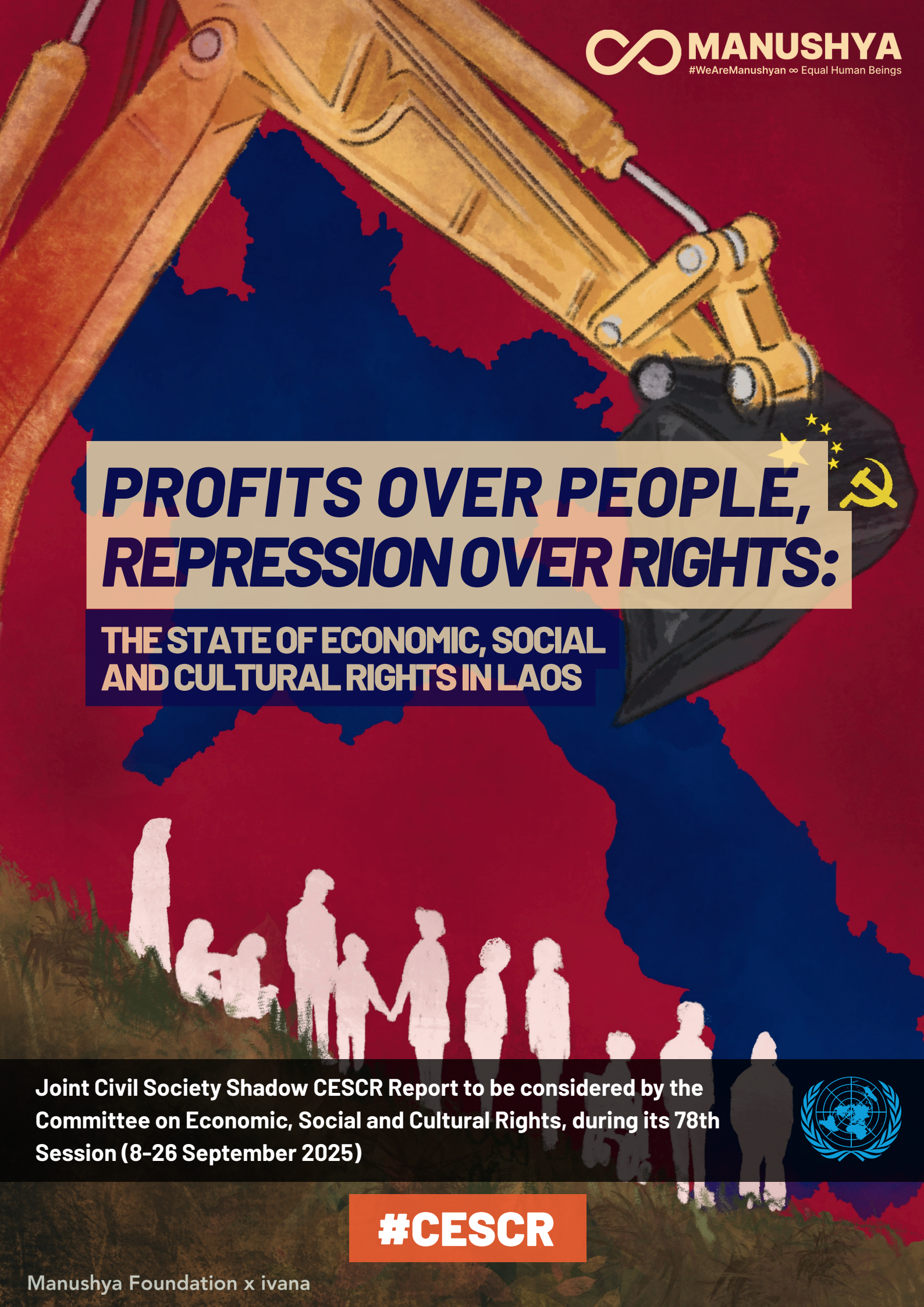




PROFITS OVER PEOPLE, REPRESSION OVER RIGHTS:

**THE STATE OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL
AND CULTURAL RIGHTS IN LAOS**



**Joint Civil Society Shadow CESCR Report to be considered by the
Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, during its 78th
Session (8-26 September 2025)**



#CESCR



Joint Civil Society CESC Report to be considered by the
Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, during its 78th Session
(8-26 September 2025)

SUBMISSION BY

Manushya Foundation



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INTRODUCTION

1. This joint Civil Society CESC Shadow Report was prepared by a coalition comprising Manushya Foundation and Power by Keyboard. It responds to the Replies of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to the List of Issues under Articles 16 and 17 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/LAO/RQ/1), to be considered by the UN Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at its 78th Session (8-26 September 2025).
2. This Report builds on the 2023 Joint Civil Society CESC Report¹ by Manushya Foundation and its partners and is informed by the diligent monitoring undertaken by Manushya Foundation and Power by Keyboard. It also draws on information from UN mechanisms, government sources, intergovernmental bodies, civil society submissions, and media reports.
3. [Manushya Foundation](#) was founded in 2017 as an Intersectional Feminist human rights organisation reinforcing the power of Humans, in particular, local communities and women human rights defenders (WHRD) to be at the heart of decision-making processes that concern them and to speak truth to power. Manushya defends local communities and seeks justice for them before the United Nations, focusing on women's rights and gender equality, digital rights, and climate and environmental issues.²
4. [Power by Keyboard](#) (ຂັບເຄື່ອນດ້ວຍຄືບອດ) was created by pro-democracy youth in March 2022 and advocates for true democracy while criticising Lao PDR's growing dependency on China. It focuses on human rights, including China's dominant influence on investments in Lao PDR and education rights for Lao youth. The page also addresses environmental concerns and fiercely supports LGBTQI+ rights in Lao PDR.³

KEY ISSUES

General Information: Freedom of Expression and Protection of Human Rights Defenders

