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Lessons learnt from gender impact assessments of hydropower projects in Laos and Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The World Commission on Dams' influential final report linked equitable and sustainable water and energy development, and the need for hydropower dam proponents to recognise rights, address risks, and safeguard the entitlements of all groups of affected people, including women. Yet since the report's publication in 2000, very limited attention has been given to the gendered effects of large hydropower dams. This situation must change, given that hydropower projects inevitably have considerable impact on women and gender relations. This article describes efforts by Oxfam, the Lao Women's Union, and the Center for Social Research and Development in Vietnam, to engage the hydropower sector on gender issues, and to work with companies and other stakeholders to pilot gender impact assessments of hydropower projects in Laos and Vietnam.

KEYWORDS

Gender impact assessment; hydropower; hydropower dams; resettlement; water governance

El influyente informe final de la Comisión Mundial de Represas vinculó el desarrollo equitativo y sostenible del agua y la energía con la necesidad de que los partidarios de la construcción de represas hidroeléctricas reconocieran los derechos, enfrentaran los riesgos y garantizaran los derechos de todos los grupos afectados, incluyendo a las mujeres. A pesar de ello, desde la publicación del informe en el año 2000, se ha dedicado poca atención a los efectos provocados por las grandes represas hidroeléctricas vinculados con el género, situación que debe cambiar, toda vez que estos proyectos inciden considerablemente tanto en las mujeres como en las relaciones de género. El presente artículo da cuenta de los esfuerzos realizados por Oxfam, la Unión de Mujeres de Laos y el Centro de Investigación Social y Desarrollo de Vietnam en el sentido de involucrar al sector hidroeléctrico en cuestiones de género y trabajar con las empresas y otros actores de manera de encabezar evaluaciones del impacto de género vinculado a proyectos hidroeléctricos en estos países.

L'influent rapport final de la Commission mondiale des barrages liait le développement équitable et durable de l'eau et de l'énergie d'une part et la nécessité que les partisans des barrages hydroélectriques connaissent les droits, abordent les risques et protègent les aspects auxquels ont droit tous les groupes de personnes touchées, y compris les femmes. Or, depuis la publication du rapport en 2000, c'est une attention très limitée qui a été accordée aux effets sexo-spécifiques des grands barrages hydro-électriques. Cette situation doit changer, au vu du fait que les projets hydro-électriques ont inévitablement un impact considérable sur les femmes et les relations entre les hommes et les femmes. Cet article décrit les efforts fournis par Oxfam, l'Union

des femmes laotiennes et le Centre de recherche sociale et de développement au Vietnam pour lancer le dialogue avec le secteur hydro-électrique sur les questions relatives au genre, et pour travailler avec des entreprises et d'autres parties prenantes en vue de piloter des évaluations de l'impact sur le genre des projets hydro-électriques au Laos et au Vietnam.

Introduction

For millions of people across the Mekong basin, water resources underpin their livelihoods and food security, and are an important aspect of people's cultural and spiritual lives. The Mekong River originates high in the mountains of the Tibetan Plateau, and flows through a wide variety of landscapes in six countries, before winding its way to the sea at the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The Mekong River and its tributaries are one of the most productive river fisheries in the world, contain a high degree of biodiversity, and are of great economic and social importance for people in the region (Coates *et al.* 2003). Yet these rivers are under serious threat from numerous hydropower projects.

Hydropower is currently developing rapidly in the six countries¹ of the Greater Mekong Sub-region. In Laos, government policy is to significantly expand energy production from hydropower. Hydropower development is driven by growing energy demands from domestic and commercial energy users, to support social and economic development, to provide energy security and, in the case of Laos, to generate income through the export of electricity to neighbouring countries including to Vietnam. In Laos, the government intends to develop 40–50 new hydropower projects by 2025, which is in addition to 20 existing projects (International Finance Corporation n.d., 1). The current master plan for power development in Vietnam includes the development of hydropower resources (particularly those that combine electricity production with flood control and water supply), along with other forms of renewable energy (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2016).

Despite the potential benefits hydropower offers (World Commission on Dams 2000), there is a downside. Large hydropower projects result in the displacement of whole communities, as areas that were once villages and towns become submerged under water as rivers are dammed. People are forced to move and re-establish their homes, livelihoods, and lives elsewhere. It has been estimated that between 40 million and 80 million people have been forcibly displaced by large dams globally (World Commission on Dams 2000, 1,439). Dam construction in Vietnam alone has displaced approximately 240,000 people to date, with two major hydropower dams, Hoa Binh and Son La, displacing an estimated 58,000 and 92,000 residents respectively (Singer *et al.* 2014, 86).

If hydropower is to benefit women and men living in poverty, it is essential to ensure their voices are heard in water governance. Water governance refers to the set of rules, practices, and processes for the management and use of water resources. These rules determine who gets what water, when, and how, and who has the right to water and related services, and their benefits (UNDP Water Governance Facility n.d.).

Oxfam's Mekong Regional Water Governance Program was designed to respond to these issues.² It is being delivered in partnership with 44 partners (from civil society, academia, government, and the private sector) across the Mekong countries, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.³ The programme aims to ensure there is fair sharing of water resources, and increased protection of river-dependent people's livelihoods and food security. It focuses on supporting increased inclusion of civil society and affected people, especially women and other marginalised groups, in water resource governance.

The rapid expansion of hydropower across the Mekong Sub-region matters for gender equality and women's rights. There is growing understanding of – and studies on – social and environmental impacts of large-scale hydropower in the region (Sneddon and Fox 2008). However, until recently, developers and governments have given very limited attention to the ways in which these projects affect gender roles and relations, and hence impact on women's rights (GIZ 2013). Large-scale projects are often presented as having the same impact on whole communities without a detailed analysis of the impact on particular groups. However, 'male bias' (Elson 1991) in the development process was first identified over 30 years ago, and this continues in many contexts today.

In response to this, the Mekong Regional Water Governance Program is supporting women's leadership in water governance decision-making processes. It is also promoting the use of gender analysis in hydropower decision-making, and is encouraging the hydropower sector to become more sensitive to the impact of its work on gender equality and women's rights.

A first step in ensuring infrastructure developments benefit women and men equally, and support longer-term positive change in gender relations, is to use gender analysis. Currently, there is no requirement in Vietnam for an assessment of the gender impacts of hydropower projects, or guidance on how such an assessment might be done and little practical experience within any stakeholder group of doing such an assessment. While gender-based discrimination is legally prohibited in Vietnam in the Law of Gender Equality (Law No.73/2006/QH11), there is no official attention to the effects of hydropower on women.

This investment has been largely missing to date, and Oxfam can play a role in enabling this process. This article describes innovative work in Laos and Vietnam that we undertook as part of the Mekong Regional Water Governance Program. Oxfam, the Lao Women's Union, and the Center for Social Research and Development in Vietnam, are working together to promote the use of gender impact assessment (GIA)⁴ of large hydropower projects.⁵

Gender impact assessment in hydropower

Oxfam developed the Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) Manual for hydropower in 2013 (Simon 2013). The manual is based on an earlier guide on GIA for mining projects, which has itself recently been updated (Hill *et al.* 2017). The GIA Manual for hydropower provides a set of tools and a process to support hydropower developers and other stakeholders

to better understand and address the gender impacts of hydropower projects, at different stages of river basin and project planning and implementation. The manual also supports project developers to design strategies to ensure that hydropower projects have a positive impact on both women and men by providing tools to enable an understanding of women and men's needs and interests.

The GIA Manual includes guidelines and tools for assessing the pre-project gender relations and status, predicting and measuring gendered impacts, and auditing gender action plans and results.

GIA provides detailed information on the impact of hydropower projects on women and men. The hydropower sector needs deliberate investment in gender analysis on the part of governments and hydropower developers, so they understand, predict, and therefore avoid, mitigate, and/or adequately compensate, the different effects of hydropower programmes on women and men. This enables them to consider how commitments made in community development, resettlement, and compensation plans associated with hydropower projects can not only address women's current social and economic needs, but also contribute to advancement in women's social and economic position. The process of GIA includes intentional consultation with women on their practical and strategic needs, thereby ensuring women are heard in the governance of hydropower, and providing an opportunity to advance women's economic and social status, and access to and control over resources.

In the next sections, we will describe how we conducted a GIA pilot project in Vietnam, and our preparations for piloting GIA in Laos. We will consider what we have learnt through this pilot process about the gendered impacts of hydropower. We will also reflect on the broader value of this work. The discussion draws on fieldwork for the GIA pilots conducted in Laos and Vietnam, between 2015 and 2017 (see Note 5). Where particular research respondents are mentioned, names are changed to protect confidentiality.

Gender, water resources, and hydropower in the context of Laos and Vietnam

In rural areas of Laos and Vietnam – and the other countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region – people are heavily reliant on rivers for their livelihoods. Women in particular play an important role in water usage and management within their households. They collect and carry water to the home, perform cleaning and washing duties at the river and participate in agricultural activities that are water-dependent. Yet women – and the issue of gendered roles and relations – have largely been seen as marginal in decision-making on water issues (Grant *et al.* 2016). This is compounded by limited opportunities for women's voices to be heard in decision-making from the household to the state. Water governance and hydropower decision-making are no exceptions to this rule.

The degree to which women are able to participate in and influence water governance decision-making processes must also be understood in, and take into account, the broader political context in Laos and Vietnam. There are some similarities worth noting in the two countries' political situations. Laos and Vietnam are both one-party states, where the space available for civil society to be recognised, operate, and contribute to decision-making is

limited (Le Quang *et al.* 2015), and corruption in both countries remains a major problem (Transparency International 2017). In such contexts, it can be difficult for communities and civil society groups to be able to influence water resource governance. Women face additional barriers, due to social norms about women's roles and responsibilities.

However, there are provisions within both countries' existing legislative frameworks which allow for public involvement and participation in environmental and social impact assessment processes. Civil society organisations and networks have been able to create spaces to advocate on water governance issues. In Vietnam, for example, there is a national-level river protection network – Vietnam Rivers Network – which monitors, evaluates, and advocates on policies and projects related to water resources, including hydropower development.⁶

The national constitutions of Laos and Vietnam protect the rights of both women and men. The Constitution of Laos specifically promotes women's progress, and Vietnam's specifically prohibits discrimination against women. Both Laos and Vietnam have specific legislation and national strategies on gender equality, and both countries have ratified key UN conventions on women's rights. At a regional level, all ASEAN⁷ countries have adopted the Vientiane Declaration on Enhancing Gender Perspective and ASEAN Women's Partnership for Environment Sustainability (ASEAN 2012).

Women's land rights are of particular relevance to hydropower development, given the sector's impact on land, and there is legislation in both countries that says that land acquired by a woman and man during their marriage is a shared asset, and that land titles or certificates for these assets must include the names of both the wife and husband. In Laos, the Property Law 1990 and Land Law 2003 are the relevant pieces of legislation. In Vietnam, the Law on Marriage and Family (1986, revised in 2000) and the Land Law (2013) are the relevant legislation. However, while joint titling is intended this does not always occur (Rao 2011).

The existence of national policy frameworks that promote gender equality and protect women's rights is necessary, but insufficient to guarantee women's rights. The laws need implementation, and there are significant gaps in the implementation of these frameworks in the context of hydropower development.

A high priority has been placed on gender mainstreaming⁸ in Laos policy and sectorial strategies, including those related to natural resource management. In Laos, hydropower developers are required to conduct an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment of their activities (in accordance with the Decree on Environmental Impact Assessment of 2010). In Vietnam, developers must conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (in accordance with the Law on Environmental Protection 2005, revised 2015, in Vietnam).

However, there are no specific requirements in either law that oblige project developers to assess the gender impact of their projects, or to consider how a project may affect women and men differently, as part of these assessments. Despite the existence of national policy frameworks that promote gender equality and protect women's rights, there are significant gaps in the implementation of these frameworks in the context of hydropower development.

The legal framework in Laos for the hydropower and energy sectors does contain some provisions that specifically protect the rights of women and recognise the gendered impacts of the sector. In 2015, the Government of Laos adopted its 'Policy on Sustainable Hydropower Development' (Decree No. 02/GoL), which requires that projects should develop 'gender development plans' prior to construction and implementation of the project. The subsequent guidelines on the policy note that social management and monitoring plans should take into account distributional impacts on – and participation of – vulnerable groups, including women. Further, the concession agreements that govern hydropower projects do contain gender provisions in some cases. In comparison, specific legislation and government policy on the energy sector in Vietnam are silent on gender. Given the importance attached to the expansion of hydropower in the region, this is a critical omission, which Oxfam has aimed to address in the work described in the next section.

The gender impact assessment pilots

In both Laos and Vietnam, the project teams followed a similar process of preparing for – and then conducting – the GIA pilots. In both countries, the GIA pilots are collaborations between the companies operating the hydropower projects, relevant government ministries, civil society organisations, and affected communities.

In the two pilot projects, a series of workshops and training workshops were held in March, May, and November 2016, with government, hydropower companies, individuals, and organisations from civil society, and affected community members in Laos and Vietnam. The workshops were designed to build stakeholder understanding of gender issues in river management and hydropower development, introduce Oxfam's GIA Manual, and encourage policy and practice change from government and companies. In addition to the workshops, private meetings were held with hydropower companies seeking their voluntary participation in the GIA pilots.

In Laos, the Lao Women's Union and Oxfam conducted context studies in 2015 in eight villages affected by the Nam Lik 1-2 and the Theun Hinboun hydropower projects. The aim was to gather information as a baseline. We also aimed to build our partners' skills to conduct a gender analysis, identify impacts, and learn together about how to use and adapt the tools in the GIA Manual. A further study in Laos is planned for August 2017. The Theun Hinboun Power Company has agreed to participate in a GIA to be conducted by Lao Women's Union in four villages in Khoumhoum and Hinboun districts in Khammouane province that are affected by the Theun Hinboun hydropower projects.

In Vietnam, a GIA of three villages affected by the A Luoi hydropower project was completed in late 2015 and a second GIA, focusing on three villages affected by the Srepok Hydropower project, was completed in 2016. These GIA pilots in Vietnam involved document review and focus group discussions and interviews in affected communities. The research teams used the tools in Oxfam's GIA Manual to guide their work (particularly the activity profile; access and control profile; institutional analysis; impacts and issues analysis; gender needs assessment; and women's empowerment analysis). The findings

from each GIA were shared with relevant stakeholders including with affected community members.

Gender impacts of hydropower projects: case studies from Laos and Vietnam

The GIA pilots around the A Luoi and Srepok dams in Vietnam, and the context studies around the Nam Lik 1-2 and Theun Hinboun dams in Laos,⁹ have revealed much about the impacts of hydropower projects on gender roles and relations.

Livelihoods: gendered roles and power relations

The A Luoi hydropower project in Vietnam provides a valuable case study on the different experiences of women and men who have been forced to resettle because of hydropower. One woman involved in the research, Mai (a pseudonym), explained that prior to the construction of the hydropower project, her family made a living from multiple activities: a small coffee plantation, shifting cultivation of rice, corn, and other vegetables, paddy rice cultivation, and the collection of non-timber forest products. These activities were shared between women and men, who would work together particularly in clearing land for cultivation and planting crops. Once crops were planted women would largely be responsible for taking care of the farm, while men undertook other activities such as hunting in the forest. Mai explained that while these activities did not make the family rich, life was relatively stable from year to year. She and her partner could afford to send their three children to school, and they were happy.

In contrast, life following resettlement in the A Luoi project was very different. Mai's family lost its main sources of livelihood. They were given low-quality land for rice paddies and acacia and cassava cultivation. Mai's husband had no other options but to become a wage labourer. His inability to pursue his traditional livelihood pursuits, and the overall economic decline of the family resulted in him 'turning from a hardworking man to an alcoholic and violent man', according to his wife (interview, 20 February 2016 and A Sap Village, Hong Thuong Commune, A Luoi District, Thua Thien – Hue Province, Vietnam).

The research team found that social norms prevented women affected by the A Luoi project from engaging in alternative livelihood options that might otherwise have been open to them after resettlement. These included wage labouring or illegal timber harvesting. Such work is considered to be physically strenuous, and not suitable for women. Women then became more financially dependent than previously on their husbands, because they have even fewer livelihood options than before. Men often resorted to more wage labouring after resettlement but this does not provide much security of income. We were told men's confidence has been undermined: both their confidence in society, and their own ability to support their families. Some people linked this to increased alcohol consumption and violence against women, as in the case of Mai, described above.

Some women resettled to make way for the A Luoi project were able to continue to pursue their usual livelihood activities at their new village, but reported that this involved

greater efforts than before. Some families were still able to grow crops in the new village. However, the older women and young girls who are responsible for selling the families' crops at the market had difficulties reaching the market, because their new village was located further away. This increased the amount of time it took to reach the market.

Our research in communities affected by the Srepok dam – also in Vietnam – had similar findings. There, communities had to adjust to changes in the economic structure of their community. The traditional economy was reliant on the natural environment for the collection and cultivation of fisheries, non-timber forest products, and vegetables, and that was seen by the community as having valued the role of women. Some of the communities are matrilineal, and women traditionally have leadership roles in families.

Participants in the research told us that after the Srepok dam was built and the community resettled, this traditional economy was destroyed. People then had to adapt to a market economy. Research participants reported that, as they see it, the new economic structure is characterised by the use of new technologies, and the exchange of money, but also reduced access to land and water resources, and a detachment from nature.

The research team heard that this economic transformation has reduced the role and position of women in the communities around the Srepok dam. While improved infrastructure has brought opportunities for trade and tourism, men have captured these opportunities as they are more likely to drive motorbikes or trucks and are able to access external services. It has also put new pressures on women in the form of increased domestic violence, more family care responsibilities, and greater household debt. Women are traditionally loan borrowers on behalf of the family and the increased availability of cash in some households has resulted in loans for businesses, children's education, and other family expenses being offered and accepted. All these changes have made women more dependent on men in the longer term.

Hydropower development fundamentally changes rivers (World Commission on Dams 2000). Dams alter the natural flow of rivers, disrupting the migratory patterns of fish, and reducing the number and type of fish found. Dams can also affect water quality, including by increasing amounts of sedimentation in the water and changing natural flood cycles. The opening and closing of the 'water gates' in hydropower dams can increase the rate at which riverbanks erode, often causing the loss of highly valued agricultural land. Some of these impacts can be felt a long way downstream of a dam.

During the context survey in Laos, the research team heard that the Nam Lik 1-2 and Theun Hinboun hydropower projects have resulted in increased riverbank erosion and more frequent landslides, and reductions in the availability of fish from dammed rivers. A number of families had lost agricultural land because of riverbank erosion caused by the dam. Agriculture is almost exclusively women's work in one of the villages the team visited, so the loss of agricultural land disproportionately affected women.

Both women and men engage in fishing activities in the resettled communities, although it is men more than women who tend to earn an income from the sale of fish.

The research team was told that men who continue to rely on fishing for their livelihoods have to travel further up or down the river to find fish, and in some cases have seen their incomes decline. However, some men have been able to gain employment with the hydropower company to the overall economic advantage of their families. But this alternative livelihood option, in the formal sector, does not appear to be available to women, who in many cases have seen income from their traditional livelihood activities decline. Women are therefore more dependent on male income than before, and this dependency weakens their bargaining power within marriage and the family.

Similar effects were also reported by research participants in the context study of the impact of the Theun Hinboun Expansion Project, also in Laos. The inundation of the reservoir area affected riverbank gardens, which were submerged, or ended up too far away from the resettlement site for most households. Home gardens have replaced riverbank gardens for many families, but income from home gardens is small compared with income from the much larger and more fertile riverbank gardens.

The link between gendered roles in livelihoods, and bargaining power in marriage and the family, is clear from these case studies. They echo findings from another study of the impact of hydropower in Bolikhamxay Province in Laos, where women – who are responsible for decision-making on riverbank gardens – have seen their control over decision-making and income decline (Weeratunge *et al.* 2016). While home and riverbank gardens were becoming less viable and profitable, fishing had become more important as a generator of income. Men dominate family decision-making about fishing. As such, women had fewer activities on which to make key decisions (especially in the absence of other sources of income such as weaving), and male-dominated livelihood activities increased in significance. The result was that the men ended up having more influence than women on decision-making relating to household livelihoods (Weeratunge *et al.* 2017).

Changes in cultural and spiritual life

Livelihoods are a critical element of human wellbeing, but there are other non-economic elements that contribute too. Participants in our research emphasised the inter-connectiveness of economic livelihoods with ideas about the meaning of life, culture, and religion.

For example, the spiritual lives and traditional cultures of many people around Vietnam's Srepok dam are very closely attached to the flow of the Srepok River. In Srepok, the damming of the river and the introduction of market-oriented and technology-based farming, concentrated resettlement and 'modernised' lifestyles – all of which may be attributed at least in part to the hydropower project – are interlinked to cultural and spiritual changes.

The research team heard from community members that the river is a living entity, containing living values for local people and that the 'death of the river' is a cause of profound spiritual loss for the community. The research team was told that the construction of the dam and the resettlement has resulted in a breakdown in traditional nature-human relationships. This has undermined indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and the leadership roles held by women, even in matrilineal groups.

Failure to include women in governance and decision-making

Our research found that there was a failure to involve women in consultation processes for the planning and implementation of resettlement, compensation, and livelihood programmes. In the case of the A Luoi project in Vietnam, the household-head, who is normally assumed to be male, was invited to meetings with the hydropower developer and government. The research team heard that women did not have the opportunity to participate in these meetings. The Vietnam Women's Union¹⁰ could have been an appropriate forum to convene meetings with women and the project developers and relevant government agencies. However, the Women's Union has not been consulted on this or, we understand, any other hydropower project in Vietnam.

The research team heard that the design of housing at the resettled community was based on the advice of the local government and a local 'people's committee'. The lack of consultation meant that the houses constructed by the company for families resettled for the A Luoi project did not have a bathroom. Instead bathrooms were built far from the houses. While houses are traditionally built with bathrooms outside, women reported in the research that they would actually prefer the bathroom inside the house. As a result, the bathrooms are infrequently used by women because of safety concerns. The houses were built in 2012, and it was only in 2015 that potable water was provided to each house. In the three-year period up to 2015, families had little choice but to consume poor-quality water, and many people believe this has resulted in health problems, such as increased rates of diarrhoea and skin diseases. Finally, the houses provided by the hydropower company were poorly constructed and leaked when it rained. As it is women who are responsible for the care of family members when they are sick and for the cleanliness of the house, the research team was told that women's workloads increased.

The absence of women from community consultation processes on compensation, and norms around the management of household finances in some communities, has meant that some women around the A Luoi project are not aware of how much compensation money their family had received. Their husbands participated in the compensation meetings and received the money on behalf of their families. Community members in the research reported that some men used that money for family needs, while others used the money for their 'drinking habits'.

Gender impact assessment: what is its value? Experience to date

One of the greatest values of GIA is its ability to gather information that allows us to have a much better understanding of how hydropower development affects women and men differently. The section above is proof of that. This information can – and should – lead to action by various stakeholders, especially by hydropower developers themselves.

Such action might include implementing efforts to mitigate the worst impacts of hydropower, including those impacts that disproportionately affect women, to design livelihood programmes that address the needs of both women and men, or to design community consultation strategies that enable the equal participation of women and men. The latter

is absolutely critical because without women's participation, their needs, interests, and perspectives will not be known and cannot be addressed.

Affected community members can also use the information. GIA can validate the lived experiences of women and men, and provide the supporting evidence needed to help persuade government or hydropower developers that they ought to be doing things differently. There is some evidence from our work to date that participation in a GIA process may empower women to speak up about the issues of concern to them.

The workshops that preceded the GIA pilots in Vietnam and background studies in Laos were also of great value. Representatives from some of the participating hydropower companies, government agencies, and civil society, explained that the workshops were the first time they had heard about GIA, and many expressed the view that the GIA is necessary for all hydropower projects.

The workshops were an important part of the GIA process, and a necessary first step in raising stakeholders' awareness of gender issues and hydropower. Without these workshops we do not believe they would have had sufficient knowledge of, or commitment to, gender issues to enable their effective participation in the pilots. (It is worth noting that in our experience a sufficient budget is required to enable this preparatory work to occur.)

Staff from the companies who took part in the pilots are now of the view that investment in community consultation processes around resettlement, compensation, and community benefits are not effective if consultation is only with existing village structures, or rely on local government representatives and community leaders to nominate participants. The status quo means that men's involvement is prioritised, and the needs and aspirations of women are ignored. The fact that some company staff now recognise that the participation of women and men in community consultations in the past has not been equal is a significant achievement. How this understanding translates into changes in practice remains to be seen though.

The workshops also gave the participants the opportunity to engage with (and understand the perspectives of), representatives who were in different positions in relation to hydropower, and had different perspectives and experiences. A participant from a civil society organisation in Vietnam explained that after listening to others at one of the workshops that she now has a better and more balanced appreciation of the difficulties that the hydropower sector has in addressing gender concerns. This perspective will inform her future research and advocacy work.

The workshops and training sessions in Vietnam were also empowering experiences for many of the women representing dam-affected communities. The workshops gave them an opportunity to share their personal experiences of hydropower projects with other women, government agencies, and national-level civil society organisations. Many of the women came away from the workshop with a much better understanding of their rights including their right to raise their voice and express their opinions in both their family and community.

An example is Thanh, one woman from the A Sap resettlement village near the A Luoi dam. She later told staff from the Center for Social Research and Development that she has

begun speaking with her husband about his violence against her, and the financial hardships the family is facing because of the dam. She is also actively involved in efforts in her community to eliminate violence against women.

Motivating hydropower companies to participate in GIA

So what motivated the hydropower companies to participate in the GIA pilots? In part, the companies want to be viewed as leaders in the hydropower sector on social and environmental issues, and consider gender to be very much at the forefront of innovations in social practice. The companies also believe that the development outcomes for communities impacted by their projects will be improved by a stronger focus on gender. While ‘enlightened self-interest’ is a factor, we also know that for at least some staff in these companies their commitment to gender is genuine and strongly held, and often a direct result of their engagement with our work. Some staff told us they now believe that GIA should be required for all hydropower projects.

It is our hope that these companies will become a good example who can influence other hydropower companies to better address gender in their operations, and become champions for GIA by promoting its uptake in the sector. Many of the participating company representatives have told us – quite rightly we believe – that the hydropower sector and governments have a shared responsibility with regards to addressing gender issues. Company representatives also told us that they believe that the GIA Manual provides a useful focus for such discussions to begin.

We also expect that the consultants engaged by hydropower companies to undertake environmental and social impact assessments will begin to develop the necessary skills and experience in gender impact assessment in response to the interests of their clients in the hydropower sector, and become advocates for GIA. Some consultants are interested in gender issues, and many have some skills; and the GIA Manual was developed with input from key consultants in the sector. Oxfam intends to continue to work on GIA with hydropower sector consultants in the future.

It is important to note that the GIA pilots in both Laos and Vietnam focus on existing hydropower projects. Consequently, the findings from the GIA could not change these projects in a significant way as the dams were constructed and communities resettled a number of years ago. However, if the companies have ongoing responsibilities towards resettled communities there may be opportunities to change the design and delivery of livelihood programmes or other services delivered by the company and/or local authorities for example. If the GIA pilots were done at the hydropower pre-feasibility stage, which is when gender issues should be first considered, it may have been more difficult to engage companies or investors in a GIA pilot, or to conduct an independent process.

In such a scenario, the role of civil society representatives might change from that of researcher and facilitator only, to researcher, facilitator, and advocate, not only for GIA, but also potentially for the rights and strategic and practical needs of women and men to be addressed, based on the findings of the gender impact assessment.

The greatest challenge, and greatest success, of the work to date has been gaining the participation of industry and government stakeholders in the GIA pilots. This task would have been easier had a stronger legal basis existed for assessing the gender impacts of hydropower, similar to legal requirements for environmental impact assessment. To deal with the existing situation where there is no specific legal requirement for gender analysis, research organisations have to play an active advocacy role trying to encourage hydropower companies, local authorities, and affected people to get involved in the pilots.

In our research, teams were able to successfully use existing policy and legal frameworks on gender to open discussions with government and industry. The teams were able to draw on the fact that the constitutions of both Laos and Vietnam protect the rights of both women and men, both countries have specific legislation and national strategies on gender equality, and both countries have ratified key UN conventions on women's rights. The teams also emphasised that civil society organisations, including themselves, have a legitimate role in wanting to engage with government and industry stakeholders on key social and environmental issues, and a role in monitoring and critiquing major infrastructure projects such those in the hydropower sector. Based on these foundations, the teams were able to persuade key stakeholders to engage in a discussion on gender and hydropower, and ultimately to participate in the pilots.

Conclusion

It is very important to continue efforts to mainstream gender impact assessment into the hydropower development process.

We believe GIA is a valuable process, with the potential to minimise the negative impacts of hydropower development on women, as well as on men. Two factors are at work here. The first is that GIA enables the potential negative impacts on women and men to be identified – applying a gender lens enables what might have otherwise been invisible to become visible – and strategies to avoid or minimise these impacts to then be developed. The second factor is that GIA gives a voice to women to express their concerns, needs, and aspirations and as such participation in a GIA can be an empowering experience for women.

Our initial experiences discussed here show that GIA – both the findings that emerge from the assessment and the process itself – can be used by companies and governments to intentionally create benefits for women and redress existing gender injustices. Land could be jointly titled when communities are resettled. Women could be provided with access to resources and opportunities they didn't have before, such as safe and secure livelihood opportunities, or infrastructure that eases their unpaid work burden.

But these benefits need to be properly designed and implemented – both in relation to the infrastructure (that is, the siting, design, and operation of the hydropower dam needs to be conducted in a way that avoids or at least mitigates the identified impacts on women and men), and in resettlement or compensation plans and programmes for communities. The alternative is business as usual, and the exacerbation of women's existing disadvantage.

The participation of industry, government, civil society, and affected community members – especially women – is crucial to the success of a GIA process. Each stakeholder brings a different and valuable perspective. The participation of the hydropower industry and government is crucial because these stakeholders can change the way hydropower projects are designed, operated, and regulated. The consultants the hydropower sector engages to undertake environmental and social impact assessments, or to help design resettlement programmes, also have a role to play as potential providers of gender analysis services.

In conclusion, the work undertaken to date by the Center for Social Research and Development, the Lao Women's Union, and Oxfam has been possible because of the goodwill of some hydropower companies and their willingness to participate in our GIA pilots. The value of this should not be underestimated. However, widespread uptake of GIA is unlikely without governments and communities demanding this standard of practice in hydropower developments, and supporting legislation that requires it. In Laos and Vietnam, mechanisms for this to occur would be to amend existing legal instruments that currently require hydropower developers to conduct an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment or Environmental Impact Assessment.

Notes

1. The six countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region are Cambodia, China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.
2. While the Oxfam Mekong Regional Water Governance Program formally started in 2012, Oxfam has been working on issues related to water governance and hydropower in the Mekong region for 20 years.
3. For more information on the Oxfam Mekong Regional Water Governance Program and the Inclusion Project, please see <https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/infrastructure-people-and-environment/save-the-mekong/mekonginclusion/> (last checked 23 October 2017).
4. For more information on gender impact assessment (GIA), please see Oxfam's manual on GIA in hydropower: Michael Simon (2013) *Balancing the Scales: Using Gender Impact Assessment in Hydropower Development*, Oxfam Australia, <https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/infrastructure-people-and-environment/save-the-mekong/gia-manual/> (last checked 23 October 2017). See also Candida March, Ines Smyth and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay (1999) *A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks*, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxford.
5. The GIA pilot projects with Lao Women's Union and CSR D are delivered through Oxfam's Inclusion Project 2014–2019, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Mekong Water Resources Program, and one of the main projects under Oxfam's Mekong Regional Water Governance Program.
6. For more information on Vietnam Rivers Network, see www.vrn.org.vn/en/ (last checked 23 October 2017).
7. ASEAN countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
8. By gender mainstreaming we mean the integration of gender equality and women's rights as concerns into policy and strategies.
9. For further technical information on the hydropower projects that were the focus of our GIA, please see A Luoi Hydropower Plant, Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam: <http://www.power->

technology.com/projects/luoihydropower/, <http://globalenergyobservatory.org/geoid/41647>, Thuen Hinboun Hydropower Project, Lao PDR: <http://www.thpclaos.com/index.php?lang=en> (last checked 23 October 2017).

10. The Vietnam Women's Union was founded in 1930 and has a membership of more than 13 million women. It has a formal role advising the Communist Party and the Vietnamese government on women's issues and gender-related policy and legislation.

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