

Social Protection System: Insights from Families Left Behind in Ban Sandin, Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT— The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, serves as a policy framework guiding the international agenda of ASEAN member countries. This emphasis on social protection within the regional bloc is aligned with the United Nation's global agenda, particularly, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This presentation analyzes the social protection system in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), exploring traditional and innovative coping mechanisms and how they reflect community social dynamics. Drawing on case studies of families left behind and insights from fifteen additional informants in Ban Sandin, Lao PDR, this article synthesizes scholarly literature to explain the impact of migration on these families. The findings highlight existing gaps in the social protection system and policy implementation, especially in addressing needs of individuals and families left behind.

The study also underscores the importance of gender equality in facilitating occupational support for returning migrants and enhancing disaster risk management. Therefore, social protection should be promoted as a national framework across ASEAN member countries and collaboration with the governments of Thailand and Lao PDR to extend social protection coverage. In addition, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations should be strengthened to promote sustainable community poverty alleviation practices. In designing social protection frameworks,

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the complex issue of migration should be considered in its positive and negative implications.

Keywords : Social protection, Migration, Families left behind, Lao PDR, Thailand

Introduction

The term ‘social protection’ has played a pivotal role in shaping global development policy, leading to collaboration between the World Bank and the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2016, due to its integration with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the article highlights deficits in local field development and discrepancies in coverage relative to the development agendas of United Nations agencies. These international organizations often prioritize technical cooperation programs facilitated through governments and non-profit organizations. In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), efforts have been underway to implement the ILO’s Global Flagship Programme aimed at establishing social protection floors (SPF) for all, with a target of achieving 90 percent coverage of social health protection for the population. This initiative particularly emphasizes the expansion of equal and effective access to quality health services (ILO, 2021).

The Lao PDR government has endeavored to drive social protection policies and programs in line with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, 2013. However, according to the report ‘Social Protection in ASEAN: A Strategy Guide for Employers,’ Lao PDR falls below the regional average in terms of social protection expenditure, accounting for only 8 to 10 percent of GDP in 2020. This report emphasizes the importance of expanding social protection to the informal sector and underscores the need to consider instruments of social assistance coverage for the poor and marginalized people (ILO, 2023). In this article, we focus on the families left behind by Lao migrants because a significant number of both documented and undocumented immigrant workers migrate to

countries like Thailand in search of higher economic development levels, aiming to secure better opportunities for themselves and their families through remittances.

This article highlights the significance of the challenges and advancements in social protection within both global and regional contexts, focusing particularly on ASEAN countries. In the case of Lao PDR, we examine the social protection system (SPS) through three distinct implementations: (1) targeting vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and those left behind; (2) exploring informal social protection mechanisms utilized by families, communities, and donor organizations to manage shocks, particularly in response to flood disasters within domestic contexts; and (3) addressing coping mechanisms in response to the shocks responded by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we draw upon data findings from our research, which collected information from family members of migrants and key informants in Ban Sandin, to provide comprehensive explanations of the overall situation rather than exclusive case studies.

In this article, two primary objectives are addressed. Firstly, there is an examination of the lack of social protection coverage for both left-behind individuals and vulnerable groups. Secondly, the article aims to explore the broader implications of international migration, which encompasses expenses, remittances, and potential future benefits. Migration can enhance employment opportunities and quality of life, as migrants often provide financial support to relatives who remain in their home countries. The article is structured into four sections. Part I examines international and national social policies related to social protection. Part II presents the findings obtained from families left behind in the village regarding the shortcomings in social protection, and discusses the deficiencies in the SPS in Lao PDR. Finally, Part III provides recommendations for the advancement of social protection in Lao PDR.

Understanding the Development of Social Protection in Lao PDR

The historical context of Lao PDR includes experiences of colonization and geopolitical insecurity during the Cold War era. Following the post-Cold War period, Lao PDR transitioned from a focus on traditional security to prioritizing human security within the framework of international governance and human development agendas (Howe, 2023). In addition, Lao PDR has attempted to integrate into global neoliberal economic systems by combining with East Asian nations like China, Japan, and South Korea. Lao PDR has established interactions with international organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) alongside regional organizations like the ASEAN and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as a result of this cooperation. Moreover, this dependence has resulted in the effects of Chinese engagement with major development initiatives and its hegemony in Lao PDR's agricultural supply chains (Howe & Park, 2015).

The government of Lao PDR operates as a single-party authoritarian state, collaborating with UN agencies. However, there is an argument that global development policies often overlook specific issues within local communities. Social protection, which encompasses both social assistance and social insurance, is primarily advanced by the government through technical assistance programs provided by UN agencies to address both normal and crisis situations (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2021). Nonetheless, these initiatives frequently fail to align with the national agenda of the people, resulting in limited access to social services and infrastructure in underdeveloped areas of the country. For example, the ILO advocates for the Assessment-Based National Dialogue on Social Protection and the development of the National Social Protection Strategy. The Lao Government is obliged to adhere to the pathway outlined in ILO Recommendation No. 202 and cannot disregard these global development agendas (ILO, 2017b).

