

# Reasons for lack of development in laos

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In South East Asia, in the centre of the Southeast Asian peninsula, lies the land-locked country Laos. The country that is now the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR, or Laos) has a slightly greater land area than Uganda and is bordered by several countries. On the north lies China, on the north-east Vietnam, on the south it is bordered by Cambodia, on the west by Thailand, and on the north-west by Burma. These neighbours have, to varying degrees, influenced Laotian historical, cultural, and political development. The recorded history of Laos began in the fourteenth century with Fa Ngum (reigned 1353-73), the first king of Lan Xang.

Prior to this, Laos was inhabited by Mongols. Under Fa Ngum, the territory of Lan Xang was extended and it remained in these approximate borders for another 300 years. In the 1690's conflicts arose with Burma, Siam (Thailand), Vietnam, and the Khmer kingdom, and they continued in the eighteenth century ending in Siamese domination. Early in the nineteenth century, Siam held authority over much of the territory of contemporary Laos, which then consisted of the principalities of Louang Phrabang, Vientiane, and Champasak.

Siam at the time sought to extend its influence in Indochina since it faced conflicts with France, which then had established a protectorate over Vietnam. By the end of the nineteenth century, France had replaced Siam as the dominant power on the South East Asian peninsula. In 1890, Laos was integrated into the French colonial empire of Indochina as a group of directly ruled provinces, except for Louang Phrabang, which was ruled as a protectorate. The French ruled indirectly through the king of Louang

Phrabang and a hierarchy of royal officials, although the French resident supervisor always had the final word.

The French in 1946 signed an agreement with the king of Louang Phrabang that established him as king of a unified Laos within the French Union. The French granted internal rule over a united Laos in 1949 and most of the nationalist leaders, who had fled at the time of the French reoccupation, returned to the country. However, Laos remained part of the French union. In 1954, independence was recognised by the Geneva Conference. In the following years the Pathet Lao, a group of pro-Communist nationalists that was aided by North Vietnam, gained strength as a rival to the Royal Lao Government (RLG).

Coalition governments in 1957 and 1962 lasted only a very short time, and fighting intensified between the two sides. Meanwhile Laos became increasingly involved in the conflict between the United States and Communist forces (Vietminh) in Vietnam. In 1964, the United States began bombing Laos with the aim of stopping the flow of troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran from North Vietnam through Laos to South Vietnam. The bombing continued for several years and caused immense damage. In 1973 a cease-fire was finally arranged in Laos and the following year a coalition government was formed.

In 1975, after the Communist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia, the Pathet Lao took control of government and in December the Lao People's Democratic Republic was declared. After that the American aid was withdrawn, Laos formed special relationships with the Union of Soviet

Socialist Republics (USSR) and Vietnam, which stationed many thousands of troops and advisers in the country. But by 1986 the state of the economy was so poor that the government introduced major reforms, including making the majority of public enterprises independent of state control.

One of the government's aims was to decrease dependence on Vietnam, and in more recent years it has also established better relations with neighbouring Thailand, as well as other countries such as the United States, which has agreed to extend development aid in return for a crackdown on the drug trade. Laos is largely mountainous and forested, and only about 4 percent of its total land area is arable. With about 54 per cent covered with forests, the country is made up of a mountainous area extending north and south throughout most of the country and a small area of lowland on the southern and south-western borders.

The mountainous area covers about nine-tenths of the country and can be divided into a northern section and a southern section. The northern section has heavily forested mountain ranges and plateaux cut by deep, narrow valleys and gorges, and the south section contains more barren forested limestone terraces. The principal river of Laos, the Mekong, enters in the north-west from Thailand and flows south along the border between Thailand and Laos before entering Cambodia. The offshoots of the Mekong rise in the mountains and flow through deep valleys.

The climate of Laos is tropical, but there are wide variations in temperatures within different areas, mainly because of the variations in elevation.

However, the principal climatic features are determined by the monsoons.

The wet summer season takes place from about May to October, while the cool season lasts from about November to February. The remainder of the year is hot and humid. Laos has extensive forest resources, and although there has been a considerable deforestation in recent years, about half of the country is still covered with forests.

There exists a so-called slash-and-burn agriculture which means that forests are burned in order to create fields for growing crops. The consequence if this is that the soil fails to fertilise, the lands are therefore abandoned and even more trees are cut down in another location. Together with poor forest management, the slash-and-burn methods are the main reasons behind the deforestation. Another negative consequence of the reduced forest resources, together with the changes in cultivation, is the deterioration in Laos' abundant water resources.

