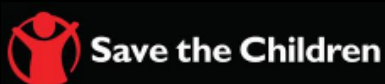


ALTERNATIVE CARE IN LAOS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH CHILDREN AND CAREGIVERS



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Mónica Ruiz-Casares, PhD

September 2013



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSSS	Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux [Health and Social Services Centre]
CPN	Child Protection and Assistance Network
EMBS	Ethnic Minority Boarding School
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GOL	Government of Laos
IC	Informed Consent
KI	Key Informant
LAK	Lao Kip [currency]
Lao P.D.R.	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPB	Luang Prabang
LSB	Lao Statistics Bureau
LSIS	Laos Social Indicators Survey
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoLSW	Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare
MoPS	Ministry of Public Security
n.d.	No data/date [available]
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NUOL	National University of Laos
PEI	Photo-Elicited Interview
PSA	People's Supreme Assembly
SCI	Save the Children International
SOSCV	SOS Children's Village
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States Dollars
XYB	Xayabury

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings of a study on parental and alternative childcare in Luang Prabang (LPB) and Xayabury (XYB) provinces in Northern Lao People's Democratic Republic (P.D.R.) The objectives were to document (a) existing family and community practices aimed at **preventing parental separation and promoting parental care and family reintegration**; and (b) **alternative care arrangements** for children separated or removed from, abandoned, or relinquished by their parents in these provinces. The specific research questions of this study are:

- a) How are children cared for in XYB and LPB provinces?
- b) How are decisions made regarding children (formal and informal) alternative care?
- c) What are the (perceived) effects on these care situations on child wellbeing?
- d) What would help parents and families prevent child separation, abandonment, and relinquishment?

Answers to these questions were sought in the context of a capacity building project involving Save the Children, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Laos (NUOL), and the Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux de la Montagne (CSSS-DLM) affiliated with McGill University in Montreal (Canada). Training of SC staff and NUOL faculty (n = 12) consisted of a two-day alternative care and social research workshop held in Vientiane (NUOL) followed by one-week of data collection per province and semi-structured daily group meetings throughout the fieldwork.

Information was gathered from adults (n = 226) and children (n = 314 ages 7-17 years) in family-based and residential care settings by means of individual interviews (n = 26) and group discussions, an online survey with child protection agencies (n = 8), and participatory photo-voice with a group of children (n = 20). Representation was balanced by province (LPB = 281 and SYB = 248; the remaining 11 in Vientiane) and sex (female = 292, male = 248). Both rural and urban settings were included. A review was conducted of publications and information on children in Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools (EMBSS) provided by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Measures were taken to observe informed consent, respect confidentiality and voluntary participation, and reduce any potential adverse consequence to the participants. Scientific and ethics approval were obtained from the CSSS de la Montagne (Canada). An ad-hoc Advisory Committee was convened in Vientiane to ensure contextual appropriateness of research design and data collection instruments.

According to Lao law, parents and guardians have the responsibility to care for and educate children as well as to protect the rights and interests of children (PSA, 1990, 2006). Parents are the main caregivers of children. Mothers play an important role in cooking, clothing, and caring for children during the early years; fathers work to provide for the needs of the family and give advice to children. When working parents cannot take the children with them (e.g., to the office or to the upland rice field), they rely on relatives (mostly grandparents), older children, and neighbors to care for children while they are away. Some parents send children to kindergarten, hire someone to care for children at home, or engage in "*swap care*"—a customary practice by which some ethnic groups send their babies to be cared by someone else to safeguard parents from illness, until the baby "*grows enough*."

Key informants raised concerns about the lack of accurate, up-to-date information on the prevalence of formal and informal alternative care in the country as well as of systems to support alternative care placements. Some estimate prevalence to remain stable while others consider that numbers are growing due to rural-urban migration and resettlement, reduction in slash and burn cultivation (which makes families have to work away from their home for extended periods of time), financial need, and larger observed numbers of at risk children on the streets and in urban/semi urban areas. This is confounded by widespread misunderstanding of terms such as “orphan” and “adoption”; the former is often used to refer to any separated and abandoned children regardless of the known living status of their biological parents, and the latter, to any care provided by relatives and non-relatives regardless of duration and level of formalization.

There are few abandoned children in LPB and XYB. Positive child-care practices and strong family and community ties result in most children being raised within their families. Village authorities and institutions such as the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) and the village child protection and assistance network (CPN) advise parents to promote children’s education and protection (e.g., use non-violent discipline and avoid early marriage) and mobilize resources to support families in need. This includes ensuring guardianship of orphan or abandoned children. Differential treatment of children in family-based care by sex, age, and whether the child is biological or adoptive was said to exist. In EMBSs, newcomer and young children as well as children with disabilities are said to receive more caregiver attention.

Children are sent to live with relatives mostly when parents pass away (orphans), separate/divorce, or remarry, or to obtain accommodation while they complete their (secondary or vocational) schooling. Financial need and education seem to be the key determinants of child separation and reunification. Other frequently mentioned reasons include employment of a parent or child (including upland farming and migratory work), children running away from home (e.g., due to domestic violence or substance use),-and outsiders taking away children on promises of better living conditions or employment. In terms of temples, children become novices to access to education, secure basic needs, gain merit for self or family, build character, or relax during vacation. Decisions to send children to residential care are generally made by parents, often in consultation with relatives, the head of the village, and ministry officials. Children are not always consulted despite promotion by village headmen and other authorities (Figure 2); however, some children are said to make the decision by themselves.

Overall, participants agreed that it is better for children to live with their parents, and that parents generally provide good care and support. Wealthier and smaller families are perceived to provide better care. Exposure to violence as well as lack of material resources, hygiene, parental literacy skills, supervision, and time for children may result in school drop-out, drug use, and some children *“not wanting to live with parents”*. There is a widespread belief that children in residential care cannot go back to their parents unless they have *“finished their study and have a job”* or they are part of *“middle and better-off families.”*

Orphan children are generally cared for by relatives and, when these are not available, the village authority may appoint a guardian or send them to an SOS Children’s Village (SOSCV) or EMBS. Orphan children and children whose parents cannot provide for, may also be adopted by relatives or non-relatives. When a couple cannot have their own children, they

may try to adopt by “*asking for children to live [with]*” in a village or a hospital. References to families following all the steps indicated in the law are rare and a common use of the term “adoption” to refer to informal fostering is widespread. Oftentimes, adoptions are discussed orally, payment exchanged with the relatives of the child, and/or a *baci* ceremony [ritual to celebrate important life events] held. On occasion, the adoption is formalized with “*permission notes*” or letters from village authorities.

Orphan children are sometimes separated from their siblings and sent to live with relatives, some of whom do not provide adequate food or enough support. In contrast, relatives and unrelated local villagers may become “*second parents*,” providing different types of support to orphan children and children living away from their parents. For children given up for adoption to families overseas, absence of “*formal checks conducted in-country on adoptive families by Lao authorities*” until inter-country adoptions were interrupted in 2012 were also matter of concern to KIs. Some KIs and caregivers described institutions as a better alternative to parental care as they provide food, accommodation, and access to education and healthcare. Supervision by teachers, who “*were trained on how to look after children*,” more time to study rather than assisting with household chores, and an opportunity to make new friends were praised by teachers and adolescents in EMBSs.

Similarly, there is confusion about the different types of residential care institutions (e.g., EMBSs are often called “orphanages” and orphanages are described as institutions for children whose parent(s) have died or whose families are poor). In LPB and XYB, there are one SOSCV (n = 134 children ages 3-17 years, 60% boys) and four EMBSs (n = 155, 59% boys). Established in 1993, SOS Children’s Villages of Laos is an organization chaired by the MoLSW and with a National Director based in Vientiane. It currently serves over 1000 children in six SOSCVs, and other education, health, and social facilities throughout the country. Private overseas funding is supplemented with local income for school fees. Upon relatives’ request to the MoLSW and subsequent investigation by the organization, children whose parents have passed away (double orphans) or single parent who cannot care for them may relocate to the village. Girls generally stay in the house until they come off age and sometimes after that if they are not financially independent. At age 14 years, boys are sent to live in a youth house. An SOSCV consists of 10-14 brick houses in which 10-11 children from diverse age groups, sex, province of origin, and ethno-cultural groups are cared for by a single female caregiver or “mother.” Children attend school in the village grounds, where they also play and participate in household tasks. Accommodation and food were assessed as adequate by children and caregivers. Newcomers’ difficulty with language (they often do not speak Lao), malnutrition, lack of hygiene, and homesickness results in slow adjustment in some cases. Children are not allowed to go back home and their relatives are allowed to visit up to 4 times a year. However, school staff estimates that very few actually do it.

EMBSs include 500-630 children (about half live in dormitory) and 3-8 ethno-cultural groups. Children are often sent to EMBS at 9-11 years of age; some children may remain into their early twenties as they complete their education. Children are recruited on a quota-based system set by the MoES. About 70-100 new students are registered per year in each EMBS, mostly children from economically disadvantaged families, orphans, and divorced parents. Widespread misconception exists about EMBSs housing only one ethno-cultural group and/or orphan children. Children may visit their families during school vacation but transportation costs largely determine children’s ability to travel. The government of Laos

(GOL) provides most of the funding, including a monthly (food) allowance per child of 200,000LAK (approximately 25USD). Additional resources come from cultivation, animal breeding, sewing and tin can selling. Children may earn extra income through cultivation and sale of the produce to the school kitchen. Healthcare costs are difficult to cover. Overall, children described receiving good care and advice from teachers (and nurses). A student/teacher ratio of 60/1 is common during the academic year. Dormitories are age- and sex-segregated and oftentimes overcrowded (14-20 children per bedroom) and/or under furnished. Older children keep order in the room. Children generally play within the compound. Challenges identified by school staff include: Managing cultural diversity, teenage pregnancy, and difficulty ensuring respect for school rules and school attendance by girls and children after school vacation. Adaptation to the school is particularly difficult for young children, who often miss their families and have limited Lao language skills. Insufficient food (breakfast is not provided), and stealing of personal property in the dormitories are difficult for adolescents.

