



# **INTRODUCTION**

# INTRODUCTION

A1.1: Administrative division of the Lao PDR in 2015





## Administrative division and topography

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a landlocked country located in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by the People's Republic of China to the north, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the east, the Kingdom of Cambodia to the south, the Kingdom of Thailand to the west and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the northwest.

At the time of the latest census, the country had one city – Vientiane Capital City – and three secondary metropolitan areas – Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Pakxe towns – along with numerous smaller provincial and district capitals. All towns in the Lao PDR are under the administration of the respective province or district, except for Vientiane Capital City, which is equivalent to a province.

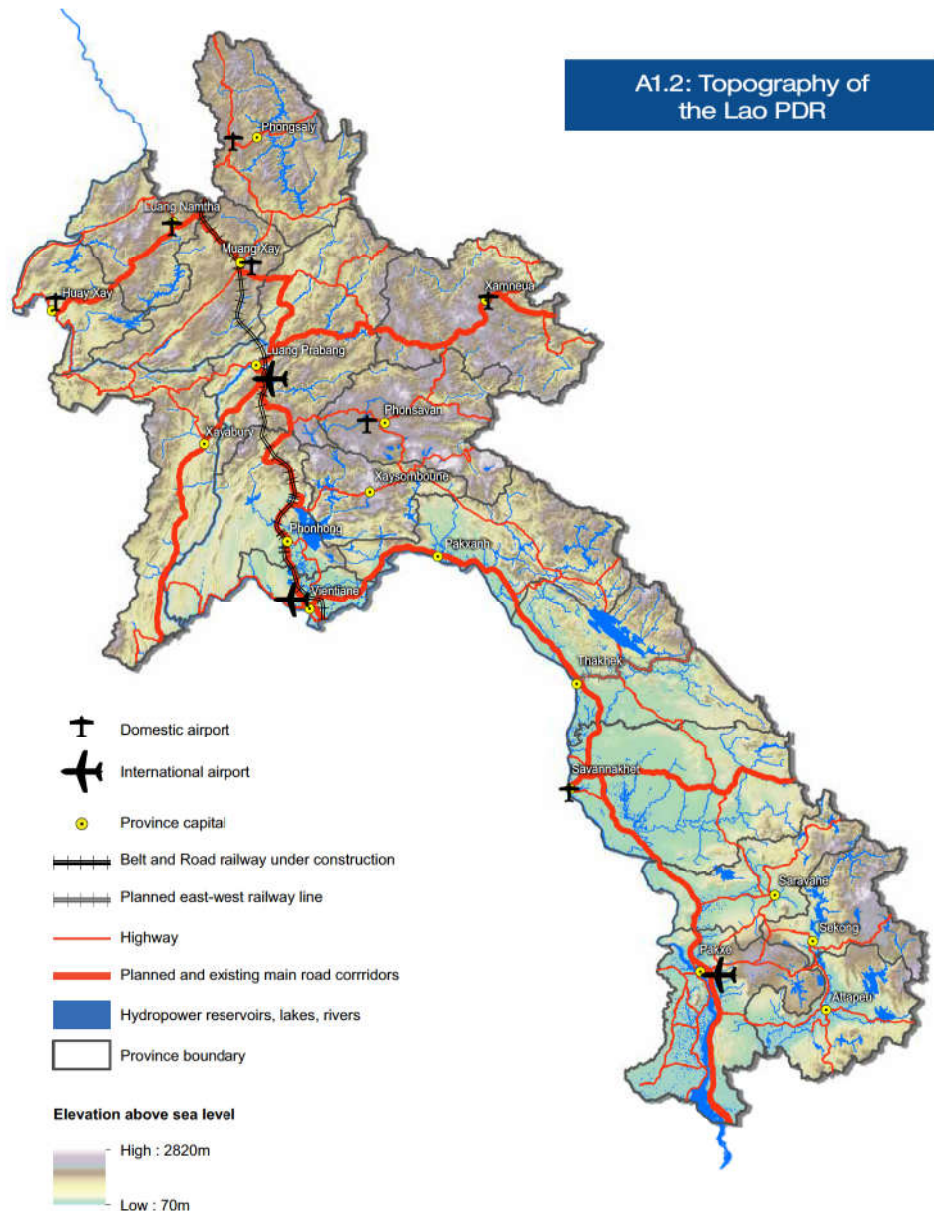
Map A1.1 shows the administrative division of the Lao PDR in 2015, including provincial and district boundaries with their respective provincial capitals. The number and delineation of the administrative divisions has been adjusted numerous times since the establishment of the Lao PDR. The changes are intended to improve local administration and public service delivery, as well as socio-economic and cultural development through strategic allocation of its limited resources.

