

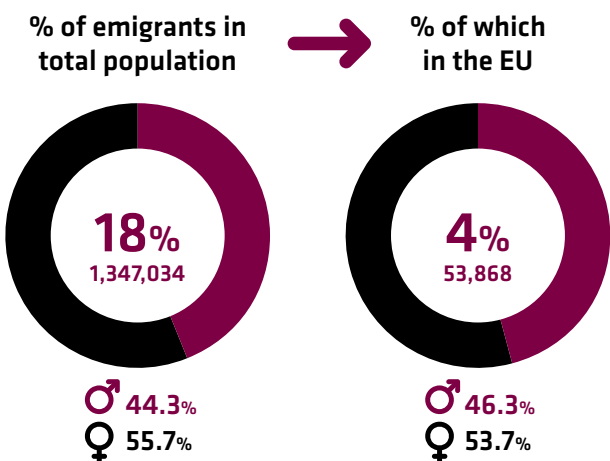


# Diaspora engagement mapping

## LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

### Facts & figures

#### Emigration



#### Top countries of destination

|               |         |
|---------------|---------|
| Thailand      | 934,936 |
| United States | 230,858 |
| Bangladesh    | 89,317  |
| France        | 46,932  |
| Canada        | 15,416  |

#### Political rights

|  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Dual citizenship <sup>1</sup>  | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Right to vote in national elections for citizens residing abroad <sup>2</sup><br>With restrictions | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Voting from abroad<sup>3</sup></b><br>At embassies and consulates                               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

Remittances as a share of GDP: **1.3%**  
Remittances inflow (USD million): **198**

Terminology: While there is no dedicated diaspora engagement policy in Laos, members of the diaspora have been referred to as “Lao expatriates abroad”.<sup>4</sup> In official policies, the terms “migrant workers” and “youth migrants” have also been used.<sup>5</sup>

**Laos does not have a diaspora engagement policy.**

1 Lao PDR (1990), *Law on Lao Nationality*

2 Voting from abroad is allowed only for legislative elections. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024), *Voting from Abroad Database*.

3 Vientiane Times (2021), *Polling stations set up for Lao citizens to vote overseas*.

4 Vientiane Times (2023), *Party, government attach great importance to Lao expatriates abroad*.

5 Lao Statistics Bureau (2021), *9th Five-year National Socio-economic Development Plan (2021-2025)*.

## Overview of the policy and legislative framework



2016



2025

**Vision 2030 and 10-Year Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2016-2025** – Under Part III: “Policies, mechanisms and implementation measures” of the Vision 2030 and 10-Year Socio-Economic Development Strategy, Laos aims to create labour migration policies to support the country’s development.

2021



2025

**9<sup>th</sup> Five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NESDP) 2021-2025** outlines Laos’ national development planning process, highlights the role that young migrant workers play in the country’s growth and recognises the need to invest in their health and education. The plan aims to expand the employment service network to address illegal migration to foreign countries, ensure measures for systemic migration, and address issues of employment among workers returning home from abroad. Under Outcome 2: “Improved quality of human resources to meet development, research capacity, science and technology needs and create value-added production and services”, Laos aims to create 392,197 jobs both locally and abroad.

2021



2025

**National COVID-19 Recovery Plan** lists practical recommendations to help Laos recover from the effects of COVID-19, such as the unexpected return of Lao migrants from abroad and the subsequent loss in remittances, as well as increases in the poverty rate, inequality and unemployment. The plan recognises the lack of migration governance policies, reintegration frameworks, and high-quality data on migrants in the country. Migrant workers are the target group of several recommendations, including the strengthening of the system for sending Lao workers abroad to reduce irregular migration, the development of MOUs with key destination countries (e.g. Thailand, Malaysia), and the establishment of stronger data systems.<sup>6</sup>

### » Trends

As the share of Laotians living abroad has been growing, mostly due to labour migration to neighbouring Thailand, the government has been increasing its efforts to sign memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with countries of destination,<sup>7</sup> as well as better monitor remittances sent by migrant workers. Despite this progress, efforts to engage with the wider Laotian diaspora (i.e. other than migrant workers) to attract highly skilled human capital and diaspora investments into the country appear to remain limited.