Of particular concern in institutional care settings is the lack of follow-up and ongoing assessment of the placement, and variables standards of care. Significant variation exists in the state of facilities and resources across EMBSs. Some adolescents in residential care indicated not receiving sufficient care (young children are said to receive more attention) or having enough contact with their parents (children may visit their parents once a year provided they can afford the cost of transportation). According to EMBS teachers and caregivers, insufficient food and homesickness have a negative impact on children's health and school performance, and dissuade families from sending children to EMBS. Strict rules and lack of Lao language skills render the adaptation of some children more difficult. Concerns over the *"lack of psychosocial support for children"* were also voiced by survey respondents. Some children are reported to drop out of school without notice and/or to threaten to commit suicide if they are not sent back home. Cases of children not wanting *"to visit their own village and their own families"* were described too. Late announcement prevented some children from applying for admission in some rural communities.

At about 10 years of age, there are boys in LPB and XYB who become novices, often until they complete their schooling. Access to education, food, and community support were praised by children. Positive behavioral changes were highlighted by caregivers. Monks (primarily the leader of the temple), fellow novices, and, sometimes, *"second parents"* in the community provide care and support. Diversity of backgrounds of novices, limited material resources, and difficulty providing emotional support to children pose challenges to caregivers. Strict rules, demanding subjects (e.g., learning Pali language), homesickness and lack of money for transportation (to visit family) are difficult for novices. No street children are said to exist in the communities visited. ¹

Participants recommended helping families to overcome poverty and educating parents about children's rights, the importance of keeping children in the family, and appropriate ways to discipline children are needed to prevent child separation and abandonment. Systems must be in place to monitor progress in those areas.

Study Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed based on the findings from this study:

1. Develop child-sensitive social assistance programs to improve the livelihoods of families and to prevent the need for alternative care
2. Advocate for and strengthen community-based care and protection measures for orphans and vulnerable children
3. Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the ministries of Labor and Social Welfare, Education and Sports, and Public Security (MoLSW, MoES, MoPS), and strengthen collaboration between all agencies working in the alternative care of children
4. Develop standards of care and protection, particularly for children who are in institutions, and regularly evaluate for compliance.
5. Involve children and families in decision-making about issues that matter to them, including planning interventions
6. Strengthen routine data collection and management systems on orphan, separated, and vulnerable children
7. Conduct further research and analysis on community-based initiatives for the care and protection of vulnerable children as well as on the links between alternative care and socio-economic and cultural factors
8. Raise awareness of and enforce legal and policy framework
9. Regulate adoption
10. Conduct rigorous assessments and periodic monitoring of alternative care placements and facilitate family contact and reunification.

¹ Friends International has identified a growing number of street children in LPB.

Introduction

1. Background

There are at least 24 million children without parental care globally (EveryChild, 2009). Research shows that orphaned and abandoned children are more vulnerable to poverty, child labor, school non-attendance, and mental health problems (Monasch & Boerma, 2004; K. Whetten et al., 2011; R. Whetten et al., 2011) and that children inadequately supervised may sustain physical, mental, and social negative outcomes (Morrongiello et al., 2008; Theodore, Runyan, & Chang, 2007). Children and families sometimes use separation as a strategy to increase access to food and services such as education. In the context of poverty it is not clear the extent to which this choice is actually freely made and whether the results of such choices are beneficial to the wellbeing of the child and his/her family. The focus of this study are children with and without temporary or permanent parental care in two Northern provinces of Lao P.D.R., namely Luang Prabang (LPB) and Xayabury (XYB)—to explore the perceptions and practices that act as barriers or enabling factors to their protection and care.

Children without parental care is the term used in this study to cover all children not living with their parents or guardians, for whatever reason and in whatever circumstances. When a child's own family or guardian are unable, even with appropriate support, to provide adequate care for the child, or abandons or relinquishes the child, children may end up living in the streets or in alternative care. The latter includes living situations that are family-based (e.g., kinship or foster care) as well as residential care (e.g., orphanages). The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, adopted by the General Assembly on 20th November 2009, aim to ensure that children are not placed in alternative care unnecessarily and, where out-of-home care is provided, that it responds to the child's rights, needs and best interests. The guidelines give priority to the prevention of family separation and abandonment, and to the importance of local family-based care alternatives. Institutionalization should be a last resort. In this line, Save the Children International (SCI)'s Child Protection Initiative global strategy places children without appropriate care as one of its key priority areas (SCI, 2013). This includes, among others, children 'in' or 'at risk of requiring' alternative care.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (P.D.R.) is a landlocked country in mainland South-East Asia (Figure 1). It has a total estimated population of 6.5 million of which half are females, two-thirds live in rural areas (largely engaging in the cultivation of rice), and 37% are under 15 years of age (LSB, 2012). The provinces of LPB and XYB are home to 463,485 and 389,139 people respectively. The country is linguistically and ethnically very diverse. Lao is the official language although many other languages are spoken by ethno-cultural minorities as well as foreign languages. The Lao Loum, Lao Theung (category that includes the Khmu), and Lao Soung (including the Hmong) represent roughly two-thirds, one-fourth, and one-tenth of the population respectively. Buddhism is the religion practiced by most of the population although ethnic minority groups in the mountain regions have maintained animist rituals and traditions (Dommen, Lafont, Osborne, Silverstein, & Zasloff, 2013).



Figure 1 Map of Lao P.D.R. with Provinces in the Study Underlined

According to the recently released Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS), most children in Lao P.D.R. live with both parents, single parenthood is uncommon (7% of children live with their mother only and 2% living with their father only), and 6% live with neither parent (MoH & LSB, 2012). Nationally, 5% of children in the country have lost one or both of their parents as a result of death. Orphan children are less likely than non-orphans to attend school (67% of children age 10-14 who have lost both parents vs. 84% of children of the same age group who have not lost both parents and who live with at least one parent). Additionally, practices such as leaving young children home alone or with another child under 10 years of age (14%) and child violent discipline (76%) exist in the country (MoH & LSB, 2012). A baseline survey on child protection conducted in XYB and

LPB provinces last year revealed that parents assume a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to support and protect their children (SCI, 2012). Nonetheless, this survey also revealed that many parents send their children to work outside of their hometowns and their awareness of possible negative consequences of such an arrangement was very low. The impact of poverty and violence on child separation, and cultural practices such as sending children to live with relatives in the case of divorce or death of parents (instead of remaining with the surviving parent) were briefly noted (SCI, 2012). Besides, child trafficking is common along the borders (MoLSW & UNICEF, 2004), and orphanages, group homes, and other residential care facilities are under-regulated.

In Lao PDR, child protection is still an emerging sector, lacking a clear strategy, professional social workers, and a formal care system. Despite initial efforts to develop Lao National Care Guidelines and decrees for inter-country and national adoption, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) are not yet transcribed into the Lao context. In order to inform the drafting of these guidelines, local research evidence is needed. In response to this need, a partnership was created for capacity building and data collection and analysis on formal and informal child care systems. The result of this collaboration, this report provides a picture of the situation of family-based and alternative care in LPB and XYB provinces. We hope that it will also offer a discussion platform on which to build further research on the effects of parental separation in Lao P.D.R.

2. Objectives and scope of the study

The ultimate goal of this study is to identify critical elements of quality parental, family, and alternative childcare in XYB and LPB provinces in Northern Lao P.D.R. Save the Children International (SCI) has ongoing child protection interventions in these two provinces. The specific objectives are to document (a) existing family and community practices aimed at **preventing parental separation and promoting parental care and family reintegration**; and (b) **alternative out-of-home care arrangements** for providing physical and emotional support to children separated or removed from, abandoned, or relinquished by their parents in these provinces. This includes kinship, community-based, and residential care alternatives.

The specific research questions of this study are:

- e) How are children cared for in XYB and LPB provinces?
- f) How are decisions made regarding children (formal and informal) alternative care?
- g) What are the (perceived) effects on these care situations on child wellbeing?
- h) What would help parents and families prevent child separation, abandonment, and relinquishment?

3. Methodology

This report is based on data collected within the framework of a capacity building project between Save the Children-Laos, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Laos (NUOL), and Dr. Ruiz-Casares from McGill University and the Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux de la Montagne (CSSS-DLM) in Montreal (Canada). The aim of this partnership was to enhance local social research capacity, particularly as related to the alternative care of children. This was done through a two-day workshop held at the NUOL in January 2013 led by Dr. Ruiz-Casares, followed by supervised practice in the field. Training participants were divided into two groups, each one of which participated in one week of data collection in one of the two target provinces. Drs. Ruiz-Casares and Phommavong joined both teams for the full duration of the fieldwork. Daily reflection meetings were held in the field at the end of the day to share preliminary results, advice on incidents, and complete to the training. Data collection took place January-March 2013.