According to the international development framework after 2016, the globally accepted development master plan is the SDGs.

The SDGs highlight social protection as a crucial aspect of global social governance, aiming not only to coordinate synergies among social policies but also to centralize international organizations within the United Nations to collaborate in implementing this master plan (Deacon, 2013; 2016). The key components of this master plan include: (1) Target 1.3, aiming to implement suitable SPSs and measures to achieve sustainable coverage for the poor and the vulnerable; (2) Target 3.8, focusing on achieving universal health coverage, which encompasses financial risk protection and access to safe, effective, and affordable quality essential health care services; (3) Target 5.4, aiming to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, and promoting shared responsibilities within families and households; (4) Target 8.b, which calls for the development and implementation of a global strategy for youth employment and the execution of the Global Jobs Pact by the ILO; and (5) Target 10.4, which emphasizes the adoption of fiscal, wage, and social protection policies to achieve greater equality (United Nations, 2015).

The SDGs serve as a comprehensive development framework implemented by United Nations member states, providing direction for the creation of national and regional strategies, programs, and plans. Subsequent discussions will explore global and ASEAN regional cooperation, along with overarching data from case studies in Lao PDR. Notably, Lao PDR is one of only 10 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, or 1 in 50 worldwide, to receive support from the ILO Global Flagship Programme's second phase of technical cooperation. Consequently, social protection holds top priority in the Lao PDR's national development strategy, with plans and initiatives aimed at improving the population's access to legitimate and efficient coverage. Nonetheless, there is still a deficiency in the literature about the governance and policy of national social protection, which deviates from the insight gathered from field research.

United Nations Collaboration on Social Protection

Global social protection cooperation can be approached in two ways. The first approach utilizes the SDGs, particularly Target 1.3, as a framework for designing ‘Universal Social Protection’ by entities such as the World Bank and the ILO. This approach aims to integrate SPFs in the form of universal coverage under a human-centered agenda. The prevailing trend in social protection policies and measures is the rights-based approach, which emphasizes universal welfare based on minimum standards, to foster sustainable economic and social development for individuals, communities, societies, and countries. This approach seeks to encourage each country to develop universal social protection schemes, such as old-age pensions and child support grants (ILO and World Bank, 2016; ILO, 2017; 2019a; ILO, 2019b; Zelenev, 2015).

The proposal for universal social protection underscores the need to implement the SPF framework, outlined by the ILO, which emphasizes the expansion of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The SPF comprises three main components: social assistance, social insurance, and voluntary insurance (ILO, 2011). However, in the majority of developing countries, including Lao PDR, social assistance takes precedence. For instance, during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, social protection measures in Lao PDR primarily focused on social assistance rather than social insurance and labor market programmes. Emergency cash transfers were provided to target groups affected by disruptions in the tourism and manufacturing sectors, including the impoverished, newly poor families, and approximately 1,500,000 informal workers, constituting 21 percent of the population (Gentilini et al., 2020, 2022). Lao PDR lacked preventive measures and disaster risk management strategies during crisis situations such as COVID-19. This highlighted the vulnerabilities of migrant worker families left behind, who lacked access to voluntary insurance coverage.

The second approach is the framework of ‘social risk management’ (SRM) introduced by Robert Holzmann in the 1990s. He proposed three categories of social risk management aimed

at addressing insecurities and shocks, as well as mitigating financial crises, unemployment, natural disasters, epidemics, food shortages, and similar challenges. These three categories include prevention, mitigation, and coping strategies. In terms of social protection provision, the World Bank did not explicitly stipulate it as the government's sole responsibility, but rather emphasized the importance of establishing and developing informal social protection mechanisms. These mechanisms could be managed at the village or community level, or through the reinforcement of knowledge, grants, or equipment received from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These approaches could be termed as 'risk sharing' and 'risk transfer'. Consequently, cooperation occurred among individuals and communities without formal institutional interventions or welfare schemes officially prepared by governments (Holzmann, 2001; 2003; Holzmann & Jorgensen, 1999; Jorgensen & Siegel, 2019).

