



PROMOTING WOMEN'S

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

WITH ETHNIC GROUPS

IN THE MEKONG

A LAOS CASE STUDY



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This factsheet shares learnings from CARE Australia’s strategic evaluation of our Women’s Economic Empowerment programming in the Mekong, with a focus on our work in Laos. Through analysis of CARE programming, the evaluation demonstrates how women from ethnic groups are gaining access to, and control over, economic resources, and how this in turn has led to socio-cultural changes at the individual, family, and community levels. The evaluation was jointly funded by CARE and the Australian Government through the Australia NGO Cooperation Program.

Why women’s economic empowerment in Laos?

While achievements in economic growth and poverty reduction in Laos have been impressive in recent years, rural poverty remains a major challenge. The majority of people in Laos who live in remote rural areas belong to diverse ethnic groups and, although complex, there is a strong link between poverty and ethnicity. Women in Lao ethnic communities have limited income earning potential due to gender norms which focus on household and reproductive roles. They also experience heavy workloads and lack of mobility. The national legal and policy framework in Laos is quite favourable to the protection of women’s rights, though customary law and lack of access to services can mean that ethnic women living in remote communities do not benefit from legal protections and government policies.

What methods did the evaluation use?

This evaluation is based on a desk review of five projects implemented by CARE in Laos since 2005 combined with a field study of one of the projects. While none of the selected projects had a primary level objective focussed on women’s economic empowerment, the majority of project approaches included some aspect of targeting women, or wider empowerment aims combined with livelihoods approaches. Four of the projects reviewed aimed to improve food security and nutrition through a livelihoods approach, with the fifth project combining Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) clearance with livelihoods interventions. Every project included activities aimed at empowering women, and the approach evolved over time from a targeted to a mainstreamed approach, with the two most recent projects integrating gender equality throughout the project.



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What were the evaluation findings?

Program Impact

The evaluation concluded that a combined approach that increases women's inclusion in income earning activities while at the same time decreasing women's workload and promoting social norm change around gender roles has been successful in increasing the economic empowerment of women from remote ethnic groups in Laos.

Action to improve women's agricultural knowledge and capability, was combined with approaches to bring women together to identify and address problems. This has led to an increase in women's confidence, and ability to negotiate and solve problems. Through joint activities with women and men and through gender training, projects have seen women and men successfully working together to produce coffee and rice, to market their produce and to make decisions together. Changes in the communities have resulted in greater respect for women's contribution to family income and inclusion in family and village decision making. There also appears to be some influence on women's and men's desire to have fewer children and to increase the age of marriage.

"I am now in the irrigation group – I manage all of the village volunteers to build and maintain the irrigation system. This has resulted in much higher yields in the rice production and I am proud to be part of that. I am not nervous about being in this group as you have no need to be afraid of anything if you want things to be better. We don't want our lives to be like before. I am very happy. I would like things to get much better in the future. Other women feel the same. Women are much better than before as they can now express themselves in meetings" Woman irrigation group member, Dak Den.

"I use the money I earn from selling coffee to send my children to study housing engineering in Pakse. I paid 8,000,000 Kip [almost USD1,000] for the school fees and material for my children between October 2014 and January 2015. Some women also sent their daughters to study at the teachers' school in Salavan Province". Woman group member, Dak Den.





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Promising Practices

The combination of economic and social approaches has been a key to the effectiveness CARE's work on economic empowerment in Laos. This has enabled a more sustainable change as the social aspects have increased women's power and agency and have begun to address some of the barriers related to gender inequality in economic activity. At the same time the economic aspects have enabled women to start earning an income and to take a part in economic decision making. All of the reviewed projects contain some combination of the following initiatives:

- **Initiatives to enhance women's income earning by increasing their ability to produce and sell agricultural, garden and livestock produce.** This has meant building women's technical knowledge of agriculture, gardening and livestock, while at the same time building commercial awareness of the potential of cash crops, selling of surplus food and selling non-timber forest products. The inclusion of women in training initiatives such as study visits and courses while also giving them roles in cascading training through the village has increased women's status in the villages and their perceived value within the family. Livestock banks, used in two of the projects reviewed, appeared to be an effective way of increasing very poor women's access to food production and income earning potential as it enables shared ownership, responsibility and benefit for livestock.
- **Initiatives for women to form women-only groups and to become part of mixed gender groups,** such as coffee processing groups or livestock bank groups.

