



Pathways to Justice: Learning from the past, charting the future in Asia

Laos (2006 - 2025)

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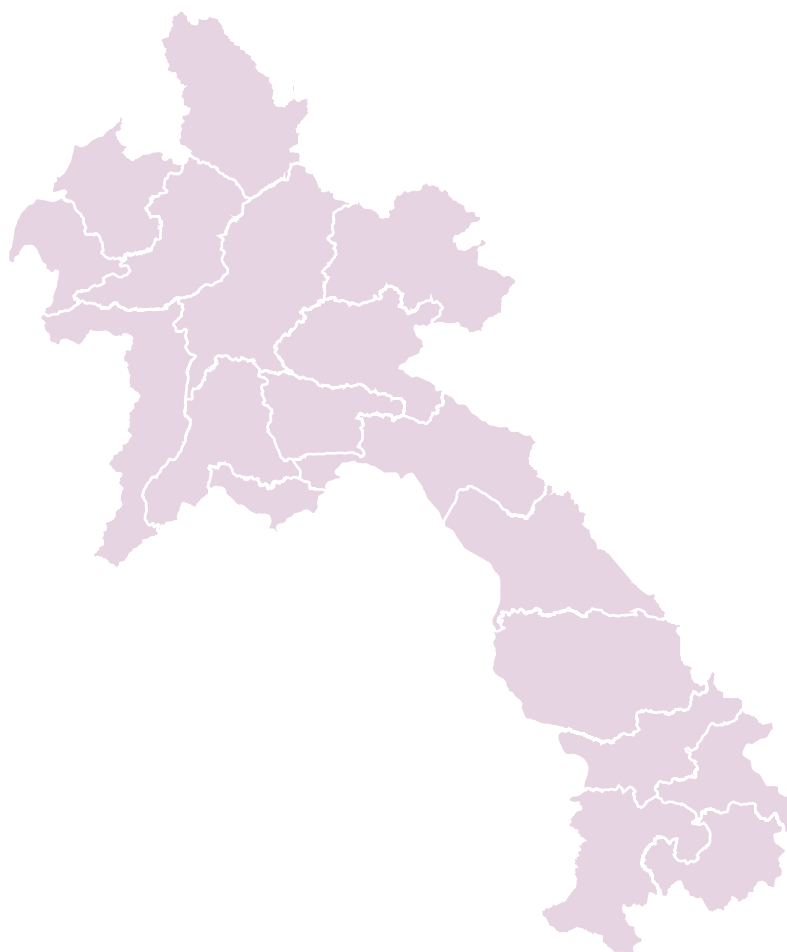


The Asia Foundation

Pathways to Justice: Learning from the past, charting the future in Asia

The Asia Foundation (TAF) is an international nonprofit organization working to solve the toughest social and economic challenges in Asia and the Pacific. Informed by more than 70 years of experience and deep local knowledge, we work with partners across more than 20 countries to improve lives and expand opportunities. In 2023 and 2024, The Asia Foundation conducted a historical analysis of its justice sector work in seven countries—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste. In some of the countries, TAF has carried out justice sector work for five decades, providing an extensive body of work to study. There are successes and failures, and the purpose of this analysis is to learn from those experiences. By assessing what we got right and wrong, what variables we anticipated and accounted for and which we didn't, we are better equipped to identify future justice sector needs and provide effective support and solutions. Each study is presented in a separate paper summarizing TAF's programming, key findings and lessons, and recommendations and opportunities for future justice sector reforms and programs in the country.

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Pathways to Justice in Laos: Lessons from Two Decades of Reform

(2006 - 2025)

Geraldine Yam and Thip Nouansyvong

Executive Summary

For much of Laos' history, the legal profession has been small and largely unknown to the public, particularly in rural and remote areas. Since 2006, The Asia Foundation (TAF) has worked with the Government of Lao PDR, the Lao Bar Association, civil society, and international donors to strengthen access to justice, promote the rule of law, and build evidence-based governance. Building on the country's 2009 Legal Sector Master Plan and successive National Socio-Economic Development Plans, TAF has played a central role in designing, piloting, and institutionalizing reforms in the justice sector.

TAF's major contribution has been its effective support to the development of a nationwide legal aid framework, which has expanded access to justice for people from economically disadvantaged or underserved communities. With the Ministry of Justice, TAF helped draft and implement the 2018 Legal Aid Decree, establishing provincial and district legal aid offices that provide free services such as counseling, legal drafting, advice, and referrals for those lacking resources. In 2023, the government approved a legal aid fund to secure regular national budget allocation and other long-term financing to support legal representation for approved cases.