Considering the exploratory nature of the research questions and the interest in understanding decision-making processes, qualitative methods are more appropriate. The perspectives of adults (n = 226) and children (n = 314 ages 7-17 years) were elicited by means of individual and group interviews, an online survey with child protection agencies, and the use of participatory photo-voice with a selected group of children. Representation was balanced by province (LPB = 281 and SYB = 248; the remaining 11 in Vientiane) and sex (female = 292, male = 248). More specifically, information was collected through:

(a) a **review of the literature** and secondary sources, including normative policies/laws, reports, academic publications, and Ministry of Education and Sports's (MoES) data on children in residential care. Beyond the scope of this study to conduct a comprehensive review of regulations and other publications, this brief review nonetheless provides a necessary framework within which to interpret the results of the study and to propose next steps for research and action;

(b) brief **online survey** was sent to child protection staff at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donor agencies in Vientiane in March 2013 (n = 8, representing 44% response rate). Information was collected on the Lao legal and policy framework on alternative care, ongoing prevention and intervention activities having an impact on family care and child-parent separation, and strengths and gaps on regulations and practices in this regard. Respondents were also invited to bring to the attention of the research team other relevant publications and resources.

(c) semi-structured **key informant (KI) interviews** with community authorities (n = 26) including government officials from relevant ministries/departments and organizations (e.g., LWU), and other people knowledgeable about (alternative) child care in Vientiane & target communities, as well as head staff at institutions providing care (i.e., SOS Children's Villages, EMBSs, Buddhist monasteries). KIs were identified by SCI in dialogue with local partners and government officials. All English notes were entered into a word processor for analysis.

(d) **focus group discussions** (FGDs) with adults (n = 192) and children (n = 294, of which 103 younger than 12 years) in family-based and residential care settings. On average, there were 10 participants per group (range 5-13). Sex-segregated meetings were held with adults and adolescents in all communities except in some EMBS, as agreed with staff in these institutions. In each province, FGDs were conducted in 2 urban and 2-3 rural settings home to diverse ethno-cultural groups (primarily Lao Loum, Hmong, Khmu, and Prai). FGDs explored adults and children's perceptions about parental and alternative care: characteristics of quality care, factors leading to parent-child separation, alternative care arrangements considered and available, how decisions are made to send children to live away from home, and the perceived benefit of these arrangements for children and their families. Discussions were facilitated by one researcher and notes taken by another team member; all notes were transcribed and translated into English in a word processor for analysis.

(e) **photo-elicited interviews** (PEI) were conducted with a selected group of children (n = 10) and adolescents (n = 10) in residential care—orphans (n = 4), EMBSs (n = 8), and monasteries (n = 8) in the target provinces. A welcoming environment for the research and presence of children from diverse backgrounds and levels of vulnerability were key criteria used for the selection of institutions and participants. Children were selected in dialogue with the heads of each institution (n = 5), who were also interviewed. Besides children's background information, children were given digital cameras and asked to take a dozen photographs (e.g., of things, places, and people important to them), and to comment on them. All the children invited to participate agreed to take part in the study.

All notes and images were entered into a word processor for analysis. They were analyzed to identify common trends, themes, and patterns for each of the issues covered in the study. Content analysis also helped flag diverging views and opposite trends.

4. Ethical considerations

Measures were taken to ensure that participation was voluntary, to protect confidentiality, observe informed consent, and to reduce any potential adverse consequence to the participants. Study purpose and procedures were explained to all relevant authorities to

obtain the necessary permissions. Scheduling of interviews was also done in dialogue with local authorities and interviewees, trying to accommodate respondents' schedules so as to maximize participation rates. Permission from parents and children was obtained in advance. Informed Consent (IC) forms were summarized orally to respondents to ensure that respondents are clear about what they were engaging into. PEI participants were asked to get permission before taking someone's photograph, as well as how to take pictures in such a way that protects people's privacy. All nominal information was taken out of interview notes and responses to the online survey before analysis. All identifying information has been changed in this report to protect participants' identities.

The SCI Child Safeguarding Policy was implemented during data collection. Approval for the project was obtained from the National University of Laos (NUOL). Scientific and ethics approval were obtained from the CSSS de la Montagne (Canada). An ad-hoc Advisory Committee comprised of the study partners and representatives from child-oriented organizations and researchers was convened in Vientiane to ensure contextual appropriateness of research design and data collection instruments.

5. Limitations

This study only collected data from two provinces and a limited number of locations. Sites and participants were selected in a non-random way, following criteria that would maximize diversity of experiences and opinions. No detention centres, transitional shelters, or street children were included in the study. Nonetheless, information obtained in the targeted communities provides evidence to inform future policy, program, and research on the care practices of families and institutions nationwide.

Findings

1. Family-Based Care

The first question that this study sought to answer was "how are children cared for in XYB and LPB provinces?" Specifically, we wanted to learn (a) who are the legal and customary child caregivers in the communities visited; (b) what role do parents, siblings, extended family, and non-relatives play in caring for children; and (c) whether there is any differential treatment of children within families and in residential care settings. A child is legally defined in Lao P.D.R. as "any person below 18 years of age" (PSA, 2006).

1. Parental Care & Family Support

Parents and guardians in Lao P.D.R. have the responsibility to "provide warm care to children," to protect children, and to promote their full development (Arts. 10, 22, & 24 (PSA, 2006). According to the Family Law (1990), both parents have equal obligation to care for their children "regardless of whether the parents are still living together or divorced" (art. 35). Parents are also responsible for educating children and to protect children's rights and interests so that if they fail "to educate their children, exceed their parental rights, or use violence and ill-treatment towards them, the court may withdraw their parental rights, but parents must continue to implement their parental obligations in caring for the children"

(arts. 32-33). In turn, children must respect, “care and assist their parents in their old age, when ill, unable to work and in need of assistance” (Art. 36).

In line with these and [coexisting] customary regulations, respondents from all age groups and care settings indicated that parents have the primary responsibility for children, with mothers *de facto* playing a more important role in cooking, clothing, and caring for children during the early years. This is due to fathers often working outside of the village as well as to widespread support for breastfeeding. The role of fathers varies across groups and communities, though they too play an important role in raising children because they “*find the money to feed the family, work for farming, give advice,*” and “*send child to school and understand the important role of education.*” Sometimes, fathers “help”, yet other times they become the primary caregivers—“*my father takes more care than my mother because my mother is a teacher so she doesn’t have time to care [for us],*” explained a young child. Whereas older children go to school by themselves, parents often accompany young children.

Sometimes, working parents hire someone to care for children at home or send 3-5 year old children to nursery school/kindergarten. Neighbors may also take care of children while their parents are away. More frequently, relatives (mostly grandparents) help care for children, particularly when the parents cannot take the children with them (e.g., in the upland rice field). Parents may leave young children under 3 years with older siblings at home “*but mainly only during the weekend because they all go to school during the weekday and daytime. (...) If the kids are too young, then the mother or father has to take them with them to the rice field or garden*” (KI XYB). In the absence of relatives, neighbors may take care of children while their parents are away. “*Epecially children from high land ethnic groups are sent to upland ethnic families for taking care in swap care. By doing these, they believe that when mother gave birth, parents couldn’t keep [the child] at home, [or else the] parent would be ill, so they have to send their baby to someone’s care until the baby grows enough*” (KI LPB).

2. Protective practices and community support

Parents are said to take good care of children by “*giving warm love to them regularly*”, not arguing in the family, encouraging children to go to school, teaching children to respect older people and friends, and spending time with their children. They also teach them “*how to do house work, how to eat, play and how to behave in society (...), not to be extravagant and not to have bad behaviours,*” said a KI in LPB. Several key informants explained how educating children takes time and, “*if parents have no time, children can become badly behaved*”; parents in poor families were said to take the least care of children because “*they spend most time at work, therefore their children develop bad behaviour and become addicted, [and] drop out of school,*” explained a KI from XYB. To avoid that, some village headmen encourage parents to spend time with their children. Some also promote child protection education, which is said to result in better care practices, a reduction in violent discipline and child labor.

Parents are said to take care of children by themselves; nonetheless, village headmen and vice-headmen see it as their role “*to promote children’s parents to go to school and also advice parents to look after and take good care to children.*” (KIs XYB). When families in the village face problems with children or other difficulties headmen “*mobilize them to work hard and sometimes [we] mobilize other villagers to help them to build house and other some necessary*

things,” or “to donate money and send them to hospital” (KI XYB). They also “monitored closely if they [children] have any problems in their families: illness.” (KI LPB). An approach used by one village headman in XYB involved wealthier families sharing with poorer families their experiences and “ideas on how they support their children and encourage them to go to school and how to take care of them.”

There are also village organizers who cooperate with parents to look after children such as the LWU in the village. They encourage parents to “work hard [to offer] children better lives,” “to avoid using violence with children,” “to listen to their own children when they say something right,” and to encourage their children to go to school. Other supports may include the Youth Union, welfare unit, older association group, the village CPN, and the school. These groups monitor that caregivers look after children properly and educate community members about children’s rights, including the prevention of marriage before age 18 years and the use of violent discipline. The village development [committee], composed of 10 members who monitor the situation of children in the village, write reports to the village headman and to the committee of village developers describing “children education, development, and promotion [activities] for children to go to school” (KI, LPB). The role of international aid in child protection was also recognized, particularly through organizations that “come to help children’s lives in the district,” including the promotion of family planning.

Participation in household tasks and time to play and study are also part of children’s lives in the community. All young children in family-based care performed household chores (e.g., cooking rice, washing dishes, and feeding ducks and chicken), did homework alone or with a parent or sibling, and had time to play with friends. Demands on children’s time helping parents to work, however, may interfere with children’s schooling and time to study. Children often referred to alms giving as something that made them feel happy and safe.

School enrolment and attendance was identified by all age groups as a protective mechanism, particularly for ethnic minority children and economically deprived households. There are village authorities who meet with parents of five-year olds to guide them in regards to their children’s schooling. In some communities, children with disabilities are allowed to “learn with normal boys in class.” In contrast, in other communities, “education is a problem for children with disabilities because they cannot learn well like other children. Sometimes they go out of school without permission and teachers said that they were abnormal, not like other children so we can’t enroll them as students in the school,” explained a KI in LPB. Only one school for deaf children was identified; otherwise, villages have no school for children with disabilities.

