

COUNTRY PROFILE

LAO-PDR

1. Geography and Topography

Lao PDR is located in the center of Indochina, sharing borders with China to the north, Myanmar to the northwest, Thailand to the west, Cambodia to the south, and Vietnam to the east. Its total area is 236,800 square kilometers. Around 70% of its terrain is mountainous, reaching a maximum elevation of 2,820 m in Xieng Khouang Province. The landscape of northern Laos and the regions adjacent to Vietnam in particular are dominated by hills. The Mekong River is the main geographical feature in the west and, in fact, forms a natural border with Thailand in some areas. The Mekong flows through nearly 1,900 km of Lao territory and shapes much of the lifestyle of Laos. In the south, the Mekong reaches a breadth of 14 km, creating an area with thousands of islands. The country enjoys a tropical monsoon climate with two distinct seasons - the rainy season from the beginning of May to November and the dry season from December to April (Diopenes 2003).

2. Disasters and Their Impact on the Environment and Communities

Lao PDR is among the least developed countries. It ranks 143rd of 173 in the Human Development Index (HDI) of 2000. As of mid-2002 estimates, the population of Lao PDR has reached 5,777,180 of which about 85% of the population are rural dwellers. Population below poverty line is approximately 40% in 2001 (CIA World Factbook cited in Diopenes 2003).

The main causes of poverty, according to the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, in order of priority are: i) land problems, ii) no cash investment to pay for rice while improvements are being made, iii) livestock disease, iv) natural disasters and pests, v) environmental degradation, vi) lack of water for potential agricultural production, and vii) difficult access to rural credit (Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper 2001).

In the same report, other factors contributing to poverty include lack of village leadership, relocation, insufficient health services, too many children, lack of commercial skills, lack of government assistance, low prices for agricultural products, opium addiction, UXO (unexploded ordnance) contamination and theft.

Although the country "seems to be well protected from typhoons and wind storms", the country suffers from annual and recurring floods, droughts, infestations and fire. Lao PDR, located at the lower Mekong basin, experiences flooding from May to September when the amount of water increases in the upper Mekong. The flood in 2002 damaged 27,210 hectares of the 292,219 hectares planted to different crops (Ministry of Agriculture 2002). This accounts for only 9.3 per cent of total but in a country where the poor is far less resistant to economic shocks and where the public sector could offer few safety nets, these damages contribute considerably to people's poverty.

In contrast, the mountainous areas heavily dependent on rain water for their agriculture, suffer from drought. This has always resulted to lack of drinking water, and lack of water for domestic use and agricultural production. Pests infestation plague farm lots. From

1997 to 2000, more than 500 incidents of fire occurred and this includes cases of forest fire (Phetsavang nd).