5. Lao PDR does not recognise the status of human rights defenders (HRDs) and lacks a legal framework to support or protect them and their work. HRDs are often viewed by the State as enemies and threats. Courageous HRDs who dare to speak out, especially those raising concerns about the environmental and social impacts of development projects, are often subject to serious retaliation, including threats, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, and even enforced disappearances, all aimed at silencing them.
6. Although Article 44 of the Constitution⁴ guarantees citizens the right to freedom of speech, press and assembly, this right is severely restricted in both law and practice. A range of repressive legal provisions continue to be used to suppress free expression. The Penal Code,⁵ for example, contains vaguely worded and overly broad offences that are frequently used to silence dissent. These include provisions criminalising treason to the nation (Article 110), propaganda against the state (Article 117), as well as defamation, libel, and insult (Articles 205 and 206). This fosters a climate of fear and intimidation, effectively undermining the broader human rights landscape, including the advancement of economic, social, and cultural rights for the Lao people. As a result, HRDs working on these issues face heightened risks, with their advocacy frequently met with harassment and repression, as follows:



Notable Cases of Repression, including Intimidation, Arbitrary Arrest and Detention, Enforced Disappearance, Attempted Murder, and Killing Inside Lao PDR

7. B.P. is a 35-year-old Lao activist who peacefully protested against corruption by holding a sign in central Vientiane, including in front of the UN centre, on 10 July 2024. He was arrested shortly after and has since disappeared. Even after 1 year, his whereabouts remain unknown, and authorities have provided no information, leaving his family and the public in the dark.⁶
8. Between March 2023 and June 2024, 3 members of the Alliance for Democracy in Laos (ADL) were killed or disappeared in Lao PDR after participating in the Asia Pacific Sustainable Development Forum (APFSD).⁷ M.S., who attended the 10th APFSD in March 2023, was found dead in September 2023 under suspicious circumstances. In February 2024, C. disappeared shortly after collecting his passport to attend the 11th APFSD. B., who also attended the forum and initially sought refuge in Thailand, was found dead in June 2024 after returning to Lao PDR.
9. In January 2024, 6 residents of Xang Village, Xieng Khouang Province, were arrested for protesting against the government's illegal seizure of ancestral land, which was allegedly granted to Phengxay Import-Export Company through bribery and falsified land titles.⁸ Among those arrested were 4 male protesters and 2 members of the village's Women's Union, who were detained while delivering food to the men in custody.
10. A.L. is a Lao youth democracy activist who manages a well-known Facebook page exposing the realities of #WhatsHappeninginLaos through which he advocates for genuine democracy and openly criticises the country's increasing dependence on China. On 29 April 2023, he was shot multiple times in Vientiane.⁹ Following Manushya's effort, he received the urgent care he needed.¹⁰ Yet, 2 years after the attempted assassination, the government continues to withhold information, and the perpetrators remain unpunished.¹¹
11. H.X. is a dedicated Lao woman HRD. She courageously spoke out against government corruption and corporate abuses, drawing attention to their harmful impacts on local communities. On 12 September 2019, she was arbitrarily arrested and coerced into falsely confessing to charges of defamation and spreading anti-state propaganda, resulting in a 5-year prison term.¹² Although she was released in 2024, her case exemplifies the severe reprisals faced by HRDs.¹³
12. S.P., S.C., and L.T. were arrested on 5 March 2016 while visiting their families in Lao PDR, following their online criticism of the government and participation in a peaceful protest at the Lao Embassy in Bangkok, where they denounced corruption, deforestation, and human rights violations. In 2017, they were sentenced to 20, 16, and 12 years in prison, respectively, after being convicted of treason, spreading anti-state propaganda, and inciting social disorder.¹⁴
13. S.S. is a prominent Lao civil society figure who was abducted in Vientiane on 15 December 2012. His fate has remained unknown for more than 12 years.¹⁵ Despite claiming an ongoing investigation, the Lao government has issued only vague statements,¹⁶ declined UN and foreign assistance,¹⁷ and provided no updates to his family or the public.¹⁸ Moreover, to date, no case of enforced disappearance in Laos has been resolved, and no perpetrators have been identified or brought to justice.¹⁹
14. For the full list of notable cases of arrests and reprisals against villagers and civilians related to land, development projects, and corruption in Lao PDR, please refer to Annex 1.

Notable Cases of Transnational Repression: Lao Activists Facing Repression Abroad

15. J.A. is a Lao blogger who gained attention through his viral reporting on the Attapeu Dam collapse in July 2018.²⁰ Due to his online activism, he was forced to flee Lao PDR and now lives in exile in France. On 14 June 2025, J.A. was violently attacked in Pau, France, sustaining 3 stab wounds.²¹ Given his profile and the lack of any robbery attempt, the incident is suspected to have been an attempted extrajudicial killing by the Lao government.²²
16. B.K. was a Lao activist and member of the Free Lao movement, known for his strong advocacy for democracy and human rights in Lao PDR. He attended the 2023 APFSD alongside ADL members and later fled to Thailand, where he was granted refugee status by UNHCR. On 17 May 2023, he was found dead by the roadside in Ubon Ratchathani, just days before he was due to depart for Australia.²³
17. O.S. is a member of the Free Lao movement and a vocal HRD who sought asylum in Thailand. He disappeared in Bangkok on 26 August 2019, following a meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights ahead of the Rapporteur's official country visit to Laos.²⁴ His whereabouts remain unknown to this day.

Notable Cases of Transnational Repression: Lao Authorities' Cooperation with Foreign Governments on Lao Soil

18. In May 2024, the Lao government handed over 17 Myanmar nationals to the military junta at the Golden Triangle border.²⁵ Although the junta claimed they were linked to a People's Defence Force, local reports indicated they had been arrested by Lao police on 13 April 2024 while simply collecting funds for families displaced by the fighting in Laos' Ton Pheung District.
19. Additionally, in November 2017, Lao PDR adopted Decree No. 238 on Non-Profit Associations (NPAs), replacing the 2009 decree. The regulation substantially expanded state control over civil society organisations, granting authorities broad powers to obstruct the formation of NPAs, criminalise human rights groups, prohibit a wide range of activities, restrict access to foreign funding, and dissolve organisations at their discretion without any mechanism for appeal. It also permits the criminalisation of unregistered associations and the prosecution of their members.²⁶

Article 1: Right to Self-determination

Non-Recognition of Indigenous Peoples

20. Lao PDR is the most ethnically diverse country in mainland Southeast Asia. Despite Lao PDR voting in favour of the adoption of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it does not recognise Indigenous Peoples. Rather, it classifies them as 'ethnic groups' and considers that all ethnic groups have the same status.²⁷ The government recognised 160 ethnic subgroups within 50 ethnic groups divided into 4 main ethno-linguistic groups: Lao Tai, Hmong-Lu Mien, Mon-Khmer, and Sino-Tibet.²⁸ The promotion of a 'multi-ethnic' society results in the denial of Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination and collective rights, including the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent and customary land rights.

