



Project: Social Protection | Supported by EU and Oxfam
Location: Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR
Date: Tuesday, March 16, 2021
Interviewers: Muksin Straker-Cook & Vilasith Phonepadith
Topic: Covid Hunger/Inequality



Bing and her two children sit outside their home in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR. Muksin Straker-Cook/OxfaminLaos

One Year Later: Lao Informal Workers and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Bing Phonkao, 39, informal worker and mother of four, lives in Vientiane Capital, Laos, with her husband and two youngest children. She moved to the capital five years ago in search of work, and after getting married she decided to relocate.

Before giving birth to her third child, she often jumped back and forth between Laos and Thailand, working mainly at construction sites. For the last five years or so, she has made a living collecting Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in wetland areas around the city and selling them at the local markets.

She does not own any land for farming, so she relies primarily on wildy growing vegetables and plants.

Ponds and other small bodies of water are present throughout the city. In the morning and during the evenings, people often visit these areas to look for fish, snails, frogs, river weed, and vegetables that grow around the water. In challenging times, the wetlands are a critical source of nutrition for those in need.

"It has been a difficult time for us. I used to earn between 70,000 to 80,000 LAK (USD 7.47 - 8.53) a day from selling fruits and vegetables at the markets, but my earnings have reduced by half since the lockdown."

The lockdown measures imposed by the Lao government to manage the spread of Covid-19 encouraged the closure of most markets, leaving Bing with very few customers. Since the lockdown, she has only been able to earn half of what she made before. Her customers, many of whom continue to face financial difficulties due to the pandemic, would bargain for lower prices, as they were also not making much income. She often relied on her regular customers and the support of close friends to make ends meet.

" We would share what we collected or give 5,000 LAK (USD 0.53) here and there."

"Since the pandemic, raising a family has been harder," shares Bing. Since schools remained closed until the end of 2020, her five-year-old daughter had to stay at home with little to keep her occupied. Bing also added that she would send money to her two children living with her in-laws in Xayaburi province. However, she had to stop about two years ago as she was not making enough to support the whole family. "Although the schools are open now, I still can't send my daughter because I can't pay her fees."

Like many mothers, Bing has found herself balancing caring for her children, her youngest being only a few months old, and maintaining a livelihood source. With few opportunities ahead she is worried about the future.



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Poulouang works with cement, water, and other materials to make traditional Lao cooking stoves. Muksin Straker-Cook/OxfaminLaos

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Pouluang Duanglatilath Keouangdee, 28, is an informal worker living in Vientiane Capital, Laos, with his wife and two children. In 2006, he moved from his hometown in Sonlathburi, Savannakhet Province, to find work, leaving his parents and seven siblings to manage the family farm.

As a bachelor, he worked as a laborer at construction sites, earning a daily wage. There, he learned how to work with cement and other building materials, a skill he makes full use of as a self-employed craftsman of traditional Lao charcoal stoves. His workstation, a three-by-four-meter space at his house in Nongtatai Village, is just enough for him to mix, mold, and carve cement into stoves—often producing 10 to 12 units on a productive day. With a single stove selling for around 25,000-30,000 LAK (USD 2.67 - 3.20) at the local market.

"It was a challenge. I would usually make around 2 million LAK (USD 212) a month, but for about a month, I received no orders."

The lockdown resulted in the closure of most non-essential businesses throughout the country. Market vendors who would often purchase Pouluang's stoves were no longer open, and for several weeks, he did not sell anything. For supplementary income, he worked as a freelance electrician in the evenings--a job he continues to do after 3 pm once work on the stoves is complete.

"We did not have much money during the month of lockdown, so we grew vegetables at the back of the house."

Pouluang and his family survived on the little income they had saved and a small batch of organic vegetables they grew in buckets and suspended shelves outside their house.

Fortunately for Pouluang and his family, after restrictions on stores and other businesses were lifted, orders for his stoves started coming in again--more than what he could produce on his own.

Pouluang dreams of building a small store with a larger working space to have others support him. However, recent payments to repair his truck, which he uses to transport the stoves, and tuition fees for his daughter, mean that it will take a little longer for him to make his dream a reality.

When asked about his outlook for the future, in the case of another lockdown, Pouluang responded, "I have no plans if another lockdown occurs. I will do what I can do."



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Poulouang sits in his workstation outside of his house in Vientiane Capital. Muksin Straker-Cook/OxfaminLaos



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Poulouang's home-grown vegetables--to supplement as a nutrition source during the lockdown. Muksin Straker-Cook/OxfaminLaos