Since the 1990s, both universal social protection and SRM have been developed using the abovementioned approach. The World Bank has supported the implementation of social safety nets to improve the lives of vulnerable families, and individuals experiencing poverty. The majority of these measures employed means testing to determine eligibility for assistance, aligning with the objectives of social assistance. Assistance often took the form of conditional cash transfers. In the 2010s, the World Bank expanded the scope of social protection to include labor protection. Given that the working-age population represents the longest phase in the human life cycle and faces the highest risks, it is crucial to not only promote access to education, healthcare, food, and housing for individuals in this age range but also prioritize human capital development and employment promotion. Some measures of social assistance concerning labor market programmes, such as public works, are not considered traditional social assistance but rather initiatives aimed at employment promotion if they incorporate training, job-seeking processes, and career counseling (World Bank, 2012; 2018; 2019).

ASEAN Regional Cooperation on Social Protection

ASEAN initiated the development of the SPS in 2006, receiving academic support from the European Union (EU) to strengthen social protection measures for vulnerable groups. In addition to social assistance, social insurance, and labor market programmes, this support includes categorizing welfare based on geographical areas, and child protection. In 2006, Lao PDR assessed that the sole existing labor market programmes consisted of training and labor standards (Cuddy, Suharto, Thamrin & Moran, 2006).

The success of establishing the ASEAN Social Protection Framework can be attributed to collaborative efforts involving ASEAN Regional Cooperation on Social Protection, international organizations under the United Nations, civil society, private sectors, and other development partners. The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection serves as a practical guideline for designing policies and action plans among member countries. Its objectives are to enhance the well-being and livelihoods of ASEAN people by providing access to opportunities for human development, social welfare, and justice. The principles of the Declaration are grounded in human rights and address the basic needs of the poor, at-risk individuals, people with disabilities, elderly individuals, out-of-school youth, children, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups (ASEAN, 2018).

According to the ASEAN vision, social protection is deemed a vital welfare mechanism aimed at reducing poverty and establishing social safety nets to mitigate the consequences of globalization, including ensuring access to food security, healthcare services, disease prevention, drug control, and disaster risk management plans. Moreover, ASEAN advocates for the necessity of social protection for migrant workers in destination countries, as they often lack access to benefits available to other workers, such as compensation for disability, disasters, and old-age pensions (Asher & Zen, 2015; Hall, 2012; Olivier, 2018).

The declaration not only underscores the role of the public sector but also encourages families and communities to play a pivotal role in supporting the SPS to deliver social services, representing an informal type of social protection. Given the dependence of social services on geographical factors, management cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all solution. However, ASEAN social protection initiatives are predominantly focused on social welfare and the development of social insurance, social assistance, and social services. Therefore, there is debate surrounding the adequacy of the Declaration's consideration of social policy vision and management mechanisms, particularly its failure to encompass labor market policy and planning measures, hindering progress toward human capital development (ASEAN, 2018).

Lao PDR's National Social Protection Strategy and Policy

Currently, social protection in Lao PDR serves critical roles in poverty reduction, promoting equality, driving socioeconomic development, and fostering social cohesion. This demonstrates how important it is for the Lao PDR government to work together across public sectors in order to develop national social protection programs and policies. Despite these efforts, social welfare in Lao PDR remains inadequate and insufficiently covered. Historically, the social welfare administration has largely fallen on families and communities, contributing to an informal SPS (Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2020). This section will examine the evolution of social protection in Lao PDR.

Three domestic contexts in Lao PDR necessitate international and regional cooperation: (1) the geographic vulnerability disparity between urban and rural areas; (2) ethnic conflicts leading to racial segregation; and (3) inherent vulnerability stemming from gender inequality and limited opportunities for women to access resources (Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihood, 2015). Furthermore, international organizations, NGOs, and ASEAN support regional cooperation on social protection, recognizing

it as integral to international development policies. Transition countries in ASEAN, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Lao PDR, prioritize human capital advancement through education and infrastructure improvements for national economic development (Cuddy, Suharto, Thamrin & Moran, 2006).

In 2019, the Lao PDR government endorsed the SPS following the SDGs framework. The progress report of the partnership for sustainable development (2017–2021) highlighted two social protection indicators: (1) the number of formal employments covered by the social security system; and (2) the ratio of impoverished individuals benefiting from the social protection scheme (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2019, p. 5). In addition, support was provided for the UN Joint Programme on Establishing SPFs in Lao PDR between 2020–2021. This initiative aimed to advance various SDG targets, including Target 1.3 (social protection systems for all), Target 2.2 (eliminating all forms of malnutrition), Target 16.9 (strengthening social cohesion), and Target 17.3 (mobilizing financial resources for developing countries). These endeavors continuously influenced the design of the SPS in Lao PDR across four key areas: (1) poverty reduction in rural and ethnically diverse regions; (2) provision of school meals to ensure adequate nutrition for children; (3) enhancing access to education, particularly for girls with low literacy levels; and (4) acknowledging that poverty and vulnerability stem from economic crises and natural disasters (UN Joint Programme, ILO and UN Agencies, 2020).

