



Lao People Democratic Republic
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

National Social Protection Strategy

Vision 2030
Goal 2025

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Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare

September 2020



Lao People's Democratic Republic
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

Prime Minister

No.224/PM
Vientiane Capital, dated 01.04.2020.

Decree
On Endorsement of National Social Protection Strategy

- According to the Law of the Government of Lao PDR (revised), No. 04/NA, dated 08 November 2016;
- According to the revised version of the Labour Law No. 43/NA, dated 24 December 2016;
- According to the proposal of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, No. 0670/MLSW, dated 03 March 2020.

Prime Minister issues the Decree to:

Article 1: Officially endorse and declare the implementation of the National Social Protection Strategy based on the agreement at the Government meeting in March 2019.

Article 2: Assign the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to take leadership in collaboration with concerned sectors to translate into effective and efficient actions and implementation of this National Social Protection Strategy.

Article 3: Ministries, agencies equivalent to Ministries, provinces, Vientiane capital and other concerned sectors acknowledge, cooperate and implement this Decree effectively and efficiently.

Article 4: This Decree is effective from the date of signature.

Government of Lao PDR
Prime Minister

Signed and stamped

Thongloun SISOULITH

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Foreword

The National Social Protection Strategy 2025 (NSPS) benefits from the results obtained in the Assessment-Based National Dialogue on Social Protection (ABND) process developed by the United Nations (UN) and led by the International Labour Organization (ILO), previously held in the country. The ABND was conducted under the oversight of the Government's Drafting Committee for the National Social Protection Strategy, under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, with technical support from the ILO and the joint support of other UN agencies. In preparing of the ABND, data collection and analysis were carried out together with several technical meetings and consultations at the national and local level, leading to the production of a final report endorsed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare together with the ILO and the UN's Resident Coordinator in Lao PDR.

In preparing the NSPS, the Drafting Committee based their work on the principle of sustainable access to social protection services of quality for all, as well as on assessment of the extent and quality of coverage of the social protection system in the country. This was to ensure that the provision of social protection services would be predicated on informed, evidence-based experiences and be in alignment with the national goals, as well as to guarantee that implementation would be appropriate to real conditions and situations based on the human and financial resources available. This process also included dialogue with UN agencies, development partners and other concerned partners.

In the process, the NSPS drafting committee organized various technical meetings and consultations at the national and local levels. These included dialogues with government actors, workers' organizations, employers' organizations, UN agencies and other development partners. The NSPS is structured in line with Lao style documents, contains clear content, is aligned with policy and social and economic development plans, and is able to be integrated with regional and international priorities. The NSPS is consistent with Vision 2030 and Goal 2025, and its strategic objectives are in the areas of health insurance, social security, and social welfare. Each of the strategic objectives contains a set of activities to be performed during the implementation of the NSPS.

This NSPS is the commitment of the Government of Lao PDR to regional and international integration – particularly the collaboration between Lao PDR and international organizations and development partners to develop better and more effective social protection that is linked to other regional and international policies and commitments.

Vientiane Capital, date: 02 April 2020

Minister

Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare

Signed and stamped

Dr. Khampheng SAYSOMPHENG

Acknowledgement

On behalf of the Government of Lao PDR, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare would like to express our sincere appreciation to those involved in and who contributed to the research and development of this National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS). We gratefully acknowledge the Drafting Committee of the National Social Protection Strategy, led by Mme Baykham Kattiya, Vice Minister of Labour and Social Welfare as the Chair of the Committee; Dr Yangkou Yangleuxay, Director General of Planning and Cooperation Department of Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare as the head of Secretariat to the Drafting Committee; together with the members of the Committee from the following: Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Ministry of Finance, Commission of Social and Cultural Affairs of the National Assembly, Lao Federation of Trade Unions, Lao Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the National Social Security Fund Office, the National Health Insurance Bureau and other sectors. Their valuable contributions will result in the success of the NSPS. The NSPS was officially endorsed and its implementation declared with Prime Ministerial Decree No. 224/PM, dated 1 April 2020. This will be guiding future implementation, including the integration of the NSPS into sectoral development plans.

The NSPS benefits from technical support from Mr Nuno Cunha, ILO Senior Social Protection Specialist, and Ms Khemphone Phaokhamkeo, ILO National Coordinator for Lao PDR; from Mr Jose Ramon Aguin Ferradas, Social Protection Expert, for providing technical support and leading the research and analysis, consultation and drafting of the draft NSPS; from Mr Andre Felipe Bongestabs, Social Protection Costing Expert, for his support; and from Mr Jean-Claude Hennicot, former ILO Technical Advisor, for providing data and information and valuable comments to the strategy.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, on behalf of the Government of Lao PDR, is also grateful to the United Nations agencies in Lao PDR for their joint support and contribution to NSPS development, particularly the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Lao PDR, UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, WFP, and UNDP. In addition, the Ministry extends its gratitude to the Australian Embassy in Lao PDR, the European Union Delegation to Lao PDR, Humanity & Inclusion in Laos, HelpAge International, the IMF, Oxfam, development partners and civil society organizations for their support and contributions.

Terminology and definition

Allowances for poor students refer to cash allowances for school uniforms, educational materials and other necessities.

Block grant refers to budget support to primary and secondary schools to compensate school fees and ensure provision of free education.

Cash for work refers to cash transfers distributed to vulnerable individuals or households in exchange for labour.

Children in need of special care refers to children who are orphaned, disabled and/or without caretakers; children who are affected from physical abuse and/or sexual exploitation; children who are victims of trafficking; children who are in situations hazardous to their health/lives or suffering from labour exploitation.

Coverage refers to the population reached by a social protection service programme against the defined eligible group.

Coverage rate refers to the extent to which programmes reach their target population, and it is usually measured by the percentage of those covered by the programme against the defined eligible group.

Disability refer to a physical, mental, vision, hearing, communication or memory impairment that hinders the execution of tasks or actions, resulting in restricted participation in daily life.

Education scholarships refer to cash transfers to students at the junior secondary education and vocational levels who are poor and disadvantaged.

Formal workers refer to workers employed in a labour unit or who run businesses or services registered according to the law and regulations.

Grant for vocational education and skills development refers to a transfer of cash or a subsistence allowance to students who are poor and disadvantaged to enable them to access vocational education or skills development.

Health insurance is to ensure access to essential healthcare services, and is financed by co-payments and by contribution from the government.

Informal workers refer to a worker who is self-employed.

Lonely elderly refers to an individual aged 60 and above without caretaker(s) or who lives in a poor family.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms serve different functions. On the one hand, monitoring tools allow an assessment of the extent to which an intervention has been evolving, and involves the routine collection of administrative and programme-specific data on how many beneficiaries are reached and covered, and how effectively the intervention is reaching beneficiaries, etc. Monitoring should be a continuous process, integrated as an essential component of any programme design. Evaluation, on the other hand, entails assessing specific areas of a programme's implementation and operation (process evaluations), as well as assessing the impacts of interventions on outcomes (impact evaluations).

Non-contributory scheme is a scheme where members are not required to make contributions to receive benefits.

The poor refers to individuals with an average income of less than LAK192,000 per month.

Poverty means a lack of basic needs for daily life, such as insufficient food to meet required energy needs (approximately 2,100 calories per person per day), lack of essential clothing and shelter, incapacity to access essential healthcare and basic education, and lack of access to basic infrastructure networks.

Poverty line refers to an income level that is considered minimally sufficient to sustain a family with regard to food, housing, clothing, medical needs, etc.

Public works programmes are a subset of social protection programmes, generally defined as public labour-intensive infrastructure development initiatives that provide cash or food-based payments. Public works programmes provide income transfers to the poor through employment, and are often designed to smooth income particularly during “slack” or “hungry” periods of the year. The programmes often build infrastructure, such as rural roads, irrigation, water harvest facilities, tree plantations, schools and health clinic facilities.

School meal refers to the provision of lunch to children at kindergartens, pre-schools and primary schools in rural, remote and poor areas. Meals may be procured through the use of raw materials supplied by school gardens as well as through budget allocations to procure lunch from local communities.

Social assistance refers to assistance and service in response to material and mental needs.

Social protection is a set of policies and programmes designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout the life cycle. Social protection systems address all these policy areas by a mix of contributory schemes (social security and social health insurance) and non-contributory tax-financed benefits (social welfare).

Social protection floor is a nationally defined set of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum, that over the life cycle all in need have access to essential healthcare and to basic income security, which together secure adequate access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level.

Social security is a programme protecting national social security fund members and their families against life-course contingencies, such as healthcare, work-related contingencies, maternity, unemployment or sickness, old age pension, death and survival benefits as specified. Social security is financed from contributions by workers and their employers.

Social welfare is a set of social services designed to prevent and solve social problems and promote social development, including promoting a social safety net to ensure a basic livelihood for people in society. Social welfare includes the provision of essential services to people to meet the basic needs for decent livelihood development – including good education, good health, adequate shelter, decent employment and income – to ensure the welfare and security of society.

Standard of development refers to the defining of multifaceted conditions to measure success in a family, the development of a village, the urbanization of large villages into urban districts, and the strengthening of districts in line with reality of the country over time.

Targeting means the selection of beneficiaries of a programme.

Transfers refer to the provision of assistance in cash or in kind on regular basis. A transfer is a form of non-contributory assistance provided to ensure a regular income to poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Examples include elderly pensions for lonely elderly, or cash grants to children in need of special protection, to disabled persons who cannot help themselves, and students who are in poverty.

