

REPORT ON FINAL EVALUATION INCLUSION PROJECT



OXFAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Inclusion Project (IP) of the Oxfam Mekong Regional Water Governance Program (MRWGP) commenced in March 2014, and will be completed in September 2019, following the decision to extend its original end date from 2017. It has been funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and designated as one of the four pillars of DFAT's Greater Water Resource Program for the Mekong. The IP has been implemented through a combination of funded activities implemented by partners; non-funded partner relationships; and activities directly implemented by Oxfam, in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, as well as with transboundary and regionally-focussed bodies.

The IP has sought to ensure the inclusion of community and civil society voices on water governance, with the assumption that better inclusion of community voices and knowledge will contribute to better and more sustainable decisions and management approaches, as well as realising communities' intrinsic right to manage their own water resources. Within this framework, there has been particular focus on enabling women's active participation in water governance and support to women's leadership at all levels, with the assumption that recognition of women's voice and knowledge will lead to better and more sustainable approaches. The IP has also sought to include the voices of indigenous communities and organisations in the affected river basins, and to ensure effective disability inclusion across its activities.

To achieve this, the IP has operated through three interlocking strategies of

- Gender and women's leadership;
- Strengthening civil society to manage water resources and participate in water decision making; and
- Convening and promoting policy and project dialogue.

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

As described in the Terms of Reference, this is:

1. To evaluate the impacts of the IP and the extent to which the project has achieved its anticipated outcomes
2. To evaluate the extent to which the project's approaches and strategies contribute to the project's outcomes and impacts; and
3. To identify lessons for Oxfam and its partners that inform the next MRWGP strategy.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was conducted from November 2018 to January 2019, with a Team Leader, and two national consultants, focussing on direct work by Oxfam partners in Myanmar and Vietnam respectively. Detailed focus on these two countries was to balance that given to IP work in Cambodia and Laos during the 2016 Mid-Term Review.

PRINCIPAL ELEMENTS OF THE EVALUATION WERE:

- Comprehensive document review covering IP activity, review and planning for the duration of implementation
- Initial interviews and briefing with all key IP staff
- Participation of the Team Leader in the December 2018 Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) forum
- Field work and data gathering by national consultants covering all active partners in Vietnam and Myanmar during January 2019
- Data gathering by Team Leader with Cambodia and Laos partners during January 2019
- Regional workshop with Oxfam staff to test out initial findings at the end of January 2019
- Submission of initial draft for Steering Committee review; subsequent revision and finalisation of draft by Team Leader, in February/March 2019.

The evaluation also engaged with the leads of the other three pillars of DFAT's Mekong WRM program, the Mekong River Commission (MRC); the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE).

Given the particular nature of a program focussed on influencing and capacity building, much evidence presented in the Evaluation report is necessarily derived through triangulating subjective impressions and statements. Further, it has been clear from the IP's original design and Theory of Change that the project would operate as one element in a complex and dynamic regional context, and therefore, assessing project impacts is necessarily a matter of determining contribution, rather than simple attribution to agency by Oxfam and/or partners.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND EVOLVING NATIONAL/ REGIONAL CONTEXT:

The context in which the implementation of the IP has taken place has been dynamic, particularly with regard to official attitudes towards and regulation of civil society, and government scrutiny of the media. This has called for re-examination of some key Assumptions in the IP Theory of Change (ToC) which give weight to governments' readiness to allow civil society space; to include and respect the voices and knowledge of civil society bodies. There is further question as to where the effective point of decision-making lies, whether within those levels and instruments of government and regional bodies to which civil society is permitted access, or in other less publicly accountable quarters.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING: Oxfam has worked with considerable flexibility and agility in a dynamic, challenging and sometimes restrictive context, to maintain and extend the space for civil society organisations to function, and to participate in dialogue around water governance and closely-related issues affecting them. Approaches have been adapted according to the different regulatory and organisational environment of each country. Achievements have also been built on a nuanced understanding of what 'civil society' actually means in the context of countries all of which have long records of close state control and relatively recent permission to any kind of autonomous, or semi-autonomous, community organisation.

To achieve this, training in skills specific to influencing and advocacy has been of particular value; also Oxfam's nuanced and consistent approach to accompaniment of emerging and diverse partners

- Focus on indigenous communities has been essential, given their locations and heightened vulnerability of traditional land tenure, livelihoods and spiritual values to hydropower development. The opportunity to work with their communities, organisations and networks has been effectively used, and the increased strength and confidence of indigenous organisation appears partly due to Oxfam support.

