

ChildFund Australia

Development Effectiveness Case Study

Women's Empowerment

Theme: Access to Assets; Power

Relevant Outcome Indicator

OI 18: % of women who report a significant increase in household income over the past three years which was spent on family needs

Country: Lao PDR

Date: 10/12/15

Program: Strong Communities for Children

Projects Reference: LA03-003
LA03-010

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In Nonghet District, children's development is challenged by limited livelihood prospects and food insecurity. In order to address this issue, ChildFund Laos implemented the Livelihoods and Food Security Enhancement Project (LA03-003) that prompted some positive progress in local livestock management systems. With the intention of further developing this progress, ChildFund Laos started the Improving Gender Equity and Livelihood Security in Nonghet Project (LA03-010), taking into consideration the link between livelihood initiatives and gender equity. By improving access to new skill-sets, resources and networks to effectively manage livelihood initiatives, these projects aim to empower women and enhance their quality of life. Children will also benefit from women's empowerment as it improves the development and the well-being of the family, as well as across generations.¹

In ChildFund Laos partner villages, different Women's Livelihood Groups (WLGs) have focused on establishing several activities, such as weaving, animal husbandry, and sweet-making.

Mrs Lar is a 34-year-old woman from Nonghet. *"I have three daughters and one son; I live with my husband and my mother-in-law who is 68 years old. We earn income from rice and corn fields as well as pig raising."*



When ChildFund Laos came to the village a few years ago and offered the opportunity to take part in a project to develop livelihood initiatives, Mrs Lar thought it would be good for her family: *"I decided to join the animal raising group and my husband also thought that it was a good idea. Our family was already raising pigs but it was very challenging as some pigs often died, leaving the family with low income."*

In the WLG, there are eleven women, of whom three are leaders. Their main role is to document the group's activities and communicate with the Village Head and ChildFund Laos staff. Mrs Lar explains that one

man is regularly supporting the group, especially when there are more physically-demanding activities such as the vaccination of pigs.

¹ UNICEF, Empower Women to Help Children, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media_37474.html (accessed 21-11-2013)

With the technical support of the District Agriculture Office, ChildFund Laos organised some useful trainings before providing pigs to the group's members. Now the women can take care of the pigs by themselves with the support of the group. They organise meetings every three months but they can also meet in case of a special event. The meeting allows the members to exchange experiences and learn from each other. If there is a decision to make, they organise a vote facilitated by the leaders. ChildFund Laos provided the money to start the activity, and the group is now managing the budget by itself working with a micro-credit system. As the Project Officer explains, "First we gave them a loan, and now the women manage it collectively. If a family wants to buy some pigs they can borrow from the group bank and make monthly reimbursements. Now, the role of ChildFund Laos is to follow up with this autonomous WLG."

Being a part of the WLG helped Mrs Lar to develop the pig raising activity with her family: *"Animal raising is part of everyday life; it is a permanent job. It is a family job, everyone helps each other. The activity improves the family's living conditions as it increases the family's income and gives us more chances to do other things."* The participation in the project was also good for Mrs Lar herself. The skills and the knowledge provided by ChildFund Laos and their partners changed her role as a woman. This year, ChildFund Laos and the Provincial Lao Women's Union provided training about gender issues. *"Both men and women participated, so everyone could understand that we all have the same rights and that women cannot be abused such as when they have to do all the work, carrying the baby in front and many things on their backs, and the men do not help at all; or when they cannot express their opinion or join some events."* Mrs Lar thinks that the training and the development process occurring in the village since 2012 have had a positive impact on the gender issues, and have contributed to improving women's lives in the community.

Mrs Lar feels that through participation in the project, she has had the chance to develop the way she expresses herself, and it has changed her relationship within her family: *"I can discuss things with my husband and also with my children, and I see that they react positively to my ideas."* She feels that now she participates more in the decision-making process in her household. *"We discuss everything together, sometimes I have to follow my husband's decision but sometimes he has to follow my opinion; it is equal."* She considers her husband to be an important source of support; he helps with the pigs' vaccinations but also with the housework so she can join her activities outside the home. Since they got married, the couple joined their incomes and control the household spending together. This choice was reinforced by the training they received on gender, as it highlighted the importance of sharing decisions as a couple.

The confidence that Mrs Lar has developed is useful for her involvement in the community. During village meetings, community members recognise that she has good ideas. She is now a member of the Village Development Committee and the Village Party Committee. Furthermore, she is one of the coordinators for the Poverty Reduction Project for her Village Cluster, initiated by the government and the World Bank.

Phone, the 15 year-old daughter of Mrs Lar, also expressed her positive feeling regarding the involvement of her mother with ChildFund Laos. *“My mother took part in various activities with ChildFund and now she understands what development means. Along with my father, they undertake some activities that make our life better. My mother is happy to participate and I can see some changes in her behaviour. For instance, she encourages me and my siblings to be well-behaved and to pay attention to our studies. She also joins the community meetings and expresses herself even if some people disagree with her.”*

Mrs Lar wants to share the knowledge she gained and to go on learning more. She would like to have more education, but she is not sure that she will be able to access informal education opportunities. Yet, what is certain is that with her experience, she wants to help develop her family and her village. For Mrs Lar, it is essential to include her children in the process: *“I am not sure that there will be another training session on gender in the village, so I want them to know about this. I want them to understand this issue when they are young because it will change the way they behave in the future.”*



Mrs Lar's daughter, Phone, was indeed aware of this: *"I know that my mother joined a training session about gender and we also have some booklets with information on it in the house. She talked to me about equality between men and women, about the fact that before the man had more power than the woman in the household but now they both have the same rights. In my family, my parents help each other; now they share the tasks but before it was different. "*

Not only do both parents have a word to say in Mrs Lar's household, the children's voices are also taken into account, as expressed by Phone: *"When my parents have to make a decision they discuss it between themselves, they listen to each other's opinion but they also ask us if we agree or not with their suggestion. I can tell them what I think."*

The story of Mrs Lar shows the large impact that her participation in ChildFund Laos' project has had on her life as a mother, a wife and a woman. She has had the opportunity to acquire new technical skills and knowledge, not only about managerial, financial and technical aspects of animal raising, but also about gender equity and women's rights.

Mrs Lar noted the good support she receives from the WLG; each woman helping each other to improve the activity and to manage the group. Moreover, the regular participation of one man who helps the group shows their ability to develop a positive cooperation between genders.

This case study also reveals the importance of family support. When the husband is aware of the benefits the whole family can receive from the woman's livelihood activity, as well as of her right to participate, he seems to be keen to encourage her and help her to achieve her goals. Raising awareness about gender roles and gender equity in the entire community appears to be a significant step forward in improving women's conditions in the community. Empowering a woman like Mrs Lar by giving her the opportunity to engage in a livelihood activity not only impacts upon the family's living conditions by generating new sources of income, but also impacts her personal life, her position in the family and her participation in the community by building her capacity to express herself. With her involvement and her commitment towards development, Mrs Lar is a very good role model for her daughters, as well as all the girls and women in their village and the broader Nonghet community.