



**PROMOTING WOMEN'S**

**ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

**WITH ETHNIC GROUPS**

**IN THE MEKONG**

**A VIETNAM 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 Vietnam. 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 vietnam?

Although vietnam has undergone a socio-economic transformation over the last 20 years and is now categorised as a lower middle income country, the poverty rate among the country’s ethnic minority groups has increased over that period. The incidence of rural poverty is spatially correlated with the distribution of ethnic minority populations across the country and so is particularly high in the vietnam’s northern highland and mountainous regions.

Women in ethnic minority communities in vietnam experience multiple deprivations which take the forms of; limited access to education and training; limited or lack of voice in decision-making within their households and communities; limited engagement and visibility/ recognition in the public sphere; limited access to productive resources such as land and credit; limited mobility outside the household, heavy workloads and an extended working day; and high levels of domestic violence.

## What methods did the evaluation use?

This evaluation is based on a desk review of program documents for four initiatives implemented by CARE in Vietnam since 2004, combined with an ex-post field study of one of these initiatives. The interventions included two projects specifically promoting the economic engagement of poor ethnic minority women and men in northern mountainous regions, which both involved targeting strategies focussed on women, and two larger-scale programs designed to promote livelihood security and community-based initiatives for sustainable natural resource management and economic development. Although the sectoral focus and approaches adopted by these initiatives varied, all four included activities focussed on building women’s agency – including activities to promote women’s access to credit/ micro-finance - and on redefining norms and institutions through capacity-building work with partners and community-based organisations. The more recently implemented projects were characterised by an explicit focus on strengthening market linkages for rural producer groups.



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## What were the evaluation findings?

### Program Impact

The four programs reviewed have all contributed to promoting ethnic minority women's engagement in economic activities - mostly by increasing women's participation in small-scale household level agricultural production activities. In addition to evidence of these improvements in women's economic advancement, the country case study found evidence of positive impacts in relation to women's power and agency, with ethnic minority women reported to have developed new skills and knowledge, as well as confidence in applying those new skills and knowledge, leading to changes in relationships within and beyond their households.

The experiences of the four CARE Vietnam programming interventions consistently show that as women begin to take on a more active role in economic activities and begin to earn income and contribute more to household finances, so they are also able to begin to play a more active role in decision-making processes of their households and communities, thereby achieving further agency.

As men (and other women) begin to see women as skilled and capable income earners, they tend to respect and value women's views and contributions more, in what has the potential to become a mutually-reinforcing "virtuous circle" process of social change.

However, the experiences of these programs also indicate that transformative processes of changing social norms take time, and require the on-going engagement of women, men and community leaders in processes of dialogue and collective action. Involving women in training and capacity-building activities, enabling them to build stronger social networks through group membership structures, and facilitating their access to income-generating opportunities are important ways of promoting women's economic advancement, power and agency. In themselves, they are not enough to bring about the structural changes in formal and informal institutions required to create an enabling environment to facilitate and sustain advances in women's economic empowerment over the longer term.

Such initiatives can be complemented by using community- and couple-based approaches which promote men and women's improved understanding of gender relations.

### WOMEN'S VIEWS OF THEIR INCREASED CONFIDENCE

"Before the group's establishment, I had little knowledge. I could not dare to talk to strangers much and if somebody asked me something in a discussion like this, I felt very nervous. Nowadays I feel much more confident, I no longer feel nervous, I attend more meetings and talk openly to lots of people. However, although we are confident to communicate in our village, if I was attending the meeting at the commune and district village, I might be still tense and nervous." Woman participant, Son Phu VSL group.

### A MAN'S VIEW OF WOMEN'S INCREASED AGENCY

"I see that my wife has changed a lot since her participation in this group (a VSL group). She dresses more neatly and talks with a softer voice. Previously when there was a party in the village, I used to go as her husband (i.e. on behalf of the household). But now she is interested in going to the party in her own right. If they were not participating in this group, women would not be able to keep up with the development of society." Husband of Trung Hoi VSL group member.





