

5th Brief:

The 5th Population and Housing Census of Lao PDR November 2024

“Counting Everyone, Because Everyone Counts”

“Managing a census project entails working with many people who have never had experience doing it; it entails long project timelines within which there may be a turnover of key personnel; it entails a geographical spread that covers the entire country; and it requires the cooperation and collaboration of a range of organizations, both public and private” - UN census management handbook

The upcoming 5th Population and Housing Census (5thPHC) in Lao PDR, scheduled for 2025, represents a pivotal undertaking for the Lao government. As one of the nation's most comprehensive and intricate peacetime operations, this census aims to capture and analyze the socio-demographic and economic trends that will shape Lao PDR's future. Since 2021, the Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), in collaboration with various line ministries and key development partners, have been diligently preparing for this monumental task. The 5th PHC will provide vital information that will guide policy decisions and development strategies, ensuring that the nation can effectively address its future challenges and opportunities.

The 5th PHC serves as a cornerstone for national and sub-national planning and decision-making, providing crucial population data to inform development and humanitarian strategies and allocating resources. The census will help track population dynamics, provide baseline data on the progress towards the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) 2021-2025 implementation, and aid in the monitoring of the 10th NSED 2026-2030. Moreover, it will provide evidence to the Lao's achievements in relation to the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD PoA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The significance of the census is underscored by the fact that up to 107 of the 231 indicators of the SDGs require population data for monitoring. The 5thPHC provides invaluable insights into the demographics of disadvantaged regions and vulnerable groups, such as the poor, elderly, persons with disabilities and migrants.

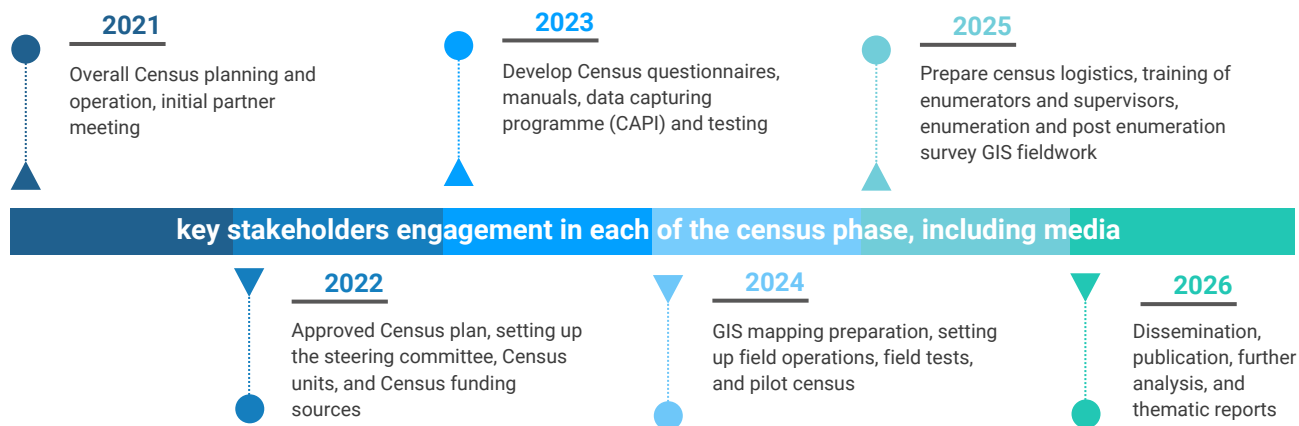
The 5th PHC will be the nation's first-ever digital census. Utilizing handheld devices and GIS-based maps. It is estimated that nearly 13,000 census field staff will collect data across 18 provinces within a four to five-week period in 2025.

Investing in the 5th PHC is investing in the future of Laos, for accurate, transparent, and timely data which is the bedrock upon which effective policies are built.

Achievements to Date

In line with the Census timeline, several significant milestones have been successfully concluded, marking critical milestones in the preparation for the 5th PHC.