Participation in these groups has enhanced women's confidence, knowledge, ability to negotiate and communicate with peers (men and women), and to take part in village and project decision making. The increase in confidence appears to also extend to sales activities – with more women able and willing to leave the village to access markets. Notably in projects where there were no women's groups, the progress that women were able to make was limited.

- **Specific approaches to change social norms around women's and men's roles and gender inequality.** The evaluation found that gender training had a transformational impact on men's and women's attitudes and behaviour. This had supported the other project elements and had potentially contributed to a more sustainable change. Leadership of village heads and other influential people in the village was also found to be an important aspect of the social norm change around gender.
- **Initiatives to improve wellbeing through reduced workload and improved nutrition, sanitation and access to sexual and reproductive health services.** The evaluation found that women whose workload had decreased and nutrition had improved reported feeling more energetic and having more time to themselves and to earn an income. Women rated improved sanitation and village and household cleanliness as important aspects of the changes that have taken place in their lives. This highlights how hygiene and access to latrines can have a positive impact on women's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, which are important for women to be able to function as equals to men in income earning activities.

How will we put our learning into practice?

CARE promotes a culture of learning and continuous program improvement. This evaluation provides a solid foundation of analysis, learning and reflection to inform future women's economic empowerment practice and programming in the Laos and beyond. It is encouraging that many lessons from this study confirm forward directions that CARE is already progressing. Directions arising from the evaluation include:

Ensure that a thorough gender context analysis forms the basis of all project designs. This should follow CARE's existing tools such as the Women's Empowerment Framework.

Develop a more comprehensive approach to promoting women's inclusion in private sector development. This should be based on the analysis of what women need in order to develop their income earning potential and could include:

- Access to financial services such as savings and loans and insurance through Village Savings and Loan Associations, formal banking system, mobile money.
- Enhancing access to markets through making market connections (e.g. through Fairtrade), addressing physical and gender barriers to accessing markets (including innovative approaches to sales models, communications and physical market places).
- Private sector approaches that encourage collaboration and joint ownership within and between villages in order to enhance inclusion and income equality, while at the same time enabling bulk purchasing of inputs and bulk sales (e.g. cooperatives).

Ensure training has a long term approach and that it is appropriate for women. This should be based on women's needs and, where possible and beneficial, should be integrated with men's training. Training approaches could include:

- Mentoring and continued technical support.
- Integration of life skills into technical skills training.
- Cascading of training between men and women, throughout villages and between villages (particularly important where women's mobility is limited).

Support village, district and province champions for gender equality and women's empowerment.

- Enable village heads to improve their effectiveness and leadership of change processes.
- Strengthen the capability of Lao Women's Union representatives by ensuring they have a role on the projects.
- Support government champions to visit villages and to provide moral and technical support to gender equality approaches.

Produce a strategic approach to inequality and exclusion in the remote ethnic communities.

It is important to consider the whole community with respect to increasing income, rather than limiting benefits to a small number of people, because these remote ethnic communities are so closely knit and have high levels of cohesion and social capital which is part of their survival and success strategy.

Analyse and monitor the risks associated with social norm change, alcohol consumption and violence against women and children.

- Ensure there is a system for women to talk about violence in the family (for example through women's groups or with health workers) and to address through support systems and access to justice.
- Raise awareness of alcoholism within a health context and provide access to services.
- Monitor men's attitudes towards women's changing roles and ensure men's fears and concerns are listened to in order to avoid backlash and violence.

Address structural and enabling environment barriers.

- Connect the local services with the project activities in order to improve access to health, education and WASH services and to maximise impact for women's economic empowerment.
- Consider WASH initiatives that are women focused in order to support women's confidence building and family hygiene.
- Monitor and raise awareness of local and national policies and implementation of women's rights legislation in relation to customary law in ethnic areas.

Strengthen project and programme-level M&E processes based on appropriate mixed methods approaches. CARE should consider developing a set of standardized outcome-level indicators to be measured across programming initiatives which share a common focus on women's economic empowerment.



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ABOUT CARE

CARE works with poor communities in developing countries to end extreme poverty and injustice.

Our long-term aid programs provide food, clean water, basic healthcare and education and create opportunities for people to build a better future for themselves.

We also deliver emergency aid to survivors of natural disasters and conflict, and help people rebuild their lives.

We have 70 years' experience in successfully fighting poverty, and last year we helped change the lives of 72 million people around the world.



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This Laos Case Study Report is part of CARE Australia's Women's Economic Empowerment with Ethnic Groups in the Mekong Region Evaluation. For the Vietnam Case Study Report and Ex-Post Evaluation Report, please visit www.care.org.au/what-we-do/lessons-impact/

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