Lack of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in Development Projects

21. As per Article 17 of the Constitution and Article 3 of the 2019 Land Law,²⁹ all lands belong to the State. The absence of FPIC, the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and the lack of legal recognition of customary land rights have enabled the forced eviction of Indigenous Peoples and land grabbing for development projects without adequate compensation, further exacerbating their marginalisation.³⁰
22. In 2021, government troops launched a campaign of attacks against Hmong groups living in forests near Phou Bia Mountain to remove them from areas targeted for development and foreign investment schemes.³¹
23. The Nam Ou River Cascade Hydropower Project has displaced thousands of people, primarily Indigenous Peoples, without respecting their right to FPIC. The project's environmental impact assessment (EIA) and other key information were not made publicly available, and sources of livelihood have been destroyed or severely diminished without adequate compensation.³²

Article 1: Right to Self-determination and Article 1(2): Right to Freely Dispose of Natural Wealth and Resources

Land-Grabbing in Profit of Businesses

24. As all lands belong to the State, registering ownership of land is necessary for individuals. However, rural and Indigenous communities face obstacles in conforming to this obligation.³³ While the 2019 Land Law aimed at regulating land use rights, it has largely benefited State and private interests, leaving communities vulnerable. The law centralises government control, providing vague guidelines and allowing for greater government discretion in land acquisitions.³⁴
25. In December 2023, the government repealed the 2016 Decree 84 on Compensation and Resettlement Management in Development Projects which provided guidelines for fair compensation and resettlement of affected communities, arguing that these issues were already covered under the 2018 Law on Resettlement and Vocation³⁵ and the 2019 Land Law. However, these laws have failed to provide effective remedies for affected communities. Weak provisions and poor enforcement have allowed land seizures, displacement, and dispossession to occur without meaningful participation or consultation.³⁶
26. The 2018 Law on Resettlement and Vocation aims to manage and monitor resettlement to ensure that the affected people are provided with residential and production land and occupation. However, several legal provisions continue to hinder the protection of community rights, and weak enforcement mechanisms have left numerous communities displaced by development projects without fair compensation or adequate resettlement.³⁷
27. In May 2024, the National Assembly Resolution No.57 amended key Land Law provisions permitting the issuance of land titles and certificates within state forest zones for communities with longstanding usage. While this is a positive step for communities living in forest areas and is expected to benefit over 3,000 villages nationwide, key challenges remain in implementing the Resolution and ensuring recognition of collective rights over forests.³⁸

28. Between 2014 and 2017, a total of 1,758 land deals, covering roughly 50% of Laos' territory, were granted to investors, 61% of them to foreign entities. Most allocations were for mining, agriculture, and tree plantation projects, with 240 concessions, covering 137,332 hectares, located within national forest areas.³⁹
29. **Ban Yeup Village:** On 25 July 2017, Lao authorities arrested 14 individuals, including minors, for cutting down rubber trees as a protest on land that had been confiscated from them and leased to a Vietnamese rubber company. Several detainees were reportedly subjected to physical abuse, including electric shocks. One of the detainees died in custody on 29 January 2018. While officials claimed he died by suicide, his relatives reported signs of torture.⁴⁰
30. **Luang Prabang Dam:** Villagers who were forced to relocate in Northern Laos for the construction of the dam have reported inadequate compensation, a lack of clear information, and the loss of traditional livelihood, calling into question the legitimacy of the project.⁴¹
31. **Pak Lay Dam:** The government had approved the construction of key infrastructure while information regarding relocation plans and compensation arrangements for affected communities were missing.⁴²
32. **Laos-China Railway** Nearly 4 years after the completion of the project in 2021, many villagers who were evicted from their land are still awaiting compensation.⁴³ In addition to lengthy compensation, inadequate payments have been reported.⁴⁴
33. **Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy Dam collapse:** On 23 July 2018, the collapse of the dam in Attapeu Province, southern Laos, resulted in the deaths of at least 71 people and displaced over 7,000. 7 years on, survivors continue to wait for justice, adequate compensation, and secure housing. To date, many displaced families have been resettled in poorly constructed homes on infertile land, with limited access to livelihoods.⁴⁵ Please refer to Article 2(1): Maximum Available Resources below for further information on corruption and misappropriated funds.
34. **Sugarcane in Savannakhet Province:** Analysis of different investment models of sugarcane companies showed that State land concessions often overlap with pre-existing land users and customary claims. The search for production maximisation coupled with loss of access to land for local communities have pushed smallholders into deeply inequitable sub-lease agreements, including farmers renting back the land that had been taken from them for the concession.⁴⁶

Article 2: Actions Taken to Gradually Fulfil the Right under the Covenant

Lack of Corporate Accountability

35. While Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution emphasise the State's commitment to promoting the protection and restoration of degraded environments and highlight the government's focus on economic development that harmonises with cultural growth and environmental sustainability, the reality on the ground differs greatly. Despite the introduction of various laws such as the 2013 Environmental Protection Law, the 2017 Law on Minerals, and the 2022 Decree on Environmental Impacts Assessment, EIAs are often overlooked, and projects often involve clearance of forests, environmental contamination, and destruction of ecosystems. Lao PDR also lacks a comprehensive legal framework to effectively hold corporations accountable for environmental

damage and human rights abuses,⁴⁷ even if it is currently taking steps to develop a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights. If the plan only contains voluntary measures, it will not ensure corporate accountability and will only be a tool for whitewashing.⁴⁸

