



## **THE IMPACT OF THE LAOS-CHINA RAILWAY PROJECT ON LAOTIAN HUMAN SECURITY IN 2021-2023**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In 2017 until 2020, the economic security of the Laotian society is experiencing problems where the unemployment rate is above 2%. This high unemployment rate affects the slow economic growth of Laos. In December 2021, Laos-China railway project is finally completed after 5 years of construction. In this paper, the author describes the positive and negative impacts caused by this railway project on the human security of Laotian society. In addition, this research also aims to analyze Laos government policies in preventing the negative impacts caused by this project on its human security using descriptive-qualitative research methods. The research found that the positive impacts of Laos' economic policy to cooperate in the railway project with China on its human security such as providing more jobs for Laotian society, increasing state revenue, improving the living standards of Laotian society. However, this project also has a negative impact on the environmental security of Laotian society. The negative impact can be prevented by the Lao government's efforts such as cooperating with China as a cooperation partner. Laos' economic policy in cooperation with China through the railway project greatly affects human security, especially in economic security. Laos succeed to reduce unemployment rate with the Laos-China railway project.

**Keywords:** Human Security, Laos-China, Railway Project, Laotian Society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In December 2021, Laos-China launched the Laos-China Railway which connects Vientiane (capital of Laos) with Kunming, Yunnan (Province in China). The Laos-China Railway is China's key mega project under BRI since it was first released in 2013. The target area of BRI itself is to connect the eastern Asian region with Europe, especially in the economic field, through small or inland areas. In addition, BRI also has several objectives such as building and expanding markets, regional economic recovery, RMB internationalization, and others (Ohashi, 2018). The Laos-China railway is the largest infrastructure construction in Laos, costing US\$5.9 billion. Due to the high cost, China

and Laos established the Laos-China Railway Joint Venture Company, which is 70% owned by China and 30% by Laos. From the company, 60% of the railway construction cost was covered, and the other 40% had to borrow from the Exim Bank (Export-Import Bank) of China (Zuzana Košková, 2023). The Laos-China Railway is a key mega project built by China since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first released in 2013. Infrastructure development at such a high cost is a project resulting from the combination of China's Belt and Road Initiatives and Laos' strategy of “transforming from landlocked to landlinked” (Liu Xiaoqi, 2021). This is because Laos is the only ASEAN member country where 80% of its territory is highlands and mountains. In addition, Laos is a country that does not have direct access to the sea because it borders the land of neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, and China (Laos-China Railway Showcases a Decade of BRI's Achievements”, 2024). In fact, the sea is a very important route for a country in conducting international trade (UNCTAD, 2022). Therefore, the Lao government must make extra efforts to improve the country's economy.

Laos is one of the poorest countries among ASEAN member states. This poverty affects the human security level of Laos (Jones, 2004). Poverty and slow economic growth in a country are caused by the high unemployment rate in the country (Kukaj, 2018). Even in 2017-2020, the unemployment rate in Laos reached above 2%. In fact, human security is complementary to the security of a country (The Commission on Human Security, 2003). Infrastructure development in a country has a significant role in human security in that country. This is because infrastructure has an important role in the economic, social, and as a vital need for people in their daily lives (Victor I. Sorokin et al., 2023). The existence of the Laos-China Railway makes the dreams of the Lao people come true, such as to interact with neighbouring countries. With easy access to neighbouring countries, Laos can increase its economic strength (Huaxia, 2021). The inauguration of the Laos-China railway in December 2021 has a positive impact on Lao human security, one of which is reducing the unemployment rate (Yang Yongquan, 2023). Besides that, Lao people are also worried about the negative impacts caused by this railway project, especially environmental issues.

### **Human Security**

Human security, according to Human Development (UNDP, 1994), is an integrative concept. The concept of human security means that every individual should be able and given the opportunity to fulfil their most basic needs such as having and securing their livelihood as a source of subsistence. The concept of human security fully recognizes the universalism of life. Human security itself cannot be achieved through acts of violence but through development that involves everyone in the world.

