas, as well as the lack of employment opportunities for youth who have finished formal or non-formal education. Additionally, if a graduate decides to stay in the local community, he or she risks ending up in a job where the skills gained from the education are not used due to lack of job opportunities.

Another issue of concern is that graduates from technical schools located in urban areas often do not want to return to their village because of the poor living conditions and because they prefer life in an urban area.

Limited agricultural production and limited business skills among rural youth are other obstacles. Even though their family can pass on traditional production skills, they still end up with a lack of contemporary skills. Without knowledge and skills in modern agricultural technology, rural youth are at a disadvantage. And their development is affected.

### ***2b. Opportunities regarding rural youth and employment***

Youth involvement in agriculture can be improved through greater attention to job training possibilities. Youth are open-minded, interested in new techniques and quicker in adapting to new methods. One recommended approach is to have youth work as volunteers in villages in cooperation with DAFEO. In doing so, they receive practical training through demonstration plots, pilot projects, etc. They then can transfer the knowledge and skills to the rest of their village. This concept responds to the reality that people's willingness and commitment to be trained and then transfer the new knowledge and skills is greater if the instruction comes from someone they know from the community instead of being taught or passed to them from strangers. Having youth work as volunteers also can ease the language barrier with older farmers, as youth in general are better at reading, writing and understanding Lao language compared to the older generation. It is thus recommended to include male and female upland ethnic group members in the NAFES staff to reduce the language and cultural barriers.

Facilitating and extending youth's access to credit could be the best starting point to encouraging rural youth to invest in agricultural endeavours. This extended access to credit

also can improve youth's possibilities to engage in alternative income-generating activities. Currently, all crops and NTFPs are sold without any or very limited processing at the local level. Processing could be a way to raise income from these products, but it requires skills training. And it has to be incorporated into development projects, which, of course, should be undertaken in a sustainable way without overexploitation of NTFPs.

Another sector where youth labour can be used is in development and infrastructure projects. Establishing new schools, road construction, water-supply schemes and other projects offer future employment opportunities for youth, as does the maintenance needs once they are built. Also, providing improved access to primary health care will require more health care workers, and if young people are provided appropriate training, that could present employment possibilities.

### ***3a. Obstacles regarding rural youth health***

As mentioned previously, rural youth have more limited awareness and less access to information and health care facilities than urban youth. They thus face greater risk of disease infections, which under more urban conditions would be less of a problem because there would be health care facilities providing preventative care. Unfortunately, many rural areas do not even have access to basic sanitary facilities or clean water.

Due to traditions of getting married and giving birth at a young age, rural females are likely to experience more health problems, considering that rural women on average give birth to twice as many children as their urban counterparts. Also, there is a lack of midwife services available in the rural upland areas.

Limited knowledge about health and sexually transmitted diseases heightens rural youth vulnerability to becoming infected with HIV or other STDs. Although the number of HIV infected persons is still low, there is a need for awareness-raising campaigns to prevent the spreading of it.

### ***3b. Opportunities regarding rural youth health***

The increasing focus on reproductive health through awareness raising will help safeguard and improve the lives of rural women through a reduction in child births. The improved awareness and knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases will also reduce the risks of young mothers becoming infected. Also, enhancing basic sanitary facilities will improve the health of rural youth and help reduce diseases caused by poor sanitation standards.

Shifting traditional cultivation patterns also can have positive impact. By changing the agricultural production from primarily rice production into a more varied range of crops would provide the rural population with a more varied diet, which will benefit the general state of health in the rural areas. The positive effect of this could be even more enhanced if agricultural development projects promote the cultivation of especially nutritious fruits and vegetables.

## **Recommendations**

- Rural youth have considerable potential as a workforce and a willingness to help develop their rural communities. But they need good income-generating opportunities to remain in the rural areas. This requires that government, institutions and agencies respond with specific policies & programs directed at rural youth.
- More institutions and international organizations should look specifically at rural youth and target their needs and development. This includes policies aimed at keeping youth in their rural communities.

- Youth should be included in international organizations' development activities in the early phases of projects when they can express their needs and thus develop ownership of the activities.
- Creating youth interest and management groups with specific emphasis on animal rearing, crop production, fishponds, handicrafts, etc., would greatly benefit the implementation of development activities.

**Need to:**

- Improve access to basic education and to vocational training is critically needed;
- Improve the knowledge and skills of agricultural extension staff;
- Improve access to vocational training centres with a curriculum that includes agriculture subjects and even providing alternative training options, such as farmer-to-farmer approaches.
- Promote and improve rural youth's access to funds and microfinance for investment in agricultural production, either through bank loans or revolving funds in villages;
- Improve female farmers' access to credit and other financial services.
- Have a more explicit focus on rural youth in development;
- Implement agricultural and rural development projects with rural youth as a specific target group across the country.

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