36. While Lao PDR aspires to become the “Battery of Southeast Asia” by operating at least 100 hydropower projects by 2030, a study by the Mekong River Commission warns that such development poses serious risks to the region’s ecological and economic sustainability. Impacts include a 30–40% decline in Mekong fisheries by 2040 and a 97% reduction in sediment reaching the Mekong Delta, threatening food security and livelihoods across the basin.⁴⁹
37. Following the development of railway connectivity, allowing fastest exportations to China, there has been a dramatic expansion of fruit plantations led by Chinese investors. More than 110,000 hectares of land within national conservation and protected forest areas have been granted to investors for agriculture and logging purposes.⁵⁰ In 2023, Lao PDR lost over 136,500 hectares of primary forest, a 47% increase from the previous record in 2022, placing the country among those with the highest deforestation rates. Intensive agricultural expansion projects fuelled by Chinese investments have been the main driver of this dramatic increase in forest loss.⁵¹
38. The rapid expansion of mining has led to severe environmental pollution. In 2021, toxic chemical discharge from a mining operation turned the Nam Bak River green, killing fish and contaminating the Bac Non River.⁵² In 2022, pollution from an iron mine operated by a Vietnamese company turned the Sa-A and Xe Noi Rivers red. The company was also involved in illegal mining. These incidents rendered the rivers unsafe for consumption and use.⁵³
39. Environmental and health impacts have intensified in recent years. In early 2024, Indigenous Peoples in Houaphanh Province were exposed to heavy metal contamination from a rare-earth project run by a Laos-China company. Hundreds of families in 36 villages lost access to clean water, and downstream communities were unaware of the project until contamination surfaced 2 years after operations began.⁵⁴ Later that year, a sulfuric acid spill from a tanker en route to a Chinese rare earth company polluted the Khan River.⁵⁵ In early 2025, the Nam Xang River turned red after repeated spills from Tienhao Kaobang’s iron mine.⁵⁶ In May 2025, the Lao government authorised Si Udom Mining Co., Ltd., in partnership with a Chinese investor, to explore rare minerals over 1,600 hectares in Houaphanh Province, a project involving chemical processing that raises questions about safeguards and whether communities have been adequately informed about the potential impacts and their rights.⁵⁷ In July 2025, authorities suspended potash mining projects in Vientiane due to environmental and safety concerns.⁵⁸
40. Rampant corruption, coupled with a clear lack of law enforcement, has contributed to the emergence of several Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Northern Laos as hotspots for human rights abuses. The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) hosts criminal enterprises like drug trade, human and wildlife trafficking, and online scams. The zone operated by Z.W., a Chinese national whose organisation, Kings Romans, has been under U.S. Treasury sanctions since 2018, is exempt from most national economic regulations and is subject to separate labour laws.⁵⁹ It is also reported that national police and other authorities need permission to enter the zone.⁶⁰ Recently, on 4 July 2025, the government authorised a Chinese investor to enter into a concession to develop a new SEZ covering an area of more than 7,000 hectares in Luang Prabang Province without conducting community consultation or human rights, environmental and social impact assessments.⁶¹

Article 2(1): Maximum Available Resources

Widespread Corruption and Lack of Transparency

41. While the Constitution does not explicitly mention corruption, Article 6 obliges state officials to uphold the legitimate rights and interests of the people. Lao PDR has also enacted Anti-Corruption Law No. 27/NA (2012) and dedicated provisions in the 2017 Penal Code. Nevertheless, the lack of effective implementation of anti-corruption measures in the country has led to the continued prevalence of corruption throughout the country.⁶² Lao PDR scores 33 out of 100 on the 2025 Corruption Perception Index and ranks 114 out of 180. While the country increased its score by 5 points from 2024, it still ranks among the lowest in Southeast Asia.⁶³ Corruption totalled losses in 2024 amounted to USD 32.1 million,⁶⁴ with development and investment projects being the primary sources of the graft.⁶⁵
42. Several obstacles bar appropriate prevention of corruption: the serious restrictions on civic space and freedom of expression prevent people from raising the issue of corruption; the ability of the government to combat corruption in all situations, considering how corruption is widespread among government officials;⁶⁶ and corruption in the judiciary system.⁶⁷
43. Following the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy Dam collapse, while the dam operators disbursed \$91.2 million in disaster relief, 71% of the compensation was pocketed by the government. In February 2022, Manushya petitioned the UN Special Procedures to seek compensation for survivors. Later, in November 2023, Manushya and its partners engaged with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to reveal the fraudulent actions of Lao authorities regarding compensation. As a result, in January 2024, the governor of Attapeu Province reported that \$4.2 million allocated for victims was missing. Additional investigations led to 23 provincial and district-level party and State officials being disciplined for embezzling funds intended for victims. However, most were only reprimanded or dismissed from the party, rarely prosecuted or imprisoned.⁶⁸
44. In July 2025, the Lao government launched a public fundraising campaign in response to the devastation caused by Typhoons Wutip and Wipha.⁶⁹ The initiative drew widespread public criticism on social media where citizens questioned the government's financial management and accountability. Many expressed scepticisms over the need for donations, given the state's responsibility to provide disaster relief through tax revenues and substantial foreign aid.

Article 2(2): Non-discrimination

45. The Lao Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity and religious beliefs through Article 8 and Article 9. Article 43 guarantees the freedom of Lao citizens to hold or not to hold religious beliefs. The prohibition of ethnic-based discrimination is reinforced by Article 227 of the Penal Code. However, the Lao government's persistence to qualify Lao PDR as a multi-ethnic country particularly contributes to undermining differences or denying the vulnerability of certain ethnic minority groups and Indigenous Peoples.⁷⁰
46. Despite policy commitments such as the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021–2025), Indigenous Peoples continue to face limited access to basic services in rural areas due to persistent resource constraints and the prioritisation of the Lao-Tai Buddhist majority.⁷¹ Indigenous communities lag behind in healthcare, education, and access to clean water and

sanitation. Poverty rates are highest among the Hmong-Lu Mien (38.4%) and Mon-Khmer (32.7%), with the Hmong-Lu Mien making up 19% of the poor despite comprising less than 10% of the population.⁷²

