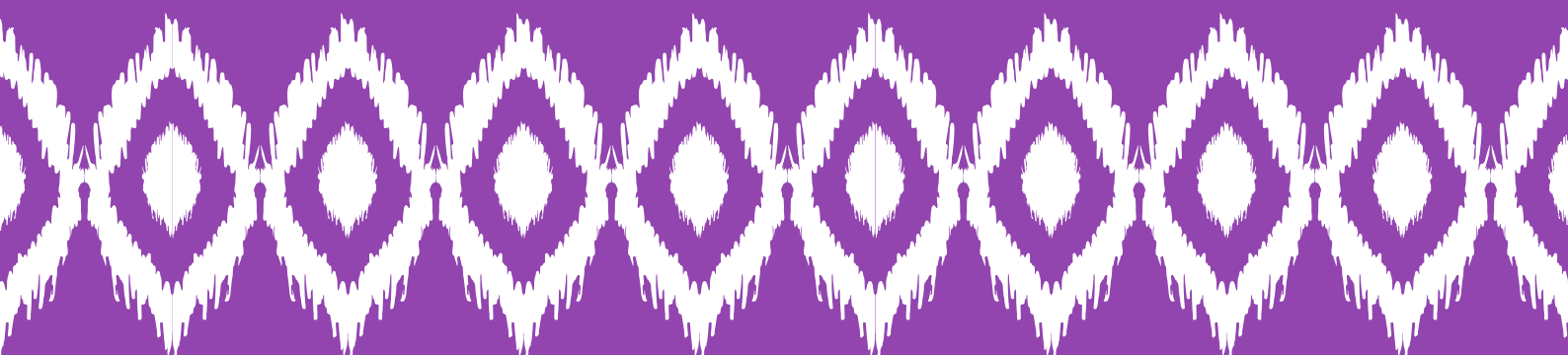




# ROOTED IN PRACTICE: A MAPPING OF LAO PDR'S CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM

Led by Artists and Cultural Professionals





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Key Terms and Scope



## INTRODUCTION

2

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

3

## METHODOLOGY

4

## KEY FINDINGS

5

Current Trends in Creative Practice  
Challenges Faced by Artists and Cultural Professionals  
Recommendations  
Policy and Institutional Recommendations  
Sectoral and Organisational Recommendations  
Artists and Cultural Professionals, and Community-Level Recommendations

## CONCLUSION

6



# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This mapping presents a practitioner-led overview of the cultural and creative industries in Lao PDR, based on primary data collected through interviews and surveys with 42 artists and cultural professionals across multiple regions. It identifies key structural challenges, including a lack of consistent funding, limited institutional support, weak infrastructure outside urban centres, and barriers to digital and international engagement. At the same time, the mapping highlights emerging trends such as multidisciplinary practice, digital experimentation, reinterpretation of Lao PDR's heritage, and socially engaged art. Artists and cultural professionals also expressed a strong desire for greater access to education, legal literacy, mentorship, and decentralised exhibition platforms.

The analysis links artists and cultural professionals' perspectives to broader systemic conditions. Recommendations call for national cultural policy development, investment in regional infrastructure, inclusive education, and support for ecological and digital innovation. By centring artists and cultural professionals' voices, this mapping offers grounded insights to inform future strategies that can strengthen and sustain Lao PDR's creative ecosystem.





**For clarity, this report sets out several key terms as they are applied in the Lao PDR context:**

- **Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI):** Sectors that generate cultural expression and creative value, including visual and performing arts, crafts, textiles, literature, film, music, design, and digital media. In Lao PDR, these industries are understood both as contributors to livelihoods and as custodians of heritage and identity.
- **Arts and Culture:** Art is understood as practices of creative expression, spanning traditional forms such as weaving or temple painting through to contemporary music, performance, and digital media. Culture provides the broader framework of shared practices, values, and heritage within which artistic work takes shape.
- **Creative Work:** Creative work encompasses the production, presentation, and circulation of cultural expression. It includes not only the making of artworks but also related practices such as curation, teaching, design, and cultural organising.
- **Artists and Cultural Professionals:** For the purpose of this report, this refers to individuals directly engaged in artistic creation, curation, cultural education, arts management, or related practices within the CCI industries of Lao PDR.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

This mapping provides a practitioner-led insight into the CCI in Lao PDR with the aim of identifying key challenges, emerging trends, and opportunities as perceived by artists and cultural professionals across the country. It focuses on capturing first-hand insights from those working in the visual arts, performing arts, crafts, music, film, digital media, and literature.

The study employed a qualitative, practitioner-informed approach, drawing on interviews and open-ended surveys, complemented by a brief desk review of recent cultural activities. A total of 20 artists and cultural professionals participated in interviews, with another 22 completing the survey. Participants represented a wide range of disciplines and professional profiles, from freelance practitioners balancing multiple income sources to more established figures with institutional roles in education and cultural programming.

Through surveys and interviews, the mapping gathers what artists and cultural professionals identify as the most pressing challenges to their practice, including funding uncertainty, limited visibility, constrained collaboration, and lack of access to training and audiences. It also explores

areas where artists and cultural professionals observe momentum, including the rise of digital forms, cross-sector collaborations, and shifting creative interests in the post COVID-19 context.

Rather than offering a policy or institutional analysis, this mapping centres the lived experience of artists and cultural professionals. It aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of the current conditions shaping the creative sector in Lao PDR and to support future strategies that are grounded in the realities of those actively working within it.

