



POLICY BRIEF

Laos climate change contributes to unsafe migration: addressing the impacts for vulnerable children and youth

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Summary

This policy brief provides a call to action for development partners of Laos and Thailand, the primary destination of choice for Lao migrants, to address key drivers of distress migration in communities of origin and to make migration safer, more humane and more just for Lao parents and children alike, providing more support for those who stay behind and those who go, empowering children to help shape a better future for themselves.

The policy challenge

The research finds the mounting pressures of climate change on livelihoods are contributing to migration under distress. It also finds that vulnerable rural low-income Lao families who are reliant on natural resources and have the weakest buffer are by far the most exposed. Accounts from families dependent on subsistence agriculture revealed that they are resorting to migration as a last option to make ends meet. The element of distress is significant because it amplifies the risks and exacerbates the negative impacts migration can have. Lao families migrating in distress are more likely to do so without legal protections and move in stages that leave them physically distanced from each other and their social safety networks, placing children and youth into precarious positions with heightened risks of abuse and exploitation.

The response needed

Policies in Laos and destination locations will need to recognize how the issues of climate change, distress migration, and exploitation are interconnected, and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable, and mobilize domestic and international resources to support them and their specific needs. Further action is needed in Laos to address the financial stressors that are triggering distress migration among the most vulnerable families, especially as climate change increases the frequency and severity of natural hazards, triggering financial shocks for rural poor of Laos. These actions could include improving the resilience and reliability of rural infrastructure, supporting communities to adapt livelihoods for shock resilience, and providing timely targeted relief to allow faster livelihood recovery post-disaster and to protect against the adoption of negative coping mechanisms such as harmful debt that further traps families into poverty and financial distress.

Policy enhancements can be made in Laos, Thailand and other destination countries to make migration safer for children of low-income earners, including to address unintended impacts of current migration policies. Where these policies have failed to fully account for the drivers, dynamics and pathways of distress migration, they have inadvertently contributed to deprivation and exploitation of vulnerable children and their families.

This policy brief outlines recommended actions necessary to strengthen the enabling environment for safe, orderly and dignified migration that upholds the rights, well-being and opportunities of migrants, particularly vulnerable groups such as children. It draws on insights from field research and interviews conducted with dozens of children, young people, parents and leaders across two vulnerable communities of **Soukhuma district** in Laos, as well as an in-depth review of national and international research, policy-oriented reports and insights from experts.¹

¹ The findings set out in this report draw from research conducted across three countries during 2023 through a partnership between World Vision East Asia and Stockholm Environment Institute. For further reading and methods refer to the full findings report: VVigil, S., Steiner, C., Kim, D., Flores, D., & Davis, M. (2024). Climate change, vulnerability and migration: Impacts on children and youth in Southeast Asia: <https://www.wvi.org/eastasia/research-climate-change-vulnerability-migration>

Context

The Laos economy has grown rapidly in since the 1990s with substantial investments made into national infrastructure to increase connectivity and diversification away from agriculture into mining and tourism. The impact has been a significant reduction in poverty from 46% to 23% from 1990s to 2018. However, development has been inequitable. The majority remain largely rural, 70% are dependent on agricultural production or informal employment and highly exposed to economic and climatic shocks, with frequent disasters.² Laos is highly vulnerable to climate change, ranked 142 out of 181 countries in the ND-GAIN Index, and the increasing frequency of climate change induced natural disasters are hindering development, amplifying disparities and pushing people deeper into poverty.³ An estimated 31% of the population are children less than 15 years old and ethnically diverse, with more than 49 ethnic groups.⁴ Education rates are low, with just 36% of those over age 25 having any secondary education.⁵

Income disparities across Southeast Asia have been a pull factor for regional migration from Laos, however internal and external migration patterns among Lao people have fluctuated significantly, growing rapidly in the early 2000s, shrunk back following the global financial crisis, and have begun to rise again since 2015.⁶ As of 2020, close to 1.3million Lao people lived abroad, 56% of them female, although recent data shows higher populations of males leaving. Internal migration is also prevalent, representing 16.7% of the population.⁷ As the most developed country in the Greater Mekong Subregion with average wages double those at home, Thailand receives four times more Lao labour migrants than any other country.⁸

The villages visited in Soukhuma district are an example of the high rates of deprivation still experienced by significant portions of the rural population. Among those interviewed, hunger was common, families relied on agriculture, especially rice or cassava and raising livestock and poultry, many lacked road connection or access to services and could not readily travel to school or to jobs outside their villages. Less than a quarter had ever completed even primary school. Their livelihoods had been devastated during recent climate events. Rainfall is reducing overall and becoming more extreme making drought now commonplace, and when floods increasingly hit, villages are cut off from any transport or access. Many migrate, typically long-term, to Thailand after hearing about job opportunities. Migration was a marker of desperation. The households that had not resorted to migration owned land and were relatively wealthy.