Since 2018, when TAF supported the ministry in piloting 5 legal aid offices, the system has grown to 94 offices across 10 provinces, supported by new manuals, case reporting systems, and training for Ministry of Justice officers, many of whom, while they had a law degree, had no practical experience in providing legal services. TAF also supported practical legal education at law schools through clinical legal education programs and training for legal professionals, enabled the provision of legal aid by the Lao Bar Association and civil society groups—such as the Association for Development of Women & Legal Education—and convened quarterly roundtables to coordinate the work of diverse legal aid actors. TAF has also contributed to an increase in the number of licensed lawyers operating in Laos, through scholarships for law students.

TAF contributed to policy reforms and training that strengthened village mediation units, emphasizing ethics, limits of jurisdiction, and protection for vulnerable groups. At the national level, TAF support to the Institute of Legislative Studies enabled the regular production of independent briefing notes for the National Assembly, embedding evidence-based policymaking and extending to the provincial assemblies to enhance post legislative scrutiny and representation in their constituency. Between 2019 and 2024, TAF-supported legal aid providers assisted thousands of clients.

The number of licensed lawyers has risen from fewer than 200 in 2018 to nearly 600 in 2025. Civil society organizations, whose work on access to justice was once unrecognized, are now acknowledged in government reports to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These gains have not come without challenges. Legal aid offices remain underutilized, with most citizens still turning to village leaders rather than formal institutions to resolve disputes or grievances. Limited resources, high staff turnover, and weak coordination across justice institutions hamper consistency and quality. Data systems remain inadequate, and long-term monitoring and evaluation are underdeveloped, making it difficult to capture change fully. Yet TAF's experience has shown that small, flexible pilots can build trust and open space for reform, close alignment with government priorities is essential, and sustainability depends on embedding ownership within state and nonstate institutions alike.

Looking forward, TAF will continue working with the Ministry of Justice and partners under the forthcoming 10th National Socio-Economic Development Plan. Priorities include consolidating legal aid offices into centers of excellence, linking them to stronger mediation mechanisms, deepening engagement with legislatures at national and provincial levels, expanding civil society participation in lawmaking, and nurturing the next generation of legal professionals through scholarships and clinical legal education. Even in a constrained operating environment, there is opportunity to make justice more people-centered through youth and private sector engagement, gender-sensitive services, and inclusive communication.

Overall, TAF's work has helped institutionalize improved access to justice in Laos, foster a more professional and inclusive legal community, and promote gradual shifts toward evidence-based legislative governance. The task is to secure sustainability and deepen reforms to make justice more accessible, responsive, and equitable for all Lao citizens.



Two villagers read legal information brochures in Khmu language, a local language, provided by the project at the legal aid exchange visit in Salavanh Province in March 2024.

Why law and justice?

TAF opened an office in Laos in 1958, with operations pausing between 1975 and 1989. After the promulgation of the Lao PDR’s first Constitution in 1991, the executive branch and National Assembly began to take a more systematic approach to developing laws, shaping the country’s legal system, and defining the roles of agencies and judicial institutions.

TAF’s law and justice program in Laos began in 2006. The program’s rationale was closely tied to TAF’s mission of helping rebuild a postwar state that respects the rule of law and promotes national unity. Early initiatives included strengthening village mediation units, supporting the Lao Bar Association (LBA) in legal education and dissemination, and piloting legal aid clinics—particularly to protect the rights of marginalized groups. In a sensitive political environment, these were relatively safe entry points to promote a governance system more responsive to the rule of law.

In 2009, the government released its Master Plan on Development of the Rule of Law in Lao PDR Toward the Year 2020 (the “Legal Sector Master Plan”). It envisioned a legal framework that was uniform, coherent, clear, credible, and predictable; accessible to all; and developed in a transparent, participatory manner. The plan prioritized stronger legal drafting, better implementation of laws, and improved public respect for laws. While the plan invited cooperation with international organizations and donors, legal aid was not initially included as a priority. Nonetheless, many laws were earmarked for development or amendment, and the National Assembly began systematically reviewing legislation.

Since 2011, Lao PDR’s five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plans (NSEDP) have reflected a growing focus on governance and justice. The current 9th NSEDP (2021–2025) opens with the objective of preparing Laos for graduation from least developed country status, improving livelihoods, and ensuring fair and inclusive access to benefits. TAF’s law and justice work has evolved in step with these priorities, ensuring that development occurs in ways that uphold and protect the rights of citizens, especially those from economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities, while also helping to shape new initiatives in the justice sector.

