

# Laos

The Asia Foundation launched its first programs in Laos in 1958. Today, the Foundation's office in Vientiane works with local partners and Lao government agencies to strengthen governance and improve access to justice for all Lao citizens, empower women leaders and advance women's rights and opportunities, help communities manage development and safeguard their natural environment, and increase international cooperation and access to information.



## STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE & IMPROVING ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Laos adopted its national Constitution in 1991 and has enacted numerous laws and regulations since then, but the majority of citizens, particularly in remote areas, still lack basic legal awareness. The Asia Foundation works with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the National Assembly, the Lao Bar Association (LBA), and other government and community-based organizations to promote the development of the legal sector and improve access to justice and the rule of law for all Lao citizens.

Support from the Foundation is helping the MOJ and LBA build the skills of lawyers and justice personnel, with a focus on public-interest law. A key achievement of this partnership has been the establishment of the nation's first legal aid clinics—nine offices, six directly supported by the Foundation, that make justice more affordable for the poor and vulnerable, especially women, children, and minority populations. By end of 2017, our partner legal aid providers have provided legal advice to more than 2,300 citizens, including representation of 100 citizens. Several dynamic Lao lawyers have now established their own public-interest law firms, and the government of Laos plans to open



legal-aid offices throughout the country by 2020 – guided by a new Legal Aid Decree and Coordination Unit which the Foundation has supported MOJ to develop.

Recognizing the important role of traditional justice processes, the Foundation also supports capacity building of Village Dispute Resolution Committees. With Foundation support, the MOJ has established the policy and legal framework for community mediation, developed official mediation manuals, and trained mediation master trainers. Professional training for village mediators will begin in 2018.

The Foundation also works with the National Assembly to promote evidence-based and consultative lawmaking. We have supported the Law Committee of the Lao National Assembly to solicit feedback on new and proposed legislation. In 2016, the Foundation helped establish a parliamentary research unit at the National Assembly, which is mandated with providing parliamentarians with information needed for effective policymaking. In the first year of operation, the parliamentary research unit produced six research briefing notes, the first ever in Laos, on topics



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ranging from land policy to regulation of small and medium enterprises.

## EMPOWERING WOMEN LEADERS & PROTECTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

For more than two decades, The Asia Foundation and its local partners in Laos have worked to secure women's legal rights, increase their presence in leadership roles, and help improve their lives through education and professional opportunities. From 2015 through 2019, 35 young girls from poor and low-income families will receive full scholarships from the Foundation to pursue a degree at the National University of Laos. The program includes opportunities to develop critical thinking and professional and leadership skills in addition to academic coursework.

In 2011, the Foundation and the Lao Women's Union (LWU) conducted a survey to identify risk factors for trafficking-in-persons in Vientiane. Results showed that girls and women who lacked education and vocational skills are more vulnerable to trafficking, and it found that public awareness of human trafficking in Laos was low. We are working with the LWU and women's shelters to raise awareness among at-risk populations and break the cycle of exploitation through education and vocational training.

## SAFE-GUARDING THE ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

Laos is rich in natural resources, including water and fertile land, timber, metals, gems, and minerals. But this precious endowment is increasingly threatened by unsustainable economic development. The Asia Foundation supports community-based projects that enable Lao citizens to both benefit from and protect these natural resources that are critical to their livelihoods.

The government of Laos supports sustainable natural resource management, including through Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and River Basin Management (RBM) strategies. In collaboration with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), the Foundation is spearheading a groundbreaking community-based approach to monitoring and managing water resources in Laos. The project engages communities to take a more active and informed role in protecting and responsibly stewarding water (and related natural) resources. As part

of this process, the Foundation has developed and trained more than 10 communities on a simple water resource monitoring protocol. MONRE has included this community biomonitoring data in an official water resources monitoring database. This data provides the basis for collaboration among government, industry, villagers and NGOs to prevent, minimize, or even reverse environmental problems. For example, aquatic habitats are being protected or restored through the work of village fisheries and wetland committees; farmers are applying Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) to reduce agrochemicals; and communities are making more holistic and participatory decisions regarding water use.

In 2016, we launched the "Love Laos, Keep It Clean" ([www.lovelaos.org/clean](http://www.lovelaos.org/clean)) initiative to address waste management challenges. Pilot communities and schools are being encouraged to adopt integrated waste management techniques such as recycling, composting, and proper waste disposal. Through informational videos disseminated via Facebook and Lao TV, the Foundation aims to reach hundreds of thousands of viewers with "Love Laos, Keep It Clean" messages.

## EXPANDING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The Asia Foundation assists the National Library of Laos, the Central Library at the National University of Laos, the National Assembly Library, and many other schools and public libraries across the country to improve their collections and expand access to digital information. We helped establish the digital library platforms for the National Library and University Central Library, as well as provided training on how to use free online journals and learning resources.

More than 30 libraries and branch libraries receive books from the Central Library; and the number of participants increases each year. The Foundation has helped train local library workers to professionally manage books and recordings. 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. The Books for Asia program has provided books to Laos's Central Library since 2009. In 2017, the Foundation's e-book initiative *Let's Read!* was launched in Laos. In years to come, *Let's Read!* will make hundreds of Lao-language books available online for free.

*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*

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