



**07<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific International Conference on Quality of Life**

Wina Holiday Villa, Kuta, Bali, Indonesia, 02-04 Oct 2023

**Sustainable Development in Luang Prabang:  
Analysis of trends, challenges, solutions**

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**Abstract**

This study reports the current state of sustainability in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, featuring the industry of heritage tourism, and draws attention to the use of collaborative methods in meeting the needs of local communities, visitors, businesses, and environment preservation. A transition towards sustainability in Luang Prabang is the main object. Alongside the examination of the sustainability level, it proposes an establishment of a preferred and present-day scenario for the local management to refer to. Following, an essential aim lies in providing awareness and understanding of existing problems, trends, and challenges in the tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Sustainability; Luang Prabang; Heritage; Tourism

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8i26.5203>*

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**1.0 Introduction**

How can scientific research play a part in the implementation of sustainable development goals in the world? Climate change, social inequality, pollution, political instability — all of them are just the tip of the iceberg known as the challenges of environmental development. These issues are the main concern of sustainable development practices and research nowadays. Initially, sustainable development (SD) was focused mostly on environmental issues, yet, the contemporary meaning of sustainability is based on four pillars: economy, environment, human, and society. The balance between those areas represents sustainability's goal of attaining the needs of the present without causing any harm in the future.

How is SD connected to the tourism industry? In the past years, there has been a tendency to increase concerns over the implementation of sustainable tourism with an intention to restrain negative impacts on already existing environmental challenges. There comes the implementation of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) aimed at securing a sustainable future for both developing and developed countries in the same way. Each of the goals has its objectives to be achieved and to which the tourism industry has the potential to play a significant role.

According to the World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is defined as "*tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities*" (United Nations, n.d.). The UN highlights goal number 8, the goal of decent work and economic growth, then number 12, the goal of responsible consumption and production, and number 14, the goal of life below water; and connects all of them to the tourism industry. Although, it has the potential to contribute to the whole set of 18 goals and even move beyond them (UNWTO, 2017), but

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tourism is also regarded as a source of many environmental and social problems and impacts in the world. Despite that, the way of making tourism more sustainable is not limited or focused on dealing with the industry's negative impacts, but on helping the local communities raise their social and economic level of benefits, attracting people's attention to the local heritage, and raising their awareness and support for conservation of tangible and intangible valuables.

### 1.1 Current trends of sustainable development in the world

The sustainable development is a worldwide goal that aims to bring stability between the needs of people, nature, and well-being. The biggest obstacles in the way of achieving this goal are population growth and social inequalities, together with climate change and environmental pollution. The needed support to overcome these challenges may be found in the latest sustainability trends that we may see rising in 2023. The list represents an increasing use of affordable renewable energy sources; an expansion of recycling, reusing, and repurposing actions; an improvement of sustainable transport options and efficient use of electric vehicles; an intensifying growth of 'alternative' and plant-based food (Mckay, 2023).

These trends represent a more compound set of actions that lead to a transition from a free market and planned economies to a circular economy of production and consumption that is focused on sustainability. Moreover, there may be a possibility for a transformation to a bigger level of the economy also known as a green economy system that can reduce ecological and environmental damages and risks by simultaneously improving social equity and human well-being (LinkedIn, n.d.), which should be an international goal to achieve.

### 1.2. Analysis of SD application in Lao PDR

Discussion about the popular SD trends leads to the presentation of the current situation in Lao PDR and the actions that have been taken around sustainability in the city. The data that corresponds to the SD situation, including official information and recent activities has been found in the Voluntary National Review on the implementations of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development prepared in collaboration between government and national stakeholders of the Lao PDR. The review has the potential to deal with all 18 SDGs, however, for the present it highlights 9 key SDGs selected since the first VNR made in 2013. The 2030 Agenda demands multisided participation including not only the government, stakeholders, and professionals, but also the cooperation between citizens, international partners as well and country visitors to ensure that the commitment to the universal value "Leave No One Behind" (United Nations, 2022) is being respected. The first adoption of SD was made in 2015 and the priority has been given to the implementation of effective SD methods in the country. Since then, it has been decided to maintain a fairer distribution and allocation of goods gained from economic growth and secure this process for the time to come. For the present, the focus is on the following SDGs that are still considered to be in need of greater and wider attention from the public, including local citizens, businesses, and government, where progress is still behind and has to be accelerated (VNR of SDGs, 2021):