Recently, the Lao PDR government prioritized two principles in the development of the SPS to stimulate economic growth while simultaneously reducing poverty and inequality, thereby addressing the gap between urban and rural populations.

Firstly, a significant emphasis was placed on healthcare system reform, particularly under the National Health Insurance Strategies (2017–2021), which integrated the system into the administration of the Ministry of Health. Formal economy workers were required to contribute to the social security fund, whereas those in the informal economy accessed medical care through the national tax budget. However, shortcomings were observed in the

integration of public offices both in policy and administration levels, leading to limited access to health services for rural residents and vulnerable groups. Furthermore, adjustments in benefits and budget planning were deemed essential (ILO, 2020).

Secondly, the World Bank's framework was employed to address disaster risk management, given the substantial losses and damages caused by such occurrences. Under the SPS, the Lao PDR government developed directives and oversaw their implementation. Despite recurring annual challenges in rural areas, no government-led initiatives have been introduced to mitigate these issues. Consequently, social protection strategies aimed to transform policies into program planning, establishing a clear framework encompassing target groups, welfare categories, management schemes, and implementing agencies (See Table 1) (Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2020; Khan & Marzi, 2019a).

Table 1 Social Protection Schemes in Lao PDR

Schemes	Categories	Target groups	Implementing agencies
Contributory schemes			
National health insurance (2020)	Health	Civil servants and formal economy workers	National Social Security Office, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare

Schemes	Categories	Target groups	Implementing agencies
Social security: unemployment benefit; sickness benefit; work injury; occupational disease and nonwork-related disability benefit; maternity benefit; childbirth grant; survivor's benefit child and family; death grant	Employment Health Social security	Formal economy workers from both the public and private sectors, self-employed (voluntary); informal economy workers (voluntary)	National Social Security Office, Ministry of Labor and Welfare
Old age pensions	Social security	Compulsory coverage of formal public and private workers; self-employed and informal workers (voluntary)	National Social Security Office, Ministry of Labor and Welfare
Non-contributory schemes			
Free schooling	Education	Students across all educational levels	Ministry of Education and Sports
Grants/scholarships for secondary education	Education	Students from poor families	Ministry of Education and Sports

Schemes	Categories	Target groups	Implementing agencies
National school meal programme	Education Nutrition	Primary and secondary students in disadvantaged districts	Ministry of Education and Sports, World Food Programme (WFP), Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Education for Development Fund
Secondary school stipend programme	Education	Lower or upper secondary school students from poor families	Asian Development Bank (ADB)
Technical and vocational education and training scholarships	Education Employment	Students from poor families	Ministry of Education and Sports, Asian development Bank (ADB), German International Cooperation (GIZ)
Livelihood support and essential social services through community asset creation	Employment	Community in targeted poor districts	Poverty-Reduction Fund (PRF)

Schemes	Categories	Target groups	Implementing agencies
Other benefits (food, vouchers, and other in-kind transfers)	Health Nutrition	Pregnant women and children	Ministry of Labor and Welfare and others
Natural and man-made disasters	Livelihoods	Victims of disasters	Ministry of Labor and Welfare
Mixed systems			
National health insurance (2020)	Health	Poor informal workers and Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health programme (MNCH)	National Health Insurance Bureau (Ministry of Health)
National health insurance (2025)	Health	Civil servants, formal workers, poor, informal workers, Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health programme (MNCH)	National Health Insurance Bureau (Ministry of Health)

Schemes	Categories	Target groups	Implementing agencies
Legal system			
Severance pays : Paid sick leave : Paid maternity leave	Health Social security	Formal economy workers	Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare
Special protection (exploitation, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and others)	Health Education Employment	Vulnerable populations	n/a

Source: Adapted from Khan and Marzi (2019a, pp. 28-29) and Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (2020)

The Lao PDR National Social Protection is dedicated to advancing social policies and fostering economic growth. To this end, the Lao PDR government committed to formulating the National Social Protection Strategy by 2020, initiating the process with national consultations on social protection in 2013. This endeavor involved collaboration with various development partners, including the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, trade unions, and other relevant actors (Khan & Marzi, 2019a; Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2020; Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods, 2015, p. 16).

The strategy encompasses three primary objectives:

Firstly, ensuring universal access to effective social protection by extending social insurance coverage to all, establishing

minimum standards, and delivering quality services across the spectrum of promotion, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

Secondly, expanding welfare services to vulnerable groups by broadening social protection coverage to include non-standard employment workers, formalizing the inclusion of informal workers in social insurance, and enhancing benefits within social insurance schemes for this segment. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry is actively involved in the evolution of the social security system.