- Myanmar offers a very different and uncertain context for civil society development and operating space; within this, Oxfam appears to have worked to very good effect in supporting partner capacity, though issues of replicability will need to be addressed.

- Value has been added to the work of national networks of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other institutions in Cambodia and Vietnam in terms of specific training, wider relationship building and exposure as well as direct resourcing;
- Opportunities to link up local experience and priorities in water governance to regional platforms have been used to very good effect with Oxfam support, with locally focussed Community Based Organisations being heard on national and transboundary issues for the first time.
- Where civil society channels are limited; direct engagement by Oxfam with government- and government-linked bodies has enabled greater recognition of the need for gender equity mainstreaming and of the need for direct community engagement.
- Implementation experience has shown that it is essential to look beyond the classic structure of work via local NGOs, which has a comfortable fit with standard INGO business models, but risks omitting some of the most dynamic players. In some cases, adjustment may be needed to Oxfam's systems to allow easier partnership with a range of bodies and networks that do not have standard structures.
- As corollary to enabling partners, Oxfam needs to come more fully to grips with its own role within civil society and other networks. Cambodia partners in particular expressed appreciation of the role that Oxfam plays:

‘NOT JUST A DONOR, BUT A PARTNER’,

but also expressed the need for Oxfam to better determine the boundaries of its role; to state more clearly which direct influencing tasks it would undertake itself. This is clearly understood in some areas, especially where Oxfam has direct access to national government agencies in a way CSOs do not; but requires continuing scrutiny and adjustment as collaboration continues.

GENDER JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP:

The socio-economic context in countries across the region has been changing significantly during the implementing period, with circumstances affecting opportunities for women's voice and leadership both positively and otherwise. Changing rural economies and mechanisation of agriculture have altered women's roles, and so the case for their inclusion in all levels of water governance needs to develop accordingly. Within this context, Oxfam's interventions with partners to support introduction and implementation of gender strategy has materially helped the strengthening of women's participation, public voice and leadership.

Examples with both Myanmar and Vietnam partners show the effectiveness of gender training models in raising awareness and rapidly delivering material change for women in terms of public participation and labour sharing; but long-term accompaniment and investment is needed to ensure sustainability of these.

Oxfam has actively supported innovation in gender mainstreaming within CSOs, with results including much higher and more active participation of women in Community Fisheries and other community bodies; and young women using radio as the vehicle for expressing community priorities and concerns in Cambodia. Young women leaders have been actively fostered by partners in Myanmar, though in the face of considerable weight of traditional attitudes and practice.

Particular note needs to be made of women assuming very public leadership in indigenous communities, which took many observers by surprise. The most prominent example was around the Kbal Romeas community, faced with expropriation of land and livelihoods by the Lower Sesan II dam. This is an area requiring further analysis and continued support.

In Vietnam, the IP supported the first national women's consultation as part of the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation & Agreement (PNPCA) for the Don Sahong dam in southern Laos, conducted by the Vietnam Women's Union in collaboration with Oxfam partner Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN).

This gave platform for the voices of large numbers of women from diverse areas and levels of society, and also allowed local women leaders to speak in a regional forum. This engagement through the Vietnam National Mekong Committee appears to have been one of the contributing factors in Vietnam's current moratorium on further dam construction.

A very significant development effected by Oxfam has been through Gender Impact Assessment tools. These have been well received by a range of government, private sector and community actors in the roll-out implemented under the IP; their ownership by government bodies in particular is a promising sign for their future delivery of positive change in approach and outcomes.

Partnerships with quasi-government bodies – particularly the Vietnam Women's Union and the Lao Women's Union – have required substantial investment of effort, with results not always obvious, but are and will remain essential for integration of gender concerns, and Oxfam has managed these well throughout the IP.

In all of these areas, Oxfam's long-established track record as implementer and partner in gender work across the region has been an important asset in approaching gender justice within the IP; and IP implementation experience seems to have added to this credibility.