47. Officials use Decree 315 and the principle of social harmony to justify the continual regulation and supervision of certain religious practices, especially those associated with emerging or lesser-known Christian groups comprising members from minority ethnic backgrounds.⁷³
48. Hmong people continue to experience systematic discrimination and extreme violence from the government following their involvement in the “CIA’s Secret War” during the Vietnam War. Abuses against Hmong individuals include acts of extreme violence, such as bombing, extrajudicial killings, and torture, forcing them to remain hidden in remote mountains or to seek asylum outside Lao PDR. The need to remain hidden pushes them into extreme poverty. On 10 March 2020, teenagers Z.H., K.V., and M.V., along with elderly V.H., left their jungle refuge in a risky bid to reach Thailand in search of a better life. 2 days later, they disappeared. A video showed their vehicle at the bottom of a cliff, with 2 bodies inside bearing unmistakable signs of torture. The teenagers remain missing to this day.⁷⁴ A recent report highlighted the severe human rights violations faced by the Hmong people, warning that they are at critical stages of dehumanisation, polarisation, and persecution.⁷⁵

Article 3: Gender Equality

49. Lao PDR has established a legal framework to promote gender equality, including the Constitution (Articles 35 and 37), the Penal Code (Article 224), the 2004 Law on Development and Protection of Women, and the 2019 Law on Gender Equality. These laws aim to eliminate discrimination and guarantee equal rights for women. The government’s National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Children (2021–2025) includes measures such as gender quotas in leadership roles, particularly in climate and disaster sectors. Key institutions like the NCAWMC, Lao Women’s Union, and Women Parliamentarian Caucus support implementation and monitoring. However, despite these initiatives, significant gender disparities persist due to entrenched stereotypes, power imbalances, and structural barriers that impede women’s full and equal participation in all areas of public life.⁷⁶ Recently, Lao PDR declined in the Global Gender Gap Index, where it dropped from 89th place in 2024 to 96th in 2025.⁷⁷
50. Moreover, gender disparities continue in education and economic participation. Males still have higher literacy rates overall.⁷⁸ An emerging concern is the gendered impact of digitalisation. Women face barriers, including lower education levels, disproportionate domestic responsibilities, and cultural norms that associate digital skills with men.⁷⁹ Female enrolment in vocational training and higher education remains disproportionately low, particularly in technology-related fields.⁸⁰ Also, women with lower literacy and limited access to digital skills are more vulnerable to exploitation, including online sexual violence and forced participation in cyber-scam operations.⁸¹
51. In the labour market, 58.1% of women remain outside the labour force compared to 47.4% of men, largely due to unequal care responsibilities as women spend 48% of their day on unpaid domestic work, while men spend less than 40%.⁸² In public administration, 45% of women occupy the lowest salary levels, compared to 33% of men.⁸³ Informal employment is disproportionately high among women, and a gender pay gap persists across agriculture, industry, and services.⁸⁴

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

52. Around 1 in 3 women experience sexual, physical, or emotional violence, yet only 1 in 10 seek help from authorities.⁸⁵ A deeply rooted culture of silence, shaped by societal norms and patriarchal values, perpetuates this cycle. Moreover, as society increasingly relies on technology, the avenues for perpetrating violence have expanded to technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV). TFGBV often occurs on a continuum, where actions that begin in the digital space can escalate to offline GBV and vice versa.⁸⁶
53. The Lao government's efforts to address GBV and TFGBV, including through relevant legislations and National Action Plan,⁸⁷ remain insufficient as research reveals a persistent gap between policy and implementation. Many survivors do not seek help from authorities due to limited awareness of available services, gaps in legal protections, fear of stigma or reprisals within their families, and low levels of digital literacy.⁸⁸ These challenges are compounded by the lack of dedicated legislation and insufficient training of law enforcement personnel, leaving many without access to effective redress or protection.⁸⁹ While the government has recognised TFGBV as an emerging concern,⁹⁰ it has yet to adopt specific legislation addressing this issue.

LGBTQIA+ Rights

54. While Article 35 of the Lao Constitution affirms legal equality for all citizens regardless of gender, social status, education, belief, or ethnic background, it does not explicitly reference sexual orientation or gender identity. Although the phrase “Lao citizens irrespective of gender” could be interpreted to include LGBTQIA+ individuals, this interpretation is undermined by Article 37, which narrowly frames equality as applying to “men and women”, thereby excluding gender-diverse populations from legal recognition. At the legislative level, Article 151 of the 2018 Civil Code⁹¹ explicitly prohibits same-sex marriage, denying LGBTQIA+ individuals equal rights, particularly in areas such as property ownership, joint bank accounts, and access to spousal health insurance. The absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination laws leaves LGBTQIA+ persons vulnerable to systemic exclusion and rights violations, particularly in employment, healthcare, and access to public services, thus perpetuating marginalisation.⁹²
55. Despite growing social acceptance, discriminatory perceptions of LGBTQIA+ individuals persist. They are often stereotyped as entertainers or treated as objects of ridicule, rather than being recognised for their knowledge, skills, and leadership potential.⁹³ They also continue to experience systemic discrimination in the labour market, with many denied employment.⁹⁴

Article 6: Right to Work & Article: 7 Right to Just and Favourable Conditions of Work

Labour Rights Violations: Inadequate Minimum Wage Amid Inflation

56. According to Article 105 of the 2013 Labour Law,⁹⁵ the Lao government is responsible for determining the minimum wage to ensure a basic standard of living. However, despite recent increases, the minimum wage remains inadequate to meet basic living costs, especially amid high inflation and currency depreciation. As of 2024, the minimum monthly wage is set at LAK 2,500,000 (approximately USD 116),⁹⁶ yet many workers report that this income does not cover essential expenses such as food, utilities, and transportation.⁹⁷ Moreover, some privately owned companies in Vientiane continue to pay below the legal minimum, arguing that unskilled workers are not entitled to the full wage increase.⁹⁸

57. Persistent economic pressures, including high inflation, currency depreciation, and stagnant real wages, have driven many workers to shift from formal service jobs to informal self-employment or agricultural work.⁹⁹ With wages failing to keep pace with inflation, many are forced to pursue alternative income sources or migrate abroad to support their families. As of June 2025, over 415,000 Lao workers were reported to be employed abroad.¹⁰⁰ This growing trend of labour migration has contributed to a domestic labour shortage that further undermines the country's already fragile economy.