Thirdly, fostering the development of social welfare programs tailored to vulnerable groups and extending program reach to cater to diverse demographics, including pregnant women, children, the disabled, the elderly, and disaster victims. The Lao PDR government prioritizes educational opportunities and skills training for marginalized and working-age populations to ensure future employment prospects and decent work. Additionally, free school meals are provided to students residing in disadvantaged rural areas.

In terms of the social protection scheme, two main components were identified: Firstly, social security was characterized as ‘narrow,’ implying its limitation to social insurance. Funding for this segment derived from contributions made by employers, employees, and the government, with an emphasis on providing welfare coverage for vulnerable people across various life stages. Secondly, social welfare constituted a program offering old-age pensions, child support grants, public work opportunities, and unemployment benefits (Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2020).

However, gaps were observed in policy development and the social protection scheme, particularly regarding the availability of both cash and in-kind social welfare programs. This discrepancy arose because initiatives and actions for social protection development primarily originated from donors rather than the Lao PDR government. For example, the ILO funded three projects aimed at providing technical assistance and developing social protection. The first project focused on enhancing social protec-

tion and employment benefits in the tea and coffee industries in Lao PDR, while the other two projects aimed to develop the SPS in Lao PDR and other countries in the Asia-Pacific Region (ILO, 2022). In addition, there was a lack of coping mechanisms for disadvantaged families and villages in different geographical areas to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, despite the Lao PDR government's recognition of the need for such mechanisms (See Table 2). This represents another gap in the SPS (Khan & Marzi, 2019a).

ASEAN countries implement social protection measures to alleviate the risks brought about by disasters. In the context of Lao PDR, seasonal occurrences such as storms, floods, and droughts usually exhibit short durations, although droughts may persist for medium to long terms. Nevertheless, Lao PDR ranks among the ASEAN region's countries with the lowest level of shocks and hazards. The disaster risk management system in Lao PDR relies on specialized national institutions, setting it apart from many ASEAN nations that possess dedicated legislation governing risk governance (Khan & Marzi, 2019b).

Table 2 Traditional and new coping strategies of Lao PDR

Social protection in emergency or crisis situations	
Traditional coping strategies	Disaster risk management is based on experience in predicting risks such as droughts, storms, and other natural disasters, as well as emerging risks like climate change and forest encroachment. Coping strategies for disasters often involve short-term measures, such as borrowing rice grains from relatives.

New coping strategies	Planning for disaster risk management means farmers selling their products in advance to have cash for seed and fertilizer for the next harvest. Some families choose to hire out labor, while others may turn to outmigration or borrow money from village development funds. It is essential to address gender inequalities and prioritize support for individuals and groups at risk of social exclusion.
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Source: Summarized from Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods, 2015

The SPS development has transitioned from an abstract framework to an actively managed system that plays a crucial role in shaping policy and implementing various schemes. As articulated by the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, social protection is grounded in the principles of human rights, labor, economic empowerment, and sustainable development. Its overarching goal is to alleviate poverty, enhance labor skills, improve the quality of life for the poor and vulnerable, and ensure that no one is left behind. To this end, the government has endorsed and supported three key social welfare programs focusing on education, nutrition, and social services. Moreover, the government emphasizes the significance of the ASEAN Social Protection Declaration and Framework in empowering local communities to foster environmental sustainability and ensure inclusivity (Saysompheng, 2020, pp. 6-7). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a testament to the operational efficacy of the SPS during crises and emergencies, but Lao PDR government face with the return of migrant workers and limited management in public health care because various causes, such as fragmentation of the system, lack of social protection in the informal economy, finance administration of non-contributory schemes, and so on (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2021).

The SPS development has evolved from a conceptual framework to a dynamically managed system, playing a crucial role in shaping policy and implementing various schemes. As articulated by the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, social protection is grounded in principles encompassing human rights, labor, economic empowerment, and sustainable development. Its overarching objective is to alleviate poverty, enhance labor skills, improve the quality of life for the poor and vulnerable, and ensure inclusivity. In pursuit of these objectives, the government has endorsed and supported three key social welfare programs focusing on education, nutrition, and social services. Furthermore, the government underscores the significance of the ASEAN Social Protection Declaration and Framework in empowering local communities to promote environmental sustainability and inclusivity (Say-sompheng, 2020, pp. 6-7). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the operational effectiveness of the SPS during crises and emergencies. Nonetheless, the Lao PDR government faces challenges associated with the return of migrant workers and inadequate management in public health due to various factors such as system fragmentation, lack of social protection in the informal economy, and administrative issues in non-contributory schemes (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2021).