Findings

Climate pressures are a key driver of migration, especially in distress

- Among the communities interviewed, distress migration was common, particularly as a result of climate-disrupted livelihoods leading to debt and food insecurity. A significant portion (approximately 20%) are struggling were struggling to feed their family during certain months of the year and lack dietary diversity due to low crop yields, crop failures, and/or a lack of stable work. Many households faced crushing debts, often linked to floods, droughts or storms.
- The negative impacts of climate change on livelihoods leading to financial distress were most notable among villages and families reliant on natural resources for food and income – cassava, rice, livestock and fishing.

² Rural population is 63.8% in 2020, IOM. (2023). Migration in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: A country profile: <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-lao-peoples-democratic-republic-country-profile-2023>; FAO Country Profile: <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/120>

³ ND-GAIN Index. (2022). Laos Country Profile. [https://gain-new.crc.nd.edu/country/laos​;:contentReference\[oaicite:0\]{index=0}​;:contentReference\[oaicite:1\]{index=1}](https://gain-new.crc.nd.edu/country/laos​;:contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0}​;:contentReference[oaicite:1]{index=1};); World Bank. (2022). Lao PDR - Vulnerability. [https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/laopdr​;:contentReference\[oaicite:2\]{index=2}​;:contentReference\[oaicite:3\]{index=3}](https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/laopdr​;:contentReference[oaicite:2]{index=2}​;:contentReference[oaicite:3]{index=3}).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Data as of 2022, World Bank database: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CUAT.LO.FE.ZS?locations=LA>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UNICEF Country Migration Profiles: Laos: <https://esa.un.org/miqmqprofiles/indicators/files/LaoPDR.pdf>

- Water shortages and drought are limiting dry-season cultivation and leading to increasing extraction of groundwater reserves.
- Each participant had unique circumstances but all shared the same reason for migration - to earn more than they could at home.
- Migration is viewed as a last resort. Many adults and children said they did not wish to migrate, particularly if it meant risky border crossings and long-term separation from their families. Most said they would happily stay if they could have decent work (and/or a viable farm) and not have to worry about going hungry, being unable to cover health costs or other basic needs, or taking on unsustainable debt.

Physical environment, infrastructure, and dam developments are exacerbating the negative impacts of weather events on livelihoods and financial strain

- Physical isolation due to the lack of reliable roads or bridges severely limits livelihood options for many of those interviewed, forcing them to choose between deprivation at home and migration to an urban area or Thailand.
- Upstream hydropower projects as well changes in precipitation have increased the prevalence and severity of flooding. The location of villages around riverbanks means most of the villages in Soukhuma district are highly exposed to flooding. Many lost as much as 90 percent of their crops during recent floods.
- During the rainy season, more than half of the villages in Soukhuma district are inaccessible due to poor road conditions, which severely limits livelihood options and further exacerbates the negative effects of flooding.
- Families are reluctant to relocate to because designated sites lack land suitable for crops.
- Monocropping is in practice, undermining water security, long-term soil health, food diversification and community nutrition.

Children and young people were active participants in the decision to migrate, reflecting their needs and aspirations for a better future and better socio-economic conditions

- A high portion of children are migrating (21.4% of the migrant population) to Thailand from Soukhuma district through risky irregular channels to take up informal work in plantations.
- The child migrants interviewed said they had made the decision to migrate, many focused on helping their household cover basic needs or pay off debts.
- Children are aware of many of the risks of migration. They recognized that migration was not the best pathway out of poverty, even if it was their only option at the time. They were aware of the precarity of the journeys and the exploitative conditions that were common at their destination. Sometimes one sibling worked so that others could stay home and attend school.