*This mapping provides a practitioner-led insight into the CCI in Lao PDR with the aim of identifying key challenges, emerging trends, and opportunities as perceived by artists and cultural professionals across the country.*



# 3. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The CCI in Lao PDR reflect a landscape of growing activity, persistent gaps, and evolving practices. While artistic expression has become more visible in recent years, the sector remains uneven in its distribution of resources and recognition. Most creative work is concentrated in urban centres like Vientiane and Luang Prabang, while artists and cultural professionals in other provinces face limited access to creative infrastructure, training opportunities, and national platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted cultural activity nationwide. Tourism declined, events were cancelled, and many artists and cultural professionals lost their income. Although some turned to digital platforms to continue their work, access to technology and digital skills remains uneven. These disruptions also revealed the highly informal nature of the sector, where most practitioners

lack legal protections, stable income, or institutional affiliation.

Despite these challenges, signs of revival have emerged, such as the return of [Lao Art Week and the Lao Contemporary Art Exhibition](#), which re-established public platforms for contemporary visual arts. [The Lao Handicraft Festival and 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Traditional Textile Symposium](#) strengthened regional cultural exchange, while the [UNESCO recognition of the Naga motif](#) renewed pride in cultural identity.

Artists and cultural professionals are also exploring emerging forms. Youth-led initiatives in digital illustration, art toy design, and online storytelling show a generational shift in aesthetics and media. In music and film, artists and cultural professionals have gained visibility through digital platforms and local festivals like the [Blue Chair Film Festival \(formerly known as the Luang Prabang Film Festival\)](#).

Literature remains active, though constrained by limited publishing support.

There is also growing cross-sector collaboration, with artists and cultural professionals contributing to public campaigns by organisations such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund. These efforts help expand the role of creative work in public life and raise the visibility of artists and cultural professionals.

This complex landscape reveals both resilience and precarity. By documenting what artists and cultural professionals identify as the key challenges and opportunities, this mapping contributes to a more grounded understanding of the cultural and creative sector's current conditions in Lao PDR.



## The power of 1000 Kip

My breakthrough came with T-shirts featuring the three women from the 1000 kip note. This design was deeply personal - growing up poor, my mother would give my brother and me a thousand kip each for school lunch. The post-COVID inflation crisis added another layer of meaning. I reasoned that since every Lao person recognized these three women from different ethnic groups, why not put this familiar image on wearable art?

On August 15, 2022, I posted a mock-up of the design on Facebook. Within minutes, purchase inquiries flooded in, including wholesale requests - all before production had even begun. The response was so overwhelming that I had to turn off my phone for three days and temporarily stop taking orders. The 1000 kip note, first issued in 1992, found new life 30 years later through my designs. Even young children recognized it as the "bank note of the buffalo," nicknamed for the herds depicted on its reverse side.

Today, I run SNAE SHOP. My product line focuses on everyday items: shirts, bags, hats, clothing, postcards, and Lao-style stickers. The most popular item remains the T-shirt featuring the three women wearing glasses. Foreign tourists

ສະໜັບສະໜູນຄວາມຄິດສ້າງສັນຂອງຄົນລາວໄດ້ດີ:  
You can support this Lao creatives works through:

- SNAE SHOP (Night Pop-up Shop) From 5 - 10:30 pm**  
Contact Information:  
Facebook/ IG: SNAE SHOP  
Tel. +856 20 5998 3540  
Location: between Memory and Salana Hotel, Chao Anou Rd, **Vientiane Capital.**
- SNAE DESIGN (8 am - 4 pm)**  
Contact Information:  
Facebook: SNAE DESIGN  
Tel. +856 20 5998 3540  
Ban Pho Ngern, Jinalmo - Banhom road, Hatsuifong District, **Vientiane Capital.**
- MAISON SAM SAN**  
Contact Information:  
Facebook: Maison Sam San  
Tel. +856 20 52566511  
Sisavangvong road, Ban Xiengmouan, **Luang Prabang**

# 4. METHODOLOGY

This mapping adopted a qualitative, practitioner-informed approach using interviews, open-ended surveys, and a brief desk review of recent cultural activities in Lao PDR. A total of 20 artists and cultural professionals participated in interviews, with another 22 completing the survey. Participants represented a broad range of disciplines including visual arts, performance, literature, crafts, textiles, film, music, and curation.

Sampling followed a snowball method, beginning with existing and active practitioners from ASEF culture360's [Lao PDR organisation directory](#) and expanding through peer recommendations. Interviewees were based in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Champasak, and Savannakhet, with most having at least two years' experience in the sector. While video calls were proposed, many provincial participants preferred WhatsApp voice messages due to connectivity and access limitations.

*Participants represented a broad range of disciplines including visual arts, performance, literature, crafts, textiles, film, music, and curation.*

The cohort included freelance artists and cultural professionals balancing multiple income sources, emerging practitioners at the start of their careers, and more established figures with institutional roles in education and cultural programming. This mix of independent and institutionally affiliated participants provided a layered understanding of both structural and personal dynamics shaping artistic practice in Lao PDR.



## 5. KEY FINDINGS

This section presents key findings from interviews and surveys with artists and cultural professionals across Lao PDR. Insights are grouped into three themes that reflect shared experiences:

- Challenges faced by artists and cultural professionals
- Current trends in creative practice
- Perceived opportunities and future needs

Rather than statistical data, the findings highlight practitioner perspectives and lived realities. They also situate artists and cultural professionals' experiences within the wider CCI landscape of Lao PDR, where practice, markets, and public value intersect.

### CURRENT TRENDS IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

#### MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES ARE NOW A DEFINING FEATURE OF ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN LAO PDR.