POLICY DIALOGUE AND INFLUENCING – ENGAGEMENT WITH WIDER STAKEHOLDERS:

Oxfam has been an actor in its own right in this – 'a partner as well as a donor', as expressed by partners in one Focus Group Discussion – as well as an enabler of civil society partners' voices. In the current national climates of the Mekong countries, some partners have expressed the need for Oxfam to use its position and relationship to express their needs and perspectives direct, through a combination of some continuing lack of confidence in their own knowledge and skill in presentation, and vulnerability to adverse reactions from higher levels of government. There has also been the view expressed that Oxfam needs to make its own policy positions clear, or clearer, with several partners saying at different points that different and even contradictory views are expressed by different Oxfam staff in different contexts. An important factor in Oxfam's successfully weaving a path through a very dynamic and sensitive political/policy context during the IP's implementation does seem to have been the absence of a simple or rigid policy stance; what does seem imperative is that, in each occasion where Oxfam takes a clear policy position – as in the decision to boycott the MRC-organised prior consultations around the Pak Lay dam – rationale for this needs to be clearly articulated, so a clear overall internal policy framework can be gradually established. It is also imperative to note here that being considered by governments as simply 'anti-dam' would almost certainly lead to rapid curtailment of Oxfam's license to operate.

SPECIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE IP IN THE AREA OF POLICY DIALOGUE HAVE BEEN:

Successfully supporting the inclusion of civil society actors in policy dialogue, and notably in enabling the voice of some locally-focused actors to be included and heard in national and transboundary dialogue. Partners have particularly been enabled through building their knowledge base, and provision of specific skills relating to influencing and policy engagement.

Women's knowledge and perspective have also been enabled to a significantly greater degree than before the IP, with the consultation with Vietnamese women as part of the Don Sahong dam PNPCA being a major turning point.

Building relationships with key national government and government-linked bodies, particularly Lao and Vietnam Women's Unions; and some technical institutions, has created effective channels for access into larger dialogue and influencing.

Oxfam itself has played a direct and active role in policy dialogue, pursuing particular policy change aims, in addition to supporting partner engagement. Continued engagement of Oxfam as mediator and enabler does seem necessary for a longer period to enable engagement of emergent civil society actors especially.

DISABILITY INCLUSION:

from the IP implementation experience, and the sampling of the evaluation, key findings have been that **Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs)**, as essential partners in developing strategies for mainstreaming across the program, did not have an immediate grasp of the relevance of water governance to disability inclusion, and considerable dialogue and collaborative work was needed to develop joint understanding and thence models for practice. Amongst existing partners focused on water governance, understanding of and commitment to disability inclusion pre-training varied widely, with some including good practice quite independently, others having little apparent awareness for the need.

Improvement of disability inclusion across the board in water governance does seem genuinely achievable, but will require continued investment and consistent mainstreaming.

WIDER STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT; PRIVATE SECTOR; AND CHINA:

Engagement with the other leads in the DFAT Greater Water Resource Program for the Mekong region appears to have been positive, but limited, and the degree of communication and collaboration overall less than intended. It also seems clear that this was not solely or principally due to Oxfam's level of readiness to collaborate; but would require closer addressing by DFAT and partners in designing future such collaboration.

Direct engagement with the private sector has been limited, though the piloting of the GIA shows one likely path forward, given government adoption and ownership of this in Laos in particular. The sensitivity of private sector actors to national government observation of their relationships appears to be a factor which has limited contacts so far. In Vietnam, engagement by Oxfam's partner CSRD with the A Vuong power company over a livelihoods initiative for a dam displaced community appears to have been harmonious and productive.

Engagement with China, as both state actor and home to many significant private sector actors, remains a major issue to address, and development of a more concerted approach will depend on negotiation and collaboration with Oxfam International's China affiliate, hitherto limited.

MODALITIES OF IMPLEMENTATION AND OXFAM INTERNAL FACTORS:

Several key issues emerged in assessing Oxfam's effectiveness in implementation of the IP

DEPTH OF EXPERIENCE AND COMPLEXITY OF PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS:

Oxfam's several decades of experience in water governance, civil society strengthening and work for gender justice in different countries of the Mekong region has been critical to success. Oxfam's ability to maintain the resulting complexity of relationships, from emerging and locally-focussed CSOs, to national and transboundary networks; and multiple instruments and levels of government, has been key to the IP's credibility and success. Managing to hold such a diverse range of partnerships, with organisations which might otherwise have no connection, or even see each other as antagonists, has been a considerable accomplishment. Continued work in this area would seem to be dependent on maintaining the source of detailed knowledge and the credibility that comes from direct links to community, as well as the profile and technical and policy know-how to work at national and international policy level.