Emigration from the country is often pursued by young Laotians seeking jobs to support their families, as the country suffers from a lack of job security and low wages. The number of Laotians migrating continues to increase every year, especially to Thailand, where there is a high demand for low-skilled labour in the agriculture, infrastructure, manufacturing, and service sectors.<sup>8</sup> Migration from Laos is also highly gendered, with an estimated 56% of emigrants being women. However, many of them obtain work abroad through irregular channels and therefore have fewer opportunities for decent employment and less access to protection and services in their countries of destination.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, many political activists who hold anti-regime sentiments also continue to flee the country, mostly into Thailand, and have established diaspora groups that aim to promote democracy and political exiles’ protection and resettlement into their countries of destination. Many of these government critics and activists are being targeted but have little to no protection.<sup>9</sup>

6 IOM (2023), *Migration in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic: A Country Profile 2023*.

7 ILO (2023), *Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers*.

8 ILO (2002), *Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Thai Government and the Government of Lao PDR on employment cooperation*.

9 Walker, T. (2023), *Why are Laos activists being targeted abroad?*



## Achievements

In 2002, an MOU was signed between Laos and Thailand to establish appropriate employment procedures, facilitate the return of workers after the termination of their employment contracts, implement proper labour control measures, and prevent illegal migration, trafficking, and illegal employment.<sup>10</sup> In 2023, it was also announced that Laos aims to promote cooperation more closely with Viet Nam concerning Lao migrant workers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Laos has also pursued agreements and initiatives to facilitate labour migration, including seasonal work, in countries beyond Southeast Asia, such as in South Korea and Japan.<sup>10</sup>

A major milestone in migration governance in Laos came into effect in 2020 in the form of Decree No. 245 on the Placement of Lao Workers to Work Abroad after many years of consultations and refinement. It aims to enhance protections for Lao migrant workers and improve the regulation of recruitment agencies that send them abroad. After the decree, Laos also promulgated Ministerial Agreement No. 1050 on the Management of Employment Service Enterprise in 2022. The agreement put in place a dispute resolution mechanism for migrant workers, providing them a place to report their grievances and seek support.<sup>10</sup>

The country has established the Decree on the Sending Migrant Workers to Abroad 2020, where Article 10 states that migrant workers have the right to work abroad and send money into the country as facilitated by recruitment agencies. However, apart from this, there is currently no other detailed and specific policy that guides the systematic monitoring and management of remittances in Laos.<sup>12</sup> In 2021, remittances amounted to 2.29% of Laos' GDP, not including informal remittances sent by Lao migrant workers.

## Obstacles

- **Lack of migration framework:** Policies to manage the migration of Laotians abroad and engage with them for development remain extremely limited. While the government has taken steps to pass legislation to protect migrant workers abroad, as well as implement initiatives to better harnesses remittances sent back home, it has yet to pursue the integration of migration into broader development policy planning.<sup>13</sup>
- **Remittance systems:** There are limited frameworks on the management and promotion of remittance transactions in Laos, despite their importance in the country's economy.
- **Dearth of data:** There is a need for Laos to improve its collection and management of data on migration, which could help inform policies concerning its diaspora. Many inconsistencies continue to exist in migration-related definitions and methodologies, and statisticians often use outdated systems to manage information.
- **Complex administrative procedures:** While MoUs with countries of destination, such as Thailand, have facilitated an increase in the number of Laotians moving abroad, admission through the MoU process still represents a relatively small proportion of Lao migrant workers. Due to costly, time consuming and complex procedures for recruitment, many enter countries of destination through irregular channels, increasing their vulnerability to labour rights abuses.<sup>14</sup>



10 ILO (2002), *Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Thai Government and the Government of Lao PDR on employment co-operation*.