- SDG 1 — *No Poverty*, liquidating extreme poverty is one of the main goals which also includes social protection and equality. The country has been successful in accomplishing the goal up to the beginning of the pandemic. According to the data, the percentage of poverty in the country was 18.3% in 2018 (Asian Development Bank, 2022). In the Northern part of the country, Luangprabang province is listed among other districts with the highest numbers of poverty, in 2019 it was 20.4% (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020).
- SDG 2 — *Zero Hunger*, food insecurity was one of the main issues in the country even prior to COVID-19; according to the World Hunger Index Lao PDR is ranked 82/121, to compare, the percentage of hunger in the country has changed to -3.3% since 2014 and considered to be a moderate level of hunger (Lao PDR, n.d.). This means that people have different and unequal food distribution among the districts, including the need for improvement of agricultural and sustainable food production. In addition, the agriculture sector in the country has strong linkages with big potential for future employment with its development and support in obtaining the SDG goal of zero hunger.
- SDG 3 — *Good Health and Wellbeing*, COVID-19 has changed the country's course of action in human development. It also negatively influenced life expectancy at birth in 2021 and signalled upcoming health risks and mortality rates. A danger was also posed to the young generation by affecting their livelihoods, disrupting education, affecting health conditions, and setting a certain threat to the continuance of higher education and possible employment in the future (Phuong, 2022). For the future, the country targets quality childcare and effective access to quality healthcare by including access to justice and infrastructure. However, it has been acknowledged that more work may be required to reduce the connection between health and socio-economic background, employment outcomes, and education.
- SDG 4 — *Quality education*, the main goals are for equal access to education, universal access to free primary and secondary education, and expansion of educational facilities and scholarships. Primary schools' enrolment has important progress in little gender gaps, controversially to the enrolment at secondary and tertiary education. This makes a total of 70.6% of the participation rate in primary school in 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2022). School attendance rates are lower in rural and remote areas. The number of enrollments can be affected by the education level in the family or the lack of it, by the status of income. The reason behind the lower percentage of graduation with each level of school (primary is 90%, lower secondary is 61% and upper secondary is 40%) lies in many factors, among them are lack of standard facilities in schools and in highly skilled and professional teachers; in addition, the educational infrastructures have suffered many damages due to floods in 2018 and 2019, lately COVID-19 imposed other challenges on already weak educational investment. According to Figure 1, in 2014, Luangprabang province had in total of 976 schools,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of which were supplied with clean water and sports courts, however, only  $\frac{1}{3}$  of schools had electricity provided and only  $\frac{73}{976}$  schools had libraries.

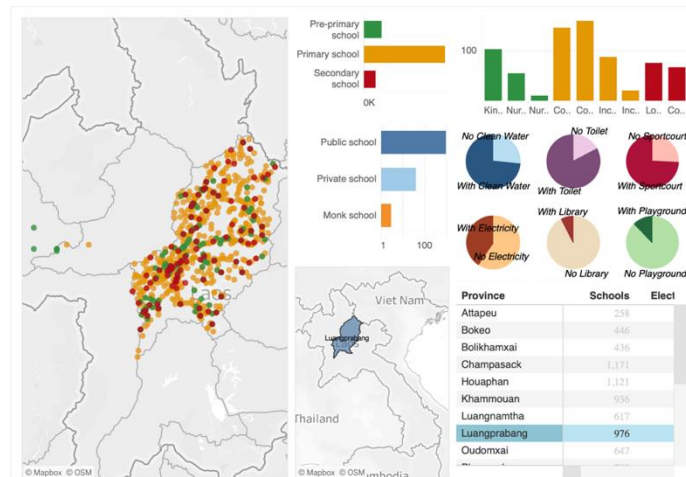


Fig. 1: Schools in Luangprabang Province  
(Source:) SDG 4 Quality Education, n.d.