Areas of work

Building Access to Justice through Legal Aid

One of TAF’s Laos office’s most significant achievements has been establishing a nationwide legal aid framework. Work began in 2008 with support to three LBA legal aid clinics—one each in the northern, central, and southern regions—funded by the McConnell Foundation under the Improving Access to Justice for Lao Citizens project. Although the 2009 Legal Sector Master Plan recognized the importance of legal aid, a formal framework was still absent. LBA members had agreed to provide free services, but the MOJ required a legal mandate to formalize this role.¹

In 2013 through 2018, TAF supported the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) in piloting five government-run legal aid offices.² Building on this experience, TAF helped the ministry develop a policy and legal framework that culminated in the 2018 Legal Aid Decree. The decree established legal aid offices at provincial and district levels, with responsibilities for public law dissemination, legal counselling, and document drafting—but not courtroom representation, which is restricted to licensed lawyers.

The institutionalization of legal aid enabled protection of the rights for vulnerable groups including the economically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, women survivors of violence, and victims of trafficking—to access free legal services. TAF also supported the MOJ in designing a legal aid fund, approved in 2023, alongside regulations to secure long-term state budget allocations. In the interim, donor funds covered the costs of legal representation, allowing clients from vulnerable groups to pursue cases in court and providing a model for how the fund could function in the future.

Strengthening the Ministry of Justice to Deliver Legal Aid

The Legal Aid Decree drew new attention and investment into Laos’ justice sector. Through funding from several donors, TAF’s role was to build the MOJ’s capacity at both policy and operational levels. At the central level, TAF helped establish management structures and administrative systems for nationwide legal aid. This enabled the MOJ to expand from 5 pilot legal aid offices to 94 offices across 10 provinces.

Beyond financial support, TAF provided technical assistance to ensure quality and consistency of services. This included developing and updating a legal aid manual, introducing case management and reporting procedures, and training provincial and district ministry staff—most of whom were not lawyers—on substantive law and client-facing skills. To reach the public, TAF also supported the creation of simple legal information materials and short docudramas on common legal issues, many produced in local languages. These complemented the MOJ’s law dissemination mandate.

1 Interview with representative of legal association, August 5, 2024

2 MOJ first legal aid offices: Oudomxay, Xayabouly and Champasak provinces, and Kaenthao and Xienghone districts

Assisting the Ministry of Justice to Strengthen Village Mediation Units

A longstanding focus of the Access to Justice Project has been to improve village mediation, a customary practice in Laos that was formally recognized in 1997 and brought under the MOJ's responsibility. Village mediation units are grassroots justice bodies that resolve disputes within villages through peaceful means, helping preserve social order.⁴ For many citizens—due to custom, preference, lack of awareness, or limited access to formal systems—village mediation remains the most common avenue for justice. While the units offer quick and inexpensive resolution, the quality of outcomes has often been uneven, particularly in sensitive cases such as domestic violence. Over the years, TAF has supported the MOJ in strengthening the units through:



Research and analysis on gender and social inclusion.



Inputs into legislation, including the 2016 subordinate regulations and the 2021 Decree on Village Mediation Units.



Development of manuals and training packages aligned with new legislation.



Training of Trainers for provincial and district ministry officials to cascade knowledge to village mediators.

These resources emphasize mediation rather than arbitration, mediator ethics, and clear limits on village mediation unit jurisdiction—important safeguards to ensure fairness and protect vulnerable groups.

Parliament Strengthening Program

Regarding governance, TAF has worked with the National Assembly to strengthen its lawmaking and oversight functions. This began in 2016 with modest support to the newly formed Institute of Legislative Studies (ILS), helping staff conduct research and prepare briefing notes on draft laws and policy issues. These independent analyses provided parliamentarians with a stronger evidence base for debate and decision-making.⁵ The early results were well received, and since 2020, donor support from the U.S. State Department and the governments of Australia and New Zealand has expanded the program. TAF now works directly with National Assembly members, committees, and the Provincial People's Assemblies to enhance their ability to scrutinize the executive and respond to and represent their constituents.

⁴ Government of Laos (2019), *Master Plan on Development of the Rule of Law in the Lao PDR Toward the Year 2020*; Decree on Village Mediation Units 2021

⁵ Interview with TAF staff, February 13, 2024; Interview with TAF Staff, August 2, 2024

This program has helped cultivate a culture of evidence-based policymaking, gradually increasing parliamentarians' trust in research outputs and broadening their openness to independent information.