Unemployed refers to individuals aged 14–60 years who have no opportunities for work or who are looking for employment.

Universal benefit refers to scheme applying to all nationals of a country.

Victims of disaster refers to victims of natural and manmade disasters, such as fires, floods, droughts, disease outbreaks, cold weather, landslides, earthquakes, volcanic eruption, etc., that have resulted in the loss of lives or property and/or damage to the economy and environment of the affected region.

The vulnerable and disadvantaged refers to individuals who lack opportunities to access services related to education, vocational and skills development, decent employment, essential healthcare, psychological counselling, food and shelter.

Vulnerable groups refer to groups particularly threatened by social, economic, political or other pressures.

Working age, but poor refers to individuals aged 14–60 years who can work, but who earns an average income lower than the minimum wage.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ABND	Assessment-Based National Dialogue on Social Protection
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
GDP	gross domestic product
GGE	General Government Expenditure
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LAK	Lao kip (national currency)
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LECS	Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey
LFTU	Lao Federation of Trade Unions
LNCCI	Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry
LSB	Lao Statistics Bureau
MIS	management and information system
MoLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
NHI	National Health Insurance
NHIB	National Health Insurance Bureau
NSEDP	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
NSPC	National Social Protection Committee
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
NSSF	National Social Security Fund
RAP	Rapid Assessment Protocol
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UXO	unexploded ordnance

I. Introduction.

1. Role and significance of the National Social Protection Strategy

The social and economic inclusion of all members of a society is essential in promoting economic growth while simultaneously reducing inequality and poverty. In the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the existence of inequality in income generation and imbalances in sharing the benefits of economic growth, particularly between the wealthy in urban areas and the poor in rural areas, have been observed. However, it is not only in rural areas but across the country that one finds poor families who cannot take care of their children and vulnerable individuals like people with disabilities or older persons who live alone, among other disadvantaged groups.

In the current context, and as the economy is steadily growing, there is the capacity to allocate government budget and resources to further develop the social protection system – helping these vulnerable groups, reducing socioeconomic inequality and helping to redistribute the fruits of economic growth. This investment will not only benefit those who are more in need but also strengthen the country’s social and economic development.

The Government of Lao PDR is therefore committed to gradually aiming for universal coverage in social protection, according to the available resources and the given socio-economic context, and to working towards building a much-needed social protection floor that protects all Lao people from socioeconomic shocks, environmental disasters and vulnerabilities.

The present National Social Protection Strategy 2025 (NSPS) seeks to strengthen and complement the Government’s previous international commitments and national strategic objectives. By doing so, the Government aims to realize the contents of Declarations, Conventions and Recommendations concerning the implementation of social protection for all. These include, at the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the ILO Convention on Social Security Standards (No. 102); the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202); and the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also play a fundamental role in providing additional guidance to Lao PDR in achieving socioeconomic development. The relevance of the SDGs is acknowledged in the NSPS, as they have become an integral part of the goals, objectives and activities, and also serve as a benchmark for monitoring and evaluating the success of the Strategy.

At the national level, the Constitution of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic grounds the efforts of the State to provide compulsory primary education and a high-quality education system for all, and to facilitate access to education for all, particularly for people who live in remote areas, ethnic groups, women, children, vulnerable people and those with a disability. The Constitution also commits the State to developing skilled labour, promoting vocational skills and occupations, and protecting labour rights. The highest law also commits the State to implement policies on social security and support to several social protection-related rights.

The five-year 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) 2016–2020 targets reducing poverty significantly and recognizes the priority of achieving the SDGs. The 8th NSED sets the principal directions to be followed by the Government. Among them are harmonization between economic development and socio-cultural development; linking rural development with poverty reduction; improving human capital by enhancing workforce skills; and rooting solidarity in the society.

2. Scope of the National Social Protection Strategy

The Government of Lao PDR recognizes the role of social protection in reducing poverty and inequality and in promoting socioeconomic development and social cohesion. Working to improve the conditions of the poor is as essential for this strategy, as is ensuring that those who have already achieved adequate income security will not fall back into poverty.

The NSPS targets to promote, expand and improve the implementation of social protection policies and to contribute to human capital development in Lao PDR, while also contributing to the goals and objectives of other

relevant sectoral and socio-economic development plans. To achieve these, the NSPS states its vision until 2030, and defines its goals, strategic objectives and activities for developing the social protection system until 2025. Vision 2030 and Goal 2025 seek to strengthen and further develop the three pillars of social protection in Lao PDR, namely: health insurance, social security and social welfare. By developing the social protection system, the NSPS is expected to effectively contribute to the redistribution of economic growth to all groups in society, to social harmony and cohesion, to poverty and inequality reduction, and to long-lasting, resilient growth that benefits all. The Government of Lao PDR is committed to achieving the goal of social protection for all. Based on the resources available and the socio-economic conditions of the country, the Government is making an effort to establish a social protection floor to protect all Lao people from socio-economic shocks, natural and man-made disasters, and poor living conditions throughout their life cycle.

3. Development Process of the National Social Protection Strategy

The NSPS builds upon the results of the Assessment-Based National Dialogue (ABND) process previously conducted in the country. The ABND is a participatory assessment methodology developed globally by the United Nations, under the technical leadership of the International Labour Organization (ILO). This methodology is useful to assess the extent and quality of coverage of the social protection system in a country. To that end, the ABND identifies policy gaps and problems in the implementation of social protection schemes, and provides recommendations on how the system can be extended and improved to reach everyone.

The Lao PDR ABND was carried out under the oversight of the Government's Drafting Committee for the National Social Protection Strategy under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW) and relevant sectors, with technical support from the ILO and the joint support of UN agencies. The assessment used a participatory approach consisting of data collection and analysis and a series of consultative meetings and national and local dialogue workshops. This led to the production of a final report endorsed by the MoLSW.

In preparing the NSPS, the drafting committee based their work on the ABND's conclusions and recommendations. During the development of the Strategy, the focus was on the provision of access to social protection services of quality for all, and in a sustainable manner. In the process, the NSPS drafting committee organized various technical meetings and consultations at the national and local level. These included dialogue with government sectors, labour representative organizations, employer organizations, UN agencies and other development partners.

The structure of the strategy is based on the structure used for Government strategic documents, which consists of four parts:

- Part I: Introduction;
- Part II: Social protection situation in the global, regional and Lao PDR contexts;
- Part III: National Social Protection Strategy; and
- Part IV: Implementing measures.

II. The social protection situation in the global, regional and Lao PDR contexts

1. Social protection in the global context

1.1 International commitments and standards

Lao PDR has joined the international community in Conventions and Recommendations that focus on rights to social protection and their development.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)** – Social protection fulfills social and economic rights anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, as prescribed within Articles 22 and 25. Social protection systems are based on the right of everyone to healthcare, education, decent work and an adequate standard of living throughout the life cycle.

The **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (General Comment 19 on the right to social security) (1966)** prescribes the right to receive social protection in Articles 9, 11, 12 and 13, stating that no one should live below a certain standard of living, and everyone should have access to at least essential social services.

The **Minimum Social Security Standards Convention, 1952 (No. 102)** and the **ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202)**. The Recommendation provides guidance on building nationally defined social protection floors and reaffirms that they are economically affordable for any country. Social protection floors can be introduced, developed and maintained anywhere, taking into consideration particular national circumstances.

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** aim to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable socio-economic and environmental development in social harmony. The SDGs are recognized in the 8th NSEDP to be a priority area for Government action. The Lao PDR is focused on achieving these development goals by 2030, and the NSPS is a reflection of the Government's commitment. Therefore, the NSPS carefully chooses its goals and objectives to help to achieve SDG targets directly linked to social protection.

The following are the SDG goals and targets directly linked to social protection:

- Goal 1 – End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
 - Target 1.3 – Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.
- Goal 8 – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
 - Target 8.5 – By 2030 achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.
 - Target 8.6 – By 2020 substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.
- Target 10.4 – Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.
- Target 18.3 – By 2030, ensure that all identified UXO [unexploded ordnance] survivors and victims have their health needs met and survivors most at risk of poverty are provided with support for livelihoods/employment.

1.2 Types of social protection schemes

Social protection systems and policies have been implemented in many countries around the world, including in developing countries. Although there is a diversity of social protection schemes, they can be organized into two main groups:

Social security (contributory schemes) is a scheme wherein benefits are received on the condition of registration and payment of contributions (by workers, employers and/or government) that are managed by social security and health insurance institutions, as guided in social security and health insurance laws in the case of Lao PDR. The conditions to qualify for benefits from social security schemes (including health insurance) are

usually established under social security legislation. The required levels of contribution (and the benefits received) are established in relation to the worker's insurable earnings. The benefits received include protection against life-course vulnerabilities such as illness, old age, unemployment, and others. Insurance contributions are the main source of funding in most countries, but funding can also include resources from a government's general revenue.

Social welfare (non-contributory schemes) are schemes wherein the reception of benefits is not linked to the contributions received from the beneficiary, but are instead based on sociodemographic criteria like residence, belonging to a specific age group (for instance children or older adults), and situations like poverty or vulnerability. Non-contributory schemes are thus the component of social protection offering a higher contribution to poverty reduction. These measures include, for example, the social pension, child grant transfers, and public works or unemployment benefits. Access to health services can also be organized through non-contributory schemes. Non-contributory schemes are funded from a government's general revenue and might temporarily benefit from grants or loans from international development partners.