The preservation of cultural practices was described as another factor contributing to good child care. KIs from LPB illustrated it this way: “For instance, the Khmu have festivals: the Hmong have the Kinjieng festival there is the crops festival after the harvesting has finished in January, [and] the Karlee celebration [Khmu new year]. For lowland ethnic groups, such as the Tai Phuan, [they] have more festivals in a year.. (...) Now those celebrations can be joined and villagers can visit other ethnic in return during celebrations. Besides, they have preserved those unique ways of celebration perfectly. Young people in the village also follow and preserve well their own traditions.” For example, during an “ethnic festival, they wear their traditional clothes as symbols, each ethnic can communicate in their dialects and they can understand them and can celebrate their traditional festival together happily.” Indeed, young children in

different communities chose images representing cultural practices such as dances, games (e.g., Hmong rattan ball), festivals (e.g., Lao Loum merit-making practices), and ethnic outfits as protective.

3. Differential treatment

Many participants indicated that all children are treated equally. Many others, however, indicated that not all children are treated the same. For example, while parents in some communities *“give love equally to both boys and girls”* and encourage them both to study, in others boys are more encouraged than girls because a boy *“can help his father at work”* and also because there are girls who prefer to help mothers with housework and weaving for selling than to continue studying after secondary education. Boys were also said to require more attention because, compared to girls, they more often *“disobey their parents”* and need further advice *“in order to avoid drug abuse.”* On the other hand, raising girls is also said to be more costly *“in terms of eating, wearing clothes, etc”*. While participants indicated that younger children receive more attention in terms of feeding, cleaning, etc, some young children complained of not getting enough food at home because *“older brothers and sisters take the food faster”* than them. Adoptive children and children who live with relatives do not always receive the same treatment than biological children in terms of getting enough food and clothes, and being required to work harder in household chores. The opposite situation was also described: *“Some family’s parents take more care of adopted child than their [biological] child because parents don’t want to hurt their feelings”* (KI XYB).

In some districts, differences were pointed out in terms of quality of care practices across ethno-cultural groups. Higher inequality among women and children in rural areas was also denounced. Quality of care was, however, often linked to wealth and family’s ability to meet children’s needs—*“In the past, Lao Loum ethnic groups took good care of their children rather than other ethnic groups. Nowadays, the Lao Theung ethnic groups can take good care of their kids too—those who have sufficient money to support them,”* shared participants in a FGD in LPB.

EMBS teachers indicated that all children are treated equally at the school as they *“have to follow the rules of the EMBS strictly”*. Although adolescents agreed with this assessment, they also indicated that some children do not receive sufficient care and some teachers *“don’t like minority”* [children], *“saying strong words”* to them. They also noted that younger children and girls are considered more vulnerable groups and thus receive more attention from teachers. Newcomers into the EMBSs may also receive more attention from teachers and leaders of student groups, who will take special care for them and teach them the Lao language. EMBS teachers also indicated providing extra care (e.g., learning approach and some appropriate facilities) to children with disabilities.

2. Children Without Parental Care

The second question that this study tried to answer was “how are decisions made regarding children (formal and informal) alternative care?” First of all, what circumstances lead parents to consider child separation, abandonment, or relinquishment, and who makes the decision (e.g., do children participate). Additionally, when choosing a modality of alternative care, what options do parents in XYB and LPB have, and what factors do they prioritize?

Finally, what are people's perceptions of family-based and residential care arrangements in the target provinces?

1. Circumstances Leading to Child Separation and Abandonment

Key informants raised concerns about the lack of accurate, up-to-date information on the prevalence of formal and informal alternative care in the country as well as an absence of systems *"to support either informal or formal care placements, and [the] many children [who] are often in a flux of both"* (KI online survey). They also noted (and we independently observed) general misunderstanding of the use of the term "orphan" to refer to separated and abandoned children regardless of the known living status of their biological parent(s) is widespread. For example, a KI in LPB described the case of *"two orphans in the village because their parents left them to go to [another] province, and their children didn't want to leave, so they sent them to live with relatives."* This finding is consistent with prior research by UNICEF which documented *"terminological confusion since two Lao words ('khampa': single orphan) and ('khampoy': double orphan) are often used indiscriminately to describe double orphans, single orphans and children in single parent families due to divorce or separation"* (MoLSW, MoPH, & UNICEF, 2004, p. 6).

When asked about observed changes regarding child care and particularly their placement away from the parental home in the last decade, survey respondents indicated that either the situation seemed stable over the years or that it is on the increase due to (a) rural to urban population movements and the resettlement of villages; (b) lack of funds to support children's basic needs and education; (c) a reduction in slash and burn cultivation (which makes families have to work away from their home for extended periods of time); and (d) increasing numbers of at risk children on the streets or in centers in urban/semi urban areas.

Aside parental death, KIs and respondents to our online survey indicated having at least some evidence that parents separate from or abandon their children in Lao P.D.R. due to any of the following circumstances: (a) material poverty or inability of parents to care of (all) their children; (b) access to education or healthcare; (c) employment of parent or child (including seasonal or migratory work); (d) birth out of wedlock; (e) physical or mental disability of parent or child; (f) natural disasters; (g) children running away from home (e.g., due to domestic violence or substance use); and (h) outsiders taking away children on promises of better living conditions, employment, or other opportunities. A few cases of youth under 18 years of age migrating for work domestically or to Thailand were described; some companies reportedly did not accept them due to being under age, yet others offered them "heavy work" (e.g., at a rubber plantation, sawmill factory, or doing road work). Some children never came back home. Similarly, family separation occurs when parents take on migrant work (particularly in Thailand), leaving their children in the care of grandparents or other relatives.

Parents hope that, by sending their children to residential care, they will later get a job and then be able to go back to the village. The expectation of EMBS in supporting economic and social mobility of ethnic minority children is a frequent claim (Faming, 2012). The decision to send a child to an EMBS is generally made by the parents (and relatives)—oftentimes in consultation with the children, the head of the village, and the District official from the Department of Education (Figure 2). Some children are said to make the decision by

themselves and some headmen insisted in obtaining the agreement of the child before sending him/her to the 'orphanage school': *"parents have to ask children [if they] want to go to live in orphanage school; parents can't force them to leave home,"* said a KI in LPB. Likewise, the LWU promotes consulting with children before sending them to an SOS Children's Village (SOSCV). According to KIs, in some communities there was no child who wanted to go to an EMBS, so the quota was not filled. One adolescent in family-based care, for example, shared that he was *"afraid that if I go to school, I will not have friends to play with me and no food to eat."* Some parents resisted to sending children to an EMBS if they do not have other children to help at home. In contrast, demand is high in other locations but, according to one KI, insufficient schools and late announcement resulted in some children in rural areas not being able to apply for admission on time--*"Some children in villages in remote areas can't come because they did not receive [the] announcement."*

2. Alternative Care Arrangements

a. Kinship Care and Care by Non-Relatives in Family-Based Settings

KIs in some of the districts indicated that few children live with their relatives yet in other areas this practice is more common. Children are mostly sent with relatives for education (mostly secondary school, but also to study English in LPB during school vacation) and when *"parents can't look after children."* When parents cannot care for their children (e.g., due to poverty or if a single parent is in jail), they may send them to live with relatives *"until they can go to vocational ethnic school."* Relatives provide accommodation, while children's parents may send money to buy food, clothes, and study and sports materials. Other times, children are said to *"borrow money from other people or [from] relatives."* Family size and economic status may determine parental separation. A KI from LPB explained it this way: *"For big families who have more children, parents have to work hard share love to all children equally, they couldn't support them all and it is necessary for parents to send their children to live with other families being adopted children."*

Grandparents raising children when (young) parents are not capable of doing it or if parents pass away, was described in many settings. In some cases, children are left with grandparents permanently while their parents work away—*"There was one family [that] went to work to Thailand and one girl [who] married a Thai boy but she came back to give birth in Laos and left her child with parents and she went back to Thailand again"* (KI LPB). One survey respondent shared his concern that in rural communities, some children are spending extensive time away from their parents due to long distances to farm land, *"particularly for those that may be involved in opium cultivation."* A similar situation was described with parents who go out and live *"at the animal farm (sanum), leaving children at home [alone for 2 or 3 days]"* (KI XYB). There are communities in which one out of 3 or 4 families experience parental separation due to work. Some cases of children going away by themselves upon completion of primary school to work elsewhere (within Laos or in Thailand) were also described in both provinces. Few children are said to live under the care of non-relatives.



"They did not invite me to discuss"

At 9 years of age, Donh left his village with his brother and moved to an ethnic minority boarding school away from the district where they had grown up and where their family and friends still lived. His father had passed away some years earlier-and his mother and maternal grandparents had difficulty raising them, including ensuring access to education. *"A relative of my father told my grandparents to send my brother and me here. My mother, grandparents and relatives made the decision. They did not invite me to discuss. My grandmother told me the decision. I felt sad because I did not want to come here. (...) At the beginning, I missed my family [and] wanted to go back home. I did not want to stay here."*

After they moved to the school, their mother remarried. Whenever they would have money to pay for transport to go back home, they would stay with their grandparents, and work in the fields or care for his mother's new baby. So, *"after a year, I decided to stay [at the EMBS]. The teacher and friends talked to me a lot... (...) I prefer to stay here than in the village because if I go there, I do not have father or mother."*

Figure 2 Child in Residential Care/EMBS

Child separation also occurs in cases of divorce. Articles 20-25 of the Family Law (PSA, 1990) are devoted to divorce and remarriage. Both husband and wife can ask for a divorce for any of the nine reasons listed in Art. 20. Among those, a KI in LPB underscored adultery and drug consumption by husbands, and gaming (e.g., playing cards or lottery) and adultery by wives. The law indicates that, to protect the interests of children, the court must formulate measures, including child custody and support if husband and wife do not agree on their own (art. 23). Husbands are banned from asking for divorce while his wife is pregnant or if they have a child who has not yet reached the age of one year (Art. 22). According to participants, in case of parental separation and divorce, children often prefer to stay with the mother; however, *"if the mother is not good, children can choose and move to live with the father or relatives who they like to live with."* Other children may prefer to stay with grandparents or to live alone.