The country is divided into 17 provinces and one prefecture, Vientiane Capital City. Provinces are further divided in 148 districts, with 9 new districts established since 2005. The smallest administrative unit is the village. The Lao PDR is composed of 8,507 villages, which has decreased from 10,052 in 2005, largely as the result of a process of administrative consolidation of physical villages.

Vientiane Capital City, once part of Vientiane Province, was formed in 1989 as a prefecture separate from Vientiane Province. In 1994, Xaysomboune Special Administrative Region was established, combining parts of Vientiane, Borikhamxay, and Xiengkhuang Provinces. Xaysomboune was under central administrative control until it was dissolved in 2006, when the respective districts were re-allocated to the initial provinces. In 2013, the area was then established as a new province.

About three quarters of the country's territory are relatively sparsely populated mountainous uplands (see Map A1.2). The highest peak is Phou Bia Mountain at 2,820 metres above sea level (masl) in Xiengkhuang Province, and the lowest point is 70 masl along the Mekong River in Champasak Province, near the Cambodian border. With 6.5 million people residing in an area of 236,800 km<sup>2</sup>, the country has one of the lowest population densities in the region.

A1.2: Topography of the Lao PDR

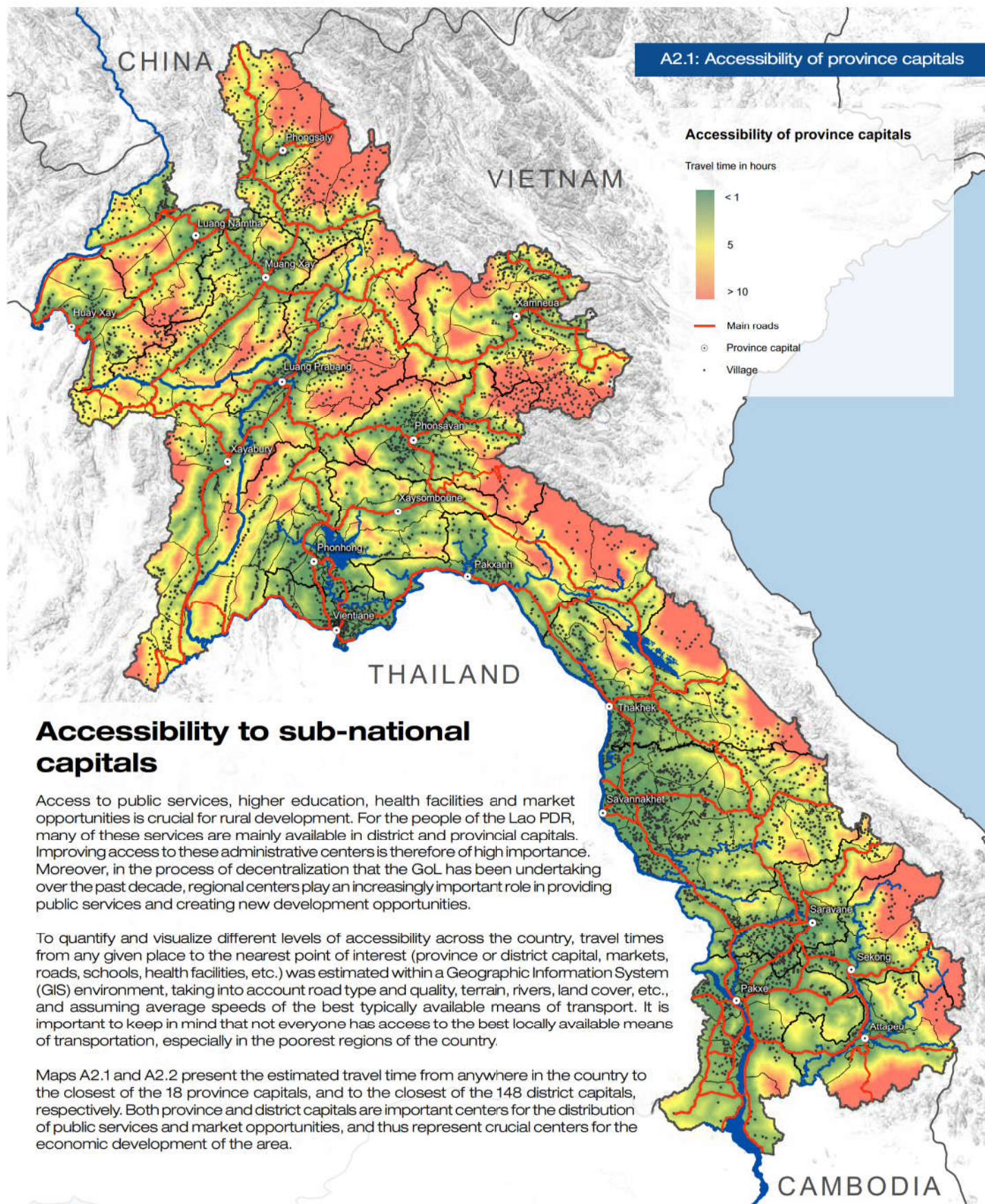


The lowlands, where about three quarters of the country's population lives, constitute around 25% of the country's area, and stretch from the plains around Vientiane Capital City along the Mekong River to the Cambodian border, including much of Savannakhet Province.

Map A1.2 shows the main national road network, along with the planned major road and railway corridors. The Lao PDR depends greatly on road transportation for economic development. In recent years, road network expansion has been followed by a sharp increase in the number of vehicles throughout the country. Although the road network improved substantially in the last decades, many roads are still in poor condition. Waterways are another vital means of transportation, and the Mekong and Nam Ou Rivers are especially important natural channels for large-draft boat transportation. International and national airports are located on the map as well. The country has ten airports, three of which offer international flights, namely Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Pakxe Airports.

While the mountainous terrain of the country is a challenge for the population in terms of improving transport and agricultural land use, it can also be used to the country's advantage through the construction of reservoirs and the operation of hydropower stations.





