



# OXFAM MEKONG REGIONAL WATER GOVERNANCE PROGRAM INCLUSION PROJECT PHASE 2

END OF PROJECT EVALUATION FINAL REPORT, 30TH SEPTEMBER 2024

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**BACKGROUND:** Phase 2 of the Oxfam Mekong Water Governance Inclusion Project (IP2) has been implemented since mid-2020 by Oxfam in consortium with International Rivers (IR). IP2 succeeded IP1, which ran from 2016 to 2020, funded by DFAT for a total of \$A9 million as a core investment of DFAT's Greater Mekong Water Resources Program 2016-2020 (GMWRP) with Oxfam as the sole implementing agency.

IP2 is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and since 2021 the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The original timeframe was from June 2020 to June 2024, with a No-Cost Extension to April 2025 later agreed. Total investment in IP2 was AUD 5,431,705 by DFAT, and USD 3,467,281 from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The project was delivered by a consortium of Oxfam and International Rivers until June 2024, and by Oxfam from July 2024 to final conclusion in April 2025.

The Inclusion Project aims to achieve more inclusive, equitable and sustainable water governance that reduces the impact of climate change and increases social accountability to citizens in the Greater Mekong region. The program envisions that communities living in the Mekong and Salween River basins are able to realise their right to sustainable livelihoods.

## The IP2 project has three key interlocking domains of change.

1. Social inclusion, Gender equality and women's leadership
2. Civil society engagement and networking
3. Government and the private sector.

These are fully articulated in the three End of Project Outcomes detailed below: Evaluation



**PURPOSE:** The end of project evaluation was commissioned with the following objectives:

4. To evaluate the impacts of the Inclusion Project Phase 2 per the Theory of Change and Theory of Action, as both were revised for the No-Cost Extension to April 2025,
5. To evaluate the extent to which project approaches and strategies contributed to the
6. project's final outcomes and impacts,

7. To identify lessons learned from the project for Oxfam, International Rivers and their partners and to develop recommendations for continuing program work in the key domains of change.

The evaluation was conducted by a team of three: Mark Deasey (Team Leader); Bounthavivanh Mixap and Vo Thi Tam, all of whom had substantial prior engagement with Oxfam's inclusion work in the Mekong sub-region.



**METHODOLOGY:** The Evaluation was managed by IP2's Project Management Unit (PMU), with oversight from a Reference Group including representatives from DFAT, SDC, Oxfam and International Rivers. The evaluation proceeded with preparation of an Inception Report, followed by review of the extensive documentation produced throughout the project, and data collection with key stakeholders across the region. Extensive face-to-face Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) including direct community contact were carried out in Vietnam and Cambodia. In Laos, due to the lack of an official project MoU, data collection was largely confined to KIs with key stakeholders in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Contact with Thai, regional and other stakeholders was via online interviews.

Emphasis was placed on applying a gender lens to the evaluation, consonant with the purpose and structure of IP2 overall.



**LIMITATIONS:** The most important factors noted were:

- Impossibility of ensuring balance in focus between the different countries and stakeholders in the region, due to factors including security restrictions on movement and direct interaction with programme work in the field; also the relative scale of current project activity in each country. This was partly mitigated by use of online communications to conduct interviews with stakeholders in those locations.
- Continued difficulties in obtaining direct input with private sector actors, as has been documented as an issue throughout IP2 (and IP1) implementation.
- Fewer interviews with government actors than was hoped for, although important data was gathered from local government officials in Laos and Vietnam and from national- level officials in Cambodia.
- Interviews sought but not obtained with a small number of stakeholders, several of them key to regional-level activity of IP2, and two being national government figures.

- The Evaluation Team unable to meet in person throughout the process, due to constraints of timetables and budget. This was significantly mitigated by strategic use of online communications, voice and written.