Like in the past, orphan children are generally cared for by relatives and, when these are not available, the village authority takes care of them. Nowadays, they may be sent to SOS Children's Villages and EMBSs. Village heads must also appoint guardians for abandoned children or incompetent individuals from among their close relatives or from other individuals (arts. 43-44, (PSA, 1990). They may also be given up for adoption. When children

are orphaned and their relatives cannot take care of them or when parents are unable to provide for their own children, particularly in remote areas, children are said to be *“accepted to be adopted permanently.”* When a couple cannot have their own children, they may also try to adopt. Whereas some KIs indicated that no one had come to ask for children in their village to be adopted child, other KIs in both provinces said that some people (non-relatives) *“from other villages come to ask for children to live [with] them because they have no children.”* *“They gave money to the relatives of the child and took the child away,”* oftentimes discussing the adoption orally and not signing any documents. More generally, one KI from LPB explained how these practices changed across ethno-cultural groups and over time in this regard:

“In the past, some lowland ethnic families brought children from different ethnic families to be adopted child, and also Hmong ethnic families used to ask for child from relatives to be adopted child and there was no problem. For Khmu ethnic families whose families can’t give birth, they also ask for other families to have adopted child. (...) For adopted child, Hmong ethnic [families] usually come to ask for children from lowland ethnic and Khmu ethnic to have their adopted children. (...) Before 1975, villagers believed in superstition that when a lady gave birth, baby brought unlucky symbol for parents if they kept that child with them or parents would die. On the other hand, when they have many children, they can send to their relatives to take care.”

Children born in a hospital and brought home “to be a child” were also reported. “If a person wants to adopt a child, they can leave their contact info with the hospital. Hospital will call if there are mothers who do not want babies and call these contacts who will come, fill out paperwork and receive a baby. There is no checking up to ensure the child is going to a good home/family.” To date, the lack of a national policy on adoption may explain that adoption is sometimes formalized with “permission notes,” letters, or “documents from doctor, village headman and judge.” Frequently, though, there is only an informal agreement between adoptive and biological parents or relatives—“They just asked the parents of the child, organized the baci [string-tying ceremony] for mother and child... and got the child.” Some of the limitations of not following the procedures outlines in the law (Figure 3) were outlined by one participant who explained how “some of adopted children become good children, they receive good care, have high education, get good job, and are successful in their lives. In these cases, when their child is brought up with other families as a little child, their parents who gave birth have no right to call him/her as their child or they have to devote the right as fatherhood [i.e., renounce to parental rights].” A common use of the term “adoption” to refer to informal fostering is widespread. Whereas this reflects lack of awareness of these procedures in the communities visited, strict compliance with the confidentiality requirement, or infrequent formalization of adoption needs further study.

b. Residential care: Orphanages and Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools

Whenever parents are not able or available, most children are cared for by relatives and other community members. Some children, however, are sent to institutions either on a permanent basis (SOSCV) or during the school year (EMBS) until they complete their education. Confusion about the different types of residential care institutions exists among the public. For example, the term “orphanage” can be found in the official name of an EMBS and orphanages are described as institutions for children whose parent(s) have died or

whose families are poor. Moreover, there is a policy vacuum on this regard (e.g., guidelines and standards of residential care). Lack of detailed information about the background of children in institutions was pointed out by KIs. The fact that institutions depend from different Ministries (e.g., SOSCVs depend from the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW) whereas EMBSs depend from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)) adds further complexity. A residential facility operated by the Ministry of Public Security (MoPS) in Vientiane was not included in the study as it was outside of its geographical scope.

Articles 37-42 and 51 of the Family Law (1990, revised 2008) are dedicated to the adoption of children. It indicates that adoption ends all rights and obligations from family of origin and adopted children are to be treated as biological children (Art. 37). Adoptive parents may change the adopted child's first name "if deemed inappropriate"; the child consent will be needed for children 10 years of age or older. Adoptive parents may also request that the adopted child uses their family name (Art. 40).

Before the adoption, both the child's parents and adopting parents must provide written consent (except if the former "have been withdrawn their parental rights or have been recognized as unable of act or as disappeared"). Although the law indicates that "adopted children must be under age" (art 38), the law later requires their consent "if such children reach the age of eighteen," creating some confusion as to whether all adopted children need to voice their agreement with adoption when they reach 18 years of age (regardless of whether the relationship has been in existence for some time) or if individuals who are not under age can actually be adopted too. Disclosing a child's without the adoptive parents' or the registrar officers' consent is considered a criminal offense (Family Law, Art. 40).

Adoption procedures involve a request made by prospective adopting parents to the village administrative committee within less than one month of the intended adoption (art. 39). The Family Registration Law (1991) further details that "after the village chief issues approval for the adoption, such must be sent to the Family Registration official for registration within 3 days, and thereafter the Adoption Certificate is to be issued to the adoptive parents" (Art. 14). "Relations between adoptive parents and adopted children arise from the day the adoption is registered" (Family Law, Art. 41).

The Revised Family Law does not indicate the legal procedures for foreign citizens to adopt Lao children. Article 51 only indicates that foreign citizens who want to adopt Lao children must be "authorized by the competent authorities of the Lao People's Democratic Republic." On February 20, 2012, the GOL suspended these authorizations until appropriate regulations and procedures are established on inter-country adoption (USDS, 2012). The Lao P.D.R. is not party to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of inter-countrv Adoption (1993).

Figure 3 Adoption in Lao P.D.R. Law

- **SOS Children's Villages**

SOS Children's Villages of Laos was established in February 1993 by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and SOS-Kinderdorf-Vereins (SOS Children's Villages), a not-for-profit organization funded in 1949 in Austria by Hermann Gmeiner. The organization is chaired by the MoLSW and has representatives from other government ministries on the Board (i.e., MoES, and Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Health, and Information, Culture, and Tourism). The first SOSCV opened up in Vientiane in 1994. At present in Lao P.D.R. there are over 1000 children in six SOS Children's Villages (Luang Prabang, Pakse, Samneua, Savannakhet, Vientiane, and Xiengkhouang), five SOS Youth Facilities, six SOS Kindergartens, five SOS Hermann Gmeiner-Schools, one SOS Vocational Training Centre, three SOS-Social Centres and one SOS-Medical Centre. A National Director oversees the work of all these centres and serves as a link with other national associations and the umbrella SOSCV International. While this study focuses on children in residential care in one of the six SOSCVs (privately financed), children from the surrounding community attend schools and daycare centres. Funding from outside of Laos is supplemented with local income for school fees for children living in an SOSCV as well as children living in the community.

Children whose parents have passed away (double orphans) or single parent cannot care for them (e.g., due to handicap) may live in the village since birth. Age is estimated whenever birth certificates are not available. The child's relatives or surviving parent need to apply to the local authority up to the MoLSW. SOSCV will do an investigation into the case, including visits to the village and the family. With the agreement of their relatives, siblings may be brought together to the village. The village authority, who takes care of children who have no parents, asks children before they leave their families whether they are happy to attend the school.

Each of the six SOS Children's Villages in Lao P.D.R. consists of 10-14 brick houses in which one adult female caregiver (referred to internally as "Mother") lives with approximately 10-11 children from diverse provinces and ethno-cultural groups. The mothers are single women who take on the responsibility of caring for and educating children "like real mothers", providing them with emotional, instrumental, advice, and other types of support. Besides supervising and providing advice to staff and children, the role of the Village Director also includes caring for children (e.g., when they are sick). The transition of caregivers is not always easy. According to some children adjusting to a new mother (e.g., if the previous one gets married and resigns, and a new one moves in) can be difficult. For caretakers, the main difficulties include dealing with disobedient children, caring for all children in their care at once (particularly when one of them is sick or requires special attention), and not being able to leave the village often.

Both boys and girls live in each house, although they sleep in separate bedrooms (2-6 children per room, often in bunk beds). Children are grouped by sex and age (e.g., one room for younger girls and another one for teenage girls). The Mothers have their own separate bedroom in the house. Girls generally stay in the house until they come off age and sometimes after that if they are not financially independent (e.g., if they are pursuing further studies). At age 14 years, boys are sent to live in a youth house, where the mothers visit them twice per month. Following consultation with their mothers and successful examination results, some children move out of the village to attend vocational school, college, or university. Still others take on jobs or become novices. They may all visit the village after they leave.

Children assist with household chores such as cleaning the house and washing clothes, following a rotating schedule of tasks established by the mother. Some activities are done as a group (e.g., cleaning village grounds). Most of the cooking is done by the mothers, yet children aged 10 years and older often accompany the mother to the market and cook. Breakfast (7:00am) consists of egg with sticky rice and condiment. Lunch (around noon) and dinner (7:00pm) consist of fried vegetables, meat or fish, and rice. The village provides for all the needs of children, including food, clothes, educational materials, among others.

All children attend school, located on the village grounds. Given closeness to their homes, children may walk by themselves or with friends, although mothers also accompany them. After school, children enjoy playing sports in the schoolyard (e.g., football, pétanque, kick volley-ball (sepak takraw), etc) or other activities such as a sewing and art. In the evening, before dinner, all children gather together for (Buddhist) prayer. Before going to sleep, children are required to finish their homework, which they do with the assistance of the older children in their house.