Key Partners

TAF's Laos office maintains a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Justice, primarily working with its Justice Administration and Promotion Department and Law Dissemination Department. Legal aid offices operate through the provincial and district offices of justice.

With the National Assembly, TAF works closely with the ILS and the International Cooperation and Planning Management Secretariat, and more recently with parliamentary committees and provincial people's assemblies.

TAF also partners with CSOs and INGOs—notably those focused on women's rights, inclusion, and countering violence against women and girls and trafficking—to expand legal empowerment and social justice. Collaboration with law schools and the National Institute of Justice has introduced clinical legal education and community service models, inspiring new generations of legal professionals.

Impacts

Increased Access to Justice through Legal Aid

Legal aid is now institutionalized across Laos, providing citizens from disadvantaged groups with a formal avenue to pursue justice. The 9th NSEDP even includes an indicator on the provision of legal services through provincial and district legal aid offices. Between 2019 and 2024, legal aid providers supported by TAF assisted more than 5,000 individuals.⁶ A 2022 survey of clients in six provinces showed that 75 percent were at least moderately satisfied with the services received.⁷

Beyond direct representation, wider law dissemination efforts—through printed materials, multimedia products, and community outreach—have increased public awareness of legal rights and services. Vulnerable groups now know where to seek support.⁸

Legal aid clients supported by TAF and its partners include a child and a person with a disability who were victims of rape, a juvenile offender, pregnant women in custody, and a survivor of harmful customary practices. Without the legal aid framework, these individuals would likely have had to navigate legal system without representation—if they were able to have a hearing at all. The establishment of legal aid has also been highlighted by the government in its 2023 and 2024 periodic reports to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a concrete achievement in advancing access to justice.

6 The Asia Foundation (2024). Cost Extension Proposal to USAID for the Legal Aid Support Activity, internal document

7 Project Management and Implementation Committee under the MOU between the Ministry of Justice and The Asia Foundation (2022). *Mid Term Evaluation Report on The Promotion of Access to Law and Justice Program for Lao People*, internal document

8 Ibid.

Strengthened Capacity of the Ministry of Justice

Up until 2024, TAF had supported 94 legal aid offices, and 95 percent of 74 legal aid officers surveyed said that they have used skills gained from program activities in their work, and many expressed appreciation for the activities.⁹ As of 2025, even with funding limitations, TAF continues its partnership with the MOJ to implement legal aid services in 10 target provinces, with particular emphasis on three model provinces—Xayabouly, Vientiane, and Savannakhet—where efforts are focused on enhancing service quality and building the capacity of legal aid offices and village-level mediation mechanisms. For the remaining seven provinces, TAF provides support through a competitive funding process. This approach encourages provincial offices of justice to develop work plans with budget proposals, fostering skills in financial planning and project design. It also prepares them to request future state budget allocations and sustain legal aid services beyond the project’s duration—an objective that aligns with the MOJ’s long-term vision for institutional sustainability.

With a view to sustainability, TAF prepared master trainers within the MOJ on the legal aid and village mediation manuals, as well as facilitation skills, so they can take ownership of, and lead future capacity development of provincial and district offices of justice—which will then train village mediation units—beyond the term of current funded projects.

A More Engaged Legal Profession and Justice Sector

The legal profession in Laos has expanded significantly: from fewer than 200 licensed lawyers in 2018 to 588 by 2025.¹⁰ TAF supported at least 30 of these lawyers through scholarships, which enabled law graduates from marginalized communities to complete professional training at the National Institute of Justice.

TAF’s investments in professional development—through the LBA, Clinical Legal Education, and pro bono initiatives—have also borne fruit.¹¹ Of the more than 300 students who graduated from clinical legal education programs, around half are now working in law or justice institutions, carrying forward rule-of-law values and social justice commitments.¹²

There is also growing government recognition of the role of lawyers and CSOs in supporting citizens from vulnerable groups and communities.¹³ For example, the government’s 2023 periodic CEDAW report highlighted ADWLE’s legal aid work with women survivors of violence and its gender sensitivity training for mediation units. Such recognition signals the increasing legitimacy of CSOs and their contributions to justice reform.¹⁴

Improved Lawmaking and Parliamentary Oversight

In 2017, with TAF support, the ILS produced its first briefing notes for parliamentarians. Initially, these were sporadic, inconsistently distributed, and not widely trusted. Continuous engagement and capacity-building by TAF changed this. By 2024, the ILS was producing briefing notes for every ordinary session, with 11 notes prepared for the most recent session—a fourfold increase compared to earlier years and covering nearly every new or revised law tabled for deliberation.