**DOCUMENT REVIEW:** IP2 has been noticeably more comprehensively documented than the first project phase (2016 – 2020), and with an increased depth of analysis. Particularly valuable in framing the evaluation was the Political and Economic Analysis (PEA) of the operating context in the Mekong sub-region, in both the original version, and the refreshed version delivered in May 2024; also specific documents for GEDSI planning, and the introduction of Outcome Harvesting as part of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) framework. Important contextual and implementation elements emerging from the document review included the trend to increasingly authoritarian government and tightened central control across the region and concomitant narrowing of civil society space; the resilience and creativity of civil society actors in the changing environment, and the agility of IR, Oxfam and IP2 partners in working through available channels and platforms. The emergence of new non-hydro renewable energy (RE) generation technologies as a potentially disruptive factor to hydro- and fossil fuel power generation has been significant, as has increasing government and public consciousness on the impacts of climate change, on the river systems and more broadly.

The evaluation interrogated the Theory of Change (ToC) and Theory of Action (ToA) in the light of both PEA documentation per both the original and refreshed versions, and experience of project implementation as expressed by key informants. Individual elements are explored further under each of the component Outcomes and detailed in the Findings. Broadly, the implementation strategy chosen appears appropriate, and was pursued with nuance and flexibility. Important progress has been made in all three Outcome areas designated, but the stated Outcome 3, of achieving commitment to major change in government and private sector compliance with international standards in hydropower and renewable energy generation, appears optimistic in the current political and economic context of the region, and in IP2's timeframe, although noting that this Outcome was originally set for an eight-year period, in which further progress could be expected.

**Key observations and findings per Outcome were:**



## OUTCOME 1

### Women leaders and representatives of marginalised social groups are playing leadership roles in influencing national and regional state and non-state actors in WRG and energy policy and planning processes.

IP2 appears to have achieved a very high level of success in certain aspects of this Outcome, although the level has varied considerably across different countries of the region. Continuity from IP1 and the initial fostering of women leaders appears to have been significant in achievements under IP2. Important new directions and strategies have been applied with partners and communities, most notably through different forms of Community Action Research, including the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) in Cambodia; the Sao Baan (People of the Village) methodology in Laos; the Tai Baan approach in Thailand; and the People's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) on the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project. Partners, communities and individuals who had engaged with this reported major change in women's roles and confidence in leadership; community cohesion and solidarity; and ability to articulate community concerns and advocate to authorities with a united voice. FPAR and other Community Action Research activities have been complemented by a holistic strategy to support women's resilience and continued development in leadership, based on recognition of the realities of women's roles and social position. One critical element of this strategy has been the establishment of national and regional peer networks of women leaders. Advances were made in CSO and other partner consistent use and reporting of gender analysis and impact in their work; also, government and private sector agencies using Gender Impact Assessment in their planning and strategy, but at lower rates than initially targeted.



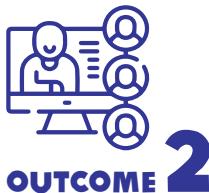
Asia Women and Rivers Congress in Chaing Rai, Thailand



Women of Kon Mom community fishery in Cambodia

The project also appears to have consistently enabled the inclusion of young women and Indigenous women in community organisation and leadership, with proper incorporation of the principles of intersectionality. Inclusion of people with disability (PwD) and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE) has been less consistent, but some important initiatives and achievements were noted, which could be the basis for more widespread good practices in the future.

Achievements have been uneven across the region, due to factors including government oversight and control of available organising and training space; security; and the level of pre-existing understanding of gender equity principles by partners and communities. Also, it is noted that women leaders' engagement with authorities and key actors in water resource governance has been most consistent at the local and sub-national level to date, although with some important instances in practice of linking local knowledge and concerns to national and regional advocacy. In Thailand, a higher degree of national engagement by women leaders from partners and communities was achieved with government, statutory and private sector bodies largely due to a longer history of community-level organising and greater available space for advocacy and influencing. More consistent, joined-up, bridging of the gap between local and national and regional engagement and influencing should be a priority for future work on inclusion in water resource governance.