Gender norms shaped migration patterns as well as the characteristics, distribution and risk profile of work for both those who left and those who stayed behind

- Girls are overrepresented among those migrating through risky irregular channels to Thailand, making up two-thirds of migrants under the age of 18.
- Mothers often stayed behind and cared for the children if they could find jobs locally, while men undertook longer-distance migration. However, many mothers and fathers migrated together, particularly in the poorest families, and several women migrated on their own, reflecting the growing feminization of migration in Southeast Asia.
- Often girls took on substantial household and caregiving responsibilities and boys might take on physically dangerous farm and household tasks. Reflecting established gender roles, boys were particularly likely to feel a duty to help provide for the family and repay debts.

Migrating in distress put children, youth and their families into situations where they were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and reduced access to support

- The majority of migrants interviewed had crossed the border through irregular channels and worked mainly in agriculture and in construction, opting for longer stays due to the risks associated with moving.
- Those who had engaged in irregular migration were the most vulnerable to exploitation, forced labour and potential violence. However, those who migrated through regular channels still reported being abused and

feeling they could not complain without jeopardizing work permits. Internal migration also carried some risks, like wage theft and difficulty accessing services.

- Migration disrupted and inhibited children's formal education. Children who migrated often did not participate in education or healthcare, and many did not return to school once home. In Thailand, while schools allow non-residents, parents fear revealing their status to authorities.
- Instead, migrated children of low-income earners typically work. Children's work environments at the destination were particularly hazardous, precarious and exploitative – including within plantations, hospitality, domestic work, fishing and sex work. Lack of legal employment channels means migrant children work in poorly regulated sectors with lax labour law enforcement. Like migrant parents, child migrants often said they had been exploited, forced to work long hours, and sometimes cheated out of their wages.

Migration did not always pay off, it often failed to provide the expected economic returns and left families overall no better or potentially worse-off

- Whether they stayed in their country or crossed the border, many migrants found the financial benefits fell short of their expectations. Remittances might just cover debt payments or basic expenses and did not significantly improve their family's socio-economic situation or enhance their resilience to climate change.

Migration reshapes and disrupts family relationships and social safety nets, impacting the children who remain behind

- Because low-wage migrant workers have no legal way to take their dependents to another country, and irregular migration is risky and stressful, migrants often leave their children behind, especially the youngest.
- After parents or siblings left, the stress and burden on the children left behind increased. The caregivers, usually grandparents or single parents, often struggled to meet children's basic needs, including at times not having enough to eat. Meeting needs is made harder by the very high rates of disability among the grandparents in Laos.
- Children who remained took up more work, sometimes physically dangerous, and at times left school to maintain subsistence livelihoods, food production, and domestic chores. Children's mental and physical health were often affected. Some feared debt collectors would hurt them.

Implications

Laos has made important strides in climate policy with its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and National Adaptation Plan (NAP), which aim to improve resilience in sectors such as agriculture and water management.⁹ However, these frameworks fall short in addressing specific needs related to gender, children, and youth.¹⁰ Although there are efforts to integrate gender concerns, they lack the depth required to fully tackle gender disparities and the vulnerabilities of younger populations. Additionally, the relationship between climate change and migration remains underdeveloped, with policies primarily focused on adult labour migrants, leaving child migrants' needs largely unaddressed except in the context of trafficking prevention. The links between climate change and migration are underexplored in these documents. Current policies on labour migration predominantly focus on adult populations, leaving significant gaps in the protection and support for child migrants, particularly those affected by environmental displacement. Efforts around child migrants are primarily focused on trafficking prevention, as highlighted by international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM), but there is little recognition of how climate change could exacerbate these challenges.

In addition, the implementation of these policies has faced challenges in reaching the most vulnerable populations. Despite the existence of climate adaptation plans, many marginalized rural communities and migrant workers remain inadequately protected. The implication is that the most vulnerable families are left to bear the brunt of migration risks. This is largely due to limited capacity and resources at the national and local levels, which hinder the effective scaling up of climate resilience measures and enforcement of existing policies. Without further addressing the conditions that drive distress migration, as well as the conditions that make it so risky, millions more children will experience exploitation and be further trapped in poverty, compromising their health, well-being and future prospects.