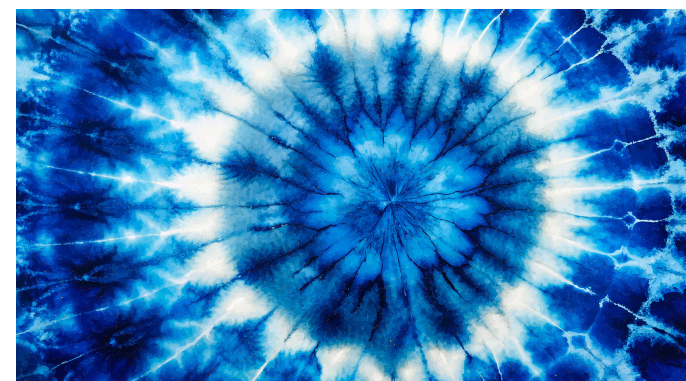
Artists and cultural professionals described a diverse and evolving creative landscape shaped by multidisciplinary approaches, digital influence, and a renewed connection to identity and tradition. Exploration of new art forms is universal. All 22 respondents reported working across different media, combining practices such as painting, textiles, typography, music, fashion, photography, and digital design. Mixed media work is common, with some artists and cultural professionals blending sculpture, installation, or clay with digital elements.

Multidisciplinary creativity also includes combining artistic practice with business, education, and social issues. **“Street art, especially wall painting,**

**is a central practice,”** While another shared, **“Artists are experimenting with new skills such as sculpture using clay and plaster.”** Several described combining fields, noting that **“graphic design and advertising art are becoming more popular”** and that collaboration is key, as **“working with other artists and sharing ideas helps the work improve.”**

The trend demonstrates a diverse, evolving, and hybrid creative ecosystem in Lao PDR. Multidisciplinary practice is emerging as a central trend, signalling that artists and cultural professionals are striving to expand their skills, remain relevant, and connect art with wider cultural, social, and economic contexts.

REINTERPRETATION OF TRADITION IS A STRONG CURRENT, WHERE LAO MOTIFS, MATERIALS, AND HERITAGE ARE BLENDED WITH CONTEMPORARY FORMATS AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES.



A recurring trend involves the reinterpretation of Lao traditional elements, such as motifs from temple murals or street signage, and integrating them into contemporary forms. One artist reflected **“After COVID, some of us turned inward to focus on emotions, while others reinterpreted traditional culture in contemporary ways.”** Another said, **“Sometimes I use Lao symbols like Patuxai or old banknotes to comment on society and the economy.”** Survey responses confirmed this, with several artists and cultural professionals noting that themes of identity, tradition, environment, and spirituality become more prominent in their work after COVID-19. Others highlighted material choices, noting, **“I like to use natural fibres in my art,”** and **“Indigo is my favourite dye, and the modern indigo powder makes it much easier to use than the old methods.”** Several respondents similarly emphasised visual arts, traditional craft and fashion as their main areas of practice, often grounded in local materials and techniques. Artists and cultural professionals are drawing inspiration from cultural heritage while also exploring global aesthetics, including the use of English lyrics, international pop culture, and futuristic visual styles.

This illustrates that Lao creative practice is moving beyond the preservation of tradition into dynamic reinterpretation, where heritage serves as a flexible tool for innovation. It reflects a society that is gradually more open to contemporary expression, signalling a growing demand for such practices. This also points to an emerging behaviour of collecting contemporary works in Lao PDR, suggesting a shift in cultural value and audience engagement.

**“After COVID, some of us turned inward to focus on emotions, while others reinterpreted traditional culture in contemporary ways.”** Another said, **“Sometimes I use Lao symbols like Patuxai or old banknotes to comment on society and the economy.”**



## DIGITAL TOOLS AND PLATFORMS SUCH AS FACEBOOK, TIKTOK, AND DESIGN SOFTWARE ARE ESSENTIAL FOR CREATION, PROMOTION, AND FEEDBACK.



*“Most promotion now happens on Facebook and TikTok. I even got a new client once through TikTok.”*

Another explained, *“Digital tools make creating easier and more efficient,”* while others added a note of caution, *“AI can be useful as a tool, but the results often feel too much like a machine and lack real life.”* Survey results supported this, with 21 out of 22 respondents reporting that they primarily promote through social media, using it to share work-in-progress, seek feedback, build visibility, and research international trends, while fewer relied on exhibitions, word of mouth, or printed media. Digital platforms are central to creative development and promotion. Artists and cultural professionals are also experimenting with new technologies, including variable fonts, AI-generated design, virtual world elements, and digital painting.

The growing use of digital platforms reveals a strong trend in Lao PDR creative practice, with artists and cultural professionals relying on social media, design software, and emerging tools such as AI and variable fonts to create, promote, and connect. This reflects a wider demand among Lao artists and cultural professionals to remain relevant and to link their work to local, regional and global networks. Digital engagement provides opportunities for visibility, collaboration, and upskilling, positioning artists and cultural professionals to access new markets and professional growth.

## IDENTITY, EMOTION, AND MENTAL HEALTH HAVE EMERGED AS CENTRAL THEMES, WITH ART USED FOR SELF-EXPRESSION, STORYTELLING, AND THERAPEUTIC REFLECTION.



Themes of personal identity, emotion, mental health, and spirituality are increasingly present in artistic content. One interviewee explained, *“Inspiration comes from everyday life and simple observations. Art is a reflection of lived experience.”* Another shared, *“After COVID, many young artists focus on their own feelings and memories.”*

Several described art as therapy, with one noting, *“The process itself, even before the work is finished, is already art.”* Artists and cultural professionals described their work as being driven by lived experience,

emotional memory, or self-discovery. Storytelling is often autobiographical or location-based, reflecting daily life, community, or cultural memory. Some noted that art has become a form of therapy or a way to process internal states, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This trend points to an ongoing transformation of artistic expression from tradition to contemporary art in Lao PDR. Artists and cultural practitioners are moving beyond representation of external culture towards a more contemporary, self-expressive mode, that explore identity, emotion, and mental health. It gradually aligns Lao PDR practice with wider global trends in art, that place wellbeing, personal narrative, and lived experience at the centre.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS, SELF-ORGANISED POP-UPS, AND YOUTH-DRIVEN HYBRID VENUES SUCH AS CAFÉS, INFORMAL GALLERIES, AND CREATIVE HUBS ARE BECOMING IMPORTANT PLATFORMS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INDEPENDENT EXPRESSION IN THE ABSENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE.