## Riverine communities and civil society actors are engaging with and influencing sub-national, national and regional WRG policy and planning processes, and promoting the interests and rights of vulnerable social groups.

Direct engagement with sub-national, national and regional WRG policy and planning processes has certainly been strongly and consistently enabled throughout IP2. It is less easy to ascertain or assert the level of influence which has so far resulted. As with Outcome 1 above, engagement has been most readily observable at the local-to-sub-national level, and it is also at that level that influence can be fairly claimed to have been achieved.



Learning exchange on community action research in Cambodia.

Significant instances of direct engagement by communities and CSOs to national level are noted, and elsewhere, important progress has been achieved in linking the local to national and regional levels, through CSO umbrella bodies, providing space for women and other community leaders in national and regional fora.



Nine journalists from Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam have been trained in reporting on GEDSI issues in water governance in October 2023, Thailand.

**Some important new strategies have been introduced and mainstreamed in response to assessment of what the most accessible channels of engagement are, and what is most likely to result in response. These have included:**

- Effective use of both traditional and new media, to amplify community voices, including regular briefings, media trips and focused training of journalists where relatively open media conditions allow, and further engagement with the IP2-supported Women on Air program on the small independent Women's Voice Radio in Cambodia to optimise very narrow available media space and give direct public voice to women community leaders and their concerns. This has been complemented by optimising social media channels for 'soft advocacy', in recognition of government sensitivity to public opinion, even in undemocratic contexts.
- The importance of building an evidence base, integrated into community action research methodologies e.g. FPAR, Sao Baan and People's EIA, and also collaborations with academic institutions and government researchers; and using this evidence as the basis for engagement.
- Deeper and more consistent engagement with the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (and MRC Development Partners, particularly the TROIKA), and the

linked Cambodia National Mekong Committee Secretariat, as both have displayed greater openness to civil society voices. IR, Oxfam and partners' engagement and influence can be seen as both result and cause of the greater openness, together with influence from some funding partners of MRC.



## OUTCOME 3

**Target government and private sector actors at the national and regional levels increasingly commit to comply with regional and international standards and good practice: and include the perspectives of civil society in hydropower and RE policies and plans.**



Mekong Fair in Chiang Kong where a representative from Chinese Embassy was on the panel with Thai academics and Thai Member of the parliament in December 2023

From both the review of documentation and engagement with key stakeholders, it seems clear that there is relatively little firm evidence that increased compliance by government and the private sector has been gained through IP2, although noting that this Outcome was set with an eight-year timeframe in view. Against the adjustment of the original Outcome for the NCE period, to commitment to comply, considerably more progress has been made, and is detailed below.

Important progress has been made on several fronts, particularly opening of channels for dialogue and influence, and that this could work towards a critical mass for future influence, particularly in the event that greater democratic openness occurs in one or more government; that the poor fiscal

outcomes of hydropower investment become clearer; and/or that greater pressure comes from a more aware and concerned public for sustainable energy options.

### Particularly noted from IP2 experience have been:

- Gender equity, and GEDSI becoming an increasingly open point for engagement with government policy across the region on a wide range of issues.
- Greater receptiveness of Thai banks to considerations of environmental impact, and financial risk, in hydropower development.
- Opening of new channels of influence with the Lao national government, despite civil society space remaining highly constrained.
- Increased openness of the Cambodian government to non-hydro renewable energy initiatives, on both local and large scale.
- Diverse channels of engagement and influence with Thai institutions and actors, including on plans and projects related to Thai outbound investments, and transboundary impacts affecting Thai citizens.
- Thai agencies mandated to monitor and raise issues of transboundary impacts on the Thai population of infrastructure built elsewhere.