- SDG 5 — *Gender equality*, the goal is to eliminate discrimination and violence against all women and girls, adding value to unpaid care and domestic work, and equal access of women to economic resources, and reproductive health care. United Nations Development Program proposed a gender equality strategy for 2022-2026 where the Women's Economic Opportunity Index has been used to analyze the current situation. The country obtained a score of 38.6/100 and was ranked 108 out of 128 other analyzed countries. The data shows that women's labor force participation is as high as men's, unofficial employment has a share of 82.9% (women's share is 85.9%, while men's is 79.9%) and presents administrative and financial challenges, together with unstable income, tax, and social insecurity. Women spend longer hours at work, although their average monthly income is lower than that of men. This gap is especially noticeable in occupations related to craft and skilled agricultural workers. However, in the occupations of managers, the number of women is greater, and so is their income (81% to 62%). According to the data from 2016, the businesses owned by women (partly or fully) had a share of 43.1% (UNDP Lao PDR, 2022). The proposed ideas are targeted at the straightening of social protection systems, the development of gender-responsive policies, and the greater extension of access to basic and accountable services.
- SDG 8 — *Decent work and economic growth*, targeting the promotion of sustained economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, protection of labor rights, and increase in access to financial services. The integration of the 2030 Agenda requires to be built on the SDG Multi-Stakeholder Partnership framework which means that the citizens and society can play a greater role in developing policies, particularly, for economic growth (VNR of SDGs, 2021). The focus is made on the support for inclusive labor markets and business: technology diffusion, entrepreneurship and strong competition on the market, increased resilience, and better adaptation of employees, providing access to good quality jobs, prioritizing women, and ethnic minorities, and providing enough possibilities to retrain or learn a new set of skills. The Government paid close attention to agriculture, technology development, and accessible facilities in the cities. Additionally, the importance has been given to tourism strengthening as one of the great sources of employment and economic benefits.
- SDG 13 — *Climate action*, resilience and adaptation to natural disasters and climate change, and strategic engagement with the Green Climate Fund (GCF) are the main goals. Greenhouse gas emissions were high in 2000 caused mostly by forestry and land-use change. The country is extremely vulnerable to floods that not only damage the environment but also interrupt any kind of development in the country and displace large numbers of people. Moreover, the technical capacity of the country is still limited to have full access to GCF. Despite that, Lao PDR is determined to achieve an emission reduction target of 60% by 2030 by collaborating with the NDC Partnership, furthermore, by focusing on adaptation and resilience development in transportation, health, agriculture, water, forestry, and other land use in the country (Lao PDR. *Climate Promise*, 2021).
- SDG 17 — *Partnership for the growth*, straightening domestic and international resources, promoting trade and multi-stakeholder partnership, enhancing policy and institutional coherence. A high priority has been given to regional and global cooperation and integration. A possible graduation out of a least developed country status by 2026.
- SDG 18 — *UXO and mine actions*, *UXO and mine actions*, removal of the Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) obstacles, the goal that has been "developed to address the war legacy of more than 80 million cluster submunitions remaining unexploded scattered across the country" (UNDP Lao PDR SDG 18, 2022). This sustainability goal has a special importance, it not only affects all social and economic sectors of the country but also represents a great threat to its development as an incredibly dangerous threat for people. The target is to zero annual casualties from UXO accidents, clear all contaminations from areas defined as 'poor', meet the needs of identified survivors, and ensure full funding for future activities. In practice, the government

is raising awareness and supporting the mine risk education that will further decrease the chances of accidents. The probability of a total clearance of UXO from poor areas is unlikely to be achieved. The numbers show a total of 3,852 ha of land that was cleared in 2017, while 22,873 ha of land were recognized as confirmed hazardous areas (Figure 2). The rest of the goals lack sufficient funding and require external donors. In total, UXO clearance represents a massive financial problem for the government and following the track of the past contributions to the sector the minimal, it is doubtful that the government will be "in a position to fully fund continued clearance and assistance in 2030" (SDG 18 Lives Safe from UXO, 2019).

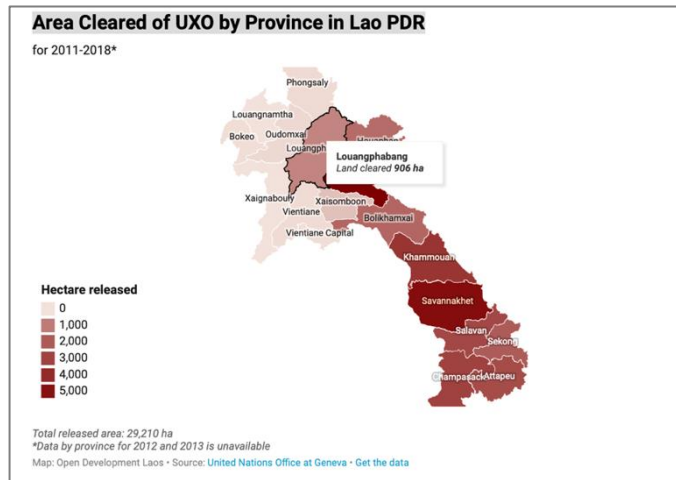


Fig. 2: Area Cleared of UXO in Luangprabang Province  
(Source:) UNODA – United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (n.d.)