Several artists and cultural professionals highlighted the role of solo exhibitions and self-organised pop-ups in gaining recognition, especially as formal venues remain limited. Urban-based creative spaces like The Art House serve as informal hubs where youth engage with visual art outside of academic settings. Emerging curatorial formats and hybrid uses of café, studio, and gallery spaces are becoming more common. *“Collections are often created just for exhibitions, even when resources are limited.”* Another noted, *“Installation and digital art are becoming more popular among young artists who want to show their work in new formats.”*

The growing use of informal spaces highlights the resilience of artists and cultural professionals, who recognise the need for platforms while also adapting to the local context. By maximising existing resources, they often complement local businesses through their artistic skills in exchange for space to showcase their work.

*The growing use of informal spaces highlights the resilience of artists and cultural professionals, who recognise the need for platforms while also adapting to the local context.*



INTERNATIONAL EXPOSURE THROUGH EDUCATION OR RESIDENCIES IS INFLUENCING CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES, MATERIALS, AND EXHIBITION FORMATS.



There is also a noticeable influence from international education, residencies, and exposure to other Southeast Asian arts scene. One interviewee reflected, **“Studying abroad showed me new approaches to materials and formats.”** Another added, **“Animation is such a powerful and accessible medium for storytelling. It inspired me after seeing it used overseas.”** Others stressed the regional dimension, saying that **“Exchange across Southeast Asia has really expanded our perspectives and networks.”** Artists and cultural professionals returning from Japan, the Philippines, or Malaysia described how these experiences shaped their material use, exhibition formats, and conceptual approaches. Survey responses support this trend, with several participants noting the value of international collaboration and mobility for expanding networks and bringing in new ideas.

These trends collectively indicate that Lao PDR artists and cultural practitioners are increasingly positioning themselves within a regional and global art ecosystem, using international experiences to enrich local practice. It reflects a growing openness to mobility, collaboration, and cross-cultural dialogue, which is gradually shifting Lao creative practice from being locally bounded towards being regionally and internationally engaged.

ART IS INCREASINGLY USED AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL IMPACT, INCLUDING PROJECTS FOCUSED ON DISABILITY INCLUSION, LEGAL EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY HEALING.

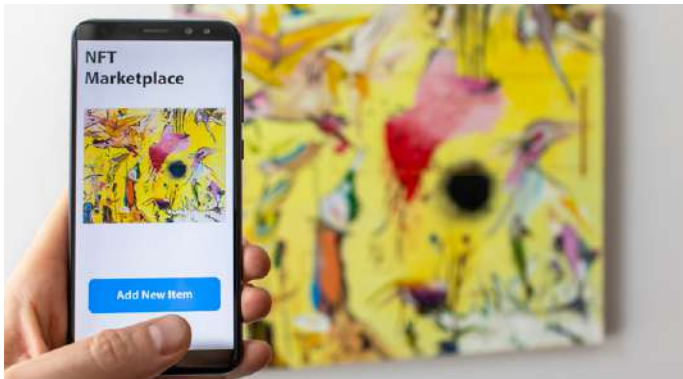


As one interviewee described, **“Some of us are working with communities on accessibility and inclusion, and that is becoming part of the art itself.”** Survey respondents also noted that art in Lao PDR is increasingly recognised as a tool for social responsibility and collective wellbeing, where creative practice is used to empower communities, raise awareness, and drive inclusion.

This illustrates a broader shift toward socially engaged art, aligning Lao creative practice with global movements that see art as both cultural expression and a form of civic engagement. From observation, more NGOs and organisations are also funding art initiatives that engage directly with communities. As a result, socially engaged practice is becoming a central factor for many artists and cultural professionals when developing projects, with community impact often considered alongside artistic expression.

CURRENT TRENDS IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS ARE BUILDING PERSONAL BRANDS, MANAGING THEIR OWN DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS, AND BLENDING CREATIVE WORK WITH LIFESTYLE, FASHION, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP.



One interviewee explained, **“Young people are rising because of technology and social media. They can create on tablets and post immediately.”** Another said, **“I started learning about NFTs because I see them as both an artistic and business opportunity.”** Across practices, artists and cultural professionals are increasingly moving towards self-branding, managing their own distribution channels, and building unique artistic identities. Their work often bridges personal stories with collective memory, traditional visuals with digital experimentation, and local inspiration with international formats such as installation-based storytelling.

Lao artists and cultural professionals are not only makers but also cultural entrepreneurs, who are actively shaping their visibility, markets, and professional pathways. It highlights a growing independence within the sector, where artists and cultural professionals combine creative practice with entrepreneurial strategies to sustain themselves and connect to global networks.

“Young people are rising because of technology and social media. They can create on tablets and post immediately.”





## CHALLENGES FACED BY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS

### LACK OF CONSISTENT AND ACCESSIBLE FUNDING REMAINS THE MOST URGENT BARRIER FACED BY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS.



