



# LAOS

**Population** 6.7 million **Area** 236,800 sq km (91,400 sq miles)  
**Major languages** Lao, French **Major religion** Buddhism  
**Life expectancy** 65 years (men), 68 years (women) **Currency** kip



Southeastern Laos is extremely poor and sparsely populated. Roughly 70% of Laotians work in agriculture. Mountainous and wooded, accessibility is very difficult in some of the country. The history of the Laos of today starts with its colonization by the French in the nineteenth century. Due to large cultural and political differences country remained unstable for decades. At present Laos finds itself in calmer waters. National and regional authorities are working together to build a system of accessible and high quality eye care.

Mekong Eye Doctors became active in Laos in 1994.<sup>65</sup> Back then, MED took part in several eye camps in the hospitals in Champasak and Pakxong; extremely poor and sparsely populated provinces. Founder Eric

van Agtmaal also paid many visits to local schools in the area. During the screenings, one in ten children was diagnosed with eye disorders caused by vitamin A deficiency and were given vitamin A capsules. A large-scale follow-up project was needed to provide a structural solution to the problem, but it was never realised. However, seven eye camps were held in 1995 during which vitamin A was distributed. That project ended in 1999 when it was taken over by the national vaccination programme.

At present, the Eye Care Foundation is once again active in three provinces in Laos: Xieng Khouang, Houaphan and Xaysomboun. The emphasis is currently on training eye doctors and nurses, providing further training and setting up eye departments in health clinics.

Patient and nurse during an eye screening



During an eye surgery

Raising awareness in local communities is also an important activity, especially in motivating people to go to the hospitals.

Efforts in Xaysomboun have only just begun with small health posts referring patients for surgeries at the hospital in Anouvong. That same approach is taking shape in two other provinces. Basic eye doctors and ophthalmic nurses are now also receiving extensive trainings. The eye care department at the hospital in Houaphan has been modernised and additional ophthalmologists and nurses are being educated.

In Xieng Khouang province, where ECF started in 2010, the progress is already clearly visible. In the provincial capital Phousavan, the foundation supported the development and construction of an eye clinic in collaboration with the local hospital and Lions Club Land van Cuyk and Noord-Limburg.<sup>66</sup> The district network is also taking shape. Local people now have better access to eye health care due to new facilities, mobile eye camps and eye screenings in primary schools.

At the moment, ECF employs a part-time staff, based in Vientiane. Staff members Sivixay Vongphachith and Khounkham Inthasone coordinate the projects that are supported and monitored by the team in Cambodia. ECF's medical advisor for Laos is the Dutch ophthalmologist Cees van der Windt, who regularly travels to Laos to give on-the-job training.

## ECF FAMILY IN LAOS

To date, ECF has worked closely with the National Ophthalmological Center, the provincial health departments and district health offices. Key focal persons for our Laos activities are Dr. Khamphoua Southisombath, Director of the National Ophthalmology Center, Dr. Sipheth Phanouvong, Deputy of the National Ophthalmology Center, Dr. Komoua Naoleng, Head of Xiengkhouang provincial hospital, Dr. Ouy, Head of Houaphan provincial hospital and Dr. Touny, Ophthalmology of Xaysomboun province. Please see the inside cover of this publication for a full ECF Family List.



▲ Cees van der Windt during an eye screening

<sup>66</sup> Fight for Sight (Netherlands) is a foundation of Lions International MD 110 Netherlands. An English name because of the contacts with mainly English-speaking developing countries. Retrieved June 14, 2019 from Fight for Sight: <http://www.fightforsight.nl>

Patient resting after her cataract surgery





▲ During an eye check ▲ Portrait of Taii, a young boy, after a surgery ▲ Taii after a cataract surgery with his friends