### 1.3 Tourism Impact

Year	Number of Tourist Arrivals	(%) Δ	Average Length of Stay (Days) for International Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Days) for Regional Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Days) for the Total Tourist Arrivals	Revenue from Tourism (Dollars)
1990	14,400	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1991	37,613	161.2	NA	NA	NA	2,250,000
1992	87,571	132.8	NA	NA	NA	4,510,000
1993	102,946	17.5	3.5	NA	NA	6,280,000
1994	146,155	41.9	5.1	NA	NA	7,557,600
1995	346,460	137.0	4.3	NA	NA	24,738,480
1996	403,000	16.3	4.8	1.8	3.3	43,592,263
1997	463,200	14.9	5.0	3.0	4.0	73,276,904
1998	500,200	7.9	5.0	2.4	3.7	79,960,145
1999	614,278	22.8	5.5	2.4	4.0	97,265,324
2000	737,208	20.0	5.5	2.4	4.0	113,898,285
2001	673,823	-9.0	8.0	2.4	5.2	103,786,323
2002	735,662	9.1	6.5	2.1	4.3	113,409,883
2003	636,361	-14.0	6.0	2.0	4.0	87,302,412
2004	894,806	41.0	6.5	2.0	4.3	118,947,707
2005	1,095,315	22.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	146,770,074
2006	1,215,106	11.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	173,249,896
2007	1,623,943	34.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	233,304,695
2008	1,736,787	7.0	6.5	2.0	4.3	275,515,758
2009	2,008,363	16.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	267,700,224
2010	2,513,028	25.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	381,669,031
2011	2,723,564	8.0	7.0	2.0	4.5	406,184,338
2012	3,330,072	22.3	7.2	2.0	4.6	506,022,586
2013	3,779,490	13.0	8.4	2.0	5.2	595,909,127
2014	4,158,719	10.0	7.9	2.0	4.9	641,636,543
2015	4,684,429	13.0	7.5	2.0	4.8	725,365,681
2016	4,239,047	-10.0	7.5	2.0	4.8	724,191,957
2017	3,868,838	-8.7	8.3	2.0	5.2	648,067,008
2018	4,186,432	8.2	7.9	2.0	5.0	811,010,661
2019	4,791,065	14.4	7.9	2.0	5.0	934,710,409
2020	886,447	-81.5	7.9	2.0	5.0	213,367,141

Fig. 3: Number of Tourist Arrivals, Revenue from Tourism, And Average Length of Stay, 1990-2020  
(Source:) INTHAPHOME, P. (2020). Statistical Report on Tourism in Laos

Apart from the general statistics provided for the country, the situation in the town of Luang Prabang has a major distinctive feature — it became a World Heritage Site of UNESCO in 1995 and since that moment the town's life has changed. Crowds of tourists poured into the city, the development came with them and so did the pressure and harm on the landscape of Luang Prabang. The number of visitors and buildings that were built for tourism purposes has been rising since the inscription year which can be seen in figures 3 and 4, respectively. 14,400 tourists arrived in Luang Prabang in 1990, by 1995, the number rose to 346,460 and by the year 2019, right before the pandemic crisis, it scored 4,791,065 visitors.

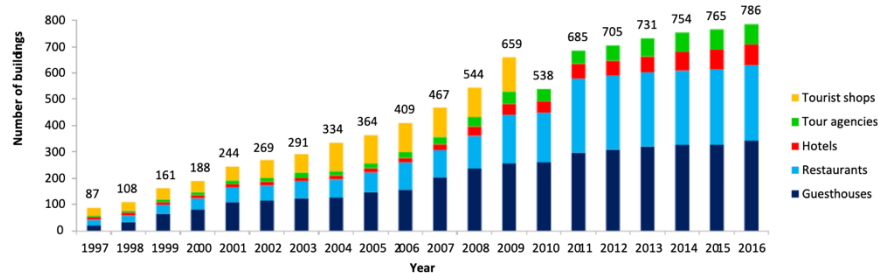


Fig. 4: Number of touristic buildings in Luang Prabang from 1997 to 2016  
(Source:) INTHAPHOME, P. (2020). *Statistical Report on Tourism in Laos*

## 2.0 Literature Review

Due to the author currently being based in Bangkok (Thailand), the research is predominantly desktop-based, and all the insights mentioned in the paper were taken from personal observations and interviews conducted during the last study trip in Luang Prabang in December 2022 and January 2023 by connecting to the local citizens, involving their participation in composing the up-to-date picture of the present-day situation of sustainable development activities and methods used in the city, conducting surveys and establishing examination of proposed theories or ideas together with the local representatives.