Out of 22 respondents, 14 identified lack of funding as one of the biggest challenges they face as artists and cultural professionals in Lao PDR. A central concern raised across interviews was the lack of consistent funding to sustain creative work. Many artists and cultural professionals reported having no access to grants or institutional support and instead relied on personal savings or one-off commissions to continue producing work. Some mentioned that the instability of sponsorships often led to cancellations or last-minute changes in plans, and several pointed out the emotional and financial toll of repeatedly self-financing their own projects.

*“It is hard to really focus on art when you are never sure about money, and the politics and economy just make it riskier,”* explained one interviewee. Another admitted, *“Many of us cannot rely only on art, we have to do side jobs to survive.”* A third added, *“Sponsorship is still rare, and exhibitions often depend on whether a sponsor will support or not.”*

Artists and cultural professionals in Lao PDR face a fragile and unstable funding environment where reliance on personal savings, side jobs, and one-off sponsorships disrupts creative continuity. This financial uncertainty generates emotional strain and burnout, eroding resilience and limiting opportunities for professional growth. Without consistent support mechanisms, artists and cultural professionals struggle to invest in long-term projects or build visibility, leaving the sector vulnerable to disruption. Broader political and economic instability further compounds this precarity, making artistic livelihoods even more insecure.

*A central concern raised across interviews was the lack of consistent funding to sustain creative work. Many artists and cultural professionals reported having no access to grants or institutional support and instead relied on personal savings or one-off commissions to continue producing work.*

### MINIMAL INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT, NGOS, OR INTERNATIONAL BODIES LIMITS ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS’ DEVELOPMENT.



One interviewee said, *“Most of the support I have had comes from individuals, not any big institutions, and it is always small and temporary.”* Another reflected, *“I have received international support before, but never anything lasting from the institution here in Lao PDR.”* Institutional support was noted as minimal or absent. Artists and cultural professionals shared that most initiatives in the sector are led by private individuals or organisations, while government bodies and NGOs play a limited role. Several stated that support is generally short-term and based on specific events, with no long-term strategy or public infrastructure to nurture artistic development.

The testimonies highlight an ecosystem where institutional support is fragmented, temporary, and unreliable. Cultural development is largely driven by individuals rather than systemic structures, leaving artists and cultural professionals without consistent pathways for growth. The absence of a national strategy or policy framework to nurture creativity reinforces dependence on external or ad hoc initiatives. Such a weak institutional environment undermines long-term sector resilience and prevents the arts from being integrated into broader national development agendas.



## SEVERE INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS EXISTS, ESPECIALLY OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL, INCLUDING A LACK OF PUBLIC GALLERIES, TRAINING CENTRES, AND EXHIBITION PLATFORMS.



Eight respondents cited limited access to exhibition spaces, confirming what many interviewees also raised as a persistent challenge. Public galleries are rare, especially outside the capital. In provinces like Luang Prabang, artists and cultural professionals indicate that private galleries are the only available option. Participation in larger events are often limited to artists and cultural professionals with strong networks or those based in Vientiane. The limited number of venues means that opportunities to showcase work are scarce, particularly outside the capital.

One explained, *“There are not enough places to show our work. If we had more galleries or venues, the whole arts scene would feel stronger,”* one interviewee explained. Another noted, *“Most of the time there are only one or two big events a year, and that is not enough for artists to grow.”* A third described feeling discouraged, saying, *“When there is nowhere to present your work, people do not even know it exists.”*

The testimonies reveal a structural weakness in cultural infrastructure that restricts visibility and limits the growth of the sector. The lack of public galleries, training centres, and exhibition platforms prevents the development of a sustainable cultural ecosystem. Without broader infrastructure, artistic work remains disconnected from national audiences and unable to expand beyond isolated initiatives.

## LIMITED ACCESS TO TRAINING AND MENTORSHIP HAS LEFT MANY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS SELF-TAUGHT AND WORKING WITHOUT FEEDBACK OR GUIDANCE.



Another eight respondents selected limited access to training or education. Many interviewees highlighted the lack of foundational art education and training. Several pointed out that there are few programmes available for young artists and cultural professionals to build core skills such as anatomy, sketching, or typography. Others noted that mentorship is lacking, and many artists and cultural professionals work alone without opportunities for feedback, critique, or professional growth. For example, an artist working in type design described *“There are not many formal classes, just small private lessons here and there.”*

## CHALLENGES FACED BY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS

This absence of dedicated education programmes or platforms has left many practitioners develop their skills without structured guidance or feedback.

The testimonies point to a systemic gap in training and mentorship that restricts the professionalisation of the creative sector. Without formal structures for skill-building, artists and cultural professionals are left to rely on fragmented or informal learning, which limits innovation and weakens artistic quality over time. The absence of mentorship further compounds isolation, preventing knowledge transfer across generations. This signals that the sector lacks the institutional foundations necessary to sustain long-term artistic development and international competitiveness.

## EMOTIONAL BURNOUT AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS ARE COMMON DUE TO THE PRESSURES OF WORKING IN ISOLATION WITHOUT STRUCTURAL SUPPORT.



Six respondents reported limited public awareness or understanding of the arts. Artists and cultural professionals expressed that their work is often undervalued and misunderstood, especially in contemporary or abstract forms where audiences remain small and limited to those with financial means. *“The arts scene here is so small and scattered that a lot of us feel like we are working in our own little world without much connection,”* said one interviewee. Another explained, *“I use art to cope with stress, but there is no real system to support our wellbeing.”* A third reflected, *“Some people are always visible, but many of us are overlooked completely.”* Emotional and mental health challenges were also shared. Some artists and cultural professionals use their work as a coping mechanism but described the lack of mental health support systems. The need to take on multiple roles, such as producing, promoting, and managing their own work, has led to burnout. Others reported difficulty gaining recognition, especially when they are not visible online or lack personal connections.