According to UNDP, human security has seven important components of two major components (freedom from fear and freedom from want). first, economic security. The economic security of individuals can only be achieved if they have a source of income or basic income. This basic income is derived from employment wages or regular

government benefits. Economic insecurity has several negative impacts such as increasing the poverty rate in a country or region and homelessness. Second, food security. As the name implies, food security is the right of individuals to have access to basic food for their daily lives. Obtaining food physically can be obtained in several ways such as growing their own food, buying, or by utilizing the public food distribution system. Third, health security. This is the guarantee or right of individuals to avoid or obtain treatment and protection from disease. Fourth, environmental security. This is protection for individuals against natural disasters and environmental damage caused by the industrialization process. Fifth, personal security. It is the protection of individuals from physical attacks. Some of them include war, torture, inter-ethnic tensions, crime, street violence, rape, drug use, child abuse, suicide, etc. Sixth, community security. This is the protection of a group or ethnicity from violence or ethnic cleansing. Seventh, political security. This is the right of people to live in a country that respects and provides their full rights and protection from state repression. This research aims to analyze the impact of the Laos-China Railway Project on Lao human security in the period 2021 to 2023. By understanding and knowing the impact of a policy, this research can add a source of reference for analyzing or doing research.

## **RESEACRH METHOD**

In this research, researchers used qualitative methods with descriptive research types. Moleong defines qualitative research as research that intends to understand phenomena about what is experienced by research subjects, for example behaviors, perceptions, motivations, actions, and others holistically, and by means of descriptions in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by means of descriptions in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by utilizing various natural methods (Tuti Khairani Harahap, 2022). Ramdhan defines descriptive research as research that aims to provide a description, explanation, and also validation of the phenomenon under the research (Muhammad Ramdhan, 2021). Sugiyono defines the descriptive research method as a research method that aims to describe a phenomenon or event in detail and systematically. This research not only describes the state or condition of an object, but also identifies and examines the relationships between existing variables (Hastin Umi Anisah, 2021).

Based on the definitions of the experts regarding the research method above, researchers in this study will explain in detail and truthfully about the impact of the Laos-China railway in 2021-2023. In addition, researchers will identify and explain how the relationship between variables, namely the relationship between the Laos-China railway and human security in Laos. Furthermore, the data for this research uses secondary data, which is obtained through previous journal articles and also news or report from Laos and China. In addition, this research also uses data from the Laos government website.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

### Laos-China Railway Project

The Laos-China Railway is the first major development project to ever take place in Laos. Laos itself has reasons why Laos, as a small country in ASEAN, wants to accept China's offer to build its infrastructure. Firstly, the geographical location of China. China is a country with a very good economy and has a very close location to Laos. This geographical proximity is an important consideration for the Lao government to accept the offer of this infrastructure development project. seeing how advanced the Chinese economy is and the geographical proximity of the two countries makes the Lao government think that they will easily develop and improve the country's economy. Secondly, Laos' rich natural resources, which are much needed by China, have the potential to become the biggest factor in its economic development. With the Laos-China railway, it will facilitate and save the cost of Laos exporting to China. Third, the influence of China's demographics. China's demographics, which reach more than 1.4 million people (figure 1), have the potential to increase tourists in Laos (CEIC, 2023). The tourism sector is considered because tourism is the second contributor to economic growth after the mining sector (Dariskiyah et al., 2022; Krish Rugchatjaroen & Simonekeo Senesathith, 2017). In addition, this infrastructure development is to achieve several important objectives. Firstly, it facilitates Laos from a landlocked country to become a land-linked country; secondly, it fuels socio-economic development by enriching local and international revenue sources; thirdly, it provides convenient, safe, and fast transportation for the daily life of Lao people; fourthly, it enhances and expands Lao country's main economic sectors such as business and tourism, and; fifthly, it enhances China's economic relations and integration with ASEAN member countries (Suhardiman et al., 2021).