IP2 engagement with RE at national and regional policy level commenced in 2021, but substantial on-ground initiatives commenced only in 2023, and results are relatively sparse to date. It does need to be noted contextually that the IP2 PMU has made substantial input to the design and direction of other non-IP2 RE initiatives by Oxfam and partners, which have significantly complemented IP2 work in this sector.



The NHRC investigative meeting on Pak Beng dam in Chiang Kong, September 2023

There have been strong positive comments from other actors on the approaches taken by IR, Oxfam and IP2 partners in using available channels and strategies for influence in RE, and continued application could reasonably be assumed to contribute to more tangible results regarding both policy and practice.

## Assessment against the OECD-DAC Criteria:

Issues relating to project design, management and implementation approach are addressed principally under these:

Regarding Effectiveness and Efficiency, we note the high value-add of IR and Oxfam working in concert on this project, with strong complementary strengths including depth of experience, partnership networks and long experience of engaging from community to regional level in the region. The consortium structure was found to be cumbersome, however, and significantly increased transactional costs. Support from both SDC and DFAT has amplified the resource base, the relationships with other development initiatives in the region and the reach of the project, but also resulted in higher demands on management resources to meet accountability requirements.

Oxfam's complex internal architecture has in some instances worked against efficiency, particularly with regard to relationships between the PMU and country teams. In Laos particularly, it has been a contributing factor to diminished project impact and effectiveness, while substantially raising transactional costs.

Coherence of the project has been questioned, given very different levels of reach and modes of implementation across the different countries of the region; also, the gaps in linkages from activity at the grassroots level to national and regional engagement. Assessment through this evaluation would indicate that highly disparate elements have been combined towards a unified approach; that gaps are recognised and are being addressed, though further work is clearly needed; and that women and men at the grassroots do recognise strong commonalities of circumstance and priority. This has been most notably evident through national and regional gatherings engaging grassroots leaders, and the networking which has continued from these.

Consciousness of sustainability has been evident, particularly through investment in and empowerment of local communities, organisations and networks, and development of their mutual support, as well as optimising of in-region expertise within Oxfam and IR. However, it also seems clear that some continued resourcing of local actors and networks will be required if the current momentum is to be maintained. This should include more concerted advocacy to governments for support to community bodies which in fact align with official policy. Partners' continued ability to operate in communities can also be dependent on their ability to respond to immediate livelihood concerns, as well as medium-term influencing.

The relevance of the project is utterly clear, as expressed by all stakeholders engaged with. While there is continuing uncertainty around the extent of achievability of Outcome 3 – presuming a further phase of the Inclusion Project to span the projected eight-year time frame – given political trends within the region, it seems clear that the promotion of women's leadership, the fuller inclusion of marginalised communities and population groups, and the enabling of civil society will remain critically important in the dynamically evolving context of the region.



## Recommendations:

The following recommendations have been formulated with the assumption that substantial institutional donor funding will be available for a continuation either of the Inclusion Project, or a coherent regional program of closely related work.

The recommendations are based on the substantial strengths identified in IP2's implementation, which should inform future practice, as well as areas identified for learning and improvement. Not all current aspects of IP2 practice are covered in this formulation, but the list should be read with the assumption that the successful practice identified under all three Outcome areas and the six OECD-DAC criteria should continue to form the basis of a further implementation phase.

### For Future Program Design:

1. The model to promote and support women's leadership as developed through IP2 should be specifically documented and shared more widely for possible adaptation and use beyond the countries where it has been most visibly used, and possibly in other program contexts. This should also be integral to any future phase of the Inclusion Project.
2. Future work on women's leadership should incorporate monitoring of individual women's stories of change across gender normative practices, and the pathways to transformative change they indicate.
3. The further development of women's leadership from community to national and regional levels should be a core focus of a future project phase, consolidating and expanding from successful practice and learning under IP2.
4. A clearer and more coherent strategy for the inclusion of people with disability, people of diverse SOGIE, and other marginalised groups, drawing on the diverse examples of successful practice in IP2 should be developed for any future phase of the Inclusion Project. OPDs and organisations of people with diverse SOGIE should be directly engaged in this design.
5. The enabling of Indigenous women's leadership, which has been successfully undertaken through IP2, should be further consolidated; extended where possible across the Mekong region, and further supported in developing linkages with Indigenous women's activism globally.
6. Lessons learned from focus on young people's engagement across all components of IP2 should inform the articulation of a specific youth strategy for continued programming.