The testimonies reveal how structural gaps in support systems contribute to emotional exhaustion and a sense of isolation. Artists and cultural professionals are compelled to carry multiple responsibilities without institutional or mental health resources, resulting in burnout and reduced creative capacity. Lack of recognition and visibility within society further undermines motivation and reinforces feelings of invisibility. The absence of wellbeing structures is not only a personal challenge but a systemic weakness that threatens the sustainability of the sector as a whole.



## LIMITED LEGAL KNOWLEDGE LEAVES ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS VULNERABLE IN PROTECTING THEIR WORK AND RIGHTS.



Artists and cultural professionals often lack awareness of copyright and personal rights, leaving them at risk of exploitation. Several stressed that education in this area is urgently needed to help them navigate professional opportunities with confidence. As one interviewee explained, **“Artists do not really understand copyright or personal rights, and we need more education about this.”**

The lack of legal literacy signals a structural gap in professional capacity that weakens the bargaining power of artists and cultural professionals. Without knowledge of copyright and rights protection, practitioners are exposed to unfair practices and unable to safeguard their intellectual property. This not only limits individual confidence but also constrains the sector’s ability to professionalise and participate on equal terms in regional or international markets. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring fair recognition and sustainable livelihoods for cultural workers.

## DIGITAL AND LANGUAGE LIMITATIONS HINDER VISIBILITY, PROMOTION, AND ACCESS TO INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION.



Digital infrastructure was also noted as a challenge. While some artists and cultural professionals have gained exposure through social media platforms like TikTok, others shared that algorithm changes reduced their visibility. High costs of equipment and limited digital literacy further restrict participation in digital art or online promotion. Artists working in Lao font design also highlighted technical issues with outdated font systems, which make their work difficult to use on modern platforms. An artist explained **“In Lao PDR, the fonts we have are few and old some have been used for decades already. They just do not work well for modern digital use.”**

Language barriers were frequently mentioned as a limitation for international engagement. As one artist explained **“Language is the biggest barrier. It stops us from really connecting with the international art world,”** Another admitted, **“When you do not know English well, you cannot apply for things or communicate with people outside Lao PDR.”** Several artists and cultural professionals shared that they had missed opportunities because of limited English skills or difficulties in navigating application processes. This has contributed to a sense of hesitation or insecurity when presenting their work outside of Lao PDR.

The evidence points to structural challenges in both digital access and language capacity that restrict the visibility and global reach of Lao artists and cultural professionals. Outdated digital systems, costly equipment, and limited training create barriers to full participation in contemporary creative practices.

At the same time, limited English proficiency curtails opportunities for international exchange and professional development, fostering hesitation and insecurity when presenting work abroad. Together, these limitations reinforce isolation and prevent artists and cultural professionals from connecting with wider markets and networks, weakening Lao PDR’s presence in the international cultural landscape.

## SOCIAL UNDERVALUATION OF THE ARTS CONTINUE TO AFFECT PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING, AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT, AND THE PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY OF ARTISTIC CAREERS.



One interviewee explained, **“In Lao society, most people still see art as just decoration, not something with deeper meaning.”** Artists and cultural professionals described this lack of recognition and visibility remains uneven. Several interviewees stated that only a few artists and cultural professionals consistently receive funding or public exposure while many outside of these networks operate in isolation or feel overlooked. Another reflected, **“People often look down on some kinds of art as something small, but for us it is real creative work with value.”** Niche practices, such as typography or sound art were highlighted as being particularly misunderstood or unsupported.

These testimonies reveal a persistent undervaluation of the arts that undermines public understanding and the perceived legitimacy of artistic careers. When art is reduced to decoration, it erases its social, cultural, and economic significance. The unequal recognition of certain practices also deepens inequality in the sector, reinforcing exclusivity and leaving many artists and cultural professionals marginalised within society. This social perception limits audience engagement and weakens the status of art as a viable profession, signalling a need for broader cultural awareness and recognition.



## GEOGRAPHICAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS PREVENT RURAL AND LOW-INCOME ARTISTS AND CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS FROM PARTICIPATING IN NATIONAL EVENTS OR PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

Artists and cultural professionals based in rural provinces face additional geographic barriers. Travel expenses, lack of reliable transportation, and limited access to information about opportunities limit their ability to participate in national events. Most opportunities are concentrated in Vientiane, meaning those outside the capital struggle to connect with wider networks or audiences. One interviewee shared, *“Many of us have to pay for our own studies and support our work ourselves. Moving from the countryside to the city makes it even harder.”* Another explained, *“Travel costs are so high that many artists outside the capital just miss out on opportunities.”* These barriers combine with weak national outreach, continue to exclude rural practitioners from larger events and exhibitions.

This challenge highlights how limited transportation accessibility and uneven national distribution systematically disadvantage rural and low-income practitioners. Exclusion from mobility, networks, and platforms weakens the diversity and inclusivity of the cultural sector, reinforcing inequalities and limiting its overall development.

One interviewee shared, *“Many of us have to pay for our own studies and support our work ourselves. Moving from the countryside to the city makes it even harder.”* Another explained, *“Travel costs are so high that many artists outside the capital just miss out on opportunities.”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### Policy and Institutional Recommendations

#### Clear and Consistent Cultural Policy

Artists and cultural professionals consistently raised concerns over the absence of a coherent national framework for culture. As one explained, *“We need clear policies and consistency. Right now the arts are not valued because there is no real plan.”*

This lack of policy has reinforced minimal institutional support, leaving cultural development dependent on short-term or fragmented initiatives. To address this, the government could begin by recognising major cultural events within national agendas, providing them with credibility and sustainability. While developing a comprehensive cultural policy and funding architecture may take time, immediate recognition and direct funding of widely attended annual events would suggest a commitment to treating culture as a legitimate component of national development. At the same time, establishing an arm's length arts council model, or at minimum an interim independent funding panel, would add credibility and transparency, ensuring cultural support is delivered fairly and consistently rather than through ad hoc sponsorships.