Less than one-third of the rural population has access to safe drinking water. Recently, Laos has also had great environmental difficulties with its wildlife. About 70 percent of the wildlife habitat was lost during the 1980s, and a number of species of mammal, bird, and plant have been threatened with extinction. The population as of 1996 was estimated at approximately 4.9 million people. The population growth rate is relatively high, it is estimated at about 2.9 percent per year. However, child and infant mortality rates are also high, and life expectancy averages less than fifty-two years.

The population density of Laos is quite low, with more than 85 percent of the population being rural, living in small villages of less than 1,000 people. Rural life is dependant of the changing agricultural seasons, such as

conditions of drought or flood. Those staying in urban areas mostly live in the Mekong River valley towns and those of its offshoots. Vientiane, the capital and largest city of Laos, is also the centre of a very limited industrial sector. The effects of recent economic reforms have been rather limited and mainly concentrated to the Vientiane plain.

There is a great lack of recent statistics of Laos and many of them are not very reliable. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a gross national product (GNP) estimated to range from US\$295 to US\$350 per inhabitant and a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$206 per capita. The Laotian economy is heavily influenced by the weather since it is mainly based on agriculture, which employs most of the population. The main crop is rice but corn, vegetables, tobacco, coffee, and other foods are also grown.

It has been said that Laos has a largely unskilled work force and that it needs development. Advancements such as these are particularly important for two areas with potentially high foreign exchange earnings; agro-forestry and hydropower. Forestry has been a source of economic benefit despite the lack of a modern transportation network. Laos" other many resources include gypsum, tin, gold, and iron ore, but the potential for the exportation of these resources has not yet been realised. However, the government is attempting to expand industrial activities.

By far, imports surpass exports. The country has to import manufactured goods, medicine, and machinery. Laos exports electricity from its hydroelectric power stations, wood products, textiles, coffee, and tin, but

these commodities are all very limited. Laos is also a major producer of opium. The economy depends heavily on foreign aid which comes mostly from Western nations. Some of the aid that the government receives is used to stop the drug trade. Today the literacy rate of Laos is approximately 57 percent.

The education and social services of the country are primitive, although some improvements have been made lately. The LPDR has made a commitment to five years of universal primary education, but limited financial resources and a lack of trained teachers and teaching materials have restricted educational opportunities. Enrolments have increased, however. Western healthcare is largely restricted to the more "urban" areas, due to the difficulties of transportation. Similarly, improvements in health care are constrained by finances and the limited numbers of trained health care workers.

About 85 per cent of the Lao are Theravada Buddhist and many Lao, especially the highland mountain peoples, practice animism. Buddhism has long been a strong force in Lao culture and remains a major influence in everyday life, despite a Communist government. Even top officials worship in the Buddhist tradition. Each Lao village has its own temple, called a wat, which is the centre of festivities and rituals. The Laotian culture is closely knitted with its religion. Buddhist temples in every village serve as intellectual centres.

The life of the Lao peasant is organised around religion, and most activities are directed by the Buddhist calendar. Louang Phrabang and Vientiane are known as "Cities of a Thousand Temples" and have many examples of

traditional Buddhist art and architecture. There are various reasons for the poor economic state and welfare position of Laos. The main reasons are three: political, economical, and geographical. The location of Laos has often made it a buffer between more powerful neighbouring states, as well as a crossroads for trade and communication.

Migration and international conflict have contributed to the present ethnic composition of the country and to the geographic distribution of its ethnic groups. On the other hand, this position has also often meant that the country has been a target for conflicts and considerable pressure. Its neighbours, such as Thailand (Siam) and Vietnam, have tried to influence and exploit Laos' weak position for their own interests, which in turn has been of great detriment for the country. As in most other underdeveloped countries, Laos has not had the capacity to exploit successfully its human and natural resources.

The educational level of the population has stayed relatively low, and its rich natural wealth has not been developed in an appropriate manner. The weak political leadership has resulted in a mismanagement of the economy and of the potential possibilities of its population. Laos is the only landlocked country in South East Asia, and this naturally faces the country with great problems. Its natural resources are mostly unexploited or unsurveyed. Because of its mountainous topography, Laos has few reliable transportation routes.

This inaccessibility has historically limited the ability of any government to maintain a presence in areas distant from the national or provincial capitals.



It has also limited interchange and communication among villages and ethnic groups. The Mekong and Nam Ou rivers are the only natural channels suitable for large-draft boat transportation; furthermore, from December through May low water limits the size of the craft that may be used over many routes. The Khong falls at the southern end of the country also prevent access to the sea.

Despite all the negative aspects of the Laotian political and economical environment that has been described above, many experts predict a relatively happy future for the country in the longer perspective. The country is today in peace and harmony, at least in comparison with the conditions ten or twenty years ago. There is no open threat from its neighbours, and no open rebellion from forces within the nation. The expectations from the donors community have grown, and many observers have great hopes that the economic development will go for the better in the coming years, partly as a consequence of the for relaxed conditions in Laos.