ROAD MAP FOR 5th PHC



1 Regular Technical Assistance and Support to LSB

UNFPA's technical and coordination support has been pivotal in advancing LSB's census preparations in 2024. This includes enhancements to census instruments, tools, development of crucial strategies such as quality assurance and risk registers, communication and publicity plans as well as Genderizing the Census. This ongoing cooperation has enhanced LSB's capacity through comprehensive field tests and improvements in effective census preparation. The provision of long-term and short-term technical assistance in the fields of census coordination and operations, census quality assurance, data processing and ICT, Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping, communication and publicity, genderizing the census as well as coordination with key stakeholders has been instrumental in refining census methodologies, questionnaires and applications, ensuring effective implementation of the census plan.

2 2nd Field Test and Pilot Census: Ensuring Effectiveness and Quality of Census Instruments

The quality of census tools and procedures were significantly enhanced through a comprehensive second field test conducted from March 4-10, 2024, across 10 Enumeration Areas (EAs) in Vientiane Capital. This critical exercise was designed to refine the preparations for the pilot census, focusing on diverse field conditions. Ten enumerators, trained during this phase, were equipped to assume key roles as master trainers for the subsequent pilot census.

The pilot census, held from May 27 - June 16, served as a full-scale rehearsal for the upcoming national census. It included the pilot Post-Enumeration Survey (PES), which was conducted across four provinces—Bokeo, Houaphanh, Sekong, and Vientiane Capital. This pilot thoroughly tested all aspects of the census processes and procedures, including fieldwork logistics, staff selection, functionality of census tools, instruments, and applications such as CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews) and GIS (Geographic Information System) maps. Data transmission and storage systems were also put to the test, with the primary goal of integrating innovative technology while identifying any potential issues with census instruments and human resources. Extensive training was provided to over 28 census master trainers on census methodology and applications, preparing them to train the 100 enumerators selected for data collection across the four provinces. These enumerators successfully reached approximately 15,000 dwellings/households, ensuring broad coverage and data integrity.

Key Observations and Findings

- In the pilot census, a thorough monitoring framework was implemented. The digital questionnaire and CAPI applications were particularly successful, with enumerators swiftly adapting to the user-friendly interface. As a result, interviews were conducted more efficiently, leading to improved data quality.
- In the pilot census, the cooperation received from village authorities and the public was overwhelmingly positive. This extensive cooperation between district and village authorities with the census enumerators facilitated seamless data collection and access to households during the three-week pilot census period.
- The training sessions, including the Training of Trainers (TOT) and Training of Enumerators (TOE), were a success due to the high-quality training materials provided. These materials facilitated positive feedback from the enumerators during their training and also contributed to the smooth usage of digital devices.
- Analysis of the pilot census and pilot PES results revealed minimal inconsistencies and discrepancies, indicating the effectiveness of the census applications. The enumerators appeared comfortable using the applications and demonstrated a satisfactory understanding of the questions and questionnaire flow.
- By meticulously planning and promptly preparing, the LSB efficiently completed the pilot Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) within two weeks of the pilot census data collection's conclusion. PES is an invaluable tool in determining the census' quality, evaluating census coverage, and assessing content reliability and validity.
- Despite several achievements, challenges were observed, particularly due to the quality of GIS mapping and delineation of Enumeration Areas (EAs). The challenges stemmed from a shortage of skilled human resources in the area of GIS, limited training and short period of GIS field operations that contributed to significant delays in finalization of the provisional EA and preparing the final maps in quality. This resulted in oversized EAs and in some cases overlapping boundaries of EAs and villages which created some challenges for enumerators and data collection processes.
- The cost of the pilot census saw an approximate 89% increase. This significant escalation was primarily driven by rising inflation and increased market prices for goods and services, particularly for the enumerators' packages and outfits. Additional factors contributing to the transportation costs for enumerators, largely due to challenges with the size of EAs as well as unforeseen observation expenses. Given the limited financial resources available, it is crucial for further mobilizing of financial resources, carefully plan the main census budget and identify opportunities to minimize costs.
- The average number of interviews per day fell short of expectations, particularly in Bokeo province, affecting the timely completion of interviews within the designated EAs. Special economic zones in Bokeo also presented challenges, including the necessity for multilingual questionnaires and special arrangement for data collection.