#### Better Funding and Investment Mechanisms

Artists and cultural professionals envision a future where strong public support, accessible education, and inclusive policies enable the creative sector to grow. However, funding remains fragmented and inconsistent, forcing many to rely on one-off sponsorships or personal savings. As one interviewee explained, *“Without money, it is impossible to create. We need real support that is more than just short events.”*

This lack of sustainable financing prevents long-term planning and undermines the broader ecosystem of curation, production, and presentation. Another respondent stressed, *“Funding should not only go to artists but also to curators, producers, and spaces that make the whole ecosystem possible.”*

A robust approach would combine transparent state mechanisms with incentives for private partnerships. Practical measures could include government provision of buildings to serve as cultural and creative spaces, or requiring large companies to contribute a small percentage of profits, whether in cash or in kind resources such as space, equipment, or materials.



Embedding such mechanisms, together with multiyear funding windows and publicly available grant calendars, would reduce reliance on short-term sponsorships, strengthen credibility, and allow artists and organisations to plan strategically rather than facing last minute uncertainty.

Strengthen Legal and Rights Protection for Artists and Cultural Professionals

Artists and cultural professionals increasingly recognise the importance of legal knowledge as part of professional practice, particularly in relation to copyright, contracts, and international regulations. However, limited awareness has left many practitioners vulnerable to exploitation and excluded from cross-border opportunities. As one artist explained, **“Artists do not really understand copyright or personal rights, and we need more education about this.”**

A national programme of legal education is essential to safeguard practitioners, build confidence, and ensure fair participation in regional and global exchanges. This could be reinforced through pro bono legal services and bilingual template contracts in Lao and English, enabling practitioners to navigate opportunities with greater security and confidence.

Sectoral and Organisational Recommendations

More Exhibition Spaces and Decentralised Infrastructure

There is a rising trend among artists and cultural professionals to adapt informal solutions such as pop-up exhibitions in cafés or other temporary venues. These initiatives reflect the resilience of creative practitioners who create opportunities by making use of available spaces. However, the lack of formal exhibition venues remains a serious concern, especially outside Vientiane. One respondent noted,

**“Most of the time exhibitions happen only once or twice a year, and that is not enough for artists to develop.”**

Addressing this gap requires organisational leadership in developing decentralised infrastructure, including regional exhibition spaces, open call programmes, and national events. Expanding beyond the capital would give artists and cultural professionals in rural and provincial areas the chance to present their work and engage audiences, reducing inequalities in access to cultural platforms.

To complement this, micro grants for cross disciplinary production could support experimentation across media, enabling practitioners to prototype hybrid works for these new spaces. Additional measures such as small venue upgrade grants and a pop-up permit pathway would also help legitimise informal and ‘youth-driven platforms, making them more sustainable and better connected to audiences.

Stronger Art Education and Skill-Building Systems

Young artists and cultural professionals are increasingly seeking spaces for skill-building, feedback, and experimentation, with growing interest in mentorship, peer learning, and creative entrepreneurship. Despite this demand, access to training and mentorship remains extremely limited, leaving many practitioners self-taught and working in isolation. The absence of structured feedback and professional guidance restricts artistic growth, weakens innovation, and reduces the sector’s long-term sustainability.

Organisations, universities, and creative hubs therefore have a critical role to play in establishing training systems that cover both artistic fundamentals and professional skills. By embedding mentorship programmes, peer networks, and opportunities for solo or small-scale exhibitions, described by one respondent as **“platforms that help young artists build confidence and take the next step,”** the sector can nurture resilience and

ensure that professionalisation extends beyond a few privileged circles. To strengthen this system further, national platforms for feedback and exchange, opportunities for artists to present their work and receive guidance, and programmes that build teaching and mentoring capacity. This measure will support knowledge transfer and build stronger feedback loops across generations.

International Exchange and Respectful Collaboration

International exchange is seen as vital for artistic growth, with experiences abroad often described as life changing. Despite this enthusiasm, limited opportunities, compounded by language barriers and minimal institutional support, mean that many artists and cultural professionals remain excluded from cross-border collaboration.

Organisational leadership is needed to design exchange programmes that are accessible, culturally grounded, and equitable. This means ensuring reciprocity, avoiding tokenism, and embedding respect for Lao cultural identity within collaborative frameworks. To support this in practice, targeted language bursaries and application support workshops could be developed to help practitioners overcome barriers in grant writing, residency applications, and international communication.

Digital Innovation and Cultural Identity

There is strong interest in digital innovation, with artists and cultural professionals eager to experiment with tools such as three-dimensional printing, AI, and digital design. Yet high costs, outdated systems, and limited training continue to block access, leaving many struggling to remain visible and competitive.

Organisations should prioritise developing digital labs, training programmes, and shared access to equipment. Supporting innovation in this way would enable artists and cultural professionals to explore new technologies while retaining cultural identity through practices such as font

creation, ensuring that digital growth strengthens rather than erases heritage. To maximise impact, this should be combined with training in digital marketing and analytics to expand visibility, as well as subsidised connectivity or equipment lending schemes to lower barriers to participation in the digital economy. Establishing accessibility standards for Lao fonts, making sure the Lao written language is accessible to everyone in modern digital environments. For example, providing open-sources option and ensuring Lao text is compatible across operating systems, software, and design tools.

Fairer Access and Transparent Selection Processes

Artists and cultural professionals have also raised concerns about fairness in selection processes. This reflects a wider challenge of exclusivity and gatekeeping, which discourages emerging practitioners and reinforces inequality in the sector.