Poor Labour Rights Protection: Exploitation and Human Trafficking in SEZs

58. Due to limited employment opportunities, an increasing number of low-income workers are seeking better wages in SEZs, inadvertently exposing themselves to heightened risks of exploitation and human trafficking. While human trafficking is criminalised under Article 215 of the Lao Penal Code, and internal mechanisms such as the National Committee on Anti-Trafficking in Persons and the Human Trafficking Prevention Department have been established, these measures remain insufficient to effectively address the issue.
59. Although SEZs are intended to attract foreign investment and drive local development, they remain poorly regulated and have instead become enclaves for transnational criminal operations. In particular, the GTSEZ has become a focal point for serious labour rights violations and human trafficking.¹⁰¹ The Kings Romans Casino in the GTSEZ, for example, has been linked to money laundering, cyber scams, and trafficking in persons.¹⁰² Trafficking victims in the zone are coerced into working in online scam centres under brutal and exploitative conditions, including physical abuse, forced confinement, and debt bondage.¹⁰³ Passports are often confiscated to prevent escape, leaving individuals trapped in forced labour.¹⁰⁴
60. The Lao government's response to trafficking and cyber scam operations remains limited and largely driven by external pressure. The August 2024 raids on the GTSEZ, which resulted in over 770 arrests, took place only after direct intervention from China.¹⁰⁵ However, a meeting between Lao government officials and Z.W., the Chinese crime boss operating the GTSEZ, held prior to the raids reportedly gave criminal networks ample time to relocate.¹⁰⁶

Article 11: Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

61. While Lao PDR has made progress toward development goals, it remains on the UN list of 44 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as of 2025.¹⁰⁷ The government, which initially aimed for graduation in 2020¹⁰⁸ and then in 2025, has now set 2026 as the new target.¹⁰⁹ This delay highlights the ongoing disparity between government aspirations and the structural challenges still faced by the population, particularly in rural and marginalised areas.
62. Moreover, although the government has declared multiple districts poverty-free and claims steady progress toward LDC graduation by 2026,¹¹⁰ these narratives overlook the persistent poverty and inequality experienced by many communities on the ground. According to the latest World Bank survey from May 2025,¹¹¹ more than 82% of households remain impacted by inflation. In response to rising food prices, many families have been forced to rely on savings, sell livestock or other assets, or incur debt, while one-third of households have reduced their spending on essential health and education services.

63. The cost-of-living crisis is further exacerbated by surging electricity prices, which have doubled over the past 2 years due to rising domestic demand and the continued depreciation of the kip.¹¹² Despite operating 94 power plants and being promoted as the “Battery of Southeast Asia”, electricity costs have become unaffordable for many households. In April 2025, some reported bills as high as LAK 2.7 million (approximately USD 125).¹¹³ Aggravatingly, the government has announced continued tariff hikes through 2029, with households expected to pay nearly double the January 2025 rate by the end of 2026.¹¹⁴
64. These burdens are passed onto consumers as the state struggles to repay foreign debt incurred through infrastructure loans.¹¹⁵ The crisis was largely unavoidable, stemming from weak planning, excessive investment in the domestic energy sector, primarily funded by Chinese loans, and further intensified by systemic fiscal and governance weaknesses.¹¹⁶ Public debt reached 97% of GDP in 2024, with the International Monetary Fund projecting it will rise to 127% by 2029, placing Lao PDR in a state of both external and overall debt distress.¹¹⁷
65. Furthermore, Lao PDR is undergoing its largest administrative restructuring in decades, merging key ministries to reduce public spending amid rising debt and persistent inflation, cutting the number of ministries from 17 to 13 in an effort to improve efficiency.¹¹⁸ This reflects growing economic strain and the pressure to curb expenditures, with potential implications for the delivery of essential services and the realisation of socio-economic rights.

Article 12: Right to Health

66. The right to health is enshrined in Article 25 of the Constitution. The right is also guaranteed through a set of recently enacted and revised legislative instruments, including the 2023 Law on Health, the 2023 Law on Primary Health Care, the 2023 Law on Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases, and the revised 2023 Law on Health Care.¹¹⁹
67. However, a lack of adequate resources continues to obstruct meaningful implementation.¹²⁰ According to the World Bank,¹²¹ even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, health expenditure remained low compared to other countries in the region and relative to its level of economic development. The country’s health financing system is marked by limited public investment and a heavy dependence on out-of-pocket (OOP) payments and external aid.¹²² OOP spending continues to be the largest source of health funding, discouraging access to healthcare among low-income populations and often worsening household financial hardship. External assistance accounts for roughly 20% of total health spending, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of critical programmes such as immunisation, HIV, and tuberculosis services.¹²³
68. Many health facilities lack basic infrastructure. Approximately 25% of health centres do not have access to safe water, and 60% experience frequent power outages.¹²⁴ While basic equipment and infection prevention items are generally available, the supply of essential medicines and diagnostic tools remains critically low, particularly at the health centre level.¹²⁵ These challenges have been exacerbated by the sharp depreciation of the national currency and rising inflation.¹²⁶

HIV/AIDS

69. HIV remains one of the key public health concerns, with the number of diagnosed cases steadily increasing each year since 2022.¹²⁷ Between January and November 2024, 1,896 new HIV cases

were reported, bringing the cumulative total to 22,584 cases since 1990.¹²⁸ In the first 3 months of 2025, 360 new cases were recorded.¹²⁹ Notably, 53% of people living with HIV are aged 15 to 29.¹³⁰ Recent reports indicate a troubling rise in HIV infections among young Lao women, particularly those engaged in sex work linked to the influx of migrant workers employed on Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, including hydropower and mining operations.¹³¹ The trend is also observed in the GTSEZ where commercial sex activities targeting Chinese clients often involve unprotected sex and cases of group exploitation.¹³²

70. Limited access to sexual health education, particularly in remote areas, has contributed to rising HIV infections in Lao PDR.¹³³ Insufficient government funding for awareness campaigns and prevention programmes has hindered efforts to inform young people about HIV and AIDS, while limited internet access in rural areas reduces the reach of social media initiatives.¹³⁴ Widespread stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS continue to discourage many from seeking testing and treatment.¹³⁵

