

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
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NEWS RELEASE



LAO PDR MUST GUARANTEE THAT DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND INVESTMENTS IN THE COUNTRY RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES DURING ITS UN HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW (UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW)



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26 July 2019, Bangkok – Manushya Foundation and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) call on the Government of Lao PDR to guarantee that development projects and investments are respectful of rights of individuals and communities, particularly rural and indigenous ethnic groups, in the country with effective remedy for harms when they occur. The call was made in a [joint submission](#) for the third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Lao DPR, which is scheduled to be held in January-February 2020. Manushya and AIPP also urge the United Nations (UN) member states to use the UN human rights review to ensure greater efforts by and accountability of the Lao government for promotion and protection of human rights and for addressing social, environmental and human rights impact of development and business projects.

In January 2015, UN member states made at least 17 recommendations to the Lao government directly relevant to the human rights impacts of development projects and investments. Accordingly, the government had committed to promote inclusive growth and poverty elimination, combat corruption, ensure equal treatment of ethnic groups, empower women in decision-making, protect customary land rights in implementation of national land policy, enforce moratorium on land concessions and review existing concessions, respect obligations regarding forcibly displaced persons and ensure protection of rights persons belonging to minorities and effectively investigate all alleged abuses, among other recommendations. As of today, the government has partially implemented only three of the recommendations while it persistently failed to implement other recommendations as per the assessment in the [joint UPR submission](#) demonstrating that development projects and investments in Lao PDR are not carried out in a sustainable manner resulting in severe human rights' violations and exacerbation of poverty.

Manushya and AIPP have expressed concern at Lao PDR's economic growth strategies, which heavily rely on large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly mega hydropower dams, land concessions, resource extraction and other foreign investments. As per the [joint submission](#), the current 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020) reaffirms hydropower development as a means to alleviate poverty despite heavy toll of displacement of rural and indigenous communities due to dams' poor planning, inadequate resettlement and remedy programs. Those projects and investments disproportionately benefit the wealthy elites resulting in lower ratio of poverty reduction to economic growth and increase in inequality for large proportion of population. At the same time, the government is currently drafting a decree on ethnic affairs, which reportedly continues the policy to resettle ethnic groups from their areas threatening their customary land rights and traditional livelihoods.

“Customary land rights of rural and indigenous communities are largely ignored in Laos, which enables the government and businesses to forcibly take away their land or displace them for hydropower or other infrastructure projects or concessions,” said Gam A. Shimray, AIPP Secretary General. ***“States must put greater pressure on the Lao government to be more accountable for such impacts on the rights of the affected communities and to ensure that development and business activities are undertaken only with their free, prior and informed consent after meaningful consultations and proper assessments.”***

While those affected by the development or business projects, particularly women and indigenous ethnic groups, have limited participation in decision-making, the organizations are further alarmed by severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association in Lao PDR, which make it almost impossible for affected communities and individuals to voice their concerns and access effective remedy for harms suffered.

For example, after the collapse of a dam at the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy Hydropower Project, which resulted in at least 71 dead or missing and more than 4,000 people displaced, the compensation have been inadequate and inconsistent. The government also [aimed](#) to conceal information about the dam collapse at the time of the disaster, requesting Lao citizen not to follow social media and international news. It is yet to publish its report on the investigation into the dam collapse, which reportedly point to construction errors by the dam developers – let alone establish any legal responsibility for the impacts on the communities. Additionally, few individuals or communities who have mobilised against violation of their rights as a result of development projects and investments have faced further suppression, including harassments, torture, imprisonment and even disappearance or killing. For instance, when the Yeup villagers in Sekong province protested unfair confiscation of their lands in 2017 given to a Vietnamese rubber company in a land concession by cutting down rubber trees of the company, the police detained fourteen villagers, including a boy and girl of fifteen years old. Several of the detainees were allegedly beaten or subjected to electric shocks in the days following their arrest. In January 2018, one of the 14 villagers reportedly died under mysterious circumstance in police custody while two are seriously ill.

“The Lao government must immediately end its restrictions on fundamental freedoms, media and civil society in order to ensure sustainable and equitable development in line with its international human rights obligations,” said Emilie Pradichit, Manushya Founder & Director. ***“The Universal Periodic Review provides an unique opportunity for the Lao government to commit to take effective steps to improve the human rights situation in the country, for which other UN member states must raise human rights challenges of various communities, particularly those most marginalised, such as indigenous ethnic groups and women.”***

The two organisations in their [joint submission](#) also provide specific, measurable and action-oriented recommendations for the Lao government to ensure a real sustainable development with respect for fundamental rights of individuals, indigenous peoples and local communities, including: recommendations on the right to development to examine development initiatives to eradicate poverty; recommendations on political framework and good governance to address corruption in development projects; recommendations on racial discrimination and cultural rights of ethnic groups to discuss the disproportionate impact on them; recommendations on the right to participate in public affairs particularly of women; recommendations on the right to an adequate standard of living to analyse land-related rights and the impact of land concessions; recommendations on internally displaced persons to study relocation and resettlement as a result of development projects; and recommendations on right to an effective remedy in the context of development projects.



Access the Joint UPR Submission here:

<https://www.manushyafoundation.org/joint-upr-subm-to-laos-mf-aipp>

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About Manushya Foundation (MF)

Manushya Foundation is an Asia regional foundation promoting community empowerment to advance human rights, social justice and peace. Founded in 2017, we strengthen and connect diverse community and grassroots groups to place them at the centre of human rights and sustainable development responses of their countries. For further information on the work of Manushya Foundation, visit:

<https://www.manushyafoundation.org>

About the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1992 by indigenous peoples' movements. AIPP is committed to the cause of promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and articulating issues of relevance to them. For further information on the work of AIPP, visit:

<https://www.aippnet.org>