Fixed routine, discipline, and punctuality are emphasized at the village. Younger children are perceived to need more attention and care than adolescents. This is partly due to their difficulty with language, since newcomers often do not speak Lao; this results in slow adjustment and relationship building in some cases. According to caregivers, some children also display signs of malnutrition, lack of hygiene, and homesickness upon arrival, yet they recover steadily by joining in school meals and activities, and playing sports. Children are not allowed to go back home or to leave the premises without their Mother/staff's permission and/or company. Children's relatives are allowed to visit them at the village up to four times a year. However, school staff estimates that only about 2-3 % of relatives do it, allegedly due to distance and cost of transportation. They often bring gifts to the children such as food and clothes. Village headmen are also reported to follow-up with children.

- **Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools**

According to the Division of Ethnic Education of the MoES, in 2012-2013, there are three EMBS in LPB province (XiengNgeurn, Nambak, and LPB Districts) with 1056 students (61% boys), and one EMBS in XYB province with 495 students (54% boys). In 2010-2011, there were 27 EMBS in the country and almost 9,000 children (64% boys) attending school there. Children are referred to EMBSs on a quota-based system. About 70-100 new students are registered per year in each EMBS, mostly children from economically disadvantaged families. Figure 4 the recruitment process followed. Sending children to EMBS or vocational school requires parental agreement; children are sometimes consulted. *"In the case of some families that are poor and do not have enough food to eat,"* some participants in LPB explained, *"then children decided by themselves to go to those schools."* Children are often sent to EMBS at 9-11 years of age; some children may remain into their early twenties as they complete their education. While in some years, villages propose more children than the capacity of the district, other years there are not enough candidates. The government aims to set up at least one EMBS per province so that many children may benefit from schooling there.

Criteria identified by the MoES for eligibility to attend an EMBS include: 1) poverty; 2) orphanhood; and 3) divorced parents. Poverty is assessed either using Lao government/UN definitions or villages can also identify and certify by themselves that a family meets the

poverty requirement. These criteria are not revised annually. Divorce was not mentioned by KIs in the institutions visited; they, in turn, listed belonging to an ethno-cultural group, and originating from an off-road rural/remote area and/or a large family as criteria for student selection. A misunderstanding was observed among interviewees, who often considered EMBSs as housing only one ethno-cultural group and/or orphan children. Sometimes referred to as “orphanages”, EMBSs are actually not restricted to orphan children. In fact, the large majority of children in EMBSs do have living parent(s) and relatives. Estimates provided at the institutions visited reveal that the proportion of orphan children was low at approximately 15% of all children in the EMBS visited, and there were even fewer double orphans (2.5-3% of all children). Orphanhood status is not collected systematically at the central level.

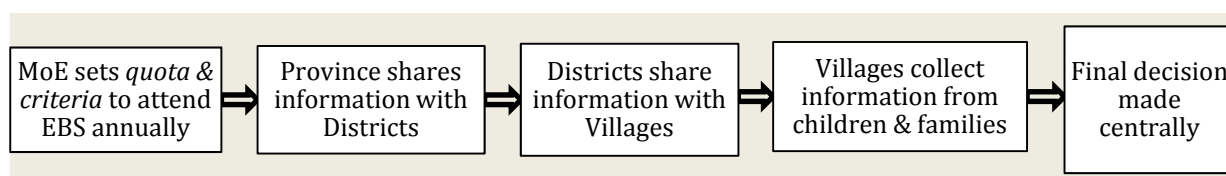


Figure 4 Recruitment Process to attend EMBS

Children visit their families during school vacation (once or twice per year, sometimes once every two years) and, if their family lives nearby, they may visit on weekends too and, thus, bring some food. Some children receive visits from their parents, who may also bring them food; others rarely receive news from their parents. Some children maintain contact with their families by phone, either by calling themselves or, for younger children, teachers do it for them. Transportation costs largely determine children’s ability to travel. Orphan children may also stay in school during the vacation period. Teachers at one of the EMBS visited indicated that some children do not want to visit their homes “because in the EMBS they get warm support” or “because they have their relatives in those areas (...) to support them.”

The EMBSs visited ranged in size and diversity between 500-630 children (of whom about half live in a dormitory) and 3-8 ethno-cultural groups. Children come from different districts within the province and at times from outside of the province. Some EMBSs admit children from nearby villages to attend school only. EMBSs follow the MoES standard curricula and use Lao as the language of instruction, although children may speak other languages after class. Additionally, some EMBSs offer different activities with donations received from agencies and individuals (e.g., the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) supports vocational training in some sites in Vientiane Province). The government of Laos (GOL) provides most of the funding to support EMBSs, including building construction as well as operating funds. The amount of government allowance per child per month has been raised to 200,000LAK (approximately 25USD). This covers mostly food and some clothing and toiletries. Delayed payments sometimes pose difficulties to managers, who may have to take advances (e.g., from teachers who supply the school with chickens). Some EMBSs have habilitated surrounding land where they grow a vegetable garden and raise animals (fish, goat, chicken). Sewing/tailoring and can selling generate additional income. A rotating system is in place in several sites that allows a group of children to earn some extra income through cultivation of this land and sale of the produce to the school kitchen (e.g., 60,000LAK for 40Kg of vegetables (or lunch & dinner for one month) = 8 USD). Otherwise, children are not allowed to take up employment to raise extra funds.

The main caregivers of children in EMBSs are teachers, both male and female. Wherever available, nurses also take care of children. Generally, one unmarried teacher is responsible for each dormitory (normally gender matched); teachers rotate during day and night (e.g., two teachers are assigned each day to monitor children in the dorms, and another two to supervise the evening study) and receive a monetary incentive for taking care of children at night. A student/teacher ratio of 60/1 is common during the academic year. In one of the EMBSs visited, teachers were said to keep a notebook to keep track of students going in and out. Overall, children described receiving good care from teachers and friends. Children and adults described instances of teachers caring for children when they were sick, providing food, clothes, medicines, and taking them to the hospital. Paying for healthcare and medical operations were often described as difficult (70% of cost of treatment to be covered by children and 30% by the school). Teachers also coach students to clean the rooms, do gardening, etc and teach them *“about life outside of the EMBS”* and *“to help each other within and outside of the family.”*

Generally about 14-20 children sleep in one bedroom (some dormitories are cramped), with separate buildings for boys and girls; some buildings have two floors. Concrete/brick or wood are used for construction. The number of bedrooms varies by institution; within the same sex, groups are created according to age and grade/classroom. Adult supervisors often occupy a nearby room. School administrators select older, responsible children *“with good attitude and school results”* to keep order in the room. Children generally sleep in wooden bunk beds dressed with a mat, a blanket and a pillow. Some EMBS, however, have raised wood platforms on which mats are permanently extended rather than bunk beds. In general, children and families are responsible for clothing and school materials. However some children arrive *“only with their own pair of clothes,”* explained EMBS staff, *“the school had to buy new clothes for them. They did not have a sleeping mat, mosquito net, mattress, [or] blanket.”* Children store their personal possessions in bags under, over, or on their beds. Sleep time is between 9pm and 5am. Photographs of these types of dormitories as well as ethnic traditional outfits and practices, and alms-giving ceremonies were selected by young children in EMBS to represent things and places that made them feel good and safe. Like young children in family-based care, images of rubbish, adults yelling at children, children fighting or doing hard work made them feel bad and unsafe.-Children generally play within the compound and engage in cleaning and other household chores too. Activities in the school include dance, singing, painting, and sports (e.g., football, rattan ball, and basketball). In one of the EMBSs visited, all students participate in cleaning the school together two-days per week under the guidance of teachers.

From the perspective of adults, the main challenges regarding child care include: (a) communication and management of cultural diversity (particularly for ethnic minority children); (b) fighting and disobeying school rules (e.g., school attendance); (c) sexual interactions and teenage pregnancy; (d) resistance of some caregivers to send girls to school instead of keeping them at home to care for the family; and (e) children’s resistance to come back to school after they visit their families during weekends or vacations. Adaptation to the school is particularly difficult for young children, who often miss their families and lack familiarity with school and language.

Adolescents mentioned insufficient food, clothing, and school and hygiene materials, as well as stealing of personal property in the dormitories as difficult aspects of living at the EMBS.

In the EMBSs visited, breakfast was not provided—“*[we] don't have breakfast; [we] buy bread, sometimes eat glutinous rice cake (bread is a donation) or fruit*,” explained 8-12 year olds in one of the EMBS. In some cases, no functional dining room exists either, thus obliging children to collect the food at the kitchen and eat in their dormitory. Some children get food from their families, others cultivate the vegetable garden and sell the produce to earn money they then use to buy food, clothing, and other necessities. Some children borrow money from teachers. Lunch at the EMBS is served at noon everyday and dinner at 5:00-6:00 pm and they consist mostly of soup, vegetables, rice, pepper sauce, and a little meat, egg, or fish. Menus change every day and meals are generally prepared by teachers or cooks although adolescents sometimes cook their own breakfasts under the supervision of a teacher.

c. Buddhist monasteries

Several of the communities visited do not have temples and/or novices at the temple. Temple boys (sangkarlee watt) are not present in these communities because, in the words of KI from XYB, “*the temple is a place used for worship.*” Some of these communities practice Buddhism, though, and monks from neighboring towns are invited on occasion to bless and celebrate important life transitions. Young children in all groups selected photographs of child novices and monk schools among the images that represent safety and positive feelings.