2. Social protection in the regional context

In October 2013, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection. The ASEAN Charter guides the Declaration with the specific goal of providing people with equitable access to opportunities for human development, social welfare and justice. The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection urges ASEAN Member States to expand and improve the quality and quantity of social protection measures in their own country. The Declaration acknowledges equality for all in accessing social protection and pays particular attention to the poor, vulnerable children, persons with disabilities, people of old age and other vulnerable groups. To achieve this, the Declaration calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development, poverty reduction and human capital development.

Several other regional commitments have guided the design of the Strategy, such as the Hanoi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children (2010); the Brunei Darussalam Declaration on Strengthening Family Institution: Caring for the Elderly (2010); the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the ASEAN Community (2011); and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012).

Lessons learned and current context of the social protection system in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam has recognized the need to change the current fragmented targeting approaches that address individual situations of need to a life-cycle approach that recognizes the universal risks and vulnerabilities affecting each age group. This neighbouring country is also shifting its understanding of the social protection system from a provider of subsidies to a source of support.

In this context, Viet Nam has recently developed a Master Plan on Social Insurance Reform (MPSIR) for contributory interventions, and a Master Plan on Social Assistance Reform and Development (MPSARD) for non-contributory interventions.

The MPSIR has the objective of expanding social insurance until its coverage reaches all the population. With this goal in mind, the country is set to progressively expand social insurance coverage to reach more formal economy workers (through compulsory contributions) and informal economy workers (through voluntary contributions). Furthermore, the plan aims to expand participation in the unemployment insurance scheme to cover a higher percentage of the working population, and expand the coverage of the pension for the elderly. The MPSIR also aims to increase the satisfaction of social insurance participants, as measured by a "social insurance satisfaction index". All these objectives will be targeted while also ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Social Insurance Fund.

Currently, Viet Nam provides regular social assistance through cash transfers to older persons who live alone and having no relatives, who belong to poor households and are between 60 to 80 years old; older people over 80 years old having neither a pension nor social insurance; persons with a disability; single parents from poor households; and orphans. Other social assistance interventions include, mainly: a funeral cost allowance;

healthcare and health insurance card provision; an education support policy; electricity subsidies for poor households; and emergency social assistance.

The targets of the MPSARD include expanding the social assistance cash transfers to all older adults without pensions or State allowances and to all children under 36 months old. The Government also plans to integrate by 2030 all the social assistance transfers into a single scheme targeting households.

3. Social protection in the Lao PDR context

3.1. Introduction

Lao PDR's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at a rate of between 4% and 8.6% for the last 25 years. Since the 1992/1993, the time of the first Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS), poverty incidence has fallen from a 46% share of the total population to 23% in 2012/2013. Likewise, the country's Human Development Index (HDI) has risen from 0.400 in 1990 to 0.601 in 2017, and past progress on first achieving the Millennium Development Goals – and currently in attaining the SDGs – are encouraging.

However, not all are equally benefiting from economic growth and progress. Poverty persists, basic services are not yet available in many districts, and inequality is increasing within urban areas, between urban and rural areas and between provinces. These factors threaten the country's socioeconomic development and its graduation from the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

The high rate of economic growth is not being translated into an equally high rate of poverty reduction. For each 1% of GDP increase per capita, poverty decreased only by 0.47%, making Lao PDR lag in terms of capacity to transform economic growth into poverty reduction against neighbours like Cambodia or Viet Nam.

The share of poverty is higher in rural areas (29%) than in urban areas (10%), and the gap continues to increase due to a different pace in poverty reduction. Poverty has a higher incidence in the South and Central Provinces, among ethnic minorities and among households whose head has a low level of education. The majority of these households with low education levels belong to ethnic minorities, depend on agriculture to subsist, or suffer from the consequences of unemployment.

The poor and those living in rural areas are not seeing much of the fruits of economic growth. Economic growth is also not being translated into an increase in consumption, threatening to stagnate economic growth in the foreseeable future. Consumption patterns are unequally distributed, and only the wealthy have experienced an increase in purchasing power at a consistent rate. Since the poor are not benefiting from growth, their consumption levels remain low and are unable to drive further economic development. Had GDP growth been more equally distributed, it would have fostered consumption within a broader share of the population –including the poor – and would have contributed to further GDP growth and poverty reduction in a beneficial cycle.

Meanwhile, net enrolment in education has increased in recent years but is still much lower among the poor, particularly in levels above primary education. This difficulty including a larger share of the population in the education system threatens the necessary fulfilment of the country's human capital potential and positions Lao PDR's workforce as the least literate and numerate in South-East Asia.

In recent years the LECS surveys have warned about how areas and households that had seen improvements in their situation during previous years have fallen back into poverty due to the incidence of economic shocks and the lack of an adequate system to protect their previous improvements. If the necessary steps are taken in distributing more equally the fruits of economic growth and in providing the population with an adequate level of protection against socio-economic shocks, Lao PDR has all the potential to graduate from its current challenges and offer better life prospects to its population.

In the current context, the country can use the benefits of economic development to improve government services, provide opportunities for people to participate in the development process and invest in social protection for all, assisting them in times of need during their life and during emergencies and disasters.

3.2 Related policies and regulations

The Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic acknowledges the commitment to develop compulsory primary education and a high-quality education system for all, particularly those in remote areas,

ethnic groups, women and disadvantaged children (art. 22). Regarding the further improving of human capital, the Constitution also addresses the need to develop skilled labour and promote vocational skills and occupation, while not forgetting to promise to protect the rights and benefits of workers (art. 27). The Constitution commits the State to implementing policies on social security (art. 28) and consecrates in its second and fourth chapters support to several social protection-related rights: “The State attends to improving and expanding public health services” and “providing healthcare to all people, creating conditions to ensure that all people have access to healthcare, especially women and children, poor people and people in remote areas and to ensure people have good health” (art. 25). “Lao citizens have the right to receive education” (art. 38) and “to work and engage in occupations which are not contrary to the laws. Working people have the right to rest, to receive medical treatment in times of illness, [and] to receive assistance in the event of incapacity or disability, in old age, and in other cases as provided by the laws” (art. 39).

The Law on Healthcare (2005) and the National Health Insurance Strategy (2017–2020) state that all citizens have the same right to receive healthcare services regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion or socio-economic status; they strengthen the legal status of the National Health Insurance; and they develop the National Health Insurance Fund.

The Law on Education, the Law on Vocational Education, and the Education and the Sports Sector Development Plan (2016–2020) define the goal to achieve compulsory primary education and expand it up to secondary education, and envision that by 2030 “all Lao people have equal and equitable access to quality education”. The Prime Ministerial Decree on School Meals aims to reduce malnutrition and increase school enrolment and completion rates.

The Social Security Law provides the basis for the compulsory contributory social security system through the creation of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) by merging the State social security system with the private sector system and offering voluntary participation in social security to the informally employed and self-employed.

The Labour Law includes benefits for formal economy workers, including: temporary wage continuation in case of sickness, maternity, employment injury, and occupational diseases; severance pay for which employers are liable; and a range of short- and long-term cash benefits as well as medical benefits as part of the compulsory contributory social security system under the NSSF.

The Law on Persons with Disabilities stipulates benefits for people with disabilities who are poor, homeless or old, and dictates the creation of a welfare fund for people with disabilities. The Prime Ministerial Decree on Social Welfare defines social welfare as short-term in-kind assistance, as well as long-term regular cash benefits. Beneficiary categories are set to include: orphans, people with disabilities, older adults, victims of trafficking and victims of disasters.

The Prime Ministerial Decree on the National Health Insurance addresses the harmonization of the existing healthcare system into a single system and the aim to expand long-term healthcare services for all; it is supplemented by the Prime Ministerial Decree on Free Maternity for All and Free Health Services for Children Under 5.

The Prime Ministerial Decree on School Meals aims to reduce malnutrition, increase school attendance and improve completion rates.

The Prime Ministerial Decree on the National Population and Development defines priorities in expansion of reproductive health services.

The Prime Ministerial Decree on the Poverty Reduction Fund calls to “support and establish sustainable local capacity, procedures, and systems that are aligned with the Government of Lao PDR’s policy of decentralization and [with] poverty reduction targets”.

The Government of Lao P.D.R. aims to integrate regional and international Conventions and Recommendations into its policies. This commitment was reflected in the Lao People Party Congress Meeting statement about the need to “creat[e] harmony between regional economic development and social-cultural development to ensure improved livelihoods of people and sustainable development”.

Despite recent positive developments, Lao PDR still has a large number of people who have not been adequately protected from life-cycle vulnerabilities like unemployment, the lack of a pension at old age, or other situations that can lead to poverty and social exclusion.

In order to develop a social protection system that covers everyone, it is necessary to implement the National Social Protection Strategy and attain the goals of improving and expanding the health insurance, social security, and social welfare systems.

3.3 The five-year 8th Lao National Socio-Economic Development Plan

The five-year 8th NSEDP is currently being implemented to fulfil the directives of the 10th Party Conference and to help the country in achieving the objectives set in the Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2025 and the Vision 2030.

The 8th NSEDP envisions that Lao PDR becomes an upper-middle income country moving towards regional and international integration, and in a context where social justice prevails, solidarity is promoted, and all have access to quality social services.

In achieving these, the 8th NSEDP sets the principal directions to be followed by the Government. Among them are the harmonization between economic development and socio-cultural development; linking rural development with poverty reduction; improving human capital capacity by enhancing workforce skills; and rooting solidarity in society.