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## Promising Practices

The evaluation identified examples of good practice from CARE programs in Vietnam which could be built upon to inform the development of future Women's Economic Empowerment initiatives. These include:

- The model of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) for informal savings and credit groups as a flexible programming platform in combination with training and/or awareness-raising activities.** The VSLA model provides a powerful and sustainable mechanism for promoting women's economic empowerment through a rights-based approach. In addition to the financial benefits of having access to savings and small-scale credit, the VSLA approach offers opportunities for women to develop their understanding of key issues (e.g. healthcare and nutrition practices, rights and legal) that form the broader context for their economic activities, and to build the social and leadership skills to act on their improved understanding.
- Conduct in-depth market analysis to identify opportunities for developing livelihood interventions based on productive activities that can offer sustainable returns to increased local-level production.** It must also be recognised that agricultural and consumer market analysis is difficult and prone to numerous uncertainties associated with changing production conditions and fickle consumer demand.
- Peer-to-peer learning mechanisms.** Such as Farmer Field Schools, farmer trainers, and/or cross-visits. These are effective approaches for promoting the uptake of technical knowledge relating to livelihood interventions, enhancing local ownership of such initiatives, building

confidence amongst target beneficiaries and promoting the empowerment of the individuals taking on the key farmer/ farmer trainer roles.

- Working with Mass Organisations as partners by means of participatory approaches.** The experiences of CARE projects of working through the Women's Union has demonstrated that Vietnam's mass organisations have the potential to be an extremely important component of the country's emerging civil society and can also play an important role in some aspects of technical service provision. confidence amongst target beneficiaries and promoting the empowerment of the individuals taking on the key farmer/ farmer trainer roles.

## 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 Vietnam 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 Women's Economic Empowerment focused projects include efforts to analyse market opportunities and enhance market linkages.** The selection and promotion of potential income generating activities for poor women in remote rural areas needs to be informed by strategic analyses of market opportunities to ensure the sustainability and impact of such activities for the groups being targeted.

**Ensure Women's Economic Empowerment programming interventions include a focus on building women's capacity for business planning and management and/or financial literacy.** For formally registered groups, capacity-building inputs in the form of specific trainings in business, book-keeping and marketing may be useful. However, for informal producer groups, the VSLA model has been found to provide an effective, practical way of building financial management skills.

**Develop the VSLA model to promote linkages with formal financial institutions.** Given the critical importance of access to capital for women engaging in small- to medium-scale economic activities, and the limitations of existing options for credit in rural communities in Vietnam, the option of developing the VSLA model further to promote linkages of mature (i.e. self-sustaining) VSLAs to formal financial institutions on a demand-driven basis is one that should be considered.

**Promote a deeper understanding of the incidence of gender-based violence and how it may be related to and influenced by women's engagement in economic activities.** The occurrence of gender-based violence was reported by project participants and key informants of the field study as a problem widely faced by women, but did not appear to have been explicitly addressed by any of the interventions reviewed. Given the recognition within and beyond CARE that women at risk of violence cannot become meaningfully empowered economic actors, this is an important gap in the programming model that should be addressed in future interventions designed to promote Women's Economic Empowerment. Programs designed to promote women's engagement in economic activities need at the very least to understand how this engagement may influence women's risk of experiencing violence, to ensure that projects adopt a Do No Harm approach.

**Incorporate approaches for engaging men and boys in challenging social norms.** Approaches for engaging men, which have been implemented successfully by CARE programmes in a range of other contexts, include the identification and promotion of male role models as champions for women's empowerment at the community-level, couple-based dialogues and gender training.

**Facilitate the active engagement in and ownership of duty-bearers at multiple levels** (e.g. authorities at local, commune and district levels) as a key factor for sustainability and replicability of Women's Economic Empowerment interventions.

**Ensure a stronger focus on advocacy, policy feedback and civil society strengthening,** to enable civil society organisations from the community level upwards to demand rights and services from state duty-bearers and ensure their accountability for their actions.

**Strengthen project and program-level design, monitoring and evaluation processes based on appropriate mixed methods approaches.** Programs which aim to facilitate Women's Economic Empowerment need to be designed in response to gender and power analyses identifying the barriers constraining women's economic advancement and power and agency, including aspects of relations and structures such as social norms.

CARE should consider developing a set of standardized outcome-level indicators to be measured across programming interventions 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 Vietnam Case Study is part of CARE Australia's Women's Economic Empowerment with Ethnic Groups in the Mekong Region Evaluation. For the Laos Case Study Report and Ex-Post Evaluation Report, please visit [www.care.org.au/what-we-do/lessons-impact/](http://www.care.org.au/what-we-do/lessons-impact/)

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