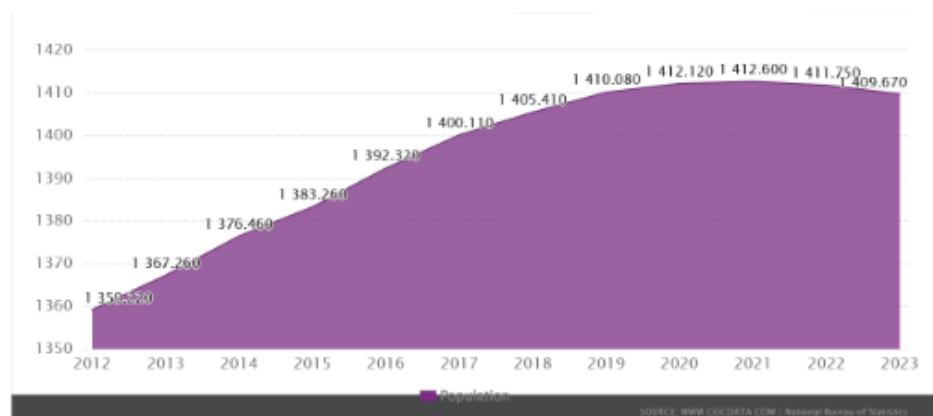


Figure 1. China's demographics in 2012-2023.

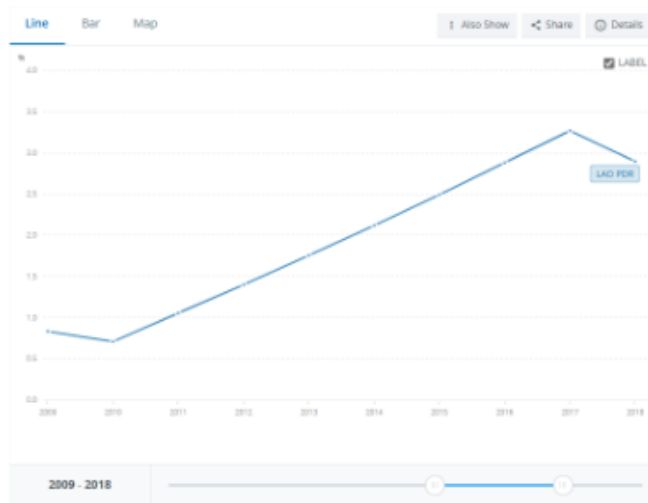
### Laos' Human Security

Security in Laos is a paradigmatic or representative case of East Asian security policy priorities. East Asia includes Southeast Asia and northeast Asia (Brendan Howe,

2023). Being a country where human security is quite low, the Lao government is thinking of all ways to become a developed country in any aspect, including accepting China's invitation to build a railway.

**Economic security**

Laos is one of the ASEAN countries with a high poverty rate. High unemployment is one of the reasons why a country experiences an increase in poverty (UNDP, 1994). Laos experienced an increase in unemployment in 2011 and peaked in 2017 at 3.3% (figure 2). The Laos-China Railway began construction in 2015 until 2021. By mid-2020, when the railway was not 100% complete, deputy minister at the Laotian Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Rattanamany Khounnivong said that the railway had reduced unemployment in Laos by 7,000 individuals (HKUST, 2020). The Chinese government said on its website that during the Laos-China Railway's construction, it was recorded that as many as 110,000 jobs were available to Lao people. Since the railway was built, many young Lao people are interested in developing and channeling their potential, interests and talents in the railway world (NDRC, 2021). It is not 100% Laos-China railway in reducing unemployment. However, based on these data, it is evident that the Laos-China railway project has a positive impact on Laotian human security, namely economic security.



**Figure 2. Unemployment rate chart in Laos**

**Food Security**

67% of Lao people are rural. They rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources to survive (IFAD, n.d.). Laos has been facing food insecurity for a long time.