The overall objective set in the Plan targets reducing poverty significantly and recognizes the priority of achieving the SDGs in two outcomes:

Outcome 1 calls for expanding “social protection benefits to all people, especially the poor and those working in the informal economy and to disseminate the Law on Social Security to the target audience”.

Outcome 2 is focused on the development of human capital, poverty reduction and universal access to quality education and health services. This outcome is organized with seven outputs, five of which are of central importance for the development of a social protection floor in the country:

Output 1 – Improved living standards through poverty reduction and a three-stage implementation focusing on addressing household vulnerability by having adequate social safety nets for mitigating shocks; to advocate all members of society to contribute to poverty reduction actively; to improve policies providing education and health in rural areas; to develop professional training to upgrade labour skills and expertise in the rural areas.

Output 2 – Ensuring food security with adequate nutrition and safety; to provide on-job training to farmers on a regular basis.

Output 3 – To grant everyone access to education, from kindergarten to vocational and university levels; to incentivize students to access vocational education/training; the importance of the Policy for Promoting School Lunches.

Output 4 – To expand and improve the quality of integrated public health services to ensure access to healthcare and medical services for all; extension of public health services to remote areas; ensure children receive adequate nutrition; to implement policies on free healthcare; to develop policies on the quality of public health services.

Output 5 – Establish and improve a social protection system and expand its coverage widely and effectively to ensure that the rights and interests of workers and the poor are protected, ensure insurance and health insurance coverage by 80% of the population by 2020; create a social fund to improve the quality of life for deprived people and victims of disasters and human trafficking; disseminate regulations on social security to workers and employers; conduct a survey on the disabled and older persons across the country; provide basic healthcare for the disabled and older adults; improve counselling services to protect at-risk children and families; enhance emergency assistance programmes to help victims of disasters; and protect and assist children.

3.4 Sectoral policies, plans and regulations related to social protection:

The NSPS has been developed to align with sectoral policies and strategies:

Healthcare policies – which include free maternal, neonatal, and child health and the health equity fund – aim to provide free healthcare protection to the poor. These policies include the endorsement of the Prime Ministerial Decree on National Health Insurance for the harmonization of the existing healthcare system into a single system and to expand long-term healthcare services for all.

The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy provides a comprehensive framework until 2020 for fostering growth and development and reducing poverty. It highlights the Government’s firm commitment to gradually reduce Lao PDR’s dependence on Official Development Assistance. It reminds that one of the pillars of Lao PDR’s pursuit of socioeconomic development has been and continues to be improving the well-being of the people through greater food security and extension of social services.

The Rural Development and Poverty Reduction Plan 2011–2015 recognized the need to provide social welfare to the poor, the disadvantaged and those who are without income or are unemployed. The Decree on the Poverty Reduction Fund calls to “support and establish sustainable local capacity, procedures, and systems that are aligned with the Government of Lao PDR’s policy of decentralization and poverty reduction targets”.

The National Population and Development Policy sets priorities for the expansion of reproductive health services, including assistance to children and the elderly in Lao PDR.

The National Human Resources Development Strategy to 2025 sets the explicit goals of raising the Human Assets Index to 66; pursuing the achievements of the SDGs; and ensuring that all Lao people complete at least lower secondary education.

3.5 Social protection implementation in Lao PDR

Social protection implementation achievements:

- 1) **Health insurance:** Improved and expanded health insurance services to civil servants, formal economy workers and their family members, the poor, informal economy workers, as well as childbirth, maternal, new-born and child healthcare free of charge under the national health insurance scheme.
- 2) **Social security:** Improved and strengthened social security providing protection currently through eight schemes: sickness benefits; childbirth grant; employment injury and occupational disease benefits; non-work-related disability benefits; pensions; death grants; benefits for insured family members; and unemployment benefits. The beneficiaries of these developments include formal economy workers; public sector workers; police, military and their dependents; self-employed workers; voluntary and informal economy workers; and family members of the beneficiaries as specified in the Social Security Law. Expanding the coverage to private sector workers and the self-employed will help to ensure the financial sustainability, accountability and the management transparency of the NSSF.
- 3) **Social welfare:** Free educational support for children through the administration of block grants to eliminate school collection fees for all students; provision of scholarships to children in secondary education from poor families; National School Meals Programme for primary and secondary schools in poor districts, supported by the World Food Programme, Catholic Relief Services and the Education for Development Fund; provision of a stipend to poor students in secondary education (both lower and upper), supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB); and provision of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) scholarships to students from poor and disadvantaged families. Improved livelihoods and essential services; provision of assistance to children with special protection, persons with disabilities and the elderly, including victims of UXO, through funding support from international organization, NGOs and development partners.

Likewise, the social welfare scheme provided emergency assistance and rehabilitation services to victims of disasters, assisted children with special needs, people with disabilities and old people, including victims of UXO. These activities were supported by the Government’s budget and through the

mobilization of resources from international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other development partners.

3.6 Challenges

Lao PDR has seen improvements in health, nutrition and education indicators over the past decades. A significant share of that progress can be directly linked to the existence of a social protection system in the initial stages of development. However, the ABND assessment has shown that the system presents important gaps, particularly in serving rural and informal working-age populations and older persons, and that there are challenges involving financial sustainability:

- 1) **Health insurance:** Insufficient government budget to support health insurance. There is a lack of human resource capacity, and the management, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of health insurance are not effective due to lack of capacity; the integration of the NSSF into a non-autonomous National Health Insurance Bureau (NHIB) would result in low institutional capacity; the office of the National Health Insurance Bureau is not independent as stated in the regulations. There is insufficient staff (particularly middle-level experts and staff in rural areas), facilities and medical equipment. There is a gap in staff and facility allocation between urban and rural areas. There is also a gap in staff training. People are not aware of the National Health Insurance (NHI) criteria for membership, services, rights and obligations.
- 2) **Social security:** Employer compliance with compulsory social security registration remains low. The social security fund's reserve remains at risk, and the financial sustainability of the NSSF is a concern. Expanding coverage to workers in the informal economy remains a challenge. Workers in rural areas and the agriculture sector have low incomes with no systematic social welfare support.
- 3) **Social welfare:** There are no systematic social welfare services and benefits provided to: children below 3 years old (particularly poor children), children requiring special protection, persons with disabilities, older adults living alone or lacking a pension, unemployed individuals and other vulnerable groups. There is insufficient budget allocated to school administration to cover the costs for poor students. There are insufficient scholarships for secondary education, including scholarships targeted at total costs or additional costs including dormitories, school materials, equipment and others. Nutrition support programmes are insufficient to provide nutrition for school age children, and nutrition support programmes are funded by donors. Since budgetary allocation to address these challenges is limited, they remain a present problem and a threat to society in the future.

3.7 Recommendations and solutions

The below recommendations and solutions have been developed to address the challenges and to continue developing and strengthening the social security system.

- 1) **Health insurance:** Strengthen NHI and NHIB's legal and governance frameworks, develop their capacity at all levels, and collect NHIB data to improve management and NHI service utilization. This also includes increasing national budget allocation to health insurance for better and improved healthcare services, including improving transparency in budget management; ensuring the quality of basic services in hospitals and health centres, particularly in rural areas; promoting awareness raising and establishing a mechanism for providing feedback and comments.
- 2) **Social security:** Enforce periodic inspections at registered enterprises; fine businesses and workers who do not comply with social security laws and regulations; conduct actuarial studies and analyses to assess and ensure the sustainability of the National Social Security Fund.
- 3) **Social welfare:** Establish support or benefits for the poor and vulnerable, including poor children under five and children with special needs, persons with disabilities, older adults living alone or not receiving a pension, and other vulnerable groups. Increase and ensure the sustainability of on-time budget allocations to schools for each fiscal year; increase the numbers and size of secondary school scholarships; increase budget allocations for the nutrition, education and healthcare of children; develop a child benefit to address nutrition insecurity and poverty; and invest in human capital formation. Create jobs for poor, unemployed people and promote the creation of producer groups, cooperatives and service

groups; establish village fund groups; provide vocational training and skills development for poor workers to facilitate their access to decent employment opportunities and increase their income, thereby reducing poverty.

III. National Social Protection Strategy

To expand on achievements and better address implementation gaps in social protection as well as to prepare for responses to future challenges, the NSPS is directed by its vision, goals and strategic objectives, and is characterized by the different activities prescribed for its implementation.

1. Vision

By 2030, Lao people have access to basic social protection services, consisting of health insurance, social security and social welfare, in an equitable, adequate, effective and sustainable way.

2. Principles

The NSPS is guided by the principles of equity, adequacy, effectiveness, universality, progressivity and sustainability; under the condition of universality, all Lao people will have access to social protection services in the same conditions regardless of age, sex, geographic location, socioeconomic group or any other consideration.

3. Overall goals

By 2025, the social protection system will be developed gradually and aim to provide higher protection to those more in need. Social protection services will have a reasonable standard of quality everywhere in a manner that will permit them to fulfill their mission successfully.

The NSPS has defined three major goals in aiming to ensure effective universal access to social protection services, and higher levels of protection for those more in need:

Goal 1: The health insurance system is further developed and strengthened.

Strengthen the health insurance schemes to ensure effective access to quality healthcare without financial hardship in a cost-effective manner to all Lao people through tax-based funding and reach universal health coverage by 2025.

Goal 2: The social security system is further developed and strengthened.