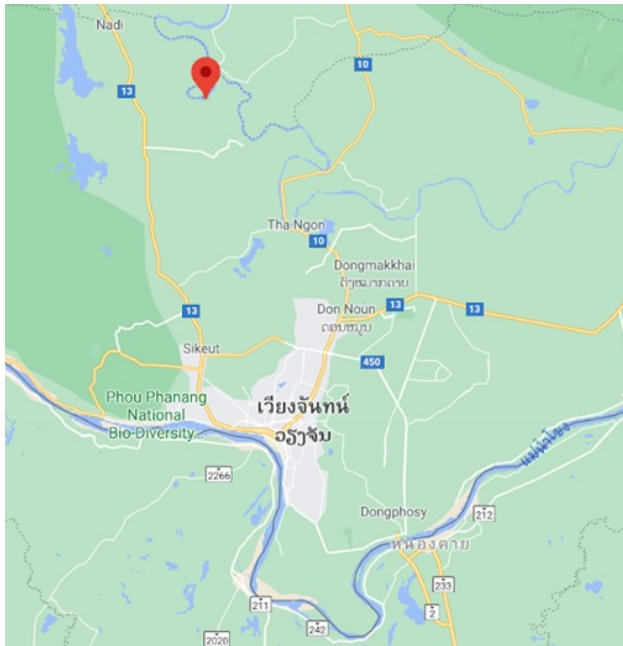
Social Protection and Families Left Behind: Insights from the Village

The following findings were from data collected in Ban Sandin village in April 2018. Located in the Nasaithong District, the village is around thirty to forty kilometers away from Vientiane (See Figure 1). Data was collected from six case studies and fifteen additional data informants. The method of purposive sampling was employed to select case studies based on characteristics such as gender, family composition, household income, duration of migration, and educational attainment. Additional data sources were selected based on diverse characteristics, including a local pharmacist, a recruitment agency representative, experienced migrants, a Buddhist monk, a teacher, and a neighbor. Subse-

quent interviews proceeded smoothly as families left behind were proficient in both Thai and Lao languages. The semi-structured interview encompassed a broad spectrum of topics, including family background, living conditions, migration patterns and remittances, and the SPS.

One of the defining features of Ban Sandin village is its year-round productive agriculture, which serves both household consumption and distribution beyond the community. Laos migrants to Thailand are drawn to the country due to its geography, language, and cultural similarities. Migration is facilitated by scarce resources and community support, enabling social mobility, debt repayment, and remittance sending. Furthermore, diverse perspectives on the motivations of Lao migrant workers are explained by various case study informants and other sources. Three factors contribute to Thai enterprises' reluctance to hire Lao workers: Firstly, unlike migrants from Myanmar and Cambodia, male Lao workers are often unable to send remittances back home or save money upon returning, limiting their investment potential in local occupations. Secondly, Lao migrants typically favor employment in the service sector, particularly in restaurants, with fewer opting for factory jobs, often seeking temporary employment during agricultural off-seasons. Thirdly, gender-related challenges emerge from the possibility of individuals marrying Thai partners and divorcing Lao spouses, with divorce often attributed to perceived laziness among Lao men, especially when earning low wages.

Figure 1: Bansandin, Nasaithong District, Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR



The examination of the Ban Sandin context and the conditions of families left behind revealed six issues pertaining to social protection in the village. The ensuing consequences that unfolded across the life cycle were scrutinized utilizing the social protection framework in the study's findings.

Food Security

Ban Sandin is in an area rich in soil and water resources, conducive to year-round seasonal crop rotation and livestock farming for both consumption and commercial purposes. Food security in the village is primarily managed by the community rather than the state, with no reported shortages. Some families

choose to migrate for work opportunities, while others opt to hire labor locally to avoid separation from their families. For instance, both internal and external neighbors have been observed stealing hens and ducks from community members, often resorting to dissection to conceal evidence. When perpetrators are identified within the village, the village leader imposes compensatory fines on behalf of the victims. This case illustrates the utilization of informal social protection mechanisms to address issues of food insecurity and hunger within the community.

Medical Care

Unlike neighboring villages, Ban Sandin lacks a dedicated health center. In cases of mild illness, villagers typically seek first-aid treatment at the local pharmacy, especially for common elderly ailments such as high blood pressure, bone pain, and diabetes. The pharmacist, functioning as medical personnel, operates the village drugstore. While some villagers still prefer traditional medicine or herbal remedies, modern medical treatment has gained popularity among the more affluent residents. Due to limited information, no villages have opted to participate in voluntary social insurance schemes; however, some wealthier villagers have invested in private health insurance. Therefore, the necessity of universal health coverage is evident, which should entail the establishment of health care facilities at the village or district level. In addition, the government should play a proactive role in disseminating information about modern healthcare, enhancing access to services, and streamlining bureaucratic processes involved in client transfers.