9 Data from evaluation of the MOU extension between the Ministry of Justice and The Asia Foundation collected in July 2024

10 LBA internal report in July 25, 2025, there were 588 licensed lawyers (F:154/M:434).

11 Interview with representative of legal association, August 5, 2024

12 The Asia Foundation (2024). Cost Extension Proposal to USAID for the Legal Aid Support Activity, internal document

13 Interview with development partner representative, August 1, 2024; Interview with representative of legal association, August 5, 2024

14 Interview with development partner representative August 1, 2024



A mock village mediation during the Village Mediation Skills Training in July 2025 in Phalanxay District, Savanakheth Province, which is one of the three model provinces of the project.

The ILS now develops these products independently, with growing demand from the National Assembly’s President and Standing Committee. Parliamentarians report that the notes have improved debates and contributed to more substantive discussions on draft laws, though it remains difficult to quantify direct impacts on decision-making.¹⁵

TAF’s relationship with the National Assembly has also matured. The Assembly increasingly seeks TAF’s support on sensitive topics such as balancing tourism with hydropower development, showing gradual cultural shifts toward openness, accountability, and democratic principles.¹⁶

Ways of working

Starting Small, Building Relationships, and Adapting to Needs

The Access to Justice, legal aid, and parliament strengthening programs began with small-scale pilots rather than large, prescriptive projects. These pilots were demand-driven, allowing TAF to respond to counterpart interests and build sustained relationships, instead of implementing external agendas. Flexible private donor funds made it possible to experiment with modest initiatives, cultivate relationships, and demonstrate results that later attracted larger donor investments. This gradual approach-built trust with key counterparts. For example, TAF’s early work in legal aid established credibility with the MOJ.

In a context where traditional political economy research is restricted, TAF has relied on a relationship-centered approach to political economy analysis. By understanding the pressures and constraints officials face, TAF could design projects that aligned with political realities while still opening space for reform.¹⁷

15 Interview with TAF Staff, February 13, 2024

16 Interview with TAF Staff, August 2, 2024, The Asia Foundation (2024). Progress Report on Legislative Development Support to the National Assembly

17 Ibid.

Alignment with Government Policy Priorities

Given the highly regulated environment for international NGOs in Laos, TAF has had to ensure that its programming aligns closely with government priorities. Legal aid initiatives were deliberately framed as top-down, state-led reforms, supporting the MOJ to institutionalize services and strengthen civil servants' technical skills.

This alignment has allowed TAF to operate effectively within official boundaries while still advancing meaningful reforms. However, it has also constrained opportunities to collect direct community feedback or implement more people-centered approaches. Despite these restrictions, TAF has found creative ways to incorporate citizen perspectives, such as:



Analyzing legal aid case data and client reports.



Producing information materials and public service announcements in local languages.



Training interpreters (in local and sign languages) to support survivors of violence against women in legal proceedings.

Institutionalizing Reforms for Sustainability

A consistent feature of TAF's work has been building local ownership so that reforms can endure beyond donor funding. This has involved:



Helping the MOJ and the LBA establish strong policy and operational frameworks.



Investing heavily in human resource development.



Positioning counterparts to cascade knowledge through training-of-trainers models.

TAF also dedicated resources to strengthening the institutional capacity of core partners such as the LBA and ADWLE, enabling them to operate more independently and attract new funding streams.

The early termination of USAID’s Legal Aid Support program in 2025 underscored the importance of sustainability. TAF is now focusing on consolidating previous capacity-building efforts by developing a limited number of legal aid offices into centers of excellence and training hubs for the broader network. This approach ensures that institutional knowledge and momentum are preserved despite funding uncertainties.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The challenges encountered by TAF’s Laos office in its law and justice programming can be divided into two categories: those arising from the macro-environment and those related to specific programs.

Macro-Environment Challenges

Operating in Laos requires all INGOs to secure a memorandum of understanding with a government partner. In recent years, memorandum requirements have grown more complex, requiring significant investment of time and resources.