Strengthen social security schemes to be more systematic and effective. Upgrade the capacity of the National Social Security Fund to collect contributions and provide social protection services for insured government officials, workers in formal employment and self-employed individuals, including eligible family members, while increasing the available reserves and ensuring the sustainability of the National Social Security Fund.

Goal 3: The social welfare system is further developed and strengthened.

Expand and strengthen social welfare schemes to be more systematic and effective. Develop and scale up benefits and services to children from poor families or in vulnerable situations, persons with disabilities, older adults and low-income and informal sector workers, and provide emergency assistance to people who are affected by natural or man-made disasters. Provision of block grants to schools, scholarships to poor students and school meals to promote poverty reduction and human resource, social and economic development.

4. Strategic objectives

The strategic objectives are classified into three big functional groups: health insurance, social security and social welfare. Each of the strategic objectives contains a set of activities to achieve the goal and vision as follows:

4.1 Health insurance

The health insurance section aims at ensuring that everyone has access to health services, including promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care of sufficient quality to be effective, and that the use of these services does not result in financial hardship for individuals.

Objective 1.1: Strengthen health insurance schemes to be more systematic and effective in ensuring that everyone has access to health services.

Activity 1: Develop and implement a legal framework for universal health coverage.

- Develop and revise the National Social Health Insurance-related legislative and regulatory frameworks to address challenges and gaps that prevent the expansion of national health insurance coverage for all.
- Implementation, dissemination, and enforcement of the law.
- Review the health insurance benefits package with the objective of ensuring adequate coverage and services.

Activity 2: Develop systems and build capacities of the National Health Insurance authority.

- Develop the capacity of the Health Insurance Authority at all levels.
- Develop an adequate and sustainable financial management system for the National Health Insurance.
- Develop and implement a unique and integrated monitoring and management information system for the efficient management of the health insurance scheme at all levels.
- Learn from the successful experiences of neighbouring countries and internationally.

Activity 3: Develop and comply with minimum standards for healthcare facilities.

- Define and implement the minimum quality standards for healthcare services, with a particular focus on the ratio of health workers to the population and the availability and quality of facilities, medical equipment and essential drugs and medicines.
- Revise and control compliance with national treatment guidelines.
- Improve the quality of health insurance facilities, increase the number of available health workers, and ensure that all facilities are stocked with the essential drugs and medical equipment.

Activity 4: Increase access to healthcare services in rural areas.

- Extend to rural areas the availability and accessibility of health services including essential facilities, medical equipment, skilled health workers and essential drugs and medicines.
- Extend health insurance coverage to people in rural areas by providing all Lao people with a health insurance identity card.

Activity 5: Ensure sufficient and timely government budget allocation to health.

- Allocate sufficient and timely government budget as contributions to the fund, to support the contributions made by insured public employees to health insurance schemes.
- Mobilize internal and external resources to ensure healthcare for the poor.

Main responsible institutions: Ministry of Health; Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Planning and Investment; Ministry of Home Affairs; and local organizations.

4.2 Social security

To develop the social security scheme for better and wider access to the social security services through contributory schemes.

Objective 2.1: All the workers and self-employed workers in the formal sector are covered by social security.

Activity 1: Expansion of social security coverage for all formal economy workers.

- Expand social protection coverage for workers at enterprises registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry at the national and local level.
- Expand social protection coverage for self-employed workers in the formal economy.

Activity 2: Enforce regular inspections at enterprises registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry

- Build the capacity of technical units to inspect social security participation and develop their ability to enforce the Social Security Law.
- Develop a new legal framework and revise existing legislation for inspections and secure the necessary human and material resources.
- Introduce legal provisions allowing penalties to be collected from non-compliant employers.
- Exchange information between labour inspectors and social security inspectors.
- Revise and update the records of enterprises registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry at the national and local levels.
- Perform inspections at private companies registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to verify compliance with social security and labour-related legislation.

Activity 3: Promote enrolment in social security.

- Encourage workers, employers and self-employed workers to participate in the social security system by increasing their understanding of the benefits of the social security schemes.
- Encourage registered enterprises to comply with social security and labour legislation by promoting dynamic registration campaigns, among other measures.

Activity 4: Ensure robust actuarial design and sufficient fund reserves.

- Conduct actuarial studies to assess the financial status of the National Social Security Fund in the short and long term.
- Carry out parametric reforms according to the results of the actuarial assessments to ensure the sustainability of the National Social Security Fund.

Activity 5: Improve collection of social security contributions and benefits.

- Perform the necessary arrangements to allow contributions to the National Social Security Fund and benefits paid from the Fund to be collected nationwide through the banking system.

Objective 2.2: Social security covers an increasing number of workers in the informal sector.

Activity 6: Adapt the current scheme design to the characteristics of workers in non-standard forms of employment

- Establish adequate mechanisms to ensure that workers in the informal sector are encouraged to participate in the social security system voluntarily and that they are offered benefits appropriate to their specific needs.
- Advocate and encourage informal economy workers to voluntarily contribute to social security, like, for example, allowing them access at a lower cost.

Main responsible institutions: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Information and Culture; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; Ministry of Home Affairs; Commercial Bank, Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU); and Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI).

4.3 Social welfare

To develop the social welfare system so that the disadvantaged, the poor and victims of disaster have better access to social welfare services or other benefits for human resource development.

Objective 3.1: Social welfare has expanded its coverage and services to meet the needs of target groups.

Activity 1: Provide services and benefits to pregnant women and to children.

- Collect and compile data on pregnant women and children, particularly those who are poor or those belonging to vulnerable populations.

- Develop and revise relevant legislation regarding social welfare benefits for pregnant women and children under 3 years old in the poorest families and those who need special protection in accordance with conditions and capacity.
- Provide benefits to children under 3 years old in the poorest districts to ensure necessary nutrition during the first two years of life.
- Provide material (food, vouchers and other in-kind transfers) and emotional support with priority to pregnant women and children who need special protection, mainly low-income pregnant women, orphan children, abandoned children, and children victims of violence, children victims of exploitation or sexual abuse, children victims of human trafficking, and children rescued from hazardous working conditions or labour exploitation.

Activity 2: Provide services and benefits to persons with disabilities and UXO-survivors.

- Collect and compile data on persons with disabilities to ensure they are provided with appropriate services and benefits.
- Develop and revise relevant legislation on the services and benefits provided to persons with disabilities (including UXO survivors with a disability) and gender-based violence survivors, in accordance with conditions and capacity.
- Provide services and benefits to different types of persons with disabilities who are not able to work, not able to help themselves, or belong to low-income families, including UXO survivors with a disability and gender-based violence survivors.
- Support the establishment and strengthen the capacity of associations of persons with disabilities by providing them with training, services, benefits or physical resources, in accordance with conditions and capacity.
- Mainstream disability concerns in the work of other ministries and their sectoral policies.

Activity 3: Provide services and benefits to older adults.

- Collect and compile information on older adults – particularly those who are poor, those belonging to vulnerable populations, and those living alone – to ensure they receive appropriate services and benefits.
- Develop and revise relevant legislation to ensure services are provided to older persons, particularly to the poor, those belonging to vulnerable populations and those living alone, in accordance with conditions and capacity.
- Assess the feasibility of implementing a social pension for vulnerable older persons who do not benefit from a contributory pension.
- Provide benefits, material support and emotional support to poor older adults and those living alone.
- Support the establishment and strengthen the capacity of older adults’ associations.

Activity 4: Provide services and benefits to victims of natural and man-made disasters.

- Collect and compile information on victims of natural and man-made disasters to ensure they receive appropriate services and benefits.
- Develop and revise relevant legislation on the services to victims of natural and man-made disasters, in accordance with conditions and capacity.
- Provide relief emergency services and benefits to victims of disasters to restore their livelihoods.
- Provide services and benefits to gender-based violence survivors to restore their livelihoods and ensure they are referred to health services when needed.

Activity 5: Expand the National School Meal Programme to all state kindergarten, pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in the villages of poor districts throughout the country.

- Develop and revise relevant legislation on school meal services for children, in accordance with conditions and ability.

- Provide one cooked meal per day to all students in all state kindergarten, pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in poor districts throughout the country. The weekly menus will be designed to the specific nutritional needs of children.

Activity 6: Increase allowance to students at the lower secondary level, prioritizing students from poor families and vulnerable groups.

- Develop and revise relevant legislation on the provision of scholarships and allowances to lower-secondary students, in accordance with conditions and ability.
- Increase the allowance to students at the lower secondary education level – prioritizing students from poor families and vulnerable groups such as students with disabilities and students from disadvantaged ethnic groups – to cover the cost of learning materials and boarding and transportation, as necessary;

Activity 7: Allocate national budget to education on time and expand coverage.

- Ensure enforcement of relevant legislation on funding to schools, in accordance with conditions and ability.
- Improve coordination mechanisms between the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Finance.
- Ensure adequate funding levels and timely funding allocation to schools through block grants with the purpose of eliminating fees charged to families by kindergarten, pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schools across the country.

Activity 8: Provide allowances for vocational training, skills development and technical training to the poor and working-age people in vulnerable situations to enable them to access decent employment opportunities.

- Develop or revise relevant legislation on the provision of scholarships for vocational training and skills development, so that technical training is provided to the poor and to working-age people in vulnerable situations in accordance with their conditions and abilities.
- Provide allowances and scholarships for vocational training and skills and technical training for the poor and working-age people in vulnerable situations to enable them to access decent employment, engage in enterprise development, and establish production groups and cooperatives, with the objectives of facilitating increased income, improving working conditions, improving livelihoods and resilience, and reducing poverty.