Children in LPB and XYB become novices starting at age 8-13 years though mostly when they are 10 years old. They stay at the monastery for variable amounts of time, ranging from one week to 2-6 months (e.g., “*when they are in school holiday*”) and, often for 2-4 years or until they complete their (secondary) education. People with disabilities cannot be novices. At age 20, children choose whether to ordain as monks (only some will do) or to go back to their communities as lay people; if they are not ready to ordain, they may also remain as novices. The decision to join a monastery is made by parents, grandparents, and other relatives in conversation with the head of the temple; at times, children are consulted. On occasion, children request to be sent to a temple. In communities without school for monks, boys “who really intend to be monks” may go to formal school with other children. Temples are often selected by proximity to parental or relative residence or taking into consideration siblings who stay or have stayed there before. The number of novices varies significantly, with some temples not having any and others having more than 50 novices at once. However, data on the total number of children living in temples was not available for this study.

The reasons given for children to become novices include access to education (study at ‘monk school’ or regular school in the community) (Figure 5); bettering life (for orphan children and poor families, since they do not need to buy clothes and food is provided by the community); gratitude to parents and merit gaining (e.g., for deceased parent or grandparent, for relief of ‘bad things’, or for future life); character building (e.g., improving their habits if they are not obedient or if they are naughty); or to relax during vacation. Access to schooling and food donations were the benefits to children more frequently mentioned. Quietness, solidarity among temple residents, and strong community support were also praised. Change in novices was most often described as “*to a positive way*” [Ado EMBS-LPB 25-Jan], loving and appreciating parents, and becoming gentle and a “*good person*”. In contrast, no change was noticed by other young participants. Novices are taught discipline and strict practice at the temple, Dhamma theory and practice, and subjects such as Mathematics, Geography, History of Laos, Lao language, English, and computers.



"In the future, I have to have education"

Some years ago, when he was 11 years old, Jacky's parents decided to send him to a nearby temple. *"We are farmers and we don't have money to support children to go to school. My family is very poor,"* he explained. His father had barely completed primary school and his mother had no formal education. Having more than a handful of children, they knew that it would be difficult to support them all through their education. So two of their sons moved to a local temple, and later to another one. *"This is an important place because everyone who comes to the province comes here to vow and pray, (...) people believe in it. I feel happy that this place was established,"* he would later praise.

His parents and teachers transmitted the value of education. *"I love to study [and] never miss a class. (...) In the future, if I want to develop myself, I have to study, to have education."* Most novices later get married and start a family, some may continue to study and become monks. He does not know yet what he will do. He misses his parents, mostly when he is sick but once a year, if he gets transportation, he visits his family back at the village. And when he is sick, the head monk and his friends take care of him. *"We love each other. When we need help, we help each other."*

Figure 5 Child in Buddhist Monastery

Many monks and fellow novices, including children's siblings whenever present, take care of children while in the temple. Indeed, life-lasting relationships were described to emerge during the period of novice hood. The leader of the temple and other monks provide advice and other types of support to novices. Nonetheless, diversity of backgrounds of novices; limited resources to provide food, clothing, and study materials; and providing emotional support and counseling to children [who may miss their families of origin] pose challenges to caregiving monks, who were not always aware of novices' family circumstances (e.g., their orphanhood status); this may be either because they did not inquire (to avoid stirring children's emotions) or because children chose not to share family issues. Whenever a novice falls sick, the monk supervisor will care for him. If the novice does not have money, relatives will be asked to help. If unable to do so, the leader of the monastery will find a car to take the novice to the hospital and to cover the cost of treatment. Donations by the community (e.g., alms giving of daily food and individual donations to the temple) and ceremonies celebrated in people's homes provide the necessary funds to cover monks' and

novices' expenses. Some novices have "second parents" in the community, believers who provide material support and advice to the novice as needed. Nonetheless, funds for transportation are not always available, thus preventing some novices from visiting their families living far away.

Among the most challenging aspects of living in a temple, there are strict rules particularly the rule of not eating after noon. Nonetheless, one ex-novice explained that after a year, this is not difficult anymore. *"The less you eat and the slower you eat, the sooner you feel satiated,"* he explained. Other difficulties include missing and limited interactions with family, lack of money for transportation (to visit family), and learning Dhamma and Pali language.

d. Children living in the streets

According to participants, none of the communities visited had children living on the streets. Similarly, in the case of 'truants' and children who drop out of school, the LWU is said to contact the relevant authorities in their village to reunite them with their families.

3. Perceived Effects of Child Care Situations on Child Wellbeing

Young children often selected photographs of happy, loving families to represent what makes them feel good and safe, and indicated that they saw this in their families, neighborhoods, and communities. Overall, children are described to receive good care from parents, who provide for their needs and teach them *"to be in good behavior for the community."* Some families, however, have limited resources, are illiterate, and/or lack safe practices of hygiene, supervision, and communication. Thus, young children often showed concern about dirtiness—"in my house, we have a lot of rubbish", accidents (e.g., if playing near a road or river), and violence (fighting, yelling, or hitting at home and school). Lack of parental time and support may also result in children dropping out of school, engaging in drugs and other socially undesirable behaviors, and/or *"not wanting to live with parents"*. In consequence, wealthier and smaller families are perceived to provide better care. This also explains participants' generalized belief that children in residential care cannot go back to their parents unless they have *"finished their study and have a job"* or they originate from *"middle and better-off families."*

Overall, participants agreed that it is better for children to be cared by their parents. Whenever this is not possible, children are cared for by other people in family-based or residential settings. Experiences of care vary, however. In the case of kinship orphan care, sometimes siblings are sent to live with different relatives and/or they do not receive adequate food or enough support. For children given up for adoption to families overseas, absence of *"formal checks conducted in-country on adoptive families by Lao authorities"* until inter-country adoptions were interrupted in 2012 were also matter of concern to KIs. In contrast, relatives and unrelated local villagers may become *"second parents,"* providing different types of support to orphan children and children living away from their parents. Thus, there were testimonies that children living with relatives, such as grandparents, receive good care, *"like their own children,"* and are encouraged to go to school. Children living with their families are said to behave better and to *"relate politely to elder people"* whereas children in schools learn to speak differently and *"become more responsible on their own"*(KI XYB).

For children sent to institutions, a KI in XYB indicated “that the school is better [than the family] because there are facilities for them such as: accommodation, food and school has regulation for children and there are people who work in the school and are on duty from morning to evening.” In fact, several participants indicated that teachers in school take better care of children than parents because they “were trained on how to look after children.” To the point that, in the words of one KI from XYB, some “children really want to leave home.” EMBSs provide children with food, accommodation, schooling, healthcare/hospital, and utilities (i.e., water and electricity). Adolescents in EMBSs praised the opportunity to study and to make new friends; they also said that teachers take good care of children in the EMBS.

Of particular concern in institutional care settings is the lack of follow-up and ongoing assessment of the placement, and variables standards of care. Some adolescents in residential care indicated not receiving sufficient care (young children are said to receive more attention) or having enough contact with their parents. Generally, children (may) visit their parents once a year; whereas in some cases this is not possible due to lack of funds for transportation, cases of children not wanting “*to visit their own village and their own families*” were described too. Children with relatives nearby may also visit their families every weekend. In some communities, few or no children are sent to EMBSs because “they just heard that in the school, children were fed poorly,” (e.g., breakfast is not provided) and/or that “*living in dormitory is difficult because there are many students,*” said KIs in LPB. Great variation exists in the state of facilities and resources available across EMBSs (e.g., non-functional toilets in some cases yet new dormitory construction in others). Concerns over the “*quality of care and the lack of psychosocial support for children*” were also voiced by survey respondents. According to EMBS teachers, insufficient food and homesickness have a negative impact on children’s health and school performance. This is compounded by some children from ethnic minority groups not speaking Lao upon arrival and strict rules (e.g., in regards to eating, studying, and sleeping) also add to the difficulty of adaptation. The vulnerability of teenagers to sexual abuse and exploitation was also of concern to some KIs. Some children are reported to drop out of school and walk back home without informing the Principal, and even threaten to commit suicide if the teacher does not send them back to their families.

4. Preventing Child Separation, Abandonment, and Relinquishment

Participants in individual and group interviews and online survey were asked to reflect on ways to help parents and families to prevent child separation, abandonment, and relinquishment. Proposals were made in order to support and eventually increase the capacity of parents and families to care for children. First of all, participants highlighted the need to support parents to overcome poverty so that they can provide for their children’s basic needs, education and healthcare. In general, parents have high appreciation for education yet many are unable to support their children to complete their upper secondary schooling and/or to continue with higher education and vocational training. To achieve that end, proposals were made for the GOL to establish secondary schools at the village level; provide textbooks, computers, sport equipment, and school uniforms; and allocate scholarships to children upon completion of lower and upper secondary education. In EMBS, requests were made to increase the monthly allowance per child (e.g., from 200,000LAK to

250,000LAK). It is also important to facilitate regular contact of children in residential care with their families. A KI in XYB expressed it this way:

“We have to educate poorer people to be active and sometimes we can help them with materials. A provincial organization has aimed to help people to get out of poverty as soon as possible. For children in orphanage, they can go back to visit their hometown, and visit [their] father or mother, for those who still have them. (...) We would like to have information we can use to educate people in village organization. And also we want to educate village authority to understand how to look after children the right way.”