Key lessons from the pilot census

- **Improvement of EA maps and expediting GIS field operations:** Significant improvements are needed in the quality of EA maps to ensure accurate enumeration, including the correct identification of all buildings and the accurate recording of dwelling numbers. The delineation of EAs must be completed on schedule to avoid further delays in the entire census preparation and enumeration.
- **Revisiting Interview Targets:** The daily target of seven interviews per enumerator proved ambitious and should be adjusted to a more feasible number. Extending the census period should be considered to accommodate these adjustments.
- **Addressing Connectivity Issues:** Strategies must be developed to manage areas with limited internet connectivity, including specialized training for census staff to handle such challenges effectively.

- **Special Enumeration Arrangements:** Special attention is required for the enumeration of collective living quarters and special economic zones. Establishing a dedicated team at LSB and special coordination mechanisms is recommended to address the unique challenges presented by these areas.
- **Streamlining the Questionnaire:** Consideration should be given to improving the census questionnaire, reducing the burden on both enumerators and respondents, improving efficiency and response rates.
- **Local Enumerator Involvement:** Efforts should be made to involve local enumerators familiar with the geographic areas and language in their respective EAs to maximize the quality and accuracy of the census.

3 Provision of ESRI Package for GIS Mapping

The technical capacity of the GIS unit at the Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) has been further strengthened through continued access to the ArcGIS software and the ESRI modernization package, which was renewed for a second year by UNFPA. The ESRI Statistics program offers state-of-the-art tools and training that enhance statistical processes, accuracy, and efficiency with GIS capabilities. The GIS mapping component of the 5th PHC is primarily coordinated under the LAOSTAT project of the World Bank, with UNFPA providing ad-hoc additional technical and coordination support as needed to expedite the GIS mapping processes.

4 Census Communication and Genderizing Initiatives

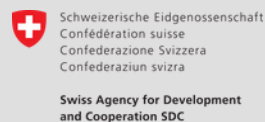
A comprehensive Census Communication and Publicity Strategy was developed with UNFPA's support to boost awareness and engagement around the census. This strategy outlines detailed activities, including the use of social media, and local awareness campaigns, census messaging and branding, as well as census enumerators outfit design. A ten-minute training video on the Washington Group Short Set of Questions (WGSSQ) was also created in collaboration with Humanity Inclusion and the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to equip census enumerators with the necessary skills to effectively utilize the WGSSQ during the pilot and actual census. To guarantee the inclusion of the gender dimension in the census, a thorough review of the census tools and instruments was conducted, and a checklist was created.

5 Securing Tablets

In a significant stride towards ensuring the success of the 5th PHC, the Government of China has provided substantial in-kind support by donating 8,000 tablets for data collection. The LSB, in coordination with the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Ministry of Finance, is making efforts to secure additional funding to procure the remaining tablets. This will fully equip all enumerators for the census and ensure the efficiency of the data collection process.

Partnerships and Resource Mobilizations

In 2024, LSB and UNFPA made significant progress in strengthening partnership and mobilizing resources for the 5th population and housing census. The number of partners increased from two in 2023 to four in 2024. Through the joint efforts of UNFPA and LSB as explained below, the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and Luxembourg joined the partnership, alongside existing partners USAID and DFAT Australia, to contribute to the census in Lao PDR.



1 First Pre-RTIM Consultation Meeting and National Conference Insights

The first Pre-RTIM Meeting on the 2025 Population and Housing Census, held on February 6, 2024, successfully reinforced partnerships and emphasized the critical role of census data in policy formulation and planning. Over 80 participants, including government officials, development partners, and private sector representatives, discussed strategies to highlight data needs and accelerate efforts for the upcoming census.