Articles 13 & 14: Right to Education

71. The right to education is enshrined in Article 38 of the Constitution and further reinforced by Article 6 of the 2024 Law on Education,¹³⁶ which guarantees all citizens equal access to quality, lifelong learning without discrimination. However, in practice, access to quality education remains a significant challenge largely due to chronic underfunding and limited government investment.¹³⁷
72. Rural areas, in particular, have long faced a shortage of qualified teachers, driven by low educator salaries and limited career prospects.¹³⁸ In Xepon District of Savannakhet Province, only 9 out of 109 schools have sufficient staff, with over 500 teaching positions unfilled in the province.¹³⁹ To address this, the Ministry of National Defence announced in June 2025 that it would recruit 2,000 soldiers as volunteer substitute teachers.¹⁴⁰ This initiative raises significant concerns about the quality of education delivered as soldiers will only receive 6 days of training.¹⁴¹
73. Moreover, high school dropout rates have remained persistently high in recent years, particularly in provinces such as Attapeu, Sekong, Savannakhet, Bolikhamxay, and Vientiane Capital.¹⁴² These trends are largely attributed to ongoing economic hardship, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and limited opportunities for pursuing higher education.¹⁴³ Broader economic challenges have further intensified the difficulties families face in supporting their children's education.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the government's claim that it has issued Decision No. 09/rev, dated 17 July 2023, outlining comprehensive measures to effectively address persistent challenges in education,¹⁴⁵ does not reflect the reality on the ground and fails to address these challenges.

Article 15: Cultural Rights

74. The Luang Prabang Hydropower Project poses a serious threat to the cultural rights of the Lao people. Situated just 25 kilometres upstream from the UNESCO World Heritage city of Luang Prabang, construction began between 2020–2021, and by November 2024, the project was 30% complete, with electricity production scheduled by 2030.¹⁴⁶ A video filmed by a worker as reported on 8 April 2025 reveals that construction is progressing rapidly.¹⁴⁷
75. The dam significantly endangers Luang Prabang's riverside cultural heritage by potentially transforming the city into a lakeside town and disrupting the Mekong River's natural sediment

flow, critical for agriculture and traditional fishing practices. Around 531 families face displacement, further threatening their livelihoods.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, safety concerns arise from the dam's proximity to an active fault line, heightening the risk of catastrophic failure.¹⁴⁹ The project's environmental, social, and heritage impact assessments have proven inadequate.¹⁵⁰ Despite repeated concerns from UNESCO and recommendation to relocate the project, the government has proceeded with construction.¹⁵¹ The UNESCO World Heritage status of Luang Prabang is now under threat, as the project risks altering its landscape and cultural identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Information: Freedom of Expression and Protection of Human Rights Defenders

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by the Netherlands and Ireland, ensure comprehensive legal protection for HRDs and activists from violations including arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, enforced disappearance, judicial harassment, and intimidation, and guarantee prompt, impartial, and thorough investigations into all allegations of such violations.
2. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendation made by Switzerland, ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance without delay, conduct investigations in an impartial, independent, prompt and effective manner, and ensure regular and transparent communication with the families concerned.
3. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by Chile and Ireland, amend laws and regulations to promote freedom of expression, including online, without fear of sanctions or reprisals, and create a safe, enabling environment for civil society by amending or repealing Decree No. 238 on Associations and refraining from prosecuting individuals for the peaceful exercise of their human rights.
4. In line with the 2024 Follow-up to Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee, ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted and, if convicted, punished with penalties that are commensurate with the gravity of the crime.

Article 1: Right to Self-determination and Right to Freely Dispose of Natural Wealth and Resources

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by New Zealand and Malawi, legislate for the recognition and protection of Indigenous Peoples in Lao PDR and continue with efforts to ensure the protection of rights of minority groups.
2. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Switzerland, ensure that development projects respect the rights of affected communities, including noting the principle of FPIC and establish a clear legal framework for compensation and resettlement of displaced persons that ensures affected individuals receive full and timely compensation based on international human rights standards.

Article 2: Actions Taken to Gradually Fulfil the Right under the Covenant

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendation made by Bhutan, strengthen the legal framework related to the environment.
2. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendation made by Luxembourg, ensure that the human rights, social and environmental impacts of major infrastructure development projects is meaningfully considered, in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and develop and implement a robust independent monitoring system.

3. Establish a public database for EIAs and monitoring reports, ensuring transparency and access to information for affected communities and civil society.
4. In line with the 2023 List of Issues from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ensure effective implementation of the anti-corruption legislation and take appropriate measures to combat acts of corruption, paying particular attention to land administration, public procurement, and tax administration.
5. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendation made by Estonia, adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in accordance with international human rights standards.
6. In line with the 2024 Follow-up to Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee, cease the persecution of members of the Hmong ethnic minority, effectively investigate violations, bring perpetrators to justice, and provide full reparation to victims or their families.

Article 3: Gender Equality

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Cyprus, and the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations, adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that addresses discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, as well as violence against women and girls, in both public and private spheres.
2. In line with the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations, adopt a comprehensive strategy to eliminate patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society.
3. Expand access to digital skills and financial resources for women without delay.
4. In line with the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations, take the necessary legal amendments to the Penal Code to specifically criminalise all forms of gender-based violence against women, including TFGBV.
5. In line with the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations, address the persistent gender wage gap by effectively enforcing the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, and promote women's access to higher-paid and non-traditional jobs.
6. Amend Article 37 of the Lao Constitution and remove binary language referring only to “men and women” to ensure the legal recognition and protection of gender-diverse individuals.
7. Repeal Article 151 of the 2018 Civil Code and recognise same-sex marriage.

Articles 6 and 7: Right to Work and Right to Just and Favourable Conditions of Work

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by Portugal, Brazil, and Sri Lanka, guarantee labour rights by ensuring adequate working conditions for all; strengthen action against human trafficking, particularly of women and children, through sufficient resources for prosecution and the dismantling of criminal networks; and adopt comprehensive measures to hold accountable all parties involved in forced labour, human trafficking, and online scam operations in the country's Special Economic Zones.
2. Ensure the minimum wage is regularly adjusted in line with inflation and the cost of living, in consultation with workers' representatives.