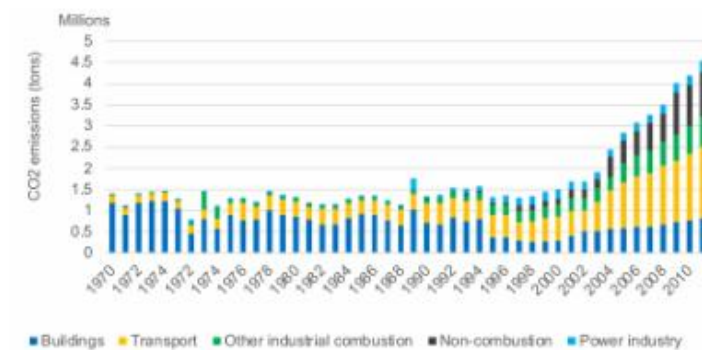
Although the majority of them are farmers, their food security is still questionable. In addition, since 2021, Laos has been experiencing a crisis due to dependence on imports. Therefore, some of them return to rural life and prefer to work on their family farms. The local government in rural Laos is considered very poor in managing the region, including in developing transport access for rural communities. This makes it difficult for communities to develop and agricultural products can only be used by themselves or revolve around them (David Hutt, 2024). The Laos-China Railway itself indirectly impacts and plays a role in efforts to reduce food insecurity in Laos. The Laos-China railway line which runs from Vientiane to the Laos-China border in Boten and continues to China, namely Kunming province through rural areas and hard-to-reach areas in Laos such as Luang Namtha province which is a mountainous region (CGTN, 2023). With the Laos-China railway, market access by rural residents will be wider so that they can buy and sell their crops and food distribution will be easier and less time-consuming and costly (Bart Verweij, 2022).

### Health Security

In 2022, research showed that out of 1264 participants aged 57 years and above, 36.9% of them had nuclear cataracts, 21.7% of them had cortical, and 10.1% of them had posterior subcapsular cataracts (Brad Guo et al., 2022). Data shows that in 2016, 27% of deaths that occurred in Laos were caused by cardiovascular disease (WHO, 2018). Laos is co-operating with China in the field of Health such as cataract surgery, and treatment of patients with heart disease in 103 military hospitals in Vientiane since 2023 (Lao News Agency, 2023). Since the inauguration of the Laos-China railway, the number of patients shows an increase in hospitals working with China (China Daily, 2022). This shows that the Laos-China railway plays a role in reducing the health insecurity of Laotian people.

### Environmental Security

Transport has been the largest contributor to CO2 emissions in Laos from 1970 to 2010 (figure 3). This has led the Lao government to make efforts to reduce the number of CO2 emissions in the transport sector. One of its efforts is to cooperate with the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). This cooperation is carried out to assist Laos in reducing emissions from deforestation and from degradation with funds reaching \$42 million from 2021 to 2025. The focus is on six provinces in Laos, namely Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha, Houaphanh, Oudomxay, Bokeo, and Xayabouly (World Bank, 2021).



Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/laos-co2-emissions/>

### Figure 3. CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions in Lao PDR

The Laos-China railway line passes through one of the provinces that is the focus of Laos-World Bank emission reduction, namely Luang Prabang province. Thus, infrastructure development, especially transport, must be transport that can reduce, suppress, or at least not add to existing gas emissions in the region. Therefore, the construction of the Laos-China Railway carries the concept of green railway. This green railway is applied at each stop station of the Laos-China railway by harmonizing between land that remains green in the midst of local infrastructure development (Chanthaphaphone Mixayboua, 2021). The green railway is implemented by working with Electricite du Laos (EDL) to build and supply electricity. This was said by Ms Yang Yonghui, Chair of the Board of Directors of Lao-China Electric Power Investment Co., Ltd. (Laotian Times, 2021) From this explanation, it can be concluded that the Laos-China railway indirectly plays a role in suppressing environmental insecurity that could be caused in the midst of the Lao government's efforts to advance the country and realize its interests in becoming a land-linked country.

#### Personal and Community Security

Laos is one of the ASEAN member countries that has a low crime rate. However, an increase in the crime rate can happen at any time if the Lao government does not prevent it from the beginning. The crime rate itself can be fueled by drugs, which is the case in Laos. Almost two-thirds of all crimes in Laos are drug-related, such as arrests for drug trafficking and possession, and drug-related murders (Radio Free Asia, 2023). Countries with good infrastructure such as Hong-Kong, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom are also quite high (Hans Tse, 2024). This shows that good infrastructure does not guarantee a crime-free country. Therefore, as the infrastructure of Laos is built, the government must make extra efforts to prevent crime in the country so as to achieve Laotian personal security. One of the efforts is to organize joint operations between the police and local and central military forces to maintain the security of the railway effectively (Laotian Times, 2022).