Activity 9: Develop production organizations and public services and facilitate access to decent work.

- Develop and revise legislation related to promoting production organizations and public services for low-income rural workers as well as legislation related to facilitating access to decent work, in accordance with conditions and ability.
- Develop model cooperatives in cooperation with international development partners.
- Promote production organizations and various services for poor rural workers to access decent work in accordance with the needs of the labour market or to change professions based on the needs of production groups, services and local cooperatives, in order to increase incomes and reduce poverty.

Main responsible institutions: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare ; Ministry of Education and Sports; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; Ministry of Information and Culture; Ministry of Finance; Central Bank, and others.

IV. Implementing measures.

The following implementing measures are of central importance to ensure the success of the NSPS:

1. Coordination and multi-sector unity

The National Social Protection Committee (NSPC) will be responsible for: the general implementation of the NSPS; the coordination of the various implementing bodies; the coordination with development partners; the monitoring and evaluation of the NSPS implementation; and the assessment of the overall situation of social protection in the country.

The NSPC is a non-standing body constituted of members from the:

- Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
- Ministry of Education and Sports
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
- Ministry of Information and Culture
- Ministry of Planning and Investment
- Ministry of Finance
- trade unions
- Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) and
- other relevant governmental actors.

The NSPC is a government-initiated mechanism without a permanent standing committee, and has responsibilities as a secretariat to the Government on social protection in the country. It acts as the coordination body and is assisted by its Secretariat, which performs closer monitoring of the implementation of activities and helps to coordinate the implementing bodies, among other tasks. The NSPC Secretariat is located at the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.

There will be local level committees chaired by the Vice Governor, with the Department of Labour and Social Welfare as Vice-Chair, and constituted of members from relevant local departments.

The coordination of the implementation of NSPS Strategic Objective 1 (health insurance) will fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. The National Social Security Fund will be responsible for Strategic Objective 2 (social security), and the responsibility of coordinating the implementation of Strategic Objective 3 (social welfare) falls to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Sports, and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

A management and information system (MIS) will be established to facilitate the work of the NSPC and its Secretariat in planning, coordinating and supervising the implementation of the NSPS. The MIS will be hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and centralize all the information produced during the development of the NSPS and other information relevant to social protection in Lao PDR.

2. Resource mobilization and financial sustainability

The NSPS expects to benefit from the NSEDP and to continue to mobilize official development aid grants and loans utilizing the roundtable meeting channel. There is also calls in the NSEDP to use low interest and long-term credit from international organizations for purposes of social development and poverty reduction; to seek private sector investment; and to use resources at maximum efficiency and prevent leakages.

The NSPS will use government funding and resources mobilized from development partners and international organizations:

- 1) **Health insurance:** The resources needed to implement health insurance activities will come from the contributions of insured individuals and the Government's matching fund, as stated in the National Health Insurance Law.

- 2) **Social security:** The budget to implement social security activities will come from contributions from workers, employers and the Government's matching fund, as stated in National Social Security Law.
- 3) **Social welfare:** A specific Social Welfare Funding Mechanism will be developed with the goal of facilitating a more effective utilization of the resources available, including domestic resources but also resources available from ODA.

Resources will be mobilized from the private sector, civil society organizations and other non-governmental actors, as well as international development partners.

Additionally, innovative sources of financing social protection will be explored, and resource mobilization proposals will be developed to advocate for the Government's budget allocation to social protection. The mechanism will be designed taking into consideration the specific national legal framework and public financial management framework, but will also take into consideration the modalities available for development partners in order to ensure that a wide number of development partners can contribute to more consistent financing of the sector. Contributions can be both financial and in-kind technical assistance.

3. Cooperation with development partners

Development partners are of central importance to the success of the NSPS, particularly during the first stages. Partnerships are strategic during the implementation and evaluation phases of the Strategy and can add value to it in multiple areas, including technical assistance, capacity building, budgetary support, monitoring of the implementation and evaluation of the results. Relevant sector technical teams will be responsible for coordinating with development partners in accordance with their mandate.

The NSPC will establish a Sector Working Group for Social Protection that will serve as a coordination mechanism with development partners to mobilize funds and resources to implement social welfare activities through donor contributions to the Social Welfare Funding Mechanism. This working group will study, design and develop an effective implementation mechanism.

Cooperation with ASEAN countries will be strengthened. Priority will be given to sharing lessons with neighbouring countries, in line with the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection.

Cooperation initiatives with development partners will be mapped to better utilize the relevant data gathered by development partners that are supporting and working on social protection for each of the target groups, and to provide tailored support to the target groups, such as disadvantaged children, poor students, persons with disabilities, elderly persons who live alone, and working aged people who need vocational and skills development.

4. Advocacy and capacity building

The NSPC will be the focal point for ensuring a good understanding of social protection interventions at all levels of the Government: national, provincial and district.

While the planning capacity of the central level of the Government will benefit from a more strategic understanding of social protection, local levels will increase their capacity to implement interventions using approaches more specific to the tasks they are required to perform.

The NSPC Secretariat and members of relevant line ministries will be supported to increase their technical capacity and understanding of social protection. To achieve this, the NSPC will coordinate access to training, technical meetings with development partners, study tours to ASEAN countries, and dissemination of lessons learned. Capacity-building activities will be expanded to reach the National University of Laos and the Lao Statistics Bureau, which will also be invited to participate in relevant consultative meetings.

Evidence-based research on how poverty and various vulnerabilities affect population groups disaggregated by age, sex, income level, and geographic area is critical to successfully reaching the goals of the Strategy. Development partners and relevant research institutions will play an essential role in increasing the understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and other vulnerabilities throughout the life cycle in Lao PDR.

Advocacy campaigns will have an important role in improving workers' and employers' awareness of social security, reminding them of its compulsory nature and encouraging their voluntary participation. Likewise, campaigns will be planned to improve the general public's awareness of the National Health Insurance (NHI) and to explain to the public the purpose of new social welfare benefits for the poor, child benefits, disability benefits, and non-contributory old-age benefits.

Advocacy also plays an important role in the implementation of the NSPS. Research studies will be produced through collaboration between research institutions and development partners to increase the understanding of social protection related issues in Lao PDR. Evidence will also be produced regarding the implementation of social protection programmes in Lao PDR.

Personnel will be invited from relevant ministries and departments to participate in capacity-building activities, including training and study tours to ASEAN countries, to learn the best practices in implementing social protection interventions.

Awareness campaigns utilizing mass media and social media will be developed so the general public will have a better understanding and improved awareness of social security, National Health Insurance, and the new social welfare benefits.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

To implement the NSPS, relevant sectors will develop a plan, programmes, projects and annual budgets to integrate into their regular sector development plans for the consideration of the Ministry of Planning and Investment.

The monitoring and evaluation of the NSPS fall under the responsibility of the NSPC and its Secretariat. The NSPC Secretariat will ensure with implementing bodies that all data are collected in a timely manner, recorded and shared. Up-to-date monitoring of data will be shared and discussed at NSPC and Secretariat meetings. The annual review of the NSPS implementation will show progress indicators for interventions under the objectives and activities for each sector to see the progress of implementation.

The NSPS will be evaluated at a midterm review in the year 2022 to assess the progress of the implementation of phase I, the impact of the activities already performed, as well as to create necessary adjustments to improve operations and results up through 2025. The NSPC, together with development partners and international organizations, will organize annual meetings to assess progress towards the sectoral objectives and on advancing the implementation plan and agreed commitments.

Development partners will provide support to both the final and the mid-term evaluations. The second semester of 2024 will see a meeting of the NSPC with development partners to share the results of the final evaluation and to start the preparation of the next steps towards achieving Vision 2030.

The present NSPS is accompanied by the NSPS Implementation Plan, which will provide details of and timeframes for the activities integrated into the Strategy through the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework and social protection assessment matrix to monitor the implementation of activities in alignment with the NSPS Action Plan and SDG indicators.