Education

The government provides subsidies to schools to ensure compulsory education for children. Schooling is not entirely free, as students are expected to cover additional expenses such as learning materials, special fees, uniforms, transportation, and meals. Unfortunately, free meals are unavailable for children from

economically disadvantaged families. Despite this, teachers act as proxies for means testing by observing and conducting interviews with family members to assess eligibility, except for educational fees and assistance materials. International organizations like UNICEF provide support materials, and the Red Cross of Lao PDR and South Korea offer one meal a day, though this does not address the underlying issue. These financial constraints contribute to school dropouts, with some students compelled to migrate with their families. According to teachers, there is a lack of community support, as they focus solely on their responsibilities within the school and exclusively monitor the socio-economic status of poor households.

Employment Status and Income

The study revealed a lack of employment promotion initiatives within the village, with no government measures aimed at fostering skill development and job creation. The majority of villagers were involved in the informal economy, primarily through farming or self-employment. Surprisingly, despite this, the village faced a labor shortage due to low education levels and a lack of skills among its residents. Migration emerged as one of the coping strategies adopted by villagers. In fact, the study highlighted that some married women migrated to Thailand and established new families, leaving their spouses behind. On the other hand, those in the community who experience disasters deal with uncertainty and employment insecurity. The challenges encountered by those unable to plan ahead and secure stable employment over the long term are exacerbated by the government's lack of assistance for local residents. The government's apparent oversight of the impact of these natural disasters on social protection measures, particularly in disaster management, is noteworthy.

Migration

The settlement not only shares linguistic and cultural similarities with Thai communities but also boasts networks that facilitate migration to Thailand. Additionally, an informal channel for financial transactions between Thailand and the Lao PDR operates within the village, offering a crucial solution given the absence of bank accounts among villagers and their geographical distance from banking services. Temporary migration predominantly assumes a seasonal and temporary nature.

Migration, coupled with gender dynamics, emerges as a significant issue. Male migrant workers exhibit lower levels of accomplishment compared to their female counterparts, rendering them unable consistently to remit funds to their families back home. Conversely, Lao female migrant workers often encounter opportunities to form new marital bonds. Moreover, villagers perceive labor migration as influenced by prevailing living standards, overlooking the potential negative consequences, such as familial challenges related to the behavior of children and adolescents. Notably, the populace remains unaware of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) pertaining to migration established by the governments of Thailand and Laos. Consequently, despite the potential for migration to transmit generational behaviors to younger cohorts who may migrate at an early age and seek employment in accordance with host country regulations, no mechanisms are in place to address these ramifications.

Family and Community relationships

The village leader and the Buddhist monk shared their perspectives, stating that during the last one to two decades, several issues had changed the community. These encompass the circumstance wherein abandoned children are nurtured by their grandparents until they attain working age and pursue employment opportunities elsewhere; the escalating estrangement among community members, with numerous individuals only returning

for festival holidays; and the persistent challenge of maintaining communal solidarity. These two major issues were discovered. First, women migrated as a result of a patriarchal system that prevented gender equality. Potentially powerful women made the decision to relocate to Thailand in hopes of finding better opportunities. Interestingly, when the female refugees got married to Thai males, they received insults. Second, the decline of family institutions, notwithstanding their capacity to transfer money to their families back home. Grandparents without welfare coverage were left to care for their grandchildren to encourage social aspects of migration as well as the welfare of the elderly. Without sufficient welfare coverage to handle the societal consequences of migration and the welfare of the elderly, children are left in the care of their grandparents. Children also must deal with their parents' separation, as divorce is becoming more common. Teachers also point out that the absence of social services provided by the government, notably child development centers, exacerbates the negative effects of parental divorce on children's development.

The findings in Ban Sandin shed light on the deficiencies in SPS and the challenges associated with government policy implementation. The SPS framework aims to delineate the roles of both the public sector and the community in social protection endeavors. Specifically, it encompasses various forms of informal social protection, which are prevalent in developing countries, including Lao PDR.

Firstly, addressing gender discrimination is imperative in the design of social protection policies. As highlighted by Cámbara (2022), women in Lao PDR often face violence, harassment, discrimination, and stigmatization, which significantly influence their decisions to stay or migrate. Women constitute a particularly vulnerable group in Lao society. Hence, promoting gender equality through initiatives such as enhancing educational opportunities for girls, fostering skills development, and creating employment opportunities for women is paramount. Furthermore, the government should extend support to mechanisms such as the Lao Women's Union, which empowers women in rural villages, ensur-

ing their active engagement and protection of their rights while preserving their autonomy from central government oversight.

Secondly, the exploration of co-identity, a topic of interest within cultural studies and anthropology, remains relatively scarce in scholarly literature. This scarcity can be attributed to specific linguistic and cultural elements shared with Thai culture, which exert influence on individual behaviors. A notable finding from the study indicates that most male workers returning from overseas destinations seldom possess savings. Despite their formal training, such as in furniture assembly and repair, the government's lack of support for job creation through employment programs is apparent. Therefore, initiatives aimed at job creation would be advantageous for wage employment, while low-interest loans could prove beneficial for those in self-employment. Job creation initiatives are particularly crucial for individuals engaged in the agricultural sector, especially those originating from poor families who lack the means to migrate.