In Laos itself, civil war or ethnic cleansing occurred in 1960-1973 (NWE, n.d.). Similar to personal security, community security in Laos has also been maintained. So, it only requires the combined efforts of the government and society in the peace of the country. With the construction of railway infrastructure, it is hoped that peace and brotherhood in Laos can be established easily.

#### Political Security

Based on data from the World Bank, the people of Laos struggle to achieve and obtain a good and decent economy because their country is flanked by mountains, forests, and hills. This makes it difficult for the people of Laos, especially rural communities, to achieve education and a decent life (World Bank, 2024). With the construction of the Laos-China Railway, which runs through several provinces that are difficult to transport, it is easier for rural residents to improve their economy and get access to proper education (World Bank, 2020).

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Launched in December 2021, the Laos-China Railway has shown some significant impacts on Laos' human security, especially from 2021 to 2023. This railway project shows how the Lao government's efforts in realizing Laos' goal to transition from a landlocked country to a land-linked country through infrastructure development and economic integration with neighbouring countries, namely China. According to UNDP, human security itself has seven important components. Of these seven components, Laos faces serious problems in four main components, namely economic, food, health, and environmental security. For this reason, Laos is working with China to reduce, suppress, and overcome these problems, one of which is through the Laos-China Railway. In addition, the Laos-China railway also has positive and negative impacts.

The positive impact of the Laos-China railway is very clear and well felt especially in terms of economic security. The Laos-China railway project has been successful in reducing and suppressing unemployment in Laos by providing more than 110,000 jobs for Lao people. The railway has facilitated trade and tourism by improving connectivity, thereby contributing to economic growth and enhancing the standard of living for many citizens. Furthermore, it has provided better access to food markets and healthcare services, which has indirectly enhanced food security and health security for rural populations. In terms of food security, the railway has provided rural communities with enhanced access to markets, thereby facilitating the sale of agricultural products and improving livelihoods. This represents a pivotal step towards addressing the long-standing issue of food insecurity in rural areas of Laos, which constitute a significant proportion of the population. By connecting previously inaccessible regions such as Luang Namtha, the railway has helped to reduce the logistical challenges associated with food distribution.

The Laos-China Railway Project has also had an indirect but beneficial impact on health security. The enhanced accessibility to transportation has enabled rural communities to access healthcare facilities in urban areas with greater ease. Furthermore, the ongoing collaboration between Laos and China in the healthcare sector, including initiatives to address conditions such as cataracts and cardiovascular diseases, has contributed to an overall improvement in the population's health security. Nevertheless, the railway has prompted concerns regarding environmental security, given that infrastructure development frequently entails the degradation of the natural environment. The Lao government is aware of the potential environmental threats posed by high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from transportation. In order to mitigate these risks, the Laos-China Railway incorporates a "green railway" concept, with efforts focused on reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through collaboration with Electricité du Laos (EDL) to power the railway with electricity rather than fossil fuels. These measures aim to align the country's developmental goals with its environmental responsibilities. However, challenges remain in fully addressing the negative impact on the environment.

The personal and community security of Laos, which has traditionally been stable, is facing challenges as a result of an increase in drug-related crimes. This situation could potentially be exacerbated by the improved transportation infrastructure. The railway's capacity to facilitate more convenient connectivity between rural and urban areas could potentially intensify the movement of illicit substances and other criminal activities if left unaddressed. In response, the Lao government has intensified collaborative operations between police and military personnel

to ensure the security of the railway and its users. While these measures are praiseworthy, sustaining long-term personal and community security will necessitate sustained vigilance and policy adaptations.

In conclusion, the Laos-China Railway Project has had a multifaceted impact on human security in Laos. While the project has notably enhanced economic, food, and health security, it has also prompted crucial inquiries into the long-term sustainability of the environment and the safety of local communities. In order to mitigate the negative consequences of the project, the Lao government has implemented several policies, including an emphasis on green infrastructure and increased cooperation with China in environmental protection and law enforcement. In the future, it is vital for Laos to strike a balance between infrastructure development and environmental and social considerations. This will ensure that the positive outcomes of the railway project continue to enhance human security across all dimensions. The project demonstrates how strategic infrastructure development can contribute to a nation's security and development goals. It also highlights the importance of responsible governance and cross-border cooperation.

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