Indeed, besides material support, participants mentioned the need to improve parenting through education on children’s rights, the importance of keeping children in the family, and appropriate ways to discipline children. In the words of another KI: *“All villagers have to be called in and educate them on children’s rights, child trafficking, and child labor. Call parents to educate them to talk to children and to seek any opportunity to return children home.”*

Systems are needed to monitor progress in those areas. In some communities, an internal reporting system is in place already. For example, in the words of a KI from XYB: *“The village child protection committee sends report about child protection in the village. The process of reporting is however, still with hierarchy. First the village committee sends the report to village authority together with students’ parents association and report to the village group.”*

Conclusions

Strong kinship and community ties in Lao P.D.R. result in extended families and neighbours generally taking in children of relatives who are unable to provide care for them or to house them in urban centres while they complete their education. Some village authorities mobilize their members to provide material assistance to vulnerable children and families. Buddhist monasteries provide food, shelter, and education to boys, mostly from deprived families in remote rural areas. This limits the number of abandoned children in the country yet it does not prevent parental separation.

Material poverty, parental divorce or death, employment, and family size are also factors leading to children being separated from their parents, whether through ‘informal’ or ‘formal’ adoption or institutionalization. Moreover, they may also hinder family reunification because parents, particularly those with many children, cannot support them all. This study documented parents’ hope that, by sending their children to residential care, they will later get a job that will allow them to go back to the village. As Phanjaruniti (1994) documented two decades ago, children may also be separated from their parents at the request of a childless couple from the same or a different family, community, and ethnic group. Parents’ lack of time to provide adequate care for their children and differential treatment of children within the family de facto remains across ethno-cultural groups. These results resonate with prior assessments in the country (MoLSW et al., 2004; Phanjaruniti, 1994; SCI, 2012).

Given the fast social and economic changes that the country is undergoing, phenomena found in more urban and industrialized settings such as drug abuse and children abandoned, trafficked, or living and working in the streets may become more common in Lao P.D.R too (NCCM, MPI, & UNICEF, 2011). Existing welfare services and residential institutions will

need to be reconsidered to respond to evolving needs and keeping in mind that strengthening families and supporting community-based responses have the potential to reach a much larger number of children and at a lower cost. Family and community interventions should build on positive networks and already functional solutions. Most notably, the important role of Buddhist temples in caring for vulnerable children and promoting child protection more broadly remains underexplored. For the few cases who cannot be cared in a family setting, a few remaining institutions should offer quality care and regular monitoring of care placements.

In order to develop successful policies and strategies for child care and protection, attention should be paid to discrepancies documented in this and other studies (MoLSW et al., 2004) between caregivers and children who would like children to remain in their hometowns, and parents, government officials and service providers who endorse institutional care to care for children from poor households. This is further compounded by a dearth of reliable, disaggregated data and monitoring systems, and pervasive confusion about core terms and procedures.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed based on the findings from this study:

- **Develop child-sensitive social assistance programs to improve the livelihoods of families and to prevent the need for alternative care**

In strengthening care systems, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) emphasizes the importance of preventing the need for the alternative care of children as well as providing quality care whenever it is required. Guideline No. 14 clearly indicates that financial and material poverty *“should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care, for receiving a child into alternative care, or for preventing his/her reintegration, but should be seen as a signal for the need to provide appropriate support to the family.”* Child-sensitive policies promoting equity and poverty reduction have the potential to reduce out-of-home placements. In collaboration with international agencies, non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, and community-based organizations, the GOL should implement family support services and income-generating opportunities to ensure that all households have access to basic needs and services, including medical care and education. For example, abolishing formal and informal school fees (while providing block grants to schools)–and providing transportation from villages to the closest urban centre would facilitate school attendance while preventing separation. Preparing youth to leave the parental home and to make informed decisions about their future, including planning before marriage or having a baby, would help prevent family breakdown later on. Limiting the development of residential care options and restricting their use to those situations where it is absolutely necessary would also prevent caregiver separations.

- **Advocate for and strengthen community-based care and protection measures for orphans and vulnerable children**

Concurring with prior assessments in the country (MoLSW et al., 2004), this study found frequent endorsement of institutional care as a valid way to care for orphan children and children from poor households. This contradicts the principles and provisions of the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), to which the Lao P.D.R. is party. Advocacy efforts are thus needed with decision-makers at all levels to educate on the benefits of community-based alternatives for child-care and protection and the limitations of institutional care. Simultaneously, the MoLSW should promote comprehensive, community-based services such as kinship care, adoption, and family support services, which are needed to prevent institutionalization and to reunite children with their families. The initiative of some villages setting up funds to help poor families and orphans illustrate positive solidarity and community networks that are worth supporting. The MoLSW should ensure that a CPN exists in each village and that a budget line is secured to make them an effective child protection mechanism for public education and service delivery in the community.

- **Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the MoLSW, the MoES, and the MoPS, and strengthen collaboration between all agencies working in the alternative care of children**

This study documented some confusion about the eligibility criteria and procedures to access institutions. The fact that residential institutions depend from three different Ministries adds further complexity. It is therefore urgent to clearly map the administrative processes and procedures for alternative child-care, i.e., who is doing what and how across ministries and other relevant public and private agencies. At a broad level, this will render these paths more transparent and facilitate equitable application of the norms. It will also help avoid duplication of efforts and a more efficient use of resources.

- **Develop standards of care and protection, particularly for children who are in institutions, and regularly evaluate for compliance**

The MoLSW should regulate child-care and child-placing activities in the country to create and enforce minimum standards of care and safety in formal and informal care settings. This document should outline basic [professional] standards required in residential child-care facilities, including EMBS and SOSCVs, to ensure that children's rights to the best care possible are realized. They should address issues related to management of the institution (e.g., financial viability; staff qualifications, training, and supervision; and internal monitoring arrangements) as well as to care giving (e.g., admission procedures; participation of children and families; case recording; facilities/accommodation; food; clothing; medical services; education; contact with personnel, family, and others; and leaving the institution). Standards should be developed with the input of children, families, and relevant groups, thus reflecting what they consider reasonable and culturally/contextually appropriate. The standards would also serve as a tool to prevent [and to investigate alleged] neglect and abuse in child-care settings. Conduct general education initiatives with families and care settings to meet standards and fill gaps. Increase training and support to caregivers in alternative care settings to acquire knowledge and skills to deliver services to children. A monitoring system needs to be established to regularly assess the implementation of the standards across child-care settings and their impact on children. Periodic inspection of all institutions should be conducted by the MoLSW to ensure adequate care and safety, and proper registration of child-care institutions and providers.

- **Involve children and families in decision-making about issues that matter to them, including in planning interventions**

Decision-making about placement should be based on regular assessments of children's needs and family circumstances. Measures need to be taken to ensure that parents and children (according to their developmental capacities) fully participate in the decision-making process of placing a child in alternative care. Considering child, family, community, and cultural value systems is needed to design effective interventions. Active participation of communities will help identify the most vulnerable children, and children's perspectives will help assess whether actions are being taken in their best interest.

- **Strengthen routine data collection and management systems on orphan, separated, and vulnerable children**

Improved data collection systems are needed for monitoring child protection statistics, particularly as they relate to alternative care placements, and to support policy-making and program planning. Regularly updated data collection, including those disaggregated at the sub-national level, will enable equity analyses and formulation of policy and programmatic responses to child-care and protection. Whenever possible, use should be made of data that is regularly collected already at the village, district, provincial, and national levels.

- **Conduct further research and analysis on community-based initiatives for the care and protection of vulnerable children as well as on the links between alternative care and socio-economic and cultural factors**

Strong evidence on existing child-care practices is needed across ethno-cultural groups to be better able to inform policies in this area—both in policy development and in policy implementation and practice. It will also help to identify stakeholders that would need to be involved in these processes. Research should document effective family and community-based care practices as well as any unintended (potential) negative consequences of policies, strategies and interventions; it is in supporting what is currently working and responding to misinformation on alternative care that we can prevent further unnecessary placement of children in institutions. Research studies should provide information that can be disaggregated by location, child's personal and developmental characteristics, ethno-cultural characteristics, and season as practices may vary throughout the year and across population groups. Use a range of methodologies to obtain quality data as well as to elicit the views of young people, both of which are needed to inform the development and implementation of policies and services that affect children.

- **Raise awareness of and enforce legal and policy framework**

A comprehensive review of the legal and policy framework related to children without parental care in Lao P.D.R. is needed to identify strengths in the current system as well as gaps that need further regulation. Input from all relevant ministries and institutions will be needed to ensure an up-to-date, complete picture of the situation can be taken to inform future planning efforts. Similarly, a clarification of administrative procedures is needed so as to ensure equity in their application across provinces and institutions. Broad dissemination of all this information will be needed to the public and to professionals working with children to ensure that practices comply with existing legal and administrative principles and rules. Dissemination and enforcement of existing policies and laws are important tools

for advocacy work. Awareness-raising should include definitions of key terms such as kinship care, foster care, and adoption, to avoid misunderstandings and for accountability. Clarification of terms should be included in the training of researchers too.

- **Regulate adoption**

The Family Law (1990, revised 2008) discusses the adoption of Lao children by Lao citizens as well as foreigners, yet further development and enforcement of these provisions are needed. This will entail the revision and adoption of regulations, the development of service and accreditation standards, and the establishment of an independent body to supervise alternative child-care placements. To start with, there is a to clarify the difference between “informal” care by relatives and non-relatives and formal adoption.

- **Conduct rigorous assessments and periodic monitoring of alternative care placements and facilitate family contact and reunification**

Conduct a comprehensive and timely assessment for every child prior to placement. Include child wellbeing indicators as part of the alternative care measurement and criteria. Conduct close follow-up of children in all alternative care settings and keep a systematic registry of children in alternative care needed. At an individual level, it will facilitate monitoring of each child’s case, thus ensuring that alternative care arrangements are only used when and as necessary. It will also serve for service delivery and planning purposes. Facilitate transition and adaptation away from the institution by placing children as close as possible to their usual place of residence (UN Guideline No. 10) and providing opportunities to interact with outside family and community. Within their best interest, enable children’s return to parental care (UN Guideline No. 13).

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