Laos

The Asia Foundation has a long history in Laos. It established its first office in 1958, then managed programs in Laos out of its Thailand office for two decades starting in 1989, and re-established its office in Laos in 2009. The Foundation’s office in Vientiane fosters effective and responsive governance and legal systems; facilitates community-level engagement in natural resource management in order to reduce the negative impacts of development on society and the environment; expands access to information; and empowers women to access rights and socio-economic opportunities.

The Foundation’s current program operates innovative projects across the following sectors:

ACCESS TO JUSTICE
Since the national constitution was adopted in Laos in 1991, many laws and regulations have been enacted. However, the majority of citizens, particularly in remote areas face difficulty in accessing legal information and services. The Asia Foundation is working together with the Ministry of Justice, Lao Bar Association (LBA), Law Committee of the National Assembly, and other government and community-based organizations in an effort to accelerate development of the legal sector and improve access to justice for all Lao citizens.

The Foundation’s support is helping the LBA to build the skills of its members, with a focus on encouraging public interest law. A key achievement of this partnership has been the establishment of the nation’s first legal aid clinics which provide legal aid to poor and vulnerable people, especially women, children, and minority populations. To further facilitate citizens to access justice, The Asia Foundation supports the Ministry of Justice to strengthen Village Mediation Units, including the capacity of their mediators.

The Asia Foundation also supports the Law Committee of the National Assembly to conduct law consultation and law dissemination meetings to keep legal professionals updated on new or amended laws, as well to obtain their feedback on proposed laws.

PROMOTING AND PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN
For over two decades, The Asia Foundation has worked with local partners in Laos to ensure women’s ability to access their legal rights, increase their presence in leadership roles, and provide greater opportunities for women and girls to improve their lives through educational and professional opportunities.

The Asia Foundation is providing full scholarships for 50 young women from poor and low-income families to pursue a four-year university degree at the National University of Laos in Vientiane. These students are majoring in a range of disciplines including social sciences, hard sciences, and foreign languages. In addition to tuition, the scholarship covers other vital expenses, such as books, lodging, and uniforms.
In 2011, The Asia Foundation and the Lao Women’s Union conducted a survey to identify high-risk factors (e.g., industries, demographic profiles) for trafficking-in-persons in Vientiane. Survey results indicated that girls and women with low levels of education and vocational skills are more vulnerable to trafficking. Furthermore, there is general lack of awareness and understanding of human trafficking in Laos. The Asia Foundation is supporting the Lao Women’s Union and the National Committee on Anti-Human Trafficking to address these issues by helping to raise awareness for at-risk populations, as well as increase efforts to improve prevention and reintegration services for victims.

To address the challenge of gender biases related to decision-making and leadership, The Asia Foundation promotes women’s participation in social, civic, and economic processes. The Asia Foundation supports the Gender Development Association to train a broad cross-section of society, from national and local government authorities to villagers and women civil society leaders, to build the prevalence and capacity of women in leadership roles.

**EXPANDING ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

The Asia Foundation assists the Central Library at the National University of Laos, the National Library, the National Assembly Library, the People’s Supreme Court library, and many other school and public libraries across the country to improve their collections and expertise. Librarians with limited foreign acquisition budgets can select books from the Foundation’s Books for Asia program, which donates nearly one million English-language books across Asia each year.

Among other projects, the Foundation supported the Coalition for Lao Information, Communication & Knowledge to increase its digital library with Lao-language articles on critical issues such as law, gender, and the environment. The aim is to encourage Lao citizens who are just beginning to use the Internet to utilize it as a vital source of information and research.

**HELPING COMMUNITIES TO SAFEGUARD ENVIRONMENT RESOURCES**

Laos is a country rich in natural resources, including timber, metals, gems, minerals, fertile land, and water. This diverse landscape is increasingly threatened by unsustainable economic development. The Asia Foundation supports community-driven projects that enable Laos citizens to both benefit from and protect these natural resources which are critical to their livelihoods.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, The Asia Foundation is spearheading a groundbreaking community-based approach to monitoring and managing water resources in Laos. The project educates villagers about the importance of protecting water resources, and engages them to use simple methods to regularly monitor water quality. The water quality data generated is then used as the basis for multi-stakeholder (e.g., government, mass organizations, industry, villagers) dialogue to prevent, minimize, or even reverse environmental problems.