FLEXIBILITY AND EFFECTIVE RISK MANAGEMENT:

Risks to civil society (and other) partners in the very sensitive policy context of hydropower and water governance are very real. Oxfam appears to have successfully negotiated these, through consistent use of risk management tools; continued nuanced knowledge of the situation, and maintenance of cordial and frank relationships. Flexible structure of the IP and its grant system has meant the project has not been overly vulnerable to change of context or space in any one country or thematic area.

WORK BEYOND IP FUNDED PARTNERSHIPS:

As previously stated, the whole of the IP has been demonstrably greater than the sum of its parts, at least if the 'parts' considered, per standard program structure, are time-bound funded partnerships. Oxfam's consistent linking up of partners from local to regional level has enabled sharing of knowledge of many kinds and building of confidence to undertake influencing. Accompaniment of emerging partners in particular has gone well beyond formulaic 'capacity building' as normally delivered by INGOs to local partners. In one Cambodia partner Focus Group Discussion, partners spoke appreciatively of ready access to and respect from senior Oxfam staff. This level of trust does seem critical in jointly undertaking sensitive and innovative work.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

The headline learning from project experience would seem to be that focussed work on both support to civil society, and the active engagement and voice of women, people with disabilities and indigenous people does need to continue beyond the funded lifetime of the IP, if the gains made are to be sustained and built on. The statement from the IUCN colleague, to the effect that water governance is both highly complex and highly sensitive, requiring long-term engagement, also reflects broad NGO experience across this sector.

ANALYSIS AND THEORY OF CHANGE:

- In developing any continuation of the IP, it will be important to articulate a Theory of Change which makes more explicit the non-linear pathways of change and the degree of risk and unpredictability working in very complex systems across multiple countries with entrenched powerful interests.

CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING:

- Oxfam needs to remain alert to the dynamic nature of civil society in the region (and globally) and be ready to adapt partnership approaches and accountability systems to ensure that opportunities to work with and through these are not missed.

- In future partnership work, Oxfam should look at further strengthening the practice of peer sharing and learning between partners, particularly where this might happen in cross-border contexts, in order to optimally develop the capacity of emerging and struggling civil society formations. Cross-learning between diverse partners has been a particular and unusual strength of the IP.

- Myanmar civil society and openness of some government levels and institutions offers real opportunities to develop and strengthen civil society and community engagement in water governance, and Oxfam needs to be alert to both the opportunities and risks here and be ready to invest.

- The space for engaging urban and other non-riparian constituencies in the region around impacts of hydropower development should be explored, as a possible channel to increasing the weight of civil society influence.

- While continuing to give priority focus to civil society partnerships, Oxfam must recognise the value and effectiveness of some of its direct links – formal and informal – to national levels of government; that these have been achieved through long-term and painstaking relationship building and explicitly build corresponding approaches into any future strategy.

- Giving proper consideration to the immediate livelihoods needs of vulnerable target communities is essential if they are to have the space, and the confidence in Oxfam and its partners, to participate meaningfully in water governance focussed activities. Oxfam needs to integrate possible pairings and brokerage between such communities and donors/actors capable of supporting solutions to those needs.

GENDER JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP:

- Continued investment in gender justice from community to regional level will be an essential underpinning of any further work in the water governance sector Oxfam undertakes, and it needs to both safeguard and continue to develop its competence and brand in the area.

- Specifically, it is essential to continue engagement with the Vietnam Women's Union and the Lao National Women's Union where they have demonstrated potential for progressive work with both women at community level and with national governments, to further enhance this competence and to move from their focus on more traditional women's roles to facilitate women's leadership in non-traditional areas.

- Building on the impact of the Gender Impact Assessment tool is one obvious point of leverage with both the Women's Unions and also the private sector, but there are multiple others demonstrated in Oxfam's practice which should continue to be pursued.

ENGAGEMENT WITH PRIVATE SECTOR AND CHINA:

- For any continuation of the Inclusion Program's work, particular focus needs to be given on how to integrate strategies for more consistent engagement with private sector actors in water governance, and with Chinese interests, both state and private sector, inside China and involved in hydropower development in other countries of the Mekong basin.

DISABILITY INCLUSION:

- Focus on disability access and participation needs to be more systematically built into any continuation of work on community engagement on water governance; and lessons learned from engagement with indigenous communities also needs to be documented and shared for learning and informing future work.

The full report available upon the request with email: info.MRWGP@oxfam.org