11 Vietnam+ (2023), *Vietnam, Laos strengthen cooperation in expatriate affairs*.

12 IOM (2022), *Remittance Landscape in Lao People's Democratic Republic 2022*.

13 IOM (2023), *Migration in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: A Country Profile 2023*.

14 IOM (2024), *An analysis of migration trends of Lao migrants for Lao People's Democratic Republic in Two Selected Provinces: Savannakhet and Xayaboury*; ILO (2023), *Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers*.

## SPOTLIGHT: effective practices



### Employment Permit System (EPS) 2023

#### EMPLOYMENT

Through the EPS, Lao migrant workers are able to work in South Korea for temporary labour migration. With the help of the Korean government, the programme coordinates the recruitment, training and oversight of migrant workers, and has proven helpful in reducing recruitment costs and the fees paid by them. The EPS allows them to work in Korea for three years, after which they can renew their contracts for another one year and ten months. Upon return to Laos, migrant workers can also reapply for more employment opportunities in South Korea. The use of the EPS is backed by an MOU between the two countries signed in September 2016.<sup>15</sup>

### QR codes for sending money (2023)

#### REMITTANCES

In 2023, it was reported that Laos will start using QR code transactions to facilitate money transfers and payments by workers and tourists in neighbouring countries. The initiative was implemented to address the lack of effective channels to enable Laotians abroad to send money home to Laos. The pilot phase was conducted with Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia at the end of 2023. Once the system is fully in place, Laos hopes that it will enable citizens abroad to transfer money through the banking system and save transaction costs, helping them avoid risks associated with using informal and unregulated channels. The system will also help the central bank monitor remittances more closely.

### Establishment of employment centres for returning Laotians 2022

#### RETURN, INFORMATION

In the aftermath of COVID-19, the Laotian government set up job centres in every province in the country to provide returning migrants with information on work opportunities. The new centres were also foreseen by the government as sources of monitoring and reporting data on employment policies, enabling the use of labour market information and the promotion of relevant skills in the country.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ILO (2023), *Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers*; Lao News Agency (2023), *Laos, R. Korea discuss Lao worker export to Korea*.

<sup>16</sup> The Nation (2022), *Skilled Lao labourers return to jobs in Thailand*.

## Annex:

# List of Actors

### Diaspora related institutions

- **At regional level**

#### Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) 1967

Laos is a member country of ASEAN, where it often actively participates in dialogues and initiatives to promote safe labour migration in the region. To this end, ASEAN has put in place various strategies, including the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers and the ASEAN Declaration on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN, among others.

- **National institutions**
  - At ministerial level

#### Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW) 1993

MLSW is responsible for leading national and regional efforts to regulate migration and negotiate cross-border agreements with countries of destination. The ministry also works to combat trafficking and implement victim protection programmes, as well as support repatriation efforts.

#### Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)

MOFA is responsible for representing Laos in international affairs and strengthening ties with other countries and with international organisations. It is organised into departments representing each major region (i.e., Asia, Pacific and Africa Department; Europe and America Department), as well as a Lao Overseas Affairs Department and a Consular Department. Laos' MOFA has seven missions across Europe, namely in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

#### Lao Federation of Trade Unions

As Laos' only trade union, their Department of Labour Protection is responsible for protecting the rights of migrant workers. They assist in the resolution of conflicts between workers and recruitment agencies, as well as spread information about the realities of migration among the Lao population.

### Diaspora organisations in Europe



Since nearly all the Laotian diaspora resides in Thailand, with some in the United States, at the time of writing in 2024, no Laotian diaspora organisations were identified in Europe.

Written by: **Maria Regina Tongson**  
Edited by: **EUDI F**  
January 2024

Implemented by



Funded by  
the European Union