Organisations should adopt transparent and inclusive systems for open calls, exhibitions, and partnerships. Publishing clear criteria, diversifying selection committees, and supporting peer networks would help build trust, expand participation, and ensure that access is not confined to established circles. At the same time, public awareness campaigns, enrichment of school arts curricula, and partnerships with media organisations could shift perception more broadly, strengthening recognition of art as a valued profession and encouraging wider audience engagement.





## Artists and Cultural Professionals, and Community-Level Recommendations

### Inclusive Programming and Reduced Urban Bias

Community engagement is increasingly seen as both an artistic duty and a development strategy, with artists and cultural professionals using their practice to support disability inclusion, legal storytelling, and youth creativity. Yet geographical and economic barriers continue to prevent rural and low-income practitioners from accessing national opportunities. Audiences and resources remain concentrated in Vientiane, reinforcing exclusion.

Expanding inclusive programming and reducing urban bias would strengthen participation, diversify audiences, and ensure that creativity contributes to wider social development. By prioritising communities beyond the capital, artists and cultural professionals can embed social impact into their work while ensuring broader representation across the sector. This should be supported by travel bursaries and regional touring circuits to prevent rural practitioners from being excluded and to bring cultural programming to audiences beyond Vientiane. In parallel, practical guidance on impact evaluation for socially engaged art would help practitioners demonstrate their contribution to community wellbeing and reinforce donor confidence.

### Mentorship and Support for Youth and Early-Career Artists and Cultural Professionals

Youth and early-career artists and cultural professionals are increasingly seeking mentorship, solo shows, and safe spaces for experimentation, reflecting a strong desire to build both skill and confidence. As one respondent noted, supportive environments are vital because ***“emotional wellbeing and social connection are part of artistic growth.”*** However, limited access to training and mentorship has left many practitioners self-taught and working in isolation, restricting their development and reinforcing inequality.

To address this, the sector should establish mentorship ladders, youth focused platforms, and safe experimental spaces. These initiatives would build technical skills while also providing emotional and professional support, ensuring that the next generation of artists and cultural professionals can thrive with confidence and resilience. Embedding wellbeing and mental health support within these programmes, including referral partners, peer support circles, and training in self care, would add an essential safety net for practitioners working under pressure.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This mapping reveals a cultural and creative sector in Lao PDR marked by resilience, innovation, and deep cultural engagement, but constrained by structural gaps and limited institutional support. Artists and cultural professionals are actively exploring new forms, merging traditional motifs with digital media, and responding to social issues through personal and community-based work. However, persistent challenges such as funding insecurity, lack of training, limited exhibition spaces, and digital exclusion continue to hinder growth.

Despite minimal public infrastructure, artists and cultural professionals are building independent platforms, developing hybrid practices, and fostering collaboration. Their work highlights a strong desire for recognition, mentorship, and inclusive policies that support creativity beyond urban centres.

The findings underscore the urgency of long-term investment in cultural infrastructure, decentralised support, and both legal and digital empowerment. With clear policy direction and cross-sector collaboration, the CCI in Lao PDR has the potential to become a powerful driver of social inclusion, cultural continuity, and sustainable development. By centring artists and cultural professionals' lived experiences, this mapping offers a grounded and actionable foundation for designing culturally responsive and sustainable strategies. Future research and dialogue may build on these findings to explore policy development, programme models, and collaborative frameworks.



# CREDITS

## Rooted In Practice: A Mapping of Lao PDR’s Creative Ecosystem Led by Artists and Cultural Professionals

### PUBLISHED BY

Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)  
31 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119595  
T: +65 6874 9700  
F: +65 6872 1135  
[www.ASEF.org](http://www.ASEF.org)

### SERIES EDITOR

Valentina RICCARDI, Kerrine GOH, ASEF

### RESEARCHER

Manithip VONGPHACHANH, [The XYZ Art and Culture Centre](#)

### DESIGN

Lorenza Lizares

All rights reserved © Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), October 2025  
Download from [culture360.ASEF.org](http://culture360.ASEF.org)  
All images courtesy of [The XYZ Art and Culture Centre](#)



ASEF is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation which promotes understanding, strengthens relationships and facilitates cooperation among the people, institutions and organisations of Asia and Europe. It seeks to enhance dialogue and exchanges, and encourage collaboration across ASEF’s seven thematic areas of Culture, Education, Governance, Economy, Media, Public Health and Sustainable Development. Founded in 1997, ASEF is based in Singapore and the only institution of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). Together with over 200 partner organisations, ASEF has conducted nearly 270 projects, mainly conferences, seminars and workshops. More than 41,000 Asians and Europeans have participated in ASEF’s activities and it has reached out to a wider audience through its social media network, websites, publications and exhibitions.

For more information, please visit [ASEF.org](http://ASEF.org).



[culture360.ASEF.org](http://culture360.ASEF.org) is a portal initiated by the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and managed by the Culture Department at the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). ASEF culture360 aims to stimulate the cultural engagement between Asia and Europe and enhance greater understanding between the two regions. Created for and fuelled by artists, cultural practitioners and policy makers, ASEF culture360 is your platform to inform, exchange ideas, interact and collaborate with the arts and cultural communities across Asia and Europe. As a reference tool, and a place for dialogue, this exciting portal will take cultural cooperation between Asia and Europe to a whole new level.

WITH THE SUPPORT OF



Co-funded by  
the European Union



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM  
Federal Public Service  
Foreign Affairs,  
Foreign Trade and  
Development Cooperation





# ROOTED IN PRACTICE: A MAPPING OF LAO PDR'S CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM

