



Food and Agriculture
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COUNTRY GENDER ASSESSMENT

OF AGRICULTURE AND THE RURAL SECTOR IN

Lao People's Democratic Republic

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THE RURAL SECTOR IN

Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CAWA	Climate Change Adaptation in Wetland Areas
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGA	Country Gender Assessment
CPF	Country Programming Framework
CSO	civil society organization
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women, in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	foreign direct investment
FDMH	female decision-making household
FPIC	free, prior and informed consent
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (the German development agency)
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LDC	least developed country
LIWG	Land Information Working Group
LURAS	Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service project under Helvetas
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MDMH	male decision-making household
NCAW	National Commission for the Advancement of Women
NNS	National Nutrition Strategy
NPA	non-profit association
NSA	nutrition-sensitive agriculture
NSAW	National Strategy for the Advancement of Women
NTFP	non-timber forest product
NUoL	National University of Laos
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PPI	Provincial Planning and Investment Office
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Sub-CAW	Sub-Commission for the Advancement of Women
TLIC	Turning Land into Capital (policy)
UN	United Nations
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USD	United States dollar
VFI	Village Focus International
VGGT	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

This Country Gender Assessment (CGA) was commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in October 2017 as a way to gauge Lao People's Democratic Republic's progress in achieving gender equality in the agricultural and rural sectors, and as a mechanism to guide FAO's strategic mission in Lao People's Democratic Republic. The analysis in this assessment comes from both an extensive desk review of existing literature related to women in agriculture in Lao People's Democratic Republic and from field work

in the Phaxai district of Xieng Khouang province which lies in the north east of the country.

Women are an integral part of the agriculture sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic, comprising over 50 percent of the agricultural workforce and contributing significantly to all parts of agricultural production. Despite women's heavy involvement in agricultural work, however, women face significant and persistent barriers to participating fully in the rural sector.

The following key findings emerged from this study:

1. Ethnicity cannot be separated from gender.

Gender dynamics and women's roles in village life and leadership differ significantly across ethnic groups. Women often face a heavier burden of work in ethnic minority groups, and cultural perceptions that favour men for positions of power and keep women from emerging as leaders and decision-makers in ethnic communities. Therefore, gender interventions in ethnic communities, while arguably urgently needed, are challenging.

2. Women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions outside the national level.

This includes at provincial and district ministries and in village administration. Perceptions, held by both men and women, that women do not possess the skills needed to hold leadership roles, prevent women from envisioning themselves as leaders and pursuing leadership roles outside their homes.

3. Many women struggle to take advantage of a transitioning economy.

The shifting landscape of the agricultural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic from subsistence to market-based models, has unique – and potentially negative – impacts for rural women, many of whom face constraints in accessing markets due to limited mobility, literacy and, in the case of ethnic women, Lao language skills.

4. Agricultural investment projects often undervalue women's involvement.

This can have unforeseen negative impacts on women, such as increasing their workload or diminishing the availability of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which many women collect and sell. Unless women are specifically involved and have asked for feedback during the project launch process, their voices will be underrepresented, and potential investments may not serve their interests.

5. Access to information is not equal for men and women.

Men are usually the first choice when it comes to attending village meetings, training, and information sessions because women are busy with housework. Women, therefore, often only receive information through their husbands, if at all. When women do attend meetings and trainings, they do not feel confident enough to speak or ask questions, which means they are not full participants.

6. Equal rights do not guarantee equal access.

Despite men and women having equal rights to use banking and credit systems, women often face barriers in taking advantage of such financial resources. Bank processes that require land titles, assets, high interest, and the signature of the head of household (most often men) all prevent women from accessing financing mechanisms as easily as men.

7. Labour migration changes household roles and workloads.

Men's migration for labour outside the home creates a heavier burden of work for women and can create tensions between husbands, wives and families. The growing number of youth moving away from villages for education and work also places additional burdens on both husbands and wives, but the gender implications of youth out-migration have not yet been researched.

8. Education and literacy underpin rural women's confidence and success.

Education and literacy rates decrease significantly from urban to rural areas, particularly for women. The education and literacy gaps between men and women harm women's self-confidence and contribute to perceptions, held by both men and women, that women are less capable than men. Improving rural women's education and literacy is, therefore, a necessary component of any intervention seeking to empower rural women and create gender equality.

Based on these findings, the Country Gender Assessment team recommends the following areas for FAO's work in Lao People's Democratic Republic grouped at the micro (village), meso (institutional), and macro (policy) levels:

● Micro-level recommendations:

- Build women's capacity and confidence, with a focus on ethnic women
- Empower women to negotiate contracts with investors
- Support the establishment of accessible credit systems
- Facilitate the formation of women's farmer groups for information and skills exchange
- Clarify the obligations of agricultural investors to follow the right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) principles and meaningfully engage women villagers

● Meso-level recommendations:

- Support collection of sex-disaggregated, time-series data related to agriculture and labour
- Explore the intersection of agricultural investment, land tenure security and trafficking
- Increase women farmers' involvement in technical training and agricultural extension
- Coordinate among stakeholders working on food security, land tenure security and nutrition-sensitive agriculture
- Enhance gender-focused teaching at universities and colleges in Lao People's Democratic Republic
- Strengthen the structure and communication of the sub-Commission for the Advancement of Women (sub-CAW) network

● Macro-level recommendations:

- Drive the discourse on gender in Lao People's Democratic Republic away from 'mainstreaming' toward 'empowerment'
- Integrate gender concerns into revision processes for national laws and regulations, such as the National Land Law, which is currently being revised, and the Agriculture Law, which is anticipated to be revised in coming years
- Empower and equip civil society organizations (CSOs) to participate in national policy and global processes, and open up space for them to do so, particularly with Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) reporting to the United Nations
- Broaden the presence of the South-South Cooperation for information sharing
- Develop regional guidance and standards, through ASEAN frameworks on gender in the rural sector



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1

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background

Gender equality is central to FAO's mandate of achieving food security for all by raising levels of nutrition, improving agricultural productivity and natural resource management, and improving the lives of rural populations. FAO can only achieve these goals if it simultaneously works towards gender equality and supports women's diverse roles in agriculture and rural development. As stated in the FAO Policy on Gender Equality, gender equality is not only an essential means by which FAO can achieve its mandate, but a basic human right (FAO, 2013a).

The goal of the FAO Policy on Gender Equality is to achieve equality between women and men in sustainable agricultural production and rural development for the elimination of hunger and poverty (FAO, 2013a). The policy also requires conducting a country gender assessment (CGA) for country-level

planning and programming. The rationale behind this requirement is that it is "fundamental for FAO to have up-to-date objective information at hand to be able to plan evidence-based, country level support towards gender equality and women's empowerment, which are key to improved food security, nutrition and poverty reduction" (FAO, 2015).

While there have been previous national-level and case study (micro-level) gender assessments, surveys and reports conducted in Lao People's Democratic Republic, there is a lack of analysis focusing specifically on gender in agriculture and the rural sector. Conversely, literature on agriculture in Lao People's Democratic Republic often does not integrate gender considerations cohesively. The aim of this CGA is, therefore, to pull these two topics together, drawing on a broad array of sources, to better understand the gender dynamics that shape the rural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic.



Box 1: What is gender?

FAO defines gender as "the relations between [men and women], both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially. It is a central organizing principle of societies, and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution" (FAO, 1997). Despite this definition, gender advocacy is often misunderstood as being the promotion of women only. In reality, gender issues include the relationship between men and women, their roles, access to and control over resources, division of labour, interests and needs. FAO's work therefore, focuses holistically on gender, following a twofold strategy of gender mainstreaming and women-targeted actions to achieve gender equality in the agricultural and rural sector.

1.2 Methodology

This CGA for Lao People's Democratic Republic has three key objectives:

- Examine the status of gender equality regarding agriculture and the rural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic at the micro (community and household), meso (institutional), and macro (policy) levels to identify emerging issues, policy gaps and priority areas for intervention;
- Inform FAO country-level planning and programming, particularly the formulation and revision of the Country Programming Framework (CPF);
- Facilitate FAO's contribution to the UN Country Team CEDAW Report and to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) formulation and implementation with up-to-date and objective information on the situation of rural women in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

The analysis in this study was compiled through an extensive desk review of research and reports related to gender, agriculture, land and the rural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic as well as national policies, decrees and laws; strategic plans and statistics provided by the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic; and 'grey literature' — namely

reports from civil society organizations (CSOs), both international and national, operating in Lao People's Democratic Republic. Following the desk review, fieldwork was conducted in two villages in Phaxai district, Xieng Khouang province, to validate initial findings of the desk review, and to better understand the on-the-ground situation of rural women.

To supplement the desk review and fieldwork, and to better understand the various actors working toward gender equality in agriculture in Lao People's Democratic Republic, in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including:

- central government agencies;
- district and provincial government agencies;
- international non-governmental organizations (INGOs);
- local CSOs (also known as non-profit associations, or NPAs);
- development partners;
- research institutions (faculties at the National University of Laos); and
- donors and embassies.

For a full list of secondary literature consulted, fieldwork tools and stakeholder interview guides, see the References and Annex sections.



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1.3 FAO's work in Lao People's Democratic Republic

FAO's presence in Lao People's Democratic Republic was established in 1980. The CPF for Lao People's Democratic Republic addresses most of the challenges facing countries in the region that were prioritized by the Member States at the 33rd session of the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference in Putrajaya, Malaysia, in March 2016, namely:

- nutrition and food safety;
- inclusive value chain development;
- food waste and loss;
- transboundary animal and plant pests and diseases, sustainable production and resilience in the context of climate change; and
- data and analysis for decision-making, monitoring and evaluation.

Key government partnerships for FAO in Lao People's Democratic Republic are with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE). Additional government partnerships are with:

- Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MOIC), responsible for the production industries, employment, domestic markets and international trade;

- Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), responsible for new and improved technology, and issues of intellectual property protection;
- Ministry of Health (MOH), in particular as the coordinator of the National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) and involvement in One Health approaches;
- Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), as a partner with MAF and MOH in the convergent approach to NNS.

FAO Lao People's Democratic Republic also works with INGOs, including Village Focus International (VFI), Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), International Water Management Institute (IWMI), as well as the National University of Laos (NUoL) Faculties of Forestry and Agriculture, and donors and development partners such as the European Union, Agence Française de Développement (AFD), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA); United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP); and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

See Section 4.5 for a comprehensive stakeholder analysis of key actors working on gender and the rural sector.

2

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC COUNTRY CONTEXT



Lao People's Democratic Republic is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia with a population of roughly 6 492 000 according to the 2015 Population and Housing Census (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Forty-nine point eight percent of the population is female, and 50.2 percent is male. The majority of the population (67.1 percent) lives in rural areas, with 59.2 percent in rural areas with road access, and 7.9 percent in rural areas without road access (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Lao People's Democratic Republic is an incredibly ethnically diverse country, home to 49 different ethnic groups. The Lao-Tai ethnic group comprises roughly 62 percent of the total population, generally inhabits the lowlands and farms paddy rice. The Khmou and Hmong groups are the next largest, comprising 11 percent and 9 percent of the population, respectively (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

2.1 Human development and gender

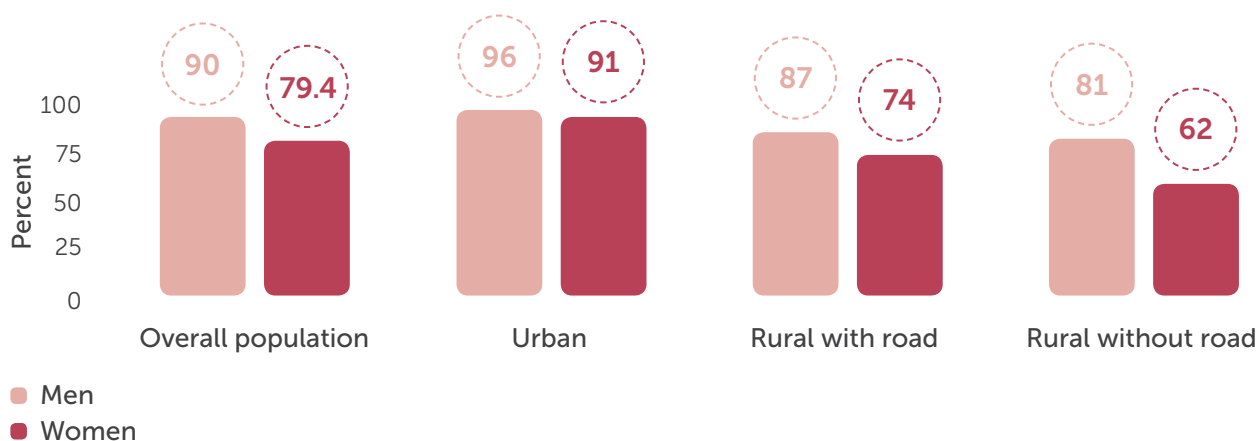
Lao People's Democratic Republic has been listed as one of the United Nation's 47 least developed countries (LDCs) since 1971, as determined by gross national income per capita, and indexes measuring human assets and economic vulnerability. Lao People's Democratic Republic's gross national income is USD 2 150 per capita, ranking at 160 of 216 countries globally (World Bank, 2017). Despite strong economic growth that has moved Lao People's Democratic Republic from a low-income economy

to a lower-middle-income economy, poverty remains a severe threat to the population (UN, 2015). According to the most recent Multidimensional Poverty Index from 2012, which analyses education, health and living standards, 36.8 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, with an additional 18.5 percent living near multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2016).

Significant progress has been made in increasing literacy and education levels of the overall population in Lao People's Democratic Republic; however, gaps still exist between men and women. The literacy of the population increased by 12 percent from the 2005 census to the 2015 census, from 72.7 percent to 84.7 percent (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Women's literacy consistently lags behind men's literacy, though, and this gap widens in more rural, remote areas (see Figure 1).

Literacy rates show stark differences when analysed by ethnicity. The Lao-Tai ethnic group, which lives predominantly in urban areas, has the highest literacy rates: 95 percent for men and 92 percent for women (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). The China-Tibet ethnic group is least literate, with a 57 percent rate for men and 47 percent rate for women. The Mon-Khmer and Hmong-lewmien ethnic groups also lag behind the Lao-Tai group's literacy, with a literacy rate of 81 percent for both Mon-Khmer and Hmong-lewmien men, and a literacy rate of 71 percent for Mon-Khmer women and 70 percent for Hmong-lewmien women.

Figure 1: Literacy rates, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2015



Source: Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015

Box 2: Gender and ethnicity

Poverty in Lao People's Democratic Republic is prevalent in upland areas, which are predominantly inhabited by non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups. As a whole, ethnic minority groups in Lao People's Democratic Republic are often less educated, less literate, less resourced and poorer than Lao-Tai groups. Ethnic women and girls are among the most disadvantaged in Lao society, facing a heavy burden of work, less decision-making power than men, limited mobility, and cultural norms that limit women's roles in society (Khampoui, 2012). Research on gender in ethnic groups, while limited, has shown that the division of labour between men and women in ethnic minority communities is stricter than in Lao-Tai groups, and this division often burdens women with more work than men (World Bank and ADB, 2012). Additionally, some ethnic minority cultures (such as the Yao, Hmong, and Akha) have more patriarchal and patrilineal cultures than the Lao-Tai group, which constricts women's role in society and their ownership over land and natural resources (World Bank and ADB, 2012). Ethnic communities are thus a priority when it comes to gender interventions, while also presenting the greatest challenges because of deeply rooted cultural norms that disadvantage women. It is, therefore, vital that any projects seeking to empower women pay particular attention to ethnicity and culture, and that any programming seeking to improve the lives of ethnic groups places special focus on women and girls.

Education rates follow the same trend as literacy rates, with improvements over the past decade, but persistent gaps in terms of gender and ethnicity. As of the 2015 Population and Housing Census, 13 percent of the population aged six years old and above had never attended school (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). At primary and secondary levels of schooling (ages 6-16), girls' and boys' attendance rates were quite close (81 percent of boys versus 79 percent of girls). However, the gender gap widened for the age group 17-25, with nearly 25 percent of men currently attending school compared to 19.2 percent of women. In this same age group, women were nearly twice as likely as men to have never attended school (10 percent of women never attended, compared to 5.5 percent of men). Among adult women, 21 percent reported to have no educational attainment, over twice the rate of adult men with no attainment (10 percent). The percentage of the population with no educational attainment is lower in younger generations than older ones, as is the gender gap between men and women; however, barriers to education, particularly girls' education, still exist, particularly with secondary education and schooling in rural areas. Attaining tertiary-level education in Lao People's Democratic Republic is uncommon in rural areas, although this is improving in younger generations and in urban areas. As of 2015, 12 percent of the population reported attending at least one year of tertiary-level education, with 6 percent having completed tertiary education (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Mothers' education, poverty headcount rates and location are significant determinants of whether children attend school. 'Survival rates', or the percentage of children completing primary school compared to the initial enrolment rate, are lowest for children of mothers with no education, children from the poorest quintile, and children from villages without road access (UN, 2015). Provincial and ethnic differences are also significant: as of 2015, Xayabouly province had the highest primary school survival rate (93.3 percent), with Saravan province 28 percentage points behind, at 65.4 percent (UN, 2015). The China-Tibetan group had the highest primary survival rate (87 percent), an interesting phenomenon given this group is the least literate in the country. The Lao-Tai group had a primary survival rate of 67 percent, with the Mon-Khmer at 59 percent, the lowest in the country (UN, 2015).

Access to electricity is high in the population as a whole, but there are significant gaps between urban and rural areas. As of the 2015 census, 84 percent of all households reported having access to electricity through a public grid system (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). This percentage was expectedly highest in urban households, 97 percent of which are connected to electricity. In rural areas with roads, electric connectivity dropped to 82 percent, and plummeted to 37 percent for rural areas without roads.

Access to improved drinking water sources stood at 61 percent nationally at the time of the 2015 census, with only 6.6 percent of households having access to piped water (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Some 36 percent of households bought bottled water as their drinking source, showing that clean, safe water infrastructure is quite limited nationally. Behind drinking bottled water, the next most common source of drinking water was from mountain

sources (24.1 percent of households). In rural areas without roads, 60 percent of households use mountain sources for drinking, and just over 40 percent of the population must travel at least 200 metres to access this water (3.7 percent of households travel a kilometre or more). Location is a huge determinant of access to improved water sources, as evidenced by Figure 2.

Figure 2: Improved water source access by household location, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2015



Source: Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015.



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The total fertility rate for Lao People's Democratic Republic is 3.2 children per woman, and the median age for first birth is 21 years (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Just over one-third of Lao women marry before age 18, with 19.4 percent of reproductive age women giving birth before 18 as of 2012 (UN, 2015). Remoteness and lack of education contribute to early marriage, as girls may not have other options to advance their futures and thus turn to marriage as a solution (Jordana, 2016). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports, anecdotally, that "teenage pregnancy is a way of life in remote Laotian villages" due to geographic isolation and lack of opportunities (UNFPA, 2013). Teenage pregnancy risks both the health of children and mothers. The infant mortality rate was 57 deaths per 1 000 live births in 2015, with the maternal mortality rate at 206 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births. Women's life expectancy is slightly higher than men's life expectancy, at 65 years at birth and 62 years at birth, respectively (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Lao People's Democratic Republic consistently ranks low in global human development, poverty and gender equality indexes. The Women's Economic Opportunity Index (2012), which analyses factors such as schooling, access to contraception, political participation, access to finance, etc., gives Lao People's Democratic Republic a score of 38.6/100, corresponding with a rank of 108 out of 128 countries analysed (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). The Gender Inequality Index, determined by women's reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity, places Lao People's Democratic Republic at 106 of 159 countries, with a score of 0.468 in 2015 (UNDP, 2016). As of 2015, Lao People's Democratic Republic has a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.568 for the overall population (compared to a world average of 0.710), as determined by life expectancy, education and access to economic resources (UNDP, 2016). When the HDI is examined by gender, however, gaps between men and women become evident: 0.560 for women and 0.607 for men, indicating less opportunity for women in Lao People's Democratic Republic (UNDP, 2016).



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2.2 Predominant discourse on gender in Lao People's Democratic Republic

Open discussion of gender issues in Lao People's Democratic Republic is relatively recent. While the discourse surrounding gender has become more progressive in the past few years, conversations on gender issues in Lao People's Democratic Republic lag behind discourses in many other countries. For instance, the slogan of the Lao Women's Union (LWU) is "Gender Equality for National Development" and includes the 'three goods' campaign, namely that women should:

- Be **good citizens**, by loving the nation, implementing the government's policies, and encouraging solidarity;
- Promote **good development**, including self-development, developing the nation, and women's organizational development;
- Raise a **good family** by creating an enabling environment for family members to access education, raise offspring as a couple in a 'warm family', and promote a good family model.

The LWU 'three goods' – sometimes quoted tongue-in-cheek as the duty of women to be a good wife, good daughter and good mother – represent the prevailing ideology in Lao People's Democratic Republic of prescribed gender roles. Formulated decades ago, these 'goods' are a long way from contemporary feminist discourse, which encourages women to support themselves financially, pursue careers and fight for gender equality. These concepts of equality and feminism are familiar in many countries now, but are not

considered in Lao People's Democratic Republic. In fact, there is no Lao word equivalent to 'feminist' – although there is a Thai word. For example, even when interviewing Gender Focal Points of key international stakeholders (including development partners, INGOs and donors), only one discussed patriarchy, none mentioned the word feminist, and none mentioned current global social change movements centred on gender. Some stakeholders noted that they wished that development partners would 'push the dialogue forward' or 'create a new narrative' on gender that is more progressive.

Some stakeholders also commented on the tendency of development organizations or projects to favour gender mainstreaming to the point where they neglect the overall goal of women's empowerment. One interviewee worried that many projects equate women's attendance at meetings with women's participation and leadership, and that this focus on meeting certain quotas of women at meetings or involved in project activities has obscured genuine day-to-day empowerment of women.

This situation presents an opportunity for FAO and other development partners to:

- be leaders in promoting a contemporary discourse on empowering women,
- avoid falling into the trap of reducing gender equality to simply counting numbers of women attending meetings, and
- support young rural (and urban) women by equipping them with knowledge of global movements and the debates surrounding gender equality.

3

GENDER ANALYSIS OF AGRICULTURE AND THE RURAL SECTOR





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3.1 Agriculture and rural transformation

Women's changing role in agriculture has gained international attention, with increasing discussion about whether agriculture is 'feminizing' globally, as evidenced by women's expanding role in the agricultural sector in regions across the world (World Bank, 2016). In Lao People's Democratic Republic the agricultural sector has been 'feminized' for decades, with women comprising just over 50 percent of the population economically active in agriculture since at least 1980 (World Bank, 2016). However, this high level of women's involvement is not a reliable indicator of women's empowerment in agriculture. Other measures, such as the amount of time women spend on agricultural tasks and women's compensation for agricultural work, are necessary to paint a clearer picture of women's involvement in agriculture. Examining these other indicators shows that women's participation in agricultural work in Lao People's Democratic Republic is not always a source of empowerment, and that some women may actually be disempowered and overwhelmed by their agricultural work.

As discussed in previous sections, the majority of the population in Lao People's Democratic Republic depends on agriculture for their livelihoods. As stated by the World Bank and ADB's 2012 gender assessment report for Lao People's Democratic Republic, women's role in agriculture is significant, but often undervalued. Increased agricultural productivity and opportunities for off-farm jobs are helping to pull some households,

in selected areas, out of poverty (World Bank and ADB, 2012). Currently, Lao People's Democratic Republic is transitioning from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, which has brought benefits for some rural communities, including economic growth, poverty reduction and employment, but has exacerbated gender disparities and power imbalances in others. For women in poor rural areas, especially those who have lost access to productive land and who cannot find employment off-farm, the commercialization of agriculture can also increase vulnerability. This transition to a market-based economy and the emergence of cash crops can bring particularly negative impacts for non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, who may not speak or understand Lao language, and who may not have experience in a cash economy. Social safety nets are not yet in place to 'catch' those who may fall during this period of transition.

It is also worth noting that not all commercial agriculture is driven by companies or investors. The majority of agricultural production across Southeast Asia (including Lao People's Democratic Republic) is smallholder-driven, with smallholder farmers being "remarkably persistent and surprisingly resilient" in the face of agrarian transformations (Rigg, Salamanca and Thompson, 2015). In this context, it is vital not to lose sight of micro-level investments, as farmers are investors in their own right by purchasing inputs, clearing land, transporting, processing, storing and selling agricultural products. When examining agricultural investment at a micro-level, it is also necessary to keep in mind that, on average,

female-headed households have less household labour and productive assets than male-headed households (World Bank and ADB, 2012). Overall for farming households, lowland or irrigated rice is the dominant seasonal crop, followed by upland rice and cereals (MAF and FAO, 2014). A greater percentage of female-headed farming households grow lowland/irrigated rice than do male-headed farming households (76.8 percent compared with 72.3 percent), and, general, female-headed agricultural households have a less diversified crop base than male-headed agricultural households (FAO and SIDA, 2010). Differences also exist in permanent crop choice, with female-headed households growing coffee most widely (grown by 29 percent of households) and male-headed households most widely growing rubber (33 percent) (MAF and FAO, 2014).

For non-commercial agriculture (either for household consumption or small-scale selling at local markets), the predominant crop is sticky rice (*khao niow*). In market gardens, the main agricultural products are vegetables and herbs such as pumpkin, beans, chilies, garlic, tomato, eggplant, sesame, and cabbage.

Various types of livestock are also raised, including cattle, chickens, ducks, goats and pigs. Services for supporting raising of livestock, such as veterinarians or feedstock, are not widely available in rural areas, so livestock raising tends not to meet its full potential.

One of the most predominant agricultural issues in Lao People's Democratic Republic in recent months is the levels and types of toxic chemicals that have been used in commercial agriculture (particularly banana plantations). Concerns about pesticide and herbicide use have caused an outcry from the public, government and development community alike, and have been widely reported by *The Vientiane Times*, and researched by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI). Significantly, these chemicals are more likely to have severe effects on women's health (including reproductive health) and on children (Xiong and Ling, 2017). This is especially the case for migrant workers, often from marginalized ethnic groups, who live and work in dormitories close to the plantations, where exposure to chemicals is highest.

Box 3: Use of pesticides and gender

As pesticide and chemical fertilizer use in Lao People's Democratic Republic increases, more information needs to be gathered on the way women use and are impacted by these products. The 2011 Agricultural Census found that female-headed farming households were slightly more likely to use chemical fertilizers (10 percent versus 6 percent) and pesticides (7 percent compared to 6 percent) than male-headed farming households (MAF and FAO, 2014). The Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service (LURAS) project, which works on rural agriculture extension in Xieng Khouang, reported in an interview that fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides often reduce women's workloads by decreasing the amount of time they have to spend on tasks like weeding, while also having the potential to increase their production and incomes. In fact, the labour-saving possibilities of pesticides and fertilizers may be a key reason they are utilized more frequently by female-headed households, which often lack able-bodied men's labour and thus are more burdened with work. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of pesticides and chemicals, as women are frequently the ones spreading them in fields, often with their children on their backs. More research is needed into this emerging concern for rural women and children's health.

3.2 Emerging issues and gender disparities at the local level

Drawing upon secondary literature, stakeholder interviews and fieldwork findings, the country gender assessment team has identified five key thematic areas relating to gender, agriculture and the rural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic:

1. Positive and negative impacts of agricultural investment and commercial agriculture, especially cash crops such as banana, coffee, rubber, maize and cassava;
2. Labour division by gender, differences in employment options and burden of work on women;
3. Nutrition and food security within the context of land tenure security;
4. Access to markets, and financing schemes (credit, loans); and
5. Unequal opportunities to participate in decision-making about agriculture, and lack of women's leadership in decision-making bodies.

Underpinning all of these thematic areas is the emerging issue of migration, both rural-urban and transboundary, which is leading to an increased risk of human trafficking for rural women and girls. This gender assessment found that a combination of factors, including (1) land tenure insecurity, (2) lack of employment options, (3) limited access to loans, markets and natural resources, and (4) effects from commercialized agriculture, including increased investment by foreign-operated agribusinesses, means that women and girls in rural areas are facing a higher risk of trafficking. The team heard from several CSOs – especially those working in northern Lao People's Democratic Republic – that the lines between 'migration' and 'trafficking' are becoming increasingly blurred.

The sections following analyse each of the five thematic areas, and provide further details on the emerging, interrelated issues of gender, migration, human trafficking, and sexual and labour exploitation in rural areas.

3.2.1 Agricultural investment

In Lao People's Democratic Republic the Turning Land into Capital (TLIC) policy (*nayobay han din pen theun*) has been the driving force behind land-based investment over the past ten years (Dwyer, 2007). Under the TLIC policy – which was not formalized into one policy document but is mentioned in several policy documents – Lao People's Democratic Republic increasingly opened the door to an influx of foreign direct investment (FDI), especially land-based investment. Promoting private-sector investment was tied to the government's long-held goal of poverty reduction and socio-economic development (Fullbrook, 2014). Since the introduction of TLIC, land-based investment (agribusiness, hydropower, mining, infrastructure) has increased rapidly as foreign investors – primarily regional neighbours China, Thailand and Viet Nam – seek to fuel their growing economies and meet their energy needs (Schönweger *et al.*, 2012). According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment data, transboundary investment from these three neighbouring countries represents a large proportion of total FDI in Lao People's Democratic Republic with the value of investments far exceeding that of other countries (OECD, 2017).

Within this context, more and more smallholder farming families are coming into contact with foreign investors. Yet many communities – and particularly women – are not equipped to negotiate fair agreements and terms with investors.

Box 4: Cases of trafficking and agribusinesses

According to a local CSO sharing on the online discussion forum LaoFAB,¹ some businessmen working for Chinese agribusinesses have kidnapped young women after their agricultural investment ended. The CSO reported that a bamboo company in Mai district, Phongsaly province, after finishing harvesting bamboo in October, “took two young female teenagers as child brides...the families were not aware that their daughters had been taken.” In this case, it was fortunate that there were interventions before the girls crossed into China and they were returned home. But the CSO representative noted that he had “heard other similar stories of young girls being trafficked across the border into China.” Another CSO working in Luang Namtha also reported similar cases of attempted ‘bride kidnapping’ and trafficking across the border to China. This is a very concerning issue that appears to be under-reported, as specific information is fragmented and official statistics either do not exist or are hard to obtain. There is a need for urgent, collective action from the government, development partners and CSOs working in this space to share information, and to develop a strategy and concrete actions to address this emerging issue.

As noted by the World Bank’s 2016 working paper on the feminization of agriculture, commercial agriculture is opening new opportunities for women to undertake paid employment outside the family farm, particularly through participation in ‘non-traditional export crop production’ (as contract farmers or direct wage employees) (World Bank, 2016). In Lao People’s Democratic Republic while some work has been done to ensure that local-level contracts between investors and communities are fair and transparent, efforts to ensure that women are meaningfully included in contract farming negotiations and benefit equally are still nascent. The Provincial Planning and Investment Office (PPI) officials interviewed during fieldwork reported that, while they work to protect villagers’ rights in contracts with investors, they do not have any initiatives on protecting and involving women. At the same time, while several CSOs work on educating and empowering communities regarding contract farming, most educational materials do not differentiate between men and women farmers and the unique impacts on each group as a result of contract farming arrangements. There is, therefore, a need for more gender-responsive initiatives focused on empowering women to be meaningfully involved in contract negotiations, through engagement both with local authorities and private-sector actors, and to ensure that women’s benefits are specifically mentioned in local-level agreements.²

A lack of clear policy and protocol on the agricultural investment process means women are often left out of conversations with investing companies and the government. Most agricultural intervention and investment projects communicate jointly with men and women in whole-village meetings (usually organized through the Nai Ban (Village Chief) under the assumption that if women have the option to attend a meeting, they will be informed. In practice, husbands are more likely to attend village meetings and frequently do not pass sufficient information on to their wives. Even when women do attend informational meetings, many feel too shy or intimidated to ask questions or express their opinions and therefore do not participate meaningfully in the process. Unless women are directly targeted for information dissemination and solicited for their opinions by investors and government, women will lack understanding of the projects and their voices will be underrepresented (FAO, 2013b).

There is one good practice example in Lao People’s Democratic Republic of an agro-forestry investor (Stora Enso Laos) working with a local CSO (VFI) to develop community consultation and communication tools specifically for women,³ including posters and a video.

¹ LaoFAB is a private discussion forum for CSOs working on land issues in Lao People’s Democratic Republic and so the authors would like to retain the anonymity of the CSO sharing the information on this platform for confidentiality reasons.

² The legal status of investor-community agreements is vague, so the authors of this report hesitate to refer to them as “contracts.”

³ This joint project was co-funded by the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project.



A scene from *Good Faith Negotiation*, a video produced as a collaboration between Village Focus International and Stora Enso Laos to inform villagers of their rights in investor negotiations and encourage communities' participation in Stora Enso's investment process. The video was made in Lao language, as well as *Ta'Oi* and *Markong* ethnic languages.

The image above is taken from the *Good Faith Negotiation* animation video which informs women of their rights when negotiating with investors (VFI and Stora Enso, 2017). A 2013 study by FAO examining the gender implications of land-based investment in Lao People's Democratic Republic found that agricultural investments do not always lead to positive outcomes for women (FAO, 2013b).

In one village with cassava contract farming investment, women reported they had fewer non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to collect after the investment and were worried that they would not have time to collect NTFPs for food during the coming harvesting season because they would be too occupied with cassava harvesting. Roughly 15 percent of families surveyed indicated their food security worsened after agricultural investment, predominantly attributable to a reduction in NTFPs. In another village affected by cassava contract farming, men reported they felt cassava

was less labour intensive than rice farming and thus appreciated growing it. Women, in contrast, reported that their workload had increased since planting cassava, because they were burdened with standard rice harvesting and domestic tasks, in addition to managing new cassava plots. Women involved in contract farming tobacco production also reported an increase in work after the investment, suggesting agricultural investments can run the risk of overburdening women.

A potential benefit from agricultural investment for women comes in opportunities for employment, wages and training. Some companies hire villagers as casual labourers on their plantations, which can lead to increased income for families affected by the investment. Unfortunately, it is common for this employment to only come at the beginning of a project during the land clearing and preparation stage, after which point labourers are no longer needed and that income source vanishes.

Regarding agricultural investment and participation of rural women, there are opportunities to close some gaps in the domestic legal and regulatory framework. For example, requirements for investors to conduct community consultations and to meaningfully include women in consultations are not clear, except during Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), as required by the Decree on Environmental Impact Assessment (No. 112 / PM, 2010), and if the investment involves compensation or resettlement, as required by the Decree on Compensation and Resettlement Management in Development Projects (No. 84 / PM 2016). There is, therefore, potential to further clarify obligations for investors to consult and continuously engage with communities affected by agricultural investment projects, in line with FPIC standards – particularly for ensuring that women are provided an opportunity to participate meaningfully in any FPIC processes.

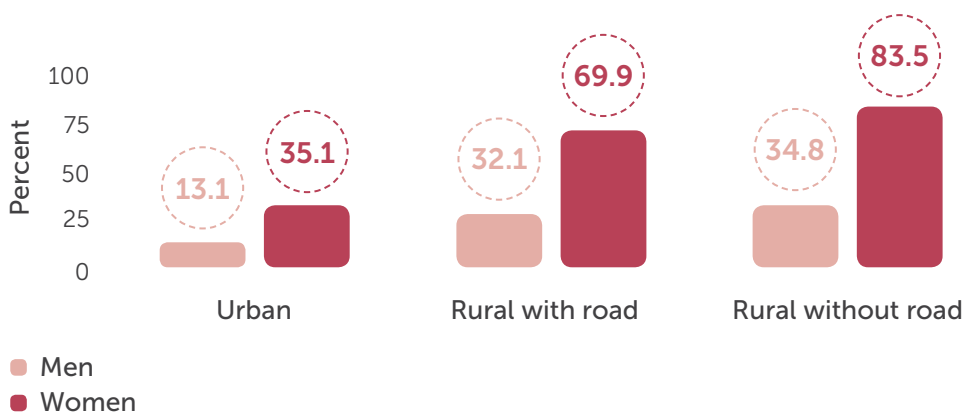
3.2.2 Labour

The labour market in Lao People’s Democratic Republic is highly informal and agriculture based. Seventy-two percent of the population is employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and most of this work is on family-run smallholdings (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). The uplands of Lao People’s Democratic Republic are the geographic area with the highest percentage of the population practicing agriculture, with 94 percent of upland

households classified as farming households (MAF and FAO, 2011). In the plateau area, 87.7 percent of households are farming households, as well as 66.1 percent of households in lowland areas (MAF and FAO, 2011). While agricultural work is more widespread in rural than in urban areas, 54.2 percent of urban households report having agricultural land assets (compared to 86.7 percent in rural areas with roads and 85.2 percent in rural areas without roads). Women slightly outnumber men in the agriculture, forestry, and fishing workforce: 51.3 percent of the workforce are women, compared to 48.7 percent men (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Thirty-five percent of people being employed as wage workers in all sectors are women (UN, 2015). Men compose the majority of civil servants, professionals, technicians and other positions that require higher education. Conversely, women are overrepresented in low-skill occupations, comprising 71.8 percent of the workforce in the service sector and 63.36 percent in the retail sector (WFP, 2016). Unpaid family work is concentrated in rural areas in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. As seen in Figure 3, sex and location are huge determinants of the percentage of the population undertaking unpaid family work, with the vast majority of women in rural areas without roads engaged in this uncompensated labour (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015).

Figure 3: Population age 10+ engaged in unpaid family work, 2015



Source: Lao Statistic Bureau, 2015.

Child labour in Lao People's Democratic Republic is widespread. The 2010 Labour Force Survey and Child Labour Survey found that roughly 15 percent of children aged 5-17 are working (Lao Statistics Bureau and IPEC, 2012). Girls comprise 55 percent of the child workforce, with boys at 45 percent. The vast majority of child labourers (90 percent) work in agriculture, forestry or fishing. Out of the working children engaged in the agriculture sector, 55 percent are girls and 45 percent are boys, mirroring the overall child workforce gender demographics. A higher percentage of children in rural areas are engaged in economic activity than children in urban areas (6.9 percent of children aged 5-17 employed in urban areas, 16.9 percent in rural areas with roads, and 21.2 percent in rural areas without roads). Out of all working children in Lao People's Democratic Republic, 88 percent come from rural areas. Over two-thirds of working children (68 percent) are unpaid family workers, likely working in agricultural production or other family businesses. The vast majority of children participating in economic activities are not in school: more than 66 percent have discontinued or dropped out of school, while 28 percent never attended. Despite the fact that Lao law prohibits working more than 48 hours per week, almost half of working children (47 percent) work 49 hours or more per week, with only 5 percent working for 14 hours or less in a week.

Outside of economic labour activity, the vast majority of children in Lao People's Democratic Republic contribute to household work, through chores such as washing clothes, cleaning dishes and the house,

and cooking. Roughly 70 percent of non-economically active children conduct household chores, whereas over 90 percent of economically active children do so (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Girls aged 12 years and older spend more time per week on household chores than boys, and while 10.7 percent of working boys reported not doing chores, only 7.4 percent of working girls reported the same. Young girls are thus more involved in unpaid household labour than young boys, an unsurprising statistic given the percentages of adult women engaged in unpaid family work (see Figure 3).

Gender as a social construct ascribes certain roles, behaviours and expectations to men and women. Traditionally, women have taken on tasks within the private sphere (household, child-rearing, subsistence tasks, etc.) while men have sought employment in the public sphere. The influx of women in income-generating labour, due to factors such as increasing agricultural investment, has not lightened these original burdens, creating an unbalanced division of labour in the household in which women carry a triple burden of productive, reproductive and community work, be it paid or, as in most cases, unpaid. While substantial debate surrounds rural transformations and the changes in smallholder farming, women's future role in agriculture has tended to be overlooked. As opportunities open up in other sectors – tourism, construction, services and industry – men are moving out of agriculture, yet the changing and expanding roles of the women who stay behind are not yet well understood.

Box 5: Trafficking and labour exploitation

The issue of human trafficking across borders to neighbouring Thailand, Viet Nam and China is a widely-known phenomenon in Lao People's Democratic Republic and one that particularly threatens rural communities, where opportunities for labour are sparser and where the notion of seeking better work abroad has high appeal. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children recently reported, most of the victims of sale and trafficking across the border with Thailand are children, and many of the trafficked girls fall victims of prostitution (UNODC, 2017). The United Nations Special Rapporteur also noted that while the trafficking of girls to Thailand for the purpose of sexual exploitation seems to have decreased in the last years, the age of the trafficked girls has also lowered. At the same time, internal trafficking, though often overlooked, seems to be on the rise. Girls are trafficked within Lao People's Democratic Republic for the purpose of sexual exploitation, while boys are trafficked for the purpose of labour exploitation, including in mining areas and in Special Economic Zones.

Division of labour between men and women in agricultural villages varies based on ethnic groups and socio-cultural traits and traditions therein, location, and resources. While there is variability between families in terms of which tasks are men's and which are women's (for instance depending on how forward or confident a wife is or how willing to help his wife a husband is), in general women's work is seen as 'lighter' and men's as 'heavier.' Women are responsible for domestic tasks including taking care of children, cooking and cleaning, as well as feeding small livestock, watering gardens and weeding. Men generally undertake tasks that are more physically intensive, such as repairing household damages, cutting wood, plowing fields, tending to larger livestock and operating machinery. For a breakdown of the division of labour across agricultural seasons observed during fieldwork see Annex 4.

The presence of rigid gender roles in rural societies constrains women's time allocation among paid and unpaid productive and household activities, leading to 'time poverty.' Domestic activities that are time-intensive, such as fetching water and fuel, are generally the women's domain, and are more demanding in areas lacking basic infrastructure such as water and electricity (World Bank and ADB, 2012). A '24-hour clock' activity from CGA fieldwork that analysed the amount of time women and men spend on their respective tasks (Annex 4) showed women had a more diverse workload than men and consistently had more working hours during the day than their husbands. The additional number of hours women worked compared to men differed by village and season: during the rice season, women worked roughly three hours more than men in both villages. During the off-rice season, women continued to work roughly three additional hours compared to men in Ban Nasom, and up to five additional hours in Ban Phosy. The gaps in women and men's schedules is attributable to women's additional burden of domestic tasks: when men were sleeping, resting, or showering, women frequently were cooking or cleaning. Even when women reported 'resting' they often admitted this included cleaning or weaving, while men's rest was usually smoking.

The mechanization of agricultural processes presents an opportunity to reduce women's workloads and balance work between men and women. Managing

technology and machines is traditionally seen as men's work; therefore, introduction of machinery can shift some tasks that were previously women's responsibility to men (FAO, 2013b). In one village where a rice mill was introduced by a project, the responsibility for rice milling was removed from women's tasks, and men instead carried bags of rice to and from the mills (FAO, 2013b). Participants reported this project overall increased men's workload while reducing women's.

The majority of women's labour contribution and workload are undervalued and undercompensated in Lao People's Democratic Republic (CAWA, 2017). CARE in Lao People's Democratic Republic equates the issue of women's role in society to a 'floating coconut', the humorous equivalent of an iceberg for climates where icebergs do not exist. Like a floating coconut, very little of women's contribution to society is seen 'above the surface', publicly recognized, appreciated and compensated. What lies below the water is the vast 'silent' or understated contributions of women, such as domestic and care work as well as underpaid or unpaid agricultural wage labour, which prevents them from securing decent livelihoods for themselves and their dependents. According to the United Nations' Country Analysis Report, women complete much more uncompensated work than men, comprising 65 percent of uncompensated labourers carrying out family tasks, such as housework, and unpaid agricultural work (UN, 2015). The status of women's compensation and wage equality in Lao People's Democratic Republic requires additional research, particularly as women increasingly seek employment as wage labourers through agricultural investment projects.

Women's workload must be specifically addressed in projects to ensure desirable outcomes. CARE in Lao People's Democratic Republic specifically targets the burden of work of both men and women in their project interventions. Their 'Women's Empowerment Approach' in CARE projects includes interviewing women to better understand their workload and asking women to identify tasks they would like to share with their families or husbands. The process is then repeated with men identifying where they are burdened and would like their wife's help. Based on the results of these analyses, interventions are specifically designed to the unique needs of each

community. CARE's approach includes holding mixed-gender dialogues where men and women discuss what benefits could be had if decisions were made jointly and work was more evenly divided. Trainings and workshops are continually held across the first year of CARE's projects, with follow-up and evaluation after the first year. This approach is certainly best practice; however, CARE noted it may take multiple years for outcomes to be noticed from this process, and changing deeply held perceptions about what is 'men's work' versus 'women's work' may take even longer.

3.2.3 Food security, nutrition, and land tenure security

Despite impressive gains in economic growth over the past decade, Lao People's Democratic Republic still has one of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition in Southeast Asia. According to recent data, malnutrition continues to be a significant problem in Lao People's Democratic Republic: 44 percent of children under five years of age remain stunted, 27 percent are underweight, and 6 percent are wasted (UN, 2015). Gender and location disaggregated data regarding nutrition in Lao People's Democratic Republic is minimal, but a recent food and nutrition security survey conducted in five provinces found some distinctions between rural and urban children. In urban areas, 81.1 percent of infants aged six to eight months who were currently breastfeeding also received solid, semi-solid, or soft foods. This percentage dropped to 76.7 percent in rural areas with roads, and to 69.3 percent in rural areas without roads (Lao Statistics Bureau & Ministry of Health, 2016). The improvement of food security and nutrition is one of the government of Lao People's Democratic Republic's highest priorities. The involvement of women will be a significant requirement to achieving this goal, as making decisions about food and nutrition is seen as women's role nationally.

As defined by international standards, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (World Food Summit, 1996). Proper nutrition among children provides for growth and development, both physical and mental, and allows them to avoid illness, succeed academically, and become healthy, productive adults. A recent study commissioned by the Land Information Working Group (LIWG) found that maintaining access to land and natural resources, including village forests and fisheries, is

an important aspect of food security and nutrition (Kenney-Lazar, 2016). Access to natural resources provides a level of food security, while selling the crops or natural products they collect contributes to household income. Similarly, a survey by CARE and FAO on women, food and land in 2013 found that the most important measure to improve food security, as ranked by women, was to increase productivity of market gardens and paddy fields (or upland rice fields), in order to sell or consume the agricultural products (Stoeber, Sisomphone and Han, 2013).

NTFPs have also proven in several studies to be a highly important food source for rural communities in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Foppes and Khetpanh, 2004; van der Meer, forthcoming; Bartlett, 2012; and others) but access is declining. In a 2012-2013 risk and vulnerability survey in Lao People's Democratic Republic more than 80 percent of households interviewed reported they experienced declining access to forest resources in the last five years (MAF and FAO, 2013). Women are particularly impacted by this dwindling access, as they are the predominant collectors and sellers of NTFPs in most communities. Women may, therefore, be pushed to travel longer and farther to collect NTFPs, or suffer losses to their income. Loss of NTFPs also threatens food security and nutrition in already under-nourished communities, as forest products like nuts, fruits and vegetables become scarcer in rural diets.

NTFPs also provide a source of income which is increasingly important in a cash economy. According to field observations and national research, women are most likely to collect and gather NTFPs, while men hunt in the forest (FAO, 2013b). In one as-yet-unpublished study (van der Meer, forthcoming), researchers from the Australian National University found that for the majority of households in rural Lao People's Democratic Republic 'environmental income' (from NTFPs and other ecosystem services) was vastly undervalued, with the environment contributing significantly not only to households' food source, but also income generation. Another study found that "wild meat and aquatic resources... [are] the biggest sources of animal protein in rural Lao People's Democratic Republic. Consumption of domesticated animals cannot currently compensate for a potential loss of access to and availability of wildlife" (WFP, 2007). Similarly, an FAO project found at least 50 different types of insects are collected in Lao People's Democratic Republic throughout the year for home consumption or sale (Hanboonsong and Durst, 2014).

Box 6: Climate change, vulnerability and food security

The impacts of climate change in Lao People's Democratic Republic link intimately with increased risk of disaster and threats to food security. Illegal logging, land concessions for plantations, and other drivers of deforestation have threatened the health, stability, and biodiversity of forest lands across the country; have increased carbon dioxide emissions and contributed to climate change; and have endangered the food security and livelihoods of people dependent on forests. As climate change results in hotter seasons, heavy floods, droughts, abnormal cold and other irregular weather patterns in Lao People's Democratic Republic, crops are vulnerable to devastation. Commercial agriculture trends that promote large-scale monocropping further increase the vulnerability of crops, as the failure of monocropped plantations can lead to the disappearance of a community's entire diet base or source of income. Crop crises as a result of extreme weather can result in food shortages, familial stress, and potentially even exacerbate violence and drinking (FAO, 2013b). Protecting forests and maintaining agricultural diversity must therefore be a high priority, both for the sake of climate stability, and for food and nutrition security in rural communities.

Land tenure security underpins viable and long-term livelihoods for people living in rural Lao People's Democratic Republic. A general definition of land tenure security is "certainty that a person's rights to land will be recognized by others and protected in cases of specific challenges" (FAO, 2005). At the highest levels of leadership in Lao People's Democratic Republic, the importance of land is recognized and protected through the National Constitution, and, more recently, in the Resolution of the Party's Central Committee on the Enhancement of Land Management and Development in the New Period (the Resolution on Land) issued in August 2017. According to this Resolution, "land is the most important foundation symbolizing the nation", and is "an indispensable factor for sustainable and civilized socio-economic development" (Lao Revolutionary People's Party Central Committee, 2017). The Resolution on land was widely regarded as a progressive step by the Party, as it recognizes a number of important issues that

were previously not openly discussed. Perhaps most significantly, the Resolution notes that a myriad of land issues has not only "caused the loss of benefits for the state and society but also led to public discontentment ... leading to lack of public confidence in relevant management authorities and loss of public faith in the general leadership of the Party" (Lao Revolutionary People's Party Central Committee, 2017).

Although under Lao law men and women have equal status with regard to land ownership and land-use rights, and women have legal capacity to enter into contracts or sign legal documents, in practice it is often the head of household (usually a man) who signs the tenure document, whether a temporary certificate or a land title. In the 2003 National Land Law, there was a provision requiring both husband and wife to sign a land title or document; however, the latest version (at the time of writing this report) of the revised Land Law has taken this provision out.



At the same time, land titling remains limited mainly to urban and peri-urban areas, leaving the majority of rural land untitled and unregistered. In the two villages visited during field work, only 5 families out of 127 had land titles. Some projects are working on land-use planning, registration, management and titling in rural areas, for example, GIZ's Land Management and Decentralization Project (LMDP) in northern Lao People's Democratic Republic, The Agro-Biodiversity Initiative (TABI) on participatory and integrated land-use planning, and the Communal Agricultural Land Management (CALM) project under the Department of Agricultural Land Management. However, most rural land users, including women, do not yet have a legal document for their tenure security. This makes it difficult to access loans or financing, as land-use rights do not provide rights to use land as collateral. Many rural communities have customary (traditional) rights to their land, but do not have titles or documentation – these 'informal' claims to land are sometimes contested.

Past research suggests that perceptions about land ownership may influence whether women have their name on a land title. A 2013 FAO report about the gender implications of agricultural investment found that some wives refuse to have their name on land titles due to traditional beliefs "that the husband will take care of her and the family," according to one government official (FAO, 2013b). Women from ethnic groups are most likely to refuse to have their name on a land title, believing land management is a man's role. Land thus passes on to sons only, with wives and daughters often not accepting their shares of the property that is rightfully theirs by law (FAO, 2013b). At the same time, these attitudes are not universal, and some research has found cases of Hmong women who had their names on land and property documents, instead of their husbands' name, because they were regarded as cleverer than their husbands (Mann and Luangkhot, 2008).

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA) is becoming a priority for the government and development partners. According to a case study commissioned by FAO and conducted by Helvetas, there are at least 28 organizations working on NSA in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Foppes, 2017). FAO defines NSA as a "food-based approach to agricultural development that puts nutritionally rich foods, dietary diversity, and food fortification at the heart of overcoming malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies" (FAO, 2014). This approach stresses the multiple benefits

derived from enjoying a variety of foods, recognizing the value of food for good nutrition, and the importance and social significance of the food and agricultural sector for supporting rural livelihoods. Recent studies have advocated for a more gender-responsive approach to NSA in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Scovill, forthcoming; VFI, 2017; Foppes and Sengyavong, 2017), including urging projects to be more mindful to not overburden women with agricultural tasks when designing and implementing NSA projects. One key finding of the Foppes and Senyavong study (2017) was that women are the drivers of decision-making on agriculture, so "NSA cannot be done without women" and that NSA programmes should have gender-for-nutrition strategies addressing:

1. Women's workload (avoiding diverting women's time away from nutrition-related tasks);
2. Women's empowerment (which leads to better participation of women in nutrition activities);
3. Women's leadership; and
4. Cooking groups which can double as child care groups.

One of the key findings of this gender assessment is that increased cooperation among sectors working on food security and NSA, and those working on land and resource issues could be strengthened. There is some overlap amongst actors working on both topics, but in many cases the information sharing and coordination between sectors has room for improvement. FAO could play a key role in promoting stronger cooperation/coordination amongst these actors, and forming new linkages across projects.

3.2.4 Access to markets and financing schemes

According to national policy, women and men have equal access to markets and banking/credit services. In practice, however, these services are not entirely accessible to a large portion of the population. The most recent Lao Agricultural Census (2011) reported that 84 percent of agricultural households do not use credit (MAF and FAO, 2014). Women face further constraints in accessing financial resources and are overall less likely than men to take advantage of loans and credit. In households that reported male or joint-decision making, 15 percent had used credit or loans (MAF and FAO, 2014). In contrast, 11 percent of female-decision-making households had taken advantage of these financial resources.

In a 2013 national CARE/FAO survey, women responded that access to credit was one of their most significant aspirations (Stoeber, Sisomphone and Han, 2013). However, women are often deterred from accessing credit and loans for a variety of reasons, both self-imposed and externally driven. During fieldwork, women focus group participants reported feeling they were not suited to handling banking matters because their husbands made the family income. This evaluation of their own abilities was incongruent with women's demonstrated skills, as women in these villages were the managers of their husbands' incomes and are arguably better suited to manage banking matters. Lack of education and literacy, and the lack of confidence these create are further deterrents for women, particularly ethnic

women, in accessing loans, as bank processes are not always accessible to people who cannot read or those who do not speak Lao language. Multiple agencies and projects have recognized rural women's need for credit and loans, and have taken steps to make financing options more available to these women, and to rural communities in general. MAF has set a goal to work with the Agriculture Promotion Bank and Policy Bank to create an agricultural credit system that can provide credit to poor, rural women farmers with low interest rates and acceptable loan terms (MAF, 2017). While these two banks are some of the largest in Lao People's Democratic Republic, their processes are not as accessible as third-party financing mechanisms that are designed with the needs of rural farmers in mind.

Box 7: Success story: GIZ's work supporting village-level microfinance and financial literacy

Although 41 banks operate in Lao People's Democratic Republic, GIZ (the German development agency) which has significant involvement in the country, reports that 83 percent of these banks only have branches in the capital Vientiane (GIZ, 2017). Local-level banking mechanisms remain difficult for villagers to access, due to factors such as distance, or simply because they are non-existent. GIZ's 'Microfinance in Rural Areas – Access to Finance for the Poor' project has made impressive progress in creating a national microfinance network of 601 village banks, with 77 000 member accounts and 115 000 account holders across the country. Villagers have saved an aggregate LAK 190 billion, or USD 23 million, through their bank accounts, as well as taken out loans exceeding USD 15 million. Out of the accounts held by one individual, 54 percent are held by women. The majority of accounts are jointly held by spouses, and 84 percent of total accounts are accessible for women.

The project has also made strides in increasing villagers' financial literacy by partnering with the Bank of Laos at the national level and with microfinance institutions in six provinces (Luang Namtha, Xayabouly, Savannakhet, Saravan, Champasak and Attapue) to provide training to bank members on financial literacy and credit management. Certain training schemes are tailored specifically to women and are led by GIZ staff who are women and an LWU representative. Women villagers involved in the project reported that they are deterred from participating more in village banks because of men's heavy role in banking structures, women's lack of capacity (for instance, with literacy, language skills and numeracy), and lack of confidence. Two-thirds of surveyed village women wanted to see more women involved in Village Bank Committees (VBC), which GIZ establishes to coordinate between villages and provincial-level microfinance institutions. To boost women's participation, GIZ directly recruits women to be a part of VBCs and provides on-the-job technical training to women who want to be involved but feel they do not have the requisite skills. GIZ requests that two out of five VBC members are women, and the ratio of women on VBCs is continually improving, currently at 36.8 percent (GIZ, 2017). Moving to future phases of the project, GIZ hopes to continually boost women's involvement in village banking structures, and further empower and equip women to become financially literate and confident.

District staff at the Agriculture and Forestry Office in Phaxai district, Xieng Khouang province, reported that banks often have very particular criteria for taking out loans, require land titles or groups of families to take out loans together, and mandate advanced financial planning (for instance, if a family wanted to spend their money in 2019, they would have to take out a loan in 2018). Due to the complex requirements imposed by banks, many women regard the loan process as particularly burdensome and therefore do not engage in it due to a lack of confidence. During fieldwork, the CGA team learned about multiple credit and finance structures that could offer potential frameworks for increasing rural populations' access to credit. See Table 1 for two examples from field work in Xieng Khouang.

Both these structures allow villagers a great deal of agency in determining the terms of their loans. They also simplify the loan application process, offer low-interest loans and long payback periods, include benefit sharing, allow small loans, do not require a land title, and request consent of both husband and wife, which can all serve to boost women's usage of financing mechanisms.

As stated previously, the shift from subsistence to market-based agriculture may disadvantage women, who often struggle to access markets. The 2011 Agricultural Census showed that farming households with female decision-makers (FDMH) sold less agricultural produce than male decision-making households (MDMH) in every

Table 1: Examples of two financing mechanisms in Xieng Khouang province

Nam Ngum Reservoir Credit Union	Lao Women's Union Fund
<p>The Nam Ngum Reservoir fund was established in 2007 as a way to improve villagers' livelihoods near the Nam Ngum Reservoir. In 2015, the fund was officially established as a Credit Union. The credit fund currently operates with LAK 2 billion (USD 240 000) and involves 31 villages. The process of applying for a loan takes roughly two days. While some form of assets are required, the village Nai Ban acts as witness for villagers who want to take out a loan, which is much simpler than the requirement of some banks that families form groups to vouch for each other's assets. Men and women's names are both required to be on loan documents.</p> <p>To participate in the credit union, families contribute LAK 10 000 (USD 1.25) and purchase ten shares at the same price. The interest for loans is quite high: 24 percent per year. This rate was determined by the members, however, who prefer a higher rate so they can get more benefits sharing at the end of every year.</p> <p>The smallest loan available through the union is LAK 2 million (USD 240), which is particularly accessible for poor rural families with few assets.</p>	<p>This fund was initiated by an IFAD project in 2005 and is currently operated by the district LWU in Phaxai district. The fund covers 20 villages and more than 2 000 members, with a current operational sum of LAK 6 billion (USD 720 000).</p> <p>Similar to the Nam Ngum credit union, the participants in this fund determine their own interest rate. The average interest rate for a village is 1.5 to 1.7 percent per month. In one Hmong village, the villagers opted for a 1 percent interest rate because their village is quite poor.</p> <p>This fund is used exclusively by women, including women from diverse ethnic origins, and presents a positive model for a financing mechanism that is accessible and specifically tailored to rural women.</p>

Source: Authors

category (MAF and FAO, 2014). While 40 percent of MDMH sold non-rice crops in the past twelve months, only 31 percent of FDMH did. Forty-one percent of MDMH households sold livestock, compared to 33 percent of FDMH households; and 28 percent of MDMH sold fish, with 20 percent of FDMH doing so. These gaps between households suggest that “farming activities among female decision-maker households are more subsistence-oriented” (MAF and FAO, 2014), potentially because women have less access to markets than men do.

3.2.5 Decision-making and leadership

Women’s leadership in positions of political power in Lao People’s Democratic Republic remains limited at all levels, from the national to the lowest administrative unit, the village. Although some progress has been made, a United Nations survey noted that only 2 of 143 districts had a female governor, and there were no women provincial governors (World Bank and ADB, 2012). At the local level, decision-making is done through a Village Committee. This Committee is made up of the *Nai Ban* and two to four elected villagers, as well as representatives from mass organizations, such as the Lao Youth Union or Lao Front for National Construction. In 2013, only 1.7 percent of *Nai Ban* were women and only 5 percent of deputy heads (World Bank and ADB, 2012). In practice, a party member is usually the one who will become a vice *Nai ban* but that is not actually required by law.

Villages also have a variety of additional committees, focusing on issues such as trade, agriculture, health, education and security. The LWU also has a village-level body, which is the main avenue through which village women participate in the village committees. With the exception of the LWU, these committees are almost exclusively composed of men. The World Bank’s 2005 gender profile on Lao People’s Democratic Republic showed that in 93 villages researched, only 7.9 percent of the committee members were women (Siliphong, Khampoui and Mihyo, 2005). This stark difference is seen mostly because, according to the Law on Local Administration (Article 91), village meetings must be attended by household heads, who are traditionally men. Additionally, in ethnic communities, women shy away from leadership positions because they are less likely to speak and understand Lao language than men, and so have a harder time following and participating in discussions (FAO, 2013b).

Leadership within households follows a similar trend, with 87 percent of all households reporting being headed by a man in the 2015 Census (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). For farming households, the percentage of male-headed households increases to 91 percent (MAF and FAO, 2011), and for rural households in villages without roads, it increases further to 92.6 percent (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). The most common reason for women to be heads of households is widowhood (62 percent), followed by de-facto headship due to men leaving the household for labour or other reasons (20 percent) (MAF and FAO, 2011).

It is important to note that, although men are often the de-facto heads of the household, they are not only the ones to make decisions. The Agricultural Census found that over 60 percent of households reported being joint decision-making households (MAF and FAO, 2014). Fieldwork in Phaxai district, Xieng Khouang province, confirmed the prevalence of joint decision-making between husbands and wives. The majority of participants in focus groups reported that most significant agricultural decisions are reached with both husbands’ and wives’ involvement, and that neither spouse would make a large decision (such as an expensive purchase or a decision on what agricultural projects to partake in) without discussing it first with their spouse. Of course, there was some variation between households in decision-making processes: some women stated they preferred that their husbands make decisions, while others reported that they made the majority of household decisions because their husbands worked as labourers outside the village.

Increasing women’s decision-making ability and leadership at the local level is necessary, and these efforts must be mirrored at the district, provincial and central levels. The empowerment of women staff at NPAs, INGOs and government agencies is essential so these staff are able to effectively work at the local level and integrate gender concerns into their organization’s work. One LWU representative in Phaxai district, Xieng Khouang province, reported that even their staff members, who work directly on women’s empowerment, did not feel confident enough to speak up at meetings and lacked oral communication skills. While they had strong written skills and could produce outstanding reports,

for example, they hesitated to express that same knowledge verbally. Similarly, the Provincial CAW in Xieng Khouang reported needing capacity building for their women staff to improve facilitation and communication skills. At the national level in Vientiane, CSOs and INGOs are beginning to do such capacity building with women staff. The Women in Leadership Task Force under the Lao Gender Network brings together a group of CSOs to empower their female Lao staff to take leadership positions through trainings and other mechanisms. This task force is still nascent and its parameters have not been clearly defined, but efforts such as this show promise to increase the capacity of dynamic women leaders in Lao People's Democratic Republic with the hope that the impact of this capacity building will trickle down to the village level.

Women's involvement in political decision-making has room for improvement. According to the LWU,

"women's participation at the political level is an overarching priority" (LWU, 2015). In their submission to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in 2015, the LWU stated that "much progress has been achieved in recent years", on advancing women's leadership in the political sphere (LWU, 2015). The submission notes that one-quarter of National Assembly members are women and that there is increasing involvement of women in government and local administration at all levels. However, this strong national presence does not trickle down to local levels. As noted earlier, women's leadership at the local level is extremely limited, a reality that men interviewed in a 2005 World Bank survey reported stemmed from the fact that "women are just less active" (Siliphong *et al*, 2005). These assumptions point towards a negative gender norm on women's capabilities in political participation, which is discussed more in depth in the following section.



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4

INSTITUTIONAL, POLICY AND LEGAL CONTEXT



4.1 Key institutional actors for gender in Lao People's Democratic Republic

In Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2003 marked the establishment of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW), an organization tasked with promoting gender equality. The commission is the result of the country's ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against Women (CEDAW). Originally, NCAW was an institution-independent agency under the Prime Minister's Office, but in 2016 it was moved under the LWU. NCAW's main tasks are to formulate and implement a national policy on gender equality; eliminate discrimination against women; and coordinate the mainstreaming of gender equality in all public sectors of public life.

To carry out these tasks, all ministries have sub-commissions (sub-CAWs) with fully functioning secretariats. This means that in the majority of ministries, government officials assigned to carry out gender equality-related work have to perform these tasks on top of their regular duties (FAO, 2013b). For many ministries, the sub-CAW is chaired by the Vice Minister with deputies from the ministerial level, one of whom is from the ministry's Women's Union. This structure means most sub-CAW representatives are frequently men, as women's leadership is limited across ministries and departments. As a result of these constraints, gender activities are often lacking financial resources, time, technical capacity and/or interest in the role (FAO, 2013b). In one extreme case, a sub-CAW representative in the Provincial Planning and Investment Office during fieldwork only found out six months ago that he has been his department's sub-CAW representative since 2008. While NCAW is charged with establishing sub-CAWs in all ministries, the collaboration among sub-CAWs on gender work is minimal. Even outside the field of gender, ministries do not coordinate as strongly as they could. There are opportunities for increased synergies among all ministries and their sub-CAWs to create a more holistic and coordinated approach to women's empowerment and gender equality.

The main political entity through which women are active is the **Lao Women's Union (LWU)** which was established in 1955 as a small Party-association and expanded in 1984 into a mass organization to support women's development. The LWU is the

organizational equivalent of a ministry, with sub-national agencies at province, district and village levels. The LWU differs from the NCAW as it is closely aligned with the ruling party, whereas the NCAW upholds neutrality. Since being moved under LWU, it is unclear how the neutral mandate of the NCAW will be affected, if at all. The official objectives of the LWU are to protect women's rights and interests; promote gender equality in family and society; develop the country; educate all Lao women to implement policies, laws, guidelines and plans of the country; and contribute to promoting cultural heritage and traditions of all women. The LWU conducts activities such as skills training, financial assistance and awareness raising about women's rights in relation to land titling and registration, women's advancement in the National Assembly, working with legislators to expand the legal rights of women, providing legal consultation for women, and disseminating information at the village level.

Overall, the existence of multiple agencies and organizations designed to promote gender equality and women's advancement in Lao People's Democratic Republic is positive. However, during field work, multiple stakeholders, including MAF and INGOs at the national level, and the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) and the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) in Xieng Khouang reported confusion about the roles of the LWU, the NCAW, and sub-CAWs. Since NCAW has been moved under the supervision of the LWU, some NCAW and LWU civil-society partners feel unsure what the distinction is between the two bodies or which organization is most appropriate for collaboration. Provincial CAW representatives reported a similar uncertainty regarding their status and role since being moved under the LWU. They felt NCAW had less status, less funding, and was of a lower priority since this structural reorganization.

Within the **Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)**, there is a Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), which houses the Gender Focal Point and sub-CAW representative for MAF. This division, in addition to being a part of the sub-CAW network, also receives guidance from LWU on its gender programmes. The MAF including DAW is a key partner for FAO and several other stakeholders working on agriculture and gender. Since around 1996, MAF has had a focus on gender and agriculture and has produced guiding materials to integrate

gender further into its programmes, from the central level down to the village level. MAF recently produced two handbooks related to gender. The first, in 2010, was a guide for collecting and using gender disaggregated data and was supported by FAO. The second, a handbook produced in 2011, was a collaboration with ADB and provides guidance for integrating gender issues into MAF's agricultural work. The lessons from this handbook have been shared with the five agricultural colleges MAF oversees,⁴ but whether this sharing has resulted in a more gender-sensitive agricultural curriculum is unknown. The DAW representative also reported sharing their strategies for gender integration with ten other ministries,⁵ noting that, if a training is occurring at MAF related to gender, staff of other ministries will often come, and vice versa. However, ensuring that government officials in other ministries are able to apply MAF's guidance from the handbook in their own work is an ongoing challenge. Another challenge, according to an interview with the DAW representative, is to change the predominant mindset within government agencies that "gender issues are women's work."

The **National University of Laos** (NUoL) was established in 1996 and currently comprises 11 faculties covering a broad range of disciplines. The university does not have any clear policy or strategy for gender equality or promotion of women, other than to follow the laws of Lao People's Democratic Republic as a country. While there was previously a quota for recruiting women staff and students to NUoL, this quota has ended (interviewees did not know when this happened), and admission and hiring now does not take gender into consideration. Gender as an academic discipline is not recognized at the university, with no focus on gender, even in the social sciences programme. One course in the Master's degree level International Development Studies programme incorporates gender, but no courses with a gender component exist at the Bachelor's degree level. NUoL faculty report that there are roughly equal numbers of women and men students at the university, with varying percentages in different degree programmes (for instance, there are more men in the natural sciences, and more women in social sciences). Education about gender issues is pivotal for changing

the discourse in Lao People's Democratic Republic regarding women's empowerment and gender roles, and for preparing future leaders to integrate gender considerations into their work. Partnerships with NUoL to introduce a gender curriculum, or degree of study in gender, therefore, present an opportunity for development cooperation.

4.2 Policies, strategies, visions and programme

The legal and regulatory frameworks governing gender, agriculture and the rural sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic are a complex, interconnected network of policies, visions, Party resolutions, strategic and implementation plans, laws, orders, decrees, and instructions. The summary following highlights some of the most relevant documents.

The **National Constitution of Lao People's Democratic Republic** enshrines equal rights of men and women in Article 35: "Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic group," and Article 37: "citizens of both genders enjoy equal rights in the political, economic, cultural and social fields and in family affairs," while Article 29 specifically commits to "supporting the progress of women and to protecting the legitimate rights and benefits of women and children" (Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2003).

The **National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy** (NGPES) specifically targets rural women and highlights plans to improve their livelihoods, with the aim of eradicating poverty in Lao People's Democratic Republic by 2020. The strategy aims to improve agricultural practices for women and strengthen land tenure security by incorporating women's customary land rights into land reallocation, titling and dispute settlement plans. It further strives to include women in project activities, apply gender equity in training services, opts to hire more women in the staff of provinces and districts, and seeks to set up a rural savings and credits scheme for women (Siliphong *et al*, 2005).

⁴ These colleges are in Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Vientiane Capital, Bolikhamxay, and Champasak provinces.

⁵ The ten ministries MAF shares its gender resources with are the Ministry of Energy and Mines; Ministry of Home Affairs; Ministry of Planning and Investment; Ministry of Industry and Commerce; Ministry of Public Works and Transport; Ministry of Science and Technology; Ministry of Education and Sport; Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment; the Ministry of Public Health; and the Bank of Lao People's Democratic Republic.



The NGPES offers a blueprint for the **National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (NSAW)** and the national social and economic development plan (NSED), which are redesigned every five years. The first NSAW was developed in 2006, with the most recent document targeting 2011-2015. The 2011-2015 NSAW goals include:

- eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women;
- increasing the number of women in decision-making positions in all levels in all fields;
- creating social awareness campaigns to promote women's empowerment;
- strengthening the sub-CAW network; and
- increasing access to education, healthcare, social services and financial resources (NCAW, 2011).

The **Women's Development Plan (2016-2020)** promoted by the LWU has eight programmes that promote areas such as vocational training and business, human resources development, traditions and culture, and international cooperation.

Specifically on agriculture, forestry and the rural sectors MAF's Division for the Advancement of Women worked in collaboration with the LURAS (Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service) project under Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation. This collaboration developed a compilation document including the **Vision to the Year 2030**, which aims to promote equal rights for women and men; eliminate discrimination against women in agricultural, forestry and rural development sectors; and establish and enable favourable conditions for women to fully participate in decision-making and implementation

of the strategy for agricultural development, rural development and eradication of poverty. The implementation plan comprises three programmes and eight sub-projects to promote areas such as gender mainstreaming in project cycles; information and statistic systems development; livelihood development and resilience to climate change; human resource development; awareness raising; and increasing collaboration at country and international levels.

Some other relevant high-level documents are the **National Development Vision to 2030**, which aims for "green economic growth that ensures sustainable, resilient development", complemented by the **10-Year Socio-Economic Development Strategy (2016-2025)**, and the **Eighth Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) (2016-2020)**, which incorporates targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into national-level planning. This includes SDG 5, which relates to gender equality and empowerment of women.

The goals of the **National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020** focus on reducing food insecurity and reducing undernutrition. The Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action was also created with the aim of achieving SDG 2: "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture", and also to contribute to achieving the targets of the Eighth Five-Year NSED. The 2015 **Agriculture Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision to the Year 2030** also supports sustainable agriculture and focuses on food security as a national priority. However, this document does not have a substantial gender focus.

4.3 Laws and other regulatory instruments

The **Law on the Development and Protection of Women** embeds the importance of gender equality in a legal framework. The main targets of the law are to:

1. promote women's knowledge and capacity;
2. promote gender equality;
3. eradicate trafficking in persons, women and children;
4. eliminate domestic violence;
5. better the appreciation of women in society; and
6. encourage women to participate in national defence and development (Siliphong, Khampoui and Mihyo, 2005).

The **Family Law**, passed in 1990, states as two of its five purposes to "establish matrimonial [and] family relationships based on mutual consent and equality between men and women" and to "protect the interests of mothers and children in family life and upon divorce," (National Assembly of Lao People's Democratic Republic, 1990). It upholds the equal rights of men and women in all aspects of family relationships. The law establishes 18 as the legal age for marriage, with some "special and necessary" exceptions between ages 15 to 18 and outright prohibition before age 15.⁶ The law puts forth a highly collaborative ideal for married couples and families to strive toward, stating that both husbands and wives have equal rights and obligations to make decisions about family matters; raise and care for children; use matrimonial property; and "engage in political, economic, cultural and social activities." Unfortunately, despite this stated equality in the law, this assessment concluded that women and men are often not equal in family decision-making, in care of children, and in engagement in the aforementioned activities. The law, therefore, lacks strong implementation at the local level and clashes with cultural norms that uphold more patriarchal family structures.

The 2003 **Land Law** makes one specific stipulation about women in Article 43 on land registration, stating that both names of husbands and wives should be included in the land register book in the case of matrimonial property. Article 58 states that the holder of land usage rights has the right to pass

their rights to their "close family relatives" upon death (National Assembly of Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2003). The ongoing Land Law revision process presents an opportunity to strengthen provisions relating specifically to women and access/ownership of land, especially productive agricultural land. The revised National Land Law is due to be tabled to late 2018. The Land Law revision is guided by the **Resolution of the Lao Revolutionary Party's Central Committee on the Enhancement of Land Management and Development in New Period** (dated 3 August 2017), which restates the use of land for socio-economic development, poverty reduction, and food security. The resolution also recognizes the importance of community participation in land management.

The revised law includes several strengthened provisions however only one is directly related to gender equality: Article 72 states investors have a responsibility to "promote employment of Lao labour, especially women and ethnic people" (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2017).

The **Labour Law**, amended in 2013, includes some provisions which protect women employees' rights. It prohibits the obstruction of employment based on gender and calls for the "creation of employment opportunities" that promote hiring of women and other disadvantaged groups. Section VI focuses on women and youth employment and includes a new Article upholding women's and men's equal rights to employment and salary in every sector. Employers are not allowed to terminate the contracts of women employees who are pregnant or have children less than one year old, and, interestingly, women may not be employed during this same time period if the work includes lifting, night work, extensive standing, or working in an elevation higher than 2 metres. The law entitles women employees to at least 105 days of maternity leave, 42 of which must be after giving birth. The Law is confusingly indecisive regarding child labour, not clearly defining a minimum age for employers to accept youth employees. It allows for employers to accept employees under the age of 18, but not under 14. Employees in this age range are prohibited from working overtime. The Law goes on to say, however, that "when necessary, the employer may accept and use youth employees under the

⁶ Unfortunately, the enforcement of a minimum age for marriage is quite weak. The United Nations in Lao People's Democratic Republic reported in 2015 that 10 percent of Lao women are married before age fifteen, making Lao People's Democratic Republic one of the countries with the highest rates of early marriage in the region. (UN, 2015).

age of fourteen, but not younger than twelve years, and must ensure the work is light work” (National Assembly of Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2013). The **Law on Local Administration** establishes the village as the most local and grassroots level of governance in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Villages are led by Nai Ban who are elected by villagers for three-year terms. The law establishes four separate village units, which oversee affairs related to the Party and mass organizations; economics and budget; social and cultural affairs; and national defense and public security. The heads and deputy heads of these units, along with the Nai Ban and deputy chief, form the village administrative unit, which meets monthly. The Nai Ban may also convene village meetings, which include the chief, deputy chief, heads of units, and heads of families. Since men are the de-facto heads of family in Lao People’s Democratic Republic these village meetings frequently over-represent men. The law makes no mention of gender or women nor specifies any percentage of women who ought to be involved in the administrative bodies.

Significantly, the **Law on Agriculture** has not been revised since 1998 and currently makes no mention of women or gender. There is potential for this law to be updated to include provisions on gender, responsible agricultural investment, and to inject more clarity into its articles.

4.4 International standards, commitments and guidance within the Lao People’s Democratic Republic context

Lao People’s Democratic Republic ratified CEDAW in 1981. Despite several decades having passed since ratifying CEDAW, UN Women in Lao People’s Democratic Republic reports on its website that knowledge of CEDAW is confined mainly to senior government officials or senior members of the LWU. UN Women emphasizes the “need for greater public advocacy and training of district officials, to encourage greater awareness of CEDAW and of women’s human rights in general” (UN Women, 2018).

The government started preparing for a CEDAW state report in 2014, and this report has just recently been completed, with preparation now underway for a 2018 report. Multiple stakeholders, both NPAs

and INGOs reported desiring more involvement in the CEDAW reporting process, particularly with ‘shadow reporting’, or the opportunity to write an independent report responding to the government of Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s official CEDAW submission, which, at the time of writing this report, has been restricted by the government. CSOs reported feeling shut out of the reporting process, but hesitated to push for more involvement due to the fragile status of their recognition by the Government of Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Opening up space for CSO involvement in CEDAW reporting could, therefore, be a key role for FAO to play, as an agency of the United Nations.

4.4.1 Gender, land and international guidance

In recent years, there have been growing concerns in Lao People’s Democratic Republic as well as globally, about ‘land grabbing’, especially in rural areas. Land grabs are generally characterized by a lack of transparency, possible violations of human rights, social conflicts, environmental degradation and land loss for local communities (Cotula, 2016). Environmental degradation and land loss for local communities have also been raised as a result of large-scale agricultural investment, especially land concession models (Schoenberger, Hall and Vandergeest, 2017). In Lao People’s Democratic Republic to date, approximately 1.1 million hectares, or roughly 5 percent of the country’s territory, has been approved for concessions and large-scale leases (FAO, 2013c). At the same time, agriculture production is becoming increasingly commercialized. Currently, 33 percent of farmers are producing mainly for sale (FAO, 2017). Use of chemical fertilizers has traditionally been low in Lao People’s Democratic Republic, however, with the spread of agricultural concessions, an increased trend in their use has been registered (see for example, LURAS discussion paper, 2017).

In an effort to combat negative outcomes from such land-based investment, and to encourage investors to be more responsible in their business practices, a multitude of global guidance has been created by development partners, CSOs and financial institutions worldwide. Many of these guidance documents contain specific provisions for promoting gender equality. One of the ten implementation principles of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) is Gender Equality, to

“ensure the equal right of women and men to the enjoyment of all human rights... and taking specific measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality” (FAO, 2012). The VGGT further emphasizes that “States should ensure that women and girls have equal tenure rights and access to land, fisheries and forests independent of their civil and marital status.” A technical guide called “Governing Land for Women and Men” was developed by FAO in 2013 to assist implementation of the VGGT principle of gender equality through the achievement of gender-equitable governance of land tenure. The guide provides advice on mechanisms, strategies and actions that can be adopted to improve gender equity in the processes, institutions and activities of land tenure governance.

4.5 Secondary stakeholder analysis

This section highlights key non-government initiatives and stakeholders working on gender in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Table 2 below presents some of the key civil society and development stakeholders, and – where appropriate – potential synergies and collaborations with FAO are highlighted.

Lao Gender Network

This network was loosely formed in 2003, and was formalized into a network structure in 2013. Over the years, the network has included participants from civil society, both local and international, from United Nations agencies, from donors and development partners and, occasionally, from the Government of Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The Gender Network aims to promote a coordinated approach to gender issues, and seeks to use collaboration to accelerate progress towards gender equality for individuals, organizations and the wider community in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Currently, the network is co-led by World Concern and CARE. While not specifically focusing on rural gender issues or agriculture, many CSOs within the Gender Network work in rural areas. There are three permanent task forces within the Gender Network:

1. Gender-Based Violence, chaired by members on a rotating basis,
2. CEDAW, chaired by the Gender Development Association (GDA), and
3. Women’s Leadership, chaired by GIZ.

The Gender Network is planning to conduct a gender analysis of power within Lao People’s Democratic Republic and is currently seeking partners to collaborate on this analysis.

The ‘Nang Noi’ Initiative

In December 2017, the WFP and UNFPA signed a joint letter of collaboration, formalizing a partnership around the Noi 2030 Framework. ‘Nang Noi’ is a fictitious adolescent girl created by UNFPA as an entry point for dialogue on issues adolescent girls are facing in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The character ‘Noi’ dreams of getting a quality education, easy access to reproductive health services and employment, and taking part in decision-making. ‘Noi’ represents all the 700 230 girls in Lao People’s Democratic Republic aged 10-19 years old (UNFPA, 2017). The initiative is supported by the Government and key development partners. The framework focuses on bringing attention to empowering adolescents in order to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Stakeholder interviews found that many stakeholders focus on gender work in:

1. stopping violence against women and domestic violence, and
2. anti-human trafficking for sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Within the context of CEDAW, this narrow focus is understandable. However, this means that there are several key issues pertaining to gender, agriculture and the rural sector which are not captured by stakeholders who only focus on these two issues. No stakeholders focused on violence against women specifically addressed the needs and concerns of rural women – a large gap, considering that rural women are often unaware of their rights and lack the resources and support network urban women have access to (CEDAW, 2003). Therefore, there is a need to better understand the drivers of violence against rural women and the integration of approaches to reducing violence that are specific to the needs and concerns of women in rural areas and agricultural families.

Table 2: List of secondary stakeholders

Name of secondary stakeholder	Description of stakeholder	Relevant initiatives and potential entry points/future collaboration with FAO Lao People's Democratic Republic
Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)	Donor and 'broker of research partnerships'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACIAR in Lao People's Democratic Republic is the regional office responsible for the Mekong countries. Currently there are some research projects on gender in other countries, but not in Lao People's Democratic Republic. • ACIAR has a forthcoming Gender Strategy which will promote institutional-level gender equality and encourage more research on gender topics. • A topic of interest for ACIAR is the feminization of agriculture. FAO could potentially collaborate on future research to better understand the effects of male out-migration on women's changing roles in agriculture.
Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)	Donor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DFAT has three focus areas (mostly at policy level) relating to gender equality: women's economic empowerment; ending violence against women; and women in leadership and decision-making. • DFAT supports women's leadership at the macro-level in the private sector, such as banking and business. There is also a micro-financing scheme beginning in 2018. • DFAT mentioned their concern about growing instances of trafficking linked to commercial agriculture, and highlighted the need for more data. This is a potential area for FAO to combine policy advocacy efforts with DFAT and assistance to the government to address this emerging issue.
CARE International	INGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender is integrated into all CARE projects and standardized training following a step-by-step approach is required for all staff and counterparts. • CARE has a number of Gender Advisors based in target provinces and at the central level, and is Co-Chair of the Gender Network. • CARE has research forthcoming on gender and coffee value chains, and is planning a national-level analysis of power and gender. • CARE is also looking to promote diversification of crops to combat negative effects of monoculture (especially as observed in Xieng Khouang with maize); FAO is invited to join advocacy efforts on this topic. • FAO could become a member of the Gender Network or collaborate on the upcoming analysis of power and gender in rural areas.

Gender Development Association (GDA)	NPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key initiatives of GDA are CEDAW monitoring; campaigns to end violence against women; education on gender roles; training and capacity building on gender for other NPAs, INGOs and social enterprises. • FAO could support NPAs such as GDA to engage effectively in the CEDAW reporting and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes.
Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)	Development partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GIZ Lao People’s Democratic Republic has several programmes, including the Enhanced Land Tenure Security, Land Management and Decentralisation project; Climate Protection through Avoided Deforestation (CLiPAD); good governance and capacity building for civil society (CEGGA project); vocational training centres, and women’s leadership and economic empowerment. • GIZ also chairs a task force under the Lao Gender Network on women’s leadership. • FAO could explore areas of collaboration with GIZ on securing land tenure for women in rural areas (especially productive agricultural land and forests), gender dimensions of emissions reduction initiatives, and engaging with civil society to promote gender equality in rural areas.
Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation	INGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helvetas is working on land and agriculture in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The LURAS project, under Helvetas, works with the Division for the Advancement of Women under MAF, and has collaboratively produced the Gender Strategy on Agriculture and Forestry. • LURAS also completed the Women’s Lives Film project: https://laowomen.org/2017/08/14/about/ • Areas for collaboration with FAO include emerging issues of water access, labour and exposure of women to pollutants through cookstoves. FAO can also be a partner in promoting gender equality through women’s empowerment.
The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	Development partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IFAD is a current key partner for FAO for technical inputs at the community level, including for Farmer Field Schools. • Current focus areas are community access to land; land-use planning; improving production for farmers; and value chain and market links, for example, banana, coffee and incense wood. • IFAD plans to strengthen its focus on land tenure security, food security, and access to rural finance/credit. These are potential areas for continued collaboration with FAO.

<p>International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)</p>	<p>INGO</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IUCN in Lao People’s Democratic Republic focuses on gender equity for securing water resources and other natural resources, and conservation projects. • IUCN was subcontracted by FAO as technical support for the Climate Change Adaptation in Wetland Areas (CAWA) project. A gender analysis was completed for this project, which feeds into the gender mainstreaming strategy for CAWA. • IUCN has also conducted a gender analysis with United Nations Environment Programme on a case study of gender and climate change. • FAO is encouraged to continue collaboration with IUCN, especially on disaster-risk reduction, climate-change adaptation, land-tenure security and gender.
<p>Land Information Working Group (LIWG)</p>	<p>Network of INGOs and NPAs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A network of 100+ members working on land-related issues in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. LIWG aims to promote sharing and learning, collaborative policy advocacy and a coordinated approach to land issues. • FAO currently engages with LIWG as a development partner, and through the Land Law Advisory group for policy dialogue and advocacy. • The LIWG network is an important entry point for FAO to share and build knowledge of global good practice, guidance and standards on gender, land and agriculture amongst NPAs and INGOs in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. • FAO publications and guidance could be shared more widely through the LIWG.
<p>Mekong Region Land Governance Project</p>	<p>Development partner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major partner for land-related issues in Mekong countries, particularly smallholders’ land tenure security and responsible land-based (including agricultural) investment. Limited gender focus currently. • Entering Phase II in mid-2018, with a stronger focus on gender and land. Potential for FAO to contribute to the design of Phase II and/or collaborate on gender-land-investment research.

Oxfam	INGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several focus areas potentially provide entry points for FAO collaboration, such as food security and sustainable development; gender equality through greater participation of women in the political, economic and social spheres; the reduction of violence against women; enhanced disaster management in rural areas; and promotion of conditions for real participation of communities and civil society. • Currently Oxfam has a project on transboundary agricultural investment in the Mekong region, and has developed a Gender Action Learning System (GALS) for women's economic empowerment in agriculture. These may be interesting for FAO to explore further.
The Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC) Lao People's Democratic Republic	INGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on forestry, especially community forestry, at policy level and micro level in northern Lao People's Democratic Republic. • Regional office in Bangkok offers 'experiential learning' and training, including a well-reviewed training on forestry, women's rights, gender and FPIC. • Potential for FAO to engage RECOFTC for gender and forestry initiatives, and for the Emissions Reduction Programme (ER-P) for enhanced engagement with civil society.
Social Development Alliance Association (SODA)	NPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speciality in action research, and has conducted several studies with a gender and rural sector focus, including case studies of ethnic minorities in Lao People's Democratic Republic and a baseline survey of the status of rural women and children which was carried out in 2016. • Supports gender training for mainstreaming, including for government and especially LWU. • SODA works closely with UNDP. • SODA is actively looking for new partners on agricultural research with a gender focus, and is planning to conduct a 'Gender Profile of Lao People's Democratic Republic' project with LWU and UNDP.
Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC)	Donor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDC Food Security and Agriculture Programme in Lao People's Democratic Republic supports farmers and farmer groups to increase livelihood resilience and improve income through better market access. • Upland ethnic minorities are a priority group. The programme also focuses on gender-inclusive value chains, responsive rural advisory services, productivity increase in crop varieties and breeds, improved management of soils and water, land-use planning to secure rotational cultivation schemes, and the promotion of agro-biodiversity.

UNFPA	Development partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNFPA’s priorities are on policy advocacy and providing technical assistance to the government. • UNFPA works with the National Assembly to advocate for policies on women’s health, family planning, adolescents and youth. • Key partners are the Ministry of Health, LWU, Ministry of Planning and Investment, and selected INGOs. • FAO can support UNFPA’s policy advocacy efforts, particularly through the National Assembly.
UN Women	Development partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No specific projects on agriculture and the rural sector, but some focus areas are relevant: Ending Violence Against Women, Women Migration Workers, Women’s Economic Empowerment, Women Market Vendor, Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao) and other policy-related issues (CEDAW, etc.). • Potential entry point for FAO to work with UN Women on the emerging issue of agricultural investment/migration/gender.
Village Focus International (VFI)	INGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VFI has two main programmes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. land rights, livelihoods, agriculture and forestry, 2. anti-human trafficking and empowerment of women and girls. • VFI partners with FAO on a variety of topics, including land tenure security, action research and NSA. • Further potential to collaborate with VFI on NSA and research, and expand into private-sector engagement (especially with agribusiness), REDD+, VFI’s organic agriculture demonstration farm (Green Earth Centre) for Farmer Field Schools, and training for women on processing agricultural products.
The World Bank	Donor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The World Bank in Lao People’s Democratic Republic has related projects on agriculture, disaster-risk management, environmental protection, and health and nutrition. • There is no specific focus on gender or rural women’s empowerment.

Source: Authors

5

CASE STUDY ON GENDER DYNAMICS IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES IN PHAXAI DISTRICT, XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE



To present a case study on gender dynamics in agricultural communities, the CGA team conducted fieldwork in Xieng Khouang province from 27 November – 1 December, 2017. The fieldwork was conducted in Ban Phosy and Ban Nasom, both in Phaxai district, roughly 30 and 37 kilometers outside of Phonsavan, respectively. Both these communities are comprised entirely of the Lao ethnic group. As a result, the findings from this fieldwork cannot be generalized to a national context because of significant differences in gender dynamics and agricultural practices among the various ethnic groups. The CGA team conducted interviews with the *Nai Bans* of both villages, and then conducted three focus group discussions in both villages: one mixed gender, one women only and one men only. These focus group discussions were thematically focused, with conversation flowing across multiple topics related to gender and agriculture. Two activities were conducted in the mixed focus group discussion. The first was to create a 24-hour-clock for both women’s and men’s days in the village, so as to compare the time women and men spend on agricultural tasks and other responsibilities. The second was to map a yearlong work calendar, to chart the flows of labour across seasons between men and women. See Annex 4 for complete data from these activities.

Roughly 90 percent of households in Xieng Khouang province are defined as agricultural households (WFP, 2013). Ban Phosy has a population of 460, with 210 females and 250 males living in 70 households. Ban Nasom has a population of 256 with 127 female and 129 males living in 57 households. The main source of income in both these villages is agriculture, particularly *khao gai noi* (small chicken rice) paddy rice cultivation, and livestock raising.

Women are strongly underrepresented in these villages’ leadership. In Ban Phosy, only two women hold positions in village administration, out of 35 total leadership positions. This inventory excludes leadership in the Village Women’s Union, which comprises four women, as these positions are unable to be held by men. In Ban Nasom, village administrative positions comprise 24 men, with two women involved in public health positions, and three additional women involved in the Village Women’s Union. The *Nai Bans* and both men and women villagers reported women feel reluctant to participate in village administration and are perceived to not have the skills necessary to be public leaders. Interestingly, in Ban Phosy, the *Nai Ban* reported the village used to have a quota for women filling leadership positions. This quota was removed after villagers expressed their dissatisfaction with this



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model (on the basis that women were not as capable of holding leadership positions), and the village switched to a general election model. Women are now seldom voted into leadership positions, and women themselves do not often vote for other women.

Division of labour in these two villages was overall consistent with the findings of other research, reporting that men tend to do 'harder' labour (house repairs, plowing, managing machinery, cutting wood), while women tended to do 'lighter' work (cooking, washing clothes, feeding poultry, tending gardens, taking care of children). This division of labour was stricter in Ban Phosy than it was in Ban Nasom, where it seemed that a previous intervention by an outside agency led to more fluidity between men's and women's tasks. Men in both villages were the main income earners and travelled outside the village after rice harvesting season to earn this income, predominantly from construction work. In the case of Ban Phosy, men either did daily work in the district and returned home at night or, more frequently, moved outside the province for several months. Men in Ban Nasom often worked closer to home in the district and, therefore, did not migrate for an entire season. Women in both villages were solely responsible for managing their husband's income and the wealth of the family. They were in charge of daily purchases and could buy household items themselves without consultation of their husbands, provided their purchases were under LAK 1 000 000 (about USD 120). Women gave their husbands pocket money to spend, and men reported that they could not purchase anything without their wives knowing. Women's tendency to be the family financial manager in the Lao ethnic group is also supported through other research from across the country (CAWA, 2017; FAO, 2013b).

Due to men's migration for labour, whether locally or more distant, women are additionally burdened with men's usual workload. While men are away, women household members must manage all the tasks they conventionally do as well as tasks that traditionally are regarded as men's work, such as managing livestock

or any necessary physical labour. If meetings or trainings take place while men are absent, women attend these, too. Men in both villages recognized that their wives have more work while they are away, although men's out-migration was thought of positively by both men and women in both villages because it provided fast income for families. The men in Ban Nasom, because they often commuted locally to their construction jobs and were present at home in mornings and evenings, reported that they maintained their home responsibilities in addition to their work in the district. For instance, they wake up early in the mornings to tend to the garden before they leave for work, so that their wives do not have to do their jobs for them. It should be noted that the CGA team did not confirm this practice with the women's focus groups, as the men's and women's groups were held concurrently. Participants in Ban Phosy did not report this tendency, likely because men in that village travel away for longer periods of time and therefore are unable to contribute to work back at home.

Men's out-migration for labour is also a primary factor behind the discussion of the 'feminization' of agriculture, as it can lead to women becoming more involved in the sector. The World Bank notes that this migration can be a source of empowerment for women if it reduces their domestic tasks and gives them greater autonomy; however, it can also lead to women being overwhelmed with work and financially strained, in which case men's migration is actually a source of disempowerment (World Bank, 2016). The two case studies in our fieldwork are not conclusive as to whether men's migration ultimately empowered or disempowered women. While women reported they did have more work during migration season, they also had greater access to information and more decision-making power. More research is thus needed into the issue of men's migration in Lao People's Democratic Republic, its effect on women and families, and what work needs to be done to counteract any issues that arise because of this trend.

Box 8: Family dynamics and men's labour

In Ban Phosy, men who did not migrate for seasonal labour reported that their family dynamic was stronger than men who were away from the village for several months. Most men who stay in Ban Phosy during the migration season work on the family fish ponds. One man reported his relationship with his family is strong because he is present daily and believes that he and his wife now share information and labour more evenly. He said he feels less tied to his traditional role and now has more time to help his wife and take care of his family, leading to a more cohesive family dynamic and a happier life for him. It should be noted, though, that the ability to stay behind to work in the village is a luxury not all families can afford. This same man borrowed LAK 200 000 000 (USD 24 000) from the bank to establish his fishing business, but many families would not be willing to take that financial risk, nor would have the land and assets to make that venture a success. Nevertheless, this man's anecdote, which describes a situation that is not applicable to all families, suggests that interventions designed to supplement family income and reduce male labour migration could have an equalizing effect on women's and men's workloads and lead to healthier and happier families.

A key role of women in both villages was to sell goods at markets, both in the district and in Phonsavan. Men often accompany their wives or groups of women to the market; however, they generally act as a driver and do not usually sell products there. Men in both villages regarded the market as more suited to women's abilities, noting that women are better at selling than men, negotiate more skillfully, and get higher prices for their goods. Interestingly, men in Ban Nasom reported that they feel embarrassed to sell things at the market because they are afraid their friends who work in government or business may see them. If they were seen, they would feel inferior to be caught selling, an activity which they perceive as less prestigious than other careers. The men did not comment on whether they believe selling products at the market is equally unprestigious for women. Because of their embarrassment, men in Ban Nasom admitted that they generally try to sell things cheap at the market so they can sell out quickly and go home early. They also reported that their money has a tendency to "leak" while at the market, meaning they will often purchase unnecessary things using their earnings while there, much to the frustration of their wives,

who are more likely to come home from the market with all the money they earned. Due to all these factors, markets are seen as women's domain.

Perceptions of gender and gender equality varied between Ban Phosy and Ban Nasom. Men and women in Ban Phosy reported that women can be equal to men, but that this equality depends on various factors, like women's level of education. Therefore, in Ban Phosy there is a perception that women are not actually equal to men. Women in Ban Phosy did have some understanding of gender equality, which they said was explained to them by authorities who did trainings in their village. They thought gender equality meant having equal decision-making power to men; having equal power of their words (for instance, their children listen to both their mother and father equally); and having equal rights. The women could not describe what 'equal rights' means, though, or what rights they feel are currently unequal. They asked the CGA team for an explanation of what 'equality' is, showing that, despite being trained in gender vocabulary, the women in this village still lacked understanding of what the vocabulary meant.

Gender equality seemed to be more strongly integrated into village life in Ban Nasom than in Ban Phosy. Ban Nasom is one of 271 *ban pattana*, or development villages, in Xieng Khouang province, meaning multiple government agencies have conducted consistent training on village rights and gender equality. Villagers reported that more than ten years ago, authorities came to discuss gender issues and led an intervention that taught men and women how to divide tasks, for instance, by teaching men how to do some domestic tasks and teaching women how to do some agricultural tasks they did not usually do. The villagers reported that, because of this intervention, they feel men's and women's roles are more collaborative and that husbands and wives help each other when needed, for example with gardening chores. Men and women in Ban Nasom reported that, because of this collaboration, they enjoyed increased agricultural production, leading to more earnings, savings and investments, in addition to greater happiness and less conflict. It should be noted, though, that in the women's focus group, two women reported their husbands did not help them with gardening. While it seems that, as a whole, Ban Nasom had more collaboration between husbands and wives, this trend was not universal within the community.

Women in Ban Nasom had a clear perception of what gender equality was. One woman raised the idea that gender equality is about equal rights, which she saw as equal work, equal decision-making power, and equal time for rest. The women noted that equal work does not mean identical work: they believed it is alright if their husbands do hard labour and they do light labour, as long as they are both contributing equally. These women perceived equal time for rest in a bit of a different manner. They recognized that women often have more work than men and that at times when men are resting, such as after lunch, women may be cleaning. The women felt their husbands' extra relaxation time was justified, though, because men are more tired from harder physical labour. As long as women and men had time to rest, based on what was appropriate for the perceived intensity of their work, the women believed the situation was equal.

Despite women in Ban Nasom having clear ideas of what equal rights and gender equality are, they said they generally keep silent if they feel that their rights aren't being respected. For instance, during the rice

harvesting season when men and women are equally busy with rice tasks, women have the additional burden of doing housework during rest periods. While they sometimes want to ask their husbands for help or express their frustration with the fact that their husbands are relaxing while they are working, they do not do so because they know their husbands are tired. They prefer to keep their dissatisfaction inside rather than start a conflict. Women in Ban Phosy seemed as if they did not always keep quiet about their frustrations. They reported that family conflict will sometimes arise if women cannot make meals on time, frustrating their husbands. However, if women explain their heavy workload to their husbands, the men are more understanding. Though, it was unclear how often women spoke up about this.

From the research that was carried out, perhaps the largest barrier to women's empowerment was that women and men in both villages consistently underestimated women's abilities and justified their lack of participation in village leadership by pointing to women's supposed 'deficiencies' when compared to men. Men in Ban Phosy reported that women were not part of village leadership because they do not have sufficient skills, knowledge and education to take on those roles, and they further lack social awareness, interpersonal skills, and familiarity with administrative theory necessary to be in an important position. Men in Ban Nasom perceived women's abilities similarly, and said that, in order for a woman to be suited for a leadership position, she must be able to speak well publicly, particularly in an official political way; make definitive decisions; set herself as a role model for the entire village to follow; and turn talk into action. Men in both villages stressed education as an important part of what women leaders need, and women in both villages referred to their own lack of education as a contributing factor to their lack of participation in village leadership. When comparing the levels of education for men and women participants in these villages, though, men were not significantly more educated than their women counterparts (see Table 3 and footnote 7). Men thus held women to an incredibly high standard, one that they themselves may not be able to measure up to. No women in either village refuted these supposed weaknesses, though, and seemed to tacitly agree with men's evaluations of their abilities. For instance, women reported that men were better suited to taking out a loan than their wives because men earned the family income, despite the fact that

Table 3: Education and age of focus group participants in field work ⁷

	Ban Phosy		Ban Nasom	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Average age (in years)	36	44	39	47
Average years of schooling	8.2	7.3	6	6.5

Source: Authors

women are the sole managers of money in both villages. Women also believed they did not speak well and therefore hesitated to participate in village meetings or trainings, even though those same women were incredibly social with other groups of women, and often even with groups of men from the village. Overall, women perceived themselves as not suited for leadership, not realizing that their everyday tasks, like managing finances, making decisions for their households, selling goods at the market, and managing multiple responsibilities, make them uniquely suited for leadership roles.

Women's lack of confidence in both villages was further emphasized by the issue of transportation, which had large repercussions for women's role in village life. The women in Ban Phosy reported that learning how to drive was their top desire when it came to self-improvement. While some women were comfortable driving cars, most reported that they felt unsafe and insecure doing so and that they were bad drivers. Therefore, they only rode in cars when men could drive them places, thus restricting their mobility significantly. Cars in these villages were reserved for longer distance travel, like to the Phonsavan Market or Vientiane. If a woman were to go into the district,

which is closer, she may drive a motorbike by herself, but not all women feel safe doing this. As a result, most women in Ban Nasom venture out of the village, mostly to the market, with groups of other women and one man acting as chauffeur in a truck. Women in Ban Phosy also prefer to have men accompany them to the Phonsavan market about twice a week so they feel more comfortable and confident. Women's dependence on men accompanying them when travelling outside the village often prevents them from taking advantage of opportunities in the district or Phonsavan, whether markets or other events, such as training or meetings. Women may also be discouraged from pursuing leadership positions in the village, knowing that they are very likely unable to travel. Improving their driving abilities and, more importantly, their confidence about driving, is, therefore, a critical area for increasing their mobility and participation in village life outside their homes. Interestingly, while this issue emerged as a common theme across our fieldwork, other literature reviewed for this report had virtually no information about transportation challenges. Women's mobility should therefore be researched more thoroughly in future research.

⁷ It is important to note that the data in this table may be skewed by the fact that most men of labour age were outside the village at the time of fieldwork, meaning the educational completion of the men who participated in our fieldwork might not be a representative sample of the village as a whole. The average age of the men participating in our focus groups was about eight years older than the average age of women participants for both villages. Since older generations are less educated than younger generations, it is to be expected that older participants did not attend as much school as younger ones. Further, the Lao schooling system has changed within the past five years with the addition of a 12th grade, meaning anyone completing schooling more than five years ago would not have had the same opportunities for study as younger focus group participants, the majority of whom were women.

6

ASSESSMENT OF THE OVERALL ENABLING ENVIRONMENT: MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



6.1 Micro-level recommendations

1. Boost confidence of rural and ethnic women in their abilities through supporting hands-on training and education programmes that redefine gender roles, and building the capacity of district agencies and CSOs to do the same. These efforts should include supporting the education and literacy of rural women, as these factors underpin women's lack of confidence and prevent them from participating fully in village leadership, contributing to meetings and training, and accessing markets, credit and loans.
2. Empower women to negotiate fair contracts, understand their rights, and feel confident to engage with investors (and other actors) is imperative. As alternative forms of investment to land concessions continue to increase, particularly in the form of 1+4 and 2+3 contract farming, there is a need to ensure that women smallholders are benefitting equally from such arrangements. There are many materials available on contract farming (see: LEAP project, LIFE initiative in Lao People's Democratic Republic, GIZ, FAO, as well as global guidance from UNDROIT, FAO, IFAD) but limited consideration of women's roles in contract farming, and even less consideration of how to better include women in negotiations.
3. Support establishment of accessible credit systems for the agriculture sector that minimize restrictions for taking out loans and offer flexible loan terms, such as variable interest rates; small and large loans; and long payback periods. While these mechanisms do not necessarily need to be through the Agricultural Promotion Bank or Policy Bank, FAO should work with MAF in its goal to make credit systems through these banks more accessible to rural communities, particularly rural ethnic women.
4. Organize farmer groups to lower production costs, improve bargaining power and increase quality. Strengthening and promoting farmer groups is a focus area for many development organizations in Lao People's Democratic Republic as well as a priority for the government. The Department of Technical Extension and Agro-Processing (DTEAP)

under MAF has recently developed a series of booklets for organizing and managing farmer groups, yet none focus on women's farmer groups. Facilitating the formation of women's farmer groups to spread information, learn new skills, and exchange successful practices is a potential area for future development cooperation.

5. The private sector is a key driver of rural transformations in Lao People's Democratic Republic particularly agricultural investment. There is potential to further clarify obligations for investors to consult and continuously engage with communities affected by agricultural investment projects, in line with FPIC standards – particularly for ensuring that women are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in FPIC processes. Incentives for agribusinesses (matching grant funds, tax incentives) for companies that promote gender equality through business operations or policies, or provide leadership opportunities for women, could be considered.

6.2 Meso-level recommendations

1. Collection of high-quality, time-series, sex-disaggregated data on decent work, labour, migration and agricultural production is imperative. Statistics should be collected to better illustrate women's multiple activities, and capture the work done (by both men and women), particularly on smallholder farming, market gardening, wage employment (both seasonal and permanent), income generation from each activity, and time spent on each the activity. Local-level government offices (especially DAFO, Department of Natural Resources and Environment and Department for Planning and Investment) can play a key role in collecting, recording and sharing this data.
2. More research is needed on the intersection of agricultural investment, land tenure security and trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation of rural girls and women. This was noted as an emerging issue by several stakeholders, yet so far there is limited data and information about the scale, scope and impacts of the issue. FAO, in collaboration with partners, could support a

more in-depth gender analysis of transborder agricultural investment, particularly in northern Lao People's Democratic Republic. There is a need for urgent, collective action from government, development partners and CSOs working in this space to share information, and develop a strategy and concrete actions to address this pressing issue.

3. Technical service centres should have outreach to women agricultural producers, and agricultural extension or advisory services need to take 'affirmative action' to promote and train women to be at the forefront of more agricultural extension/advisory agencies. The dearth of women in these services is symptomatic of a broader lack of women's leadership in positions of political power. Striving for a gender balance in this sector can help improve the perception of women's ability to take on leadership roles in agriculture.
4. Ensure better coordination amongst actors working on gender and women's empowerment, food security, land tenure security and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, as well as productive employment and decent work. There is some overlap amongst actors working on these topics, but in many cases the information sharing and coordination between sectors has room for improvement. FAO could play a central role in strengthening coordination, cooperation and forming new links among stakeholders, including CSOs, government, researchers, development partners and donors. Achieving this outcome would require strengthening national inter-institutional mechanisms to advance rural women's empowerment and gender equality in the most relevant areas.
5. There are opportunities to strengthen gender-focused teaching at Lao People's Democratic Republic universities and colleges with gender-responsive materials and tools. Integrating a stronger gender focus in faculties, such as agriculture, economics, forestry and social sciences, can help the new generation to be more aware of gender issues and promote a more meaningful understanding of gender equality. Currently, there is no Gender Studies degree offered at the National University of Laos.

However, there is potential to introduce an interdisciplinary course of study, for example on gender and rural development, or gender and agriculture. Integrating materials into the national curriculum on rights-based approaches, women's rights and gender equality, for example, is another potential entry point for development cooperation.

6. The structure and communication of the sub-CAW network must be strengthened and clarified to streamline and better coordinate gender work at all levels and among all actors. Potential areas for FAO involvement include supporting clarification of NCAW, sub-CAW and LWU mandates; assisting in assigning clear roles and responsibilities to different agencies in line with national plans and strategies; and building the capacity of sub-CAW officials to understand their roles, as well as the roles and responsibilities of other partner organizations. Where possible, support the programmatic areas of the NCAW and its sub-CAWs through assistance, such as field transportation and staff training.

6.3 Macro-level recommendations

1. Change the discourse surrounding gender, agriculture and the rural sector by moving away from on-paper participation towards greater empowerment of rural women. FAO can be a leader among development partners in pushing the narrative on gender equality to be more in line with global concepts of feminism, empowerment, and women's leadership – and challenging the assumption of some stakeholders that merely counting the numbers of women in project activities is an effective metric for empowerment.
2. The revision of laws and regulations, particularly the National Land Law, which is currently being revised, presents a political window of opportunity for including specific provisions for women, and for ensuring that Lao People's Democratic Republic's legal framework is in line with international guidance such as VGGT and CFS (Committee on World Food Security) Principles. International guidance on gender, land, agriculture and the rural sector can also provide a useful framework for development

partners and CSOs working on policy dialogue. Further, the Agriculture Law, while not anticipated to be revised imminently, has not been updated for nearly two decades; its revision could prove a pivotal tool for empowering women in the agricultural sector. Another potential channel to influence laws could be to develop a thematic working group on gender and agriculture under the Farmers and Agribusiness (FAB) Sub-Sector Working Group, which is under the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector Working Group, co-chaired by FAO and MAF.

3. Empower and equip local CSOs to participate meaningfully in national policy as well as global processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and CEDAW reporting, particularly for 'frontline' CSOs working on issues of gender, land, agriculture and rural development. Several stakeholders called for greater space for CSOs to provide input in the Lao People's Democratic Republic's government's gender and human rights reporting, which FAO can assist in opening up. FAO can support capacity building

activities to achieve greater participation of CSOs in global processes from within its network.

4. The South-South Cooperation is a government priority, as stated by the Deputy Minister of MAF, and is a promising new initiative as demonstrated by the improving contract farming initiative between Brazil and Lao People's Democratic Republic, supported by FAO. Additional exchange opportunities such as this could help to increase the capacity and knowledge of those working in the agricultural sector and spread valuable lessons from countries facing similar issues to those in Lao People's Democratic Republic..
5. There is scope for future development cooperation to work within the framework of ASEAN to develop guidance and standards towards greater gender equality in the rural sectors of member countries, including Lao People's Democratic Republic's. Opportunities for sharing with member states, particularly Thailand, could be facilitated by FAO.



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ANNEXES

Annex 1: List of national-level interviews

Organization	Interview	Sex	Position
CARE	Phetsakhone Somphongbouthakanh	F	Gender Advisor for CARE International in Lao People's Democratic Republic
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)	Sisomphet Souvanthisith	F	Head of the Division for the Advancement of Women
Gender Development Association (GDA)	Kinmala Phommachanh	F	Gender Project Officer
International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)	Phoutsakhone Ounchith	F	Country Director
Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)	Dulce Simmanivong	F	Regional Manager for East Asia
	Khampeng Mounmeuangxam	M	Deputy Manager for East Asia
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)	Soulivanh Pattivong	M	Country Representative
Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)	Xouchai Panyanouvong	F	Head of Political/Economic Section
	Patthana Siphandone	F	Programme Officer
Lao Upland Rural Advisory Services (LURAS)	Andrew Bartlett	M	Chief Technical Advisor
	Ye Vue	F	Project Officer
Village Focus International (VFI)	Kongseng Piengpanya	F	Programme Coordinator for "Protection and Empowerment of Women and Children"
	Viengmany Lornaotou	F	Assistant Programme Coordinator
National University of Laos (NUoL) Faculty of Agriculture	Somphanh Paxouvang	M	Vice Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences
Lao Women's Union (LWU)	Douangsamone Daravong	F	Director General of Planning and International Cooperation Department
	Vilayvanh Keopaseuth	F	Director of Planning (Evaluation Division)

Annex 2: Stakeholder interview guide

The following questions guided our conversations with stakeholders, although conversations did not follow this structured approach and stakeholders often addressed more than one question in their answers.

Questions for development partners, civil society organizations and government

Background information:

1. Please tell us your name and role in this organization.
2. Is your organization (or ministry) currently implementing any projects or strategies to promote gender equality and women's rights in the agriculture sector?
3. If so, please describe these projects, and tell us what informed your decision to prioritize women in agriculture?
4. (If not mentioned above, ask) who are the key stakeholders you worked with in these projects/programmes?
5. What are the main constraints in reaching women for training, agriculture extension information, or other activities?
6. What is the impact of your projects to date? (Successful/not successful and why?)
7. What could you have done/do to have more impact?
8. What challenges has your organization faced in its work in gender equality in agriculture?
9. How can the lessons learned from your project/programme be applied to other initiatives?
10. Who are the key actors, from your perspective, working towards gender equality in agriculture and empowerment of rural women? These can be government agencies, civil society, donors, farmer groups, development partners.

Challenges facing rural women:

11. What do you think are the main challenges for women farmers compared to men farmers in participating in the agriculture sector today?
12. Why do you think these barriers/challenges still exist?
13. Do you think the challenges facing rural women in agriculture today are different than the challenges women faced five or ten years ago?
14. Have you seen any examples of women being impacted by agricultural investment? If so, how were they impacted? Positive and negative effects?
15. What are the constraint(s) to achieving gender equality outcomes (i.e. to closing the gaps between men and women) and enabling women to increase their (1) participation, (2) decision-making, (3) access to resources, and (4) benefit sharing in agriculture?

Future initiatives and opportunities:

1. What do you consider are the most important priority interventions to address these challenges and increase gender equality and women's rights in agriculture? (Follow up: Where do you see the key opportunities?)
2. How do you think other development partners and donors can best support communities to support women in agriculture?
3. How do you think other development partners and donors can best support local government to empower women in agriculture?
4. How do you think other development partners and donors can best support central government and policy makers to formulate policies and laws that strengthen gender equality in agriculture?

Conclude with: Anything else you would like to add? Any reports or literature that you can share with us?

Annex 3: List of fieldwork interviews

Organization	Interview	Sex	Position
District Agriculture and Forestry Office, Phaxai District	Phonesamay Phouangkhamvang	M	Deputy Head
Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office, Xieng Khouang Province	Chanasome Sithanonxay	F	Deputy Head of the Cabinet
Provincial Planning and Investment Office, Xieng Khouang Province	Sombath Songvilay	M	Deputy Head
	Khitsavad Thoummavong	M	Deputy Head of the Cabinet
Provincial Women's Union, Xieng Khouang Province	Somphone Tulaphy	F	Head of Division
	Onhchan Inthavongsa	F	Staff
	Sounpheng Thongmany	F	Staff
	Buaphan Sivilayphone	F	Staff
	Khammeung Sibounmala	F	Staff
Phaxai District Women's Union	Vanphone Phetmanyvong	F	Head of District LWU
	Vanphet Bounnaphone	F	Deputy Head
Organic Farmers' Association, Phonsavan	Buachanh Heungvilay	F	President

Annex 4: Fieldwork data

Annex 4.1: Daily routine by time

Table 4.1.1: Division of labour during rice season in Ban Nasom

Division of labour during rice season in Ban Nasom		
Time	Women	Men
4-5 a.m.	Wake up; make fire; cook rice and breakfast; feed ducks and chickens	Wake up; smoke; go to rice field at 4:30
5-6 a.m.	Cook breakfast; feed animals, or go to the market (on some days)	Work in the rice field
6-7 a.m.	Bring breakfast to rice field to eat with husband	Work in the rice field
7-8 a.m.	Eat breakfast	Eat breakfast
8-9 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
9-10 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
10-11 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
11 a.m. -12 p.m.	Return to home to cook lunch at 11:30	Return home at 11:30
12-1 p.m.	Eat lunch and clean up	Eat lunch and rest
1-2 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
2-3 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
3-4 p.m.	Herd cattle	Herd cattle
4-5 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Herd cattle
5-6 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Herd cattle
6-7 p.m.	Feed ducks and chickens	Return cattle
7-8 p.m.	Cook dinner	Rest; wait for wife to bring dinner
8-9 p.m.	Eat dinner	Eat dinner
9-10 p.m.	Clean up from dinner; rest; go to bed at 10 p.m.	Rest; go to bed at 10 p.m.

Table 4.1.2: Division of labour during off-rice season in Ban Nasom

Division of labour during off-rice season in Ban Nasom		
Time	Women	Men
4-5 a.m.	Sleep	Sleep
5-6 a.m.	Wake up; make fire; cook rice and breakfast; feed ducks and chickens	Sleep
6-7 a.m.	Cook rice and breakfast; feed ducks and chickens, or go to the market (on some days)	Wake up; release cattle; go fishing
7-8 a.m.	Eat breakfast	Eat breakfast
8-9 a.m.	Work in the vegetable garden	Work in the vegetable garden
9-10 a.m.	Work in the vegetable garden	Work in the vegetable garden
10-11 a.m.	Feed baby chickens	Work in the vegetable garden
11 a.m. -12 p.m.	Feed baby chickens	Eat lunch
12-1 p.m.	Eat lunch	Rest
1-2 p.m.	Rest, weave, or work in the vegetable field	Cut bamboo for bamboo strips
2-3 p.m.	Rest, weave, or work in the vegetable field	Move cattle
3-4 p.m.	Work in the vegetable field; pick vegetables for dinner	Herd cattle
4-5 p.m.	Work in the vegetable field; pick vegetables for dinner	Herd cattle
5-6 p.m.	Feed chickens and ducks	Herd cattle
6-7 p.m.	Feed chickens and ducks; cook dinner	Halt cattle
7-8 p.m.	Cook dinner	Make bamboo strips; wait for wife to bring dinner
8-9 p.m.	Eat dinner	Eat dinner
9-10 p.m.	Clean up from dinner; feed dogs; make pig feed; go to bed at 10 p.m.	Go to bed at 9 p.m.

Table 4.1.3: Division of labour during rice season in Ban Phosy

Division of labour during rice season in Ban Phosy		
Time	Women	Men
4-5 a.m.	Wake up at 4; feed chickens and ducks; cook rice	Wake up at 4:30 and prepare equipment to go to the rice field
5-6 a.m.	Feed chickens and ducks; cook rice	Work in the rice field
6-7 a.m.	Cook breakfast	Work in the rice field
7-8 a.m.	Bring breakfast to rice field to eat with husband	Work in the rice field
8-9 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Eat breakfast until 8:30, then rest until 9
9-10 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
10-11 a.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
11 a.m. -12 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
12-1 p.m.	Eat lunch	Eat lunch
1-2 p.m.	Rest	Rest
2-3 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Work in the rice field
3-4 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Herd cattle
4-5 p.m.	Work in the rice field	Herd cattle
5-6 p.m.	Feed chickens and ducks	Return home; take a shower
6-7 p.m.	Feed chickens and ducks; cook dinner	Rest
7-8 p.m.	Cook dinner	Rest; wait for wife to bring dinner
8-9 p.m.	Eat dinner	Eat dinner
9-10 p.m.	Clean up from dinner; go to bed at 10 p.m.	Rest; go to bed at 10 p.m.

Table 4.1.4: Division of labour during off-rice season in Ban Phosy

Division of labour during off-rice season in Ban Phosy		
Time	Women	Men
4-5 a.m.	Sleep	Sleep
5-6 a.m.	Wake up; make fire; cook rice and breakfast; feed ducks and chickens; clean utensils from previous night	Wake up between 5:30 and 6:30 a.m.
6-7 a.m.	Cook rice and breakfast; feed ducks and chickens; clean utensils	Smoke
7-8 a.m.	Work in vegetable field	Smoke; release cattle at 7:30 a.m. or tend to fish pond
8-9 a.m.	Work in vegetable field	Eat breakfast
9-10 a.m.	Collect vegetables; wash face; cook breakfast	Work in construction outside village, or do nothing if not employed
10-11 a.m.	Eat breakfast	Work in construction outside village, or do nothing if not employed
11 a.m. -12 p.m.	Rest	Work in construction outside village, or do nothing if not employed
12-1 p.m.	Cook lunch	Eat lunch
1-2 p.m.	Cook lunch	Rest
2-3 p.m.	Eat lunch	Rest
3-4 p.m.	Herd cattle; collect food from rice field for dinner	Herd cattle
4-5 p.m.	Return home; do household work; feed chickens and ducks; cook rice and dinner	Herd and halt cattle until 4:30 p.m.
5-6 p.m.	Do household work; feed chickens and ducks; cook rice and dinner	Take shower
6-7 p.m.	Take shower; bathe children	Wait for wife to bring dinner
7-8 p.m.	Take shower; bathe children	Wait for wife to bring dinner
8-9 p.m.	Eat dinner	Eat dinner
9-10 p.m.	Clean up after dinner; teach children or help them with their homework; watch TV; go to bed at 10 p.m.	Watch TV; weave baskets; go to bed between 10 and 10:30 p.m.

Table 4.2.1: Seasonal calendar for Nasom Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province

Nasom Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province														
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Remark	
I. Gardening (cucumber, leafy vegetables, eggplant)														
Preparing the soil											F/M			
Clearing rice straw											M			
Plowing the garden											M		Using machines	
Harrowing the garden											M			
Second harrowing											M		After first harrowing, soil is exposed to the sun to dry	
Cutting wood for fence posts											M			
Shaping fence posts											F/M			
Digging holes for fence posts											F/M			
Cutting bamboo strips for fences											F/M			
Making vegetable plantation beds												F/M		

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Nasom Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province														Remark
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec		
I. Gardening (cucumber, leafy vegetables, eggplant)														
Firing rice straw												F/M		
Watering plantation beds												F		
Sowing seed												F/M		
Watering the seedlings	F	F										F		
Fertilizing seedlings with manure	F/M	F/M										F/M		
Caring for the seedlings	F/M													
Covering the seedlings	F/M	F/M												
Collecting wood to make trellises	F/M													
Fertilizing the seedlings		F/M												
Pegging the trellises		F/M												
Harvesting produce			F/M											
Loading produce onto trucks			M/F											
Sell produce at the market			F	F										
Driving partner to the market			M										Men wait for wives	

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Nasom Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province														
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Remark	
II. Paddy rice cultivation														
Pulling trellis				F/M										
Irrigating rice paddies				M	M									
Plowing the rice paddies				M	M									
Harrowing the paddies				M	M								Using machines	
Sowing rice seeds				M/F										
Building rice plantation beds				F/M										
Making dikes					M									
Pulling up rice seedlings					F/M									
Transplanting rice seedlings					M/F	M/F								
Cutting grass to feed cattle						F/M	F/M	F/M						
Hand-weeding rice paddies						F/M	F/M	F/M						
Adjusting paddy water levels						F/M	F/M	F/M						
Harvesting rice									F/M	F/M				

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Nasom Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province													
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Remark
II. Paddy rice cultivation													
Bundling rice stalks									F/M	F/M			
Harvesting rice									F/M	F/M			
Machine threshing rice stalks									M	M			Using machines
Pouring threshed rice into sacks									F	F			
Transporting rice home									F/M	F/M			

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Table 4.2.2: Seasonal calendar for Phosy Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province

Phosy Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province													
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Remark
Planting maize, cucumber, chili, eggplant, peanut, garlic	F	F	F								F	F	
Weaving	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Selling goods local festivals	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Making rice storage jars	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Making rice noodles and rice whiskey	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Sowing rice seed				F/M									
Fixing garden fences				F									
Building dikes					F								
Transplanting rice seedlings						F/M							
Pulling up rice seedlings						F							
Adjusting water level in rice field							F/M	F/M	F/M	F/M			
Hand-weeding the rice field							F/M	F/M	F/M	F/M			
Fixing dikes							F	F	F	F			Done intermittently, every 2-3 days
Reaping grass							F/M	F/M	F/M	F/M			

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Phosy Village, Phaxai District, Xieng Khouang Province													
Activity	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Remark
Harvesting rice										F/M			
Bundling rice										F			
Loading rice onto trucks										F			
Heaping rice										F			
Husking rice	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	Usually men's work but women do it when necessary (2-3 times a month)
Fertilizing fields						M/F							Done at same time as transplanting
Working outside the village	M	M	M	M							M	M	Usually construction work
Plowing the rice paddies				M	M								
Harrowing the rice paddies				M	M								
Carrying rice seedlings						M							
Herding cattle	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	Women infrequently join in herding
Collecting fire wood											M	M	

M - Male villagers

F - Female villagers

Annex 5: Limitations of the fieldwork

The most significant limitation in this field work was the ethnic composition of the groups interviewed. Fieldwork was conducted during Hmong New Year, so the team was unable to visit Hmong villages, and transportation barriers prevented the team from traveling to other ethnic communities, which were prohibitively far from the district centre. Both villages interviewed were, therefore, entirely composed of the Lao ethnic group, meaning no generalizations can be made for the gender relations in these villages as compared to villages of any other ethnic composition. Prior research has shown that gender issues in ethnic villages, particularly Hmong villages, vary significantly from those in Lao groups. There is a need for more information about gender in ethnic communities, particularly communities other than the Hmong ethnic group.

Second, the fieldwork was conducted during the season most men in these villages travel away from the village (either for a day or several months) to work as labourers. This meant that finding men to participate in focus group discussions presented somewhat of a challenge, as there were few men left in the villages. The men who did participate in our focus groups were predominantly older and represented a different livelihood experience than the majority of the men in the villages, who were not present. We did not hear

the experiences of men working outside the village (migrant workers) and, therefore, cannot know how their opinions may, or may not have, differed from men who stay in the village during this season.

The selection of villagers who participated in focus groups also could have been skewed. Since the CGA team contacted the village *Nai Bans* to request to hold focus groups, the participants were filtered through the *Nai Bans*, who told us they would choose participants who would feel comfortable speaking in front of a group of outsiders. The willingness of these participants to speak openly about their experiences, as well as their education levels and experiences themselves, may thus not be representative of the village populations as a whole.

Finally, at many points throughout our focus groups, villagers referenced training, authorities, meetings, and organizations that had somehow been involved in the village. Villagers did not remember specifics, however, and the fieldwork team therefore had an incomplete understanding of the projects going on in the villages and the agencies leading them. More information about these topics would have been helpful to understand what the villages have already learned about gender equality, and from whom.

Annex 6: FAO's priorities and initiatives in Lao People's Democratic Republic

The below four Country Outcomes are in line with Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic priorities and were agreed in conjunction with FAO:

1. Fostering agricultural production and rural development

Key initiatives: Good Agricultural Practices (GAP); strengthening agricultural value chains; support for public/private institutions for efficient agri-food systems.

2. Improved food security and nutrition, with a special focus on the most vulnerable groups (including women and marginalized ethnic groups)

Key initiatives: enhanced policy analysis and planning on agricultural economics and markets (see below for examples of FAO's policy and strategy support); gender-sensitive and nutrition-sensitive agriculture; integrated pest management (IPM) through Farmer Field Schools; improved monitoring and evaluation and data collection.

3. Forests and other ecosystems are protected and enhanced

Key initiatives: improved national regulatory and legal frameworks; decision-support tools such as GIS; community-based participatory approaches to ecosystem restoration and management.

4. Improved capacity to respond to food and agricultural threats and emergencies and the impact of climate change

Key initiatives: improved agro-climatic monitoring and analysis and data sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; capacity building to prevent and manage transboundary pest and plant diseases (such as avian influenza, Yellow-Spined Bamboo Locust, and recently, Panama disease); disaster preparedness affecting agricultural productivity.

FAO's cross-cutting priorities:

1. Decentralization (in line with the 'Three Builds' Policy of the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic) to strengthen programming at national and subnational levels.⁸
2. Gender, including support to improve gender equity in decision making.
3. South-South cooperation,⁹ including a recent South-South Cooperation Exchange between Brazil and Lao People's Democratic Republic on improving contract farming. An informational video of the exchange can be found on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md3BPX9nnR8.

In terms of specific support for policy and strategy, FAO supported the development of the National Nutrition Policy and supported the revision of National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action for 2016-2025. FAO contributed to the Agricultural Development Strategy 2025, and to the development of the country's Strategic Action Plan on Rice and the Strategic Implementation Plan for Fisheries and Aquaculture. FAO also supported the development of the first National Agricultural Biodiversity Programme (NABP), and its successor the NABP-2 in 2014, aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. To support more robust data collection, FAO also supported the Government in the Lao Agricultural Census in 2010/11, and has co-produced several publications based on the Census data.

⁸ The 'Three Builds' Policy (*Sam Sang*, in Lao language) delegates responsibilities from the national to local levels of government. It aims to develop provinces into strategy-making units, strengthen districts in all aspects, and establish villages as grassroots development units.

⁹ South-South Cooperation is a "broad framework for collaboration among developing countries based on the concept of solidarity that breaks the traditional dichotomy between donors and recipients" (FAO, 2018). It is a term used to describe the exchange of knowledge, resources, information and technology amongst developing countries, also known as the Global South.



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