Thirdly, regarding disaster management, the annual occurrence of flooding in the village has endowed residents with significant experience and knowledge in coping with such events. They have developed informal mechanisms for dealing with these challenges, often in collaboration with community-based organizations and NGOs. Despite this local expertise, the government's ability effectively to manage such shocks remains limited, as evidenced by shortcomings in the National Social Protection Strategy and the direction of technical cooperation provided by entities such as the World Bank (Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods, 2015; Khan & Marzi, 2019a; Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2020). Meanwhile, neighboring communities perceive this recurring issue as an inevitable facet of everyday life, managing it autonomously on an annual basis. Nevertheless, despite being recognized as a national priority by the Lao PDR government and international organizations, the practical response to these risks often relies heavily on the informal coping mechanisms of villagers. Furthermore, the absence of a warning system and the lack

of government assistance during crises exacerbate the challenges faced by the community. While organizations like the Lao Red Cross play a significant role, their capacity effectively to manage these risks is often limited. Consequently, it is evident that gaps exist in social protection mechanisms during times of crisis, which include additional risks such as epidemics and climate change.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlights significant gaps in Lao PDR's SPS. The absence of risk management measures during shocks and emergencies disproportionately impacts informal economy workers. A vital aspect of social protection in such situations is universal access to medical care, ensuring inclusivity across all sectors of society. However, the emergency response of the SPS during the COVID-19 pandemic faced several challenges, particularly regarding the instability of coverage for informal sector workers, who constitute much of the labor force. This situation contradicts the principles of sustainable development and "leaving no one behind," as advocated by the Lao PDR government (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2020). Despite existing social protection strategies, practical frameworks at both policy and implementation levels are lacking. There is also a notable lack of coordination among implementing agencies, particularly evident during times of crisis. Hence, Lao PDR has endeavored to drive social protection coverage in alignment with the SDGs, with initiatives including the establishment of semi-autonomous agencies for national healthcare, sustainable budget allocation, and the extension of coverage to the formal economy. However, these efforts stand in stark contrast to the practical challenges faced within local communities (United Nations in Lao PDR, 2023).

Recommendations for Advancing Social Protection in Lao PDR

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the SPS for families left behind cannot solely rely on familial and communal support, as this may lead to fragmented social welfare measures, especially in the context of non-democratic regimes prevalent in

This study proposes five key recommendations:

Firstly, there is a pressing need for a well-defined social protection framework to ensure comprehensive coverage. While Lao PDR currently adheres to the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, the World Bank's disaster risk management strategies, and the ILO's SPF, there is a lack of consensus on the scope of social protection programs. Therefore, issues such as food security, access to education, healthcare, career development, and financial support during crises need carefully to be addressed. However, the current state of Lao PDR's SPS is more focused on policy and program formulation rather than effective implementation, largely due to the community's self-reliance in disaster management, which may not align with the government's priorities.

Secondly, social protection initiatives must address the challenges associated with labor migration, which often leaves behind vulnerable populations, such as children and the elderly. Facilitating migration by streamlining the processes and reducing associated costs is crucial for both the country of origin and the destination. Furthermore, formal systems for financial remittances, including international cash transfers, should be established to safeguard individuals from fraudulent practices.

Thirdly, there exist significant gaps in social protection that fail to address pressing social issues. These include the stigmatization of women, perpetuating gender inequality despite being acknowledged in National Social Protection Strategies since 2020, and the lack of concrete implementation in national disaster management, relying instead on informal coping mechanisms. To address these shortcomings, it is imperative that SPSs be tailored to the specific needs of communities to ensure comprehensive coverage.

Fourthly, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, health-care-related social protection measures need to be adapted for greater flexibility. The absence of universal healthcare and the lack of medical facilities in some villages highlight the inadequacies of the current system. While efforts to develop the health insurance

system are underway, limitations remain, such as focusing solely on the vulnerable while pandemic risks affect all. Therefore, measures such as universal health prevention coverage, the provision of low-cost meals, and co-payments for essential commodities should be considered.

Finally, ASEAN countries should prioritize social protection for migrant workers and their families left behind as part of the regional agenda. This could involve commemorating the Decade of ASEAN Migrant Workers and establishing clear and concrete action plans at various levels. Collaborative efforts should include preparing social protection schemes for migrant workers and their families in the country of origin, establishing migrant worker databases, and creating social maps to identify vulnerable families and determine their eligibility for welfare assistance.

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