## Accessibility to sub-national capitals

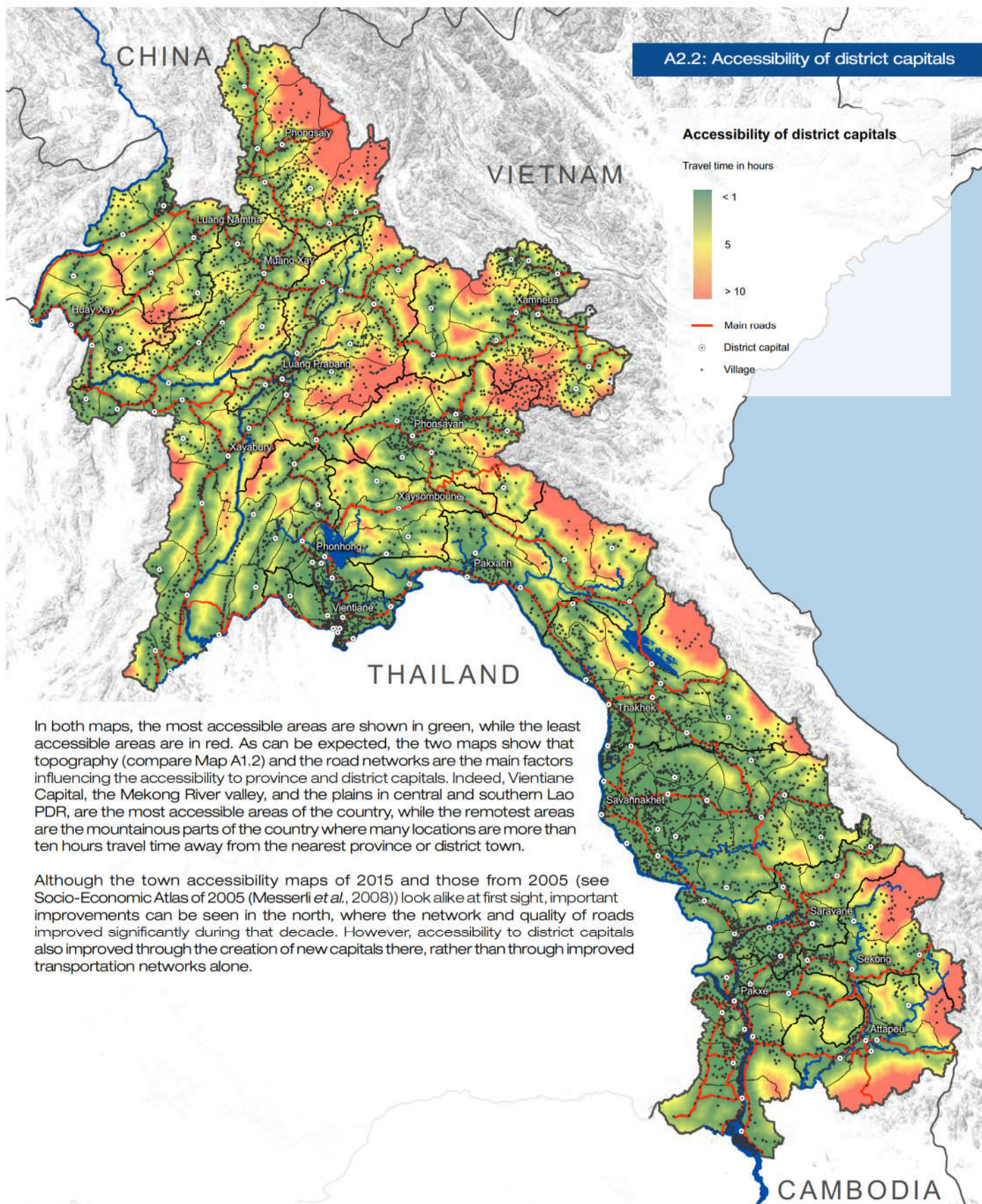
Access to public services, higher education, health facilities and market opportunities is crucial for rural development. For the people of the Lao PDR, many of these services are mainly available in district and provincial capitals. Improving access to these administrative centers is therefore of high importance. Moreover, in the process of decentralization that the GoL has been undertaking over the past decade, regional centers play an increasingly important role in providing public services and creating new development opportunities.

To quantify and visualize different levels of accessibility across the country, travel times from any given place to the nearest point of interest (province or district capital, markets, roads, schools, health facilities, etc.) was estimated within a Geographic Information System (GIS) environment, taking into account road type and quality, terrain, rivers, land cover, etc., and assuming average speeds of the best typically available means of transport. It is important to keep in mind that not everyone has access to the best locally available means of transportation, especially in the poorest regions of the country.

Maps A2.1 and A2.2 present the estimated travel time from anywhere in the country to the closest of the 18 province capitals, and to the closest of the 148 district capitals, respectively. Both province and district capitals are important centers for the distribution of public services and market opportunities, and thus represent crucial centers for the economic development of the area.



A2.2: Accessibility of district capitals



In both maps, the most accessible areas are shown in green, while the least accessible areas are in red. As can be expected, the two maps show that topography (compare Map A1.2) and the road networks are the main factors influencing the accessibility to province and district capitals. Indeed, Vientiane Capital, the Mekong River valley, and the plains in central and southern Lao PDR, are the most accessible areas of the country, while the remotest areas are the mountainous parts of the country where many locations are more than ten hours travel time away from the nearest province or district town.

Although the town accessibility maps of 2015 and those from 2005 (see Socio-Economic Atlas of 2005 (Messerli *et al.*, 2008)) look alike at first sight, important improvements can be seen in the north, where the network and quality of roads improved significantly during that decade. However, accessibility to district capitals also improved through the creation of new capitals there, rather than through improved transportation networks alone.