The development partner landscape has also become more crowded. Whereas TAF was once one of the few actors in the justice sector, the MOJ and the National Assembly now coordinate with multiple donors and implementers. While this has brought more resources to the sector, it has also created competing demands on government counterparts, causing delays in implementation and limiting the MOJ’s ability to deliver on the full scope of TAF-supported programming.¹⁸

Program-Related Challenges

A persistent challenge has been the underutilization of legal aid offices. A survey across nine districts in three provinces found that only 1 percent of respondents would go to provincial or district office of justice or the LBA for legal issues, compared to 47 percent who would approach the village chief.¹⁹ This reflects preferences, cultural norms—deference to village authorities and customary practices—and limited public awareness of formal legal aid services. Even when citizens do access legal aid offices, service quality can be inconsistent. Factors include:



Limited numbers of trained personnel.



Resource shortages at provincial and district levels.



High civil service turnover.

18 Interview with TAF Staff, August 2, 2024; Written interview with development partner representative, August 6, 2024

19 National Institute of Justice, BABSEACLE & CEGGA (2023). 2023 Laos Access to Legal Services Survey: Key Insights brochure

Coordination across the legal aid ecosystem also remains a challenge. Vertically, gaps persist between the central MOJ and subnational offices of justice. Horizontally, coordination among the MOJ, the LBA, ADWLE, and other providers such as the Lao Women’s Union is still limited. Justice agencies themselves—including courts, prosecutors, and police—sometimes lack understanding of the role of defense lawyers in criminal cases, which can further impede access to justice.²⁰

Finally, TAF has had difficulty measuring long-term impacts. Data collection across MOJ systems is weak, and—like many others in the development sector—TAF has historically underinvested in monitoring and evaluation.²¹ While TAF assesses training activities through pre- and post-tests, there has been little follow-up to capture institutional or behavioral change over time. More participatory approaches—such as stories of change or client feedback mechanisms—would help capture the lived experience of justice users and strengthen program learning.²²



A villager visits the mobile clinic to seek legal assistance and information from the legal aid providers at the legal aid exchange visit in Vientiane Province in February 2024.

Recommendations for Future Work

Aligning with National Priorities under the 10th NSEDP

Future programming will continue to be shaped by the Lao government’s evolving policy agenda, particularly the forthcoming 10th NSEDP. Alignment with state priorities will remain essential for securing approvals and sustaining collaboration. At the same time, TAF must balance this alignment with donor funding realities, the broader operating environment for INGOs and—most importantly—the justice needs and interests of the people of Laos.²³

20 Interview with representative of a legal association, August 5, 2024

21 Interview with TAF Staff, February 13, 2024

22 Abeyrathne, A., Songbandith, T. & McCravy, T. (2024). Final evaluation of the Strengthening Evidence-Based Policymaking in the Indo-Pacific project implemented from 2020 to 2024, internal document

23 Ibid.

Over the past 20 years, TAF has played a central role in shaping the legal aid framework in Laos. Building on this foundation, future justice sector programming should focus on technical improvements and service delivery, while also creating incremental entry points for more people-centered justice approaches.

Strengthening Access to Justice and Village Mediation

With ongoing support from private donors such as The McConnell Foundation, TAF will continue to partner with the MOJ to improve the quality of legal aid services. Priority areas include:



Developing selected legal aid offices into centers of excellence.



Enhancing the mediation and facilitation skills of village mediation units.



Linking mediation unit services more closely with legal aid offices, so that disputants can be referred for additional legal support when needed.

This work will be especially important as the government implements administrative restructuring, which could affect the roles and resourcing of justice institutions at subnational levels.

Deepening Governance and Parliamentary Engagement

TAF has strong momentum with the National Assembly and the ILS, and there is clear appetite to continue strengthening evidence-based policymaking and enhancing legislative oversight. Extending this work to the provincial assemblies is a natural next step, given their proximity to citizens and their potential to better represent local needs. With targeted training, research support, and tools for citizen engagement, these assemblies could become a key channel for making governance more responsive and inclusive.

Dedicated resources for independent research, policy briefs, and constituency consultations would allow committees to deliberate with greater authority and ensure laws are grounded in credible analysis. Equally important is building the Assembly's ability not just to scrutinize legislation tabled by the executive but also to initiate and propose new laws. This means training MPs and staff in legislative drafting techniques, creating pathways from ILS research to law proposals, and building partnerships with CSOs, universities, and legal aid providers. Future programming could also explore synergies between parliamentary support and other TAF initiatives—for example, using legal aid data or civil society perspectives to inform debates on justice sector reforms.²⁴

24 Interview with a representative of a legal association, August 5, 2024

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Interviews

Interview with TAF staff and representatives of relevant partner organizations were undertaken in late 2023 and early 2024.