7. Avenues to ensure the continued resourcing of community fishery groups and other
8. grassroots structures and networks, independent of institutional donors, need to be explored as a priority, particularly advocacy for in-country government funding.
9. Attention should be given to the possible evolution of the partnership model in implementation, noting the increasing strength of community organisation, and ways in which community groups may come to rely less on the intermediation of CSO partners.
10. The significant differences in political and economic contexts and in available civil society spaces in each country need to be specifically articulated in developing a Theory of Change for any future phase of the Inclusion Project, and also clearly reflected in the design of the Theory of Action.
11. Design of a future phase of the Inclusion Project should include clear articulation as to how the successful enabling of local-level leadership, engagement and influence can more consistently fully linked up to engagement and influence at national and regional levels; also respecting the differing national circumstances and constraints per Recommendation 4 above.
12. A more detailed strategy for the promotion and support of Renewable Energy initiatives from local to regional levels should be developed as part of any future program, particularly looking to possible engagement with other DFAT-supported initiatives in the region.
13. Lessons learned from engagement with social and 'old' media across the region within the IP2 implementation period should be documented and analysed to develop a component strategy for future intervention. Future media work could include sharing success stories and data that highlight the importance of community and gender considerations in policy.
14. Lessons learned from collaboration with academia, as both a direct channel of influence, and a partner in empowering community development of evidence for influence, should likewise be documented for future strategy development. Specific actions which should be undertaken in this regard include:
  - Capacity Building for Local Academics: Provision of training and resources to local researchers with whom relationships have been established on methodologies related to gender studies, community development, and policy analysis to enhance their ability to contribute effectively to discussions.

- Publication and Dissemination: Promotion of the publication of research findings in both academic journals and popular media to increase visibility and accessibility, ensuring that findings reach a broader audience, including policymakers.
  - Policy Briefs and Recommendations: Support collaboration to development of concise, evidence-based policy briefs that clearly outline actionable recommendations based on research findings, targeting specific policymakers or government departments which have demonstrated openness to dialogue.
  - Engagement in Policy Dialogue: Where official control of space permits, organise forums, workshops, and roundtable discussions that bring together academics, policymakers, and community representatives to discuss research findings and their implications for policy.
15. Oxfam and International Rivers should jointly review both successes and constraints in engaging with the private sector under both IP phases to date, with a view to articulating a clear forward strategy that weighs the relative influence and accessibility of hydro-electric companies; private financial institutions; and private sector actors in RE, and which are likely to be the targets of successful influence, whether directly or indirectly; via CSO partners; media; and/or academia and other researchers.

#### **Operational and Structural Issues:**

16. Priority should be given to addressing any remaining points of misunderstanding regarding donor engagement, communication and accountability requirements in order to optimise both donors' engagement with and contribution to the project, and also to harmonise donor accountability requirements as far as possible.
17. The disjuncture between Oxfam regional project management structure and the autonomy of individual Oxfam country teams must be addressed in any future regional program.
18. Oxfam should discuss internally and with donors ways in which current operational management and accountability workload could be streamlined and possibly redistributed to allow greater engagement of management level staff in matters of program strategy and quality.
19. The benefits of IP2's interaction and cross-fertilisation with other IR and Oxfam projects in the area of WRG, RE and Natural Resource Management should be recognised and continued in any further program phase, and also expanded to include more systematic interaction with other projects funded by SDC and DFAT.

 **Oxfam in Cambodia**

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