Article 11: Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, strengthen efforts to eradicate poverty, especially in rural and remote areas.



2. Ensure equitable access to essential services by prioritising public spending on health, education, and social protection, including social safety nets, particularly in rural and marginalised areas affected by inflation and rising living costs.

Article 12: Right to Health

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by Vietnam and Equatorial Guinea, facilitate access to health for vulnerable groups, including by strengthening the primary healthcare system, increasing public investment in health care to reduce reliance on out-of-pocket payments and external aid, and ensuring sustainable financing of essential health services, particularly for marginalised communities.
2. In line with the 2024 CEDAW Concluding Observations, ensure free access to anti-retroviral medicines, introduce age-appropriate sexuality education in school curricula, including on responsible sexual behaviour, and strengthen awareness-raising campaigns to de-stigmatise women and girls with HIV and encourage HIV testing.

Articles 13 and 14: Right to Education

1. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendations made by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Bhutan, New Zealand, and Ethiopia, continue and strengthen efforts to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all, particularly in rural and remote areas, by increasing public investment, improving teacher recruitment, addressing teacher shortages, and expanding educational infrastructure and resources to enhance quality.
2. In line with the 2025 UPR recommendation made by Thailand, intensify efforts to reduce school dropouts by promoting inclusive education for all children.

Article 15: Cultural Rights

1. In line with the 2024 Follow-up to Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee, take all steps necessary to ensure that meaningful consultations are held with communities with a view to obtaining their FPIC for development projects with an impact on their livelihood, lifestyle, and culture.
2. Cease all ongoing and planned development of the Luang Prabang Dam until a comprehensive and independent assessment is conducted to evaluate the safety, environmental, and cultural impacts, and implications for local communities.
3. In line with the 2024 preliminary observations of the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights following the visit to the Lao PDR, ensure that development processes are culturally sensitive, contextualised to specific cultural environments, and aligned with the aspirations, customs, traditions, systems, and worldviews of affected individuals and groups.



ANNEX 1

Notable cases of arrests and reprisals against villagers and civilians related to land, development projects, and corruption in Lao PDR

1. **Lao village chief killed following dispute over gold mining**: On 29 July 2024, A Lao village chief was shot dead at his office in Vientiane Province, following a conflict with a businessman over gold mining in the village. Learn more here: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/village-chief-shot-dead-unknown-gunman-07312024132731.html>
2. **Lao man arrested after posting bribery allegations against checkpoint police**: In March 2024, police in Phongsaly Province arrested a 24-year-old man for posting a Facebook video accusing officers at a checkpoint near the Chinese border of taking bribes. Authorities later released a video of him apologising and retracting his claims, though the audio appeared out of sync. The voice did not match the mouth movements, making it appear that the audio may have been added later. He was reportedly “re-educated” and released without charges following his apology. Learn more here: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/police-critic-03202024162627.html>
3. **Lao villagers arrested for protesting Chinese-backed potash mine**: In December 2022, authorities in central Laos arrested, and later released, a small group of villagers from Nong Bok District, Khammouane Province, who were protesting a 35-square-kilometre potash mine being developed by Sino Agri International Potash Co., a company linked to the Chinese government. The residents alleged they had not received fair compensation for the loss of their homes and farmland, a grievance shared by many communities displaced by Laos’ infrastructure-driven development projects. Learn more here: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/protest-12302022120129.html>
4. **Lao villagers beaten and detained by soldiers over land dispute with military**: In April 2022, 5 villagers from Houay Nam Yen, north of Vientiane, were beaten and detained by soldiers who claimed the land they and their families occupied belonged to the Lao military. The villagers, who held temporary documents affirming their right to the land, had these documents confiscated by the soldiers. They were held for 3 months at the Vientiane Military Division without access to relatives, and [upon release](#), were threatened with further punishment if they spoke to the media. Learn more here: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/villagers-04122022153941.html> and https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/arbitrary_detention-10052022180419.html
5. **Lao villager detained for months after land protest in Vientiane**: In March 2020, 2 villagers from Xiengda, Saysettha District, were detained after a video showed them confronting police over the confiscation of their land for a medical college and hospital project. One was released after accepting compensation and pledging to end her protest, while the other remained in detention 3 months later, denied family visits, and given inadequate food. In June 2020, 10 families petitioned the prime minister over the uncompensated land loss but were turned away. Learn more here: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/held-06152020155938.html>
6. **Elderly Lao man released on bail after detention over land dispute**: In November 2019, a 69-year-old Lao man was released on bail 2 months after being detained for refusing to relinquish



land that had been in his family since 1965. He was arrested after declining to sign documents transferring his 1.5-hectare plot near Viengkham Village, Pakkading District, Bolikhamsai Province, to authorities for the construction of a health centre. Learn more here:

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/laos-thitphay-thammavong-3-11272019120008.html>

7. **[Eight would-be protesters detained in Vientiane ahead of planned demonstrations](#)**: In November 2019, police in Vientiane detained 8 people who were planning protests calling for free speech and opposing land grabs, dam projects, deforestation, and unfair relocations. The arrests took place on 11 and 12 November, during the That Luang festival, preventing demonstrations planned at 4 locations in the capital. 6 of those detained, held at a guesthouse in Phonesinuan Village, Sisatthanak District, were later released after being “re-educated,” while the fate of the remaining 2 was unknown. Learn more here:

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About Manushya Foundation

Manushya Foundation was founded in 2017 with the vision to build a movement of Equal Human Beings #WeAreManushyan. Manushya is an intersectional feminist human rights organization reinforcing the power of humans, in particular women, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, forest-dependent communities, environmental defenders, LGBTI groups, and Youth, to be at the heart of decision-making processes that concern them and to speak truth to power at the forefront of their fight for Human Rights, Equality, Social Justice and Peace. Through coalition building, capacity building, community-led research, advocacy and campaigning, and sub-granting, local communities become Agents of Change fighting for their rights and providing solutions to improve their lives and livelihoods, pushing back on authoritarian governments and harmful corporations. Manushya defends local communities and seeks justice with them before the United Nations, focusing on women's rights and gender equality, digital rights, climate & environmental justice, and corporate accountability across Asia.



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