Laos has laid the groundwork for addressing climate change, and further attention is now needed to ensure that gender and youth-specific vulnerabilities, as well as migration-related challenges, are meaningfully integrated into its climate action plans. Strengthening policy implementation and expanding focus on these issues will help making climate resilience inclusive and effective. As the impacts of climate change intensify, migration could with the right support help rural Laos families become more resilient, rise out of poverty and improve their living conditions. That is only possible, however, if they can migrate safely – not in distress – and avoid exploitation and abuse. Those who stay behind also need stronger support and opportunities to thrive in their home communities and to avoid harm. Making migration safer requires policy work not only in Laos but in destination countries, especially the most popular destination, Thailand. Current migration policies that ignore the realities of families in distress, even those that aim to make migration and services more accessible, are having unintended negative impacts by channelling children and youth into riskier employment situations and inhibiting their participation in school and services.

Recommendations

An effective and coordinated response to these risks is needed by governments and development partners to address the key drivers of distress migration from rural Laos villages, make migration safer, more humane and more just, provide support for those who stay behind, and empower children and youth to shape a better future for themselves, whether they choose to migrate or stay home. Specific areas to focus action:

Update national climate change and disaster preparedness policies and policy reach to reduce financial distress as a trigger for unsafe migration by enhancing the resilience of rural livelihoods, especially for those most reliant on natural resources

1. **Enhance community resilience through robust infrastructure and disaster preparedness at the village level**
 - **Update the NDC and NAP to reflect capacity building needs for vulnerable communities.**

⁹ CIFOR-ICRAF. (2022). Lao PDR's Nationally Determined Contribution: Progress and Challenges. <https://www.cifor-icraf.org>;

¹⁰ UNFCCC. (2023). Lao PDR National Adaptation Plan (NAP). <https://unfccc.int/documents/nap>

- **Close the adaptation finance gap and invest in resilient infrastructure of priority to vulnerable communities.** Prioritize local infrastructure that will eliminate or reduce the disruption of flooding and droughts on wellbeing, income and production for those reliant on natural resources e.g. climate-resilient transportation infrastructure, schools and health care facilities at the village level, water, production technology and electricity.
- **Address structural inequalities** faced by women, youth, children, people with disabilities, displaced persons, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized ethnic groups, particularly with regards to building resilient livelihoods and access to markets through resilient and accessible rural infrastructure.
- **Prepare and respond to disasters with timely livelihood support** enabling the most vulnerable families to restore income and protect against taking on harmful or excessive debt.
- **Strengthen effective shock-responsive and gender and child-sensitive social protection mechanisms** for families in crisis targeting those most reliant on natural resources. For example, consider crop insurance schemes or other forms of social protection for rural households dependant on natural resources.

2. Provide flexible and fair support for sustainable livelihoods

- **Scale up support for livelihood adaptation** reaching all vulnerable families, especially those reliant on natural resources, to ensure families can achieve sufficient income stability as weather extremes intensify, taking into account the differentiated needs of women and men.
- **Make relocation a viable and realistic option** for villages in flood-prone zones by providing comprehensive support for transitioning and establishing alternative livelihoods at sufficient levels to meet family needs at new site and support diversification away from natural resource dependency.

3. Make migration safer and more just for both parents and children

Take coordinated action across governments and development partners to make migration channels more accessible, flexible and just:

- Create safe legal channels for the migration of children alongside unskilled migrant parents, and access to education and healthcare at destination. Update short and long-stay migration policies for unskilled workers, recognising the need for children to contribute towards household income is a reality for the poorest and can be positive where safe channels, monitoring and service access are provided for.
- Improve oversight of industries that employ migrants, with migrant-sensitive approaches to reporting abuse and exploitation.
- Explore ways to make known irregular migration routes safer, such as establishing mobile units providing assistance.
- Raise awareness among the most vulnerable about how to identify and mitigate the risks.

4. Care for caregivers – and the children who stay with them

Meet development needs of migrant children and those who stay behind:

- Monitor children's school participation at home and at destination locations and enhance emotional and social learning support available for migrant children
- Support the caregivers at home to meet the needs of children who remain behind
- Tailor child and food security programmes to meet needs of older caregivers/young mothers, especially for elderly living with disabilities with childcare responsibilities.
- Promote “intergenerational dialogues” to help reduce risks to children from changing caregiving roles and help families stay connected like access to free video calls.

5. Empower children and youth to be able to build a better future for themselves

- Create spaces for migrant children and youth to meaningfully engage in national, regional and global debates and policy-making at the intersection of children's rights, migration and climate change, including integrating climate change into school curricula.