2 Roundtable meeting on the role of civil society and non-government organizations in the 5th PHC

In June 2024, LSB, in collaboration with UNFPA, hosted a Roundtable Meeting with civil society and non-governmental organizations to seek their support in raising the community awareness about the 5th PHC. The meeting was attended by 30 participants from 19 organizations, including those representing persons with disabilities who have already been involved in preparing the census questionnaire.

Civil society organizations shared valuable insights on the importance of census data for grassroots planning, ensuring inclusivity, establishing social protection schemes, and accessing sample frames for statistical surveys to address inequalities and vulnerabilities.

Civil society organizations praised the inclusive approach integrated into the census preparation, which aims to maximize the involvement of all stakeholders and national actors to ensure everyone is counted, especially those furthest behind.

3 Roundtable Meeting and Networking Event on the role of Private Sector in the 5th PHC

On July 3, 2024, LSB, with UNFPA and AusCham, held a meeting with the private sector to discuss their role in the 5th PHC. The meeting provided census updates and brainstormed ideas for their support, especially in publicity, IT, and logistics. The goal was to strengthen partnerships between the private sector and the census office. Census data is crucial for businesses in making strategic decisions.

4 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Luxembourg Support the 5th PHC

The Swiss Confederation, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has pledged significant financial support to enhance the operationalization of the 5th PHC in Laos. This funding aims to strengthen the IT infrastructure of the Lao Statistics Bureau, enabling effective census training and capacity building.

Furthermore, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg has made a substantial financial contribution to the 5th PHC through the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Luxembourg's support focuses on two key objectives:

- 1 Strengthening census publicity, communication, and awareness campaigns to ensure broad participation from the population.
- 2 Enhancing the utilization of census data for informed decision-making and planning processes.

5 Census budget and funding gap in focus





In collaboration with UNFPA, LSB is actively involved in resource mobilization initiatives to support the 2025 Census. Recent contributions from the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the government of Luxembourg, along with a substantial increase in the government's census allocation, have significantly reduced the budget gap from \$7.9 million to \$5.0 million. These contributions will be strategically allocated to procure additional devices, implement communication campaigns, generate media exposure for awareness raising, and partially support census field operations and data analysis.





Key Actions and the way forward





- Urgent action is required to reassess the census timeline and potentially extend the census enumeration period to ensure thorough data collection.
- A review of the census questionnaire will be conducted to streamline and remove non-essential questions and the CAPI applications will be finalized.
- A set of new questionnaires and CAPI applications will be developed for people who are residing in the Special Economic Zones and Collective Living Quarters (CLQs) such as temples, dormitories, working camps, health facilities and hotels, to ensure everyone in Laos is counted in the upcoming census.
- The final test will be conducted to examine the functionality of the new developed applications as well as the IT infrastructure for data transmission and data storage.
- Selecting the census field staff including supervisors and enumerators, identifying and equipping training venues nationwide through a massive procurement of devices, finalization of training plan materials and developing census monitoring tools are among the key actions which should be completed in 2025.
- Procurement of additional tablets for data enumeration, and IT facilities for training venues.
- Initiate the census communication and publicity campaign nationwide.



For additional information or to get involved, contact us:

 Ms. Thirakha Chanthalanouvong
 Director General, Department of Social Statistics,
Lao Statistics Bureau
 Tel: +856 20 56277789,
 Email: thirakha12@gmail.com

 Dr. Bakhtiyor Kadyrov
 Representative, UNFPA Lao PDR
 Tel: +92 300 0725978,
 Email: kadirov@unfpa.org

 Mr. Kambiz Kabiri
 Policy and Census Coordinator, UNFPA Lao PDR
 Tel: +856 20 55548216,
 Email: kabiri@unfpa.org