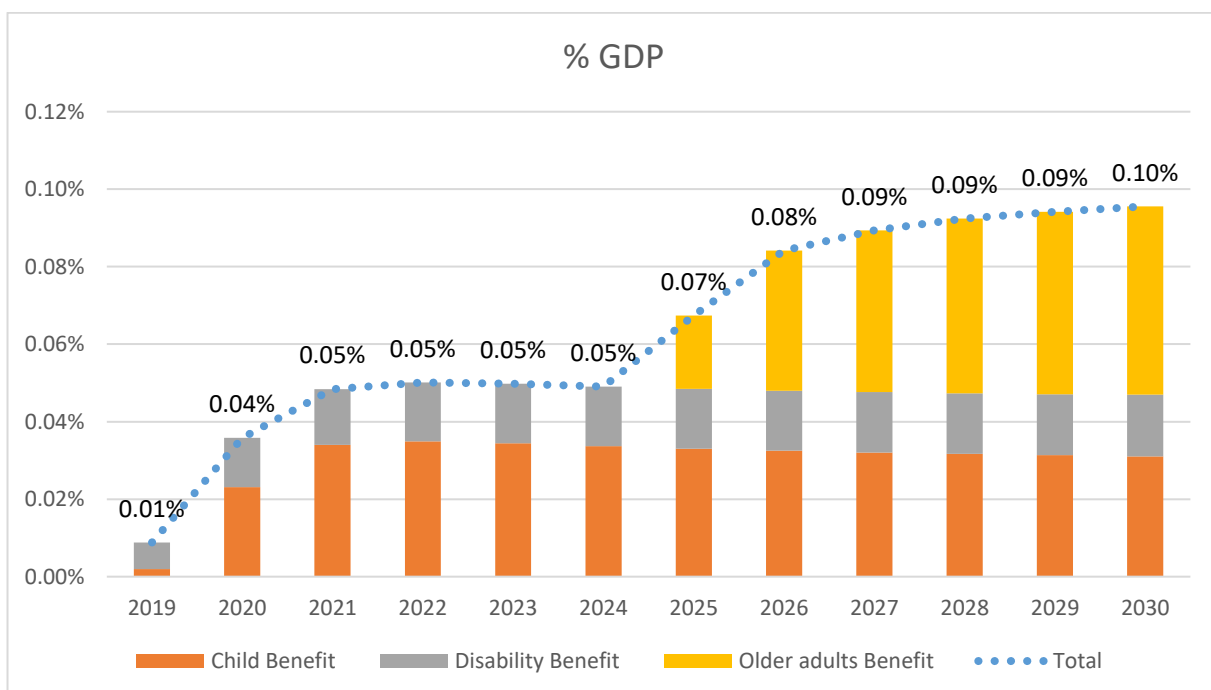
A methodology will be developed for the mid-term review to take place in 2022, which will combine quantitative and qualitative methods. After implementing the mid-term review, a report will be produced for the NSPC and a summary generated for line ministries and the Government. The results of the review will be used to modify and improve social protection interventions as needed. A methodology will be developed for the final review to take place in 2025, which will also mix quantitative and qualitative methods. After conducting the final review, a final report will be produced assessing the success of the NSPS and lessons learned. The final report will be distributed among relevant line ministries and members of the Government. The final results of this phase of the NSPS will be used to modify and improve social protection interventions and to inform future implementation phases.

Annex I. Costing 2019–2030 (child, disability and old-age benefits)

The cost estimation was made considering the introduction of the child and disability benefits from 2019 and the old-age social benefits from 2025. These benefits are a standard package for all poor at the national level starting at 100,000 kips (LAK)/month in 2019 and subsequently adjusted annually for inflation. These costs are estimated based on providing benefits only to the poor (poor children; poor persons with disabilities; poor older adults not receiving a pension). The poverty estimate used is 23.20% of the total population.

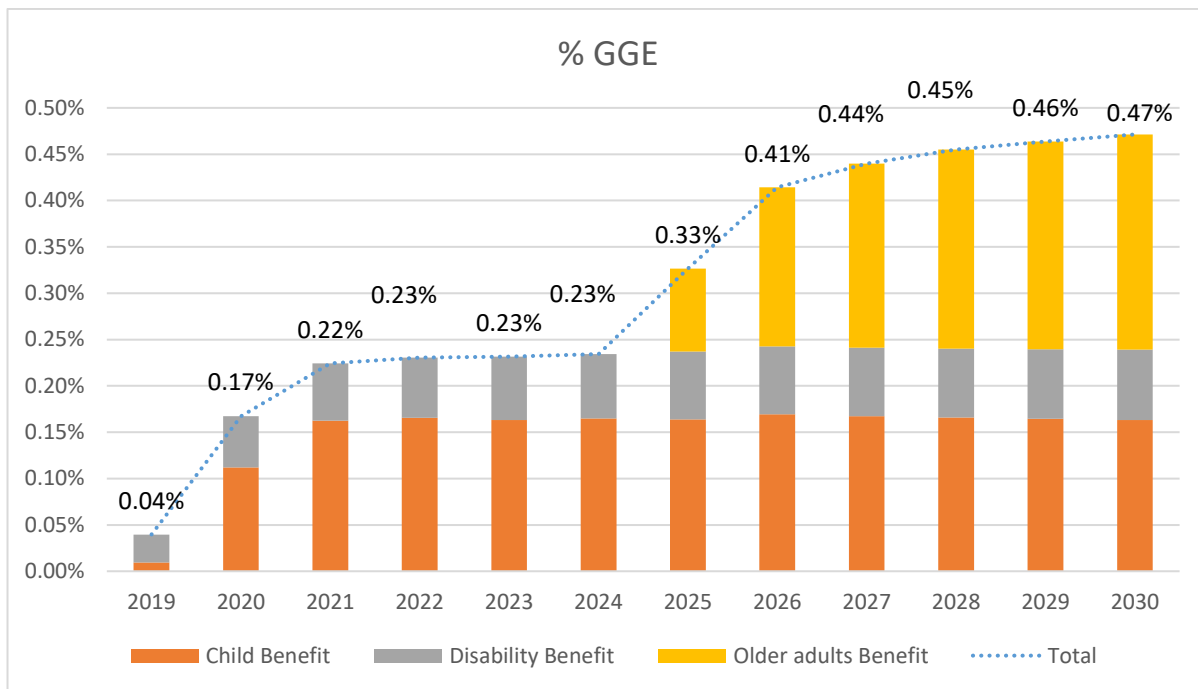
The introduction of the child and disability benefits in 2019 would mean an estimated cost of 0.01% of the gross domestic product (GDP) for both interventions in that year (Figure 1). For the perspective of General Government Expenditure (GGE), the total amount on 2019 would be 0.04% of the GGE; 0.01% of the investment would be on the child grant and 0.03% on the disability grant (Figure 2). These two interventions together would represent an estimated investment of LAK15 billion.

Figure 1. Cost of core social protection schemes, 2019–2030 (% GDP)



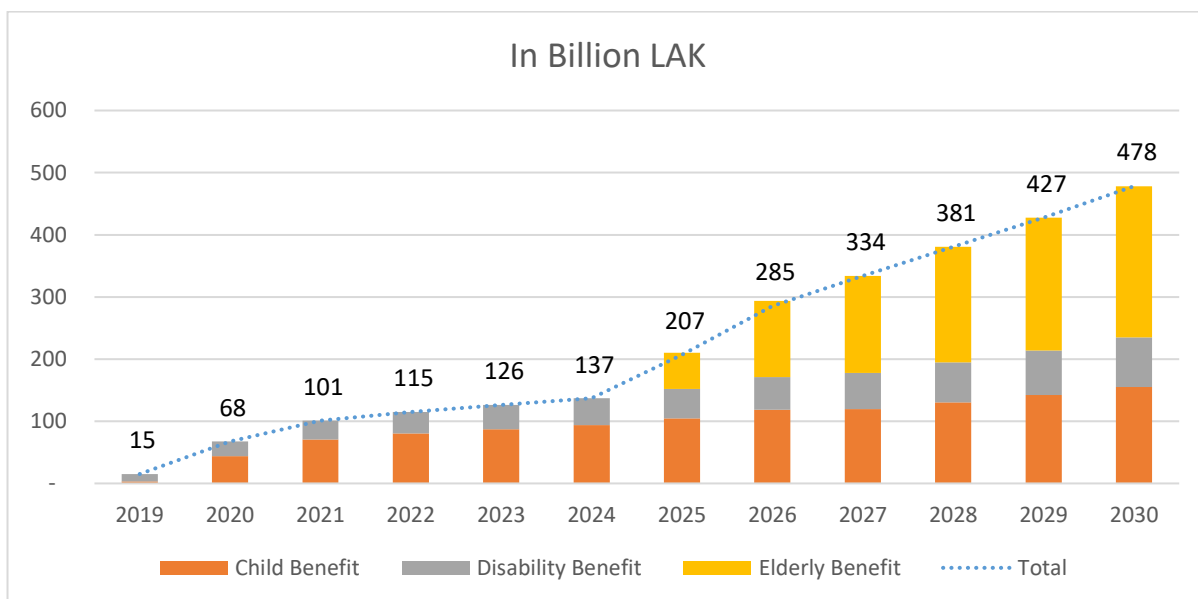
In 2025, with the introduction of the non-contributory old-age benefits, the total amount spent in these three social protection interventions would be equivalent to 0.07% of the GDP: 0.03% for the child benefits; 0.02% for the disability benefits; and 0.02% for the old-age benefits. Regarding the GGE, the distribution of costs in 2025 would be as follows: 0.16% of GGE for the child benefits; 0.07% for the disability benefits; and 0.09% of GGE invested in the old-age social benefits. The total needed from the GGE in the year 2025 would be 0.33%.

Figure 2. Cost of core social protection schemes, 2019–2030 (% GGE)



In 2030, the cost of the three schemes would be the equivalent of 0.10% of GDP, or 0.47% of the GGE. The complete time and cost series 2019–2030, and the disaggregated estimated costs in billions of Laos kip (LAK) can be found in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Cost of core social protection schemes, 2019–2030 (billion LAK)



These cost estimates will need to be revised once the action plans and the full detail of the activities and implementing measures are completely developed. It is important to mention that other strategic activities have not been included in this costing exercise, as the conditions were not all met or parallel exercises were taking place. However, those other activities could be included in the costing exercise once the necessary information is available.

These other strategic interventions and implementing measures represent a much lower level of expenditure, and their cost will be assessed during the development of the implementation plan.