The author used a thematical type of literature review for this paper to conduct the research and understand different approaches and situation analyses about the following key themes: sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable development goals, UNESCO role in Lao PDR, tourism in Lao PDR, heritage tourism, World Heritage Site of the town of Luang Prabang. The prime focus was made on the Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Lao People's Democratic Republic published in 2021 as the source of the most up-to-date information regarding the SD activities in the country.

## 3.0 Methodology

The methodology of this research is based on mixed methods with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. They included surveys, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and gathering and selecting the existing data materials.

The interviews were conducted with the students of Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang from the Faculty of Architecture. The total of participants for the interviews was 12 and 36 students the focus group. This includes other 15 participants from Silpakorn University in Thailand who participated in the JSPS Seminar dedicated to the cultural heritage in the Mekong basin countries. The participants were chosen due to the collaboration between universities and a field trip that happened in December 2022 in the North of Lao PDR to the Bang Pun Jong community for academic research purposes. The interviews were mostly unstructured, and the number and type of questions were varying with each participant. For the focus group, the participants were invited to provide their opinions on the general situation with tourism in the town and any relative impacts from the industry they were able to observe throughout the time. The surveys were regulated with other colleagues from Silpakorn University during the preparation of projects for the seminar as the tourists' point of view of the town of Luang Prabang. The discussions were made between the participants and required interviews with the local citizens such as street vendors, souvenir shop owners, representatives of the tourism industry, architects, and professors of Souphanouvong University.

For the observation, the author chose Sisavangvong Road the main street of the town. The focus was on the spatial analysis that transformed residential or public areas into tourist usage. The results were used to form the picture of the most crowded areas for the later application of the focus group and interviews. Note-taking was the dominant way of observations that were concluded in 4 days from early morning to late evening.

Before collecting the necessary existing data, the author decided to find research publications in the National Library and Archives of Bangkok, but due to the incapability to read the Lao language, together with incorrect and incomplete translations from online translation engines, this method of collecting data was replaced with English and French written materials accessible online on the Internet. Therefore, the analysis was aimed at recent research articles first and then their difference with older versions of similar publications was analyzed.

#### 4.0 Discussion

Since the moment when SD has been given a definition by the Brundtland Commission as “behavior that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland G. Harlem, 1987), sustainable development as a concept has never stopped to expand. To the present day, there is a fair amount of all sorts of definitions for this concept (Dale & Hill, 2001), worth mentioning, that these definitions have many points of view as positive as equally negative. What concerns sustainable tourism as a specific field in the concept of sustainable development, so since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development a great number of countries have declared their decision or wish to pursue and execute necessary policies for sustainable tourism development. Regardless, there is still a certain level of uncertainty over the priorities and the level of scope for making tourism more sustainable and the ways of putting them into action are only partly appreciated (Giulia Carbone et al., 2005). The question that may be asked here is: “*Is there a right path to follow?*”

#### 5.0 Conclusion

This research analyses the current situation around the principles of sustainable development in Lao PDR based on successful achievement of all 18 sustainable development goals. The focus made on 9 of them shows that the country is moving towards its goal and is dedicated to making changes.

The town of Luang Prabang has seen a significant increase in tourism that affected many industries in a positive way as a source of development and transformation, education, and new international opportunities, and equally in a negative way as a root of multiplying ecological and social problems, cultural issues, and heritage management difficulties.

Overall, the government intends to take further steps in working together with the public and businesses. However, closer attention needs to be paid to the collaboration with the tourism industry as the main source of income in the country by welcoming foreign investors and companies and applying stricter policies of heritage management not only for the tourists but also for the citizens. The rise of people’s awareness of their own environment is vital for the town, the spread of heritage knowledge, the ways of its protection for the future, and significance in the present.

Potential change may be seen in switching from heritage or cultural tourism to sustainable tourism in the country. A cooperative work towards conservation of the environment and heritage together with community and economic development. The system called “*Steps to Sustainable Tourism*” has been created by the Australian government in accordance with the tourism industry representatives, heritage managers, and academics (Hall & Testoni, 2004). The guide has been performed in different areas of the tourism industry, but only time and determination can prove its effectiveness in the case study of Luang Prabang.

#### Acknowledgment

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to Professor Dr. Mohamed Yusoff Abbas for the invitation to participate in the conference and for his support in providing me with this opportunity to do the research and further my study in the field of sustainability and heritage tourism at Silpakorn University, Thailand.

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