Annex II. Methodological note – Costing estimates for policy scenarios, Lao PDR National Social Protection Strategy 2019–2030

The costing estimates produced for the three policy reforms proposed in the strategy – namely, a child grant, a disability benefit, and a non-contributory pension for older persons – were developed using the Rapid Assessment Protocol methodology (RAP) developed by the ILO. RAP is a simple methodology to estimate the costs of the creation or reform of social protection provisions, and is based on official demographic, economic, labour force and government revenue and expenditure projections.

It is important to highlight that the RAP produces costing estimates that are indicative in nature, and should be understood as a rough indication of the affordability of and magnitude of resources needed for the proposed social protection measures.

Key assumptions underlying the projections

- Population projections⁶

Population projections until 2030 (by gender and age) are derived from the United Nations “World Population Prospects” projections with adjustments made to better match the trends identified in the national Census 2005–2015. Total population was adjusted to match the official Census results for 2005 and 2015, and population growth was adjusted to match the trend between the 2005 and 2015 Census.

- Labour and employment projections⁷

Activity rate projections until 2030 (by gender and 5-year age groups) were taken from the ILOSTAT database.

The share of informal employment (self-employed and unpaid family workers) was assumed to continue decreasing in line with the trend observed between 2005 and 2010, reaching 76.1% by 2020.

Labour productivity throughout the projection period was assumed to continue to grow at the pace from the period of 2005 to 2015.

The minimum wage (starting in April 2015 at 900,000 kips per month) is assumed to increase with inflation.

- Poverty and poor population

The data on poor people by district, province and nationally were sourced from *Where Are the Poor? Lao PDR 2015 Census-based Poverty Map: Province and District Level Results*⁸.

- Macroeconomic and fiscal framework⁹

For macroeconomic projections, the costing model uses historical data up to 2016 from the Bank of Lao PDR. The projections of GDP growth and inflation for the period until 2022 are as estimated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) “World Economic Outlook” database. For the period 2022–2030, these indicators are assumed to stay constant at 2022 levels.

The fiscal framework for government revenue and expenditure uses historical data up to 2015–16 from the Bank of Lao PDR. Projections from 2016–17 to 2020–21 are based on the IMF’s “World Economic Outlook” database and the World Bank’s Lao Economic Monitor, with additional assumptions based on discussions with World Bank specialists. For the period 2022–2030, all other indicators are assumed to stay constant at 2022 levels.

⁶ Sources: LSB 2005; LSB 2016; UNDESA 2015.

⁷ Sources: ILO 2017c; LSB 2005; LSB 2011; World Bank 2012.

⁸ Source: Coulombe et al. 2016.

⁹ Sources: Bank of Lao PDR 2016; IMF 2017a; IMF 2017b; World Bank 2016.

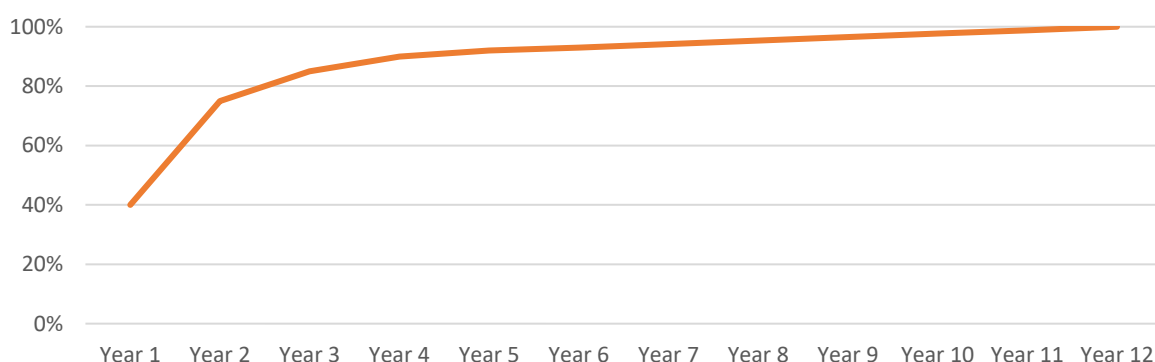
Costing scenarios: Specific assumptions

- Coverage and take-up rates

Estimates for the child benefit and the older adults benefit assume a growing take-up rate upon introduction of the programmes. The international experience shows that take-up increases gradually, as beneficiaries begin to learn about and apply for the programmes, and as implementing organizations roll-out the programme and gain reach and stabilize their new operations.

Thus, the proposed scenario assumes that coverage will increase faster in the first years of the programme, then will slow down significantly as take-up rates would already be high, and since reaching the most vulnerable individuals usually requires more effort and resources. As the eligibility criteria of the modeled programmes are based on verifiable and objective characteristics of the beneficiaries, the take-up rate after 12 years of implementation (from 2019 to 2030) is assumed to be almost 100% of the target groups. Figure 4 shows the assumed take-up rates for different years of the NSPS implementation.

Figure 4. Assumed take-up rates for the modeled scenario



In the case of the disability benefit, estimates are assuming full programme implementation and coverage of the target population from the start.

- Universal child benefit for pregnant women and children Aged 0–2

The target pregnant women and child populations include all children between birth and their third birthday and all pregnant women in the last six months of pregnancy, following population projections.

The number of maternity cases per year are assumed to be equal to the number of children under age 1 in the following year, following population projections.

It is assumed that the programme will be introduced in stages. In the first year, it will cover children born in that year, in the second year, children born in that year and in the first. Maturation is reached in the third year of the programme when the full formal target group is considered to be included in the programme.

- Benefits for persons with disabilities

The target group is people with disabilities who are not covered by the NSSF disability pension/long-term disability benefit, following population projections.

The number of persons with disabilities receiving an NSSF pension is based on ILO estimates of an actuarial valuation of NSSF pensions.

The share of persons with disabilities¹⁰ in the population considers people with a disability that affects their ability to work, go to school or perform other daily activities, and this share was at 1.46% in 2013. This proportion is assumed to remain constant for the projection period.

¹⁰ Source: LBS 2014.

- Old-age benefit, starting at age 65+, in 2025

Target population, people age 65+, excluding those who are recipients of an NSSF old-age pension, following population projections.

The number of older persons receiving an NSSF pension is based on ILO estimates of an actuarial valuation of NSSF pensions.

Take-up rate follows general assumptions, however, given the introduction of the scheme in 2025, coverage rate will not reach 100% by 2030.

Annex III. Costing by benefit (%GDP, %GGE, billion LAK)

% GDP	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Child benefits	0.00%	0.02%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%	0.03%
Disability benefits	0.01%	0.01%	0.01%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%	0.02%
Older adults benefit	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.02%	0.04%	0.04%	0.05%	0.05%	0.05%
Total	0.01%	0.04%	0.05%	0.05%	0.05%	0.05%	0.07%	0.08%	0.09%	0.09%	0.09%	0.10%

% GGE	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Child benefits	0.01%	0.11%	0.16%	0.17%	0.16%	0.17%	0.16%	0.17%	0.17%	0.17%	0.16%	0.16%
Disability benefits	0.03%	0.06%	0.06%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.07%	0.08%
Older adults benefit	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.09%	0.17%	0.20%	0.21%	0.22%	0.23%
Total	0.04%	0.17%	0.22%	0.23%	0.23%	0.23%	0.33%	0.41%	0.44%	0.45%	0.46%	0.47%

Billion LAK	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Child benefits	3	44	71	80	87	94	105	118	120	131	142	155
Disability benefits	12	24	30	35	39	43	47	52	58	64	71	80
Older adults benefit	-	-	-	-	-	-	58	123	156	186	214	243
Total	15	68	101	115	126	137	207	285	334	381	427	478

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International legislation, standards, and commitments

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- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)
- ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102)
- ILO Transition from Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) – General Comment 19 on the right to social security
- Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002)
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Regional standards and commitments

- ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection (2013)
- ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012)
- Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of the Persons with Disabilities in ASEAN Community (2011)
- Brunei Darussalam Declaration on Strengthening Family Institution: Caring for the Elderly (2010).
- Hanoi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children (2010)

Lao PDR legislation, plans and regulations

- Decrees No. 073/PM (2002), No. 222/PM, and No.10/PM (2012), about the Poverty Reduction Fund
- Decree on People with Disabilities No. 137/GOV (2014)
- Decree on Social Welfare No. 169/PM (2013)
- Decree 273/PM (2014) on the National Policy for Free Maternity for All and Free Health Services for Children Under 5
- Decree No. 470 on National Health Insurance
- Decree No.1679/Ministry of Education and Sports (2014) on Promoting School Lunch
- Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (2015)
- Education Law No. 133 (2015)
- Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2016-2020)
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- Health Sector Financing Strategy (2016-2020)
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- Law on Healthcare (2005)
- National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
- National Health Insurance Strategy (2017-2020)
- National Human Resources Development Strategy to 2025
- National Population and Development Policy (revised in 2006)
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Ministries that participated in the formulation of the NSPS

Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare

Ministry of Education and Sports

Ministry of Health

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

Ministry of Planning and Investment

Ministry of Finance

Ministry of Home Affairs

Government Office

Lao Federation of Trade Unions

Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry

National Health Insurance Bureau

National Social Security Fund

ສະໜັບສະໜູນການຈັດພິມໂດຍ: ໂຄງການ ຮ່ວມມືຂອງອົງການສະຫະປະຊາຊາດ “ບໍ່ປະຖິ້ມຜູ້ໃດຢູ່ເບື້ອງຫຼັງ: ການສ້າງພື້ນຖານໃຫ້ແກ່ການປົກປ້ອງສັງຄົມຂັ້ນພື້ນຖານ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ”

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